Making subjects grievable: Narco rap, moral ambivalence and ethical sense making

Hettie Malcomson

Music, University of Southampton, UK

H.Malcomson@soton.ac.uk

# Biographical Note

Hettie Malcomson is Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology and Social Anthropology at the University of Southampton. She trained in sociology, ethnomusicology and anthropology. Her work explores what the ethnographic study of music reveals about social inequalities. She has interrogated manifestations of racism, ageism and sexism through Mexican danzón; hierarchies of artistic and knowledge production through British new music; and, most recently, experiences of violence in Mexico through hip-hop.

Making subjects grievable: Narco rap, moral ambivalence and ethical sense making

**Abstract:**

Music provides unique opportunities to interrogate difficult issues, including narcoviolence. Scholarly and media representations of those working for Mexican organised criminal groups are often one-dimensional, and fail to engage fully with human experience. Drawing on music-focused ethnographic research, I argue in this article that subjects who participate in organised crime are made grievable and human through the portraits that commissioned rappers empathetically create of them. I explore how narco rap songs portray organised criminals as brave, respectable, able to cope with emotional trauma, and attain redemption, while effacing physical suffering and guilt. I interrogate how commissioned rappers read and empathise with their clients, create appropriate songs, and negotiate the moral dissonances this work creates, particularly when religious deities are invoked. I conclude that the human complexity of those working for organised criminal groups and their ethical struggles must be engaged with if we are to propose action on drug-trafficking and related activities.

**Keywords:** narcoviolence, ethics, grievability, rap music, Mexico

# Introduction

Alejandro ‘El Barret’. Also known as *cinquenta cinquenta* (5050). 28. Tall. Lean. Dark clippered fringe. Short back and sides. Manly brows. Long lashes. Sunken, hazel eyes. Sallow bags belying a life of weed, long nights. Rounded nose. Tached stubble. Rich, thick lips. Sparkling braced teeth. Charisma. Tattoos. Large cut diamond inked on Adam’s apple. Faded navy wings sprouting forth, echoing the curves of his jaw, reaching up towards his ears. His very own name for his rapping style outlined in a broad collar of blue flaring out from his neck onto his collar bones: *Flow Malandro*. Tattoos. On his left chest, a long-haired, wide-eyed angel with half-cut T-shirt revealing rounded breasts, midriff. On his right, a pensive skeleton with reddened heart. Dividing the two, a gated, mountainous graveyard, rocky with leafless trees, stone crosses, fleeing bats. Tattoos. His upper left arm inked with the bloody face and thorned crown of Crucifixion Jesus. On his left forearm, a curved music staff, treble clef, fragments of melody, rosary beads etched towards the blue cross which lay between his thumb and first finger. His fourth and little fingers bear chunky, silver rings. A flat-chained, ID bracelet engulfs his wrist. His right arm is tattoo-free.

2016. Worn out after a two-day bender, Alejandro stared in the mirror at his thinning body, his face. He realised he looked like a zombie. Raising his chin, He told God that he couldn’t go on like this. That he knew He existed. But Alejandro wanted proof. Real proof. He wanted to be sure. So he asked God to demonstrate his power. And God answered. Immediately. Alejandro felt an earthquake in his heart. His body convulsed. He wept and wept and wept. Even though he took drugs, wrote songs for money, for organised criminals, God came to him. That’s what he told the camera during the interview with local internet-based TV station, RDTV (5050 2016b).

After that, Alejandro went to church. He penned praise songs for Jesus Christ and changed his Facebook profile to invoke the Lord: head bowed, hands tightly clasped to reveal his rapper name, *5050*, ornately inked below the knuckles of his praying left hand. People said he would relapse. But for days, weeks, months, he stayed with God.

2018. A second RDTV interview. The presenter recounted how people had criticised Alejandro: that he was fake. Alejandro responded that he had been real in that moment, that he regretted leaving the church. But he got bored. Wanted change. ‘It’s very hard to go down a […] narrow path with little thorns, when you know the easy path is really wide and that everyone wants to go that way’ (5050 2018).[[1]](#footnote-1) In that first interview, Alejandro’s legs jittered as he sat hunched on a high stool inside an abandoned building. Now he stood outdoors: calmer, charming, assured. ‘Are you *el más chingón* (the greatest) of Matamoros?’ the presenter grinned, challenging him. Alejandro beamed.

\*

Alejandro (aka 5050) is one of the best-known narco rappers in Mexico. He has written hundreds of commissioned songs for *el crimen* (organised crime).[[2]](#footnote-2) In this vignette, we see how his tattoos assert both his status as 5050, the creator of *flow malandro (badman flow)*, and his religious and lifestyle values (a rosary, music, Christ, a churchyard, sexy angel, and death with heart beating).[[3]](#footnote-3) These two RDTV interviews reveal Alejandro’s concerns about what God thinks of him writing music for *el crimen*, of his lifestyle. Alejandro’s turn to religiosity was provoked when, he claimed, God proved His power. He felt that a choice had to be made between a religious path, a ‘path with little thorns’, and an easier path (including access to drugs, nightlife, money, success) that ‘everyone wants’ (5050 2018). While he eventually opted for the latter, Alejandro maintained that he was consistently ‘real’ (a widespread trope in hip hop culture).

\*

Scholarship, popular culture and the media have tended to depict people working for drug-trafficker as engaging with violence without a sense of guilt, of moral responsibility. Yet we lose the capacity for holistic analysis of human intentions and practices if we fail to engage with actors’ ethical dilemmas. This is important as one-dimensional representations of organised criminals and those working for them have impacted on the ways that policymakers have analysed and responded to drug-trafficking-related violence in Mexico. Miguel Cabañas (2014) has argued that secrecy often makes bellicose violence in Mexico difficult for social scientists to explore, while journalists must navigate the entanglement of drug-related violence and state power structures: it is analyses of popular culture, together with fictionalised accounts, which can provide viable in-roads. In this article, I contend that music provides a perspicuous lens through which to access and analyse the affective and ethical tensions around working for organised criminal groups. I interrogate how moral ambivalences around working for organised criminals are articulated by musicians’ creating narco rap, drawing on short-term fieldwork in the border state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, lyrical analysis and public interviews. A Christian ethical standpoint, broadly construed, emerges as a key site through with moral ambivalences are articulated.

In the following sections I first introduce narco rap, explicate Mexico’s bellicose violence and outline methodological strategies. I then explore how rappers empathise with their clients and create appropriate portraits of them. Third, I examine the ideological work that commissioned narco rap songs do, arguing that many narco rap songs embrace moral ambivalences and forge multidimensional images of practitioners in *el crimen*. Finally, I explore narco rappers’ ambivalences around their work; how they attempt to transfer moral responsibility for their songs to their clients; and how intense ethical concerns emerge in relation to religious belief.

# Necropolitical Mexico, methodological strategies and narco rap

Bellicose violence is widespread in Mexico: homicides officially numbered 269,183 between 2008 and 2018 (INEGI 2019), and by April 2018, 36,265 people were registered as disappeared (SEGOB 2019). The majority of these people were under 35, and over 75% were men (INEGI 2019; SEGOB 2019), with brutal femicides attracting media coverage worldwide. The Mexican state and criminal organisations are not only entwined, but vie to control what Achille Mbembé terms ‘necropolitics’, that is,

forms of subjugation of life to the power of death […] and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead (2008: 39-40).

Sayak Valencia argues that necropolitical Mexico is underpinned by ‘gore capitalism’:

the undisguised and unjustified bloodshed that is the price the Third World (*sic*) pays for adhering to the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism […] the many instances of dismembering and disembowelment, often tied up with organized crime, gender and the predatory uses of bodies […] as a form of *necroempowerment*’(Valencia [2010] 2018: 1-2, her emphasis).

Young, brown, working class men and women in particular are often implicated in their own disappearances and deaths by police, judicial and other state mechanisms. In 2018, the impunity rate nationally was 69% (Le Clercq Ortega and Sánchez Lara 2018: 7).

Class is key to understanding Mexico’s impunity rate. Elijah Wald argues that the censorship of narcocorridos ‘is a class thing more than a matter of crime. This is poor people’s music’ (Wald 2004: 173).[[4]](#footnote-4) And Mariana Berlanga Gayón (2015) contends that the middle and upper classes have assumed the guilt of those subjected to brutal violence, have stigmatised them, represented them as less than human, and invisibilised them. It is in part to these intellectual and political elites that this article is aimed at, for unless the Mexican necropolitics are understood *and* everyone is treated as fully human, whether they work for organised criminal groups or otherwise, strategies to curb brutal violence in Mexico will fail.

Methodologically, I take a two-pronged approach, drawing on analysis of song lyrics, publicly available interviews with narco rappers, and short-term empirical research with narco rappers. Top-down analyses of lyrics have been critiqued since at least the 1990s for imposing the researchers’ interpretations, and for failing to engage with consumers’ diverse subjectivities and the multiplicity of their interpretations (see Bennett 2008). Yet lyrics have been wrongly used by the judiciary to attempt to evidence criminal activity of hip hop practitioners (see for example, Kubrin and Nielson 2014). In this article, I analyse song lyrics, but it should be emphasised that this is my interpretation in the last instance, contextualised with six in-person interviews with narco rappers and short-term fieldwork in Tamaulipan border cities, as well as numerous interviews with rappers in other parts of Mexico (see also Malcomson 2019a, 2019c). The interviews in Tamaulipas were conducted with Mexican sociologist José Juan Olvera Gudiño in 2015, and short term fieldwork and interviews were carried out on my own in 2016, when I was invited to teach a hip hop course to rappers, graffiti artists, street dancers and academics in Matamoros (see also Malcomson 2019b).

Narco rap emerged around 2009 in northeast Mexico, and following the lead of interviewees, I classify songs as narco rap if they are (a) commissioned and (b) explicitly about someone who works for *el crimen*. A song about bellicose violence more generically is not narco rap. Rappers may write commissioned narco rap willingly at times, manage to refuse at others and/or be coerced into creating this music. I focus here on rappers who willingly write commissioned narco songs.

Many narco rappers started out as hip hop fans around aged 10, listening to groups including Control Machete, Cartel de Santa, anglophone and Chicano US rap; some were break-dancers and/or graffiti artists. They are mostly lower-class mestizo men under the age of 42, some of whom live from writing rap and/or work(ed) in manual trades, *maquilas* (factories) and/or illegal businesses (such as small-scale drug dealing). Religion is key to understanding the worldview of these men, and interviewees distinguished between Catholicism and Christian denominations (including Pentecostals, Evangelicals. Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians), and here I use the term ‘Christian’ to refer to the latter. Like Alejandro in the opening vignette, several interviewees spoke of turning to God, engaging more with religious institutions and desisting from writing narco rap. Most of these rappers also create other forms of rap: about themselves, romance, politically conscious and Christian rap. The majority live in marginalised neighbourhoods of Tamaulipan border cities where they have experienced high levels of bellicose violence for most of their lives. This violence is characterised by spectacular, gory homicides and disappearances.

The interviewees were men who write music about other men. I have not encountered women who create commissioned narco rap (although a few women sometimes commission narco rap for their loved ones). The discussion is limited by a desire for rappers to impress me in the hope it might aid their career (and not) as a white, middle-aged, British academic investigating Mexican hip hop and/or Olvera Gudiño, a middle-class, middle aged Mexican academic interested in the economies of rap (see Olvera Gudiño 2018). Rappers downplayed detailed knowledge of criminality. Given the sensitivity of the data and to protect interviewees, I do not name them, provide any interview information or use pseudonyms (as these can facilitate identification).

An underground rap artist I interviewed distinguished between a lifestyle centred around a hip hop community, and narco rap for hire that is produced for monetary gain. Similarly, an interviewee who creates *rap del barrio* (neighbourhood rap) prioritised his gang (*clika*) and condemned narco rap.[[5]](#footnote-5) Neighbourhood gangs (*clikas*) should not be confused with large organised criminal groups which traffic large volumes of drugs. *Clikas* are usually hierarchically organised with a male leader; they may be loosely or formally organised; with members coming together to defend the neighbourhood and people who are not in their *clika* but are related to them; at other times, members of *clikas* lead independent lives. Imani Perry asserts that ‘hip hop music celebrates Me and We, as opposed to You’ (2004: 89): the self and the collective are foregrounded, and an Other is established, be it a battling opponent, state authority or otherwise. And while it may be argued that a self, collective and Other are emphasised in narco rap, the collectivity and opponents are large organised criminal groups. Allegiances are first and foremost to *el crimen*, rather than to hip hop communities or a *clika*. Exponents of underground rap, like those of rap del barrio, are primarily concerned with basing their music on lived experience, and some of these artists sing about their own collectivities and allegiances. Several Mexican hip hoppers I interviewed suggested that narco rap was not hip hop, in part for not embracing values of hip hop culture, but crucially because of the links between narco rap and large organised criminal groups. Two rappers I interviewed who were in small *clikas* told me that only a few members had joined so-called ‘drug-cartels’. These *clika* members frowned on the brutal violence of huge organised criminal groups.

# Narco rap, authenticity, empathy and power

Creating narco rap is extremely dangerous work and rappers have been killed for creating narco music, like narcocorridistas (see Wald 2001; Ragland 2009; Simonett 2001). Nevertheless, interviewed rappers were motivated to write commissioned songs for *el crimen* by a desire for money (to provide for their families and/or consume), fame (although this tends to be restricted), a creative career, access to a hedonist social scene, and the ability to create well-produced recordings (as I explore elsewhere, 2019b). Their clients include people who work in various capacities with and for *el crimen*, including hit men, accountants, drug and people smugglers, on both sides of the Mexican-US border.

Narco rappers are commissioned to write several kinds of songs, predominantly dedications to the living, rest in peace songs (RIPs) to the recently deceased (often commissioned by loved ones) and, to a lesser extent, dedications to religious figures. Dissing songs (*tiraderas*) aimed at others are occasionally commissioned by individuals and groups, but these are rare and extremely dangerous: I was told that rapper K-Flow (e.g., 2009a, 2009b) was hanged from a bridge for doing so. Here I focus primarily on songs that relate to a client’s biography and working life. I have explored elsewhere (2019b) how experienced narco rappers draw on their own experiences to shape the lyric and sonic content of commissioned songs (see Malcomson 2019b). While songwriters of many genres put themselves in others’ situations, the stakes are much higher when upsetting commissioners can have potentially fatal consequences. In order to create appropriate representations of drug traffickers in their songs, and to survive, musicians creating narco music must have some knowledge of the workings of *el crimen*. One rapper told me: ‘here we’re at the foot of the cannon […] here we’re real’, chiming with Alejandro’s concern to be considered ‘real’ in the opening vignette.

There is now substantial scholarship exploring how authenticity tropes are articulated in hip hop cultures in distinct contexts (see for e.g., McLeod 1999; Kahf 2007; Clark 2013), and the ways authenticity manifests in relation to narco rap coincides with and diverges from mainstream hip hop. For example, self-expression and gendered-classed-racialised experiences of marginality are important in Mexican and broader hip hop cultures, that is what Tricia Rose terms ‘the genre’s investment in the pretense of no pretense’ (2008: 38). There is no pretence that narco rap is autobiographical in terms of being a form of authentic self-expression founded in the knowledge or experience of the creator of the music, as is often the case in mainstream hip hop culture. Perry (2004) argues that hip hoppers usually employ a first person narrative voice to write about themselves or the third person to depict a character in their collective ‘We’ (be the narrative based in truth and/or fiction). Yet it is almost unheard of for rappers to voice the subjectivity of others. In narco rap, rappers write about, take the subject position of, and appear ‘real’, for powerful others. While it is usual in many genres for musicians to take the subject position of others, the positioning rappers assume in commissioned narco rap must be understood in relation to the two genres most closely linked to it: hip hop music and narcocorridos. Helena Simonett (2001) has argued that commissioned narcocorridos are usually narrated in the third person; it is in commercial narcocorridos where the first person is employed. In commissioned narco rap, however, composers use the first person in their commissioned songs, giving voice to their clients, and directly addressing their audiences.

The subjectivities of musicians and their clients become entwined in narco rap. An interviewed rapper told me: ‘when you write a track like that, you have to put yourself in the place of this person to feel and be able to transmit what they are living’. When I asked this rapper what he felt about doing this, he responded:

It depends what the person is like. Maybe many people are in *el crimen* out of necessity or many people are in it because they really like it. It’s like everything, some people like guns and all that. But I put myself in their shoes and if it’s out of necessity, I imagine that they must feel frustrated or afraid all the time. But when it comes to writing, I put myself in their shoes, I mean, I feel like I imagine that they are brave out there in the street, they are alert all the time, that they are not going to be shot or caught by the police or something.

This rapper implies that he does emotion work: inducing feelings he imagines the client experiences and constructing images of the client as able to cope emotionally, for example, with fear.[[6]](#footnote-6) In RIP songs, commissioned narco rappers not only assume their client’s subjectivity, but also create it from the perspective of being dead. Where clients are unknown, common tropes may be employed, but sometimes clients are close friends and acquaintances. An interviewed rapper had written a dedication depicting a childhood friend’s work with *el crimen*, a dedication for the friend’s young son, and a rest in peace song for his friend when he died. The interplay of personal and impersonal sentiment, of rappers’ and others’ subjectivities, take distinct empathetic registers when writing this music.

Carolyn Pedwell (2016) proposes that rather than understanding empathy as a reproduction of emotional accuracy, it is more apposite to analyse empathy as a form of translation that includes space for ambivalence, conflict and transformation, for sitting uncomfortably in one’s own affective space. Instead of evidencing emotional accuracies and predications that may endanger themselves, narco rap songs involve affective translation: taking the clients’ emotional narrative and shaping it. Narco rappers attempt to mould what their clients think, feel and sense in a brutally uneven relationship which includes potentially lethal conflict.

Being real takes on new meaning when musicians are commissioned to write songs by powerful others: there are distinct dynamics at play. To be real for a powerful other is quite distinct to being real for oneself. When rappers write songs for themselves, they hold all the power, or so it appears: they get to choose what and how they say what about themselves and others. Yet when musicians write for potentially violent others, they enter a distinct web of power relations. David Graeber (2005) analyses how imagination is practiced by people with little power, focusing on graduate ethnography students. He proposes that when writing up dissertations, students must work not to offend or overly critique supervisors, mentors or future colleagues if they wish to succeed in academia.: they must imagine the feelings and experiences of their more powerful mentors and supervisors in order not to upset them, yet the reverse rarely occurs. Offending clients, or their enemies, can have life-threatening consequences for narco rappers and their loved ones. Moreover, rappers become associated with the organised criminal group they sing for, and are thus potential targets for other criminal groups (see Malcomson 2019b).

Despite primarily being a sonic form, narco rap has similarities with portraiture; a way of constructing subjectivities of privileged and sometimes violent Others in the image that they desire. José Manuel Valenzuela Arce comments that corridos were referred to as ‘spoken portraits’ by *Los Tigres del Norte* in their song ‘El Corrido’ (1989) and that ‘the portraits that corridos offer recreate identifiable situations, characters, fictionalising elements of reality. It is permitted to play with possible histories in them’ (Valenzuela Arce 2003: 221). He does not explore the analogy further. Yet numerous scholars, including Hans-Georg Gadamer ([1991] 2000), have argued that portraits involve an intention (on the part of the portrait maker) to create an ideal image that is recognisably a representation of the portrayed (even where the portrayed is unknown to the audience). The artist does not mimetically copy the person portrayed, Gadamer asserts, but participates in its creation as a form of ‘being-together and belonging-together’ ([1991] 2000: 262). An intimacy is implied which contributes to the shaping of the image. Akin to portraits, narco songs serve as ideal image for many consumers (see Edberg 2004), biography, record, epitaph, work song, and propaganda: they do sense-making work which serves *el crimen*, both reproducing and questioning dominant ‘narconarratives’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

# Narco rap, ideologies and grievability

Narconarratives circulate widely in popular culture and in the media depicting mythical drug-lords who fight for territory, commit gratuitous violence, and revel in excess. Howard Campbell and Tobin Hansen propose that: ‘in addition to being produced for musical entertainment and artistic purposes, narcocorridos are frequently the conduits for the worldview of the cartel leadership and their pretensions to power’ (2014: 166). Yet most narco rap songs do not merely reproduce a ‘worldview of cartel leadership’. Participants in *el crimen* who commissioned the narco rappers I interviewed were not drug lords, but more ordinary people who worked for *el crimen*. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (2019b), narco rappers have some agency in determining content, albeit limited. So rather than a top-down model of ideological production, a more complex, hegemonic understanding of ideological sense-making is at play. Narco rap has resonances with US gangsta rap, as analysed by Eithne Quinn, in that ‘its dramatisation of immediate and shocking characters [is] coupled paradoxically with its equally compelling impulse towards reflecting on and explaining such characterizations’ (Quinn 2004: 14). In this section, I explicate eight ways that narco rap songs do ideological work with reference to the Rest in Peace song *Comandante Pollo Ciclón* (2016a) by 5050 (the well-known Tamaulipan rapper described in the opening vignette); I explicate how narco rap is not straightforward propaganda, and crucially, how this music engages with the ethics and ambivalences around carrying out brutal violence; and I argue that narco rappers make subjects who participate in *el crimen* ‘grievable’ (Butler 2009: 38) through song.[[8]](#footnote-8)

First, like narcocorridos, narco rap serves as what Howard Campbell terms ‘narco propaganda […] a form of psychological warfare and terrorism, designed to intimidate, dehumanize, and dominate’ (Campbell 2014: 64). Some narco rap videos merely include the organised criminal group logo, a very few have specially made films, but the majority are sounded with a series of stills shown for around 15 seconds each (often taken from mainstream media) affording spectacular representations of *el crimen* and threats to opponents. The images in some videos relate closely to the lyrics, while others are more generic. The stills accompanying *Comandante Pollo Ciclón* include heavy weaponry (machine guns, bazooka cartridges, grenades), SUVs, large bundles of drugs, bullet-proof jackets emblazoned with the Gulf Cartel logo clarifying for the viewer these *malandros*’ allegiance; military helicopters, police and military trucks with armed guards sporting bullet proof uniforms and balaclavas; buses and lorries blocking roads; and vehicles covered in bullet holes. Other videos often include single or piled up, tortured, bloodied, mutilated bodies; bank notes; burned out and crashed vehicles; armed confrontations with enemies (military, police, other organised criminal groups); images of enemies, heroes (such as renowned drug traffickers), and antiheroes (like the Mexican Revolutionary figure, Emiliano Zapata who also fought with guns on the road, even if on horseback, instead of the later pick-up trucks, and then SUVs). Yet while narco rap serves a propaganda directed at outsiders, song lyrics are mainly concerned with the rewards and fears of insiders and potential recruits. For example, over pounding dotted-quaver piano chords in A minor and a driving beat, 5050 recounts in *Comandante Pollo Ciclón* how 18 year old Pollo (‘Chicken’) was a member of the Gulf Cartel’s paramilitary subgroup, *Los Ciclones* (Cyclones); how he had worked as a hit man from the age of 15; was loyal to his Commander; courageous enough to kill; knew the risks he was taking; did it all for his family (his girls); and ended up dead.

Second, narco rap reaffirms structures of belonging within *el crimen*. For example, in the shout outs at the end of many narco rap songs, commanders and peers are named. Loyalty is personalised: it is articulated in relation to the (individual) commander, the (collective) commando, and after that to (the imagined community of) the organised criminal group. We learn in *Comandante Pollo Ciclón*, for example, that Pollo’s commander was a father figure for him, and his colleagues ‘behaved towards him as though he was a brother’ (*se portaban conmigo como si fuera su hermano*). It is Pollo’s commando to whom he shows loyalty, bravery and care. Belonging provides a strong rationale for some people to engage with organised criminal groups. Many narco rap tracks provide assurance that such belonging is achievable.

Third, a work ethic is promoted in these songs of being brave, astute, and loyal. This is not a work ethic in the Weberian ([1905] 2002) sense of achieving salvation through work, but more of a moral code in relation to work. In *Comandante Pollo Ciclón*, bravery in the face of risk is exemplified by Pollo ‘having a heart of steel’ (*un corazon de acero*), and the song establishes that Pollo was not only able to maintain this work ethic in life, but also in death: ‘*sigo presente y firme aunque ya nadie me vea, / pero mi alma todavía en la estaca se pasea’* (I remain present and firm even though no one sees me now / but my soul is still with the commando). Even once dead, loyalty and the ability to remain brave, ‘present and firm’ are sustained. Moreover, death is portrayed as something that happened to Pollo, rather than being a point of completion. In relation to narcocorridos, Mark Edberg argues that:

it may be the case that the narcotrafficker persona is not complete unless he/she has suffered from treachery or is dead. Thus death is an ontological stage in the completion of this character. The character, at its fullest, must live as if he/she is willing to risk all, then suffer a great tragedy or die a dramatic death, going out with all guns blazing. Then, the character continues to live as the subject matter of corridos. One is necessary for the other (Edberg 2004: 268).

Similarly in *Comandante Pollo Ciclón*, we see that Pollo went out ‘all guns blazing’: he became a subject worthy of a song, contributing to the imaginary of all those who have fallen, who continue to be remembered, respected and valued. And, in addition to the characteristics identified by Edberg, Pollo is also able to sustain a presence as a loyal member of the commando.

Fourth, making money is often put forward as a justification for participation in organised criminal groups and carrying out horrific violence. In many narco rap tracks, narratives of childless protagonists relate to the allures of narco-capitalist, hyper masculinity, while protagonists with children are presented as morally ambivalent, father figures, with responsibilities to provide for their partners and children. The opulent rewards of participation in *el crimen* are promoted in *Comandante Pollo Ciclón*, akin to narcocorridos which, Valenzuela Arce (2003) suggests, promote machismo as pervading the neoliberal values of ostentatious consumption: as if having an expensive narco rap track commissioned about him were not enough, reference is made to Pollo’s adornment of his weapons, his ‘engraved AK47 with a golden charging handle’. Yet reference is also made to Pollo providing for his nuclear family, as if this justifies his actions. In *Comandante Pollo Ciclón*, not only does Pollo enjoy being a *malandro* — rebellious, gun-totting and hyper-masculine — but his biological family (his ‘girls’) is established as the financial, moral and emotional rationale for doing his work. There are parallels not only with some US gangsta rap (see Quinn 2004), but also narcocorridos, which Shaylih Muehlmann argues, promote:

a particular interpretation of the drug trade, highlighting the political and social conditions that create the opportunity for narcotrafficking. In addition, corridos emphasise the poverty from which many narcotraffickers emerge (2013: 88).

Such a discourse is often presented ambivalently in narco rap tracks. One rapper told me how typically rest in peace songs tell of:

a warrior who fought for their family, fought wanting to get ahead. But also how at times this same force makes you do things that you shouldn’t and don’t want to, but these are things which you are ordered to do and which you have to do when it comes to the moment of work. And I would say that this is a RIP for someone who was assassinated and who did something for their family.

We see this in 5050’s song *Mi Testamento* (‘My Testament’ 2016c) where we hear a woman weeping over the initial piano chords before the rapper recounts how poverty is the reason why the protagonist works in an organised criminal group: having few options, wanting a ‘good life’ and food in the fridge.

Fifth, narco rap serves as reassurance for actual and future participants in *el crimen* that the emotional horrors of this work can be managed. In the chorus of in *Comandante Pollo Ciclón*, for example, 5050 raps over a swirling synth:

*Ando en pasos del mal, soy un criminal / nunca me arrepentiré lo que viví a mi edad. / Los que saben la verdad, no lo pueden negar, / se quedaban sorprendidos nomas al verme accionar. // […] nací pa matar, lo entendí con el tiempo. / Mi jale me enseño a no tener sentimientos*

I walk in bad steps, I am a criminal / I will never regret what I lived at my age. / Those who know the truth, cannot deny, / they were just surprised to see me in action. // […] I was born to kill, I understood this with time / My job taught me not to have feelings.

In this song, criminality is celebrated with the first line of the chorus: ‘I walk in bad steps, I am a criminal’. We also learn that Pollo has no regrets, feels no remorse. Instead, fatalism is implied: he was unlucky to be killed. Moreover, given a second chance, Pollo would do it all over again. Life in *el crimen* is thus promoted. Yet, the lyrics imply that that those who knew Pollo were surprised he could kill. I was told by an interviewee who formerly participated in *el crimen* that he and his colleagues had received rigorous paramilitary physical training before joining a commando. As well as physical training, this song alludes to the psychological transformation that Pollo has underwent. It was not that Pollo woke up one day and decided to kill: it took time for Pollo understood that he ‘was born to kill’, echoing Howard Becker’s classic (1963) argument that people learn to be ‘outsiders’ (and insiders) step by step. For example, Becker (1963) argued, marijuana users learn to how to smoke, recognise being high, enjoy the sensations, and negotiate social controls and moralities around drug consumption. Becker distinguishes between beginner, occasional and regular marijuana consumers, proposing that

a person will feel free to use marihuana to the degree that he comes to regard conventional conceptions of it as the uninformed views of outsiders and replaces those conceptions with the “inside” view he has acquired through his experience with the drug in the company of others (Becker 1963: 78).

Likewise, Pollo not only learned to kill, but that he was born to do so, and could do so without feeling.

An ability not to have feelings in relation to enemies (*contras*) is maintained. Enemy lives remain framed as what Judith Butler terms ‘ungrievable’ (2009: 38). Butler asserts that

those we kill are not quite human, and not quite alive, which means that we do not feel the same horror and outrage over the loss of their lives as we do over the loss of those lives that bear national or religious similarity to our own (2009: 41).

Such a division between the human and the ‘not quite human’, the ‘grievable’ and the ‘ungrievable’, us and them, can become complicated when brutal horrors are physically enacted at first hand, however. An interviewee who formerly participated in *el crimen* told me that he had killed seven people (excluding those harmed in shootouts), and how he sometimes thought about the people he had executed, young men like himself (see Malcomson 2020). But such concerns are strikingly absent in narco rap songs. So too is any potential for inaction. And while fear may be alluded to, within the scope of narcomasculinity, only certain feelings and sensations are addressed. Few facts about the horrors of this work are revealed, and instead reassurance is provided to potential recruits that this work is manageable, ensuring organised criminal groups continue to recruit.

Sixth, when mourning is signalled in narco rap rest in peace songs, it is often addressed as a means of remembering, of enacting a memorial, rather than as a traumatic process. In relation to a 9/11 memorial, Fast and Pegley (2012) ask: what is foregrounded in commemorative music and what is effaced? In narco rap songs, the agony of physical suffering and the dying process of the songs’ protagonists are absent. Violence is mostly described generically in these songs. While the accompanying videos may display gory, spectacular depictions of narcoviolence that are circulated in mass media more broadly, these images provide a context and relate to enemies, rather than the protagonists of songs. While the images relate to others, the lyrics of narco rap songs relate to their protagonist. In some RIP songs, the deaths of others and the events leading to the protagonist’s death may be recounted, yet gruesome details of the protagonist’s death (in battle or otherwise) are excluded (in words and images). In his discussion of Plato and portraiture, Gadamer states that ‘it would truly be inappropriate to represent the dead one or his mourning father in a portrait’ ([1991] 2000: 270). Gadamer does not explore this inappropriateness, but points to an ethics around portraying the death and suffering of those sufficiently privileged to be portrayed as ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’. In Dedications and RIP songs this ethic of portraiture is maintained: suffering is effaced; the protagonist being ‘sufficiently privileged to be portrayed’ enables their inner good to be foregrounded.

Seventh, narco rap tracks reinforce the idea that respect can be acquired through work in *el crimen*. As an experienced narco rapper explained to me:

There is lots of narco rap that talks about how the Commander is a person to respect, that everyone thinks well of them, respects them. And there are others that this guy doesn’t care and goes around with his firearm. [...] others that, that have a lot of money and they go to brothels and spend money on women. And that’s where it varies, because there is a question of respect, money and *la vida loca* (‘the crazy life’): “let’s go wild and kill people”.

Respect, consumption and the enjoyment of violence are highlighted here with reference to distinct masculinities. In order to maintain respect, Richard Sennett (2003) proposes, skills, self-sufficiency and reciprocity are required. These markers are evident in mainstream hip hop culture, for example, Marcyliena Morgan proposed in relation to 1990s LA underground hip hop culture that esteem was accrued through skills ‘achieved through practice, study, self-discipline, and respect for hip hop’ (2009: 74), but respect for hip hop is not a marker of narco rap. Competence in work, courageousness (especially in the face of death), and loyalty to the organised criminal group are foregrounded in the majority of narco rap songs, including *Comandante Pollo Ciclón* where respect for the commander and commando are articulated. Yet as Valenzuela Arce (2003) suggests in relation to narcocorridos, respect can be also achieved via intimidation. As the experienced narco rapper stated above, some men who do not care about respect and instead rely on their firearms: a more individualistic, intimidating badman approach to respect may be enacted by someone whose attitude is ‘let’s go wild and kill people’. Valenzuela Arce (2003) contends that machismo underpins the ethical codes of organised criminal groups. And Rebecca Biron argues that ‘Mexican narco-masculinity […] links certain performances of maleness to the power over life and death. […] It establishes hierarchy and business practices within the illegal drug industry.’ (Biron 2015: 186). I propose that narco rap contributes to promoting this masculinity, but not by detailing it wholesale. Instead, certain vulnerabilities may be alluded to which, in the last instance, are held up as manageable. A few narco rap dedications, such as *Comandante Diablo* by 5050 (2013), present their protagonists with a terrifying, all powerful attitude, while a bearable, more fearful, firm masculinity is apparent in the majority, including *Comandante Pollo Ciclón*.

Valencia posits that hyper-masculinity, hyper-consumption and self-interested individualism are key to understanding *endriago* (monster) subjects ([2010] 2018: 137): the (mostly) men who, living in precarious conditions and frustrated by an inability to consume, rebel and turn to crime and extreme violence to acquire economic enrichment, hegemonic masculinity and power. While *endriagos* rebel, Valencia argues, they simultaneously internalise and are obedient to gendered, economic and patriarchal hierarchies, and this obedience ‘makes these men unable to question the assumptions of the system as it is imposed on them in the name of power, economics, and masculinity’ (Valencia [2010] 2018: 256). Yet while obedience was central to the discourses of some interviewees and their narco rap songs, there was also some nuance, some questioning, particularly where religious authority was concerned in rest in peace songs.

Eighth, in narco rap songs, a multidimensional image of drug traffickers and those who work with them, as both intimidating and humane, is made apparent. There are parallels here in ways in which a masculine sentimentalism is performed in US gangsta rap, such as Tupac’s “So Many Tears”, as Eithne Quinn (2004) has explored. Quinn suggests that ‘this masculine mode represents the logical counterpart to excessive public acts of violence: if the exaggerated outward deeds intimate fissures in masculine identity construction, these contemplative monologues offer extensive, even maudlin, expositions of it’ (Quinn 2004: 92). Similarly, the fissures of masculinity are explored in narco rap when fear is alluded to, in the process strengthening this masculinity. These songs promote the ability to stay firm while acknowledging fear, ensuring organised criminal groups do not lose their own. Moreover, these songs address issues which may preoccupy current and prospective participants in *el crimen*: the capacity to be brave, to deal with emotional trauma, to remain humane. The importance of maintaining humanity is signalled in Valenzuela Arce’s interview with ‘ex-narco’ Doroteo, where Doroteo comments that earning money ‘is fast, but not easy. The risk is huge, above all losing your freedom, your life, your principles. The principles which God taught us, being humane’ (Valenzuela Arce 2003: 200). Doroteo is evoking a Christian notion of the human here, the idea of being recognised by God as worthy of entry into heaven, as ‘good’. This contrasts and overlaps with the idea that a life is recognised as a life through human relationships and hegemonic norms (see Arendt [1958] 2013; Agamben 1998; Butler 2009). While the lives of participants in *el crimen* are framed by the Mexican media and other narconarratives as dispensable, ‘ungrievable’ subjects who participate in *el crimen* are made human and ‘grievable’ (Butler 2009: 38) through the empathetic portraits and ethical sense-making of these songs. And the struggles for participants in *el crimen* to maintain a dignified sense of self, to be humane, become particularly apparent when religious figures and principles are elicited.

In sum, the ways narco rap songs do ideological work include: (1) as a form of narcopropanda; (2) reaffirming structures of belonging within *el crimen*; (3) promoting a work ethic of being astute, brave and loyal; (4) justifying participation in *el crimen* with a desire to make money, either to consume and/or to provide for one’s family; (5) reassuring current and potential participants in *el crimen* that the emotional traumas of this work are manageable; (6) foregrounding mourning as a form of memorial and effacing suffering and trauma; (7) reproducing the idea that respect can be acquired through this work; and (8) portraying those who work for *el crimen* as fully human, as grievable subjects. In the next section I explore how the struggles for participants in *el crimen* and narco rappers to maintain a dignified sense of self, to be humane, is apparent when religious figures and principles are elicited.

# Moral responsibility and ambivalence

Some interviewed rappers expressed anxiety about what they would do with the guilt if something happened to their family because they wrote songs for *el crimen*. However, it was in relation to children, religious beliefs and the occasionally commissioned devotional songs for Santa Muerte (Holy Death), San Judas Tadeo (Saint Jude) and the Devil that rappers’ ethical concerns around their work emerged.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One rapper became slightly agitated when we discussed children listening to his music (on their phones and other social media), commenting that he would not let his own children listen to narco rap:

You have to pretend you don’t see, like. You say, the youngsters are listening to these songs and they are ... well, they are listening to my songs, but they are also listening to their mother, their father, who also don’t care and they blame you. […] And there are people who say: “Don’t listen to those songs because of the children. That’s why they’re like that”. They blame you. But kids nowadays, they are on the street all the time.

He refused to take any blame for the impact that listening to his music may have on children, shifting all responsibility to parents, and attributing youngsters’ behaviour to their experiences of the street. Muehlmann (2013) argues that for poor borderland narcocorrido consumers, songs portray a reality that they are all too aware of. César Jesús Burgos Dávila (2011) documents similar discourses in his analysis of north-western Mexican narcocorrido composers’ critiques of the censorship of their songs:

For them, the problem of violence and drug trafficking in Mexico is not the result of their compositions. Nor do they consider that their work incites violence, since for them, they are stories that happen in life, which can also be found on radio, newspapers and television (Burgos Dávila 2011: 9).

In both cases, there is a notion that sounds and lyrics did not fuel violent action, but instead that these songs recount on-the-ground truths, knowledge which listeners already have from their lives and the media.

Notions of ‘the truth’ are also important in corridos. While John McDowell argues that corridistas ‘hedge the truth’ (2008: 185), José Pablo Villalobos and Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta (2004) contend that although a composer’s aim in corridos is to ‘make the listener judge him and the corrido as faithful to the truth’ (Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta 2004: 143), in commissioned narcocorridos ‘*la pura verdad* [the pure truth] as an ideal begins to fade and is corrupted by the self-fashioning fancies of the underwriter financing the project’ (Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta 2004: 136). They sustain that: ‘corridos have become a narrative space whose social function is to maintain hope for the otherwise inaccessible truth’ (Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta 2004: 144). In narco rap, ‘self-fashioning fancies’ may come into play, but there is more at stake. One rapper told me, echoing several others, that he raps about and dares to tell ‘the truth’ in his commissioned songs:

Above all it’s like raw things that you rap about, but it’s for the client and also because you have to show people the truth. They are things that people know, but don’t dare to speak about sometimes. But I do, I do, but as I say, with certain *criteria* (sensitive and sound judgement): thinking about what to say and when.

He is suggesting, in contrast to Villalobos and Ramírez-Pimienta, that commissioned narco rap songs emphasise credibility more than other narconarratives (such as those produced by the media). Simonett contends that ‘deadly violence is so common in certain [north-western Mexican] communities that it affects everyone […] narcocorridos do not tell the magnitude of the problem. Yet, many of them express its human side’ (Simonett 2001: 241). Similarly, the narco rap songs that experienced interviewees circulated are not exposés: instead they provide accounts that are credible, that refuse to sanitise, to de-humanise those entangled in brutal and structural violence. This explains how it is relatively easy for rappers to attempt to put blame elsewhere when children listen to their songs. However, when religious beliefs are foregrounded, shifting moral responsibility becomes more difficult.

Narco rap songs do ideological work to assure living participants in *el crimen* that redemption is possible: for example, in *Comandante Pollo Ciclón* ‘the Lord above is looking after’ Pollo; there is no plea for entry to heaven or forgiveness. Yet while it is a cliché in Mexico that thieves pray for blessing from the Virgin before carrying out robberies, engaging with mortal sins is complex. One interviewee explained how his Christian mother took him to church for most of his childhood, taught him about God and Christ, and how he has written several songs praising them. He elaborated that responsibility lay with God for giving him talent, that he blames himself for misusing the money God enables him to earn, and that he is grateful. He asserted:

I write what I write because it is my work, but my fundamental beliefs [are] in Christ. And whether I’ll go to hell, and whether it’s bad what I’m doing, I’ve got a reason for doing it. And you have to console yourself sometimes too, because if you sit down and think that this is bad and that’s bad, then you’re not going to do it and if you do it, you’re not going to do it well.

There are resonances here with the opening vignette, where we saw Alejandro’s struggles between his belief in God and his work, writing song for organised criminals. Like Alejandro and the rapper in this quote, most interviewees tended to have conventional notions of Christian deities as all-knowing, all-present and all-powerful (akin to the early US East Coast hip hop analysed by Nelson [2005] 2015). Crucially, however, there was a concern with destiny, akin to the Costa Chica corridos analysed by McDowell (2008): it was with regard to God’s final judgments about death and the afterlife that apprehensiveness emerged most intensely. This rapper implies that he tries to convince himself and Christ that his justifications for doing this work mean it is not being *that* bad. When addressing how people criticise him for writing narco rap, he said:

It’s like, wait a minute. I’m a narco rapper because it’s my work and because I prefer being a narco rapper than being a drug dealer or a mugger. […] I much prefer writing a song and people don’t see that sometimes. They see it as: “he writes for the *maña* (mafia)”, and if they could hear what I’m saying now.

This rapper critiques others who do not see his work as he does, and creates a clear ethical division between writing songs, and drug dealing and robbery: while narco rap contains lyrics which do particular ideological work, they are less harmful than physically hurting others.

I did not feel comfortable asking interviewees about what they felt about writing songs for people who have carried out blood-curdling acts, I did ask about being commissioned to write songs for Santa Muerte and San Judas, and here ambivalences narco rappers felt about their professional practice emerged particularly strongly (examples of such songs include: 5050 2011, 2014; Cano y Blunt 2013; Cano y Blunt ft 5050 2013). Devotees of San Judas remain Catholic, while those of Santa Muerte are ostracised by the Catholic church. Some rappers attempted to distance these figures from their own beliefs, even where they were not absolutely sure of their ability to do so. One rapper commented:

To be honest, I don’t like writing songs for Santa Muerte or San Judas. [But] the client pays me and what I do, what I do is, I make myself out to be the devotee […] Muerte is the one who is going to help you with bad things, she’s not going to help you do good things. So if I’m doing bad stuff: “save me from this” and “save me from there” and “I’ll light candles and I’ll do this”. This is what a devotee does, I imagine. And then the client says to me: “And to my *flaca* [Santa Muerte, literally ‘thin woman’] brother, you know”. But sometimes they don’t know what to say to you and that’s when I say:

“Do you have a … Do you have a tattoo of her, brother?”

“Oh yes, I’ve got her tattooed here”

“Oh, great”

And then when I know, oh so they got a tattoo of her on their body, then I put in the information. And then: “Oh, yes brother, and *la flaquita* [Santa Muerte] saved me from there and this”. Always things they want from Santa Muerte, but I don’t like that stuff. I do it for the job.

Writing songs for San Judas and Santa Muerte clearly unnerved this rapper: he fidgeted as he talked about it and revealed how he was uncomfortable for him to put himself in the place of the client in these instances.

While some rappers managed to maintain ambiguity in relation to Santa Muerte and San Judas, writing songs for the Devil was even more challenging, as they were unable to deny his existence. One rapper recounted how he would have turned down a commission to write for the Devil, but had become:

friends with him [the client] before I knew what he was into. I thought it was bad to say to him: “No, I’m not going to write about the Devil, mate” […] I said: “You’re going to go, brother”. “You’re going …”. But [writing a song] about the Devil, I know, I know … I, as a Christian believer, I know what this is and I said “I’m selling out. I’m selling my soul to the Devil here”. But no, those who sold it [their soul] was them, it says so in the song. And so... [he laughs] I only made the song and earned a load of money. [...] But I imagine that the ones who are going to hell are them. More certain, right?

This rapper’s desire to save face with his friend and earn money collided with his ethical boundaries. He implies that writing this song is selling out, almost selling his soul to the Devil, but not quite: he tries to convince himself that he can put moral responsibility onto the client, saying it is they who may go to hell. Above we saw how musicians shifted responsibility to God and to the parents of children who consume their narco music, and here it is the clients who are given responsibility for venerating Santa Muerte and the Devil. Other interviewed rappers concurred that the consequences of worshiping such figures would fall on the client who paid for the track.

In relation to narcocorridos, Burgos Dávila proposes that ‘after finishing the corrido, the composers usually dissociate themselves from taking responsibility for the content. They justify this by saying it is a commission made from information provided [by the client]’ (2016: 7). Narco rap composers do more than merely reiterate the clients’ information, however. They retain some agency in shaping the sounds and lyrics of their commissioned songs (see Malcomson 2019b). Moreover, rappers empathise with the client to create a song; battle with any moral dissonance in the process; and then attempt to disassociate themselves from their creations. There is both a power dynamic between rapper and client, and a temporal element to this. Yet, when Santa Muerte, San Judas or the Devil are praised, matrices of power and temporalities are expanded to include deities, life and the afterlife. Rappers must now attempt to shift moral responsibility to others to protect themselves and their loved ones in both life and death. Responsibility implies a requirement to answer, to be ethically accountable towards others. Faced with higher beings such as God and Christ, rappers had to take responsibility, thus their intense ambivalences. Such ambivalences are echoed in several songs by well-known Tamaulipan narco rappers, including 50-50, Cano y Blunt, and Jr. El Makabro (e.g., Big Los & Chino ft Cano y Blunt 2013; Jr. El Makabro 2016; 5050 2017). There is a tenderness to these songs, with their slow piano and light-synth textures, references to being tempted by the Devil, hope for forgiveness from Christ and/or God for their sins.

When faced by death, ethical concerns about participating in *el crimen* were made particularly apparent for rappers and the protagonists of their songs, concerns forged by what Lauren Berlant has termed ‘cruel optimism […] a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility’ (2006: 21). At first sight, the core values of continuing to participate in *el crimen* are reproduced in narco rap songs, in maintaining optimism while acknowledging cruelty. Yet it is one thing to understand that people do terrible things, and another to do them, to bear the unbearable weight of this. For example, the ideological work that narco rap tracks do is akin to promises: promises of belonging and of loyalty which are compromised when it becomes apparent that it is neither easy to survive nor leave jobs in and related to organised criminal groups; the promise that those committing brutal violence will be able to manage emotional horrors (and ‘have no feelings’) is compromised by an inability to process trauma and emotional pain; the neoliberal promise of acquiring wealth and respectable manhood, and of justifying this work in relation to supporting families is compromised by the physical and emotional cruelty of this work, a cruelty both inflicted and subjected to; and finally, the promise that redemption is possible becomes harder to believe. The danger of death for these rappers is all too real: according to online sources, Jr. El Makabro (b.1995) was killed in 2016, and 5050 (b.1992) portrayed in the opening vignette was kidnapped and assassinated in 2019. In advance of his death, Jr. El Makabro wrote a RIP for himself (2014), thanking God for what he had lived and reflecting on the good and the bad he had done, and also a song emphasising his desire to be good and go to heaven (2016).

# Conclusion

Earlier in this article I evoked the widely circulating narconarratives which depict violent men who act without guilt. I argued that if we employ one-dimensional images of people working with organised criminal groups, we fail to engage fully with human experience and actions. What I hope to have demonstrated, by drawing on both ethnographic data and analysis of lyrics, is that narco rappers and their clients are quite distinct from one-dimensional images of hyper-masculine criminals which establish them as ‘ungrievable’ subjects (Butler 2009: 38). Instead, those who participate in *el crimen* are made human through the portraits that narco rappers empathetically create of them. Narco rap songs address issues that may preoccupy current and prospective participants in *el crimen*, such as the capacity to be brave in armed warfare, to deal with emotional trauma, to achieve a sense of belonging, and to attain redemption. Crucially, they construct images and memories of protagonists (living and dead) as courageous, dignified, loyal, respected, caring; establishing them as ‘grievable’ (Butler 2009: 38). And some narco rap songs directly allude to the ambivalences that commissioners experience, further pointing to their complexity. Yet these songs efface protagonists’ physical pain, horror and inability to deal with guilt and trauma.

For rappers, the emotion work involved in this work is considerable: these musicians must read, and empathise with, powerful clients; translate this understanding into rhyme; and then work through the moral dissonance this creates to ensure they later dissociate themselves from this empathetic depiction in relation to their sense of self, and potential social and supernatural critique (the impact of their songs on children, on their own lives, deaths and afterlives). That is, there is a temporal element at play: while the narco rapper attempts to think, feel and sense like their client when making a commissioned song, they later distance themselves from this portrait in order not to avoid moral responsibility. While some scholars (e.g., Burgos Dávila 2016) suggest that narco musicians are able to shift moral responsibility to their clients, narco rappers found this difficult when confronted with the potential consequences of writing songs praising Santa Muerte, San Judas and the Devil. Some subsequently wrote songs lamenting their lives and pleading God and Christ for redemption. Jr. El Makabro and 5050 (depicted in the opening vignette) were purportedly later assassinated. The larger point I wish to make, drawing from this research, is that if we are to propose action on drug-trafficking and related activities, then we must embrace the complexity of those working for *el crimen*, treat them as fully human, as grievable, as bodies that matter, and engage with their ethical struggles.

# Funding details

This project was funded by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship [Grant number RF-2017-529].

# Acknowledgments

I am extremely grateful to the interviewees for generously giving me their time and insights; to the Leverhulme Trust for funding this project; and the anonymous reviewers, friends and colleagues (you know who you are) who provided really helpful comments and suggestions. All shortcomings are my own.

# Orcid

Hettie Malcomson <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2960-4399>

# References

5050. ‘De Un Guerrero pa’ su Santo’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVR5PiJYlrA&lc=UgwLhx2ut62J3x6ahYV4AaABAg> (accessed 25/05/2020).

———. ‘Comandante Diablo’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P41pMdeQ0D4> (accessed 25/05/2020).

———. ‘Santa Muerte’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDxh7rNN9Ok> (accessed 25/05/2020).

———. ‘Comandante Pollo Ciclón’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fda9Ffwjmuk> (accessed 25/01/2018).

———. ‘Entrevista RDTV: Cantaba a Delincuentes, Ahora a Cristo. La Historia de El 5050’. RadioDual Televisión. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pMPY7bSpR4> (accessed 02/06/2020).

———. ‘Mi Testamento’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVR5PiJYlrA&lc=UgwLhx2ut62J3x6ahYV4AaABAg> (accessed 11/06/2020).

———. ‘Él Me Escuchó’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJLI2F0t5Ao> (accessed 25/05/2020).

———. ‘Entrevista RDTV: De Regreso al Narco Rap... 5050 Flow Malandro’. RadioDual Televisión. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTVHGBOUJ0Q> (accessed 02/06/2020).

Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Arendt, Hannah. [1958] 2013. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Becker, Howard S. 1963. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Bennett, Andy. 2008. ‘Towards a Cultural Sociology of Popular Music’. *Journal of sociology* 44(4):419-32.

Berlanga Gayón, Mariana. 2015. ‘El Espectaculo de la Violencia en el Mexico Actual: del Feminicidio al Juvenicidio’. *Athenea Digital* 15(4):105-28.

Berlant, Lauren. 2006. ‘Cruel Optimism’. *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17(3):20-36.

Big Los & Chino ft Cano y Blunt. ‘Platicando Con El Diablo’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0O3k06Ra0g> (accessed 25/05/2020).

Biron, Rebecca E. 2015. ‘Narcomedia: Mexican Masculinities’. *Letras Hispanas* 11:186-99.

Burgos Dávila, César Jesús. 2011. ‘Las Letras del Narcotráfico a Ritmo Norteño. Jóvenes Compositores de Narcocorridos’. *Revista Argentina de Estudios de Juventud* 4:1-12.

———. 2016. ‘“¡Que Truene la Tambora y Que Suene el Acordeón!”: Composición, Difusión y Consumo Juvenil de Narcocorridos en Sinaloa’. *TRANS: Revista Transcultural de Música, Transcultural Music Review* 20:1-24.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Cabañas, Miguel A. 2014. ‘Imagined Narcoscapes: Narcoculture and the Politics of Representation’. *Latin American Perspectives* 41(3):3-17.

Campbell, Howard. 2014. ‘Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican “Drug War”: An Anthropological Perspective’. *Latin American Perspectives* 41(2):60-77.

Campbell, Howard, and Tobin Hansen. 2014. ‘Is Narco-Violence in Mexico Terrorism?’. *Bulletin of Latin American research* 33(2):158–73.

Cano y Blunt. ‘Santo San Judas Tadeo’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVO9PfOehe0> (accessed 25/05/2020).

Cano y Blunt ft 5050. ‘Santa Muerte’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPn7awLRfwY> (accessed 25/05/2020).

Clark, Msia Kibona. 2013. ‘The Struggle for Hip Hop Authenticity and against Commercialization in Tanzania’. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6(3):5-21.

Edberg, Mark. 2004. ‘The Narcotrafficker in Representation and Practice: A Cultural Persona from the U.S.-Mexican Border’. *Ethos* 32(2):257-77.

Fast, Susan, and Kip Pegley. 2012. ‘Introduction’. In *Music, Politics, and Violence*, edited by Susan Fast and Kip Pegley, 1-33. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. [1991] 2000. ‘Plato as Portraitist’. *Continental Philosophy Review*:245–74. (Translated by Jamey Findling and Snezhina Gabova).

Graeber, David. 2005. ‘The Auto-Ethnography That Can Never Be and the Activist Ethnography That Might Be’. In *Auto-Ethnographies: The Anthropology of Academic Practices*, edited by Anne Meneley and Donna Jean Young, 189-202. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. [1983] 2012. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

INEGI. 2019. ‘Defunciones por Homicidios’. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/olap/proyectos/bd/continuas/mortalidad/defuncioneshom.asp?s=est> (accessed 22/04/2020).

Johnson, Bruce, and Martin Cloonan. 2008. *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence* Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Jr. El Makabro. 'Jr D.E.P.'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlFgI6GOQE0> (accessed 17/06/2020).

———. 'Quisiera Ser el Bueno'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqP0-WH61EM> (accessed 17/06/2020).

K-Flow. 'Sikarios de Papel'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tYqdkFDbR4> (accessed 17/06/2020).

———. 'Tiraera Pa Meko Rayo, el Mundo Es Mio '. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmMl7KadBdg> (accessed 17/06/2020).

Kahf, Usama. 2007. ‘Arabic Hip Hop: Claims of Authenticity and Identity of a New Genre’. *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 14(4):359–85.

Kubrin, Charis E, and Erik Nielson. 2014. ‘Rap on Trial’. *Race and Justice* 4(3):185-211.

Le Clercq Ortega, Juan Antonio, and Gerardo Rodríguez Sánchez Lara. 2018. ‘La Impunidad Subnacional en México y sus Dimensiones. Índice Global de Impunidad México. IGI-MEX 2018’. Puebla: Fundación Universidad de las Américas, Puebla.

Los Tigres del Norte. ‘El Corrido’. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YU0raPt3o8> (accessed 17/06/2020).

Malcomson, Hettie. 2019a. ‘Contesting Resistance, Protesting Violence: Women, War and Hip Hop in Mexico’. *Music and Arts in Action* 7(1):46-63

———. 2019b. ‘Negotiating Violence and Creative Agency in Commissioned Mexican Narco Rap’. *Bulletin of Latin American research* 38(3):347-62.

———. 2019c. ‘Point of View, Narrative Voice and Ethnographic Representation: Writing Everyday Violence in 2010s Mexico’. *Irish Journal of Anthropology* 22(1):99-103.

———. 2020. ‘On Sensationalism, Violence and Academic Knowledge’. *Transposition. Musique et sciences sociales* Hors-série 2. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.4931>.

Mbembé, J. Achille. 2008. ‘Necropolitics’. *Public Culture* 15(1):11-40. Translated by Libby Meintjes.

McDowell, John H. 2008. *Poetry and Violence. The Ballad Tradition of Mexico’s Costa Chica*. Champaign Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

McFarland, Pancho. 2008. *Chicano Rap: Gender and Violence in the Postindustrial Barrio*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

McLeod, Kembrew. 1999. ‘Authenticity within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation’. *Journal of communication* 49(4):134-50.

Morgan, Marcyliena H. 2009. *The Real Hiphop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the LAUnderground*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Muehlmann, Shaylih. 2013. *When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco-Culture in the US-Mexico Borderlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nelson, Angela. [2005] 2015. ‘‘God’s Smiling on You and He’s Frowning Too’: Rap and the Problem of Evil’. In *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, edited by Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn, 130-9. New York: Routledge.

Olvera Gudiño, José Juan. 2018. *Economías del Rap en el Noreste de México: Emprendimientos y Resistencias Juveniles alrededor de la Música Popular*. México: CIESAS.

Pedwell, Carolyn. 2016. ‘De-Colonising Empathy: Thinking Affect Transnationally’. *Samyukta: A Journal of Womens Studies* 16(1):27-49.

Perry, Imani. 2004. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Quinn, Eithne. 2004. *Nuthin’ but a “G” Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ragland, Cathy. 2009. *Música Norteña: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation between Nations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Rose, Tricia. 2008. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters*. New York: BasicCivitas.

SEGOB. 2019. ‘Secretaria de Gobernación. Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública. Estadísticas fuero Común’. <http://secretariadoejecutivo.gob.mx/rnped/estadisticas-fuerocomun.php> (accessed 06/08/2019).

Sennett, Richard. 2003. *Respect: The Formation of Character in a World of Inequality*. London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books.

Simonett, Helena. 2001. *Banda: Mexican Musical Life across Borders*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Valencia, Sayak. [2010] 2018. *Gore Capitalism*. Translated by John Pluecker. Semiotext(e): South Pasadena, CA.

Valenzuela Arce, José Manuel. 2003. *Jefe de Jefes: Corridos y Narcocultura en Mexico*. México D.F.: Hoja Casa Editorial.

Villalobos, José Pablo, and Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta. 2004. ‘Corridos and la Pura Verdad: Myths and Realities of the Mexican Ballad’. *South Central Review* 21(3):129-49.

Wald, Elijah. 2001. *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*. New York: Harper Collins.

———. 2004. ‘Mexico: Drug Ballads and Censorship Today’. In *Shoot the Singer!: Music Censorship Today*, edited by Marie Korpe, 170-4. London and New York: Zed Books.

Weber, Max. [1905] 2002. *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and Other Writings*. London: Penguin.

Zavala, Oswaldo. 2014. ‘Imagining the US-Mexico Drug War: The Critical Limits of Narconarratives’. *Comparative Literature* 66(3):340-60.

1. All translations of interviews and texts in Spanish are my own, unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rather than the highly stigmatised term ‘narco’, I follow interviewees’ practice and use the term *el crimen organizado* (organised crime), or the shortened version *el crimen*, to refer to people participating in drug-trafficking and related work. It should be noted that many organised criminal groups are entwined with state forces. These groups (some of which have been referred to as drug cartels from the 1970s) are not homogeneous in terms of structure, size or ideologies. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Flow refers to the way the rappers voice relates to other musical markers. The term *malandro*, meaning ‘badman’, stereotypically denotes a tough, drug/alcohol consuming, womanising, gun- or knife-toting underworld figure, who often enjoys music and dance (in clubs, dance halls and otherwise). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Johnson and Cloonan (2008) convincingly argue that music does not ‘cause’ violence, but instead may accompany, arouse or incite violence, or be violent (as in the case of music used in torture). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Rap del barrio* is rooted in Chicano rap (explored in depth by McFarland 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The way this emotion work is employed is slightly different to the performances of emotion described by Arlie Hochschild, in her seminal analysis of cabin crew in ‘The Managed Heart’ (1983[1983]). Hochschild distinguishes between emotional labour which has ‘exchange value’ and is directed *towards* others, and emotion work which has ‘use value’ and is *for* others (1983[1983]: 7). The majority of narco rappers’ interactions with their clients are not in person, and thus fall into the latter category. Moreover, for narco rappers, there is often a temporal disjuncture between the client receiving the product involving emotion work that they have bought. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Oswaldo Zavala describes ‘narconarratives’ as ‘a dispersed but interrelated corpus of texts, films, music, and conceptual art focusing on the drug trade’ (2014: 341). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Comandante Pollo Ciclón* had over 12,000 hits on Youtube by 25/01/2018, and was later withdrawn. By 2021, numerous of 5050’s tracks have had several million hits on Youtube. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Santa Muerte is an unofficial saint, condemned by the mainstream Catholic church, and renowned for her skeletal image, demand for intense loyalty, miraculousness and protection, jealousy and terrifying vengeance on those who upset her. San Judas Tadeo is sanctioned by the Catholic church as the saint of lost causes and, while less controversial than Santa Muerte, may be prayed to as a last resort for good or otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)