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State Censorship and the Controversy Surrounding the Narcocorrido Genre in Mexico

“Popular culture always is part of power relations; it always bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subdomination, between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it” — Fiske (2011 [1989], 17)

Over 30 years ago, John Fiske argued in his classic book *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989) that “popular culture is made by the people at the interface between the products of the culture industries and everyday life” (2011 [1989], 21). His insightful analysis of the diverse ways in which people use and subvert commodities to create their own meanings and messages remains equally relevant today, when music has become a streamed product easily accessible to the public at large. At the time of publication of Fiske’s book, certain types of popular music had become the target of censorship, in the United States and elsewhere (Jones 1991). Prompted by lobbyist groups, the U.S. government intervened directly in the distribution of popular music, holding hearings in Congress on the matter of music lyrics (Chastagner 1999). While in the United States these measures were geared specifically towards the genres of rock and rap music, laws to regulate popular music in Mexico targeted the then-emerging narcocorrido genre, a type of ballad that cherishes the lifestyle of drug traffickers¹ (Astorga 2005). However, unlike the demonizing of popular music genres with roots in African or African diaspora culture, the banning of narcocorridos was not related to structures of racial oppression (Rivera 2009, 121): narcocorrido opponents’ moral concerns were based on class distinctions. Moreover, today’s censorship of narcocorridos criminalizes artistic expressions as a preventive strategy to combat criminal activities related to drug trafficking.

Taking an U.S. American perspective, journalist Elijah Wald compares the narcocorrido to gangsta rap, calling one of its key figures in Los Angeles, Chalino Sánchez, “the Tupac Shakur of narcocorridos.” According to Wald, narcocorridos occupy “not just a kind of equivalent terrain to gangsta rap, specifically, but it’s the same audience” (interview with Walroth 2002, quoted in Simonett 2006). This kind of comparison does not apply in Mexico, where narcocorrido fans have very little exposure to hardcore rap music. While there are certainly some thematic parallels between these two genres—such as the topics of violence, illegal activities, physical prowess, and masculinity—the lyrical expression and the overall musical sound are drastically different (Simonett 2006). The ensembles that accompany narco-balladeers remain so deeply rooted in rural Mexican music that the audience cannot discern between a traditional corrido (folk ballad) and a narcocorrido only by listening to the music. Accordingly, it was not the music itself but rather the song lyrics that came under fire. As Steve Jones has noted: “It is likely that attempts to silence popular music arise not because popular music empowers youth but because it empowers via the flaunting and or breaking of rules and authority” (1991, 85). To understand the narco-music’s appeal to today’s youth audiences on both sides of the

1 Narco is short for narcotraficante (drug trafficker). It can be added to any word to specify a relation to drug trafficking. In academic writings, the genre is variably referred to as narcocorrido, narco-corrído, corridos del narcotráfico (corridos of drug trafficking), baladas de narcotráfico (ballads of drug trafficking), or música del narcotráfico (music of drug trafficking).

U.S.-Mexico border, it is necessary to take a quick look at the corrido's century-long history as a subversive expression of Mexico's lower classes.

From Corrido to Narcocorrido

Stories about the deeds of bandits, poachers, smugglers, and other outlaws have long captured the imagination of diverse audiences around the world (Hobsbawm 1969). In Mexico, narrative songs or folk ballads, known as corridos, have told the stories of the common people for one and a half centuries, commenting on everything from natural disasters and political events to crimes, family feuds, horse races, romantic entanglements, migration, and, more recently, drug trafficking (Herrera-Sobek 1993; Nicolopoulos 1997; McDowell 2000, 2015; Griffith 2002; V.A. 2002; Burgos 2013; Simonett 2014a). Populated by heroes and/or anti-heroes that emerged from the marginalized classes of society to perform inchoate class war, this mestizo cultural form flourished within the context of border conflicts with the United States and contributed to the rise of a Mexican national consciousness, especially during the post-revolution era in the early decades of the twentieth century (Paredes 1958; McDowell 1981; Holscher and Fernández 2001). Famous are the deeds of the gold-miner-turned-bandit Joaquín Murrieta, who terrorized the California mining camps after Mexicans suddenly came under the newly imposed U.S. Foreign Miners Tax Law due to California's annexation in 1848 (Leal 1995). Also famous was Gregorio Cortéz, a wrongly accused Mexican farmhand living in the Texas border area at the turn of the nineteenth century, who led his pursuers on a long manhunt before he was finally captured and jailed (Paredes 1958). The Northwestern state of Sinaloa was famed for two Robin Hood-like outlaws: Heraclio Bernal, who with this band of former mine workers raided the mountain ranges of the Sierra Madre Occidental and was killed in 1888 (Girón 1976), and Jesús Juárez Maza, better known as Malverde, who was allegedly hung in 1909, shortly before the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. Venerated as a folk saint, Malverde has become an idol of Sinaloa's drug traffickers (Simonett 2001a, 201–8). The ballads about these popular heroes, as well as those about revolutionary leaders such as General Pancho Villa, are still known and sung today (Chalino Sánchez 1993; V.A. 1994).

Accompanied by one or more guitars—more commonly today by accordion-driven norteño groups (from Northern Mexico, Ragland 2009) or bandas (brass bands from the state of Sinaloa at Mexico's Northern Pacific coast, Simonett 2001a)—and handed down orally and/or on leaflets, the corridos were the “history book” of the illiterate, providing an intriguing folk counterpoint to Mexico's official history. Today, it is this notion of the genre's subversiveness that, on the one hand, makes it an ideal expressive form for contesting a corrupt and duplicitous “official Mexico” and, on the other hand, has led to state censorship of the supposedly out-of-control production of popular music related to drug trafficking.

Even though the corrido underwent considerable changes with the onset of the recording industry in Mexico in the 1930s (Strachwitz and Sonnichsen 1994), today's commercially-produced corridos about drug trafficking, the so-called narcocorridos, still take advantage of the traditional corrido, particularly the Lower Rio Grande Border contraband-type corrido from the U.S. Prohibition era in the 1920s and 1930s, in which the smuggler was seen as an extension of the hero of intercultural conflict (Herrera-Sobek 1979; V.A. 1994; Simonett 2006b). At first closely tied to the shady underworld of the Sinaloan narcos (drug traffickers), the growing popularity

of the narcocorrido in the early twenty-first century suggests that the music industry had managed to produce a music that spoke to a large audience not defined by social, regional, national, or gender boundaries, and not sympathizing in any way with the lifestyle and achievements of drug traffickers. The genre has enjoyed widespread popularity beyond Mexico among people of Mexican or Latino descent in the United States and certain audiences in Colombia (Astorga 1997; Simonett 2001b; Almonacid 2016; Vergara 2017; Burgos and Simonett 2020).

Because the bulk of commercial narcocorridos glorify and defend the lifestyle and deeds of narcos and other actors involved in the illegal business, as well as drug-related violence, conflicts, confrontations, and territorial disputes between drug cartels, the genre has been regulated by law in several Mexican states. In Sinaloa, the historic hub of illegal narcotics production and trade, the popular music genre was first censored in 1987 (Astorga 2005). Two years later, the Sinaloan norteño group Los Tigres del Norte, by that time residing in Northern California, released an entire album with songs about drug trafficking, titled *Corridos prohibidos* (Forbidden Corridos), as a reaction to the Mexican government's attempt to suppress their music. Los Tigres allied themselves with news reporters, notably by making the corrido "El Gato Félix" (Felix the Cat) the LP's lead track. Félix el Gato was the nickname of Héctor Félix Miranda, a Sinaloan investigative journalist who was assassinated the previous year for his inquiry into organized crime and corruption in Tijuana. Furthermore, Los Tigres see themselves as "true-to-life" storytellers—another form of news reporting—rather than narco-balladeers.² Because popular music reaches a very large audience—larger than any newspaper report ever could—it has become the most prominent target of state censorship since the 1980s. Authorities justified the measures due to a sharp increase in drug cultivation and trafficking, coupled with high rates of drug-related violence, and a concurrent growing visibility of Sinaloa's drug traffickers and popularization of their extravagant lifestyle in the media. Censorship of narco-music was thus established and rationalized as a strategy to protect youth, reduce violence, and control drug trafficking (Astorga 1995).

Partly due to the ban of narco-music in several Mexican states and partly to the huge amounts of ill-attained money that remained in the United States after the shipments of drugs were sold there, the center of production shifted to the Los Angeles area in the 1990s (Simonett 2001b). Locally produced, and often commissioned by individuals related to the drug business, narcocorridos were an integral part of the local music network. Years later, major record companies such as Capitol Records (EMI Latin), Sony, Balboa Records (Musart), and Fonovisa discovered them as a profitable commodity that could be sold to a mass audience. Soon thereafter, the *Billboard* charts in the U.S. began to reflect their "mainstream" popularity. Spanish-language radio stations in the U.S. Southwest that broadcast Mexican popular music further contributed to the genre's popularization by putting narcocorridos on their airwaves.

Even though it flourished below the radar of the U.S. authorities (the Federal Communication Commission that monitors Spanish-language radio), the controversy around narco-music made headlines in several newspapers in 1997. According to the *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Anne-Marie O'Connor, critics claimed that "the ballads are the soundtrack to a nihilistic cult of automatic weapons and cocaine traffickers that is seducing their young," while defenders held that the songs "are not the siren call of cocaine kings, but an artistic reflection of an undeniable reality [...], a mirror of the contemporary Mexican political drama and part of a tradition as

2 According to the band's own website (Los Tigres del Norte, n.d.). See also Burgos and Simonett (2020, 113).

old as Mexico itself" (1997a). The *Dallas Morning News* released a story by the same writer on the popularity of the "ballads about drug cowboys" in Mexico (O'Connor 1997b), and the *Christian Science Monitor* claimed that on the Mexican side of the border, the drug lords were seen as "regular guys" who enjoyed high social prestige (LaFranchi 1997). Journalist Sam Quiñones wrote several pieces about the emerging genre, calling it "narco pop's bloody polkas" that "paint [the] underbelly of Mexican life" (1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Catchy terms such as "drug cowboys" and "bloody polkas" used by journalists to describe this new (or, more accurately, then surfacing) musical phenomenon, reflect class-based prejudices against the kind of music that accompanied these ballads. Both banda and norteño are firmly rooted in Mexico's rural society and traditions that can be traced back to nineteenth-century European immigrant influences (Simonett 2001a, 99–154).

In the digital age that began at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the controversy around narco-music has continued to grow stronger. Artists are able to circumvent the vetting of music and media industries, as well as to avoid censorship policies implemented by Mexican state authorities. Access to alternative and low-cost means of production coupled with online distribution have shaped the current proliferation of YouTube narcocorrido videos, which are consumed by millions of mostly young users. A generation of savvy young composers and performers found the material for their ballads ready-made in Mexico's gruesome reality of out-of-control violence caused by the Mexican government's decades-old war on drugs. Replete with explicitly violent song lyrics and driven by an accelerated tempo played by a (combined) norteño-banda group, the movimiento alterado (alterado movement)³ is the latest and most controversial development in narco-musical expression (Misarachi 2016). Not surprisingly, Mexican authorities reacted with even stricter laws to curb the music's growing popularity, allegedly with the intention of decreasing the violence and ensuring social peace in the region (Chávez 2016).

In the following, we will consider different positions on the censorship of narco-music from multiple perspectives. Our interest lies in censorship as a thoroughly social practice, rather than in its legal aspects. We will examine how in Mexico, particularly in the state of Sinaloa, such restrictions are justified and implemented; we analyze the scope and repercussions of censorship policies on the narcocorrido and its practitioners; and we examine the interactions and discourses of those involved in the controversy. Our analysis is based on years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Sinaloa and in California. Simonett began her ethnomusicological research on narco-music as a transnational phenomenon in 1994 while attending the doctoral program in ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Burgos, a native of Culiacán, conducted fieldwork in Sinaloa in 2008 when he was a Ph.D. candidate in social psychology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain, and continued his research as a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, from 2014 to 2015.⁴ Moreno's Master's thesis examines the impact of Sinaloa's narco-culture on the local youth based on fieldwork he conducted in 2009. He received his doctoral degree in social psychology from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México by investigating how drug trafficking affects people's collective memory.

3 Alterado in colloquial language means upset, deranged, infuriated, or being under the influence of drugs. The music productions of the alterado movement are called pura enfermedad (pure disease). A representative example of this style is the music video "Leyenda M1" by El Komander, a corrido about the legendary Manuel Torres Félix (1958–2012), aka M1, a high-ranking leading member of the Sinaloa cartel. The film *Narco Cultura* by Shaul Schwarz (2013) documents this trend. Trailer and sample scenes can be watched in Simonett 2014b.

4 More recently (from 2014 to 2018), two ethnographic projects of his concerning narco-music were sponsored by grants from the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa, Culiacán, CONACyT-23476 and PROFAPI-UAS, 2015/047.

“Cartography of a Controversy”⁵

Due to the digitalization of contemporary music production and its availability on various internet platforms, narcocorridos can be heard almost anywhere in the world. However, it is in Sinaloa’s capital, Culiacán, one of Mexico’s most unstable and crime-ridden cities due to drug trafficking activities, where young people in particular “live” the narcocorrido (Burgos 2012, 2016; Moreno, Burgos and Valdez 2016; Garza 2016a). Culiacán and the surrounding sierra, home of the infamous Sinaloa Cartel, continues to inspire young composers, but having been fully absorbed into the transnational circuit of popular music production, the music reaches beyond the region and traverses the U.S.-Mexican border. Its scope and impact can be observed on both sides of the border, particularly because many of the involved actors were either born or permanently reside in the United States, but maintain strong family ties to Mexico (Edberg 2011; Burgos and Simonett 2020).

Rather than just listening and dancing to norteño or banda music, many young people nowadays also engage in socio-musical practices such as composing, performing, and disseminating narcocorridos that tell of the feats and defeats of the capos (drug lords), of agreements and disagreements between drug cartels, of corruption, crimes, massacres, beheadings, abductions, and disappearances. In short, narcocorridos reflect their experiences, practices, and ways of positioning themselves in transnational contexts ravaged by violence and drug trafficking: “Narcocorridos, specifically YouTube narcocorrido videos, are aesthetic productions generated from ‘the margins.’ As symbolic responses to experienced realities, the content of this genre is constantly adapting to changing historical, political, and cultural conditions” (Burgos and Simonett 2020, 116). No wonder, then, that the song lyrics have grown more violent and explicit over the last decade.

It is the increase of narco-music’s popularity among young people, however, that makes the narcocorrido genre so controversial. According to government authorities, narcocorridos not only celebrate drug trafficking and drug traffickers, but may also encourage young people to commit crimes or join the cartels, thus contributing to an already pervasive sense of social anxiety and insecurity. Based on these arguments, narco-artists such as Gerardo Ortiz, Calibre 50, and Enigma Norteño have recently been denied permission to perform in the state of Sinaloa (Bustamante 2016; Redacción El Debate 2016). Considered a “social risk” by the government, the narcocorrido has been demonized (Garza, 2016b; Ramírez-Pimienta 2011), stigmatized (Valenzuela et al. 2017), vilified as “enemy of the state” (Mondaca 2012), and those who practice and are fond of it criminalized (Nateras 2016). Sinaloa and other states implemented censorship despite the lack of evidence to prove a causal relationship between the violence related to drug trafficking and narco-music practices.

Censorship is always an act of domination, a display of state power, and, in the case of popular music, a strategy to discipline cultural expressions that contradict official ethics and values (Fuente 2005). Since censorship as a social practice is situated in public life, it generates discussions about freedom of speech as well as the measures’ justification, objectives, scope, and consequences (Coetzee 2007). Thus, legal attempts to control popular music’s production and

5 *Mapping controversies* is an analytical method developed by the French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour (2012) that focuses on the actants and their role in the sociotechnical network. We adopt Latour’s idea that a controversy always involves more than two positions that stand in opposition to each other: in this case, authorities vs. the musicians, or being for or against censorship. The complexity of such phenomena can only be understood if they are studied thoroughly.

consumption reveal the different positions, discourses, practices—of both control and subversion—, and the complex interactions and tensions between the state, the culture industries, the musicians, the composers, and the fans.

As Bruno Latour (2012) has pointed out, there are never only two positions surrounding a controversy; there are several different ones. It is never a clear-cut yes or no, for or against. The positions do not take shape in a social vacuum. Rather, they are anchored in political, social, and cultural conditions; historically situated, and shaped by ever-changing situations and circumstances. According to Latour (2008, 2012), to reveal the complexity of a controversy implies to thoroughly understand its context, the specificity of the case, and the array of the positions of the actors involved in the controversy. Thus, a careful ethnographic study of the local musical practices, as proposed by Antoine Hennion (2002, 2010), is necessary in order to do justice to the narcocorrido phenomenon. This, in turn, means detailing the socio-musical spaces where this music is produced, performed, consumed, shared, and talked about.

At the center of our ethnographic attention were socio-musical spaces where narcocorridos are typically performed and consumed, such as live concerts, fairs, dances, discotheques, cantinas, and parties of individuals not related to trafficking. We also attended rehearsals by a variety of music groups, acquired cassettes and CDs from street vendors, and listened extensively to the radio. We interviewed a number of musicians who play in local bands that compose and perform narcocorridos as part of their repertoire, as well as young amateurs whose musical preferences include narcocorridos.

Acts of Power: Narcocorrido Censorship in Sinaloa

The first censorship policy in Sinaloa was implemented in 1987 by the government in a socio-political context that furthered the visibility of drug trafficking and drug traffickers in everyday life, as well as the rising popularity of the narcocorrido (Astorga 1995, 1997; Ramírez-Pimienta 1998, 2004, 2011). The media played their part in promulgating the narco lifestyle through excessive coverage (Córdova 2005). Together with the culture industries, they portrayed the narco as a subversive but mythical and heroic figure whose glamorous lifestyle, adventures, and stories became indispensable elements in the composition of new corridos. One of the favored motifs on cassette covers in the 1990s was the singer posing as a narco, featuring heavy gold chains and lavish clothing, pickup trucks, cell phones, and weaponry (Fig. 1–3). In this way, the figure of the drug trafficker was consolidated as a cultural icon of conspicuous consumption (Astorga 1995; Edberg 2011; Fernández 2011).



Fig. 1-3: Cassettes and CDs from the 1990s. Photos by Helena Simonett.

To counter the growing popularity of narco-culture, the Sinaloan government launched the 1987 Festival Cultural (cultural festival) under the auspices of the State Program of Justice and Public Security. According to the director of the Sinaloan Institute of Culture (ISIC), María Luisa Miranda Monrreal, the festival aimed to offer citizens a different (in her words, “a better”) prospect for social coexistence and spiritual well-being by promoting and diffusing (the right kind of) art and culture: “a joyful, festive and real alternative to the phenomenon of violence [...], a renewed affirmation of this culture by and for the people of Sinaloa” (cited in Burgos 2012, 125, translation by the authors). Under the pretext “to build a better place to live together” (Montoya and Fernández 2009), the diffusion of narcocorridos via radio, television, and the press was prohibited.

But these legal measures taken to curb the popularity of the narcocorrido did not keep the genre from flourishing. Since ethical issues had never been the record industry’s guidelines when economic gains were at stake, the main production of narco-music shifted across the border, where transnational music labels operated outside the legal reach of Mexican censorship (Simonett 2006b; Olmos 2005; Fernández 2011). To attract a new audience, one that was used to globally appealing music styles such as salsa or cumbia while at the same time aching for the “local” Mexican feel, norteño bands and Sinaloan bandas adapted their production to the changing taste (Burgos 2016). Soon, young people on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border began to listen to—and eventually reappropriate—the musical genre.

Between 2001 and 2003 several regional Mexican governments (gobiernos estatales), particularly in the Northern part of the country, signed agreements to banish the narcocorrido. Program directors at radio and television stations had to follow suit. The omnipresence of drug trafficking and the aggravated violence were seen as justification for implementing such measures. Banning narco-music from public networks was thought to be an important measure against artistic expressions of violence and crime, and thus a step towards ensuring public order and security, upholding public morality, and protecting children and minors from harm.

During the presidency of Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), the fight against drug trafficking intensified. Within two months of taking office, around 20,000 soldiers were involved in operations across the country. The purpose was to recuperate the spaces occupied by drug trafficking, re-establish the rule of law, and recover public safety (Osorno 2009). The government treated the problem as a matter of national emergency. However, the strategy only revealed the failure of the State to combat organized crime. Despite the increase in public security spending, instability did not diminish, and criminal structures continued to function even after the arrest (or death) of high-profile traffickers. Overall, drug related activities proliferated, and the economic power of the traffickers grew (Ovalle 2010). Violence among rival drug cartels escalated and spilled into society at large. By the end of Calderón’s term, the war on drugs had caused over 121,000 fatalities, most of them civilian casualties (Redacción Proceso 2013).

Under these socio-political circumstances, censorship of narcocorridos developed from being a preventive measure to being part of a strategy of direct intervention to combat drug trafficking. In 2009, Mexican authorities proposed bills to punish artists whose performances trigger criminal acts as subject to the Federal Law of Organized Crime (Comunicación Social 2011a, 2011b; Ibarra 2010). In addition, the governor of Sinaloa modified the State Regulation of the Alcohol Law to prohibit the performance or broadcasting of narcocorridos in places where alcohol was sold (Secretaría General de Gobierno 2011). Failure to comply with the decree

resulted in a monetary fine, the withdrawal of the license for the sale of alcohol, and the provisional or permanent closure of the establishment. This official persecution of musicians and composers of narcocorridos presumed that they were directly linked to organized crime by, for example, engaging in activities such as money laundering. The highly publicized arrest and imprisonment of the Texas-based norteño musician and Latin Grammy winner Ramón Ayala in December 2009 in Tepoztlán, Morelos, for alleged links with organized crime was seen as further proof. As a result, the tightened regulations reinforced the public stigmatization of young people as a societal group. In addition, the belief that young people would be enticed to commit crimes just by listening to narcocorridos widely circulated in the media and influenced public opinion (Contreras 2010; León 2010).

Conditions of violence, instability, and the impact of drug trafficking further increased under president Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018). More than 58,000 murders were committed during the first three years of his government (Redacción Animal Político 2016; Redacción SinEmbargo 2017). By June 2018, the number had doubled. Event organizers cancelled numerous concerts and performances at local fairs throughout the country due to the perception that the music contributed to the rampant violence. Among the artists that were denied access to the stage were popular bands such as Los Tigres del Norte, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, El Komander, Gerardo Ortiz, Calibre 50, Colmillo Norteño, and Los Buitres de Culiacán. The official justification for the measure was civil protection and safety.

The censorship of popular music functions as a mechanism of social control exercised by a (dominant) group over the conduct of the members of another (weaker) group (González Sánchez 2016, 91). This battle often takes place in public spaces that fulfill specific social functions, such as radio and television. Indeed, Mexico's Federal Law on Radio and Television forbids the transmission of news, messages, or propaganda of any kind that are contrary to the security of the State or public order (Congreso de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 2009). Article 63 of the Federal Law on Radio and Television states that

[a]ll transmissions that cause the corruption of language and those contrary to good morals are forbidden, whether through malicious expressions, words or lewd images, ambiguous phrases and scenes, *the apology of violence or crime*; it also prohibits everything that is degrading or offensive to the civic cult of heroes and religious beliefs, or discriminatory towards races; as well as the use of low comedy resources and offensive sounds. (Justicia 2020, translation and italics by the authors)

Although the dissemination of narcocorridos falls under this law, in 2011, a parliamentary group of the conservative Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), represented by Federal Deputy Armando Corona Rivera, proposed to amend article 63. In order “to avoid the unintentional apology of violence or crime in the media resulting in the prevention of crime in Mexican youth” (Corona Rivera 2011a, translation by the authors), they proposed to specify the expression “the apology of violence or crime” that would explicitly address narcocorridos:

The apology of criminal acts is: To express, describe and present images with an explicit content of admiration for crime; homicides, mutilated or bloodied victims and the material wealth generated by criminal actions. (Corona Rivera 2011a, translation by the authors)

The same parliamentary group simultaneously proposed a reform of the Law on the Offenses against Printing with the aim to further define actions that were considered an apology of

violence and crime, such as “enunciating, describing and presenting images with an explicit content of admiration for delinquency; for homicides, for mutilated or bloodied victims and for the wealth derived by criminal actions” (Corona Rivera 2011b, translation by the authors). According to Human Right’s specialist Juan Carlos Arjona,

[t]his proposal was presented after the peak in violence registered in 2011 in Mexico derived from a failed policy on security, in the context of the prosecution of crimes against health (drugs). In these circumstances, the press reported the appearance of mutilated bodies on public roads, through which organized crime sought to intimidate individuals and authorities in the region, showing their strength and impunity. (Arjona Estévez 2018, 18)

With the above amendments to the federal law, the Ministry of the Interior was empowered to regulate the transmission of narcocorridos on radio and television as well as to stipulate sanctions for any type of defense or praise of criminal acts through song. For some state legislators, however, sanctions were no guarantee of achieving the stated goals. In the words of an authority of the state of Durango:⁶

[E]nding such expressions will not end the country’s criminal acts, and it is most likely impossible to measure how much violence is reduced by not transmitting them [narcocorridos] through any channels. What will happen is that prohibiting them in practice (at least in Durango) will put an end to the commission of a crime: the apology of violence. Most importantly: fewer people (especially children) will idolize the drug traffickers because they will listen less to their songs. (Quoted in Lozano 2014, translation by the authors)

In Sinaloa, where in 2011 the performance or broadcasting of narcocorridos in places where alcohol was sold was prohibited by law, governor Mario López Valdez blamed the music for the murder of seven youths during the Carnival in Mazatlán: “At such late hours of the night, with armed people and people who were drunk or under the influence of some drugs; suddenly a music gushed forth that heated up their blood. What happened? Seven young people lost their lives, and some more were left wounded” (López Valdez, quoted in Cadín 2011). He believed that “[n]o one can rule out that [narco-music] incites, that it provokes, or somehow causes the commission of crimes” (López Valdez, quoted in Burgos 2012, 139). Narcocorridos create false heroes and persuade children to idolize them, the governor thus claimed. He downplayed censorship as a repressive act on the part of the government, arguing that, after all, people could still listen to the music on the streets, in their cars, at home or private parties.

As mentioned above, during the past years, the number of cancellations of live performances by narco-artists has increased. Among the most controversial cases was the performance of El Komander at the Santa Rita fair in Chihuahua in 2013. The Los Angeles-based artist had gained fame through his violent and graphic corridos that had become the core of the movimiento alterado. Since El Komander’s main repertoire consists of corridos that exalt criminal acts, the Chihuahua City Council requested a deposit prior to the concert as a guarantee that the artist would abide by the law (González Flores 2013). Nonetheless, El Komander performed narcocorridos and, thus, was fined 8,000 US dollars. Los Tigres del Norte had to pay a fine of 25,000 US dollars for violating Chihuahua law after performing their classic and “well-known ballad about Camelia the Texan—a woman who smuggles drugs into the United States and then murders her lover in a jealous rage” (Linthicum 2017; the song was originally released on the

6 Because the topic is quite sensitive, we keep all our sources confidential, unless we cite people whose names have been published elsewhere.

album *Los Tigres del Norte* 1974). Gerardo Ortiz was arrested by the Federal Police in Guadalajara in 2016 and later charged for “criminal exaltation” stemming from a music video that depicts the singer shooting a man in the head, tying up a woman, tossing her into the trunk of a car, and setting her on fire (Cobo 2016).

From a political point of view, censorship is a legitimate measure to prevent the circulation of material that is considered harmful, objectionable, or otherwise inconvenient. But contrary to the goal of its prohibition, the marketability of the narcocorrido only increased. For example, fines and concert cancellations contributed to El Komander’s image as an unruly man, and made him a hero in the eyes of his core fans. Censorship thus was appropriated by narco-musicians as a sociocultural practice that subverted its original intention to suppress their non-conforming voices. It is this intersection of domination and resistance through which power is exercised that now leads us to examine the positions of the censored musicians in more detail.

Subversive Tactics: Composing and Performing Narcocorridos Despite Censorship

According to Michel de Certeau,

a way of using imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of the state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces. [...] That is where the opacity of a “popular” culture could be said to manifest itself. (De Certeau 1988, 18, italics original)

Indeed, one of the artists’ most successful tactics to undermine state censorship has been to continually re-signify its meaning—that is, to *utilize* it to enhance and position their products, in much the same way as Los Tigres del Norte had manipulated the corrido prohibido label to their commercial advantage three decades before. On the 1989 LP cover of their self-censored corridos, the five artists are depicted as villains (Fig. 4). As if torn out of a newspaper, only the first part of the title beneath the photograph can be read: “Los famosos corridos de Los Tigres del Norte fueron prohibidos porqu[e]” (The famous corridos of Los Tigres del Norte were banned becaus[e]), leaving it to the album buyer to speculate about the reasons for the ban. A red stamp with the word “PROHIBIDOS” across it, similar to the parental warning label for explicit music lyrics used by the U.S. music industry, turns this product into a desirable “forbidden fruit.”



Fig. 4: Los Tigres del Norte's "prohibited" music. Photo by Helena Simonett.

Later followed the corridos pesados (heavy corridos) and corridos perrones (bad-ass corridos), and eventually the corridos alterados or enfermos (sick corridos). All of them subvert the stigma that was officially attached to them by affirming the music's "harmfulness." In such way, the term censorship assumes different meanings through which people destabilize political discourse, allowing for the opening of spaces for alternative discourses. Rather than contesting the arguments that are used against them, the censored employ the same arguments to resist, counteract, and acquire strength and visibility. Narco-artists make use of what Judith Butler has called a "hyperbolic performance" (1993, 23), an excessive public demonstration of what has been prohibited. This includes the performance and staging of cultural elements that are objectionable or inconvenient to censors.

How musicians actually operate under conditions of censorship and how they legitimize their music depends on the particular circumstances in which they work. A band such as Los Tigres del Norte, for example, stages grand, pre-programmed events, where they exclusively play their own songs, a huge repertoire accumulated over the almost five decades of their musical career. At most smaller venues, however, musicians cannot simply play a preset list of pieces, but must respond to the spontaneous demands of their audience. They must learn the latest hits of the better-known bands and be flexible enough to perform across genres, including narcocorridos. "It is what people are asking for," an U.S.-based artist, who wants to stay anonymous, explains. "If we don't play these songs [...], then people are going to say 'these roosters'⁷! As if they didn't know! [...]. If we want to reach their hearts, or make people like our music,

⁷ Expressions such as gallo valiente, "brave rooster" or simply "rooster," are commonly used in Sinaloa to refer to a potent, manly man (see Simonett 2006).

then, by necessity, we have to include what's popular right now" (interview with musician by César Burgos, 19 March 2015, Oakland, California, translation by the authors). Another Mexican musician-composer who resides in California confirms:

When the fever of the alterado movement gained ground, we said: "they are already all around, destroying the music: our Mexican music." At the beginning we listened to it and said: "That music is so bad!" Even now there are people who say that this music is bad. To them it's bad [...] but not to the youths. It's what is peaking. [...] We play [the corridos alterados] because we have to please them [the young audience]. [...] We have to be attentive to what's coming out, the new trends. (Interview with musician by César Burgos, 16 March 2015, Oakland, California, translation by the authors)

Much like former times when musicianship was seen as a trade, like masonry or carpentry, today Mexican musicians see themselves as "service providers" and their compositions as merchandise. They vehemently reject the accusations of complicity with drug trafficking even though, as one composer told us, drug trafficking "has opened many doors for us to work. [...] We write about what is given to us as data. We don't try to investigate if it's true, if it's a lie. What for?" (interview with composer by César Burgos, 10 November 2009, Culiacán, translation by the authors). Since composing corridos on commission has become a risky task, artists take various precautions, such as dissociating themselves from their clients or rejecting any responsibility for the content of the songs:

They ask me to compose the song. I do it and they stick with it. Sometimes I even tell them, "you know what? Don't tell anyone who composed it for you." [...] Because it already belongs to them, I don't have anything to do with the song any longer [...] I try not to tell any details; where it was recorded, or anything. Just, "send me the information and what you want me to say." I'll sort them out and that's it. (Interview with composer by César Burgos, 16 March 2015, Oakland, California, translation by the authors)

Because numerous artists involved in the business of commissioned corridos have been threatened or murdered—including the legendary Chalino Sánchez in 1992 and Valentín Elizalde in 2006 for singing the "wrong" corridos—artists are careful with whom they associate themselves.⁸ Some refrain from composing narcocorridos altogether, only performing them when requested by the public, as the vocalist of a well-known band of Culiacán explains:

There are times when [clients] come to us with lyrics. We listen to them, [the members of the group] get together and if it suits us, we record it [...] What we don't want is for it to be an offensive corrido, or for it to mention people who shouldn't be mentioned [...] Well, because it scares us [...] A friend called me from Phoenix, where we were about to go for work and he says, "Listen, record one of those sick corridos, those that really hit." I said, "Look, I'd rather be eating beans with cheese here [in peace]." (Interview with singer by César Burgos, 10 January 2009, Culiacán, translation by the authors)

The norteño group Los Tucanes de Tijuana that was banned in 2008 to perform in their namesake border city, insisted: "It's music. We want people to have fun, to be entertained. I think we all have a right to freedom of expression" (Mario Quintero, quoted in Burgos 2012, 138–39). And so, they turned to the very corrido to publicize their opinion:

8 According to banda musicians residing in Los Angeles who regularly accompanied the late singer and to his widow whom one of us authors, Helena Simonett, interviewed in 1996, Chalino's death is believed to be connected to the commissioned corridos which he often performed live (see Simonett 2001a: 241–54).

De muy joven yo deseaba, que me hicieran un corrido.
 Nomás les hacían a narcos, y a los que morían a tiros.
 Por fin se me hizo justicia, aquí va uno de los míos.
 Cada quien, es lo que quiere, y hace lo que le dan ganas.
 Yo escucho narcocorridos, y no vendo hierba mala.
 Así es que no inventen cosas. Es la historia mexicana.

(From a very young age, I wanted a corrido to be written about me.
 They only made them about narcos, and about those who were shot to death.
 At last justice was brought to me, here goes one of mine.
 Everyone is what they want to be, and does what they please.
 I hear narcocorridos, and I don't sell weed.
 So don't make up things. This is Mexican history.)

(Excerpt from "No solo de traficante" [Not Only of Traffickers], 1997, translation by the authors)

In the spoken lead-in to another of Los Tucanes' songs, "Los Chiquinarcos," a voice, pretending to be a reporter, asks: "Hello, how are you? Look, we're doing a special on corridos, what do you think about them being banned on the radio?" Another voice answers: "Look, buddy, they may be banned on the radio. But in my pickup truck, never!" (translation by the authors). A recent corrido by Calibre 50 featuring El Komander ("Qué tiene de malo" [What's Bad About It], 2014) includes a conversation about favorite corridos. One of them asks: "How much do you think I like corridos? What the hell of a fuss do you have with me? [...] Listening to corridos, buddy, I assure you, doesn't make me a bad Mexican." At 1:40 minutes, the two vocalists continue to converse with each other about having a taste for graphic corridos, particularly the titles by Calibre 50 and by El Komander: "And you, how many have you robbed? And I, have I killed anyone? No one, buddy, no one" (translation by the authors).

Whether merchandise or simply entertainment, musicians and composers do not believe that banning narcocorridos is an effective measure for fighting drug trafficking and violence. In the words of a musician from Culiacán: "If it were, we would collaborate so that the violence could end, we really would cooperate. We don't want violence. If [censorship] was a measure that could be used for that, we would accept it, of course" (interview by César Burgos, 2010, Culiacán, translation by the authors). The cancellations of events and surveillance of locales where live music is played not only affect the musicians' everyday lives, but also has adverse effects on audiences, as it controls their choice of musical preferences and entertainment forms.

Finding Loopholes:

Consuming and Disseminating Narcocorridos by Fans

To quote de Certeau again:

Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game [...], that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their

own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. (De Certeau 1988, 18)

Narcocorrido fans who did not want to forgo the pleasures of popular music began to engage in socio-musical practices to circumvent the restrictions implemented by the state governments, to find loopholes and inconsistencies, and to shift their maneuvers to spaces largely outside the reach of the State: the streets and the internet.

Street vending is an omnipresent feature of Culiacán's urban landscape and plays a significant role in the city's informal economy. Street vendors are concentrated in strategic places where there is a constant flow of people: in the city center, markets, bus stops, gas stations, beer outlets, taquerías (restaurants specializing in tacos, burritos, and other Mexican dishes) and outside small supermarkets (Burgos 2016; Mondaca 2012). They play narcocorridos on cheap boom boxes to promote their products: pirated music in mp3 format burned onto CDs (Fig. 4–6). Although piracy is a federal crime, distribution and consumption of pirated products are ubiquitous in everyday life. A street vendor explained: "I sell whatever my boss gives me. They bring me the records [...] We offer what people ask for, what's trending. [...] [They] ask me for a record or for a song. If I don't have it, I write it down and then I will get it" (interview by César Burgos, 2015, Culiacán, translation by the authors). The sale of such products occurs in the open, pointing to the complicity and corruption of the authorities. According to the street vendor: "Sometimes the police patrol passes by. They don't do anything, they don't even stop. They haven't done anything to me [...] I don't know, maybe the boss bribes them so that they'll let him work" (ibid.). Access to narcocorridos is facilitated by the fact that pirated products are inexpensive and ever-present. As a young listener confirms: "I'm not in the habit of buying the original records [...] as one is supposed to do. In fact, going from one locale to another, drinking with friends, we come across [a street stand] at every corner" (interview by César Burgos, 2014, Culiacán, translation by the authors). Indeed, production and consumption of narcocorridos proliferate through informal trade. Access to musical novelties occurs on the streets. It is also where productions by local groups are promoted.





Fig. 5-7: Products of street vendors. Photos by Julián Alveiro Almonacid Buitrago and César Burgos, Culiacán, 2019.

The internet and social networks have also become important spaces for the distribution of censored cultural products. Digital platforms such as iTunes, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Spotify facilitate production, diffusion, accessibility, consumption, and interaction between artists and their audiences. In this virtual environment, the popularity of narcocorridos has increased exponentially. By using spaces of communication that are outside of state control, censorship becomes irrelevant, as one young listener explained:

I don't care [...] I would be against them if they wouldn't let me listen to [corridos], if they would take them away. But one can easily listen to them from pirated discs, the internet. They just take them off the radio [...] I don't care, because I find them and listen to them elsewhere. (Interview by César Burgos, 2009, Culiacán, translation by the authors)

The internet is a crucial component of today's musical practices as it offers its users immediate satisfaction, reduces costs, allows access to music without the need for sophisticated technology, and makes it possible to listen to the most recent music, often even before it has been released for sale (Reguillo 2012; Simonett and Burgos 2015).

Concluding Thoughts

Popular culture has often been held responsible for many of society's ills (Chastagner 1999). But as Herman Gray 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" (Gray 1989, 143). Hence, it is not the purpose of this article to advocate for or against narcocorrido censorship or whether freedom of expression should or should not override the ban of this music. Rather, we consider the implementation of censorship as a productive power; that is, it not only represses and silences voices but also engenders various kinds of discourses, as well as new socio-musical practices. It is productive in the sense that it forms part of the complex relations between, and meaningful actions of, the people involved in the controversy, such as authorities, musicians, composers, and audiences.

Since the performance of music is an intangible art form, it often escapes the reach of censors who try to repress it. Indeed, legal efforts to restrict the performance and dissemination of narcocorridos had paradoxical consequences, as they overall furthered the popularization of the genre. Moreover, Mexican censorship policies were ineffective as a preventive measure to curb the production and trafficking of drugs, or to lessen drug-related violence and social anxiety and insecurity. Thus, censorship of popular music cannot be the answer to Mexico's enormous sociopolitical problems.

The young musicians and listeners of narcocorridos engage in an array of creative activities in order to preempt the legal measures that ban the genre: they compose, play and promote the music; they listen and dance to the music; they share and talk about their musical preferences. They take advantage of the inconsistencies of the legislation and find loopholes to subvert the norms and established order. The fact that narco-music continues to flourish in Sinaloa and other states shows that censorship does not prevent young people from producing, accessing, disseminating, and enjoying this music; they just have to be more inventive in doing so.

Finally, we do not aim to downplay the graphic violence of today's "hyperbolic" performance style and audiovisual productions related to drug trafficking (Valenzuela et al. 2017). In Northern Mexico, violence pervades everyday life in varying degrees. People may respond to social forms of violence, such as inequalities and injustices, with personal forms of violence. But there is no evidence that composing, performing, or consuming narco-music are activities that have a direct impact on the pandemic violence in Northern Mexico caused by the drug cartels. Moreover, one might also argue that the corrido is more than a reflection of the violent conditions in which it exists. Folklorist John McDowell (2000), for example, holds that rather than just celebrating, and thus perpetuating, violent behavior, the corrido has a regulatory and healing function within the community affected by these very same acts of violence. With regards to the narcocorridos 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, and as an example of an increased visibility for what has become allowed and tolerated by modern society.

Because popular culture never exists outside of power relations, as Fiske argued so persuasively (2011 [1989]), it often gets caught in the struggle between agents' different positions, discourses, and practices. In the case of music that is in one way or another related to the phenomenon of drug trafficking, agents such as the state, culture industries, musicians, composers, and audiences often take antagonistic positions. While attempts to control popular corridos on the part of state authorities has a long history, the common people's subversive tactics do as well. Los Tigres del Norte, for example, continue to sing their now-classic corridos about contraband and betrayal, even under the threat of having to pay huge sums as penalty, or go to jail. To face censorship means to remain true to their epithet "los ídolos del pueblo" (the idols of the common people). At the same time, this kind of authentication of one's insubordination helps to build a larger number of fans and followers on the internet. To conclude, the corrido, which was historically a subversive expression of Mexico's lower classes, continues to hold the same power in its current form as narcocorrido—a clear indication that turning the drug war into a cultural war will not resolve Mexico's actual problems.

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Abstract (English)

After briefly presenting the history of the narcocorrido and its censorship in Mexico, we assess the different positions regarding the sanctioning of narco-music from multiple perspectives. Our interest lies in censorship as a social practice, rather than in its legal aspects. We examine how in Mexico, particularly in the state of Sinaloa, such restrictions have been justified and implemented, and analyze the scope and repercussions of censorship policies on the narcocorrido and its practitioners. Furthermore, we examine the interactions and discourses of those involved in the controversy.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Nach einer kurzen Zusammenfassung der Geschichte des Narcocorridos, einer Balladenform, in deren Mittelpunkt Mexikos Drogenhändler stehen, werden die verschiedenen Positionen gegenüber der Zensur dieser Musik beleuchtet. Unser Augenmerk richtet sich dabei auf die Zensur als soziale Praxis, nicht auf ihre legalen Aspekte, denn das Verbot der Narco-Musik in Mexiko, insbesondere im Bundesstaat Sinaloa, ist äußerst kontrovers. Wir zeigen auf, wie die Zensur gerechtfertigt und umgesetzt wurde, analysieren den Umfang und die Auswirkungen der Zensurpolitik auf den Narcocorrido und seine Akteure und erläutern die Interaktionen und Diskurse verschiedener Beteiligten.

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