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## *Drug Traffickers as Social Bandits*

Culture and Drug Trafficking in Northern Mexico and the Border Region

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This article discusses ethnographic/qualitative research concerning the ways in which drug trafficking and drug traffickers are portrayed and interpreted in northern Mexico and the border region via a recently popularized form of the traditional narrative music genre called the *corrido*. The research links the drug trafficker persona to historical issues/values associated with the Sierra and border areas, including long-standing patterns of smuggling, a tradition of independence, and conflicting relationships with both Mexican and U.S. authorities. The construction of traffickers as social bandits or heroes varies by social group and between rural and urban areas. In any case, the “celebretization” of drug traffickers described in this article highlights the ambivalent relationship between drug trafficking, historical conflicts between the United States and Mexico, and socioeconomic and cultural factors. Cross-cultural comparisons are also made regarding drug trafficker portrayals in the United States.

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**T**his article reviews selected aspects of ethnographic research recently conducted by the author in the U.S.-Mexico border region concerning the way in which narco-traffickers, and by extension the drug war, are portrayed via a culturally specific and popular media genre. Specifically, the research investigated the ways in which the narco-trafficker, as a persona, is in part constructed, disseminated, and connected with day-to-day practice through the medium of the *narco-corrido*, a recently emergent variation of a traditional border song form called the *corrido*. Narco-corridos have become very popular in the U.S.-Mexico border region (as well as elsewhere), and they feature narratives about drug traffickers, who are often represented as models, admired people, or social bandits (as described in Hobsbawm, 1969, pp. 14-16) for those living in poverty. Key to the role of these narratives in constructing the narco-trafficker persona is the fact that, as songs, they are largely understood to be corridos, border ballads with a long history of

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recounting epic themes of heroes who resisted the Texas Rangers, American authorities, or in some cases, even central Mexican authorities (Herrera-Sobek, 1993; Paredes, 1958, 1993). These new corridos have situated their protagonists in the current border context and have gained a substantial amount of popularity among a wide range of Mexican, Mexican American, and other Hispanic audiences. For some narco-corrido groups (e.g., *Los Tucanes de Tijuana*, *Los Tigres del Norte*),<sup>1</sup> the audience has broadened beyond Mexico to Latin America at large. In any case, a basic presumption is the following: The fact that these songs are in corrido form has significance with respect to their meaning and the meaning of the narco-trafficker character they so often feature.

### BASIC RESULTS

Initially, the following kinds of questions were of interest: How are these narco-corridos framed or understood by those who listen to them as well as those who produce them? (Both groups were included as interview respondents in this research under the assumption that the meanings commonly drawn from a given media product result from a synthesis of producer and consumer motives, goals, and interpretive frameworks, within larger cultural and transcultural discourses.) How do the narco-corridos shape and/or reflect common understandings of the narco-trafficker, particularly in terms of the way the narco-trafficker is situated in the context of broader social forces in the U.S.-Mexico border area, which include patterns of social stratification and historical issues of power and conflict across the border? How do narco-corridos, as a vehicle for representing the narco-trafficker, have any impact on the self-in-practice? To investigate these questions, the author conducted participant observation, 55 interviews (youth and adults), and several focus groups on both sides of the border in El Paso, Texas/Juarez, Mexico, as well as in other border locations and in Los Angeles, California (where a number of small studios are located that record and produce narco-corridos). In a small-scale, preliminary study such as this, definitive answers were not expected. What I hoped for was more at the level of the suggestive, which can at least provide directions for further research. A brief review of selected results follows.

*Form.* First, I examined the form and narrative content of traditional corridos in comparison to narco-corridos to get a sense for how narco-traffickers are represented compared to traditional corrido heroes (e.g., Gregorio Cortez, Pancho Villa). There were some differences, which I discuss elsewhere (Edberg, in press), but there were enough similarities so that a signifi-

cant segment of listeners did understand and speak of narco-corridos as corridos. Thus, the general understanding of how to situate narco-traffickers was at least shaped in some way by the general equivalence of meaning given to the old and new narrative formats.

*Interpretation.* Some of the literature and discussion surrounding narco-corridos portrays them somewhat one dimensionally as narratives of resistance. My findings only partially support that argument. I found multiple interpretations of these songs, depending not only on class or social position but also on situation: In one situation, the same corrido would be taken as serious; in another, as fun, almost as humor in the same vein as other Mexican and border styles of joking (e.g., *relajo*). Some of the ways these songs were interpreted are discussed below.

*Interpreting narco-corridos as reality.* Although they are not strict accounts of facts or events, corridos are typically grounded in real events and contexts that are understood by the listening community. Based on data collected for this study, narco-corridos follow this pattern and are interpreted as a reflection of reality by many (although not all) of the listening community. These realities were many.

In the rural, mountainous Sierra region south of Juarez, for example, growing drug-related plants (opium poppies, marijuana) has for a long time been closely integrated into the life of many rural villages. One interview respondent in El Paso, a man in his 60s, recalled that, even in the late 1940s, in his small village in Sinaloa (western Sierra), there was a man who grew opium poppies in between rows of maize. The man would pay him and his friends a peso (a significant payment at the time) to take a razor blade and slice all the poppy bulbs so that the "milk" would run. Apparently, the milk granulates after a day or two, and the man would later come by and collect the granulated poppy milk. Three adult prisoners in the central Juarez jail (the *cereso*) with whom I talked also spoke of the drug industry and trade as a matter-of-fact, normal occurrence, a central part of the economy of their pueblos in south Chihuahua, Michoacan, and Sinaloa. For them, the narco-traffickers are big men, as the term is often used, providing wealth and jobs to the community.

In addition, there is the multigenerational reality of smuggling, whether what is smuggled is drugs, tequila, or something more benign like wax. Smuggling often occurs across generations, and a set of cultural understandings go with it (famed drug kingpin Pablo Acosta of Ojinaga, Mexico, came from a long family of smugglers, as described in Poppa, 1990).

Even the weapons used by traffickers have cultural nicknames: The AK-47, for example, is popularly known as a *cuerno de chivo* (horn of the

goat) after its long, curved clip. Most respondents were familiar with the term.

Another related factor is the degree to which narco-traffickers are an integral part of the tapestry of community. A *norteño* music group I interviewed, whom I will call *Plata Norte*, was tapped to write a corrido about a local trafficker they knew, whom they viewed as a "humble man, with a good heart, loved by the community," despite his involvement in trafficking. His life and his death were significant in the community. A corrido was, therefore, warranted by virtue of community esteem.

Youth interviewed on the U.S. side and on the Mexican side, who live in *barrios* or *colonias* where there is a high prevalence of drug trade activity, gangs, and so on, viewed narco-corridos as a reflection of "how it is" on the streets. This response is virtually identical to the oft-heard comment about gangsta rap. Narco-corridos are viewed as how it is not only because of the exact circumstances of the narratives, which often refer to the drug trade in and from Mexico, but also because of the attitudes, character types, and environment of risk that are presented. For these young listeners, narco-corridos thus reflect an "atmospheric of the street." The music is even called hard core, according to narco-corrido performers and producers interviewed during extended fieldwork in Los Angeles. (At least one Web site devoted to narco-corridos reports listener reaction in the same manner.)

On the other hand, I was fascinated and even surprised by another aspect of narco-corridos-as-reality, given the current mass-media hype surrounding the genre. The Arizona-based *norteño* band *Plata Norte* explained that, at almost every one of their shows (they perform all along the border in Mexico and the United States), someone will come from the audience and give them handwritten lyrics, or a home-recorded tape, for a corrido about something that happened in their town or area. These offerings are requests that the band make a corrido out of the material given to them. The events recounted may be a local tragedy (e.g., a woman whose sister was killed came to the band and asked them to do a corrido about her sister), or in some cases, a drug trafficking situation, which is an everyday fact of life in some border areas and northern Mexican communities.

*Interpreting narco-corridos as political statements.* Political undertones and overtones were present in a number of the corridos I reviewed, but, as noted below, these elements were not necessarily inherent in the character of the narco-trafficker himself (the term is gendered male here because most narco-traffickers, at this time, are male). This differs from the political aspect of traditional corridos, where the hero and subject of the corrido either makes the political statement or that subject's actions constitute a political statement. Often, where political content existed in the narco-corridos I reviewed,

the content involved a statement by the *corridistas*, the singers. For example, note the following stanzas in “The General” (Tigres del Norte), referred to earlier:

Different countries are certified by the gringo (American) government,  
 And that government says it doesn't want drugs to exist  
 The gringo government says drugs are dangerous  
 But tell me, who certifies  
 The United States?  
 Mexico has tried honestly and hard  
 To apprehend the narco-traffickers  
 It is the gringos who buy the cocaine  
 They'll pay for it any price  
 They say they don't want drugs to exist  
 But when it comes to certification  
 They give themselves a big break

In some interviews, admiration for the narco-traffickers sung about in narco-corridos had to do specifically with narratives in which the narco-trafficker “defeated” or managed to transport drugs past the police, Border Patrol, or other authorities. On one Web site devoted to narco-corridos, the music is described as “defeating” the preference of “authorities” that these realities (the realities of drugs and their related context) be “buried” by telenovelas and the passing of time. Instead, the narco-corridos “impede forgetting, immortalize people and situations, and defeat the conventional interpretations about what is happening.”

*Interpreting narco-corridos as heroic tales or allegories.* This is a key element in understanding the role and place of the narco-trafficker persona. First, as can be seen from a sample of lyrics, there is a mixed message in the narco-corridos with respect to the glorification of drug trafficking. The portrayal is one of power and daring but also of treachery, betrayal, and tragedy. Young people in particular talk about narco-traffickers as powerful and fearsome, as “players” with money, women, and an aura of excitement . . . as *valientes* (valiant, “men with balls”), or *vatos*. The narco-traffickers are just one kind of character who can be viewed as “crazy,” as willing to take serious risks so as to be the subject (said a former gang member and now gang prevention project director) of comments such as, “That fool *did it!*”

Second, whether narco-traffickers were viewed as heroes—and whether narco-corridos were viewed as songs about heroes in the manner of Pancho Villa or Gregorio Cortez<sup>2</sup>—varied greatly. In Juarez and El Paso, not many people viewed narco-traffickers as heroes (I only heard about a few narco-

traffickers who remained in and were said to contribute to their communities). This was in part because Juarez is the “dirty end of the business” where narco-traffickers try to get drugs across the border, dump (for cheap) those they can’t, and shoot it out among each other. In other locations, particularly as one moves south into the Sierra, this picture changes. There, narco-traffickers may be seen more as “big men” in the sense that they are the ones (especially in rural areas south of Juarez) who often provide employment and various services to the community. As noted above, they are also seen as political foils or tricksters, vicariously confronting, undercutting, critiquing, and escaping both Mexican and American authorities, but not always as social bandits, at least in the sense described by Hobsbawm. The line, however, is a thin one.

Still, even in Juarez (more than in El Paso, based on discussions/interview responses thus far), the image of narco-traffickers referred to above coexists with a number of commonly cited folktales and gossip items about narco-traffickers, who have near mythical status (throughout Mexico). One of these is the story of Caro Quintero (famous in the 1980s, he is perhaps the prototype of the recent crop of mega-narco-traffickers in Mexico), who made a famous declaration from jail that he could pay off Mexico’s massive external debt with his wealth. Another is the story (told in many versions) of former Juarez cartel head Amado Carillo Fuentes, called “lord of the skies,” who attained a near mythical reputation for his fleet of airplanes and his ability to appear in one place, then another, at will. Some people still think that Amado Carillo is not dead, that he staged his 1997 death so that he could live life as he wanted, free from the constant danger and precariousness of his position as cartel head.

There is also another dimension related to the mythic aspect of the drug trade. I heard various stories (see Astorga, 1997; Kaplan, 1998) about *El Narcosanto*, a narco-trafficker saint,<sup>3</sup> who is honored at a popular shrine in Culiacán in the state of Sinaloa. The narco-saint is named Jesus Malverde, who, depending on the source, is said to be a Sinaloan *bandido generoso* who robbed the rich and gave to the poor during the rule of Porfirio Díaz (Astorga, 1997) or a bandit of some sort who died (or was killed) in the 1970s, or other things. His exact connection to the drug trade is not clear; nevertheless, his shrine is commonly viewed as a “poor people’s shrine,” and people who visit often leave mementos or flowers.

Hearing about El Narcosanto, however, and experiencing it are different matters. In the Juarez prison, which is on the outskirts of the city, next to dry, dusty, and poverty-ridden Colonia Revolución, I interviewed three men who were convicted of drug trafficking. These three men, coincidentally, had formed a corrido group, either before they were arrested or while in prison. In any case, the prison director let them keep their instruments—bass violin,



accordion, and guitar—and allowed them to come up (with their instruments) to the small staff kitchen and do a show. Although the kitchen staff acted as if they had seen the group perform before, this seemed unusual to me, certainly not something one would see in an American prison, especially with inmates locked up for a comparable offense. These corridistas wore street clothes: hats, boots, belts, jeans, Western shirts. No prison garb. They were quite good, as good as anyone I heard on CDs or the radio. They sang several narco-corridos as well as corridos they wrote about life in prison. As I listened, I saw that the lead singer wore a large pendant bearing a photo or picture. I asked him who it was. “El Narcosanto,” he said in a matter-of-fact manner. Then he spoke briefly about his faith in El Narcosanto—as I interpreted it, not faith in a formal religious sense as much as an instrumental faith in the protective powers of the saint, as something that would keep him from harm.

By contrast, adult and older respondents who were not recent immigrants or who had more formal education than most (recent) immigrants tended to shake their heads and, with some gravity, deplore the way in which the corrido tradition has been “cheapened” by the narco-corridos, saying that these are nothing like the old corridos about revolutionary heroes or figures like Pancho Villa. The primary value underlying narco-corridos, it was said, is money. At the same time, several of these respondents acknowledged that “poor people” view narco-traffickers and the money they are able to distribute as a “dream,” particularly because most narco-traffickers also come from a background of poverty.

One of the early narco-corrido stars, Chalino Sanchez, is a clear example of popular appeal among those in poverty. He is widely revered today as a folk hero. Reputed to be a trafficker himself, he was also a narco-corrido singer who made money and “made it big.” Yet, he was from a poor rural background, sang with a rough, untrained voice, and, it is said, never separated himself from his people. Like rapper Tupac Shakur, he was shot and killed in the early 1990s.

*Interpreting narco-corridos as inevitable tragedy.* It is important to note that the corrido, and by extension those represented in its narratives, is a “marked genre” to start with because the corrido form itself, at least this genre of corrido, focuses on misfortunes and/or death as part of the narrative structure through which the protagonist is represented and interpreted as a hero. This is a very interesting ontological element of corridos that may have some ties, I believe, to ontological elements of other music/aesthetic genres that grow out of situations of concentrated or recurring poverty, where the life or the character of the protagonist (in this case, the narco-trafficker) is created, or at least defined, by his/her death. As such, death is part of the devel-



opmental process, and the life of the protagonist achieves a kind of completeness after death, as an ongoing iteration of a moral type.

The connection between corridos (and narco-corridos) and death is clearly a strong undercurrent. Members of one norteño group told me that because a corrido is a memorial, a corrido should never be written about someone who is alive—or if this is done, at least no name should be mentioned. In fact, as discussed earlier, a man they knew who was a well-liked community figure and a narco-trafficker had a corrido written about him while he was alive. Sure enough, said the group members, he was shot a few months later. They were then called on to write and perform the corrido written about him post mortem. However, the corrido-death connection is not necessarily the rule, because there are in fact many narco-corridos written about those who are living.

*Interpreting narco-corridos as moral lessons:* To the outsider, this connection may seem unlikely, given the subject matter. But (as noted earlier), it is not uncommon for narco-corridos to contain a warning about the consequences of involvement in trafficking. In addition, members of Plata Norte said that some of the lyrics address moral issues that have meaning beyond their drug context. For example, there is a corrido about a man who was so involved in the drug business, a kind of workaholic, that he forgot to feed his children, and the corrido describes his children in the back of his truck eating cocaine because they were starving due to his neglect. It is not only a narco-corrido but also a statement about being a responsible parent in this interpretation.

*Interpreting narco-corridos as jests.* Another way in which narco-corridos, and thus the narco-trafficker character, are sometimes interpreted is as a form of “intercultural jest” (Paredes, 1993). Such jests are called *tallas*, according to Paredes (1993). One form documented by Paredes was the *curandero* belief tale, stories told about situations in which sick people were cured by a curandero after the American doctors could not cure them. In these tales, the doctors are “shown up” by the curandero because, after the doctors pronounce the patient incurable, the curandero is easily able to cure him or her by a simple remedy of herbs, specific rituals, washing in a certain well or spring, and so on. When the doctors approach the curandero to find out how he did it, the curandero tells them nothing, other than a pious “God cured him, not I.” The doctors then leave, mystified. Another kind of joking tradition that narco-corridos may draw from is known as *relajo*, described by Barriga (1997) as “a joking relationship that involves a suspension of seriousness that undercuts normative values” (p. 50; quoting Portilla, 1966, p. 25), often involving themes of class or social stratification.

With this in mind, a number of narco-corridos can be viewed as making a jest about tricking, evading, or otherwise showing up the *migra* (Border Patrol), Mexican or U.S. police and other officials. For example, the corrido “Las Tres Monjas” (Exterminador) tells the story of narco-traffickers who dressed up as nuns to transport their drugs across the border. (They were eventually discovered, but then pulled their *cuernos* (AK-47s) out of their habits and engaged in a gunfight.) This is a popular topic for song in general. I also heard, for example, about a song by Vicente Fernandez in which he jokes about dying his hair blond to get past the *migra*.

Several of the youth I interviewed, in fact, said that they look at narco-corrido lyrics as fun, or as funny, in the manner of cartoon action or professional wrestling. The narco-trafficker character here is interpreted not as real but as a fantasy and entertainment, although one that draws on resonant themes. Norteño musicians in Plata Norte said that they themselves listen to narco-corridos along with other norteño music, in part because “we get a kick out of the lyrics,” according to one member. And when I attended a large concert by well-known norteño group Los Tigres del Norte, the crowd responded with great enthusiasm when they played a set of narco-corridos. On stage, there was an exaggerated display of simulated gunshots and sound. In one sense, there was clearly a sense of play involved in the performance. Yet, a substantial part of the audience were dressed the way narco-traffickers often dress, with boots, hats, silk shirts, and cell phones (a look labeled *chero* by many interview respondents). In the same vein, narco-corrido lyrics often employ rural themes as humorous double entendres to communicate drug-related messages: for example, the use of animal names to signify drugs (e.g., parakeet for cocaine) or phrases such as “cow’s tail with no ticks” (to mean marijuana with no seeds).

*Interpreting narco-corridos as an image enhancer and source of power.* Many sources described narco-corridos as *canciones fuertes* (strong or powerful songs). Even more, it was said that playing narco-corridos helps in the self-creation of an image that is more powerful than the person “doing the creating” may actually be. Narco-corridos, said sources from Plata Norte, “portray you as an image either that you want others to believe or that you want to believe.” By having them around and playing them, “other people will give you credit for being stronger than you are, more powerful than you are.” Thus, it is said that narco-corridos “make you braver, make you stronger.” In this way, they function as an intoxicant, an intoxicant of power. A gathering of men, listening to narco-corridos and drinking alcohol, will get “pumped up.”

In a sense, this aspect of narco-corridos is similar to the effect that corridos had as songs of the Mexican revolution and, for that matter, as songs of the Chicano movement in the United States. One source told me, for example, that when he was in prison, Latino inmates would sing corridos from the Chicano movement as a source of group solidarity and strength.

*Interpreting narco-corridos as “country music” and/or lower class music.* For many respondents, corridos were clearly a regional signifier, an urban-rural signifier, and a class signifier. This refers on one hand to their appeal as music that reminds rural-based listeners of their home setting. The obverse of the positive rural signification for listeners in this category, however, is the negative connotation attached by others to the same signification. Echoing an opinion heard from a number of adults, a middle-aged woman and mother of several children, who ran a small restaurant in downtown Juarez, said that narco-corridos and corridos in general are music that appeals to people with lower levels of education or to *maquiladora* (border industrial) workers. She said that she loved the beautiful norteño romantic ballads, but as for corridos, “they [corrido singers] sing like they are squeezing their necks.” Moreover, executives I interviewed who manage a group of radio stations in Juarez delineated each station’s audience by class. Not surprisingly, the station that played corridos/narco-corridos was unapologetically categorized as lower class.

An additional and important class issue is certainly the connection made between common northern Mexican images and portrayals of rural men from the hills or the Sierra who can survive, who can take it, who refuse to give way to anyone. That image in itself is intermingled with portrayals of narco-traffickers. There is, in some narco-corrido lyrics, a great love expressed for this tough land and at times a pride in the marijuana-growing business, as a business that is of the hills and that has helped people survive and prosper (even if they are not members of the elite).

*Narco-corridos as marketing tool.* It is also important to note that narco-corridos are now big business, and the narco-trafficker persona is a hot commodity in itself. Interviews with small and large studios/producers showed that corridos and other norteño music, once rejected by radio stations as “poor people’s music,” have attracted their attention—and thereby the attention of the media producers—because of the underground popularity of narco-corridos and the play that is made of the narco-trafficker persona (now increasingly both male and female). Thus, and this is important, the persona is further constructed and amplified by the music producing industry because it sells CDs and tapes. The narco-trafficker persona is used, I would argue, in its most shallow and sensationalized form on ads, CD covers, and so on, and

the focus is primarily on the “in your face” or outrageous element of the persona, although sometimes the social bandit element is involved. In this way, there are many parallels to gangsta rap, and, in fact, the further construction of the persona via the music industry draws (by their own admission) from the marketing and construction of the gangsta rap image.

Along with this is another related and important phenomenon. Narco-traffickers themselves, seeing the power of their caricature as a marketing tool in the media, often commission *norteño* groups to write corridos about them as a kind of advertisement, as a creation of self through the commodified narco-trafficker persona (which, as noted, includes social bandit and other socially positive components).

### NARCO-CORRIDOS IN CONTEXT: SUMMARY

Thus, although the picture is mixed, narco-traffickers as portrayed in the narco-corridos are clearly situated within a value-laden, traditional narrative form featuring a cultural persona that symbolizes resistance of some sort.

Several scholars of current corridos have emphasized this argument, including Guillermo Hernandez (1992), who notes that in most narco-corridos, drugs and drug trafficking are not the primary focus; it is the conflict with authorities and other themes of opposition that are in the foreground (see also Nicolopoulos, 1997). Along these same lines, Nicolopoulos mentions (from Hernandez) that, in the 1970s, a number of corridos told about Lucio Cabanas, a schoolteacher who led one of the best-known of several guerrilla movements that arose following the Mexican government’s brutal Tlatelolco massacre in 1968—and who was eventually killed by Mexican troops. These corridos were banned by the official PRI (Mexican government) musicians’ union. In the 1990s, government authorities in the state of Sinaloa and in other parts of Mexico also banned the playing of narco-corridos, lending to them a similar anti-authoritarian, counterdiscursive patina. In Mexico, Luis Astorga (1997) has argued that narco-corridos represent a kind of counterdiscourse against state-controlled media representations of those involved in drug trafficking, a means through which to portray an alternate image. This counterdiscursive image not only targets state representations of drug traffickers but also offers an indigenous construction of—and assertion of—a meaningful identity for those in marginalized social categories, stigmatized from birth.

Based on my data and experience, however, I cannot make such arguments unequivocally, though I might like to do so. This is not to say that narco-corridos do not have these elements within them, because it was clear to me that the genre does draw, sometimes very powerfully, from such a context. But the picture is more complex than that.

We can look briefly at what could be viewed as a border area character who is a standard social bandit persona, exemplified by Pancho Villa. Villa was a controversial hero and one of the key and most popular military leaders of the Mexican revolution of 1911. He was known not only for having a gun-toting, no-quarter-given attitude but also for giving land to peasants and building schools in the territories he controlled. Like many who were his followers, he was poor (and an orphan), had sharecropper origins, and had little formal education (Katz, 1998). When the United States refused to support him with weapons, he conducted raids into the United States and then evaded attempts by a U.S. expeditionary force under General Pershing to capture him. For this, and for his previous revolutionary exploits, he became a folk hero and subject of many corridos. And, true to the tragic model, he was assassinated in 1924 (Katz, 1998; Suchlicki, 1996).

The Villa and narco-trafficker personas overlap with other popularized (and stereotypical) portrayals of the Latino macho male. According to Mirande (1997; also see Goldwert, 1985), the popularized character type of the macho male was, after Mexican independence, introduced into the political arena as the political strongman or *caudillo*. Porfirio Díaz ruled as an authoritarian, macho figure, and then the revolution of 1910 unleashed “an orgy of machismo, sexual rampages, and destructiveness” (Mirande, 1997, p. 41, quoting Goldwert, 1985, p. 163). Pancho Villa is often cited as the epitome of this character. Mirande (1997, p. 41) cites Aniceto Aramoni (1965, p. 151), who writes that Pancho Villa exhibited “an extreme, compensatory exaggeration of the personality, narcissism, petulance, aggressiveness, intense destructiveness, considerable hatred of superiors . . . , a deep contempt for and fear of women.” Moreover, according to Mirande (1997), Villa appealed to the masses because he symbolized a peon or lower class person taking a stand against the dominant classes:

Mexicans [sic] seem to identify vicariously with the person who “bears with it,” who is brave, *que no se deja* (who doesn’t take anything from anyone), and *que no se raja* (who doesn’t back down), especially if the person is depicted as an underdog and of poor or humble origins (citing Aramoni, 1965, p. 163 here). Villa’s invasion of the United States, for example, was celebrated because it demonstrated his audacity in taking on the most powerful nation in the world. In the end, what mattered was not that the battle was won or lost or that numerous casualties were incurred but that Villa *tenia huevos* (he had “balls”) and was man enough to take on the hated yanquis. (p. 42)

And, as mentioned, the narco-trafficker persona overlaps with the image of the tough survivor of the Sierra described earlier.

Regardless of how they may be exploited in some narco-corridos, narco-traffickers have thus become larger-than-life characters, cultural personas that are brothers (or sisters) to the Pancho Villas and many other characters flowing in and out of Mexican culture (which, at the highest level, include legendary/mythical characters such as La Malinche, La Llorona, etc.). As such, the narco-trafficker persona exists outside of and beyond the actual life of any given narco-trafficker. Because of this, when narco-corridos are sung about a particular narco-trafficker, the singers are describing that narco-trafficker and simultaneously the narco-trafficker persona. Thus, narco-corridos are both contemporary narrative and homage to a transcendent myth. The fact that narco-corridos are not always interpreted in a serious manner does not detract from this. Rather, it supports this conclusion, because even when narco-corridos are interpreted as humor, it is my clear sense that they are interpreted in the way Barthes' (1972) wrestlers are interpreted, as cartoonlike on one hand, yet as larger-than-life, ritualistic theater on the other. And the fact that the myth is exploited (often cynically and hypocritically) by both narco-traffickers and music/media corporations only supports the vital existence of the myth itself: If it did not have popular power, it could not be exploited.

*Representations encapsulated within the narco-trafficker persona.* Thus, to summarize, it could be argued that the narco-trafficker persona is one current iteration of a Mexican (and transcultural) persona. As a packed symbol, it represents something like the following, set out against a structure of social stratification:

*For subaltern strata* (in Mexico and among Mexican immigrants):

1. Reversal of the common circumstance; representation of an individual who has gained power and status without being of elite or dominant background, someone who provides for "his people." The social bandit syndrome.
2. Foregrounding of the common circumstance; fame given to a traditional, rural "big man" or caudillo.
3. Foregrounding of the common circumstance; reflection of the real world of drug dealing, violence that exists "on the street."
4. Self-assertion of a clever and tough northern Mexican ideal type.

*For elite/middle class strata* (in Mexico and among Mexican immigrants):

1. Power and status achieved "outside the rules"; therefore, a form of rebellion and abandon vis-à-vis traditional values.

*Across strata* (in Mexico and among Mexican immigrants):

1. Representations related to longstanding U.S.-Mexico conflict; a person who stands in opposition to U.S. power, is able to "defeat" U.S. power, and brings to light contradictions in U.S. policy.



2. Representations of masculinity and (male gendered) power widely disseminated in Mexican culture.
3. Widely shared cultural understandings about boundaries between life and death and the presence of life after death.
4. For a small (but growing) subset of narco-corridos in which the narco-trafficker is female, power and status are achieved "outside the rules"; therefore (again), a form of rebellion and abandon vis-à-vis traditional values.

*Cultural personas and social stratification.* If cultural personas have this kind of representational function (as I argue more extensively elsewhere), then, as noted, it makes perfect sense that personas would be created over time that represent values/understandings associated with social divisions and different social segments, whether of class, subculture, or other origin. It also makes sense that at least some of the personas originating with or popular among subaltern/subordinate strata would represent a conglomeration of contesting meanings vis-à-vis the dominant social groups. There are clear elements of this in the narco-trafficker persona, and these elements are quite similar to aspects of other personas that I have encountered as characteristic of high-poverty urban settings, for example, the dealer or hustler persona.

With the urban dealer persona, the emphasis again is on performance, on establishing a reputation and carrying out a daily performance that validates the performer as a dealer and deserving of his reputation as one who makes things happen. The reputation must include a willingness to be ruthless when necessary (e.g., when territory or reputation is challenged, when double crossed), a show of wealth as a demonstration of efficacy and ability (and as a not-so-subtle rejection of the dominant society's rules for how properly to achieve success), and, in the most enduring examples, at least the pretense of attachment to community in the form of services, help, and money provided to community members. Maintaining this kind of reputation is a richly coded task. I used to hear, for example, that the way to hold a gun during a shooting was horizontally, with arm extended out to the side as opposed to in front. This was a stylized way of demonstrating power and insouciance vis-à-vis the victim.

Although the details are different, this is very close to some of the basic elements of the narco-trafficker persona. Moreover, there is a striking similarity in the way that both personas (narco-trafficker and hustler), as symbols, appear to simultaneously contest and accept dominant group meanings with respect to the criteria for establishing oneself as a significant or admired person. As in Warner's (1959) classic parable of the disfavored but socially mobile outsider, Biggy Muldoon, there is both a tendency to "want in" via demonstrations of the material trappings of success and a rejection of the dominant rules for how to get there, the accepted "cultural performance of success." Because having status or being notable is such a symbolically laden



task, an individual who rejects participation in that performance may be precluded from ever really being there. (Yet, on the other hand, such a person may end up as the progenitor of a new model of acceptable cultural performance for success or status, or even gender role.) This, in fact, is one of the subtle ways in which racism and other forms of discrimination work even when the overt or de jure constraints are gone. Moreover, if people do attempt the cultural performance along with the material performance, the dilemma so often lies in the consequent rejection of themselves and therefore of their original reference group, as described in another classic work, by Whyte (1943/1993), with respect to Chick Morelli, the former "corner boy" who became a success in the mainstream world. Thus, one of the comments I heard repeatedly during this research about Chalino Sanchez, who was both narco-corrido singer and a (reputed) narco-trafficker himself, and who made a substantial amount of money from his music, was that he "valued his people" over the money and status he gained and that he "never left his people."

A third and important parallel (noted earlier) is in the way that death seems to complete the persona; death is not the ending but the "launching" of an individual into a timeless existence as an iteration of the persona, whose life will float in the popular imagination, reputation cemented and memorialized forever, free from the barriers that prevented attainment of full status in this world. As noted, there are cultural roots in Mexico for this with respect to the narco-trafficker persona, but because this is a characteristic of personas that exist in other settings, it is not just a cultural idiosyncrasy. Something else is involved. It is possible that, in a situation of poverty where options for being a significant person are limited or perceived as limited (at least in this world), a notable death, in fact, becomes one way of living, one way of having made a dent in the cosmos, so to speak. This may be a sentiment that exists across cultures in situations of social stratification and poverty, and one that becomes embodied in culturally specific ways through the invention of personas like those described here. In this society, at least, poverty among other things is facelessness; yet, people yearn to be known, to have had an existence that produced at least some trace.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is not a great leap to say that, in a global context of stratification by nation-state, by center-periphery, by West/non-West or other such divisions, these general sentiments are akin to the ethic of martyrdom that is so common among those who are called terrorists.

With the narco-trafficker persona, however, there is less clarity with respect to those who are represented as dominant versus subordinate groups. The element of racial polarization that is part of the urban U.S. hustler persona is not so clearly part of the narco-trafficker persona. In El Paso/Juarez and other locations on the border, socioeconomic disparities cannot always be linked a priori with racial or ethnic categories, because populations on both sides of the border are predominantly Mexican in ethnic origin (see Mar-

teness, 1988, 1994), and the dominant subgroups (in socioeconomic terms) include either (a) Anglo, Mexican, and other foreign nationals who own or manage maquiladoras and their related businesses or (b) drug lords. In Juarez, I saw a number of walled neighborhoods and compounds where the elite or top families live. These are largely Mexican families. And some narco-corrido lyrics focus on the Mexican police, just as some focus on the U.S. Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. In a way, the lack of clarity allows for more exploitation of the persona, because the ambiguity can be glossed over or presented in ways that are more suggestive than clear.

Let us assume, without trying to be overly glib, that on the U.S.-Mexico border, the narco-trafficker persona draws some part of its meaning from (a) conditions of poverty set against the domination (perceived and real, in different measures) of global industry (via the maquiladora factories), the United States, and the still-salient class/race structure in Mexico; (b) the long tradition of border conflict between the United States and Mexico and the underlying antagonism that flows from the conflict;<sup>5</sup> (c) a Mexican tradition of individuals as centers of power and agency, the tradition of *personalismo* (Suchlicki, 1996); and (d) long-held images of a northern Mexican man, clever, brave, and tough. The narco-trafficker then represents a certain, culturally shaped, individual route to power for those who feel powerless, a challenge to the customary rules for how to achieve status and influence, and a route to status for those usually shut out. Thus, it is not just the modeling effect (e.g., Bandura, 1986) that is key. When constructing themselves as an iteration of the narco-trafficker persona, people take on the stance that this persona represents. Particular behaviors, including violence and drug use, are not simply mechanical imitations of a model; they are pursued to the extent that they are part of the expression of that stance.

In the context of the border, this kind of representation is powerful. Moreover, I would argue that identical or similar representations are just as salient in other situations of poverty, disaffection, and alienation, whether that is in the inner city, a rural area, or somewhere else. Fleisher (1998) has documented, for example, how youth gang leaders are mythologized, again, not just as models, but as representations of a stance. Bourgois (1989, 1996) has noted the connection between crack selling and respect in New York City. Anderson (1992) has described a young man's involvement in drugs as a redress of the humiliation experienced in the mainstream world. In my own research and program work, I have encountered a number of similar examples (see Edberg, 1998).

Consequently, actions that are often spoken of as risk behaviors need to be viewed as more than behaviors. They are also expressions. This is, of course, not the only factor involved, and it may be more or less important in different

cases. But the discourse of behavior tends to push aside these considerations in establishing causality and in developing social/health prevention and intervention modalities. As elaborated more fully in a forthcoming book (Edberg, in press), a prevention/intervention approach that views behavior also as expression, I would argue, must address that which is being expressed through the specific behaviors at issue and seek to resolve or change what lies behind the expressive stance, or to find other ways through which it can be channeled.

### NOTES

1. Other groups, perhaps not quite so famous, include *Exterminador* and *Los Capos de México* (considered hard core, according to one review; see Kun, 1997), *Los Huracanes del Norte*, *Los Dinámicos del Norte*, and *Los Rebeldes de Tijuana*.
2. Protagonist of a well-known and prototypical corrido of the late 19th century, who fought against and confounded the Texas Rangers.
3. Not, of course, an official canonized saint. A people's saint, as it were.
4. In another context, see Liebow (1993) on this sentiment among homeless women.
5. I might note, for example, that in Mexico, on Good Friday (before Easter Sunday), figures of Judas Iscariot are sometimes burned, along with other figures representing popular or moral enemies, antagonists, or people subject to popular opprobrium. A perennial favorite for burning is Uncle Sam.

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