**Narco Rap: Negotiating Violence and Creative Agency in Commissioned Mexican Narco-Music**

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This article explores agency as an ability to act and exert power creatively when failure implies literal death. It draws on interviews with an ex-narco and rappers who willingly accept narco-commissions in 2010s Tamaulipas, Mexico, a context where precarity and necropolitical logics prevail. It asserts that many rappers exert power creatively, despite the risks. Rappers shape narco-aesthetics by determining the lyrical and sonic elements of songs; draw on experiences of narco-life to contribute to narco-ethics; and mould narco-masculinities by encouraging listeners to stay firm. Prevalent discursive Us-Them dichotomies facilitate Othering and stigmatisation of actors in the narco-world, and serve to accentuate narco-power.

Narcos are well known for commissioning bespoke songs to commemorate themselves. Social psychologist, César Jesús Burgos Dávila propounds that commissioned songs:

form part of their opulent and sumptuous consumption. The circulation of their songs generates distinction, acceptance and greater visibility in their daily lives. By commissioning narcocorridos, narco-traffickers exercise, legitimate and make visible their power (Burgos Dávila, 2016: 6, my translation).

Yet, an ex-commander of a paramilitary cell of a Mexican drug cartel indicated in interviews with me that cautiousness stops some narcos from consuming songs. He explained:

*Yo sentía que era mucha quemazón eso. Has de cuenta que te estabas entregando tú solo a las autoridades ¿me entiendes? O a lo mejor lo haría, lo hubiera hecho pero sin mi nombre, que no mencionara a mi familia o dónde vivo o así ¿verdad? Que dijeran un relato de pues dónde salí; que era de una familia humilde; de un muchacho que era muy rebelde; que por agarrar decisiones fáciles, agarró calle; empezó una vida, de chiquito, de drogadicción; con el paso del tiempo, pues así se fue; conocí, se pudo involucrar a la delincuencia; anduvo en su troca*.

I felt it was really risky doing that [commissioning a song]. Like you’re giving yourself in to the authorities all by yourself. Do you understand me? Or probably I would do it, I would have done it without my name, without mentioning my family or where I live or like that. Right? It would have told a story about where I came from; that I was from a humble family; a boy who was very rebellious; who ended up on the street because he took easy decisions; who started life addicted to drugs, from small; who, with the passing of time, carried on like that; got to know, became involved in a delinquent group; went around in their truck.

He voices a concern about revealing information to the authorities about himself, his family, his whereabouts. His cautiousness resonates with my interviews with narco-rap composers who attest to a distinct power dynamic between creator and narco-commissioner than narco-music scholarship has implied.

Much research on narco-music consists of arms-length interpretation of corrido lyrics and newspaper reports. Several scholars have investigated narco-music consumption ethnographically (e.g., Edberg, 2004, Muehlmann, 2013), yet empirical investigation of music produced at narcos’ behest is scant. Notable exceptions include Helena Simonett’s analysis of commercial and commissioned narcocorridos in Los Angeles (USA) and Sinaloa (northwest Mexico), and Burgos Dávila’s examination of young narcocorrido composers in Culiacán, Sinaloa. Both Simonett (2001) and Burgos Dávila (2011) assert that, given the dangers of challenging orders, musicians writing directly commissioned songs act as narcos instruct. Burgos Dávila proposes that ‘*los compositores tienen poca libertad al componer*’ (composers [of commissioned narcocorridos] have little freedom when composing) (Burgos Dávila, 2016: 6). Drawing on interviews with narco-rappers and an ex-narco in border cities in Tamaulipas (northeast Mexico) in the mid 2010s, I argue that musicians willingly commissioned by narcos have more agency than scholarship suggests. In this article, I first document how narco-rappers negotiate working in a context where necropolitical logics prevail, that is, where failure implies literal death rather than merely the career death that musicians face otherwise. I then explore how narco-rappers maintain agency in the production process. My interest is in agency as an ability to act and exert power creatively, rather than relationships between agency and so-called structures (the concern of practice theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, 1977), or the agency of human and non-human actors as ‘mediators’ and ‘intermediaries’ in networks (as explored by Bruno Latour, 2005: 37, and other actor network theorists). Contrary to narco-music scholarship, I contend that many rappers determine the lyrics and the sounds of the commissioned narco-songs they produce. This is important far beyond Music studies, for it illuminates how agency operates in the narco-world. Through this study of music, I am interrogating why people are willing to risk their lives to work for narcos; the extent to which actors operate creatively within the narco-world; and how those working for narcos are able to exert power. I address the latter through an exploration of rappers’ ability to shape narco-ethics, that is, the moral principles of narcos’ conduct.

The broader implication of this argument is that academics and Mexico’s political classes have underemphasised that the workings of narco-power can be negotiable and multifaceted. This underemphasis is facilitated by discursive Us-Them dichotomies that prevail in Mexico, and pervaded my interviews. Interviewees used the terms *ellos* (they/them), *la mafia / maña* (the mafia/tricksters), *el crimen organizado* (organised crime), *malandros* (bad-men) and *delicuentes/la delincuencia* (delinquents/the delinquency), rather than *narco* or specific cartel names. I follow interviewees’ imperative in refraining from naming cartels, given the widespread availability of information about cartel areas of control and turf wars. I do, however, employ the term ‘narco’ given its widespread use in academia, but want to emphasize that it is problematic as an all-encompassing term that reproduces stigmatisation. Although the ex-narco interviewee had been a cartel commander and several interviewed rappers had dealt and smuggled drugs, all interviewees referred to narcos as ‘they’ rather than ‘we’. To mark where narcos are emphatically, explicitly and literally referred to as ‘They’ (*Ellos*), I use a capital ‘T’ (They/Them). Designating narcos as They creates a distance between the speaker and narcos, intensifying the construction of a narco Other. Despite blurred boundaries around who is or was a narco, this Othering creates a neat Us-Them dichotomy which does critical ideological work. This Us-Them discursive dichotomy enables almost everyone, including ex-narcos, to locate themselves as ‘Us’, as critics of narco-violence. Narcos become positioned as the morally flawed Them in opposition to a more righteous Us. Moreover, such neat Us-Them dichotomies foreground the power of narcos characterised as ‘Them’ and erase the agency and responsibility of everyone located as ‘Us’. In sum, the discursive use of the third-person plural simultaneously accentuates narco-power and enables narcos to be Othered, that is, conceived of and stigmatised as dehumanised figures, separate and isolated from everyday sociality. In the following sections, I begin by introducing methodological issues, before exploring how rappers negotiate narcos, narco-ethics and aesthetics.

**Methodological Considerations**

This article focuses on narco rap, a sub-genre of rap music that emerged around 2010 in Tamaulipan border cities, where it continues to predominate. It draws on fifteen interviews: five interviews with hip-hop practitioners in several Tamaulipan border cities that I conducted together with sociologist José Juan Olvera Gudiño in December 2015 (resulting in a conference paper exploring the challenges of writing narco rap, 2016); nine interviews that I conducted alone with hip-hop practitioners in Matamoros, Tamaulipas in December 2016, when I also gave a two-day hip-hop course to rappers, graffiti artists, break dancers, and academics at El Colegio de La Frontera Norte; and several interviews I conducted in 2016 with a 23 year-old, ex-narco. This analysis is based on five days of empirical fieldwork. Stalwarts of longitudinal ethnography often critique scholars for conducting short-term fieldwork. Yet, as Michael Taussig (2012) has implied, researchers privileged enough to live far away from war-like conditions who parachute in to interview key interlocutors have a responsibility to write up insights, which is what I am doing here.

Both hip-hop and narco-trafficking are spheres dominated by men. The interviewed rappers were lower-class, mestizo men aged 17 to 42 who lived in poorer neighbourhoods of Tamaulipan border cities: like the narcos they rapped for, the interviewed rappers were *chicos del barrio* (neighbourhood kids). There are numerous women who are excellent rappers in Mexico, but I am unaware of women who write narco rap. This article focuses on narco rap written by men about men. It is a text drawing from my experience as a middle-aged, middle class, white, British woman interviewing young, working class, mestizo Mexican men, initially with Olvera Gudiño, a middle-aged, middle-class, mestizo Mexican man. The limits and possibilities of the discussion presented here are implicated by these positionings: most interviewees downplayed illicit activities and instead foregrounded a desire for recognition as dignified creators with huge potential for fame. One rapper stated: ‘*voy cambiando de tema conforme la gente con la que estoy’* (I change the theme according to the people I’m with).He explicitly articulated, in Erving Goffman’s (1959) terms, that he presents his rapper self according to context. Interviewees’ self-presentations are reproduced in lengthy quotations throughout this article to give you, the reader, a sense of their voices. Musicians often treat interviews as a form of publicity, and most interviewees wished to be named, contrary to the widespread academic imperative to anonymise research participants. In order not to endanger them, I neither name interviewees, nor use pseudonyms, for pseudonyms often facilitate identification, particularly where data might be triangulated.

In a study of the Monterrey rap scene between 2006 and 2012, Erik Mejía Rosas recounts how narcos sought out local rappers and ‘in a few cases, the rapper who refused was kidnapped and threatened until they agreed to write a song’ (Mejía Rosas, 2016: 62). Given the diversity in rappers’ experiences and positions, this article focuses on rappers based in Tamaulipas who willingly write narco-music and their ability to act in the process. The interviewed rappers’ experiences are quite distinct from both musicians who are forced to compose and from rappers who write narco-rap from the US side of the border. Moreover, the interviewed rappers confounded moral and generic categorisation; they complicated the idea that some actors promote violence while others critique it. One interviewee denounced state violence in a song about the 43 forcibly disappeared Ayotzinapa students *and* promoted narco-violence in narco rap commissions. Two other interviewees write narco rap occasionally (about ‘being bad’) and also teach hip-hop in government youth programmes to alert young people to the problematic sides of ‘being bad’ (*malandro*). The interviewed rappers write Christian rap, romantic rap, narco rap, socially conscious protest rap, and songs about their everyday experiences. Above all, most interviewed rappers sang about themselves: Mexican rap shares the individualist tendencies found in mainstream hip hop in the USA, where authentic self-expression and the notion of ‘keeping it real’ are valued.

In the next section, I introduce the precarious socio-political context in which the interviewed rappers live and work; I point to difficulties in distinguishing between narcos and non-narcos, narco-musicians and non-narco-musicians; I document the dangers of creating narco rap; and I explore rappers’ incentives to write music for narcos.

**Negotiating Narcos: Context, Boundaries, Incentives**

The sociopolitical context of the Tamaulipan border cities in which these rappers live and work is brutal: marked by high levels of narco-related violence, narco-state entanglements, and police corruption. Although there is officially no war in Mexico, 220,459 homicides were reported from 2006-2016 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informatica, INEGI, National Institute of Statistics and Geography, 2018) and, by 31 October 2017, 33,513 people were registered as disappeared (Secretaría de Gobernación, SEGOB, Office for Domestic Affairs, 2018). Under 35-year-olds made up 53 percent of these official homicides (INEGI, 2018), and 60 percent of the 33,513 disappeared (SEGOB, 2018). José Manuel Valenzuela Arce (2015) analyses the disregard for young lives as a *juvenicidio* (juvenicide/youth genocide). Figures from 2013 revealed that ‘less than 1 percent of crimes in Mexico were punished’ (Le Clercq Ortega and Sánchez Lara, 2016: 12).

Mexico’s juvenicidio is geographically marked. Between 2006 and 2016, there were 8,029 homicides in Tamaulipas (36 percent of the national total, INEGI, 2018), and 5,991 disappeared people (eighteen percent of the national total, SEGOB, 2018). As Carlos Antonio Flores Pérez (2013) has evidenced, for at least sixty years Tamaulipan state authorities and organised criminal groups have had mutually beneficial relationships, and state officials have been co-opted at many levels. Since the mid 2000s, narco-related violence has soared in Tamaulipan border cities, exacerbated by then President Calderón’s declaration of a ‘War on Drugs’ in 2006 and intense fighting between rival cartels attempting to control the territory since 2010. Tamaulipan border cities are characterised by what Judith Butler calls ‘precarity’: ‘that politically induced condition [where …] to be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection *from* violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another’ (Butler, 2009: 26). Police corruption and narcos’ potential to inflict horrific, often spectacular violence — such as public displays of beheadings, tortured dismembered bodies, and hangings from bridges — have enabled narcos to extend their power widely. Many people are living, in Achille Mbembe’s terms, in: ‘death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of […] necropower, [where] the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred’ (Mbembe, 2008: 40). The ordinariness of drug-related activities in poorer neighbourhoods of Tamaulipan cities blurs boundaries between narcos and non-narcos, good and bad, despite discursive Us-Them dichotomies that serve to maintain such boundaries. Some, but not all, rappers told me how they and their families had been caught up in the narco world.

People’s incentives to willingly risk their lives to work for narcos should be understood in relation to the risk benchmarks of their everyday lives. As an ex-narco told Valenzuela Arce: *‘en el narcotráfico, en la política, en la vida común, es el mismo concepto, el mismo cuidado que se tiene de no perder la vida’* (in narco-trafficking, in politics, in everyday life, it’s the same concept: one must take the same care not to lose one’s life) (Valenzuela Arce, 2003: 210). The interviewed rappers made similar arguments. Musicians working in contexts where precarity and necropolitical logics prevail face far greater difficulties than musicians writing to commission otherwise. As an experienced narco-rapper explained:

*Todo eso, se lo va agarrando uno con la experiencia. Si uno no sabe, uno con la primera canción se puede morir, por hacer esto. Si uno no sabe, y tú haces una canción, porque tú te enmulaste y le quisiste hacer una canción a tal persona y alguien la escucha y dice:*

*“¿Ese qué?”,*

*y ya: automáticamente, por una canción, puedes morirte.*

All this [writing narco-music], you get the hang of it with experience. If you don’t know, you can die with the first song for doing this. If you don’t know, and you make a song, because you insisted and you wanted to make a song for someone, and someone else hears it and says,

“What’sthis?”

And that’s it: automatically, for one song, you can die.

Interviewees asserted that, like the legendary narcocorrido singers Chalino Sánchez (1960-1992), Jenni Rivera (1969-2012), and Valentín Elizalde (1979-2006), rappers have died for writing songs for narcos, and for getting entangled with warring cartels and government forces. One interviewee explained how a young rapper thought writing narco rap was compatible with working for the local government and ended up being hung from a road bridge by narcos who suspected he was a spy. The consequences of misjudging the perils of writing narco-music were made spectacularly clear.

So what motivates rappers to risk their lives to write songs for narcos in necropolitical contexts? Money was the main incentive. Some rappers managed to earn money solely from their entanglements with the drug trade, while the majority worked in *maquilas* (factories), manual trades and other areas. Lesser-known exponents charged around 1000 Mexican pesos (US $50) per song for narco rap commissions, while better-known narco-rappers asked for dollars, earning between US $300 and $500 per track (80 to 138 times the daily minimum salary of 73.04 pesos / US $3.61 in December 2016, CONASAMI). Some rappers accepted remuneration in drugs, arms, and jewels. Protection was also available to those rappers who had close relationships with narcos. An experienced narco rapper commented that he got paid eighty percent of the time.

In addition to money, fame provided a motivation for all interviewees. A teenage rapper explained:

*Es más fácil ser escuchado aquí haciendo narco rap que haciendo otro tipo de rap. Haces narco rap y se mueve más fácil en las redes sociales, entre los barrios, entre los malandros y entonces agarras fama. Muchos lo hacen por fama.*

It is easier to be heard here making narco rap than making other types of rap. You make narco rap and it moves more easily on social networks, in local neighbourhoods, between badmen and so you acquire fame. Many people do it for fame.

Here, local fame is alluded to in the first instance: fame in the rapper’s neighbourhood, among badmen, on social media networks. Becoming renowned as a rapper enabled young people to acquire respect from peers. Another interviewee boasted about being able to earn money doing what he loved and about how creating narco rap enabled him to access to high quality recording equipment, boosting production values. Many interviewees dreamed of becoming professional rappers, of being famed for their own songs rather than narco rap. Burgos Dávila argues that young musicians in Sinaloa perform narcocorridos to enter the music profession, often later playing non-narco music (Burgos Dávila, 2016: 20). Likewise, in Tamaulipas, musicians create narco rap in the hope of entering the national and international music profession with their non-narco rap songs.

While Olvera Gudiño and I (2016) suggested that money and fame were prime motivations for writing narco rap, subsequent interviews I conducted complicated this proposal. Sociality was key to understanding why these young men participate in narco rap production. Some interviewees worked together in creating narco rap tracks, featuring as guests on each others’ tracks, recording in studios belonging to peers, and spending many hours socialising together. The teenage rapper (cited in the above quote) told me that he wrote narco rap:

*a veces por fama, más que nada por dinero, y por andar en el ambiente de la diversión. Para mí esto es un hobbie; no es algo que yo diga que para siempre. […] Tengo que hacer otras cosas también: trabajar obviamente. No nada más estoy basado en esto y ya. Si me gusta, pero no lo voy a hacer para siempre. Ojalá llegue a pegar y pues ya… o que oportunidades hay para levantarte. […] Cuando ya tenga mi esposa, mis chavalos ya voy a cambiar. Ya no va a ser lo mismo de esto. Ahorita sí, subo pa’ allá, subo para donde sea, de donde me hablen ahí estoy.*

sometimes for fame, above all for money, and to hang out in an environment that’s fun. For me this is a hobby; it’s not something that I think I’ll do forever. […] I’ve got to do other things too: work, obviously. I’m not just doing this and that’s it. Yes I like it, but I’m not always going to do it. Hopefully what I’m doing will stick and that’ll be it … or there will be other opportunities to get ahead. […] When I have my wife, my kids, I’ll change. Then it won’t be the same. For now, yes, I perform here and there; I go wherever I’m called.

Interviewed rappers’ relationships to narco-work and masculinity were mediated by fatherhood. For childless rappers like the above interviewee, accumulation, fame, and socialising in a homosocial scene were incentives for writing narco rap. Many childless rappers envisaged ceasing to write narco rap once they had family responsibilities. Meanwhile, fathers who wrote narco rap articulated a responsibility to sustain their families economically in the present and the future. Several rapper fathers wrote narco rap when the opportunity arose, despite other intentions. One rapper father explained:

*A veces tú no quieres hacer un narco rap y llega el cliente que menos esperabas y pum:*

*“Hazme un narco rap”.*

*Y ya, te sientes bien... y – chale. Y te llegan dinero en mano y pues tienes que, pues es un cliente: no tienes que decirle que no si él lo quiere. Porque hay más raperos que les puede decir. Pero él, incluso, viene contigo. Por algo viene contigo.*

Sometimes you don’t want to do a narco rap and the client turns up when you least expect it and bam:

“Make me a narco rap”.

Then you feel good … and – chink. And the money arrives in your hands and, well you have to, well it’s a client: you don’t have to say no to him if he wants it. Because there are more rappers he can ask. But he came to you. For something he came to you.

This rapper was flattered and glad to earn money from writing narco rap. Some interviewed rappers refused commissions by asking a disproportionately high fee and recommending other rappers, but the majority were pleased to accept. One rapper commented: ‘*a veces puedes llegar a consecuencias o perder cosas llegado el caso, pero pues todo se lo dejamos a Dios y él sabe si nos manda de esos tipos de clientes*’ (sometimes things happen or you lose things, but everything is left to God and He knows if we are sent these types of clients). This rapper shifted the responsibility to God, in keeping with Mexico’s Catholic majority culture that emphasises trusting God’s will (and facilitates political authoritarianism and impunity).

If they want to acquire fame beyond the local context, rappers must circulate their music. Yet it was only safe for rappers to upload their narco rap songs online once the commissioner’s permission had been attained. More often than not it was clients who uploaded tracks. Performing live in other towns was an important form of self promotion. Yet travelling was not always straightforward. When I asked an inexperienced rapper if he was afraid of writing narco rap, he replied:

*Hasta ahorita no. Mi miedo era, por ejemplo, viajar: salir de aquí, era el miedo nomás. ¿Así de qué onda, qué va a pasar? Porque aquí me conocen todavía, pero yo decía: “Nombre! ¿Quién me va a conocer allá? A lo mejor me quieren hacer algo”.*

Until now, no. My fear was, for example, travelling: I was just afraid of leaving here. Like what’s up, what’s going to happen? Because here people still know me, but I said: “No way! Who’s going to know me there? Maybe they want to do something to me”.

Musicians’ voices and faces accompany the product of their labour and they become easily associated with cartels. Mark Edberg (2004) discusses how members of a recording company near Long Beach, California, wrote narcocorridos for one cartel and then another. This scenario would result in certain death in Mexico, where loyalty to one cartel is key to survival. Rappers are associated with the cartel that controls the local territory; the cartel they sing for. Like others working for and with cartels, known rappers are unable to travel to enemy territories. An experienced narco-rapper bemoaned: ‘*yo a veces quisiera no haber hecho narco rap: para poder salir y para poder hacer mis canciones. No narco rap, para poder salir a otras partes. Como que ya estoy quemado con eso*’ (I sometimes wish I hadn’t done narco rap: to be able to leave and to do my own songs […] to be able to go to other places. Like I’m burned by this). In Lauren Berlant’s (2006) terms, this rapper alludes to the ‘cruel optimism’ of narco rap composition: the promises of fame and accumulation associated with writing narco-music that are broken when rappers realise that being linked to a cartel compromises their movements and music careers more broadly. The career that most interviewees aspired to was a career singing their own rap songs. Moreover, writing narco rap tarnished rappers’ reputations in the broader hip-hop scene, as an experienced rapper commented: ‘*hay gente que tiene como mucho respeto al rap y como que se agüitan, al escuchar eso*’ (there are people who have a lot of respect for rap and they get annoyed listening to this). Two interviewees recounted how they stopped writing narco rap and managed to re-invent themselves through a church. They now adhered to ideologies combining mainstream hip hop culture and evangelism.

So far we have seen how narco-state violence complicates boundaries between narco and non-narco, narco-musician and non-narco-musician. Rappers risk their lives to write commissioned songs for narcos in necropolitical contexts for money, fame, a love of rap, the possibility of creating high quality recordings, and for social reasons. Many interviewees enjoyed being part of a homosocial scene comprising narco, ex-narco and non-narco-actors. Narco-work was normalised in this context. The fame that narco rap songs potentially bestowed was mostly local, yet inexperienced rappers believed that local fame would lead to broader stardom. More experienced rappers knew otherwise: writing narco-songs curbed rappers’ agency and potential for fame because rappers’ ability to travel, to flee, was restricted by their association with local cartels. So, to what extent do musicians maintain creative agency when writing music for narcos in necropolitical contexts? In other words: how are people able to act and exert power creatively within the narco-world and its periphery?

**Agency: Creativity, Narco-Ethics and Aesthetics**

Literature on commissioned narcocorridos suggests that musicians generally dictate sonic elements of songs, but follow narcos’ orders regarding lyrics. The interviewed rappers evidence, however, that narco-rappers often determine sounds *and* lyrics in commissioned songs, providing insights into the complex and relative power dynamics between these actors (narcos and musicians). To get a sense of these dynamics and of actors’ entanglement with the narco-world, I first elucidate how cartels are organised and narco rap defined, and then interrogate how songs are commissioned.

In his analysis of the impact of organised crime on the Monterrey rap scene, Mejía Rosas recounts how:

When they began to dispute the territory [*plaza*] of Nuevo León, organised criminals began to look for people who would write songs for their group or commando. The most frequently requested themes were: recounting the life of the commander or some member of lesser rank; speaking about the commando and actions carried out against enemy groups; a religious vow [*manda*] for the saint of their devotion, be it Holy Death [*Santa Muerte*] or St Judas Thaddaeus; and dedications for elements of the commando who had died in “battle” (Mejía Rosas, 2016: 62, my translation).

Similarly in Tamaulipas, *plazas* (narco-territories) are protected by commandos, cells of heavily armed guards who carry out kidnappings and executions, and oversee intelligence networks consisting of taxi drivers, food sellers and others (Otero, 2007). Young men mostly lead commando teams, like the ex-narco interviewee. Rappers write dedications to individual living narcos, obituary songs for the dead (*que en paz descanso,* Rest In Peace songs), and, to a lesser extent, songs for commandos and saints. I focus here on the first two types of dedications which predominate: those to living and dead individuals. Most narco rap dedications attest to the bravery of commanders. However, one interviewed rapper explained that narco rap is written for narcos with various positions:

*El narco rap no quiere decir que es sicario rap. El narco rap es de todos tipos de lo que es el narco. Contadores. Y sí son los clientes que me llegan, los que cuentan dinero, los que brincan la mota, los que brincan el pase, los que brincan a la gente, los que …, los que venden esto, los que tienen esto, los que son familiares de aquel. […] No se trata de nada más haces narco rap y ya vas a hablar de un tema. No, se trata de saber qué cargo lleva la persona. […] porque en la delincuencia hay muchos rangos, muchos rangos, puestos, se podría decir: de contadores, de brincadores, exportadores, de sicarios, jefes, comandantes, guardias […] Y es lo que tienes que saber. Cuando vas a rapear no siempre vas a hablar de armas porque el bato de repente no trae arma. Pero es narco rap pero ahí vas a hablar de maña.*

Narco rap does not mean *sicario* (hit man) rap. Narco rap is for all kinds of people who are narcos. Accountants. And yes, I have clients like that: those who count money, those who smuggle marijuana, those who smuggle doses, those who smuggle people, those who … Those who sell this, those who have that, those who are relatives of another. […] It’s not just that you’re making narco rap so you’re going to talk about a theme. No, it’s about knowing what role the person has […] because in organised criminal organisations there are many levels, many levels, positions one could say: accountants, smugglers, exporters, hit men, bosses, commanders, guards […]. And that’s what you have to know. When you’re going to rap, you’re not always going to talk about firearms because the guy may not carry a firearm. But it’s narco rap, so you are going to talk about mafia.

These songs are not just written for and about drug lords. The term narco rap encompasses songs commissioned for various types of narcos and their loved ones. But whatever positions narcos hold, the mafia trickster (*maña*) aspects of narco-work are foregrounded in narco rap songs.

Interviewees recounted how they started writing narco rap for narcos who were family, friends, and acquaintances, that is. After relying on personal networks, clients often came from further afield and rappers were approached via social media. One rapper explained how one social media platform:

*es como una herramienta que todos ocupan; es una cadenita, que todos, que uno le dice a otro, mira este chavo y este conoce al otro y este es el que te va a conectar con el otro. No hay como que un punto de que, “Ay, ahí siempre están”, no es una cadena.*

is like a tool that we all use; it’s a little chain, that everyone, that one person says to another, look this guy and this one knows that one and that’s the one who will connect you with the other one. There isn’t like one point that’s “Oh, they are always there”, no it’s a chain.

An experienced rapper explained that he communicates with his clientele using his mobile phone for messaging. He also uses his phone for choosing beats, writing lyrics, and reading lyrics back when rapping in the recording studio.

At the beginning of the commissioning process, musicians are briefed about what sounds and lyrics clients want. In terms of sound, several interviewees recounted how many clients just say they want a good track, enabling rappers to select beats and other musical elements of songs. Other clients asked for particular beats, for example from tracks by Tupac, Snoop Dog, and Eminem. Most of the interviewed rappers download pre-fabricated beats from the Internet (without regard for copyright), subsequently mixing them in the recording studio with vocals, additional instrumental parts, and sound effects, such as walkie-talkies, gunshots, and grenades. Numerous narco rap tracks include a delicate, minor piano pattern, synth ornamentation, drum loop and bass pattern, for example Cartel de Santa’s ‘*El Tigre*’ (2010, see Flores, 2013, for a lyrical analysis of El Tigre). Other narco rap songs have a more intense, relentless atmosphere, such as 5050’s ‘*Comandante Diablo*’ (2013) with its stabbing piano patterns, pounding string synths, distorted bass drum and snare. Most rappers checked that the client approved of audio elements, as well as lyrics, before committing to recording costs.

In order to write lyrics, rappers are usually provided with the narco-protagonist’s code- or nick-name, age, job title, and details of armed encounters and work colleagues. When analysing 1990s narcocorrido lyrics, which sometimes includes similar information, Simonett (2001) makes a distinction between commercial narcocorridos grounded in fiction, and commissioned narcocorridos based on factual commissioners’ data. Such as distinction does not hold for commissioned narco rap songs in 2010s Tamaulipas, however, where the boundaries between fact and fiction were blurred. Moreover, when moulding the biographical details narcos offer into lyrical and melodic material, both Simonett (2001) and Burgos Dávila (2011) assert that commissioned narcocorrido composers act as instructed. My interviews suggest that, despite the dangers, experienced narco-rappers are often able to negotiate the content of songs with their narco-commissioners, maintaining creative agency in the process. One experienced rapper explained how some clients given hardly any information and then he draws from his own experiences:

*Anduve trabajando bien, anduve trabajando mal: en fábricas, anduve trabajando mal y tuve chance de salirme. Y como sea, me di cuenta más o menos de cómo se mueve, todo el movimiento del narco y ese rollo. Y es por eso, que yo siento, que me dio un poquito más, para poder expresar en una canción. Me sale más expresarme porque yo he estado ahí, he visto y he vivido esas cosas y por eso siento que me sale más, más fácil.*

I’ve worked in good things and in bad: in factories, in bad things and had the chance to get out. And like, I worked out more of less how things move, all the movement of the narco and this thing. And that’s why, why I feel, that it’s given me a little bit more, to be able to express in a song. It’s easier for me to express myself because I’ve been there, I’ve seen and lived these things and that’s why I feel that it comes out more easily.

Narco-rappers’ first- and second-hand experience of narco-lives facilitates embellishing song lyrics. While Simonett (2001) and Burgos Dávila (2011) imply that some narcocorrido composers embellish songs by exploiting their familiarity with narco-lives, these scholars depict that familiarity as arms-length. It is unclear whether Simonett, Burgos Dávila and their interviewees chose to downplay the entanglement of musicians with narcos, but I propose that in order to grasp the malleability of narco-power and actors’ ability to act, we need to understand actors’ entanglement with the narco-world.

The interviewed rappers embellished songs according to experience. An inexperienced rapper commented: ‘*vamos a ponerle más crema para que resalte más la canción*’ (let’s lay it on [put more cream on the tacos] so that the song stands out). This inexperienced rapper inflated his depiction of narcos’ deeds (‘laying it on/putting on more cream’) to attract fame for his client and himself. Meanwhile, an experienced rapper explained how he plays down hyper-masculine bravado to ensure songs appear credible:

*Uno se tiene que pulir en la letra. Tienes que hacer cosas como que tú te las imagines y diga “si es cierto”, o sea. Como que si es un narco rap, hablando ya de un narco rap, es como que un chavo me dice: “yo me he agarrado a balazos así y acá”. Y pues yo sé quién se agarró a balazos y porque haya agarrado la… Quiere decir que no tenga miedo, ¿edá? Yo sé que el bato tiene miedo de que se lo agarren a balazos porque no se quiere morir y obviamente para mí, el bato me dice que se agarró a pelotazos y yo le pongo: “se agarró a balazos pero el bato no le tenía miedo a los trancazos, y si tenía miedo porque se le miraba que le temblaban los brazos pero él no soltaba el cuerno lo traía al varazo”. O sea algo así puedo poner yo. Ya estoy como rimando y estoy como que narrando lo que me está diciendo el bato y como que ya le estoy poniendo de mi parte.*

You have to polish the words. You have to do things as you imagine them and say: “Yes, that’s right”. So if it’s a narco rap, talking about a narco rap, it’s like a lad says to me “I’ve had bullets like this and that”. And, well I know who’s had bullets and why they’ve had the … They want to say that they’re not afraid, right? I know that the guy is afraid of being got by bullets because he doesn’t want to die, and it’s obvious to me, [if] the guy tells me that he’s had lots of bullets, I’d write something like: “*They showered him with bullets but the guy wasn’t afraid of the hits, and he was afraid because you could see that his arms were trembling, but he didn’t let go of the AK-47, he just kept on firing*”. Like I’d put something like that. So I’m rhyming and I’m like narrating what the guy’s telling me and like I’m putting in my part.

This rapper describes constructing ideal images of narcos where a more fearful masculinity endows the song with greater credibility. Rather than merely following clients’ instructions, this experienced rapper asserts that he actively participates in establishing the content of songs. This rapper shapes narco-ethics, in addition to determining the aesthetics of commissioned songs.

Being brave, loyal and astute are highly valued individual qualities in narco rap songs, as they are in narcocorridos. Valenzuela Arce suggests that risking life is entangled with masculinity in narcocorridos: ‘*ser macho es ser osado, decidido, terco, obstinado*’ (to be macho is to be bold, decided, stubborn, obstinate) (Valenzuela Arce, 2003: 159). I contend that similar hyper-masculine traits are articulated in many narco rap songs, yet a more vulnerable masculinity is portrayed in others. For example, the experienced rapper cited above stated that lyrics might recount how a narco ‘*was afraid because you could see that his arms were trembling, but he didn’t let go of the AK-47, he just kept on firing*’. Importantly even if men feel fear, if their arms are trembling, they stay firm (*firme*). The ex-narco interviewee told me how cartel members were ordered to kill colleagues who tried to flee, so continuing to participate in shootouts was their only option. With this knowledge, staying firm could be interpreted as enforced bravery, even when feeling cowardly, rather than, or in addition to, a hyper-masculine wilfulness. I explore narco-masculinities and Sayak Valencia Triana’s ‘*sujetos endriagos*’(endriago subjects) (2010: 89) in depth elsewhere, but want to emphasise here that many narco rap songs promote a narco-masculinity that includes vulnerability: in addition to wilful bravery, these songs allude to the fragility of narco-masculinity and promote the ability to stay firm while recognising fear. Narco rap songs acknowledge that narcos tremble in shootouts, have romantic outpourings, and shed tears in mourning. Crucially, however, they stay firm.

Experienced rappers also participated in shaping narco-ethics by counselling narco-commissioners on appropriate song content. Burgos Dávila (2011) argues that narcocorrido composers refrain from advising narcos and instead: ‘*intentan ser discretos evitando meterse en cuestiones delicadas, escriben con los datos que tienen y evitan investigar si la información es cierta o falsa’* (try to be discreet, avoid getting into delicate questions, write with the information they have and avoid investigating whether the information is true or false) (Burgos Dávila, 2011: 6). While experienced narco-rappers told me they refrain from addressing delicate issues and investigating realities, however, these musicians *do* ask some narco-commissioners for further information, engaging in dialogue about the content of songs. An experienced narco-rapper explained:

*hay gente que mezcla mucho a su familia y yo les digo: “puedes mezclar, pero estas hablando de este rollo, carnal, y tú quieres que mencione tus hijos y el nombre de tus chavalos y eso, y es como un poquito, como que no debes involucrar”. Yo les digo, les aconsejo.*

There are people who mix in their family and I tell them” “you can mix things, but you are talking about this [narco] scene, brother, and you want me to mention your children and the names of your kids and that, and it’s a bit like, like you shouldn’t involve them”. I tell them, I advise them.

At the beginning of this article, we learned how the ex-narco interviewee refrained from commissioning a song to ensure information about his narco-work, his early life and his family remained concealed from the state authorities. Some narcos are less cautious and benefit from advice from rappers about how to be discreet. The rapper cited here purports to caution narcos about including certain information in songs: ‘he is discreet for himself and for his clients’ (Malcomson and Olvera Gudiño, 2016). This rapper demonstrates *and* transmits an ethics of discretion to his clientele, that is, he transmits the moral principles of discreet conduct, thereby shaping narco-ethics more broadly. There are resonances here with funk proibidão events in Rio de Janeiro which, Paul Sneed argues, do ideological work to empower the criminal faction Comando Vermelho by representing them ‘with utopian and messianic overtones, as social bandits and the legitimate defenders of their community’ (Sneed, 2007: 220). Rather than social banditry, narco-rappers do ideological work by shaping narco-ethics of discretion and narco-masculinities.

Experienced rappers also exercised some agency in relation to the time of delivery of their work. Creative practitioners sometimes struggle to produce upon demand. While some narco-rappers described pressure to produce as excruciating, others highlighted the importance of producing high quality work. One narco-rapper commented:

*Él ya te pagó la mitad de la canción y tú dices:*

*“Pues es que ya me toca escribir. ¿Cómo si no tengo ganas? La jefa me regañó hace rato, o la ruca aquella me dejó. ¿Cómo le voy a escribir a este bato, ahorita una canción? O sea, no. No le quiero escribir, así no le quiero escribir, no le voy a escribir”.*

*Y a veces están los clientes llame y llame, y yo tengo el teléfono así* [gestures holding it away from his ear]*. Y ya cuando ya escribo la canción sé que al cliente se le va a pasar el coraje, porque hacen corajes también. Y ya se les pasa el coraje cuando escuchan su canción.*

*“¿Esta bien o qué?”*

*“No, sí. Te la rifaste. Te tardaste pero te la rifaste”.*

*Y ya uno se siente como que ya más aliviado. Pero es que a veces no puedes escribir cuando el cliente quiere que escribas. Te pueden mandar a grabar y vas y grabas y todo, pero no te sale igual como que ensañarla.*

He’s paid you half for the song, and you say:

“How am I going to do it if I’m not in the mood? The [wife, mother or other female] boss told me off a moment ago, or my girlfriend left me. How am I going to write a song for this guy right now? Like, no. No I don’t want to write it, I won’t write it when it’s like this, I’m not going to write it”.

And sometimes clients ring and ring, and I’ve got the phone like this [gestures holding it away from his ear]. Then, when I write the song, I know that the client’s anger will pass, because They get angry too. And so their anger goes when they hear your song:

“Is it OK or what?”

“No, you’re right. You took a gamble, but you made it. You were late but you made it”.

Then you feel relieved. But the thing is that sometimes you can’t write when the client wants you to. They can send you to record, and you can go to record and everything, but it doesn’t come out the same if you cheat it.

This rapper continued that, with experience, he refrains from writing when he lacks inspiration. Despite the risks of angering narcos, he prefers to wait to write something of better quality. The consequences of charging narcos for something they dislike were potentially more severe than delivering a good track late. Moreover, having a reputation for producing high quality songs and access to protection allowed this rapper flexibility with deadlines, a flexibility that was inaccessible to less experienced rappers.

**Conclusion**

Much scholarship has suggested that professionals servicing Mexican narcos have little agency given the dangers of challenging orders. According to this view, professionals act as instructed and narcos hold all the power. One of the possible implications of this view is a separation of social responsibility regarding narco-state articulations, as well as broader social interventions. In this article, I have explored the concepts of agency and narco-ethics to illuminate the narco-world. Specifically, I interrogated why people risk their lives to work for narcos, how people act creatively within the narco-world, and how people working for narcos exert some agency. The case of commissioned narco rap illustrates that some musicians in necropolitical settings willingly service drug traffickers for money, fame, a social scene, the urge to forge a creative career, and the possibility of creating high quality recordings. Despite the risks, experienced narco-rappers often maintain substantial creative agency. These rappers shape narco-aesthetics by determining the sonic elements of songs, as well as advising narcos on lyrical content. Experienced narco-rappers contribute to narco-ethics by promoting discretion, and moulding narco-masculinities by encouraging song listeners to stay firm. Moreover, these musicians complicate the idea that some actors promote violence while others critique it. Boundaries between narco and non-narco, narco-musician and non-narco-musician are sometimes difficult to draw in poorer neighbourhoods of Tamaulipan border cities. Yet the discursive Us-Them dichotomies employed by interviewees, as well as widely by academics and Mexico’s political classes, facilitate the separation of narco and non-narco; the Othering and stigmatisation of actors in the narco-world. Crucially, such Us-Them dichotomies serve to accentuate narco-power.

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