

Con Machaca y Mitote: NAFTA, music, and text as a narrative of self

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Transcultural record productions tell specific stories about accountability, authorship, and agency, about the workings of capital, control, and compromise, and about the strategies and possibilities for valuing indigeneity as something more than essentialized otherness or generic opposition and resistance. [Keil and Feld 1994:258]

Struggles over musical property are themselves political struggles over whose music, whose images of pleasure or beauty, or whose rules of order shall prevail. This struggle in itself has become a basic principle, not to denote a weakening of domestic identity, but rather to reiterate the historical question of making home in modernity.¹ The advent of an open-market economy in Mexico triggered an immediate social response encompassing a series of concerns and desires that underscored an unyielding economic anxiety in society at large. The overnight flood of American commodities during the early 1990s, paired to a sudden break of the local economic infrastructure, were the catalysts for the clash of local and foreign cultural forces. As spokesmen of the events of this period in the north of Mexico, the band *El Gran Silencio* musically depicts the diverse socio-economic factors operating in this struggle. Its musical hybridity is a prime representation of a prevailing social tension between hegemonic and subaltern forces.

This essay illustrates the skill and imagination with which local musicians take over hegemonic musical forms. The central problem of globalization is the tension between homogenizing and heterogeneous forces in society. El Gran Silencio illustrates this process of the negotiation of local and foreign influences in musical production.

The band's music addresses issues of identity in which icons of tradition are no longer sustainable. Identity is no longer regarded as a symbol of contested meanings but as the articulation of a dynamic process of conflict and tension between clashing and shaping forces, foreign and local. In this paper, I will attempt to show how the operation of power relations has produced a change in the configuration of identity modes. As part of the global ecumene, identity cannot rely on symbolic constructions of locally contested meanings. New reconfigurations of the self are produced not through an internal power struggle among classes, but through a conflict between hegemonic and counterhegemonic forces. Thus, identity becomes a dynamic process that does not passively deny or forcefully overcome conflict. It is a mechanism, a coping strategy of survival articulated through this process of struggle and tension from which the "self" emerges not as a symbolic code, but as a way in the world.

A Folk Mystique

Since the arrival of the Spaniards, Mexico has been an arena for racial blend. As a consequence of this phenomenon of *mestizaje*, conscious social differences based solely on race became more problematic to delineate. And even though race is still an active element in the delineation of social distinctions, the truth is that all considerations in order to mark social categories in Mexican society are, first and foremost, based on economic grounds. However, under the umbrella of established political and educational institutions, the entire social spectrum — traditionally encompassing lower, middle and high-class strata — is united through a social bond that has helped to produce a common sense of socio-political awareness.

Along with the declaration of independence of nation-states throughout Latin America, came a concern to adopt strategies for the development of national societies that would reflect Western standards of progress. Mexico was not the exception to this tendency. The educated — and socially dominating — elite began to promote efforts for the adoption of European cultural models in order to give their new society a civilized image and status in the eyes of European countries, considered to be models for progress and evolution. In music, all types of activities derived from the working classes were dismissed as archaic, barbaric representations of social regression (Carpentier

1975:280). This tendency is reflected in the number of manuscript and printed sources of Italian and French music that survive from the 1700s. In addition, the proliferation of operatic repertory, mainly arias, reflected the ongoing European trends in music composition. The musical vocabulary used by composers in the Americas was directly influenced by the Italian style of the eighteenth century, and eventually the German school took its toll in composition during the nineteenth century as well.

Meanwhile, working classes tended to be fertile grounds for the fecundity of new types of musical activity. Unique musical genres that reflected national popular idiosyncrasies developed during the eighteenth century. *Sonecitos*, sung tunes accompanied primarily by guitars and violins, evolved in different ways according to their geographical location, thus giving birth to the *son huasteco*, *son jarocho*, and *son de tierra caliente*. Musical phenomena of this type constituted, in principle, a social practice, a mode of social discourse with defined cultural parameters exclusive to the social dynamics of a portion of the Mexican community.

At the turn of the 20th century the nationalist trends sweeping throughout Europe touched a sensible chord within the consolidating socio-political structures of Latin American countries. Eager to find a distinctive sound that would reflect the voice of a soul for their nation, musicians turned their attention to local musical manifestations. In Mexico, popular sones, along with attempts for the reconstruction of a lost Aztec musical practice, were incorporated to instrumental languages and genres favorite of theaters and concert halls. The music of the streets, of the masses — *el populus* — came to be identified as the vernacular voice of a true cultural model with national resonance. Pictorially conceived as fixed, monolithic, and disregarding the dynamics of its social reality, *el populus* arose as folklore, as a symbolic social construct flexible in nature, fluid in meaning, and sensitive to a diversity of perceptions and social factors acting upon it as agents in the creation of identity models. The conceptualization of identity became a construction that relied not on the nature of the rhetorical image of *populus* created, but on the social dynamics of appropriation of this symbol and the meaning inscribed to it as a result of this process. As icon, *populus* is subjected to a plurality of meanings characteristic of the social reality of the appropriating classes, a process that Richard Middleton calls “the struggle among classes” (Middleton 1990:135).

Populus: Populi

In its historical dimension, Mexican identity has been a social construct of contestable meaning, that, more than a unified image of self, reflects the tensions of an economically stratified society. The working classes provide elements to elaborate a picture of self. On the other hand, such elements become recontextualized and the reality from which they derived is an undesired and denied social process. In Mexico, music has proven to be a flexible medium for the articulation of this tension; it is an arena where local and foreign elements intermingle and create new sounds and musical texts that are socially fluid in nature.

Although it is true that its music does not reflect an unprecedented musical phenomenon, El Gran Silencio indeed is an example of musical hybridity in which local social strategies against a global market culture operate, directly or indirectly. Local social strategies operate directly in the diversity of musical elements that the band appropriates and adapts to local musical discourses. They work indirectly in the way new economic forces came to affect society, providing new materials for cultural appropriation, therefore altering established social dynamics within a local socio-economic structure.

Under these circumstances *el populus* arises once again as an active social force, although this time operating under different parameters. Despite the persistence of local social subtleties, the transformation of the overall political and economic landscape in Mexico has nowadays produced an accentuated fluidity of social discourses in what was before a markedly stratified society. In this light, I want to show that identity emerges not as symbol, but as a reactive dynamic mechanism fueled by a common set of circumstances and conditions affecting society at large. *El populus* is therefore embraced as a coping strategy against the immediate effects of external economic forces.

A Socio-Musical Semblance

There is no doubt that the proliferation of communications media throughout the second half of the twentieth century was crucial in the proliferation of social spaces for the circulation of music. Radio, L.P., and tape recordings have always been the main means for this traffic. As a result, repertoires of music styles — characteristically as-

sociated with specific social classes sometimes — are established through the pervasive circulation of songs, making in some instances the music of a given artist or artists to become emblematic. Monterrey, Nuevo León, hometown to El Gran Silencio, is a city in the Northwest part of Mexico, musically characterized by the proliferation of two main styles, namely *cumbia* and *música nortehña*. As mentioned before, even though the image of this music has been uniformly embraced as a symbol of regional identity, it is in the working classes where *música nortehña* — and mostly *cumbia* — are most actively consumed. Be it in the street markets, houses with open doors, or in the sound systems of cars and trucks, *cumbias* (*vallenato* or *colombiana*) and *música nortehña* (polkas, *corridos* or *quebradita*) are common themes in the daily routines of factory workers, bus drivers, gas station assistants, street merchants, cooks, maids and many other low income workers, that together form what is known as *la clase popular*, otherwise called *el populus*.

Private social celebrations are the most important spaces where diverse music styles circulate. Weddings, birthdays, *quinceañera* parties, baptisms and anniversaries provide occasions to dance and sing to multiple sounds. *Cumbias*, *nortehñas*, national *baladas* and American rock songs are typical of the various social tastes that, depending on the social nature of the event, intermingle. Social gatherings of this nature have therefore been fundamental for the interaction of diverse musical and social tastes and sensibilities. In such events it is still typical today to have the following format for music performance: at about eight o'clock the first music set plays mainstream songs which can include American, Spanish "covers" or national pop, ballads or anything that is currently in the top of the music charts. At about ten o'clock, the following set follows and it is called *las cumbias*, a generic term to denote a set of music to dance together — *bailar pegado* — that includes *cumbias*, *nortehñas* and in some instances even *tejano* music. At eleven o'clock, there is a third set of mainstream music to have the young crowd dancing again, followed by a small set of slow ballads at the end called *las románticas* to end the party. Thus, it is evident that these celebrations are indeed spaces where local and foreign music equally participate, thus reflecting the interaction of a wide range of social tastes.

Although the social interaction reflected in the plurality of music styles of the above mentioned celebrations has a clear historical

precedent, hybrid musical practices in the United States did not manifest themselves until the mid-1990s. There are several factors to take into account for this matter.

Socio-Economic Historicity: The GATT

Outside the efforts to translate American rock music during the 1960s by mainstream artists, the national rock scene in Mexico remained an underscored activity that merely mimicked American musical styles (i.e. rock and blues). The impact of such music was rather low and practically disregarded throughout the 1960s and 1970s, mainly because “realities in the United States and Mexico were so different for any ideological material to be transferred” (Steinberg 1978:288). Rock musicians knew there was little local interest in Mexican rock groups compared to other music coming from the northern neighbor. The rock musician — rocker or *rockero* — was perceived as a social outcast, not as a social renegade, but as an individual separated from a socio-economic local reality, unable to produce genuinely local music styles resonant to the concerns and inquiries that the American youth articulated through rock music in the United States.

The hermetic character of the local social environment was the result of important economic factors operating in the country during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Through these three decades, Mexico formed part of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a multilateral treaty to which more than ninety countries, accounting for roughly four-fifths of world trade subscribed. Aiming for the establishment of an open, liberal and competitive trading system, the GATT’s central principle was a nondiscrimination policy among trading partners, although the treaty allowed for some amendments. If a given country wished to accord protection to its domestic products it could do so only by the use of custom tariffs. Moreover, the GATT creators allowed the implementation of further restrictions when a country was in severe balance-of-payment difficulties, even on a discriminatory basis against imports from a country whose currency happened to be scarce. It was under this provision that Mexico continued for a few years to limit or even restrict imports from the United States. With the further advent of currency devaluations in Mexico during the 1970s and part of the 1980s, it is not surprising that the country endorsed a closed-door economic policy. American goods did not circulate in stores and

the political landscape did not allow for the incursion of foreign businesses. The dollar was expensive; American products reflected an improved quality of life and purchase power was the key to it. As a result, a shopping trip to the American border — to buy goods from American stores and shopping malls — tended to reflect the privileged social status of those who could afford it.

The music circulating during these years reflected local aesthetics formed under these operating conditions. Mainstream artists performed songs in local pop styles that had very little similarity — if any at all — to American music styles. Local party bands complied with the demand based on these local tastes as well. All songs were “covers” from mainstream music, either foreign or local. There were very few bands wrote their own music and were recording artists; those bands were therefore more expensive to hire, and most fell under the *cumbia* or *música norteña* styles.

As mentioned before, rock during this time was an imitative style that closely attempted to mimic the sounds — and songs — of American groups. In contrast, *cumbia* had been a style treated with more flexibility, in which musicians allowed room for more creativity in the arrangement of songs incorporated from other styles. As an active mode of social practice, the *cumbia* is treated as an arena for the creation, adoption, and re-invention of circulating music texts. It is not unusual that some prominent local band would create a *cumbia* version of a ballad in the top charts sung by a mainstream artist (Yuri, Verónica Castro, etc.) or even use parts of an Italian opera aria in one of their songs. This type of appropriation of mainstream music into the *cumbia* style, far from being a mockery effort, is an example of active participation, and attempt by a specific sector of the community to represent their social reality in a space of diverse social tastes and sensibilities.

In this fashion, El Gran Silencio came to incorporate foreign musical elements into the molding of a new and original narrative, producing in turn a unique sound; an altogether new musical dialectic with the diverse active elements in their society. As a process of negotiation, this new discourse exposed a social tension, a problematic that would not find an outlet in the passivity imbedded in the humor and irony of *cumbia* or in the narrative of *música norteña*.

Creating Freestyle Norteño

In the musicians' own words, the music of El Gran Silencio is exemplary proof of the eclecticism and level of musical maturity that the group has reached. They continue:

But eclecticism does not mean the mixing of rhythms and styles only to adopt a pose of new Mexican rock. Perhaps due to the use of acoustic guitars and percussion instruments some people wanted to call [our music] Latin American ethno-rock. Maybe it is more correct to affirm that in our tunes there are elements of rock, hip-hop, ska, polka, quebradita, vallenato (Padilla 1998:288).

Indeed, the band's unique style is not due to a conscious decision but a conflation of different musical proficiencies. The result is an exposure to a diversity of soundscapes endorsed by each musician as a personal contribution to the formation of a condensed eclecticism.

Such eclecticism, however, did not appear out of nowhere, there is indeed a history behind these "Libres y Locos." It was during middle school when Cano and Papo Hernández would climb to the roof of their house to compose songs with a borrowed acoustic guitar and a Japanese harmonica of dubious quality. Moved by curiosity, some of their friends offered to help with choruses and percussion, using original instruments like a can, a laundry basket, and a cooking pot. Tony, a close friend of the Hernández brothers and student of visual arts, would bring to their attention from time to time their pervasive use of faulty tones and rhythmic inconsistency, in addition to his irritation with their constant borrowing of his guitar without permission. By then, Tony was an experienced guitarist having participated in a local band called Amnesia, a quite suitable name, for nobody remembers the group anymore. In 1993, Tony came on board to significantly shape the sound of the band; after all, he knew how to tune the guitar. Their first formal gig transpired through an invitation by the *Partido del Frente Cardenista*, a political party of the socialist opposition, to play at their political youth meeting.

During that year some local bands — like Acarniences, La Última de Lucas and Koer Voz de Malta — featured young talents that eventually would form prolific bands such as Plastilina Mosh and Control Machete. At the *Feria de Monterrey* 1993 (a yearly festival), the

simplicity in the sound of El Gran Silencio caught the attention of Arturo Meza — among electric guitars, synthesizers, and the digital-effect boards of other participating bands. He was an institutional figure in the Mexican rock movement, who asked if the used can was a *huehuatl*, an Aztec percussion instrument, since he could not believe that it was only a can. From that point on, the band began a series of presentations at schools, parties, clubs, plazas and even buses, where they claimed they made the most money. As a result, their instrumentation was no longer seen as a symptom of poverty and became an element of personal identity.

The band still felt that there was a missing element, something needed to give the band's sound a decisive punch. The answer came in 1994 when Julián Villarreal, ex-heavy metal guitarist, asked to play bass. The addition was excellent. By this time the underground popularity of the band in Monterrey had earned them substantial attention. Soon fan clubs began to flourish — unprecedented for a local band — and their music became obligatory in radio and television programs promoting local rock. By 1996, Juan Ramón Palacios, a radio and television personality, organized a local band contest — the fourth of this nature in the city — in which the winners would be selected on the basis of public response and applause. Coming unanimously in first position, the band used the cash prize to produce their first demo, *Dofos*, which became the best-sold demo in the history of bands from Monterrey. Their single *Mitote* was given air-time on D'99, the most prolific mainstream radio station in the city, after which the song became an overnight success. During the same year, the band was approached EMI Music. Negotiations “were long and exasperating, since these were not easy kids,” commented Alfonso Alvarez, the group's manager. Shortly afterward, the band came to incorporate the accordion works of Isaac Campa Valdez.

The rock scene was entirely new to Campa; his experience as a band musician had come from playing in a band called Artilleros del Vallenato, a group of Colombian music from a popular-class neighborhood. His incursion into the band was primarily to fulfill the need to add an accordion groove to a song for which the Hernández brothers wanted a *cumbia* flavor. Soon after, the accordion became pervasive through the rest of the band's repertory. With this, the *cumbia* spirit in El Gran Silencio began to extend in their sound with surprising freedom. Orbiting around the above-described social scenario, were other

important underlying factors that had a direct influence in the conjugation of this musical phenomenon.

¡Güe-güepa!

Soon after the American economic flood triggered by the implementation of NAFTA in the early nineties, Monterrey became an economically polarized society. The severe economic recession of 1993 was the warm welcome to a new era of “economic development,” characterized by a social crisis that reached rock bottom with an unemployment rate of 40 percent.

¡¡¡Cumbia!!! Perdido, suicidios en masa, economías que bajan. Hermanos mexicanos allá en el sur se cubren la cara y descubren la verdad, poniendo el ejemplo para que sepas tú que solo luchando te pueden escuchar y respetar. La música es violenta y la melodía se extraña, todo es exceso que eleva la piel..... ¡Pura yesca!²

Indeed the incursion of American businesses — Wal-mart, H.E.B., J.C. Penney among others — woke up society from a government-induced opiate dream of economic progress. On January 6, 1994, every Mexican citizen realized that half of the value of their money had disappeared. New established standards of production eventually forced a substantial amount of the small industry sector out of business and the held promise of increasing the job market only achieved to turn a large sector of the population into work force for foreign capital.

The NAFTA syndrome swept the country with homogenic impetus. American businesses offered an opportunity for everyone to participate in consumption strategies until then regarded as privileged. The American market was at reach; anyone could now find a shopping mall located just around the corner and go to Dillard’s or Foley’s. Cable television was cheap and in demand. The American experience was here, and everyone had the opportunity to take part in it. In this fashion, NAFTA was surely accelerating the evolution of a monoculture with the proliferation of films, television, and education, further pressurizing the country to endorse the cultural services of foreign companies and individuals. A sense of national sovereignty was eroding by the need to

alter a wide range of laws and policies in order to conform to the agreements of the new North American economic doctrine with regards to external trade, domestic self-sufficiency, foreign investment, intellectual property and technology.

The radical nature of this economic phenomenon dramatically changed Mexico's socio-political landscape. New ideologies triggered an altogether new set of perceptions; class divisions became more fluid and social tensions underscored an unrelenting struggle to accommodate an image of "self" within different and newly acquired socio-economic practices. Rock bands now using a local approach towards music production mushroomed everywhere: La Maldita Vecindad, Plastilina Mosh, Control Machete, La Lupita, and Café Tacuba, were groups that exposed a new cultural dimension in music in which elements of representation were quite pervasive. Within this new trend, El Gran Silencio emerged as a band that articulated a prevailing social reality: it reflected the anxieties and tensions of a society in a cultural conflict based on economic grounds.

As a response, *el populus* arose as an active social force, and through an embrace of populus society, became *populi*. Breaking away from traditional symbolic codes, the *populi* served as a mechanism engaged in a reactive dynamic, fueled by a common set of conditions that resonated in society at large. *El populus* became a coping strategy, a fertile ground for the absorption and re-definition of external aesthetic elements that reshaped a narrative of identity accommodating the "other" in terms of "self:"

Con sangre del norte. ¡Con machaca y mitote! Y si una guacharaca suena dentro de un camión, la cumbia te pega en el mero corazón, y si te prende el alma cuando suena el acordeón, la cumbia colombiana revuelta con rap, tocando un bugi-bugi en mi guitarra de Paracho Michoacán.¹

Re-thinking self

Everybrodi dancing cumbia, everybrodi...dancing now.
Chanki go home por la sangre mexicana...aquí la cumbia no se acaba con la Tropa Colombiana. Suena el acordeón, cumbia rap y rock n' roll, cuando toca El Gran Silencio, ¡Jirgüigo! ¡Jirgüigo!

As a hybrid musical product resulting from a symbiotic process of cultural adaptation of externally imposed forces, El Gran Silencio articulated the pervading social tension of the mid-1990s in Monterrey. In the midst of accordions, *güiros*, *guacharacas*, *bajo-sextos*, electric guitars, drum sets and electronica grooves, a conflict of finding the “self” in the “other,” produced a transformed voice with a local cultural resonance.

Indeed, *Libres y Locos* — title of the band’s first album released by EMI Music Mexico, and recorded in New York in 1998 — was not just a call to the dance floor. It was a cultural phenomenon and a boom in the Mexican music charts that soon reached platinum status. In this very first recording, the band displays the plurality of music styles circulating in Monterrey during the late 1990s. Soon after its release, the circulation of the band’s music became indeed a mirror of the social conditions in Monterrey, a practice representing not a social status but a common situation that resonated at all levels of society. *Cumbia* became a mainstream phenomenon; some of the most exclusive night-clubs were leaving aside Madonna and Shakira and turned to play *lo nuestro*. The national response was overwhelming: exclusive on-line chat rooms, unofficial web pages, and fan clubs of devoted fans were in charge of the large-scale dissemination of *pura sabrosura*. The euphoria further intensified when the band was scheduled to play at the South by Southwest Music Festival. They were the first local band to break into the American scene. *Güepa*, *pura yesca*, phrases that before carried low social connotations became part of a regional form of colloquial rhetoric.

Libres y Locos was a dynamic that endorsed the conflict affecting the local community with regards to their cultural identity. In 1998, the band stated:

Decadencia. Dosis de distintos géneros y encuentros de diversas tendencias hacen ésta. Que muestra que todo es parte de lo mismo y presenta una realidad mundial. El egoísmo y fiaca social en él que la raza humana se sumerge, mostrando que sabemos, que estamos enterados pero carecemos de conciencia, ¡así de simple! El chiste es ser tan proactivo como reactivo (Padilla 1998:288).

Cultural contact is always deeply penetrating and transforming and passivity is not an option, in fact it is never contemplated. A process

of re-action soon conjugates in pro-action in favor of continuity in the evolution of “self” and not the “other.” A process of enculturation is depicted on the capacities of individuals to change their cultural profile through processes of internal re-configuration. Therefore, a manipulation of circulating elements — either local or foreign — lies at the core of the creation of a true semblance of historical continuity. This essay is an attempt to illustrate the skill and imagination with which local musicians take over hegemonic musical forms. The central problem of globalization is the tension between homogenizing and heterogeneous forces in society. And it is in the dynamic process of cultural production that a space exists for this conflict of creative contestations, an increasing hegemonic-subaltern struggle in the realms of musical style. In this light, identity can no longer subsist as icon but rather as a process of continuity, of historical dimensions and local repercussions, in which “self” becomes a constant.

Mas si tú sientes una contradicción, que al dormir te despiertas y al despertar te duermes. Pero en este sueño tú estás sumergido, mas no te sientas nunca afligido, porque en este sueño tú estás protegido, y aunque te sientas un poco distante tu alma lo dice a cada instante...⁵

END NOTES

1 As local authors assimilate globally circulating music, musical cultural symbols defining local identity—in *Norteño* music, for example—are contested and negotiated. The local, then, is used as a strategic tool that negotiates the foreign with the traditional, thus redefining a concept of self and home by exercising the global in terms of the local.

2 Xardiel Padilla, “Los Creadores del Freestyle Norteño,” in *Vida Universitaria*, no.34, August 31 1998, electronic archive version.

3 “Cumbia!!! Lost, mass suicide, low economies. Southern brothers cover their face and uncover the truth setting an example so that you know that only fighting they will respect you. Everything is an excess that elevates the skin.” El Gran Silencio. *Libres y Locos*. EMI Music, 1998. Audio Compact Disk.

4 “If a guacharaca plays on the bus cumbia music hits you right in the heart, and your souls is set off when the accordion plays Colombian cumbia mixed with rap, playing a boogie-boogie in my guitar from Paracho

Michoacan." El Gran Silencio. *Libres y Locos*. EMI Music, 1998. Audio Compact Disk.

5 El Gran Silencio. *Libres y Locos*. EMI Music, 1998. Audio Compact Disk.

6 Xardiel Padilla, "Los Creadores del Freestyle Norteño," in *Vida Universitaria*, no.34, August 31 1998, electronic archive version.

7 "But if you feel a contradiction that when you sleep you wake up, and when you wake up you sleep, in this dream you are submerged, but don't feel bad because in this dream you are protected, even if you feel a little distant your soul says it every instant...sleep dreaming." El Gran Silencio. *Libres y Locos*. EMI Music, 1998. Audio Compact Disk.

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