

## **The dark side of transnational Latinidad: narcocorridos and the branding of authenticity**

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In *Contemporary Latin@/Latin American Media*, edited by Arlene Davila and Yeidy Rivero.  
New York University Press (forthcoming 2014).

On October 20, 2011, *Billboard* put together the First *Billboard* Mexican Music Awards. The event was co-organized with Telemundo, the second largest Spanish-language television network in the United States. The Awards would recognize excellence in *Billboard's* Regional Mexican Music category. Prior to 2011, Regional Mexican Music was recognized during the *Billboard* Latin Music Awards. Yet, as a testament to the sheer power of the Regional Mexican category, *Billboard* and Telemundo bet that the standalone ceremony would be a television and marketing success. They were correct. Five million people, almost 2.8 million adults in the coveted 18-49 demographic, saw the show. The ceremony also became one of the five highest ranked entertainment shows of 2011 for Telemundo, and won the ratings war in Los Angeles *and* Miami among men 18-34 (Cobo 2011). *Billboard's* Regional Mexican category refers to a radio format that includes banda, norteño, mariachi, grupero and ranchera music. This format is the most popular among Mexican-Americans in the United States, due in part to the large number of immigrants from northern Mexico who reside in the United States. Cementing the category's relevance is the fact that Regional Mexican accounts for more than 60% of sales in *Billboard's* broader Latin Music category. By all these accounts and its success in Los Angeles, a city dominated by Mexican-Americans, *and* Miami, a city dominated by Cuban-Americans, Puerto Ricans,

and immigrants from other Latin American nations, this ceremony was of huge significance to Latinos in the United States and to the media industries that court them (Cobo 2008).

In 2011, the big winners of the Mexican Music Awards were Gerardo Ortiz, who took the six major awards, including Artist of The Year Award, and Jenni Rivera, who took home the Female Artist of the Year Award and a special award called El Premio de la Estrella for her positive influence beyond music. Ortiz's awards were garnered for two very successful albums named after two narcocorrido hits: "Ni Hoy Ni Mañana" ("Not Today Nor Tomorrow") and "Morir y Existir" ("To Die and To Exist"). Rivera got her awards for the imprint she has left throughout her career and for a double-disc collection called "Joyas Prestadas" (Fonovisa/Universal) in which she re-interpreted iconic Mexican ballads banda style. Speaking to the sustained success of these two artists, Ortiz and Rivera also dominated the 2012 *Billboard* Mexican Music Award ceremony. Ortiz received seven more *Billboards*, including Artist of the Year. Rivera repeated as the Female Artist of the Year and received two other awards.

This article examines the convergence of Ortiz and Rivera in these two important award ceremonies, a convergence that will not be repeated. Rivera died in a plane crash in Mexico during the writing of this article and though sales of her music have skyrocketed, her success, from here on, will be posthumous and so will be her awards. Besides these two ceremonies, the careers of Ortiz and Rivera have two significant similarities, which are the reason for this article.

First, their careers are intimately tied to narcocorridos, a style of music and lyrics that narrates the lives, deeds, and adventures of people engaged in drug traffic. Ortiz is today one of the most important narcocorrido singers. Rivera began her career as a narcocorrido singer and though over time she has shed off some of her connections to the narco imaginary, her original success was due to her ability to sing the narcocorrido from a female standpoint.

Second, their personal brands and their brands' circulation in the music industry harbor notions of authenticity that rely on mystifying claims about place and biography. Both singers are from California (Ortiz is from Pasadena; Rivera is from Long Beach), a place distant from the daily violence engendered by the cartels in Mexico, but this has not

stop them from performing their narcocorridos in the first person, a narrative trope that helps give authenticity to a brand that aims to connect fans with experiences of violence.

This article argues that just as the centenary magazine *Billboard* uses the industry term Regional Mexican to designate music that may or may not originate in Mexico, Ortiz and Rivera constitute their commercial identities in relation to a fictitious imaginary in which identity, place, and consumption are central to authenticity. Considering their efforts to highlight their connection to Mexico and the manner their music circulates with their fans who, for instance, regularly comment that Ortiz sings “la pura verdad” (“the real truth”), authenticity matters. Their efforts to construct the narcocorrido brand and *Billboard*’s Mexican Regional term call attention to the problems of validating this hugely successful music genre among Mexican-American fans even though the narcocorrido is bound to Mexico and to experiences of violence.

#### ***Narcocorridos and the branding of authenticity***

There is a parallelism between singers who, like Ortiz and Rivera, embody a narco-identity while claiming to be from Culiacan or Sinaloa, and *Billboard*’s use of the term Regional Mexican to classify and brand narcocorridos. The deployment of a narco-identity and place are essential to a ‘brand culture’ that hides the deterritorialized character of the music industry today. As Sarah Banet-Weiser posits, brand culture refers to the process by which the converging relationships between marketing, a product, and consumers “become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships” (2012, 3). Claiming thus that embodiment and place are central to the branding of artists and media genres that give industrial meaning to the term narcocorrido is more than claiming that place has become commoditized. In our contemporary culture, branding is central to the meanings we give to cultural experiences and hence branding is not only about capitalism but it is also, as Banet-Weiser notes, about identity. The claims of Mexicanity and the way performers like Ortiz and Rivera have embodied the narco-brand are thus not only commercial tactics. They are also the means by which Mexican-American urban youth, who are the typical consumers of narcocorridos, reconfigure their marginalization through the tactical deployment of counter-hegemonic fantasies that narcocorridos activate, even if these fantasies simultaneously stress the deterritorialized character of the music.

Deterritorialization here is more than simply the lack of ground or locality; it is also the cultural ruse that underscores the music's lack of responsiveness to social conditions in Mexico and/or the United States and a tactic consumers use to connect to fantasies of power and sufficiency.

Connecting narcocorrido performers, urban Mexican-American youth, and transnational music corporations like *Billboard* is a relatively simple truth: The narco brand is all about authenticity, and this is not an oxymoron. Banet-Weiser (2012) notes the relevant connections that branding has with authenticity in contemporary culture. ["The] process of branding," she writes, "impacts the way we understand who we are, how we organize ourselves in the world, what stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (5). Branding is thus essential to self-identity. Thus, branding becomes intertwined with the personal and social processes by which we define our authentic self, including the social practices, objects, and knowledges that can yield, for us and, often, to us, an aura of authenticity. Not all practices, objects, or knowledges do this and part of the labor of being a functioning modern individual lies in learning to recognize the meaning of authenticity in practices, objects, and knowledges (7). One of the most significant lessons in Banet-Weiser's work is that the relationship of branding to capitalism does not preclude capitalism from being part of the social processes by which people legitimately construct authenticity, even if this authenticity is built through consumption (8). In a world where social relations are often commercial, the authentic and the commercial cannot be opposites. Authenticity and the branding of authenticity can be seen as overlapping processes. This means that the narco brand can indeed be about authenticity and the question then is: how is the branding of authenticity achieved in narco-culture? And, for whom is this branding useful?

Banet-Weiser points out that some categories of life are particularly susceptible to be conceived as authentic, and these categories include self-identity, politics, creativity, and religious experiences. As I show in this and the following sections, the narco brand connects self-identity to politics and this is possible because of the cultural labor of performers, consumers, and institutions. The use of culture as politics is a learned process that helps individuals interpret their lives in relationship to some social transactions that take meaning through the lens of power. The political is not a pre-given category of life, but

it is the part of our lives that, through a particular optic, becomes subject to power. Because it is learned, the political is the result of social processes that rely on the semantic actions of institutions. Hence, the political underpinnings of the narco brand are experienced in relationship to identity, but depend on broad institutional support and affirmation. It is this interrelation that defines the connection between narcocorrido performers, Mexican-American urban youth, and *Billboard*. How is it that this connection came to depend on and be defined by experiences of power?

***What are narcocorridos if not folklore?***

The narcocorrido connects to power because it belongs to narrative traditions historically connected to a counter-hegemonic stand. As such, it inherits cultural meanings that suggest that this musical genre is the proper narrative vehicle to speak against injustice and to do so from the position of the disenfranchised. This cultural baggage is the result of having inherited the meanings associated with the traditional folkloric music genre of the Mexican corrido. The corrido is one of the oldest and most enduring forms of musical folklore in Mexico. Reaching back centuries to Spanish narrative traditions, the corrido originated as an oral form for memorializing events and people. In simple poetic form, corridos told stories that mattered. Corridos are what Jesus Martin-Barbero (1993) would call a popular form of media: They originate among the popular classes and were meant to construct and reconstruct a version of reality from their standpoint. Unsurprisingly, corridos often have a counter-hegemonic potential.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Mexican corrido took a peculiar epic and counter-hegemonic form. Instead of emphasizing events as early corridos did, the Mexican corrido has, for more than a century, emphasized the deeds of men and women in their struggles against power. As Guillermo Hernández notes, Mexican corridos were the preferred cultural form for narrating the deeds of rebels during the Presidency of Porfirio Diaz in the last decade of the eighteenth century and ever since the corrido has retained a counter-hegemonic aura (1992, 324).

Distribution technologies changed the narrative conventions of corridos. As an oral form, corridos were indebted to the values and interests of a geographical region. They were responsive to locality. But already in the nineteenth century corridos were published

on sheets of paper and sold by the musicians that composed them. The publishing of corridos gave these narratives a new reach and cultural potential. Paper reaches farther than the singer's voice and lasts longer; publishing, thus, delinked the corrido from orality, locality, and from the present (Hernández 1992, 326). The record player engendered further transformations. Corridos became vehicles for stardom and their narrative conventions multiplied. Instead of being narrowly defined by the local, as were early corridos, or the epic, a common style during wartime, corridos were also written to tell the lives and deeds of both common people and of criminals in their struggles against the law. It is this particular type of counter-hegemonic gesture, complexly bound to anti-social behavior and culture that narcocorridos inherit.

Narcocorridos began to appear in the 1930s with titles like "Maldita Droga" and "Por Morfina y Cocaína" (Ramirez-Pimienta 2011, 13). Always exploring the moral life and deeds of drug dealers, the narcocorrido portrays a world from the point of view of the outlaw, making it an ideal vehicle for counterhegemonic storytelling, including fantasies against traditional social mores and against the state. The subgenre did not immediately succeed commercially. It took a few decades for the music to become popular. It was until the 1970s, a time in which Mexican drug cartels had grown and consolidated their influence around the growth, sale, and traffic of marijuana and heroine, that this lurid cultural genre gained broad popularity. In 1974, the little-known norteño band Los Tigres del Norte recorded *Contrabando y Traición* and the title track, also known as "La Camelia," became one of the biggest hits in the history of norteño music. With this and other narcocorridos, Los Tigres del Norte became arguably the most influential Mexican regional band in history and redefined the narcocorrido genre, making it a cultural phenomenon that expanded from California, where they lived, worked, and recorded, to northern Mexico, where they became akin to matinee idols (Wald 2001).

Like Los Tigres' reach across national borders, the narcocorrido has always been a transnational cultural form (Ramirez-Pimienta 2011, 159). It geographically originated in northern Mexico and in the American Southwest. It is concerned with the drug trade, a social phenomenon that spans the world and importantly connects Mexico to the United States. And it is historically linked to transnational traditions that bind the music style to the U.S. and German migrations. This influence is the clearest in the two polka-based music

styles that are the aesthetic core of most contemporary narcocorridos: “norteño” and “banda” music.

In addition to being the two musical genres central to narcocorridos, banda and norteño music are the two leading music categories in the *Billboard* Regional Mexican album category. They are also the leading genres in the Regional Mexican radio format. Today, most of the playtime and most of the record sales in the Regional Mexican music category are for banda and norteño music, with artists like Ortiz, La Arrolladora Banda El Limón, Roberto Tapia, and Grupo Pesado, who, as an example, on the week of December 15, 2012 dominated the top five spots in *Billboard*'s Regional Mexican Song category (La Arrolladora Banda El Limón had two songs in the top five). Rivera was in fourteenth place with her song “La Misma Gran Señora.” These artists dominate sales with romantic ballads like “Solo Vine a Despedirme” (Ortiz), “Mirando al Cielo” (Roberto Tapia), “Mi Promesa (Grupo Pesado), and “Cabecita Dura” and “El Primer Lugar” (La Arrolladora Banda El Limón) (*Billboard*'s website for the week of of December 15 of 2012). This may mean that the romantic ballad remains the most important subgenre of banda and norteño. But it also means that Regional Mexican is dominated by artists whose personal brand is closely associated with narcocorridos. Except for Grupo Pesado, which has made a public rejection of narcocorridos, the rest of the top 5 have a musical repertory that includes narcocorridos (Contreras 2008). La Arrolladora Banda El Limón may only have a few, but Ortiz and Tapia are two of the most important narcocorrido singers today. Rivera's life is closely connected to the narco imaginary. The appeal of these artists, even while singing romantic ballads, is undisputedly bound to a brand crafted through the performance of narcocorridos.

Today, narcocorridos, like all music, are distributed in cd and digital format and, like other musical genres, their online distribution is increasingly accounting for the majority of the sales. Since 2008, the early recordings of Rivera have been distributed by The Orchard, a gigantic multinational that specializes in digital distribution (Ben-Yehuda 2008). The Orchard, which globally controls more than 1.3 million songs and 5000 videos, locates, places, and markets songs in hundreds of digital stores like iTunes, eMusic, Google, Rhapsody, rdio, Spotify, and V CAST. They also sell songs with potential to become ring tones to mobile carriers like Verizon, Vodafone, and Bell Canada. Although The Orchard

also distributes to physical music stores, their digital distribution services are the central cog in their business model.

Digital technologies of circulation have again left an imprint in the corrido in general and the narcocorrido in particular, facilitating on the one hand the production and distribution of narcocorridos across nations, but also straining the ability of the genre to continue connecting to the counter-hegemonic and the experiential. Thanks to direct sales as songs and albums, and cd distribution schemas based on websites rather than physical music stores, contemporary narcocorridos are less constrained than ever by place and nation than vinyl recordings, tapes, or cds. This has meant that stars based in California, such as Ortiz and Rivera, can have instant access to the rest of the U.S. territory, a feature key to Latino artists whose fans are increasingly located in cities and towns without a music store that specializes in Latinas/os. As importantly, digital distribution allows these artists the ability to quickly reach the Mexican market, which constitutes a sizable portion of their music and concert sales. If in the 1970s the narcocorrido had to make the arduous trip from California, where it was often recorded, as in the case of Los Tigres del Norte, to the rest of the United States and Northern Mexico, digital technologies and online distribution have made this process instantaneous. As relevant to the sale and radio playtime of narcocorridos, online distribution and internet radio has meant that narcocorridos can bypass the censoring efforts of several Mexican states including Sinaloa, Baja California Norte, and Chihuahua. Digital technologies hence allow the relatively unrestricted circulation of the music, in spite of the efforts by the Mexican state to restrict it (Amaya 2013).

Although narcocorridos are not the only type of song played in banda and norteño, they are so important to Regional Mexican that I argue that the narcocorrido is one of the most important musical forms for the 32 million Mexican-Americans. It is because of narcocorridos that Los Tigres rose to the top of the Latino music world 40 years ago; it is because of narcocorridos that Rivera had a shot at being “The Diva of Banda Music”; and it is because of narcocorridos that Ortiz, very recently, skyrocketed to the top of the Regional Mexican and Latin charts. Significant to this article, it is because of narcocorridos and digital music distribution that Rivera’s last recording, the double-disc *Joyas Prestadas*, skyrocketed to the top of the *Billboard* Latin Albums chart days after her death. Marketed



individually, on the week of December 22, *Joyas Prestadas Pop* sat at number 2 and *Joyas Prestadas Banda* sat at number 4. Two of the top five spots in this coveted category were Rivera's.

Narcocorridos are central to the branding of some of the top stars in the Regional Mexican and the Latin categories, giving these singers and musical ensembles the branding of authenticity. After all, it is the narcocorrido, and not the romantic ballad, that connects music consumers to the present social realities of violence and power differentials that too commonly define the lives of Latinas/os. In addition, because narcocorridos continue the corrido tradition, they have the power to be perceived as popular, not mass, music. Fans routinely argue that they like narcocorridos because they "tell the pure truth," and this truth-telling capacity connects back to the old corridos' role as a valid repository of a community's memory, a place for historicity and the creation of proper heroes (Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta 2004). This truth-telling capacity yields authenticity to contemporary narcocorridos, to the singers who use them for branding, and to *Billboard*, a transnational magazine and corporation that in using the moniker "Regional Mexican" aims to classify banda and norteño as music connected to a place, Mexico, and to the flesh-and-blood communities of Mexicans, not simply to audiences. Given this, it is reasonable to stipulate the following: If, as Angharad Valdivia and Isabel Molina argue, Latinas/os are the 'it' category of consumers and audiences among marketers and advertisers in the United States, the 'taste' for narcocorridos has to be seen as one of the most significant developments in Latino and U.S. culture in the last decades.

#### ***A place for transnationalism and deterritorialization***

Today, many narcocorrido singers are based in northern Mexico, near the places where the influence of the drug cartels is greatest. In towns and cities like Ciudad Juarez, Culiacan, Tijuana, and Nuevo Laredo, the ubiquitous presence of drug-related events has inspired complex cultural responses, including cultural forms and practices that support the cartels, and others that reject them. Some narcocorridos are thus popular responses to these social conditions. Small, local banda or norteño ensembles in Sinaloa, for instance, are sometimes asked to compose a corrido in honor of someone killed in a drug related event. The song is later performed during the funeral as a matter of respect and as a symbol of

love for the deceased. Almost never recorded, these narcocorridos are an example of a folkloric, popular, tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Today, these truly popular narcocorridos are the minority. The majority of narcocorridos are the product of a cultural industrial apparatus dominated by the interests and needs of capitalism and transnational music companies. The vinyl record facilitated the disconnection between corrido and place and initiated a process whereby the field of music became defined and dominated by stardom, commercialism, and branding. Digital distribution technologies have increased this process, participating in the growing deterritorialization of the corrido and its contemporary and dominant subgenre, the narcocorrido. Just like Los Tigres del Norte managed to become the early stars of the narcocorrido from California, away from Mexico and the violence brought about by the drug cartels, today, an increasing number of narcocorrido stars are based in the United States. In addition to those already mentioned, narcocorrido megastars who live in the United States at least part of the year include Juan Gabriel, Marco Antonio Solís, Adolfo Ángel, Pepe Aguilar, Los Huracanes del Norte, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, and Los Bravos del Norte, and many more (Ramirez-Pimienta 2011, 187). As importantly, the majority of narcocorridos are produced and recorded in the U.S. Southwest, with most recorded in California and Texas (though a growing number come from cities like Chicago and Detroit). The careers of Rivera and Ortiz are examples of the process by which the narcocorrido brand can exist as a signifier of deterritorialization.

Rivera was born in a household marked by narcocorridos (Quinones 2012). In 1988, her father Pedro Rivera, an immigrant from Mexico, founded the record label Cintas Acuario, which is credited with launching the career of the hugely famous narcocorrido singer and songwriter Chalino Sánchez. If musicians like Los Tigres have always represented the highly commercializable end of the narcocorrido, in the late 1980s and during the 1990s, Chalino (the moniker his fans prefer) represented the popular and the authentic. His lyrics seemed to have the proper amount of rural credibility that defined the original corrido, and his raspy, untrained, voice added authenticity to a music career that ended with violence. He was born in Badiraguato, a small town in the Sinaloa mountains that is notorious for being the original home of several of the most powerful drug cartels, including the Sinaloa Cartel, the biggest crime organization in the world. In and around

Badiraguato were born Pedro Áviles, the first Mexican drug kingpin, Ismael 'El Mayo' Zambada, a boss in the Sinaloa Cartel, Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, the leader of the Guadalajara Cartel, Rafael Caro Quintero, convicted for the death of DEA agent Enrique Camarena, Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán Loera, the current head of the Sinaloa Cartel, the Beltrán Leyva brothers, who initiated the Beltrán Leyva cartel. No other town this size in the world can be credited with having a bigger effect on the world of crime around the globe. This rough town was the credible backdrop to Chalino's musical career and his death cemented his fame. In 1992 he became famous in Mexico and the United States when, during a music concert, a patron neared the stage and began shooting at Chalino. Though hit on the side, Chalino, famously, took out his own gun and fired back, and by the end of the evening, two people were killed including the would-be-killer. His reputation grew, but the success lasted only a few months. In May, 1992, Chalino was killed, execution-style, in Mexico after a concert. These events proved extremely profitable to the labels that recorded Chalino, including Cintas Acuarios. If Chalino was famous prior to his death, he became a rock star after and his recordings continue to sell today.

The recording brand of Cintas Acuario is dependent on the narcocorrido as an authentic cultural product, and Pedro Rivera refers to himself as 'El Patriarca del Corrido' ('The Patriarch of the Corrido') (His own website). All his sons and his daughter, Jenni, became musicians, with Lupillo Rivera climbing to the pinnacle of the music world. Today, Lupillo is one of the biggest stars in narcocorridos and regularly appears in the *Billboard* rankings in the United States and in Mexico.

Lupillo notwithstanding, the most successful of the Rivera family was Jenni, who became a music star and who, over time, also became a star in the world of television in the United States and Mexico. Rivera began recording in 1994, and she released her first album in 1995 (*Chacalosa*, Capitol/EMI), which sold around one million copies. The title song, "La Chacalosa," is the story of a drug queen-pin and the song positioned, from this moment on, Rivera as a singer branded by narcoculture. In this song, Rivera performs in the first person as the daughter of a narco ("soy hija de un traficante"), who was raised by and inherited the heroin business from her father ("conozco bien las movidas, me crié entre la mafia grande de la major mercancia"). The song describes her illegal poppy crops in Jalisco, her heroin labs in Sonora and declares, from a curious feminist standpoint that would be repeated in

many of her songs, that women can also become narco leaders (“y tambien las mujeres pueden”). *Chacalosa* included several other tracks that furthered Rivera’s narco-brand, including “Tambien las Mujeres Pueden,” a song originally made popular by Los Tigres, and “La Perra Contrabandista,” which literally translates as “The Trafficker Bitch.” Like other narcocorrido singers, her albums also included romantic ballads (*Chacalosa* included, for instance, “Libro Abierto,” a ranchero standard ballad), but her identity as a powerful woman willing to defy male ruled society, depended on her drug-related songs. Although in several albums she continued the tradition of other famous Mexican women singers (e.g., *Farewell to Selena* and *Joyas Prestadas*), her work can also be described as an ongoing conversation with the great ones of the narcocorrido. This is particularly true in her 1999 album *Reyna de Reynas*, in which she is in conversation with one of the greatest narcocorrido albums, *Jefe de Jefes* (1997) by Los Tigres del Norte. This narco-album reasserted Rivera’s complex gender performance, and invited listeners to, at least briefly, reflect on the sexism implied in the traditional, male-dominated narcocorrido subgenre.

In 2009, Ortiz was a little known narcocorrido singer in Sinaloa, Mexico. To publicize himself, he would upload videos of his performance to youtube.com. He began having a following and, as a ruse, in the fall of 2009 he travelled to Los Angeles, his home city, to do an underground performance that attracted 3000 people, including an executive of Del Records, who, impressed, took a chance and signed Ortiz. Practically all the musicians with Del Records are narco-singers and Del Records, from its origins in 2008, began developing a narco-brand identified as Corridos Enfermos (Sick Corridos) or Enfermedad Masiva (Massive Illness). This curious use of illness as metaphor in the branding of Del Records music compilations is reminiscent of the narco-brand El Movimiento Alterado (The Altered Movement) developed by brothers Adolfo and Omar Valenzuela Rivera, Los Twiins. Corridos Enfermos, like El Movimiento Alterado, brings together artists to record quite successful compilations of narcocorridos (Amaya 2013). In Corridos Enfermos, Enfermedad Masiva, and El Movimiento Alterado, being out-of-health and being altered are metaphors that signal both the music’s counterhegemonic identity and also the sense that the crime world the music glorifies is an unhealthy aspect of normal, sane, society. Although not as successful as El Movimiento Alterado, Corridos Enfermos strengthens Del Records’ narco-brand and introduces listeners to other singers

working for the label. At this moment, Ortiz is Del Records' most successful artist, repeatedly reaching the top of the *Billboard's* rankings.

Ortiz makes no qualms that his brand is narcocorridos. A huge percentage of his songs deal with the drug world, and, although they are not always from the point of view of the narco ("Sangre Azul," for instance, is from the point of view of a policeman), the majority depict the drug war from the perspective of the cartels. "La Ultima Sombra," "Aquiles Afirimo," "Morir y Existir," and many others speak of violence, drugs, revenge, and trafficking. In addition to these classic drug related topics, Ortiz also composes and performs narcocorridos that are about the narco-lifestyle. "El Trockero Lococho" and "Culiacan vs Mazatlan," for instance, are about highly stylized pickup trucks (pimped, if you wish) and sports cars. "A la Moda" is about fashion, jewelry, and consumption. These narco-lifestyle songs and the videos that publicize them are full of young women who seem to be the sexual reward for engaging in the proper display of excessive consumption. During the last three years, Ortiz has thus delivered a series of performances that, taken together, paint a fantastic type of masculinity bound to violence, wealth, rebellion, and traditional heteronormative sexuality. How can these fantasies connect to authenticity? Or, differently stated: What cultural labor do performers have to do in order to construct authenticity out of these deterritorialized fantasies? Why do fans believe that narcocorridos tell "the pure truth"?

#### ***Violent identities as brands***

As a musical narrative form, the narcocorrido relies on two powerful socio-cultural antecedents: the folkloric aura of the corrido, which I discussed above, and the narco imaginary's connection to neoliberalism. Together, these two combine to produce the most common narrative modality in contemporary narcocorridos and the central cog in the narco-brand: first person narration. Although first and third person narration have always been common in corridos, contemporary narcocorridos have all but eliminated third person narration. Unlike old epic corridos, which often used third person narration, as in "El Corrido de Pancho Villa," most narcocorridos today are first person narratives that connect the corrido to the experiential and that efficiently identify the singer(s) with the imaginary world the song creates. This is a contemporary phenomenon that relates to the

way the narco-brand circulates among Mexican-American urban youth. Like Gangsta Rap in other youth communities, narcocorridos have become hegemonic among urban Mexican-American youth who use these songs and performances to re-signify the violence and poverty that too often surrounds them (Morrison 2008).

Old narcocorridos like “Contrabando y Traicion” or “La Banda del Carro Rojo” were third person narrations that placed the singer in the traditional position of memorializing events and people. Today, “La Chacalosa”’s form of address (“They are looking for me for chacalosa; I am the daughter of a drug trafficker...”) is the norm and the third person narration is rarely used for new compositions. Artists like Ortiz, Rivera, and all of the members of Corridos Enfermos and El Movimiento Alterado do not typically sing descriptions of things that happen to others or moralize about the outcomes of illegal activity. They do not share the news or distribute local lore; they *are* the news and place themselves at the center of the stories. These singers, in song and performance, embody the narco-imaginary and present themselves as examples of drug-dealing success, as beneficiaries of the wealth found in drug trafficking, as those inflicting violence on others, or as those suffering the violence.

A first person narration of violence implies the singer is often singing from the position of those who survive the violence or those who inflicted it. Exceptions do exist, as in Ortiz’s “Cara a la Muerte,” a first person narration moralizing about a traitor being killed. The majority of today’s songs, however, are told from the position of power, of survival. There is no moralizing but only justifying the survivor’s success which, in narcocorridos, often comes down to arguing for or presenting a superior masculinity-- or, as in Rivera’s song, a superior femininity. For instance, in the crippey “14 Guerras,” Ortiz declares:

I am the Taliban ghost of el Chapo...  
I have tortured, decapitated, assaulted and named  
And if fear crosses my path I connect  
With my intelligence  
That’s how I do my job, with heart, I am a killer...

Ortiz takes on the identity of an assassin and torturer who believes himself the ghostly presence of el “Chapo” Guzmán, the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel. The masculinity he presents is relatively complex, for it relies on intelligence to carry out the harshest violence

on others. Yet, this masculinity is unmistakably tied to masculine excess, for is built to inflict pain and to do war.

The first person narration does more than brand the singer as the embodiment of strength and ruthlessness. The narcocorrido always seems to carry the specter of the popular, the real, and the authentic. Even as a massified form of culture, narcocorridos typically attempt to profit from the old-fashioned counterhegemonic spirit of old corridos. This means, among other things, that the narcocorrido brand is committed to a certain historicity and experiential validity that is constructed through references to place, to actual drug organizations, to real people involved in the drug trade, and, sometimes, to real events. Hence, the narcocorrido singer(s) must create brand authenticity by singing as if actual violence was part of their daily lives. Thus, narco-stars sing as if they were “El Chapo” Guzmán, “El Mayo” Zambada, El M-1 (Manuel Torres Félix), or other famous capos.

The experiential is here a trope that forces facticity into fictional and non-fictional corridos. This includes claiming to be from a place where violence is common. Hence, corrido singers place themselves in cities like Culiacan, the capital of Sinaloa; Badiraguato, the place that saw the beginning of the Sinaloa and other important cartels; Tijuana; Mazatlan; and Durango, to name a few. Predictably, the violent cities brand the singer and this effect can be augmented by connecting the biography of the singer to the cities of violence. Ortiz, for instance, makes a huge deal of the fact that he lived for some time in Culiacan (Sinaloa, Mexico), Tijuana (Baja California, Mexico), and Bogota (Colombia), three cities commonly linked to the drug trade and drug violence. Rivera commonly claims Mexican and Sinaloan roots, thanks to her father, and has many songs that refer to Sinaloa (e.g., “La Pochita de Sinaloa” and “Sinaloa, Princesa Norteña”).

The narcocorrido’s connection to violence is central to the narco-brand, even if the violence is conjured up with managerial imagery, as in some of Rivera’s lines. Yet, experiences of violence are not the only common branding mechanism. Narco-lifestyle corridos engage the violence obliquely, as they tend to depict social interactions that are possible only as the aftermath of violent criminal activity. In corridos such as Ortiz’s “Culiacan vs Mazatlan,” the protagonist from Culiacan races his highly altered Camaro against the Viper of someone from Mazatlan. Though the Camaro loses, they race again, this time the Viper against a Corvette and the Corvette wins. In the current imaginary of

Mexican-American youth, these displays of conspicuous consumption exist because of illegal actions related to drugs; the cars, and the scantily clad women which seem to always circle the vehicles in the music-videos stand for the spoils of violence, the economic and sexual rewards for joining the cartels. The song "A la Moda," a huge hit for Ortiz, is full of expensive brands that define the hyper-wealthy, including Ferrari, Dolce Gabbana, Prada, and Rolex. In the music video that accompanies the song, Ortiz displays wealth and fashion trendiness by changing outfits every few seconds; by entering the hall of an expensive hotel after driving his Ferrari; by being followed by several bodyguards; and by surrounding himself with beautiful women in a club with a table full of expensive liquor bottles. In short, Ortiz embodies the consumption and immoral frankness of the narco-lord.

Violence and conspicuous consumption are the two key ways of performing authenticity and constructing the narco brand. The first person narration of violence and wealth allows fans to personally connect to these two very important categories of life, even if this connection exists within the fantasy world. Narcocorridos tell the pure truth and fans can, however briefly, hold on to the notion that they are the ones who can inflict pain, not only receive it. Fans, however briefly, can imagine the experience of obscene wealth, even if after the dance club closes they must go back to their decrepit reality.

### ***Conclusion***

Authenticity is a powerful and demanding brand. As if to ratify that his colorful biography is evidence of his intimate knowledge of the violence he sings about, Ortiz barely survived an attack on him on March 20, 2011 in Villa del Alvarez (Mexico). His manager and promoter, Ramiro Caro, was not that fortunate. Rivera died in a plane crash, but news outlets in Mexico and the United States were quick to report that the Drug Enforcement Administration was investigating the owner of the plane, implying that Rivera's death was somehow related to drugs. I doubt it.

The music this paper deals with is catchy, rhythmic, and gets to the hips. It is old and it is new. It originated in the luscious hills of the Sierra Madre of Mexico's Pacific Coast, the same hills that saw the origin of the cultivation of heroine at the beginning of the 20th century. Sinaloa is known for his beaches, its mountains, its marijuana and heroin, and the Sinaloa Cartel. These elements combined with cultural traditions of music and violence that



eventually, in the 2nd half of the 20th century, became the origin of narcocorridos. Although from Sinaloa, the music, the violence, and the cartels are all transnational forces that have a significant presence in the United States and Latin America. In this paper I showed how these forces have become part of the Latino and music world, giving authenticity to musical expressions that depend on fantasies of place and of experience. The fantasy of place, which *Billboard* profits from, simplistically connects music written, performed, produced, and consumed in the United States to Mexico. Some Regional Mexican is from Mexico, but the bulk of narcocorridos that are used to give authenticity to the category are not. Fantasies of experience underscore the performances that define narco-stars like Rivera and Ortiz, and this claim to the experiential lubricates the circulation of music among a population hungry for cultural experiences of power.

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<sup>1</sup> Video cameras are now so common that you can find some videos of these emotional performances during funerals in youtube.com.