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## **Narcocorridos: Music, Defiance, and Violence in Transnational Contexts**

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*Narcocorridos:*

**Music, Defiance, and Violence in Transnational Contexts**



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Spring 2018 Global Studies Capstone

California State University Monterey Bay

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**Abstract**

This research aims to explain and understand the effects that the music genre known as *narcocorrido* has on society, politics, and culture in Mexico and the United States. It provides a background on the history of narcocorridos and how it came to be known as a symptom of the ongoing violence in Mexico. The *Movimiento Alterado* is also explored in this research project, as a product of narcocorrido singers who came together to glorify violence. A global aspect plays a big role in researching this topic as globalization and transnationalism reveal the complexity of politics, economics, and culture and its effects on local and transnational people.

**Keywords:** *Globalization, transnationalism, Mexico, USA, narcocorridos, violence, transnational artists, Movimiento Alterado, effects.*

## Introduction

The people around us have an effect on society that we often do not recognize. It could be one individual or many of them. In this case, immigrants have affected society in a number of unfathomable ways. Immigrants, for the most part, travel to another country for the sole purpose of improving their lives and finding new opportunities, even if certain people think that they are a pest, or bring violence and drugs. Their presence in a foreign country alters political, economic, and social relations in ways that we do not perceive. For my capstone, I explore a music genre that has been on the rise in the last decades and has primarily impacted culture in Mexico but has spread into other countries: narcocorridos or drug ballads. Narcocorridos are part of narcocultura (narcoculture); it is seen as a symptom of the social, political, and economic reality that the Mexican people face due to the escalating conflict between two forces: the government and the drug cartels (Jimenez, 2014). For anyone that attends a party or a club where the majority of the people are from Mexico, Central, and South America, they are bound to hear corridos, but even more specifically, narcocorridos. Most people hear this music on a daily basis, I grew up hearing them and it is part of an older tradition. It was not until I listened closely that I realized what they were saying. They are not just lyrics put together to compose a ballad, or romantic ballad but rather a violent/drug ballad: they usually speak about someone important, powerful, a killing, political corruption, drugs, immigrants, all within this narrative of the drug ballad. The narrative within is violent, glorifying, and speaks of popular criminals that are known globally, such as Joaquin Guzman Loera, more commonly known as “El Chapo.” Regardless of its violent representation, it lends itself to a popular form of dancing. What most people are unaware of is that narcocorridos are part of something even bigger, el Movimiento Alterado (literally the “altered movement,” but altered as in a hyped-up state). This is the “new wave of hyper-violent,

post-gangsta-rap corridos” (“10 Best Narco Corridos”, 2012). El Movimiento Alterado is composed of bands or solo artists who sing corridos and narcocorridos for a living. For my capstone, I explore how corridos evolved into narcocorridos and as a result, it formed el Movimiento Alterado. Equally important, I consider how transnationalism and globalization have played an important role in giving birth to el Movimiento Alterado and thus the narcocorridos, and lastly, how narcocorridos have become a subculture for people across borders.

### **Global Context**

Music is the one thing that all humans share worldwide. In all of the different forms that it comes in—genres, rhythms, melodies, compositions, tunes, instruments, lyrics, artists— but it is shared worldwide. Its global significance is that it is a form of universal language, transcending borders, cultures, and societies. In this case, ideas and people are being exchanged between Mexico and the USA, and it has affected culture and society on both sides. Narcocorrido audience is not limited to only Mexican and Mexican-American, but also to many countries in Latin America, and wherever these people go, they take this music with them. Narcocorridos have made big headlines in politics by becoming banned in the radio and in concerts, giving them a greater outlaw appeal. Through this, narcocorridos have found ways to overcome barriers and frontiers, literally. Crossing pirate CDs across the Mexico-USA border has become a clandestine commercial activity. Narcocorridos are now not only important as part of a culture but as a commodity as well. The narratives within the songs also serve as a social critique of the contemporary neoliberalism or the dissolution of the rights of the citizens, as opposed to the accepted notion of glamorization or celebration (Cabañas, 2014). The narratives place local people in a global context and reveal the complexity of the interactions between the legal and the

illegal and between politics and economics in the effects of globalization on individuals, groups, and societies.

For the purpose of this research, I first give context to the importance of transnationalism and globalization in the lives of people and then how it fits in the musical world. Next, I give a brief significant background in the history of the original corrido and its narcocorridos. I discuss transnational artists in the world of narcocorridos, how they came to form el Movimiento Alterado and its role in society and politics. I continue by providing background on the theories that I use: Transnational Theory to explain how this phenomenon has become a transnational culture, and Theory of Cognitive Dissonance to analyze what makes narcocorridos appealing and how it affects society in the context of Mexico and the USA. I then provide the methods used to collect information and resources that will support this research. I end by providing the final findings and analysis to which the theories are applied in a more specific context in relation to my findings.

How have transnationals narcocorrido artists and their musical movements affect/shape culture and society in Mexico and the USA?

### **Literature Review**

In a report written by the International Organization for Migration, “Migration and Transnationalism: Opportunities and Challenges,” transnationalism centers on “exchanges, connections, and practices across borders, thus transcending the national space as the primary reference point for activities and identities” (2010). Being a transnational means bringing ideas, exchanges, and interactions across borders, and they are a regular and sustained part of migrants’ realities and activities (Migration and Transnationalism, 2010). In this case, the growing presence of Latino music, more specifically Mexican music, has been in the limelight of popular

culture in the United States. How so? In the book *Amalgamating Music: Popular Music and Cultural Hybridity in the Americas* by Deborah Pacini Hernandez, she emphasizes the emergence of Latino music and how it has become across pan-regional social, political, economic, and aesthetic contexts giving it a broader historical perspective (2003). She points out that a transnational approach is especially important now given that “globalization of the music industry and increase in international migration, with new aesthetic and economic possibilities that were unavailable to Latin American and Latino musicians before” (2003). The result of this? A new “transnational-musical” movement: globalization opened the door to a new cultural hybridity.

Miguel Olmos Aguilera highlights in his book *Musicas Migrantes: La Movilidad Artística en la Era Global* (Migrant Music: Artistic Mobility in the Global Era) of the importance of globalization and modernity in creating the new cultural hybridity of music, “modernity and globalization have given rise to social inequalities-leaving some people in and some people out- in the last decades which has accelerated a fusion of various worlds.” (Gebesmair, 2017). No longer can we define international music market in nationalistic terms, with some countries imposing their culture on others- and not only is this seen with artists, but also multinational music industries. Gebesmair argues that diversity consumption and production on a local level is just as important as its worldwide structure. Why? Because the music has to come from somewhere (Gebesmair, 2017). Industry and technology also play a great role in the consumption and spread of music across borders. “We can regard reception too as a process where the meaning of culture is produced and sometimes reappropriated by the transnationals” (Gebesmair, 2007).

To understand the importance of narcocorridos in society, first, we must examine its historical roots and earlier productions, before it branched into narcocorridos.

Polka music was brought to Mexico during the reign of Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian when he invaded and declared himself Emperor of Mexico in the 1860s (Cheatwood, 2012). Polka music and waltz form a rhythmic base that serves as a foundation for banda (another genre of Mexican music), which makes it really appealing to those who love to dance. Corridos also have this musical base. A corrido is a ballad that has been a part of Mexican tradition for over 100 years (Cheatwood, 2012). The Mexican Revolution gave corridistas (those who sing corridos) much of the context in which the folk ballads are written about: bravery, revolutionaries like Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, heroic figures fighting the corrupt political system, typical Robin-Hood-like characters. It was not until the 1970s when famous Mexican band Los Tigres del Norte began to sing about real lives/events of drug lords in songs like “Contrabando y traicion” (Smuggling and Betrayal) and “La banda del carro rojo” (The Red Car Gang). This was the beginning of the trajectory for narcocorridos. According to an expert in the field of corridos, Elijah Wald, the new corrido “commemorated drug traffickers, narcos, but also composed and performed by amateurs and semi-professionals and dealing with local events or broader issues such as political corruption and immigration to the USA” (2014). Drug trafficking in Mexico has become a global illicit and competitive industry that has given, in a sense, birth to narcocorridos. Some of these narcocorridos were written because artists were paid by drug dealers (from amateur to top-notch artists) to write a song commemorating them, hence the popular saying... “a narco without a corrido does not exist.”

In the book *Narcocorrido: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*, by Elijah Wald (2001), he opens up with the success of Jessie Morales who became famous

overnight in an album recorded in remembrance of famous corrido singer Chalino Sanchez. Chalino Sanchez immigrated to Los Angeles from Mexico and was murdered in 1992. He was murdered in famous narco-land Culiacan, in the state of Sinaloa, Mexico, after a successful performance. In the book, Wald says that “Morales’ unexpected success at the age of 18 epitomizes the disconnect between a new underground culture and the American mainstream society. Dominant cultures need to understand subcultures in order to avoid racial strife.” Wald emphasizes how important LA is for the corridistas. It is the place to thrive and find success as major recording labels are centered there, but more importantly: the people. Sam Quinones explains in his book *True Tales From Another Mexico* (2001), that if emerging artists want to sign with a record label, they had to at least sing a few narcocorridos. He stresses that the commissioning of narcocorridos thrives in LA because “like old corridos, it fills a need” this one of immigrants to show that they have done well in gringolandia. It tells the narrative of immigrants living, overcoming obstacles in the USA. But beyond the sociocultural aspect, the economic aspect plays an important role in the music industry. Corridos have become commissioned, in the present day, no matter how dull and insignificant a corrido is, anyone can have one personally recorded for them for the price of five hundred to two thousand dollars, especially in Los Angeles (Quinones, 2001). And some artists supplement their income by writing corridos. Although these type of narcocorridos do not tell a story, but rather a lifestyle: so and so carries a .45, plated with gold, he is from the state of Sinaloa, parties all night long with women drinking Buchanan's, his family is the most important thing for him and he will kill anyone who comes in the way of his success

Josh Kun in his article “Death Rattle: A New Musical Movement Turns Mexican Drug Violence into Catchy Sing-Alongs” (2012), addresses the “major musical effort to exploit this

cultural shift of narcocorridos, of the USA-Mexican drug war” *El Movimiento Alterado* is formed by artists who sing narcocorridos. “It is associated with a hyper-violent culture of the Mexican narco and turned into a popular brand” (2012). *The Movimiento Alterado* (MA) members sing narcocorridos that are often labeled as “corridos enfermos” (sick corridos). They normalize a culture of death and violence told from the perspective of the cartel. In the article



“Mecanismos discursivos en los corridos mexicanos de presentación del “Movimiento Alterado”” (Discursive Mechanisms in the Mexican Corrido, the Representation of the “Movimiento Alterado”) by Tanius Karam Cardenas, in the two videos that can

Figure 1. *Movimiento Alterado*. (Morales, 2015)

pragmatically represent and define the MA, they are not only telling a story, but rather representing the characteristics of this violent movement (2013). In other words, they are acting out the vicious lyrics and glorifying them. During their concerts, their attires often mimic that of your “idealized” narco- wearing ski masks and bullet-proof vests. The Valenzuela brothers can be credited to the MA. They were born in Mexico but lived most of their lives in Southern Cali. Kun says that the Valenzuela brothers are sharp entrepreneurs, shaping Mexican musical tastes within the USA, but that the MA is “a shrewd business decision, a carefully plotted attempt to cash in on Mexican drug violence as it were a new dance craze and to do at a distance, in the safety of the United States.” This is a gripping point since the murder of narcocorrido singers has taken place in Mexico. The USA is a country where they sing freely about narcos knowing that it is very unlikely someone will try to kill them.

Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta wrote in his article “De torturaciones, balas y explosiones: Narcocultura, Movimiento Alterado e hiperrealismo en el sexenio de Felipe Calderón” (2013) (From Tortures, Bullets, to Blasts: Narco Culture, Movimiento Alterado, and Hyperrealism During Felipe Calderon’s Presidency), that the Valenzuela brothers did not actually come up with the concept of Movimiento Alterado, but rather baptized it. They have their own record label, Twiins Music Group. Here they also promote other things such as low budget movies that depict the life of a narco. Ramirez-Pimienta argues that a narcocorrido is a form of resistance that is unique and totalizing. “It is many things: an apologia, history, a system of values or against values, an agency...” (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2013). He mentions that although many of the recordings are done in Los Angeles, all the stories, or a vast majority, are from Mexico. The result? Highlighting the state of violence in which Mexico lives in and glorifying it. A compelling point that he makes is how most of those who sing some form of narcocorridos have mentioned Italy, and Sicily, more specifically. Ramirez says that “the relationship between Sicily and Sinaloa is obviously because both places are identified with organized crime and the violence of its people” (2013). And this has a lot do with how the movie industry. Hollywood, has portrayed Sicily as a cradle of refugee and violence in movies like the Godfather and Goodfellas. The artists themselves and its followers promote and sport Italian brands. One other thing he mentions is that immigrants are profiled as marginalized due to individuals like Donald Trump: he blames Mexico for the violence in the USA. So the narcocorrido redeems being Mexican.

Other record labels that represent narcocorrido artists are Del Records, and they represent some of the bigger names in music. An example of one is Gerardo Ortiz. He is a Mexican-American singer-songwriter from Pasadena. “Chances are that if you are not living in northern

Mexico or are Mexican-American living close to border towns, you have not heard of Gerardo Ortiz, but if you were to measure his popularity on YouTube, he would be twice as popular as Madonna” (Daniel, 2015). One of his most popular hits, “Damaso,” has over 231 million views on YouTube. He was nominated for a Latin Grammy for his album “El Primer Ministro.” But his popularity cost him the life of his representative and his chauffeur, and almost his, after a concert in the state of Colima, Mexico. He was interviewed multiple times and admitted to being scared to come back to Mexico, as he feared for his life and that of the people who surrounded him. But since then, he has returned. Another popular group that sings narcocorridos and is part of the MA is *Buknas de Culiacan*. Vocalist and songwriter Edgar Quintero was born in Los Angeles and he



Figure 3. *BuKnas de Culiacan*. (Remezcla, 2014)

is the son of Mexican immigrants. People often go to him and request that he write a corrido for them so as to make them “official”. In the documentary “Narcocultura” (2013), it splits the focus in Quintero and Richi Soto, a forensic investigator in Ciudad Juarez. Quintero says that he thinks of himself as a journalist, singing about events happening In Mexico- according to Quintero, he does not glorify violence. But if you listen to his songs... one would think

otherwise. Israeli-American photojournalist and director of the documentary says that if “we want narcocultura to stop thriving, we have to talk about how to change it, on both sides of the border.” (Arcos, 2013). The problem with this is that immigrants in the USA identify with this music, whilst those living in Mexico have to live the narrative within the narcocorrido. Many other artists such as Lupillo Rivera and his sister Jenny Rivera, El Komander, who are/were involved in the music industry also sing narcocorridos. What do all they have in common? Their common denominator is that they are transnationals. They came to the USA or were born here, to become more popular, to gain momentum, a shot at their career. Just like immigrants come here to fulfill their “American Dream,” those artists come here to fulfill theirs. But is their success taking a toll on culture and society for immigrants in the USA? Are they profiting at the expense of the violence and suffering that people live daily in Mexico?

### **Gaps and themes addressed**

Quinones argument that emigrants have been building a newer version of their country, more daring more dynamic north of the border, but is it a better version? With the new economic framework that globalization introduced- capitalism, free market- it gave a sort of a free pass to drugs to the rest of the world, consequently giving not only Mexico but Colombia as well, a bad reputation for spreading drugs to people worldwide. These two countries are have seen the drug trade has impacted sovereignty and governability at the international level (Cabanas, 2014). Looking at characters like El Chapo, who is known globally for becoming a millionaire and part of Forbes’ richest people in the world, has his own song “ El 701.” What do people think of this? What do people think about having a song honoring the most powerful drug lord in the world? He makes Al Capone, Scarface look like boy scouts. I think a lot of the literature that I have read analyzes and describes how narcocorridos have become part of the culture both in the USA and

Mexico, or a subculture. But they do not address if there is any opposition, aside from that of the government. I know that there are people that dislike and oppose narco corridos because they are not simply songs, but a reality for those south of the border. It is a culture here in the USA that has been commodified and turned into fashion and movies. But it is a reality in Mexico, and although plenty of the people in Mexico do associate themselves with narcocultura, there are also plenty who hate it, and condemn it, and refuse to be stereotyped by narcocultura. But it is hardly mentioned in any of the literature. One other thing left out is, we have 2-3 causal factors that have created the powerful movement of Movimiento Alterado, and narcocorridos: drugs/cartels, violence in Mexico, and another one, although I need to ponder this one, the commodifying of corridos. What would happen if those things did not exist? If there were not any videos in *elblogdelnarco.net* about people being killed live stream sending messages to politicians or rival cartels? If El Chapo would have only been a simple farmer? Would narcocorridos, and narcocultura exist? Something else that I address in my research is the extent at which artists influence their audience if they are in this career because they believe in what they are singing or is it like any other market, for the money.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

I use two theories for my capstone project, the first being transnational theory or framework. Within a transnational theoretical perspective, it highlights the extensive regions of persistent cultural interaction and exchanges of ideas, objects, peoples, images, information systems (Transnationalism, n.d.). A transnational perspective sees the multiple ties and interactions linkages across the borders of nation-states. In my case, I explore how transnationalism and globalization have played an important role in giving birth to el Movimiento Alterado the narcocorridos and how this phenomenon has become a transnational culture for immigrants in the USA. Transnational theory is applied to my project in the sense that

it helps explain how transnationalism has allowed for ideas to flow from nation-states, such as Mexico, and into other places, like the USA. A more specific scope of transnational theory is transnational culture, which can be defined as a shared pattern of learned transmitted socialization (Willis, 1992). Members of the transnational culture typically see themselves as belonging to a mixture of cultures, bi-multi-cultural, rather than monocultural. These transnationals make significant contributions to mainstream society (Willis, 1992).

Transnational artists collect these ideas and events from Mexico and make songs out of them, these songs have caused a massive subculture within the immigrant community in the United States. Some of my key variables are immigrants who follow this phenomenon as well as people from Mexico, and those who do not; local musicians and groups “bandas.” I attempt to include bigger names in the limelight of the music industry and record labels, as they are responsible for the *Movimiento Alterado* phenomenon. Transnational guru Ulf Hannerz says that “it is now more difficult than ever to see the world as a cultural mosaic, of separate pieces with hard defined edges. Cultural interconnections increasingly reach across the world” (1992). And indeed this phenomenon has brought together cultures from all South America all the way to the United States, and even Canada. This theory helps me explain this new subculture hybridization that is becoming increasingly popular among transnationals. The second theory that I use is from the school of psychology, Cognitive Dissonance Theory by Leon Festinger. This theory explains the psychology behind the massive success of narcocorridos. Cognitive Dissonance was proposed in 1957, first used to explain the attitudes and beliefs, and the behavior behind them-behavior such as smoking. “Since the reduction of dissonance is a basic process in humans, it is not surprising that its manifestations may be observed in such a wide variety of contexts”(2009).

The versatility of this theory can be applied to this research project as we will see in the analysis portion.

For the purpose of my capstone, the approach I use to conduct my investigation consist of qualitative research. Qualitative research involves exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups to attribute to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). Throughout my research, I ask questions, collecting data and analyzing it, and interpreting it. My research relies as much as possible on participants' views. That being said, I also engage in ethnographic research to gather information on my project. This took place through fieldwork- attend *bailes* (dances), consult practitioners (local musicians), and consult experts in the field of narcocorridos, specifically Prof. Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, as well as researching individual artists in the limelight through reliable media sources. I engage in participant-observation. This aids me in trying to understand the interaction among individuals, to try and interpret the meanings others have about this phenomenon and how they are affected on a global context. A diachronic method of analysis is be included in my research as the phenomenon occurring now is a product of the past, a product of historical events that have in some way or another shaped what is occurring today. I provide context analyses of some songs that support my research question, and help the audience understand better the phenomenon being studied. In terms of scholarly resources, I also use bibliographic research that includes books and published works of experts in the field. My secondary sources have engaged in ethnographic research to understand this phenomenon. Bilingual works are be part of the bibliographic research; in this case, the phenomenon being researched happens to be mostly in Spanish and plenty of literature has been written on the subject.

## Findings: A New Culture of Violence

Part of the movement that involves narcocorridos is that almost every part of it is hyper- from the lyrics of the song to the way they dressed, the way in which people are at concerts (their behavior), and the way in which the artists portray themselves. The music videos portray these artists as being real actors in the lyrics they sing. The song below is one of the “anthems” for the Movimiento Alterado, Los Sanguinarios del M1 (The Bloodthirsty Men of the M1):

“Somos sanguinarios, locos bien ondeados, nos gusta matar... bien empecharados, blindados y listos para ejecutar... cuchillo afilado, cuerno atravesado para degollar... mente de revolucionarios... respaldado por el Mayo, por el Chapo”

“We are bloodthirsty, crazy and high, we like to kill... wearing bullet-proof vests ready to kill... sharpened knife, AK-47 across my chest ready to slice your throat... a mindset of revolutionaries... backed by El Mayo and El Chapo”

When you are listening to this song, it hypes the listener up. While attending a club in Salinas (201), they were playing banda music, and there were few people dancing, but as soon as “El 45” (another popular narcocorrido) came on, masses of guys dragging their girls behind to dance this song filled the dance floor (including me), all you could feel was the bodies rubbing against each other because of how tight the dancing floor was- the crowd was spilling into the VIP areas. But what was even more fascinating was that almost everyone was singing to this one song in unison. It hyped up the crowd and this was just a local group playing, not the actual artist which is El Fantasma. When he sings this song live, the crowd’s reaction reaches unprecedented levels of hyperness, or as we like to call it “alterados y bien acelerados.” The same thing happened when I went to Lopez in Monterey- a tiny little restaurant and bar during the day, but a dancing floor during the night. Small local groups go sing there, and they play the most highly requested

songs, which tend to be narco corridos- Mi 45, El 24, está de parranda el jefe (the boss is partying it up), la hielera (the ice cooler), el terror (the terror), el 701 , el americano (the American), el 25 de diciembre (25th of December), diario de un sicario (diary of a hitman), comando x (x command), Ivan El Chapito, el karma (a very popular song).

Making a career out of singing narcocorridos is difficult to do if you live in Mexico. If you really want to succeed you have to come to where artists are made: Los Angeles. Here most Mexican/Mexican-American artists made a name out of themselves. Lawrence Downes in his article “Songs Without Borders” says that Los Angeles was “remade by Mexicans and Mexicans-Americans, the parts shaped by waves of immigration, assimilation, and reinvention” It is the city of transnationals who want to succeed, and one way, he says, to immerse yourself in the city is through the music. “Corridos are part of the literature of the common people” entrepreneur Chris Strachwitz says to Downes, founder of Arhoolie Records. Downes explains that corridos upgraded themselves to the era of drug cartels, incorporating in their music AK-47s, bazookas, beheadings, drug lords... and plenty of other powerful and violent language. But even with its violent bad reputation, it has become the “rap of modern Mexico,” but has transcended into the USA and South America. Downes quotes a book in his article called *True Tales from Another Mexico* (Quinones, 2001), saying that emigrants like Chalino Sanchez “have been building a newer version of their country, more daring and dynamic, north of the border.” Juan Carlos Ramirez-Pimienta supports this in his book *Sing to the Drug Dealers* that the young generation of adults in the USA limited themselves to listening to English music because as a strategy for life in the context of being an ethnic minority and they felt more identified with music in English. But Chalino’s lyrics resonated the life they left behind in Mexico(Quinones, 2001). Downes traveled to Los Angeles and went to the places where he would find

narcocorridos-bars, clubs, and music shops. He makes the comparison: heavy narcocorridos are often disturbing, but they are no different from hip-hop, old-time country, or blues: they depict honesty. He also mentions how the violent state in which Mexico is in due to the drug war. As a result, heavy narco corridos will not get played on the radio, and even in the USA, the more violent, gruesome narco corridos will not either. People have found ways to listen to them- bootleg CDs and MP3s, homemade videos on YouTube. YouTube has been an important medium in outsourcing *narcocorridos*.

It is true that for some artists, whether that is in the USA or in Latin America, singing narcocorridos is a must if they want to thrive. Being able to sing those few popular narcocorridos will make them more appealing because that is what the people hear nowadays. Local musicians Itzel and Panchito (*Narcocorridos: Su Influencia en la Actualidad*, 2015) say that they do not see anything necessarily positive with narcocorridos, but it really depends on the person. It could simply be that the song has a really catchy melody. This is something that a ton of people told me, as far as the reasons go as to why they listen to narcocorridos. Take my younger brother for example. He listens to this music because of the rhythm, but in addition, he likes to hear of the hardships that narcos have overcome; that is, their journey from being poor to becoming rich. When I asked my older brother, his answer did not surprise me, "I like the lyrics that are sung in the narcocorridos, the people depicted in them. I believe that the artists are simply trying to make a living and singing this type of music will give them the lifestyle they desire." His argument lines up with the reality of people here in the USA and Mexico. For example, if you attend a Mexican restaurant you might witness a trio come in and play songs that you request and more often than not, they are narcocorridos or really any type of regional Mexican music. My point is that this is their way of surviving, how they make their livelihood. Jenny Rivera, an American

singer-songwriter, who is the child of immigrants and whose family is part of the music industry said that “I’m only writing corridos and performing, and so is Lupillo (her brother), ‘cause we’re trying to make a living” (Wald, 2001)). As far as the influence in society goes? She said that in spite of being raised in a ghetto neighborhood surrounded by drugs, they never got involved in that, “you take care of your kids and let me sing what I gotta sing.” (Wald, 2001). Jenny Rivera died in 2012, in Iturbide, Mexico. There are a few theories/speculations that she was involved with cartels and that is how her plane “crashed” but it is one of those things that we probably will never know the truth.

Juan Carlos Ramirez-Pimienta said that if the violence in Mexico-along with the drugs and its actors- did not exist, neither would narcocorridos, because there would not be any content behind the songs. The artists who sing this music think of themselves as some form of journalists. It is fair to say that they profit from the reality of Mexico’s state of corruption and violence. Javier Rosas, a professional narcocorrido singer, in an interview by CBS News in February 2015 claims that his songs are a story about real people and the harsh reality; however, he claims that corridos are not the cause of the proliferation of violence but rather a consequence of the violence, misinformation, and values that parents teach at home. He states that people need to be responsible and see it as what it is: music. I can say from personal experience that I do not agree with regards to the values that parents teach. My parents, for example, do not listen to narcocorridos, but both my younger and older brother do-and are part of the movement. Did they ever support them listening to this music? No, but I suppose they never tried to stop them either. In this case, them listening to corridos has to do with the outside influence and the mass popular culture behind narcocorridos, and in a broader umbrella, narcocultura. I would argue that my little brother listens to narcocorridos because my older brother listens to them and he is part of

the movement- he dresses and gets “in the hype-state” whenever he is with his friends and during bailes/concerts. In response to the rise in popularity of narcocorridos, some states in Mexico have prohibited the reproduction/presentation of narcocorrido singers; states with high volumes of violence such as Sinaloa and Chihuahua. In that same interview, the government of Chihuahua stated that they are highly concerned with the proliferation of narcocorridos and their lyrics that glorify drugs, violence, and drug dealers. They began to fine performers who sing narcocorridos, but will it actually address anything? Will it stop artists from reproducing the music? With the amount of media sources that exist today and local musicians, underground musical reproduction is surely not going to stop people from listening to narcocorridos. Mario Trevizo, Secretary of State in Chihuahua, said that “When children and young adults hear and see these important artists playing this type of music, it makes it look like a good thing, to be part of it” (2015).

These narcocorridos tell stories, like any other. The characters are like heroes because of those capos that were born from poor families, and they accumulated a mass fortune. Their songs contain messages in the situation of countries in Mexico and the USA. Take Los Tigres del Norte’s album *Jefe de Jefes* (Boss of Bosses), “*Jefe de Jefes* was like a panoramic portrait of modern Mexican culture, painting the lives of peasant farmers, successful immigrants, greedy politicians, and all the varied denizens of the drug world in lyrics full of unpretentious but powerful moving poetry” (Wald, 2001). But why have they evolved into more violent and gruesome songs? Los Tigres del Norte say that the channels of expression have changed in the youth of today (Inside Narcocorridos, 2015). They claim that when they first started singing corridos in 1972-73, the world had different forms of expression, but today vocabulary and modes of expression have evolved- or been altered, by the present situation in which Mexico, especially across the border with the smuggling of drugs, people, guns. This is where

transnational theory comes in and can be applied specifically to border towns along Mexico-USA.

In the interview was the reaction of some parents who say that it sends a wrong message to the youth of today (Inside Narcocorridos, 2015) and they paralleled narcocorridos and rap, claiming that it was the equivalent and just as negative for the youth of today. It seems that there is division as far as the effects go and this has to do with what side of the border you stand on. As far as the performers, I believe they are more appealing to immigrants here in the USA because they were able to succeed here. And then they return to Mexico to show them how big they are, in terms of being in the spotlight. Once they are invited to shows like “El Gordo y la Flaca,” they have officially been recognized by the media... or at least the Latino media. Making other debuts such as Premio lo Nuestro or Latin Billboards also shows their levels of success. This is inspirational for those who aspire to become singers one day, that if someone from humble beginnings is now standing at the top, that too can stand at the top. What does this have to do with narcocorridos? That some of the narcocorridistas started this way. If we look at narcocorridos through a negative lens, it not only has a negative effect on society but on the lives of artists as well. Artists such as Valentin Elizalde, Diego Rivas, Jenny Rivera, among others have lost their lives singing narcocorridos, an occupational hazard. In fact, a few months after being interviewed, Javier Rosas was the victim of a shooting in Culiacan, Sinaloa. A cousin and a friend of his died at the scene due to high-impact of bullets and a car crash. Today, he is still singing narcocorridos.

In *Cantar a Los Narcos* (2011), Ramírez-Pimienta addresses something similar to what the Tigres del Norte mentioned, that due to the dismantling of the social, political, and economic fabrics in Mexico, it made it harder for young professionals to succeed. Being a doctor or a

lawyer did not improve their social or economic status, quite the contrary, it was harder for them to escalate the economic ladder and improve their situation (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011). But this “imaginary” character in corridos sounded more attractive. As did crossing the USA border. Many corridos also depict immigrants making it to the other side and making improvements in their lives, or at least they had a better chance than in Mexico.

Mariana Marin, a sociocultural investigator for Colegio de la Frontera de Mexico (COLEF), says that narcocorridos are a hard topic to discuss in Mexico-it hits a very sensible nerve- she describes that when speaking about narcocorridos within the frame of narcocultura, what is being discussed is something aesthetic, to the country; by this she means the movies like “El Infierno” and “Salvando al Soldado Pérez” (Narcocorridos: Su influencia en la actualidad, 2015), as well as drug trafficking and life experiences. This can be found in Colombia as well as the way that women and men dressed, and here in the USA. She says that narcocultura, and within the context, narcocorridos, are expressions that are born from society’s experiences. She goes on to say that narcocorridos become an element of identity- one that a person takes and incorporates it into their identity- we have the sicarios (hitmen) and the *buchonas* (girlfriend of a narco). However, you cannot give the narcocorrido too much credit for becoming an element of identity alteration. A lot of it has to do with a person’s socioeconomic status, especially in the case of Mexico and South America- primarily Colombia. A lack of education also needs to be taken into account. If a young person is poor and does not have access to education, that person has to find means to thrive- sometimes those narco corridos do sound enticing. It is the case of Mexico that young adults do not seek further education after high school in comparison with the USA. Do they violate any sort of ethical or moral standards? They are very raw expressions, and they progress, they become... further fervent and violent.

Leo Gonzales, a music producer of a record label and representative of Banda Agua Caliente discusses what effect do narcocorridos have in a person, and in society (Narcocorridos: Su Influencia en la Actualidad, 2015). He says that when a person is listening to narcocorridos and is drinking with his buddies, “te altera,” (it hypes you up). That in that moment of listening to that song, you want to be like them, and this is the immediate effect on the listener. And this

does not only happen when a person is listening to the song but what the singer is saying... the words he uses to hype up the crowd or call someone out/some girl. Other ways they hype up the crowd is by drinking on stage- one of the most popular drinks being Buchanan's. There are cases in which these artists receive threats while being in Mexico, and when they perform in the USA, they trash those threats, saying that for as long as they live, they will continue to write and sing narcocorridos. In Mexico, we see young children, as young as 13-14 becoming sicarios, carrying guns around- whether they got into this life via narcocorridos, life experiences or because they inherit it, is a different thing. I would argue that they can be interconnected.

### **Analysis**

As far as the effects go, when you analyze how it is affecting society, you have to take into account where you are doing the analysis, because as we have seen the effects that narcocorridos and those who perform them affect society differently in the USA and in Mexico. Our perspective, as far as the effects go, changes depending on the locality and lens through which we are understanding this phenomenon. This implies the theories as well. Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance explains that even though these lyrics are hyper-violent and bloody, they appeal to the masses at the concerts, now, to what extent do they affect them?



Figure 2. *El Komander, drinking Buchanan's during one of his concerts.* (Enlace Radio, 2015)

From what we have in the findings section, we saw that in the USA, it has a temporary effect. That is, you go to a club or a dance, you hear these songs, you dance, you even dress in the accepted fashion statements that belong to that particular genre, you get “todo alterado” (all hyped-up) in those brief moments where your favorite song is being played and you sing it, but then you go home and the hyped-state is over. In Mexico, however, people find inspiration in these songs, they see a way out, regardless if that path is dangerous. It can provide them with better chances of surviving than having a regular professional career and this has been accepted. Theory of cognitive dissonance also says that as soon as dissonance occurs, there will be pressures to reduce it; this explains the Mexican government’s decision to ban narcocorridos, due to the rise of violence in those states. But it only makes it more appealing. And in the USA? There have been no attempts to reduce or block those corridos. Well, in the radio you do not hear the most *corridos enfermos* (literally sick corridos), because the radio is a public space so there is censorship. But people can still play them on their phones, pump them through their car stereo. Taking into account that those who live in the USA do not live the reality of those living in Mexico or Colombia. Not only the reality, but also the economic, social, and political struggles

are widely incommensurable.

How is Transnational Theory relevant? In simple terms, if the exchanges that occur at the border did not happen, narcocorridos would have limited context for their songs. Many of these songs are about drug and arms smuggling, immigrants crossing the border, and the cultural interaction between people on both sides. Some artists are transnational, they were born and raised here in the USA but their parents are from Mexico. There are cultural connections being made across Mexico and the USA; those interconnections have allowed a new subculture to rise here in the USA. A place where this interaction is seen with greater power is along the Mexico-USA border. These border towns are a mix of both modern and traditional- Mexican tradition and American modernity. I had previously mentioned that modernity and globalization give rise to social inequalities-leaving some people in and some people out- in the last decades which has accelerated a fusion of various worlds, and although one would think that these clash, it rather has created an intercultural space. Globalization's role in this because of the opening of markets allowed drugs to be easily smuggled not only in the border but to other nations as well. Néstor García Canclini, an Argentinian-Mexican academic and anthropologist says that globalization has intensified interculturality, that is, simultaneous access to repertoires of diverse origins (Néstor García Canclini, personal communications, 2001; 1995). And some of the biggest characters have made their empire of the drug trade, like El Chapo, and he is mentioned in multiple narcocorridos which descend down to Central America and Colombia and across the border into the United States. He is a global character not only in the drug business but also in the media. But also the widespread of communications systems and media platforms have allowed narcocorridos to thrive. You can listen to them thanks to Spotify, Pandora, YouTube, and last but not least, illegal download platforms.

## Conclusion

Music is an agent of change. That is what I found out throughout my research, but it has been present for quite a while in society. Whenever certain events happen around the world, there is someone who writes a song to describe what is going on. Artists are depicting their own narrative, their representation of the events that are happening in Mexico and in the USA. There are gaps in this study, them being the limitations I encountered by not being able to travel to Mexico and border towns. Based on all of the material that I read, I concluded that if the violence that is persistent and perpetuated in Mexico did not exist, neither would the songs. If characters like El Chapo and other drug lords did not specialize in drug trafficking, the songs would have no context for them to be written. If those that travel long distances to arrive at the USA did not struggle while being there, these songs would not be written. But all of these things are happening, and they are a reality, a harsh one. I have tried to come to terms that narcocorridos perpetuate violence, especially among the youth, but it is more complex than that. These are part of an older tradition that is also mine and one that I am proud of because it is the product of hardworking people. They are not only for entertainment purposes but also because they are the stories that depict the reality of my people. It is a trend, one that gains momentum as things worsen in Mexico and if social, political, and economic unrest is appeased, these songs will become a thing of the past and in addition to a hybrid tradition; maybe they will evolve into something else. I agree with those scholars and people that say it is a symptom, a response of the unrest in Mexico and as of now, I have decided that they are sounds of resistance and a cry to demand an end to drugs and violence.

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A few years back, my cousin Amanda was a victim of organized crime in Mexico. She was tortured, murdered, and dumped on the side of the road. She left behind her little kid and her whole family. There were many people so many people who said that she was involved in this type of “stuff” and that is ultimately what got her killed. Whatever the reason was that got her killed, she did not deserve this, neither the thousands of people-young or old- who also have died as a result of organized crime. My capstone is dedicated to them.

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