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Los gallos valientes: Examining Violence in Mexican Popular Music

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Abstract
Narco-music (narcomúsica, a type of Mexican music related to drug trafficking or traffickers) is a fast-growing business, notably in the United States where big music corporations are signing promising narco-bands and where Grammy Awards officially recognize and validate this new kind of popular music. At the heart of this essay lies the complex problem of how popular culture is redefining and mystifying the persona of the outlaw, which, with the help of the mass media, turns into a role model for many youths. Though fiercely contested, narco-music is a cultural commodity that succumbs to the hegemonic power of the culture industry. This music, thus, cannot be understood properly outside the wider power relations in which it is embedded and that nourish its growth.

Resumen
La narcomúsica (un tipo de música mexicana asociada al tráfico de drogas o a los traficantes de drogas) es un negocio en rápido ascenso en los Estados Unidos donde las corporaciones de música están contratando las narco-bandas promisorias y donde los Premios Grammy oficialmente reconocen y validan este nuevo tipo de música popular. Como eje de este ensayo está la compleja problemática de la manera como la cultura popular está redefiniendo y mistificando la persona fuera de la ley, quien, con la ayuda de los medios, se constituye en un modelo para muchos jóvenes. Aunque atacada fuertemente, la narcomúsica es un producto cultural que sucumbe al poder hegemónico de la industria cultural. Esta música, por tanto, no puede ser entendida como si existiese por fuera de las amplias relaciones de poder en que está inscrita y que alimentan su desarrollo.

In the early morning hours on March 27, 1997, minutes after the musicians
had finished their performance at a local baile (dance) in the rural area south of Mazatlán, Sinaloa, the roar of discharging guns disrupted the calm night. A group of forty hooded gunmen, disguised as agents of the Policía Judicial Federal and heavily armed with assault rifles, stormed the scene where an alleged drug trafficker had enjoyed the music of his favorite band, Banda El Limón, and had paid it to play an additional two hours—much to the delight of the local people. The target of the attack, José Luis Carrillo, the nephew of the legendary “Lord of the Sky,” was riddled with forty-two bullets; his buddy Guadalupe was shot six times. Carrillo had made the mistake to trespass the territory of a rival drug clan, causing the village to turn into a killing field. The local police officers counted a total of 150 cases after searching the crime scene the next day. The ferocity of this clash between feuding narcotraficantes (drug traffickers) even shocked the inhabitants of this area of northwestern Mexico who were used to hearing gunshots and who knew that every fiesta carried the risk of ending with a bloody encounter. The village was quiet the days after the killings: all male villagers had abandoned their homes out of fear of vengeance and new gun battles, leaving behind women, children and old people. Carrillo’s funeral was splendid: he was transported in an open trailer surrounded by his friends and accompanied by the Banda El Limón which was playing his favorite pieces (García 1997: 1B-2B).

Since the 1970s, the accordion-based conjunto norteño and the banda sinaloense, a type of popular brass band which is locally also called the tambora (after its signature bass drum), have become more and more associated with and dependent on the subculture of Mexico’s drug dealers, called for short narcocultura (narco culture). Wherever drug bosses party, they hire a regional band to play their favorite music and to entertain the invited guests (Poppa 1990; Figueroa Díaz 1991: 17). There are indeed plenty of newly composed ballads that confirm this “custom,” and the musicians themselves do not keep these “special events” a secret either. The above recounted lethal encounter, however, is more than a simple anecdote. Rather it points to the very heart of a complex problem that involves questions about popular music and its relation to violence and to power, economic power in particular.

In recent years, narcomúsica, music related to drug trafficking or traffickers, has become very popular among a predominantly young Spanish-speaking audience—not just in the regions where cultivation of marijuana is prevalent, but also in the cities north of the border where traffickers make a fortune by selling the illegal good. No longer confined to the subculture of the narcotics (short for narcotraficantes), or gallos valientes
(brave roosters) as they call themselves, narco-music is a fast-growing business, notably in the United States where big music corporations are signing promising narco-bands and where Grammy Awards officially recognize and validate this new type of popular music (Simonett 2001b). At the core of this trendy music with deep roots in the Mexican ranchera (country) tradition is the narcocorrido, a ballad that describes, apotheosizes, comments, or laments the deeds of those involved in the drug cultivation and trade. The popularity of narco-music has provoked passionate discussions comparable to the gangster rap debate (O’Connor 1997; Ontiveros 1997). Based on mostly emotional and ideological judgments, people either condemn the narcocorridos for their negative and emulative effects on the youth or applaud them for “telling the truth”; but few have attempted to scrutinize the ambivalence at the heart of this new musical form. In his thorough examination of the relationship between poetry and violence in the ballad tradition of Mexico’s southern Pacific coast, folklorist John McDowell (2000) suggests that the corrido is more than a reflection of the violent conditions in which it exists. Rather than just celebrating, and thus perpetuating, violent behavior, he points out the corrido’s regulatory and healing function within the community affected by these very same acts of violence. With regard to the narcocorrido of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, sociologist Luis Astorga (1995) similarly views the new compositions as a symbolic product that may generate a collective catharsis, but also as an example of an increased visibility of what has become allowed and tolerated by modern society. In my book on banda music (Simonett 2001a: 201-225), I have examined how particular character images perpetuated in folklore and songs have facilitated the acceptance of subcultural values among a large public, and how subversive individuals may convert into “folk heroes” by relating the drug lords to Jesús Malverde, Sinaloa’s most idolized and mystified social bandit. Indeed, narcocorridos began to emerge only after the activities of traffickers were largely tolerated and, in most cases, protected by Mexican officials.

Although norteño groups have experienced governmental suppression and control of their musical activities as early as the 1970s when Los Tigres del Norte launched their first big hit, “Contrabando y traición” (Contraband and Betrayal), censorship of corridos which tell stories about drug smuggling was no a hot topic until bands began to record corridos that pointed to the involvement of high officials in the illegal business (for example, “El circo” [The Circus], composed by Teodoro Bello in 1995, names then-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his brother Raúl). Ridiculing the government’s attempts to repress its music, Los Tigres released an entire album with songs about drug trafficking in 1989 with the title Corridos...
prohibidos (Forbidden Corridos). Admired by millions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans as “los ídolos del pueblo” (the idols of the people), Los Tigres del Norte is indisputably the most influential norteño group and one of the top-selling groups in the Latino market today. Its success has made the group “untouchable” and free to exercise harsh criticism of the Mexican government and official authorities, blaming them for the failure to win the “war on drugs” (for example, “El general” [The General] by Teodoro Bello on Los Tigres’ Grammy-nominated 1997 album Jefe de jefes [The Boss of Bosses]).

As has been pointed out by communication theorists, the easy access to mass media and modern recording technologies in Western society, and increasingly in every society, aids the expansion of the plurality of voices and, thus, encourages the process of democratization. Yet, we ought not to forget that popular music is a cultural commodity disseminated by the media and, thus, succumbs to the hegemonic power of the culture industry. Narcocorridos are not simply “people’s chronics that transgress, desecrate, or question the official view,” as José Manuel Valenzuela (2002) defines them in his recent book on the genre. Despite fierce calls from concerned parent groups, church officials, and legislators to censor this music, “prohibited corridos” neither subvert dominant ideologies nor really contest governing authorities. Being “image-centered and narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” (Appadurai 1990: 9) like most cultural commodities disseminated by the media, narcocorridos—if not simply fictitious—usually just retell what has previously been published in newspapers or broadcast on television. In an interview published in the fanzine Furia Musical, one of the most prolific corrido songsmiths confirmed: “My songs are based on what the press, the radio, and the television say … I create my songs from what we all know” (Teodoro Bello, quoted in Cruz 2000: 13; all translations are mine). But there is no doubt that the narcocorrido also benefits from a commercial mystification of the drug trafficker.

Because of the illegal and clandestine nature of the drug business, those directly involved have seldom had the desire or the opportunity to speak for themselves. Described and portrayed by outsiders, notably the government and the print media, reports about the narcos and their real live world have been mixed with myth and fantasy (Astorga 1997: 245). With their increased visibility in the public sphere, however, narcos began to narrate their own life stories. Corridos, particularly those they commission, have become significant for the fabrication of their social life as well as the construction of a cultural self-image. I am not arguing that this self-representation is more factual, for, as Appadurai (1991: 199) has
so keenly summarized, “the new power of the imagination in the fabrication of social lives is inescapably tied up with images, ideas, and opportunities that come from elsewhere, often moved around by the vehicles of mass media.” Paired with the fictitious world of already existing narcocorridos and the pre-fabricated elements of the traditional corrido repertory, commissioned corridos are as imaginary, or as genuine, as commercial corridos composed by professional songsmiths. Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish the different types of narcocorridos, performance practice, and the social worlds in which they flourish. Beyond the lyrics, narco-music provides the means by which its listeners and practitioners invent, construct, and assert their identities. This music, thus, cannot be understood properly outside the wider power relations in which it is embedded and that nourish its growth.

Drug trade and modern heroes

Today’s commercially most successful bands that play the narco-repertoire—Los Tigres del Norte, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, and Banda El Recodo—all originate from Sinaloa, known as “land of the drug traffickers.” The slopes of the northern Sierra Madre are geographically and climatologically an ideal region for growing narcotics. The area has a long history of cultivating and trading drugs (see Astorga 1996; Verdugo Quintero 1993). In the early twentieth century, Chinese immigrants to Sinaloa and Sonora began to cultivate opium poppies. At that time, opium was legal and its flowers were even grown in the cities’ public gardens. After the Mexican government prohibited narcotics in 1927, the public opium houses were closed. Despite antidrug laws and national eradication campaigns to combat drug cultivation, the growing of marijuana and opium poppy plants continued to flourish in the inaccessible and rugged Sierra Madre mountains, and by the late 1940s, Mexico’s illegal narcotics industry was well-established. The drug trade grew more violent during the following decades as traffickers quickly adapted their organizations to each new attempt by the federal police to destroy the illicit business. Mexico’s economic crisis in 1982, two devastating earthquakes, and the decline in oil prices in the mid-1980s gave the drug trade a major impetus. The economic collapse coincided with both an increased demand for drugs in the United States and favorable weather conditions in northwestern Mexico. Mexico’s high external debts and inflation rate had a profound impact on the country’s social and political structure. Narcos became an important factor in the national economy by generating employment, bringing in foreign exchange, and investing money in infrastructure.
companies, and the stock market. Through their businesses, they made influential connections with bankers and politicians: they used the former for money laundering and the latter for protection.

Despite activities that go hand in hand with drug trafficking—assault, robbery, kidnapping, and killing—some narcos enjoy a high social prestige and a good reputation in their native region (LaFranchi 1997). Because ethical categories such as good/bad and right/wrong may not necessarily be perceived as antipodes, many people seem to have a certain ambivalence regarding drug traffickers. According to Oscar Loza, president of the Sinaloa Commission for the Defense of Human Rights, smuggling may be prohibited legally, but not socially. “We’ve been living for more than 50 years with the drug-trafficking culture. When we talk of a second and third generation living with drug trafficking, they begin seeing it as something natural, not something criminal. Many people still see it as a crime, obviously, but more and more see it as just another economic activity” (quoted in Quiñones 1998). This explains views such as the one expressed by a college student from Culiacán, the capital of Sinaloa, cited in the same newspaper article: “When drug lord Miguel Felix Gallardo went to jail in the mid-1980s, people were really sad. Here these guys aren’t enemies, they’re friends. They’re really well-liked.”

Men who dare to oppose the authorities have always earned the respect of the underprivileged, and apparently increasingly so by all social classes. Audacious individuals such as highwaymen, poachers, brigands, hoodlums, smugglers, desperadoes, and other outlaws have captivated the imagination of numerous people all over the world. In contrast to the official, governmental and media, representation of these criminals however, the image painted in folklore is more favorable. It is no surprise then that modern folklore (the culture industry) portrays the modern bandit (the narco) in a sympathetic manner as well. But even though most narcos are far from being “noble robbers,” they benefit from the bandit myth. Narcos “are heroes not in spite of the fear and horror their actions inspire, but in some ways because of them. They are not so much men who right wrongs, but avengers, and exerters of power; their appeal is not that of the agents of justice, but of men who prove that even the poor and weak can be terrible” (Hobsbawm 1969: 50).

Chalino Sánchez, “the Tupac Shakur of narcocorrido”
Immortalized with and through his songs, Chalino Sánchez embodies like no one else the narco-subculture that encompasses both Mexico and the United States (see Simonett 2001a: 241-254; Quiñones 2001: 11-29). Born in 1960 in Sanalona, a small village some thirty kilometers from Culiacán, Chalino went north at age eighteen after he allegedly revenged his sister who had been dishonored by a local valiente (tough guy). While working different jobs through some of which he got into close contact with the narco-world, Chalino began to compose corridos on commission and later, from 1989 on, recorded them for his clients with norteño groups and local Sinaloan bandas that call Los Angeles their home. Chalino’s career as a singer however was short lived. In 1992, after a late show in a nightclub in Culiacán, Chalino was arrested by heavy armed men dressed as agents of the federal police. In the morning, he was found dead, shot four times execution style. One newspaper reported the crime with a headline suggesting that Chalino’s violent death was like one more of his corridos (Lim 1992). After a fruitless police investigation, his files were closed and rest with all Culiacán’s other unsolved crimes. Wild speculations thus began to circulate along the lines of a Sinaloan saying: “This son-of-a-bitch is capable of letting himself be killed just so that they compose a corrido for him.” Chalino had already been a controversial singer during his lifetime. Many people, including some of Mexico’s famous artists, were quite irritated by Chalino’s wide acceptance and popularity. His thin, nasal, tense, and rather high-pitched voice was by no means considered a good singing voice. As his widow Marisela Vallejo affirmed, Chalino was the first to admit that he could not sing. He was just an ordinary guy with a dream. The key to success is to live what one is singing, said ranchera singer Amalia Mendoza once about José Alfredo Jiménez, one of the most beloved Mexican vocalists (Gradante 1982). Like Jiménez, Chalino sang his own songs and only rarely recorded songs he did not compose himself. As one corridista (corrido composer/singer) expressed: “He lived singing the corrido, the corrido was his death.” Many people indeed suspected that Chalino did more than just compose and sing narcocorridos. Seemingly enjoying the mystification, Chalino never said anything to clarify these allegations. But people who knew Chalino closely attribute the singer’s success to his charisma and to his ability to fabricate his own image by drawing from Sinaloan folklore and the bandit-hero myth, not to his particular clientele. The numerous corridos composed in his memory picture Chalino as a brave and determined man, as a sincere and true companion, and as a famous and adored singer who was always surrounded by friends and women. Ascribed to him are the virtues of the corrido hero summarized in the expression, un gallo valiente (a brave rooster).
In the decade since his violent death, Chalino’s characteristic voice and his particular way of portraying “the tough guy from the hills” have been imitated by numerous young *corridistas* dreaming of becoming equally successful and famous. But what is more, Quiñones (2001: 24) claims, “he brought thousands of Mexican-American kids back to their parents’ country music, of which they’d been thoroughly ashamed. A Mexican-roots renaissance took place, though this time undertaken not be a small group of Chicano college professors, intellectuals, and artists but by a large swath of working-class youth.”

Because of its accompanying violence, the narcocorrido has its parallel in gangster rap, a music first popular on the U.S. West Coast in the early 1990s. The murders of rappers Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G., in 1996 and 1997 respectively, remain unsolved, but there is a web of theories and allegations similarly to those enwrapping Chalino Sánchez. According to journalist Elijah Wald, the world of the narcocorrido is “not just a kind of equivalent terrain to gangsta rap, specifically, but it’s the same audience … [T]he Black and the Anglo White kids are not buying corridos [yet], but the guys who are buying corridos are all also buying rap … [M]any people forget what rap looked like before the L.A. guys got in. It’s very similar, you had Afrika Bambaata and Grandmaster Flash wearing fancy costumes and looking like pros just like Los Tigres del Norte, and then the L.A. guys, be it Chalino, or be it Eazy E or Ice Cube, suddenly just came in dressed like street guys. To think about what was going on in their lives, it was exactly the same appeal. Not to mention Chalino getting himself (fatally) shot, I mean everybody calls him the Tupac Shakur of narcocorrido, it’s a metaphor you can’t escape” (interview by Walroth 2002).

Most teenagers in the black and Latino neighborhoods of the mega-city Los Angeles are familiar with the gritty drug war milieu and its consequences. It is no surprise then that themes of violence, physical prowess, and masculinity enter the African and Mexican traditions of storytelling. Although there are some parallels between gangster rap and the narcocorrido beyond the lyrical content and the characteristic makeup of the performers and audiences in terms of gender, age, social class, and location, the lyrical expression and the overall musical sound could not be more different. While rap artists explore grammatical creativity, verbal wizardry, and linguistic innovation, *corridistas* retreat to a stylized vocabulary of preset formulas. While rapping is accompanied by a highly rhythmic, sophisticated, electronically based sound, corridos are sung to (mostly) acoustic, rural-rooted Mexican bands which play an “archaic,” “square,” “old fashioned,” but “obliviously cheerful,” “rollicking polka
rhythm,” as the music has variously been described in the press. Only recently have narco-bands begun to mix in sound effects, such as sirens, gunshots, and engine roaring, adding realism to the statements expressed.

It is no accident that the music of the modern, urban corrido is still deeply rooted in Mexican local culture. Since its beginnings in the late 19th century both *norteña* and *banda* have been shunned by Mexico’s upper classes, labeled as “vulgar” and “backward.” The roots of *norteña* music can be traced back to the polka music of Czech and German immigrants who settled in northern Mexico and south Texas in the mid-1800s. The accordion-based dance music flourished among the Mexican population in the border region and developed into a particular regional style. In the 1950s innovative *norteño* groups integrated a vocalist and updated their instrumentation by adding an electric bass and a percussion set. Two decades later, *norteña* music had spread along the border and into the interior of both Mexico and the United States (see Peña 1985). Although brass-band music had long served as one of the educated classes’ favorite pastimes, bands eventually became associated with lower-class music making, rejected by the elite as a crude imitation of their venerable military bands by ignorant peasants who could not do any better. *Banda* musicians’ low social status was related to the alleged low quality of their music and to the rather disreputable locales where some of them had found work. Urbanization, capitalism and, eventually, the culture industry altered Sinaloa’s society, its lifestyles, its habits, and its popular musical tastes, but *bandas* remained popular among the rural population and the lower-class urbanites throughout the 20th century.

In the 1990s, many observers of Los Angeles’s youth culture have marveled at the phenomenon of young people of Mexican heritage dancing to the beat of *ranchera* music. They found this kind of nostalgic adherence to and preference for rural Mexican music rather contradictory (Simonett 2004). In today’s multirooted society, Latinos have begun to value their own norms and ways of life. Faced with discrimination and an increasing openly expressed racism, teenagers and young adults have tried more fiercely to assert their ethnic particularity and to search for a musical voice to state unequivocally who and what they are. Narco-music is an illustrative example of the “shifting balance between what is remembered and what is currently demanded” (Preston 1997: 49) that make up identity. Narco-music brings in the sounds, images, values, and language from another, rural, pre-modern, culture and mixes them with the technology and aesthetics of an urban, postmodern culture. This syncretic fusion of traditional elements and contemporary features is an expression of its creators’ and listeners’ own senses of identity. Hence, it comes as no
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surprise that recordings such as Lupillo Rivera’s *Despreciado* (Despised) was listed by the *Billboard* magazine as the fifth best-selling Latin music album in 2001 (see Camarena 2003). Blending gangster rap and hip-hop with *norteña* music, Rivera is able to create a raw, but urban sound that appeals to a young audience that derives its social conventions, fashions, and aspirations from both the narco-world and the American youth culture.

The untapped potential of ethnic/grassroot musics

In the early 1990s the Los Angeles radio market began to reflect the demographic transition the city was undergoing when a hitherto unknown Spanish-language FM station became number 1. Although airing a variety of rural-rooted Mexican musics, KLAX’s success was based on its concentration on *technobanda*, a modernized, synthesized version of the acoustic *banda sinaloense* that emerged in the mid-1980s in Jalisco, Mexico, and eventually became hugely popular among a young Mexican/Mexican American audience. During the third year of KLAX’s unparalleled domination of Los Angeles’s airwaves, new competing Spanish-language radio stations emerged, copying its programming strategies and on-air style. Chief among them became KBUE-FM, which shifted its emphasis towards *norteña* music. Although south of the border radio stations had voluntarily banned narcocorridos from their airwaves (in Sinaloa as early as 1987), KBUE program directors did not shun from broadcasting the underground genre. Having not gotten any airplay for his compositions during his lifetime, Chalino’s recordings became a hot commodity in the late 1990s. In a *Billboard* interview, KBUE executive Pepe Garza claims of having “rescued” the legendary Chalino Sánchez. “We are the kind of people who like to take risks. When we feel that a style of music is about to explode, we try to accelerate the process” (quoted in Lechner 2003). The music industry is on a constant lookout for new musics. Local ethnic and grassroot musics in particular are being assessed for their potential to add “to the pool of musical resources available to broader audiences” (Slobin 1993: 18).

In contrast to the high sales figure the music industry achieves with this new genre, many narcocorridos never leave the narrow confines of the subculture. Rather than being merchandized through the mass media, they are disseminated primarily through live performance in suitable nightclubs or at private parties. Some end up being recorded in local recording
studios catering to such clientele, but the record is strictly for personal use of the patron who pays for the composition as well as the recording (Simonett 2001b). Despite these confining characteristics, commissioned corridos are embedded in a larger cultural network, and they respond to and interact with the products of the culture industry at large. Thus, while the popularity of commercial groups such as Los Tigres del Norte or Los Tucanes de Tijuana depends to a great extent on grassroot musical traditions, the production of commissioned narcocorridos in the Los Angeles area grew notably with the rise of commercial narcocorridos in the 1990s.

Although having much in common, the two types of narcocorridos differ notably. In the small world of the narcos, composer and customer often know each other, have mutual friends, or frequent the same nightclubs. The customer usually provides the corridista with a list of biographical data that he wants to have mentioned: names of friends, locations, his car model and favorite weapon, details of his deeds, and so forth. The relationship between the narrator (first person singular) and the protagonist of the story (third person singular) coincides with the actual relationship between the corridista and the client. A closer look at commercial corridos shows that they hardly ever mention names, identifiable locales, or events. Rather than specific individuals, the persons described are characters or prototypes of the narco, very similar to the archetypal bandit-hero. Since this direct relationship does not exist in commercial narcocorridos (rather than a particular client, the corrido author addresses an imagined mass audience), we observe a shift from the “I”-corridista and the “he”-narco to the fictive “I”-narco. This shift allows the author of commercial narcocorridos to speak directly to his audience. Moreover, it sounds as if the stories told were a first-hand experience. According to Garza, program director of KBUE-FM, it was not until his station began to broadcast “narcocorridos with elaborate, first-person narratives with sound effects” in 1998 that young people would take notice, for “there was a parallel between this kind of material and gansta rap” (quoted in Lechner 2003). The marketing debt is apparent. Like in gangster rap, where many of the artists emerged from the gang life of the ghetto, the line between corrido singers and narcos is often blurred—at least in terms of advertising. The stage persona and imagery of the performer are a crucial component in the marketing of this music. In order to establish the singers’ underworld credibility, the packaging involves the display of narco paraphernalia such as cell phones, gold chains, colorful silk shirts, heavy arms, and pickup trucks or SUVs.

As Simon Frith (1987: 137) has pointed out, “popular music is popular not
because it reflects something, or authentically articulates some sort of
popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of
what popularity is.” Having been sold on the streets, at swap meets, in
small stores catering to an Mexican immigrant clientele, or just performed
live, narcocorridos were an integral part of the local music network long
before major record companies such as Capitol Records (EMI Latin),
Sony, Balboa Records (Musart), and Fonovisa discovered them as a
profitable commodity geared to a mass audience and long before the
Billboard charts began to reflect their “mainstream” popularity.

Calls for curbing violent music

Calls from special interest groups and politicians to control the
dissemination of popular songs about drugs and violence in Mexico has
led several states to remove narco-music from their airwaves. In 2002 the
Baja California state radio stations signed an agreement to stop playing
narcocorridos while knowing that they would not be able to compete if
American stations across the border continued to air narco-music.
Proponents of such actions seem convinced that this self-imposed
regulation supports the government in its fight against drug crimes. The
opponents not only claim that suppressing popular songs from being heard
by the public is outright censorship, they also question a causal link
between narcocorridos and criminal behavior. The fervent discussion
about the legitimacy of narco-music reminds of similar quarrels fought over
popular music in the United States, beginning with jazz in the 1920s. As
Herman Gray (1989: 143) has pointed out, “Claims against popular music
are not just about music. They are also expressions of political, cultural,
and social disagreements over images, meaning, and behavior. They are
contests for control over public images and expressions.” During the
conservative political and social climate created by the Reagan
administration special interest groups emerged to assert moral control over
a society that was believed had gotten out of hand. Popular culture was
being held responsible for many of society’s ills. Founded in 1985, the
Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) called for a tighter control over
the dissemination and consumption of popular music in order to curtail its
alleged harmful effects on the values and character of young listeners
(Chastagner 1999). The call for the defense of family and traditional values
was echoed in Senator Joe Lieberman’s opening statement of the Hearing
on “Music Violence: How Does It Affect Our Children” in 1997: “[Song
lyrics] are helping to create a culture of violence that is increasingly
enveloping our children, desensitizing them to consequences, ultimately
cheapening the value of life … More and more parents in this country feel that the culture is their enemy.” Although the PMRC was partially successful in its fight with the music and broadcast industries that eventually agreed to use parental warning labels for explicit music lyrics, a report to the Congress by the Federal Trade Commission in 2002 revealed that the music industry continued to advertise explicit-content music on television shows and in print magazines popular with teens. The public controversy over “dangerous music” goes on.

Concerned interest groups know they cannot stop cultural productions. What they try is to impose a conscience upon the culture industry executives by causing public and political pressure. To their allegations that the music industry is placing profit ahead of social obligation, Hilary Rosen, president and chief executive officer of the Recording Industry Association of America, replied that companies seem to be a convenient corporate scapegoat. “The reason a record company invests in an artist is because the company believes that the artist has a unique vision and a creative way to express it,” she said in the 1997 Senate Hearing on music violence. But one had to be blind not to see that those who decide over who meets the test of “artistic credibility” are equally interested in the profit to be made. Recently, the executives of Madonna’s Miami-based label Maverick seriously considered signing at least one narco-band for 2003, claiming that the music’s artistic level outdoes its alleged potential for inducing criminal behavior (Castillo 2002). According to Maverick’s president Bruno del Granado, the label’s interest is based on “the novelty of the music and its interesting sound,” and on the fact that there is already a large number of youths buying this kind of music. He is convinced that the narcocorrido will become the most prominent genre of Latin music in this decade.

Urban popular music is conflictive, but it “is not in itself revolutionary or reactionary. It is a source of strong feelings that because they are also socially coded can come up against ‘common sense’” (Frith 1987: 149). Thus, music is about experience. Musical experience, on the other hand, always contains social meaning and is placed within a socio-historical context. An analysis based simply on the song lyrics thus must be deficient, for it ignores the historical and social context in the formation of music. Moreover, it demeans the role of experience and emotion so crucial to musical practice, as well as the music’s role in the construction of identity, self and communal. As Frith (1987: 139) cautions us, “we are not free to read anything we want into a song.” Concerned parent groups and politicians, however, focus solely on what they believe are corrupting, harmful, antisocial, and anti-moral lyrics, thus, stripping popular music off
its sonic and social meanings. Conspicuously absent from all Senate hearings about the problems of contemporary popular music were those who actually consume the controversial products, the adolescents. Although lacking conclusive studies on young listeners’ reception of “dangerous music” and its effects on their still developing minds, Donald Roberts, a communication specialist at Stanford University, explained at the 1997 Hearing that those most susceptible to being influenced by the messages in the music are the “troubled kids,” the “risk-takers or sensation-seekers,” not the bulk of the audience, “the pretty good kids.” Considering the popularity of narcocorridos among young Latino audiences we may assume that some listeners indeed regard dope-dealing a gratifying shortcut or a magical path to personal empowerment, even if they are not personally involved in the illicit business. Long Beach-native Jenni Rivera, the only female corridista of the new genre, and her brother Lupillo see themselves as products of the ghetto without being implicated in the lifestyle they portray in their songs. Taking themselves as examples, they have no concerns about a possible negative effect of their “bad stuff” on young audiences. On the contrary, Jenni believes that “it gives [the listeners] an adrenaline rush, they get hyped up and it makes them happy. It makes them feel tough and it makes them feel, like, really, really Mexican. And I think we all like to feel like that” (quoted in Wald 2002: 144).

While the music’s sonic and verbal messages may provide young listeners with some sense of empowerment, narcocorrido opponents of Mexican heritage are concerned about this sort of nationalist display: they feel that the narco attitude further contributes to an already widespread stereotypical image of the Mexican as a criminal. The fervent controversy about narcocorridos resembles the debate about rap whose initial opponents did not come from the white, but from the black middle class. The print media in the United States still treats the narcocorrido as a curious phenomenon, not as a threatening one. The genre is not yet “on the radar of area authorities” (Jordan 2002), and the Federal Communication Commission that monitors Spanish-language radio does not seem to capture the subtleties of the coarse Mexican language used in corridos pesados (heavy corridos) or corridos perrones (bad-ass corridos), the new songs of young Los Angeles-bred corridistas. The warning voices come from within the community. Announcing a narco-band concert in Orange County, journalist Gustavo Arellano (2001) alerts: “With corridos pesados in one culture, gangsta rap in another, and trash metal as overlord, we can look forward to some interesting shit in the next decade.”
Popular music and its plebeianization: concluding thoughts

Already in 1972, the sociologists Richard Peterson and David Berger pointed out the interplay between the drastic change in public consciousness regarding the lyrical content of songs during the rock era (1950-70) and changes in the technology of disseminating popular culture, the music industry structure, and the market of popular songs in the United States. While in the first half of the 20th century “success came from marketing a song that was more ‘average’ than any of the others then being offered,” (Peterson & Berger 1972: 287), rock and roll brought about a new complexity of themes, appealing to an ever younger listening audience, though the mass media continued to play an important role in filtering the content of popular music presented to the public. But after “eight decades of rebellious sensationalism in American popular music beginning with ragtime ‘coon songs’” (Mooney 1972: 181), the larger public was inclined to accept rock and roll. Taste in popular music shifted with young people’s buying capabilities, setting off a long-term trend toward spontaneity, crudeness, and vulgarity—a tendency that seems at the rise as more musics of marginalized, working class, ethnic, immigrant, and small-scale affinity groups enter the mainstream of mass market-disseminated popular music.

Similar tendencies can be observed in Mexico. Controlled by the government, the nascent music and film industries in the 1930s helped spreading ideologies and social views of a particular social spectrum. Nationalistic radio laws issued by the government privileged certain popular cultural forms in order to ensure that the medium would disseminate a uniquely Mexican culture and thereby promote a sense of national solidarity. Banda and norteña music were not on the roster, and folklorists believed the corrido tradition would cease with the integration of the rural population into the modern state. In “The Heroic Corrido: A Premature Obituary?,” James Nicolopulos (1997) calls for a re-evaluation of the corrido tradition, affirming that some of the newer compositions of the 1990s still fit the formal characteristics and ideological content of the heroic corrido. The hero of the narco corrido, however, is no longer the brave man of Mexico’s revolutionary era, commemorated in the classic corrido. By the end of the 20th century, he has degenerated into the pistol-toting gallo valiente who commits crimes with impunity because he has power, money, and political influence (Paredes 1993: 218). Abundant in money but short of years to live, traffickers spend much of their drug profits...
Narco-music transforms both local and transregional soundscapes. Despite the commercial music industry’s emphasis on novelty, the use of rural Mexican music in the narcocorrido genre serves as an essential connection with nostalgic sentiments. Because of its strong bonds with the Spanish language and its embeddedness in traditional music performance practice, narco-music will hardly acquire the same global omnipresence as rap music did over the last two decades. The music’s rootedness in the particularities of its local culture apparently does not suit a crossover audience. Although a product of the global flow of people and goods, narco-music depends on culturally specific locations.

Before the genre of the narcocorrido was invented, the world of the traffickers had only been accessible to a very restricted circle of people (Astorga 1995: 148-49). Yet, with the growing number of traffickers and the huge profits they make, the narcos’ extravagant lifestyle, their mansions, luxury cars, fineries, jewelry, weaponry, and so forth, could not longer be concealed from the public, nor was it intended by the narcos. While the narcos as a social group have gained in visibility and thus in validity, the stories about them still draw upon the myth of the singular outlaw hiding in the inaccessible sierra. In a tradition in which bandits have become folk heroes, the narco—redefined and mediated by popular culture and disseminated by the mass media—has acquired this mythical position too. While in earlier decades the narcos occupied the background of the social stage, nowadays they have advanced to the footlights and are the principal characters. Popular music has assisted them in gaining even more visibility, as well as respectability. Many Mexicans would agree with Arnold Jiménez (2003) that the narco-culture is not as much a form of reaction of a subculture as it is a part of the very same corruption that permeates the country and the government.

Whether it is hidden or blatant, violence pervades everyday life in varying degrees. Inequities and injustices are ingrained in society. Marginalized people respond to these social forms of violence with personal forms of violence. In this sense, corridos that glorify the *gallos valientes* and their deeds can be considered a morally justified response to social forms of violence. The intersection of music and violence makes those who believe in music’s constructiveness feel uncomfortable. While some young singers and band musicians are convinced that affiliating themselves with a wealthy sponsor of the shady underworld will inevitably lead them to success, others, such as Banda El Limón, distance themselves from the narcos and their culture. In a newspaper interview, the leader of the band
recently acknowledged that they are now only playing corridos with inoffensive stories: “But because this genre lives from battles and gunshots, we all know that one can’t make a corrido about Winnie the Pooh” (quoted in Contreras 2003).

Bibliography

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