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Narcocultura As Cultural Capital For Latinx Youth Identity Work: An Online Ethnography

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NARCOCULTURA AS CULTURAL CAPITAL FOR
LATINX YOUTH IDENTITY WORK:
AN ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

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NARCOCULTURA AS CULTURAL CAPITAL FOR
LATINX YOUTH IDENTITY WORK:
AN ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY

by

EMILIANO VILLARREAL, M.S., B.A.

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Why would young Latinxs want to be, talk, look, and act like narcos? This work analyzes the ways in which narcocultura has become an important source of cultural capital for many Latinxs. Narcocultura is the assemblage of music, video, television, and other forms of cultural production that feature figures of transnational narcotrafficking as central protagonists of their narratives. Based on a yearlong online ethnography, I examine the ways in which Latinx Facebook users appropriate and recontextualize narcocultura in their identity work through the lenses of LatCrit theory, critical discourse analysis, and personal lived experiences, which provided the departing point for the study and a key analytical tool. I analyze conversations I had with participants of narcocultura-oriented Facebook groups, as well as products and artifacts posted to these groups. My analysis explains the ways in which narcocultura can be engaging and empowering, while violent and problematic. The ways in which participants navigated said tensions are an important part of the study's findings, as well as how young Latinxs use narco-centric identities to subvert class, gender, and race hegemonies. These findings have implications for practitioners of critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies who want to use these important sources of cultural capital to underpin meaningful learning experiences.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
List of Excerpts.....	ix
List of Illustrations.....	xi
List of Lyrics.....	xii
List of Tables.....	xiii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Why would anyone want to act like a narco?.....	2
Attraction and Repulsion.....	6
What is narcocultura?.....	7
Academic Goals of the Dissertation.....	12
Overview of the Dissertation.....	12
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	16
Hip-Hop Culture as Cultural Capital for Black Youth.....	17
Parallels between Hip-Hop Culture and Narcocultura.....	23
Contemporary Academic Work about Narcocultura.....	24
Youth, belonging, and narcocorridos.....	25
The narcosphere and imagined narcoscapes.....	27
Narcoviencia.....	32
Commodification and Discardability, Key Concepts from the Literature Review.....	36
Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework.....	39
Latinx Critical Theory.....	40
Identity Theory.....	43
Imagined Audiences and Critical Discourse Analysis.....	46
Chapter 4: Methods.....	49
Positionality as a Researcher and Academic.....	50
Personal Conflict with—and Academic Interest in—Narcocultura.....	56
Positionality as a Soldier.....	59

A nuanced understanding of narcocultura emerges	61
Ethical Considerations and Challenges of my Study, Narcocultura as Taboo	622
Online Ethnography	66
Study Design and Data Collection	68
Data Analysis	70
Selecting Facebook Groups for Study	71
Participant Selection	75
Chapter 5: Retratos of the Participants	80
Reina Rivera.....	81
Cinco Siete	86
Cinco Siete <i>cleanses</i> his online presence of “chacaloso” content	94
How Reina Rivera and Cinco Siete’s multiple dimensions set them apart.....	99
Edgar Quintero and Luis Coronel	103
Chapter 6: Narco-Discourses about Gender and Class	114
Buchonas y Buchones	114
How Women Are	120
Chapter 7: Aquí Andamos al Cien, al Tiro, Activados	136
Chapter 8: The Legitimation and Appropriation of Violence.....	154
Niños Sicarios y Sicarias Cabronas	155
Sicarios y Pesados.....	169
The Legitimation of Violence, Crime, and Dehumanization.....	172
“Nada más es al que te pongan... o si te topan”	177
Chapter 9: Discussion and Limitations	182
Pesados, Sicarios y Sicarias as Subversive Identities	182
Intersections of Sicario and Sicaria Identities with American Militarism.....	185
Nihilism in Narco-Narratives.....	189
The Commodification of Narcocultura.....	194
Limitations of the Study.....	197
Chapter 10: Conclusions and Implications	201
Learning to Be Narco.....	201
The Interconnection of Struggles.....	207

Using Narcocultura in Critical and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies	208
Addressing my Conflicts with Narcocultura and the Wars on Drugs and Terror.....	214
References.....	217
Vita	229

List of Excerpts

Excerpt 1.1 – <i>Es como cualquier otra música</i>	2
Excerpt 5.1 – <i>Questions about Reina Rivera’s pseudonym</i>	83
Excerpt 5.2 – <i>Question about Cinco Siete’s live videos</i>	86
Excerpt 5.3 – <i>“Por mamones”</i>	87
Excerpt 5.4 – <i>El Chapo vs. Trump</i>	89
Excerpt 5.5 – <i>Cinco takes down his photos</i>	95
Excerpt 5.6 – <i>Cinco’s reasons for taking down photos</i>	96
Excerpt 5.7 – <i>“Aparentar ser pesado”</i>	102
Excerpt 5.8 – <i>Luis Coronel’s pseudonym</i>	103
Excerpt 5.9 – <i>Edgar Quintero’s pseudonym</i>	105
Excerpt 5.10 – <i>“Los Bukanas de Culiacán” are actually from L.A.</i>	106
Excerpt 5.11 – <i>¿Por qué aparentar ser pesados?</i>	107
Excerpt 5.12 – <i>“Puro pájaro nalgón”</i>	108
Excerpt 5.13 – <i>Los de abajo se te van a querer subir</i>	110
Excerpt 5.14 – <i>Me quisieron tirar</i>	111
Excerpt 5.15 – <i>El hijo del Chapo ya no es jefe</i>	111
Excerpt 5.16 – <i>Los hiqué</i>	112
Excerpt 6.1 – <i>Buchones</i>	114
Excerpt 6.2 – <i>Buchonas, hoes, and fresas</i>	116
Excerpt 6.3 – <i>What women want</i>	125
Excerpt 6.4 – <i>Fotos para impresionar</i>	127
Excerpt 6.3 – <i>“Tengo con qué”</i>	129
Excerpt 6.4 – <i>“Enseñar que tienes con qué”</i>	129
Excerpt 6.5 – <i>“Qué van a decir las plebas?”</i>	130
Excerpt 6.6 – <i>What morras like</i>	131
Excerpt 6.7 – <i>What women like</i>	131
Excerpt 6.8 – <i>Andar con todo</i>	132
Excerpt 7.1 – <i>Andar al cien</i>	136
Excerpt 7.2 – <i>Rifársela</i>	137
Excerpt 7.3 – <i>“Andar al cien con la gente”</i>	140
Excerpt 7.4 – <i>Corridos are misunderstood</i>	141

Excerpt 7.5 – <i>Andar al tiro</i>	142
Excerpt 7.6 – <i>Andar activado</i>	144
Excerpt 7.7 – <i>Andamos al cien</i>	146
Excerpt 7.8 – <i>Bodyguards</i>	150
Excerpt 7.9 – <i>Nunca ando solo</i>	1511
Excerpt 8.1 – <i>Killing a sangre fría</i>	156
Excerpt 8.2 – <i>La diferencia</i>	156
Excerpt 8.3 – <i>Women and children</i>	157
Excerpt 8.4 – <i>Nomás de mamones</i>	171
Excerpt 8.5 – <i>El movimiento</i>	173
Excerpt 8.6 – <i>Los contras no son gente</i>	174
Excerpt 8.7 – <i>Real power</i>	175

List of Illustrations

Illustration 5.1 – “El Chapo” as President	90
Illustration 5.2 – Trump tweets about El Chapo	91
Illustration 5.3 – El Chapo tweets about Trump	92
Illustration 5.4 – El Chapo tweets back at Trump	92
Illustration 5.5 – <i>Las Chakalozas</i> opening graphics	98
Illustration 6.1 – DVD covers for <i>Sin Tetas/Sin Pechos no Hay Paraíso</i> (2006).....	121
Illustration 6.2 – Ads for <i>Sin Senos no Hay Paraiso</i> and <i>Las Muñecas de la Mafia</i>	121
Illustration 6.3 – Women in Los Buchones de Culiacán and El Komander videos.....	124
Illustration 6.4 – User shares video with entire Jorge Santacruz album.....	134
Illustration 7.1– User shares meme to “Corridos al Millón”	145
Illustration 8.1 – User shares lyrics to “Somos Efectivos”	155
Illustration 8.2 – “El Niño Sicario” was recurrently shared by various users	159
Illustration 8.3 – Image by Lidia Porter used as meme	160
Illustration 8.4 – Image by Clayton Haugen used in Sicarias Cabronas meme.....	161
Illustration 8.5 – Image by Clayton Haugen used in Sicarias Cabronas meme.....	162
Illustration 8.6 - Juana “La Peque”	163
Illustration 8.7 - Melissa “La China” Calderón	163
Illustration 8.8 – Fernanda Castillo meme.....	165
Illustration 8.9 – Fernanda Castillo meme.....	165
Illustration 8.10 – Kate del Castillo meme	165
Illustration 8.11 – Fernanda Castillo meme.....	165
Illustration 8.12 – Fernanda Castillo meme.....	165
Illustration 8.13 – Kate del Castillo meme	165
Illustration 8.14 – Snip of “Sicarias Cabronas” image timeline	166
Illustration 8.15 – “Sicarias Cabronas” memes with the same message.....	167
Illustrations 8.16 through 8.19.....	170
Illustration 8.20 – “If you’re not a good killer then you’re a good kill”.....	170
Illustration 8.21 – User shares fan-made video for “El Comandante Metro 4”.....	179
Illustration 8.22 – Video and lyrics for “El Cargo del Cholo Vago” recurrently shared to group	181

List of Lyrics

Lyrics 1.1 – “ <i>El Residente</i> ”	3
Lyrics 1.2 – “ <i>El Panu</i> ”	4
Lyrics 1.3 - “ <i>Alterado Loco Atravesado</i> ”	11
Lyrics 6.2 – “ <i>Gente del Pareja</i> ”	128
Lyrics 6.3 – “ <i>El Diablo</i> ”	128
Lyrics 7.1 – “ <i>Carteles Unidos</i> ”	139
Lyrics 7.2 – “ <i>Somos Efectivos</i> ”	143
Lyrics 7.3 – “ <i>El de los Lentos Carrera</i> ”	147
Lyrics 7.4 – “ <i>Así es la Vida</i> ”	148
Lyrics 7.5 – “ <i>100 Casquillos</i> ”	149
Lyrics 7.6 – “ <i>El Calaca</i> ”	152
Lyrics 8.1 – “ <i>El Niño Sicario</i> ”	158
Lyrics 8.1 – “ <i>Tumbando Contrás</i> ”	174
Lyrics 8.2 – “ <i>El Comandante Metro 4</i> ”	178
Lyrics 8.3 – “ <i>El Cargo del Cholo Vago</i> ”	180
Lyrics 9.1 – “ <i>El Niño Sicario</i> ”	190
Lyrics 9.2 – <i>Heavy in the Game and El Niño Sicario Lyrics Comparison</i>	192

List of Tables

Table 4.1 – <i>Data Points for Facebook Groups Included in the Study</i>	75
Table 4.1 – <i>Data Points for Participants in the Study</i>	77

Introduction

This dissertation paints a rich picture of how narcocultura is an important reference point in the ways in which many Latinxs make sense of the world. My work is meant capture the complexity of narcocultura, by looking at cultural production and interactions of Latinx Facebook users who coalesce around narcocultura-oriented groups in the online platform. I conducted this study as an online ethnography to research how and why some Latinxs use elements of narcocultura artifacts in the construction of their identities. The theoretical framework that underpinned the study from its inception is Latinx Critical Theory or LatCrit. Identity theory is another theoretical perspective that I am using in order to recognize and explain the identity work of participants. My work is guided by a tension between the ways in which narcocultura can be both engaging repulsive. Besides being the starting point of inquiry, this tension is a central meaning-making tool for the analysis. Ultimately, my academic goal for this dissertation is to produce knowledge about the ways in which Latinx Facebook users who participate in these groups interweave meaningful elements of narcocultura into their online self-representations and to humanize them. My aim is for this knowledge to have implications for practitioners of critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Furthermore, I mean for this dissertation to illustrate the complexities of online narco-cultural production in depth and in rich detail, and to connect my findings to contemporary studies of social science researchers that are trying to understand and explain the complex meaning making processes inherent to narcocultura.

Chapter 1: Why would anyone want to act like a narco?

Excerpt 1.1 – *Es como cualquier otra música*

Participant	Text as typed ¹	Text translated
Cinco Siete	Tu nmas oie los corridos kmpa Ai t dicen todo	Tú nada más oye los corridos compa, ahí te dicen todo
Emiliano	Y dicen la verdad?	Y dicen la verdad?
Cinco Siete	Aguebo	A huevo
Emiliano	Cual me recomiendas que oiga para informarme?	Cuál me recomiendas que oiga para informarme?
Cinco Siete	Susedio nlos mochis	“Sucedió en los Mochis”
Emiliano	Ese si lo tengo ubicado es el de la captura del chapo	Ese sí lo tengo ubicado, es el de la captura del Chapo
Cinco Siete	Ei	Si
Emiliano	Cual otro?	Cuál otro?
Cinco Siete	El resident	“El Residente”
Emiliano	Ese de quien es?	Ese de quién es?
Cinco Siete	Tmb d los kuates El panu	También de Los Cuates [de Sinaloa]... “El Panu”
Emiliano	Jajaja ya los estoy buscando	Jajaja ya los estoy buscando
Cinco Siete	Alcien	Al cien!
Emiliano	Algo mas que pienses que es importante que la gente sepa acerca del narcotráfico, los corridos? O la gente que los escuchamos?	Algo más que pienses que es importante que la gente sepa acerca del narcotráfico, los corridos, o la gente que los escuchamos?
Cinco Siete	Pz k no lagan d pdo	Pues que no la hagan de pedo
Emiliano	Quiénes? Por qué o que? Jajaja no entiendo	Quiénes? Por qué o qué? jajaja no entiendo
Cinco Siete	K es nrmal Es kmo cualkier otra musica	Que es normal, es como cualquier otra música
Emiliano	Yo no recuerdo que en despacito cortaran cabezas cabrón seguro que es como cualquier otra?	Yo no recuerdo que en “Despacito” cortaran cabezas cabrón, seguro que es como cualquier otra?
Cinco Siete	Pajajajaj es k son corridos proibidos No mmds kmpa	Jajaja es que son corridos prohibidos, no mamadas compa
Emiliano	Ves! No es como cualquier otra!	Ves! No es como cualquier otra!
Cinco Siete	Pajajaja pz no	Jajaja pues no

This excerpt is the transcript of a Facebook messenger conversation with Cinco Siete², one of the participants in this study. We are discussing narcocorridos (folkloric ballads that

¹ I include the original text/speak on all conversation excerpts to genuinely depict the voices of participants.

² All the names of study participants are pseudonyms they selected themselves.

lyricize the exploits of narcotraffickers and their soldiers), and he is explaining that if I want to know what is going on in regards to the drug war in México, all I had to do is listen to these song. “Ahí te dicen todo” (“they tell you everything in there,”) he claimed, so I asked him if they “tell the truth?” (“dicen la verdad”). “A huevo!” he answered, using a popular Mexican vernacular way of using the word for “egg” to say “for sure”. Cinco suggested that I listen to a narcocorrido called “Sucedió en los Mochis” by band Los Cuates De Sinaloa, a song that recounts how notorious cartel de Sinaloa boss Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera, was captured by Mexican marines in the city of Los Mochis in 2016. I told Cinco I was familiar with that song and asked him to suggest another one. He recommended “El Residente” by the same band. Here are the lyrics to that song:

Lyrics 1.1 – “*El Residente*”

Original Lyrics

Ahora que soy residente voy a hacerme ciudadano, para elegir president y apoyar a mis hermanos. Y a los que están sin papeles, pues hay que echarles la mano. (Berrelleza, 2017a)

Translation

Now that I am a legal resident, I will become a citizen, so we can elect a president and help my brothers. We need to help the people that don't have papers.

Cinco also suggested that I listen to “El Panu” a song about the chief gunman for the Sinaloa Cartel, this narcocorrido references names of most of the leaders and soldiers for the cartel de Sinaloa, including Iván Archivaldo Guzmán, el Chapo's son (ZETA, 2016). Its lyrics are very different to the ones from “El Residente”:

Original Lyrics

Yo soy el Panu compa de Iván. También soy amigo del Chapo Guzmán. Yo soy del equipo, en mí pueden confiar. Pa’ lo que se ofrezca siempre he de accionar. Mi pistola al cinto no puedo olvidar. Tengo quien por mí se aviene a pelear (Berrelleza, 2017b).

Translation

I am el Panu, I’m friends with Iván. I’m also a friend of el Chapo Guzmán. Y am a trustworthy teammate. I’m up for any action. My pistol on my belt is something that I never leave behind. I have people willing to fight for me.

In contrast to “El Residente”, a song about a Latinx who that has obtain legal residency in the United States and now is looking forward to becoming a citizen to help elect someone that will help undocumented Latinxs, “El Panu” sings about how he leads an army of gunmen who fights for the Sinaloa cartel. These two songs are in the same album by Los Cuates de Sinaloa, and their contrasting lyrics represent the kind of tension that Cinco and I discuss immediately after. “What do you think is important for people to know about los corridos?” I asked him. “Que no la hagan de pedo” he answered, (“people shouldn’t make such a big deal about it”). When I asked him to clarify that answer, Cinco explained that narcocorridos are like any other type of music or “cualquier otra música”. “I don’t think ‘Despacito’ had any beheadings” I replied, referring to the most popular Spanish language song in the United States at the time, and to the often-gruesome pictures narcocorridos paint³ in their narratives. Cinco shared a digital laugh and admitted that, in some ways, no, narcocorridos are unlike any other type of music. By saying that these sogs are “corridos prohibidos” (forbidden corridos) and not “mamadas” (phony things), Cinco underscored the seriousness and realness that narcocorridos are attributed, illustrated by

³ See for example “Los Sanguinarios del M1” by band Los Bukanas de Cuiliacán.

the fact that the Mexican government forbids their broadcast via radio waves or for artists to perform them in concert without paying a fine (Gobierno del Estado de Sinaloa, 2011).

It is clear to me that Cinco found narcocorridos to be life affirming, and utilized them as sources of information and discourse to construct his worldview. In this dissertation, I study emerging forms of transnational “narcocultura”, the cultural production that emerges from the world of transcontinental narco-trafficking. I met Cinco in a Facebook group that coalesced around narcocultura, where I “hung out” for over a year; I held months-long conversations with some of the group’s participants using Facebook’s Messenger, hoping to elucidate upon the ways in which they use narcocultura as cultural capital for identity work. So when Cinco Siete told me that narcocorridos were “como cualquier otra” type of music, I had immersed myself in the genre and conducted enough research on the subject to partially agree with him. Narcocorridos are like any other music because they often feel empowering and culturally affirming, but they are different from other types of music, because they are closely associated to international crime syndicates, to which they sing praises.

The two songs that Cinco wanted me to listen to illustrate this conflict, which I have personally experienced with narcocorridos. They are sometimes really fun to listen to, they use the same type of beat that every kid who went to school in México was taught how to dance for the danza folklórica “bailables” (folkloric dance numbers made to reinforce Mexican identity in schools, prepared from months and performed in front of crowds of proud parents). Their lyrics sometimes read like an action movie, where heroes get into gunfights, drive fast cars, and always get the girl. However, they are also songs about drug trafficking, kidnaping, torture, they are

profoundly misogynistic, and sung by artists who are sometimes bankrolled by the narcos⁴ themselves.

Attraction and Repulsion

I have experience with the ways in which criminal syndicate use narcocorridos as a terroristic tool. In 2008, I was working in the Ciudad Juárez Municipal Police, and the local delegation of the Red Cross. Radios for both agencies were rudimentary, and their frequencies were easy to monitor and intervene; this meant that groups working for any of the warring cartels could not only listen to police communications, but could also send messages over the air for all emergency personnel to hear. The chief “sicario” (as media began to call cartel gunmen, in reference to the Sicarii assassins that targeted the Roman occupiers of Judea) of the Sinaloa Cartel in Juárez—later identified as former Municipal policeman Mario Núñez Meza (CNS, 2013)—had the moniker of “El Quitapuercos” (“the pig remover”). Every time a police agent was murdered, a corrido called “Quitapuercos en Chihuahua” would play over the Municipal Police radio frequencies. To this day, you can find the video of said narcocorrido on YouTube with 1.8 million views. Even as familiar as classic narcocorridos were to me, I had never experienced a guttural and adverse reaction listening to one until I listened to “El Quitapuercos”. I suddenly found myself hating all narcocorridos, the corridistas, and their audiences alike. It wasn’t until years later, after emigrating to the United States and serving in the U.S Military, that my understanding of narcocorridos nuanced and I began enjoying them again⁵.

This personal tension between appreciation and intense dislike of narcocultura is at the center of my motives to study it. If transitional crime organizations like the Sinaloa cartel are

⁴ I use “narco” and “narcos” as a general description for the heads of the transnational drug cartels, lower-level traffickers, and cartel soldiers.

⁵ I explain this process in the positionality section.

having police officers killed and writing songs about it, why would young people want to be, talk like, look like, act like narcos? In this dissertation, I attempt to bring fellow academics and policy analysts along as I attempt to answer the question. The tension is s an entryway for outsiders to understand the young people that consume narcocultura. I am not the only person that is conflicted by an internal coexistence of attraction and repulsion to narco-cultural artifacts. In illustrating the answers to this conflict, I seek to help others understand narcocultura, a phenomenon that is often seen as socially deviant. However, focusing exclusively on the deviance keeps us from imagining ways in which narcocultura could be a pedagogical tool. By reframing the deviance in relationship with the attractiveness of narcocultura, I center my work on the tension, presuming that using it in identity work makes sense to many Latinxs, and trying to elucidate their reasons.

What is narcocultura?

The origins of the term narcocultura are hard to pinpoint, and its use in social sciences literature is evolving. Narcocultura can be broadly defined as a form of cultural capital centered on the aesthetics, music, and mythology that surrounds narcotrafficking in Colombia, México, and the United States. Narcocultura takes many forms; for example, one of the artifacts most broadcasted in Colombia are the narco-themed “novelas” (soap-operas), these are teleseries that dramatize the lives of prominent Colombian narcotraffickers (Wilches, 2014). In México, songs known as “narcocorridos” are the oldest, best-known, and most broadcasted artifacts (Cabañas, 2014; Schwartz, 2015). In the United States, Spanish-language broadcasting companies like Univision and Telemundo, are currently using the Colombian-style narco-novela format to produce teleseries about Mexican narcotraffickers, giving way to a new age of transnational, mainstreamed narcocultura.

Corridos, the musical genre form which narcocorridos borrow their style, are a folkloric, narrative musical genre of great significance for Mexican heritage, one that has been historically associated with the land struggles that led to the Mexican Revolution (Héau de Giménez, 1991), and considered as one of the most representative elements of Mexican identity (Avitia, 1997). Scholars like Avitia (1997) and Héau de Giménez (1991) go as far as to consider these storytelling songs as non-official national emblems (each state in México, for example, has its own government-sanctioned corrido). The narcocorrido had been, until the advent of the internet, a corrido subgenre, one that told the exploits of the “narcos”, that is, the drug traffickers and their soldiers. These songs remitted their audiences to stories of contraband, where the poor—but cunning—successfully challenged the authoritative Mexican State’s military and law enforcement. In narcocorrido narratives, narcos cheat the authorities, defeating the brute force of the corrupt State through craftiness (Noe, 2009). For decades, they recorded and produced with limited budgets and technology, and distributed mostly by street vendors because the mainstream distribution, broadcasting, and live performance of narcocorridos has long been outlawed by Federal and state governments in México. Artists who recorded and distributed mainstream label records with narcocorridos had to do so using crafty lyrics that only made allusions to known narco traffickers—never mentioning them by name—and used elaborate metaphors and euphemisms to direct the imagination of their audiences (see for example Los Tigres del Norte, 1974, 1997, 2002).

Fast-forward 50 years, and many of the Narcocorridos of the 21st century are filled with abject violence, their lyrics portray deadly clashes between rival cartels or against the armed forces of the State, and are often accompanied by video renderings, which sometimes depict sexual assaults, kidnappings, and beheadings. Long-gone are the days of elaborate metaphors,

today, corridistas (corrido singers) sing the praises of narco traffickers using their first and last names, presenting to their audience with hypermasculine (Hunnicuttt & Andrews, 2009), hyper-materialistic (Richardson & Scott, 2002), misogynist, and hedonistic roles. The themes, roles, and narratives that shape narcocorridos extend to other forms of narcocultura, such as series and movies, which are mostly consumed via digital platforms such as Netflix and YouTube, where State censorship is much less prevalent.

So, going back to Cinco Siete (or Cinco, as I refer to him throughout this dissertation), he was probably making a comment about how his enjoyment of narcocorridos had parallels to others' enjoyment of different musical genres (such as hip-hop, country, etc.) and that perhaps their crime-orientation was a secondary type of appeal. When I mentioned that I partially agreed with that it was to clarify that narcocorridos have parallels with other types of music. Consider gangsta rap and heavy metal for example; these are genres defined by their rebelliousness, which involve lyrical performances that fly in the face of political, social, and even musical correctness, and are often represented by artists who embody gendered, hypermasculine roles (especially in the case of gangsta rap), who in their narratives interact with objectified feminine characters; all the features I would describe as at the core of narcocorrido narratives. However, I could not help but think that Cinco's statement was also accurate in that Narcocorridos are like any other music because, in the United States, they are programmed to play openly by radio stations across the country, and digital television channels run narcocorrido videos on public airwaves. The narcocorrido industry has also spawned at least one major record label: "Twiins Culiacán". This Los Angeles-based corporation produced most of the songs that are referenced to in this study, and conceived the enterprise known as the "Movimiento Alterado", to which the Facebook group I participated in—"La Plebada Alterada"—owes its name.

The phrase “plebada alterada” is unique to Mexican narcocultura. “Plebada” is a colloquialism that can be traced to the Mexican state of Sinaloa; the word is used to refer to young people, a “plebe” is a young man, and a “pleba” is a young woman. The term derives from “la plebe” which is used in Mexican Spanish to refer to an uneducated, unrefined underclass that serves the upper echelons of society. I find that Sinaloan dialect has become a way of identifying as a narcocultura-insider for many Latinxs, especially those of Mexican heritage, and will discuss this in more depth in subsequent chapters. It is relevant to point out that Sinaloa and Culiacán—the state capital—in particular, are at the mythological center of Mexican narcocultura.

It is illustrative that Twins Culiacán, for example, may be based in L.A., but was branded as originating in Culiacán. The Valenzuela brothers, identical twins who own the record label, have applied this same type of branding to at least two of the bands they produce: “Los Bukanas de Culiacán” and “Los Buchones de Culiacán,” L.A.-based bands, whose members are U.S. born. It was the Valenzuela brothers who coined the phrase “Movimiento Alterado” (“altered movement”) to brand their expanding enterprise of narcocultura productions. “Alterado” is an attribute continually used in narcocorrido lyrics to describe the altered mental state in which the protagonists claim to be, derived—sometimes tacitly, others very explicitly—from drug use. One such example can be found in the song “Alterado Loco Atravesado” by Rogelio Martinez:

Lyrics 1.3 - “*Alterado Loco Atravesado*”

Original Lyrics

El blindaje lo protege, granadas y cuernos y chaleco antibalas. Bien preparados atacan, responden. La guerra es de carrera larga. Se considera alterado, loco, atravesado, de mentalidad violenta. Arremanga al que se cruce, levanta y tortura, veneno le fluye por todas las venas (Martínez, 2010).

Translation

Armor protects him, grenades and machine guns, and a bulletproof vest. Well prepared they attack, respond. War is a long endeavor race. He is considered to be altered, crazy, crossed, of violent mentality. He kills whoever crosses him, kidnaps and tortures, poison flows through his veins.

Consequently, to label something as “alterado” in this context, is to identify it as part of the type of narcocultura artifacts Twins produces, and at some point “la plebada alterada” emerged as a self-applied label that young consumers of these products gave themselves, spawning several Facebook groups with the same name, online communities populated by like-minded Latinxs who consider themselves insiders of the Movimiento Alterado. I selected two such groups as sites for the digital ethnography that shaped this dissertation. I had a complicated relationship with them in general, there were days when it was impossible for me to immerse myself in narcocultura without feeling like everything it represents and reproduces is violent, but there were also the days when I listened to narcocorridos with pleasure. I intend to elucidate upon this complex academic and personal relationship with narcocultura by presenting my positionality and background.

Academic Goals of the Dissertation

In terms of social theory, dissertation has the objective to produce, cultivate, and connect knowledge about the ways in which Latinx Facebook users who participate in narcocultura-oriented Facebook groups make sense of their identity work in the age of the embodied internet, and to elucidate cultural elements of narcocultura appropriated into their online personas. The study contributes to the growing body of scholarly work meant to criticize the relations of power that shape the so-called “war on drugs” (Cabañas, 2014) or “drug-war” (González, 2017). This means that it connects to other recent academic studies about narcocultura. These studies—which are outlined in the literature review—have also elucidated the ways in which narcocultura has become an important meaning-making tool for Latinxs.

Throughout the analysis, I strive to illustrate the mainstreaming of narcocultura as a reservoir for cultural production, a trove of semiotic resources to make sense of one’s world. I argue that my exercise in understanding how people use cultural elements of narcocultura in their identity work on Facebook is important for those working in education because it can inform critical pedagogical practices that use narcocultura in culturally sustaining ways that subvert hegemonies, oppression, and develop learners’ critical consciousness. This is the most important link my study has to the domains of learning and culture, because in many respects, participants in my study were learning and adapting their perceived place in the world through the lens of narcocultura.

Overview of the Dissertation

I have divided the dissertation into 10 chapters. This introductory chapter, as I have illustrated, is meant to help readers gain an understanding of what narcocultura means, in the context of the dissertation, as well as to obtain insight on my perspectives about the phenomenon and why I study it. This study looks at very specific products of narcocultura, which are

televised, broadcast over radio waves, and reproduced in the internet, but are not to be regarded as the complete spectrum of narco-cultural production. Thus, the following section provides a brief overview of the sociocultural significance of corrido music (the folkloric music genre most closely related to narcocultura), a condensed history of the artifact forms narcocultura has taken, as well as a summarized account of how it is becoming more mainstream, in particular, within the United States. This, I argue, provides Latinx youth access to a developing array of narco-oriented identities (like the *pesado*, or the *sicario*), many of which emerged in conversations with study participants, and are explained in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 consists of a literature review that summarizes qualitative research that explores the topics of hip-hop culture and narcocultura. The review illustrates the ways in which I began to develop an understanding of the ways in which music and television can be researched ethnographically. I review contemporary academic work about narco-cultural production, which help clarify the ways in which narcocorridos are at the center of many young Latinxs sense of cultural identity, and present concepts that are key to understanding narcocultura. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework for my work, in it I explain how Latinx Critical Theory (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valdés, 1998) or LatCrit is the overarching framework that allowed me to utilize methods that I found were necessary in facilitating the study. I cite Hine's (2015) work regarding the ways in which the internet is embedded into our everyday lives in such an omnipresent manner that we experience as embodied, and Identity theory (Davis, 2014, 2016; Burke & Stets, 2015) as content specific theoretical perspective in order to recognize and explain identity work.

Chapter 4 is the methods chapter. It begins by presenting my positionality as a researcher, but also as soldier. In this chapter I discuss how the convergence of these perspectives nuances

my understanding of narcocultura and the ethical challenges I faced in studying it. For the methodology, I draw heavily on the work of Hine (2015, 2016) to explain how this study was an online ethnography, also, I portray the methods for collecting and analyzing data, and how I selected the Facebook groups that became sites of study, and the processes of individual participant selection. Participants are depicted in rich detail in Chapter 5 “Retratos of the Participants”, in this chapter, I introduce each of the participants and explain their multiple dimensions, and the ways in which I made sense of our conversations and relationships. Additionally, I explain participants’ recurring ways of explaining the distinctiveness of narcocultura identities, to help readers understand the different relationships I developed with different participants and the ways in which those differences influenced data analysis.

Starting in Chapter 6, I begin presenting and unpacking the codes I used to make sense of the data that emerged while I participated in the Facebook groups and as I conversed with participants. I show how gender identities and discourses intersect with class and how these intersections are important. I also provide historical background and sociocultural contexts for the codes that emerged. Beginning in this chapter, I present and analyze narcocorrido lyrical imagery, to illustrate the ways in which these songs are central in producing and reproducing the coded language of narcocultura, and in popularizing the use of particular code words or phrases. Chapter 7 explains how participants in this study consistently referred to themselves by pluralizing the verb “andar” (“to walk”, i.e. “aquí andamos”) something I take to mean something closely resembling hip-hop’s use of the expression “to roll with”. Therefore, in said chapter, I illustrate the ways in which participants used the term “andar” and “andamos” to assert cultural belonging. This analysis leads into the unpacking of sicario-related meanings of the many forms of “andar” in Chapter 8, where I account for the crime-centered identities that emerged in

the study. These identities are portrayed in the narrative of the chapter as they emerged in the conversations with participants. I present these conversations followed by their analysis, and I illustrate them using narcocorrido lyrics, and images obtained from the Facebook groups in which I participated in. Following the analysis and illustration of criminal-centered identities. I discuss how these identities embody and exemplify the legitimization of violence, crime, and dehumanization in Chapter 8.

Multi-dimensional discussions of the findings can be found in Chapter 9, where I connect the discourses about violence embedded in crime-centered narratives with enduring discourses of race, class, and gender in Mexican society. I illustrate the intersections of sicario identities with American militarism, with my own sense of identity as a member of the U.S. military, as well as aspects of hegemonic forms of masculinity. I also discuss the limitations of the study in this chapter, because I consider that these were characterized by an over-reliance on precisely these forms of masculinity. I summarize my findings in Chapter 10, where I explain how subversive identities like the ones found in narcocultura have implications for critical educators, and urge readers to imagine ways in which we can use narcocultura as part of critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Finally, I address the personal tension that provides the through line for the dissertation by explaining how I understand my own sense of identity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter consists of a literature review that summarizes qualitative research that explores the topics of hip-hop culture and narcocultura. The works cited come from peer-reviewed academic journals and doctoral dissertations; I have arranged these in ways that illustrate how narcocorridos parallel the gangsta rap (Rosen & Marks, 1999) phenomenon in more than one way. These two musical genres are shown to share discursive characteristics and societal origins. Rap is shown to have a long-standing discursive conflict with social institutions, presented as a source of life-affirming narratives and discourse for many racialized youth, and as a cultural repository of crime-oriented Black identities preoccupied with getting rich or die trying. These are characteristics that narcocorridos mirror; the reproduction of narco-oriented identities in commodified forms of narcocultura is shown to be underpinned by a profound nihilism and a preoccupation with death.

The review of this literature illustrates the ways in which I began to develop an understanding how music and television can be researched ethnographically. These were a point of departure in an attempt to understand the investigative paths that critical scholars have undertaken in order to understand the ways in which crime-oriented identities are commodified and reproduced in Black communities, how hip-hop culture has been used to deconstruct Black youths' identity work (Davis, 2016; Burke & Stets, 2015), and to develop my own study about how narcocultura has become both a commodity and a mainstay of Latinx cultural capital. In a subsequent section, I review contemporary academic work about narco-cultural production, which has used its artifacts as sources of data. These works help clarify the ways in which narcocorridos are at the center of many young Latinxs sense of cultural identity, and also present

concepts that are key to understanding narcocultura: the narcosphere (González, 2017), imagined narcoscapes (Cabañas, 2014), and narcoviolencia (Halvey, 2018).

Hip-Hop Culture as Cultural Capital for Black Youth

Bourdieu (1973) explained that we often utilize “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1973), or prefabricated meanings, to position ourselves and others in a particular status hierarchy within our societies. Cultural capital therefore plays a central role in how we construct self (and social) identities, as well as community, which are the basis for both social inclusion and exclusion. In this context, the process of creating meaningful semiotics in the construction of identity is known as “production” (Bourdieu, 1973). Then “reproduction” is used to make reference to the ways in which these meanings, once constructed, replicate throughout societies.

Hip-hop, for example, has been described as a “reservoir of Black youth production” that “illustrates Black youth agency” (Watkins, 1998, p. 65). In “Keepin’ it Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture, and Black Identity” Clay (2003) defines hip-hop as a form of cultural capital that Black youths enact in everyday settings, using it as criteria for setting up exclusionary margins of legitimacy and authenticity of Black identities. This definition emerged from an ethnographic study the author conducted while situated in an inner city youth center in northern California. Clay describes the site as an environment where young boys and girls felt under constant peer-pressure to “have the right clothes, listen to the right music, and speak the right language –all of which were based on hip-hop” (p. 1351). Here, the author found that to a great extent, Black youth identity was being formed and negotiated through hip-hop culture, which also permeated everyday interactions among the Black youths that frequented the center, and the mediation of their relationship to adults.

Hip-hop culture can be described as the rich cultural web and repository of significance that has hip-hop music at its core. Hip-hop is a form of lyrical art that emerged in the 1970s in the South Bronx according to Martinez (1997) and Oliver (2006). Rap music is probably the most popular sub-genre of hip-hop, and as Rosen and Marks (1999) explain, in the 1980s and 90s, Los Angeles based rappers such as Tupac Shakur engendered its “gangsta” form, which shifted hip-hop’s emphasis from denouncing the decay of the inner cities and social consciousness raising, to glorifying the “thug life”, a lifestyle of crime, decadence and ostentatious wealth, which according to Traber (2012) proved extremely lucrative for the artists.

This commodified form of hip-hop culture is what Clay (2003) describes participants in the study as reproducing. Clay reports that young Black men and women enacted hip-hop identities at some level on a regular basis. The more explicit cultural signifiers consisted of gender coded fashion, gestures, and attitudes; males were expected to be sexually aggressive and females enacted the hyper-sexualized characteristics of women in hip-hop videos. The author found these performances evocative of the historical legacy that, according to Collins (1990) constructs Black women’s sexually objectified identity in relation to others, the “institutional backdrop for a range of interpersonal relationships that Black women currently have with Black men, whites, and one another” (p. 179).

Clay (2003) explains that “what is important here is that if hip-hop is indeed the Blackest culture [...] and is the overwhelming representation of what it means to be a Black youth [...] then these markers of performance are significant because all Black youth are encouraged to adhere to them to be accepted as authentically Black” (p. 1355). She illustrates this assertion by the following case:

Darin was an African American boy that had yet to master the tools necessary to *keep it real*. In addition to his glasses, which were a source of teasing at the center (he was ridiculed for his “nerdy” look), Darin went to one of the schools that require uniforms, which he often wore. Darin frequently fought for attention from others but rarely received positive responses. Negative responses seemed to also stem from his inability to master the tools of performance –the right clothes, the controlled coolness in everyday interactions, and the right kind of gestures. (Clay, 2003, p. 1355)

Clay (2003) offers an ethnographic account of how “struggles around popularity and Black identity at the center [...] were based on several key factors: performance of hip-hop culture being the primary one” (p. 1355). Black youth used hip-hop culture as capital to denote the status hierarchies within their peer groups; the use of fashion, gestures, language, and the enactment of identities established popularity, instituted mechanisms of peer-support support and encouragement, and ultimately validated one’s Blackness. The author explains: “the ability to garner most of the room’s attention throughout [one’s] performance, along with [one’s] overall manner and style of dress, act as the cultural capital needed to keep it real among [one’s] Black peers” (p. 1352). Music and video media emerged in the study as central to these processes of social identification, as they provide easily accessible musical, linguistic, aesthetic and thematic codes for hip-hop culture.

Clay (2003) also recounts how the introduction of hip-hop paralleled the beginning of the so-called *Reagan era*, describing it as a period of rampaging capitalism, characterized by the deindustrialization of American cities, where Blacks and Latinos –having been vocationally channeled into now obsolescent trades- found hope and recognition in the stories being told through rap. It was rappers’ particular ability to portray stories as if they stemmed from personal

experience that helped them captivate a young, marginalized audience. The subsequent influx of drugs into decaying post-industrial American cities, meant that rap's stories –and therefore the cultural capital they provide to their audiences- quickly and increasingly began to be defined by the markets drug-dealers inhabited: first the block, then the hood, and finally the streets.

In “The Streets: An Alternative Black Male Socialization Institution”, Oliver (2006) explains that street identities are characterized by patterns of behavior ritually expressed in a manner associated with urban street culture such as “pimps, players, hustlers, and street women which are prominent in rap and hip hop videos and in the public personas that many rap and hip hop artists present for public consumption” (p. 924). The author asserts that over the past two decades rap in general has glamorized America's obsession with achieving status through material acquisition. Gangsta rap pursues and ritualizes an alternate route to material and social success for an underclass of Black males; it goes beyond describing the rage and anger that exist in “the ghetto”, to commend the extreme means that some are willing to use to transcend poverty and hopelessness. Gangsta rap reflects its producers' and reproducers' misogynistic attitudes (Kitwana, 2002; Pough, 2004). The genre promotes street-oriented manhood roles, in which men achieve significance as “gangstas”, “playas” and “ballas” (Oliver, 2006, p. 926), that is, characters who deal drugs and engage in other criminal activity as a means of achieving transcendence, the author explains:

The cumulative effects of intergenerational exposure to historical and contemporary patterns of racial and gender oppression directed against Black males has served as a catalyst leading many marginalized Black males to socially construct masculine identities that place emphasis on toughness, sexual conquest, and street hustling as a means of coping [...] and transcending. [...] Indeed, individual and collective perceptions of

systematic exclusion from the conventional means of achieving identity and status as a man within the legitimate opportunity structure, along with individual-level variation in access to supportive family and community support, has had the effect of enhancing the attraction and institutionalization of the streets as an alternative setting to pursue personal and social significance. (Oliver, 2006, p. 921)

Oliver also suggests that, unlike previous generations of lower and working-class Black men and women—who learned the content of urban street culture socialization by physically observing and emulating the attitudes and behavior of seasoned players, hustlers, and their female counterparts—contemporary Black youths are socialized into this culture through exposure to commodified products, that is, they are learning the behaviors associated with the streets from hip-hop music videos and gangsta films, which are reinforced by rap lyrics and videos that glorify life in the streets, night clubs, and parties. In “I See Death Around the Corner: Nihilism in Rap Music”, Kubrin (2005) makes an extensive review of how these street identities are weaved into the narratives of gangsta rap lyrics by engaging in content analysis with over 400 songs on rap albums published between 1992 and 2000.

Kubrin (2005) concludes that from the perspective of gangsta rappers like Snoop Dog, Master P, Coolio, Notorious B.I.G., and DMX, the only things more prevalent in the marginalized Black neighborhoods than poverty, family disruption, and limited opportunities, are violence and death. According to Kubrin, one in four songs referenced at least one of the themes that the author identifies with nihilism: “bleak surroundings with little hope, pervasive violence in the ghetto, and preoccupation with death and dying” (p. 444), this leads the author to assert that nihilism comprises an important part of the street identities. This is a conclusion shared by

Oliver (2006) who explains that “gangsta rap is about existing on the margins of American society” (p. 925) where success has to alternatively pursued.

These alternatives, which vindicate crime and violence, gain relevance if we consider Sullivan’s (2003) findings about many Black teenagers’ outlook of rap music as life affirming. In “Rap and race: It’s got a nice beat, but what about the message?”, the author presents findings from a survey of 51 adolescents in a Midwestern city of the U.S. Sullivan explored the interpretations of rap music that these young people had and found that, in comparison to their non-Black peers, Black youths were more likely to consider the genre life-affirming, or that rap was truthful and taught them about life. The author describes these young Black men and women as far more committed to rap than their non-Black counterparts (even non-Black participants that self-reported listening to the genre).

Sullivan asked participants in said study about the ways in which rap had affected their lives, the author found that while both groups (Black and non-Black participants) seemed to have favorable opinions of rap music, its reported significance for their everyday lives and identity varied by race. Black adolescents, for example, could easily name a multitude of rap artists, were more inclined to wear clothes like those in rap videos, and utilize vocabulary and speech patterns similar to those of rappers. Sullivan’s (2003) findings seem to be consistent with Clay’s (2003), in that rap in particular—and hip-hop culture in general—constitutes cultural capital that Black youths enact in everyday settings; capital which primary repositories are, according to Oliver (2006), lucrative commodities such as gangsta rap albums and hip-hop videos, which present imagined (glorified) ideas of what it means to be a gangsta, a playa, etc., identities that men and women learn to weave into their identities and reproduce (at least partially) in their everyday lives. In the following section, I attempt to draw parallels between rap and hip-hop culture, and

narcocorridos and narcocultura, as mirroring repositories of cultural capital produced in the margins of American (the continent) societies.

Parallels between Hip-Hop Culture and Narcocultura

Narcocorridos are part of a musical genre that emerged in México during the second half of the 20th century; they are songs that explicitly depict the violent exploits of narcotraffickers; their authors and interpreters sometimes being referred to as corridistas (Morrison, 2008). Furthermore, Morrison (2008) explains that “keeping it real” (p.392) is just as important to narco-corridistas as it is to gangsta rappers (in portraying narco life and depicting life in “the ghetto”, respectively). Corridistas in fact portray themselves as singers of “la pura verdad” (los Tigres del Norte, 1997)—nothing but the truth—which validates Morrison’s connection of their shared motive to tell it like it is. Edberg (2004) further clarifies the parallels between gangsta rap and narcocorridos:

Like gangsta rap [...] narcocorridos often describe the exploits of, and situations faced by, those who are portrayed in some manner as outlaw heroes. As a basic presumption, the fact that these songs are in corrido form has significance with respect to their meaning and the meaning of the narcotrafficker character or persona they so often feature.

(Edberg, 2004, p. 259)

Narcocorridistas portray these outlaw heroes in similar ways to which gangsta rappers portray themselves, by reproducing misogynistic, nihilistic, and hedonistic gender roles through both lyrics and video. Edberg (2004) refers to these crime-oriented identities as “narcotrafficker cultural personas” (p. 260) that allow individuals to fashion their own self-image in the likeness of narcotraffickers, and allow others to identify them in those roles, “a richly coded task that

involves violence, highly visible demonstrations of wealth, a symbolic veneer of rejecting socially sanctioned pathways to success that have been closed off to subaltern groups” (p. 271).

Edberg’s positioning of subalternity at the center of narco-identity resonates with Oliver’s (2006) assertion that gangsta rap is produced from marginality. Narcocorridos are at the core of the web of significance that is narcocultura, much like rap is at the core of hip-hop culture. Generally, narcocultura narratives present drug traffickers (drug dealers are rarely referred to) in one of two ways. The first one is as generous men of humble—generally rural—background for whom the tall gates of the top echelon of our characteristically hierarchical society have opened up quickly, which has given their families access to country clubs, private schools and universities, and a world of other amenities few people in Mexico could hope to aspire to (Cerbino, 2011). The second one is as a hedonistic urban playboy, a cosmopolite thug, a ruthlessly violent entrepreneur (Edberg, 2004). This depictions portray the narcotrafficker as a viable alternative by which to pursue success, much like street identities do for Oliver (2006), and present identity archetypes that may constitute an appealing identity for Latinx youths who face “systematic exclusion from the conventional means of achieving identity and status as a man within the legitimate opportunity structure” (Oliver, 2006, p. 921) and consider the narcosphere (González, 2017) “as an alternative setting to pursue personal and social significance” (Oliver, 2006, p. 921).

Contemporary Academic Work about Narcocultura

This section of the literature review includes the scholarly work to which I connect my own research. Outlined are academic works that provide important theoretical tools to the analysis of the data collected throughout the study. One such concept is “appropriation” (de los Ríos, 2019; Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018) which describes the ways in which we can shift

negatively-valued meanings associated with certain language practices, attitudes, and behaviors to positively-valued ones. This is similar to the idea of “recontextualization” in Fairclough (2003), which is described in *Critical Discourse Analysis* as the way in which “elements of one social practice are appropriated and relocated in the context of another” (p. 222). Other concepts are “narcoscapes” (Cabañas, 2014), “the narcosphere” (González, 2017) and “narcoviencia” (Halvey, 2018), which are ways of explaining the complex webs of significance (Geertz, 1973) that give way to narcocultura in Latinx communities, most notably those of Mexican and Colombian heritage. These principles are key to understanding how we make sense of the political arrangements, social structures (Fairclough, 2015), and societal roles (Burke & Stets, 2015), and the inherent symbolic and physical violence (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994) of narocultura.

Youth, belonging, and narcocorridos

In “Los Músicos”: Mexican Corridos, the Aural Border, and the Evocative Musical Renderings of Transnational Youth” de los Ríos (2019) examines US-Mexican transnational youths’ engagement with narcocorridos. The author describes narcocorridos as a way in which US-Mexican transnational youths assert their resistance and sense of cultural belonging. This article stems from a ten-month long ethnographic study, in which the author worked closely with four focal students who were avid corridistas, and who connected the researcher with other adolescents who regularly listened to and performed corridos both inside and outside of the Southern California public high school they attended.

de los Ríos (2019) found that these youths who consumed and performed narcocorridos “engage critically, intellectually, and aesthetically” (p. 177) with these songs. For the author, this sense of cultural belonging meant that these youths were collectively “taking resistive stances

[...] to transnational dynamics of power that maintain and exacerbate poverty and exploitation in México” (p. 178) and “against White racial supremacy” (p. 179) in the United States. Despite the “deeply misogynist, violent, and heterosexist features of narcocorridos” (p. 194), the author argues, these songs “carry important transnational critiques and lessons on capitalism, state-sanctioned violence, and globalization” (p. 177) “that disrupt linguistic and racial hierarchies” (p. 182). The author posits that narcocorrido narratives portray a reading of the socio political realities of the communities that create them, and illustrate the ways in which young people negotiate these realities, and of these youths’ everyday resistance practices.

In other words, de los Ríos (2019) found that performing narcocorridos was the way in which these young artists “exerted a sense of belonging and enacted their cultural and performative agency” (p. 189). The author describes narcocorridos as narratives that provide youths with communicative repertoires that are useful in asserting resistant identities, especially to young people who share a “collective consciousness of their racialization and criminalization” (p. 192). The young corridistas whom de los Ríos worked with, appropriated narcocorridos in community-binding ways, playing them for audiences at their high school. The author explains that these songs allowed young men to position themselves as storytellers of their communities and to sing about “their world making, their social aspirations, and their ideals of justice” (p. 193). Even if, (as de los Ríos admits) the content of these songs was as oppressive as it was progressive, where their narratives resist some hegemonic discourses about classist and racist hierarchies, while reproducing violence and misogyny.

Appropriation in this context means to subvert oppressive ideologies by shifting the negatively valued meaning of language practices, attitudes, and behaviors (associated with the gender, racial, and classist stereotypes these ideologies produce) to positively valued ones (de los

Ríos, 2019; Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018). I will illustrate examples of appropriation throughout this dissertation, one example is the appropriation into participants' communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2012) of speech mannerisms characteristic of Spanish speakers in the Mexican state of Sinaloa (a vernacular I refer to as Sinaolan, Sinaloense or Sinaloan slang). This appropriation illustrates the subversion of Mexican linguistic hierarchies that stem from language ideologies about the purity of Spanish. These hierarchies place Sinaloense in a subaltern position, considering it defective or altered (Marimón-Llorca, 2015). In part, it was my obvious apprentice of Sinaloense status, which cemented my “parejita” moniker, whereas highly regarded Plebada Alterada members enjoyed “pariente” status. By using Sinaloense, participants in my study not only asserted their belonging to narcocultura-oriented groups, but also potentially attained prominence, depending on the genuineness of their performance. I exemplify this by bringing attention to the apprentice of Sinaloense status in which I believe some participants kept me, bestowing me with the title of “pareja” or “parejita”, whereas a highly-regarded movimiento alterado insider would have enjoyed “pariente” (blood relative) status. Pareja literally translates to “couple”, but in the context of these conversations, participants used it to call me partner (or little partner in the case of “parejita”). “Pareja” is what police agents in México usually call each other and their involvement in organized crime (at least narratively) is widespread, so the term has become a mainstay of narcocorrido lyrics.

The narcosphere and imagined narcoscapes

Reading the Narcosphere: A Queer Hemispheric Critique of Narco Cultural Production is a dissertation by González (2017) in which the author examines “the ways in which individuals and/or groups engage with the relationship between the political and cultural affairs of [...] narco cultural politics” (p. 15). “Narcosphere” is how González (2017) defines the

shifting spectrum of narco-cultural production where there is “a perilous discursive convergence of narco cultural politics and a multiplicity of violence that targets the bodies of vulnerable subjects” (p. 14). The author explains that political narratives about the so-called “drug war” have become dominant cultural narratives in the public sphere in American societies (Colombia, México, and the United States), and how *narcocultura* (the author always uses two words: *narco cultura*) has become commodified. In fact, González argues that narco cultural production can be better understood as a byproduct of neoliberalism—the deregularization and privatization of public resources and services in the pursuit of a global industry (Cabañas, 2014)—and neocolonialism, than as simply inherent to narcotrafficking.

To construct an explanation of what the Narcosphere is, González (2017) builds upon the notion of imagined narcoscapes, first presented by Cabañas (2014) in “Narcoculture and the Politics of Representation”, in which Cabañas used Appadurai’s (1990, 1996, 2011) idea that ethnoscaples, financescaples, ideoscaples, mediascaples, and technoscaples constitute the imaginary landscapes that provide us with “the building blocks of [...] imagined worlds” (2011, p. 589) by which we shape postmodern social life. Cabañas (2014) argued, that as such, many American societies would also require “imagined narcoscapes” (p. 7) to make sense of the complex, and sometimes contradictory, connections between the hegemonic powers behind the drug war, and narco culture (p. 8). Narcoscapes allow, for example—Cabañas argues—for Mexican society to make sense of the ways in which former peasants like El Chapo amassed such power and wealth while allegedly being hunted down by the State. They are the “cultural frameworks of meaning” (p. 9) through which we imagine how and why El Chapo colluded with the police officers, generals, businessmen, and politicians that were supposedly trying to capture or kill him.

According to Cabañas, these imagined narcoscapes are reproduced in narcocorridos and narco-novelas:

Narcocorridos tell stories about drug smuggling, offering responses to the War on Drugs from Mexican and Colombian perspectives. Narcotelenovelas develop marginalized characters (the sicario [assassin], the prepagado [escort], the lower-level drug dealer, and so on) who appear at the crossroads of the legal and illegal worlds, offering images of the complex webs of criminal and state powers. (Cabañas, 2014, p. 9)

González (2017) writes from “a queer subaltern lens where queerness signifies a relation of nonnormative subjectivities” (p. 13). To the author, the idea of a sphere, rather than a *scape*, symbolizes the three-dimensional condition of the frameworks of meaning the author is referencing. These frameworks include layered stratifications; social hierarchies that reflect our societies’ class, gender, and race political relations, which have complex interconnectedness with narco cultural production. González’ dissertation study analyzes Discourse in “narco cultural texts” (p. 190)—some multimodal—about Colombia, Mexico, and the United States, such as Estrada’s (2010) *El Infierno* (motion picture), Naranjo’s (2011) *Miss Bala* (motion picture), and novels such as *Rosario Tijeras* (Franco, 2004), and *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (Vallejo, 2010). The subject of normalization is central to Gonzalez’ epistemology; as the author explains: “both neoliberalism and el narco attempt to disavow non-normativity within their own realm” (p. 34). In other words, Gonzalez posits that both neoliberalism and narco cultural production (what I call *narcocultura*), at their ideological core, reject queerness and reproduce oppressive discourses that attempt normalize heteronormative identities.

The so-called “drug war” (Cabañas, 2014; González, 2017) is represented by González as a neoliberal policy contained within the larger agenda of American neocolonialism, which has

exacerbated economic inequality in Colombia, México, and the United States. The author argues that growing inequality, alongside the seemingly contradictory, parallel phenomena of disappearing trade barriers, and increasingly militarized borders, are all factors that shape the narcosphere. In Colombia and México in particular, neoliberal agrarian policies, which discarded the model of state-sponsored agricultural production, make marihuana, poppy, and coca, among the few crops with which poor agricultural producers can compete in a global market (González, 2011). Neocolonialism, in the context of the narcosphere, means that political elites in the United States pressure ruling elites in Colombia and México to accept and adopt increasingly militarized solutions for dealing with “el narco” (González, 2017, p. 12), the amorphous entity that supplies narcotics to the seemingly insatiable U.S. black market for recreational drugs, utilizing precisely the same commercial architecture and mechanisms that neoliberalism has established in the continent.

Within this complex state of affairs, where elites in Colombia, México, and the United States have established a neoliberal political landscape that aggravates inequality and marginalizes small agricultural producers, where neoliberal policies have deregulated commercial barriers—the disappearance of which facilitates narcotrafficking—while militarizing national borders (which only maximizes profits for el narco by driving up the prices of illegal recreational drugs in the U.S.); the narcosphere emerges as a way of illustrating the interconnections (meaning-making, social, economic, and political) of el narco’s relations of power. González (2017), from the perspective of a self-described queer scholar, is concerned with people placed in subalternity “a person at the margins of society as a result of a multitude of oppressive systems, including economic class and gender” (p. 77). The author argues that

patriarchy is at ideological core of neocolonialism, and therefore at the core of the narcosphere as well, explaining that:

The narcosphere in this sense, is both a discursive site and an interpretive lens that filters, layers, hides, and/or illuminates information, a lens for reading society with the potential to redirect attention away from and/or draw attention to state and economic apparatuses across socio-political relations. In other words, the narcosphere hides as much as it renders visible. It is ubiquitous, it penetrates and diffuses through and from civil society and the state. The narcosphere is both the process involved in our conception of current society as well as our position within it. (González, 2017, p. 96)

Through the lens of queer theory, González (2017) deconstructs narco cultural production to elucidate the ways in which collusion between existing structures of patriarchy and neoliberalism are complicit in reinforcing sexual hierarchies that discursively construct vulnerable subjects as disposable. The author illustrates this through a critical reading of narco cultural text *Rosario Tijeras* (moniker of the novel's protagonist, a heterosexual woman, rape survivor, turned low-level drug dealer and—at times reluctant—escort from the shantytowns of Medellín in Colombia). Rosario, González (2017) argues, is objectified throughout the text “as a prized object of desire”, a matter that the author ties to ideologies “of women as marketable commodities, such as the underlying logic of beauty queens [...] that we see for example in the Mexican film *Miss Bala* by Director Gerardo Naranjo” (p. 142).

In González' analysis, Mexican films like *Miss Bala* (Naranjo, 2011) and *El Infierno* (Estrada, 2010), alongside Colombian narco-novelas such as *Sin Tetas no hay Paraíso* (Bolívar Moreno, 2006), and *Las Muñecas de la Mafia* (López & Ferrand, 2009) are portrayed as cultural productions that illustrate how Mexican and Colombian societies have experienced profound

transformations since the 1970s, as a result of neoliberal economic policies, the ever-expanding American market for illegal drugs, and the militarization of public safety. In all of these narratives, women's bodies are almost exclusively framed as destined for sexual labor or as a vehicle for traffic. This, González argues, is “not exclusive to narco-cultural production but rather becomes magnified within it, wherein narco culture gains by following the logics of racial and class essentialisms imbricated by gendered and sexual dominant discourses” (p. 143).

To González (2017), this illustrates how narco cultural production “is but one more added layer to the existent and enduring structural violence of hemispheric contemporary society” (p. 145); were drug cartels, rather than displacing the ruling elites of America, have helped them secure their clamp on power by justifying the militarization of security, as well as the repression of dissent and social difference, under the guise of the so-called war on drugs. In these elites, drug cartels have found partners, lenders, and political liaisons. The author theorizes the violence intrinsic to the narcosphere as a re-categorization of the violence inherent to neocolonialist forms of patriarchy:

This categorization is discernible in the discursive exploitation and disregard of undesirable individuals through the violence against certain groups based on their creation as socially aberrant markers associated with gender, sexuality, class, race, and citizenship status for the benefit of the global capitalist market. In other words, violence prompted by homophobia, racism, classism, and misogyny becomes masked as drug trade and drug war violence. (González, 2017, p. 96)

Narcoviolenca

The central role these forms of narco-violence have taken in Mexican society is addressed by Halvey (2018) in a dissertation titled “Narcoviolenca in Contemporary Mexican

Culture”. Like González (2017), Halvey analyzes the Discourse of “Miss Bala” and literary *narco* works of fiction by Elmer Mendoza and Eduardo Antonio Parra, but also looks at journalistic photography and art. Halvey’s findings mirror those of González (2017) in that the author posits that “narcoviencia” (p. 4) is utilized by ruling elites to repress political dissent and to shut down the public sphere. About how narcoviencia has fragmented Mexican society, the author writes: “narcoviencia is at its core a violence that is intended to terrorize and divide the public; it is violence that has often successfully relegated the public to the private sphere” (p. 14). The author explains:

I use the term narcoviencia throughout this dissertation to refer to public acts of violence whose origin is presumed to be the conflict produced by drug trafficking. These are acts carried out by criminal organizations or by representatives of the state (local police, federal police, the military) acting either in collusion with or attempting to suppress these criminal organizations. Narcoviencia so often involves a cruelty that goes past death—a cruelty that involves the open decay of corpses and tortured and staged cadavers. (Halvey, 2018, p. 4)

Halvey (2018) explains that the artifacts analyzed in the dissertation, such as narconovelas, gruesome photographs, and explicit films, have elicited calls for censorship—as have narcocorridos—among Mexican elites, who have labeled these as produced in poor taste, and accused their producers of something akin to drug war profiteers, or capitalists of tragedy. However, the author argues, narco cultural production allows us to “understand invisible structures of power and common sources of suffering, to see society as a whole, to understand who the victims are, and what makes narco culture alluring and possible” (p. 12). To Halvey, the allure of narco cultural production symbolizes the public’s desire to make private suffering

public and to shift “private shame to public matter” (p. 13). Even as it prompts elitist outrage and is characterized as a source of national shame, narco culture (what I call narcocultura) emerges is Halvey’s writing as the only viable avenue of making narcoviencia visible:

When narconovelas, cadaver photographs, and art and film elicit fury, it is because anger about the violence itself is displaced onto these cultural artifacts. Cultural expression becomes the realm in which public disagreement and discussion about narcoviencia itself can take place. (Halvey, 2018, p. 13). The rejection of these works responds to the fact that they expand what are considered spaces of political discussion, removing politics from the strict purview of so-called experts. Crime novels, film, and particularly photographs, open different ways of understanding which experiences count as political, and whose voices the public should consider. (Halvey, 2018, p. 13)

Narcoviencia, Halvey (2018) explains, constantly reminds the Mexican public of their individual vulnerability, by confronting them with stories and images of murdered journalists and activists, which in turn makes “silence is both necessary to survival but also untenable” (p. 6). Writing from an Arendtian perspective of political theory, Halvey argues that faced with this untenable silence, engaging with narco cultural production is one of the few ways in which the Mexican public—which is imagined by the author as comprised of individuals “who see and recognize one another’s vulnerability, bear witness to it, and engage with this crisis in whatever spaces are available to them” (p. 9)—can begin to construct multi-layered explanations and understanding of the reality in which they live (p. 252).

According to Halvey (2018) scholarship striving to understand the effects that narcoviencia has on the public and the public sphere, must focus its attention on narco cultural production, especially because narcoviencia has disarticulated public debate in México in ways

that make it impossible to address it in other spheres. Across the Mexican political landscape, cruelty that goes past death (narcoviolenca) “replaces governmentality as the mode by which power is exercised” (Halvey, 2018, p. 244). Therefore, narco cultural production “has become the site where the public looks to find truth about what is occurring in the public realm” (p. 249), its consumption and production can be understood as an “active form of opposition” by members of the public who have a desire to develop a “criminal literacy” (p. 251) that allows them to comprehend the hidden nexuses between the material and the political perpetrators of narcoviolenca, and to “drag into the open for public debate and viewing [...] the secrets of narcoviolenca that have been hidden or repressed” (p. 251).

“Pure violence as a crucial form of power” (Martinez, 2017, p. 129) is a topic that Martinez (2017) addresses in the dissertation titled “The Dialectics of the Community: Mexican Production of Death”. In this document, the author analyzes the production of death and violence in contemporary Mexican society from an aesthetics perspective, based on a study of the literary works *La Fila India* by Antonio Ortuño (2016), *Trabajos del Reino* by Yuri Herrera (2004), and *Perra Brava* by Orfa Alarcón (2010), as well as the films *Sicario*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (2015), and *2666* by Roberto Bolaño (2004).

For Martinez (2017), the films *2666* (inspired by the unsolved murders of poor women in Ciudad Juárez) and *Sicario*, illustrate “the metamorphosis of violence” (p. 125) that has transformed death into the preeminent avenue for the exercise of political power. In the case of *2666* his power is exercised over women’s bodies—in ways similar to those described by González (2017), who describes it as “femicide” (p. 189)—and in the case of *Sicario*, as an instrument of neocolonialism—also reminiscent of González (2017). *La Fila India*, which is based on the 2011 San Fernando massacre (where Los Zetas murdered 59 Central American migrants

in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas), is depicted in the dissertation as literary exposition of how Central American waves of northbound migration are the result of a neoliberal system that makes uprooted peasants “legitimately killable” (p. 127). This discourse of people pushed into the margins as legitimately killable, has echoes in narcoviencia (Halvey, 2018) and the ways in which González (2017) describes the narcosphere. All three authors agree that people who are not useful in the context of neoliberal systems, are regarded by elites as discardable, and that the exclusions of said usefulness are constructed through patriarchal ideologies of gender, class, and race; making women, Black, Native, and poor, the principal categories of subalternity.

Like Halvey (2018) and González (2017), Martínez (2017) finds that framing the militarization of public safety within the confines of the so-called war on drugs, allows those who espouse it to place the violence it has engendered in a context of war, “this way [the State] can justify and legitimize its acts and violence, a legitimate form of violence. The State only kills those who are legitimately killable, and brings the concept of violence out of the contours of politics” (p. 125). For Martínez (2017), in the arena of the Mexican “war”, crime and government are intertwined; el narco “has become a culture, and the State itself” (p. 16). This finding mirrors those of the other two authors, as both the narcosphere (González, 2017) and narcoviencia (Halvey, 2018) are construed as complex frameworks of understanding that allow us to imagine that everything “narco” in America is interwoven into the ideological fabric of neocolonialism.

Commodification and Discardability, Key Concepts from the Literature Review

I find that there are important epistemic takeaways from the literature reviewed in this chapter, especially from the three dissertations discussed in this last section. In the introduction and first two sections, I argued that hip-hop culture and narcocultura can and should be studied

as parallel phenomena, as gangsta and narco cultural production emerge from communities marginalized by neocolonialism and neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism, however, absorbs these forms of resistance and commodifies them; the resulting artifacts reproduce the patriarchal archetypes that are inherent to neoliberalism, presenting “heterosexuality as the requisite sexual behavior for normative masculinity and femininity” (González, p. 84) with identities that present men as warriors, women as sexual objects, and non-binary roles as aberrant and discardable.

The discardability of the subaltern (people who are poor, indigenous, women, non-binary, etc.) emerged as a central theme of the dissertations included in this chapter. This disregard for life, and the centrality of violence beyond death as the primary political tool in contemporary Mexican society, are illustrated by the authors, not as inherent to drug trafficking, but as intrinsic to the neocolonial American model of governance, which has patriarchy at its ideological core. To begin to imagine this complex web of significance, “Narcoscapes” (Cabañas, 2014), the “Narcosphere” (González, 2017), and “Narcoviencia” (Halvey, 2018) appear in the academic literature as useful tools to illustrate the interconnection of free-markets, militarization, violence, and cultural production.

Methodologically, the dissertations reviewed resemble my own in that they utilize cultural artifacts as sources of data, and that Post-Structuralism, Critical Theory, analyses of Discourse, and aesthetics play a significant role as theoretical frameworks. My academic goal for the study that shapes this dissertation was to capture the complexity of narcocultura in-depth and in rich detail by looking at online cultural production and interaction on Facebook. The deconstruction of the multimedia Facebook identity work (Davis, 2016; Burke & Stets 2015), required a multidimensional epistemology and methodology not unlike those used by González (2017), Halvey (2018), and Martinez (2017). I explain the theoretical underpinnings for my study

in the next chapter, beginning with Latinx Critical Theory (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valdés, 1998), which provides the overarching conceptual framework for my work, followed by the content specific theoretical perspective of identity theory (Davis, 2014, 2016; Burke & Stets, 2015), as well as a discussion of imagined audiences (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2015).

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This dissertation is meant to produce, cultivate, and connect knowledge about the ways in which Latinx Facebook users who participate in narcocultura-oriented groups make sense of their identity work (Davis, 2016, 2019) in the age of the embodied internet (Hine, 2015), and to elucidate cultural elements (Rymes, 2012) of narcocultura appropriated (de los Ríos, 2019) into their online personas (Edberg, 2004). The theoretical framework that underpinned the study from its inception is Latinx Critical Theory (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valdés, 1998) or LatCrit. The resolution to use LatCrit has to do with my worldview, which entails a political inclination to criticize the relations of power that shape the so-called “war on drugs” or “drug-war”, and to connect my work to other critical research on the subject.

As I have mentioned, the data collected in this dissertation was almost exclusively obtained via digital communications, observations of online communities, and participation in social media. This chapter explains how, aside from any political predilections, LatCrit allowed me to utilize methods that I found were necessary in facilitating my study, such as the construction of “composite characters” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) which other researchers have used while working in the context of Latinx Critical Theory. In a subsequent section, I establish that operationalizing research exclusively in the digital realm amounts to ethnographic work because postmodern life exists in an online-offline continuum. To explain this idea, I use Hine’s (2015) postulate that the internet is embedded into our everyday lives in such an omnipresent manner, that we experience in an embodied way.

Identity theory (Davis, 2014, 2016; Burke & Stets, 2015) is a more content specific theoretical perspective that I am using in order to recognize and explain the “identity work” (Davis, 2016) underlying the digital content that participants in narco-oriented Facebook groups

post online, and the ways in which they talk about these artifacts. These social media posts are often constructed with a specific audience, and in order to explain how this relates to identity work and the online-offline continuum of cultural life, I rely and expand on the concept of “imagined audiences” (Marwick & Boyd 2011), using it to connect social media activity to overarching social structures like class and gender (Davis, 2019) .

Not discussed in this chapter, but equally important to the analysis of the ethnographic data I collected throughout this study, are the principles of narcoscapes (Cabañas, 2014), the narcosphere (González, 2017), and narcoviolenencia (Halvey, 2018) which were discussed in the review of the literature. These are helpful theoretical concepts to understand the ways in which narcocultura reproduces in the age of the embodied internet and the ways in which it has been marketed in recent years. Alongside personal aesthetic deliberations based on my life experience and positionality, these principles help me illustrate how some attributes of narcocultura can become very engaging (for me as well as for other Latinxs). Finally, these three concepts are key in drawing parallels and connections to the pervasive structures of patriarchy and neoliberalism that support the so-called “war on drugs”, and connecting my work to other academic struggles to criticize this drug war.

Latinx Critical Theory

Latinx Critical Theory provides the overarching theoretical framework for the analysis of the findings in which this dissertation is grounded. I present said findings in ways suggested and utilized by Solorzano and Yosso (2001) in *Critical Race and LatCrit Theory and Method*, a text that proved foundational to this dissertation. The authors present an annotated conversation between two “composite and data-driven characters, Professor Leticia Garcia and graduate student Esperanza Gonzalez” (p. 471). This narrative interweaves history and theory in between

the character's interventions. In this text, Critical Race and Latino Critical theorists are referenced in the conversation, and definitions of LatCrit are cited inside of quotes. One such example is the how they present Gonzalez' definition of LatCrit as part of a narration:

Esperanza pulled out an article from her backpack and continued, "One of the legal scholars in LatCrit Theory, Elizabeth Iglesias (1997) has defined LatCrit as, 'exploring how Critical Race Theory might be expanded beyond the limitations of the black/white paradigm to incorporate a richer, more contextualized analysis of the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of white supremacy, particularly as it impacts Latinas/os in their individual and collective struggles for self-understanding and social justice' (p. 178). I think we need to extend those discussions [about Critical Race Theory] to education. In fact, I've borrowed and adapted work from the LatCrits and have come up with the following definition of LatCrit theory in education:

A LatCrit theory in education is a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and discourses that effect People of Color generally and Latinas/os specifically. Utilizing the experiences of Latinas/os, a LatCrit theory in education also theorizes and examines that place where racism intersects with other forms of subordination such as sexism and classism [...] LatCrit theory in education is transdisciplinary and draws on many other schools of progressive scholarship."

(Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 479)

Esperanza is not an individual person, she does not exist as such, but her experiences are granted validity by Solorzano and Yosso (2001) who constructed Esperanza, composing the character to "based on information from numerous interviews, focus groups, biographical,

humanities, and social science literature, and personal experiences” (p. 490) in order to have an embodiment of this data. Esperanza’s the definition of LatCrit as a framework that places experiences at the center of epistemology and is transdisciplinary, serves as a starting point for describing the ways in which I designed the study and analyzed the data. However, more important is that the presentation of the findings in many ways resembles the narrative work of Solorzano and Yosso (2001) because, given the impersonal nature of “virtual worlds” (Boellstorff et al., 2012) I found myself constructing my participants using a mix of interviews, autobiographical resources, social science literature, and personal experiences.

Thus, LatCrit emerged as the epistemic perspective that encompasses all other theoretical and methodological perspectives in the study, from design to analysis. Complementary to Solorzano and Yosso’s (2001) explanation of the centrality of experiential knowledge and transdisciplinarity in Latinx Critical perspectives, research methods, and pedagogy, I utilize the postulates set forth by Valdés (1998) about the epistemic objectives of LatCrit being (1) the production of knowledge, (2) the expansion and connection of struggle, (3) the advancement of transformation (p. 7), and (4) the cultivation of community and coalition (p. 8), to guide and present the analysis about “large social structures” (Merolla et al., 2012) such as race, class, and gender.

The spirit of the postulates presented by Valdés (1998) aims to make LatCrit a point of departure for substantive transformation (both social and epistemological), a point of interconnectedness of ideologies, discourses, and institutional structures; a fulcrum for the praxis of social justice, as well as a space from which we can develop intellectual and political coalitions that seek to elucidate oppression. Or as composite character Leticia Garcia explains: “when we focus on recognizing the intersecting roles of racism, sexism, and classism and being

committed to social justice, we can challenge dominant ideology by utilizing the experiences of People of Color and contextualizing our critiques historically, using multiple disciplinary tools” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 486); which Esperanza complements by saying “LatCrit theory and method in education criticizes the traditional paradigms, both in content and format. So we can actually utilize the life histories of our students and their parents as valid narratives” (p. 486). In presenting their theorizations, constructed through multiple experiences, as the voice of two composite characters, Solorzano and Yosso (2001) illustrate my own rationalization for embedding myself in LatCrit: it validates a multitude of cultural artifacts to become ethnographic data, and it allows reformatting the ways in which we present it.

Identity Theory

Within the larger framework of LatCrit, I am using the more content-specific perspective of identity theory (Davis, 2014, 2016; Burke & Stets, 2015) to facilitate my interpretation of the exclusively digital data collected in the study. Identity theory stems directly from the social psychology discipline but has its roots in the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism. Considering that identities are constructed through social interaction, identity theorists pay particular attention to the symbols we utilize in our identity negotiation processes, and at the ways in which we attempt to verify these processes. Burke and Stets’ (2015) explain that identities have two structural bases, the first one is our roles in social structure by which we name and label ourselves and others (“teacher”, “student”, “criminal”, etc.), the second is the groups to which we belong. According to the authors, these second kind of groups can either be categorical (such as gender, race, and social class) or based on behavior, such as religion, professional and political affiliation, etc. Thus, Burke and Stets (2015) conclude, we have both role identities and social identities with symbols that we recognize and share.

The need for a theory of identity that accounts for societal roles, critical categories, as well as choice behaviours is illustrated by the reference to “online personas” in my research goals. Edberg (2004) defines persona as a “culturally shaped, flexible public representation that persists over time, and is embodied as a person and iterations of that person” (p. 258); a “packed, polysemic, symbolic structure born in the nexus of class, power, national and regional identity” (p. 268) that functions “as both a bundle of meanings and as a prototype for how to act out those meanings in practice” (p. 258); however, this definition did not originally emerge in the context of digitally-mediated communication. Because of this, I looked into the ways in which identity theory has helped other researchers to explain the ways in which we build online self-representations through social media (another one of my stated research objectives).

I found that Davis’ (2014, 2016, 2019) particularly useful in describing what I wanted to look for when unpacking the culturally shaped, packed, and polysemic personas of narcocultura-oriented Facebook users, mainly because the author’s work relies on establishing a “fluidity between digital and physical” (Davis, 2014, p. 500) and “between online and offline” (p. 506). In “Triangulating the Self: Identity Processes in a Connected Era” Davis (2014), argues that that “online interactions act as impetus for future offline activities” as “life takes place through the physical and the digital, often simultaneously” (p. 8). The author illustrates social media presence on platforms such as Facebook as an integral part in the continuum of online-offline identity construction: “relationships are established and maintained across digital and physical settings; behaviors are planned, recorded, shared, and re-articulated synchronically and asynchronously, with physically and non-physically co-present others” (p. 9). Davis also posits that our online self-representations pursue a balance between what we perceive as our ideal image, and the amount of authenticity we feel we can pull off: “achieving an ideal-authentic

balance entails accomplishing a particular version of the self, but doing so in a seemingly natural way; it is to engage in identity work, while hiding the labor of doing so” (p. 6).

As an instrument of social psychology, identity theory has a depth that I do not have the academic expertise to fully utilize, but I’ve borrowed Davis’ (2014) idea that identity work means working to have others view us in ways that are consistent with symbolic meanings connected to an array of different identities, all while attempting to look genuine (as if these traits were somehow innate) and at the same time working to verify identity meanings through our social interaction. I have also borrowed Davis’ (2014, 2016) premise that Facebook profiles and the digital artifacts we produce through them can be regarded not only as identity work, but as windows into the social structures that surround and shape us, because we can deconstruct online personas and artifacts in ways that allow us to retrace curating decisions to social structures like class, gender, and race. In the context of narcocultura, for example, Edberg (2004) maintains that narco-oriented identities display “a symbolic veneer of rejecting socially sanctioned pathways to success that have been closed off to subaltern groups” (p. 271), and therefore have an important component of class.

This exemplifies how the social theories presented in this section, especially those about the parallels and overlaps of offline and online identity work, and the existence of imagined audiences constitute a fundamental starting point for the analysis of the data collected in this study. Another powerful analytical tool is described in the positionality chapter, which recounts many important lived experiences, which developed the personal system of ideas and ideals that gives way to the tension (between engagement and repulsion) I experience encountering narcocultura. I constantly found myself drawing upon these experiential forms of knowledge during my ethnographic work in order to make sense of social interactions, all of which I try to

make intelligible for readers throughout the presentation of my analyses and findings. Finally, it is important to underline that central theoretical elements for the analysis of my data were outlined in the review of literature and not this theoretical framework chapter, namely, the concepts of narcoscapes (Cabañas, 2014), the narcosphere (González, 2017), and narcoviolenencia (Halvey, 2018).

Imagined Audiences and Critical Discourse Analysis

Having visual arts academic background means that I regard the creative process of constructing a social media posting as something akin to preparing artwork for an exhibition, an act of curation of one's online persona that prepares it for showcasing to an audience. I therefore consider the creative process (as brief or lengthy as it may be) that goes into crafting a status update, selfie, comment, etc. During this process, participants curate photographs, information, language, and decide how to present the finalized artifacts and to what audience. "What audience" is precisely what concerns the work of Marwick and Boyd (2011), who explain that identity relevant data can be found in the self-representing content that we post to social media, partly because these posts seek identity feedback from "imagined audiences" (p. 115). This means that exploring how participants imagine their audience can help us shed a critical light upon the offline social structures which shape imagined audiences, such as class, gender, and race, which also shape participants' expectations about their role in the world and how these roles require them to behave. Therefore, in my conversations with study participants I made a point of attempting to understand what audiences they were trying to reach with their posts and why, through a perspective closely supported by my previous experiences using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

CDA-oriented methodologies focus on the power of language, asking researchers to look at the ways in which we reproduce social structures and roles, State and social institutions, as well as identity through discourse. “Discourse” in Fairclough (2015) is based on Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of “habitus” (p. 78) or “world making” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 22). In Fairclough (2015) every single verbal interchange reproduces social structures because discourse is not only the way in which we construct our imagined worlds (and audiences), but how we physically construct our societies. For both Bourdieu (1985) and Fairclough (2015), the power of language is central to the process of world making, where there are constant struggles for legitimacy.

Fairclough (2015) exemplifies the discursive struggle for legitimacy by discussing how modern societies have consented to rules that legitimize violence as a monopoly of the State, and justify the ways in which it can be utilized. Historically, many states have exercised this monopoly in reprehensible ways that were seen not only as justified, but were legal (the list is extensive and includes, for example, the United States’ legalization of slavery). The discourse of legality, Fairclough argues, draws on shared moral values more than it draws on rationality. Thus, beliefs held by dominant members of societies are elevated to legal language, setting it above others, and determining behavioral rules for societies, which reflect hegemonic ideologies of class, gender, race, etc. This example is especially important, because understanding issues of justification and legitimization of violence in the context of narcocultura were at the center of the questions I asked study participants.

I have mentioned the idea of the embodied internet repeatedly in this chapter but have not yet explained it thoroughly. This is because the concept of the embodied internet straddles the line between theoretical perspective and methodological approach, and I decided to place it in the methods chapter. Thus, in the following chapter I explain how I used Hine’s (2015)

methodological perspectives about the “embedded, embodied and everyday” internet to build a bridge between social theories and ethnographic methodologies. Among other things, this notional bridge allowed me to validate my approach to online social interactions as embodied interactions and to write about them in the subsequent chapters without having to constantly reiterate their digital nature. I also discuss the methods by which I designed the study, collected, managed, and analyzed data. As well as the ways in which I selecting the Facebook groups I studied, and how I went about recruiting participants.

Chapter 4: Methods

In this chapter, I explain to readers the particular ways in which I seek to construct knowledge, the empirical bases that support my epistemic perspectives, and my academic foundations. All of which in some way shape the research methodologies I have come to prefer. My attempt to explain my epistemic and methodological foundations begins by recounting some of my experiences growing up in México (Ciudad Juárez, specifically), obtaining undergraduate and graduate degrees there, as well as a wealth of professional experience in emergency medical services as well as public safety. These experiences shaped my worldview and placed my research interest at the crossroads of youth, media, and delinquency. What I mean by this is that in my developing career as an academic researcher, when left to my own devices, I have always opted to study the ways in which communities form narratives about delinquency, the ways in which these are reproduced in the media, and how they affect youth.

My experience as a combat medic in the U.S. Army is also briefly discussed in this chapter, as are the ways in which this experience nuanced my perspective on narcocultura. I also touch upon the ethical considerations that shaped the study, and an overview of the epistemic challenges I faced with narcocultura, some of them personal, others professional. For example, analyzing my conversations with participants, required me to spend copious amounts of time and energy trying to identify and dispense with my own pervasive beliefs about class, gender, and race in an attempt to contextualize their perspectives, and to deliver their voices as unfiltered as possible. However, filtering elements in participants' narratives that may jeopardize their right to privacy was also paramount, and this tension presented a number of challenges regarding ethics throughout this study.

I characterize the methodology of this study as an online ethnography (Hine, 2016). I drew heavily on the work of Hine (2015, 2016) as the fieldwork proved to be quasi auto ethnographic, meaning that Facebook, as the site of fieldwork was embodied by—and embedded in—my own digital practices, experiences, and reflexivity. This notion that internet use is something that is an embedded and embodied (Hine, 2015) establishes the justification of the methodology utilized. This means is that the study was conducted completely online, and that I adapted the methods for conducting this particular type of study in ways that relied on understanding and explaining the ways in which I understand Facebook use, group and interpersonal interactions across this platform, as well as unpacking the significance these interactions had for me as they happened. In this chapter, I explain the particularities of online ethnographies, as well as the concept of the embodied internet, and how these informed my study’s design, as well as the methods for collecting and analyzing data. I also explain how I selected the Facebook groups that became sites of study, and the processes of individual participant selection.

Positionality as a Researcher and Academic

I am a heterosexual man born in México to a middle class family. Both my parents are surgeons who devoted their lives to public service and my education, which means that I was privileged enough to attend Montessori Method schools as a kid. Phenotypically, I look White or “güero” as we say in México, which means that, even as I was aware that Latnix people were discriminated against in the United States, I didn't really have racial discrimination (or almost any type of discrimination) projected at me growing up. I remember that the discourse about racial discrimination was that it was something that others did to us accross the border, but not something we did to anyone. What characterizes my life as a social science academic is that it

takes an epistemic perspective positioned at the crossroads of youth, media, and delinquency. Meaning that I've always been interested in studying the ways in which the discourse of criminality is constructed, especially in multimedia such as the press and artifacts of popular culture.

I attended the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ) which awarded me both a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in photography, and later a Master's in Social Sciences. My thesis for the latter was based on my experience with the ways in which social processes of identification and imagined worlds can enable government policies, which in the name of public safety, violate human rights. More precisely, I studied a public safety plan implemented by the Ciudad Juárez Municipal Police during part of 2007, in which the municipal government deployed most of its police resources to detain minors who were out of their homes after 10:00 PM.

This policy, known in local media as “el toque de queda” (curfew), used the police to remove young people from public spaces after dark and seemed to garner great popularity among Juarenses. The newspapers and local TV channels ran news stories that spoke about how much the people were behind the program. It took a few, very determined citizens, to sue the city into canceling it, as it violated the constitutional rights of young citizens. Shortly after this policy was discontinued, I began conducting scholarly research that looked at how and why the city's public security institutions seemed to conceive of the city's youths as actors that contributed to public insecurity. During the course of this (my thesis) study, I came to realize that poor young men, specifically, were at the center of this sort of popular imaginary that construed them as threats. This construction may have some anecdotal merit, as I also found that (without minimizing the dreadful fact that thousands of women are murdered every year in México) most of the violent

deaths that make it to the news are those that are perpetrated on poor young men by poor young men (Flores Ávila, 2012).

I will discuss some theoretical perspectives as part of my positionality because I consider them central to the way I have come to understand the world, even if these do not appear to be directly connected to the study at hand. For example, I consider that my perspective is characteristically Freirean. This means that I disagree with the premise that men are inherently violent and need to be normalized, as well as with the notion that poverty by itself engenders violence, instead arguing that oppressive hegemonies, marginalization, and inequality motivate it. My Freirean perspective comes from engaging with Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory. It was reading Freire and Macedo's (1987) dialogue in *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (about the complex cluster of social relations, ideologies, attitudes, and practices implicated in our understanding and meaning-construction of relations of power) that helped me decide the theoretical framework from which I wanted to study narcocultura. In order to establish said framework, I first borrowed Geertz's (1973) notion that culture is a "web of significance", or more complexly, a generally internalized, but collectively shared organization of socially subjective significations, that in a given historic moment and context, take objective form as symbolic representations. Bourdieu (1973) characterized this web of significance as a dialectic relationship, in which interiorized cultural significations are formed through shared communal experiences, but these experiences are themselves mediated and deciphered subjectively by individuals. I am indeed very interested in the objective forms that narcocultura takes, what these forms represent, and what narcocultura artifacts symbolize in general. I am more interested, however, in the subjective significations individuals give artifacts of narcocultura, and the ways in which they decide to use and reproduce them.

Throughout my postgraduate education and work as a scholar, I have looked at the intersections of institutionalized marginalization, delinquency, and mass media in an effort to further understanding of phenomena such as police culture, hip-hop culture, and narcocultura. I consider that the definitive link between my affinity for studying delinquency and pursuing a doctorate in Teaching, Learning, and Culture (TLC) is precisely the study of the ways in which we enforce cultural norms, whether written (in the form of laws, regulations, and policies) or tacit (such as gender norms). I have come to find that the two principal State (Giddens, 1985) enforcers of cultural norms (explicit and implicit) are the police and schools. I cannot conceive the study of institutionalized marginalization without the parallel study of both these institutions, perhaps because I was brought up to look at public policy across a lens of Critical Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 2015), and Critical Pedagogy.

Social and State institutions play an important role in reproducing dominant forms of societal culture because they are the systemic enforcers and normalizers of cultural norms, socialization and identity construction (Meador, 2005; Smith, 2000). Enforcing becomes a relevant term since the exercise of force is inseparable from hegemonic power relations, which result in the development of cultures of resistance, that attempt to confront the uneven terms of the establishment, using any available resources and symbolic materials (Dillon & Neal, 2015). What this means, in particular for the study that shaped this dissertation, is that I understand the very institutions erected to suppress societal violence to be complicit in generating it, by playing a central role in the production of subcultures and countercultures that emerge from resistance (Valles, 2015), as alternative mediums of socialization (Oliver, 2006), in opposition to institutionalized enforcers of normalization that scholars like Meador (2005), and Smith (2000) identify as complicit in the making of marginality. In other words, I look at the ways in which

the institutions that are supposed to educate and/or protect citizens, through their policies and practices, actually hasten delinquency and violence by marginalizing certain people.

Embedded in the criminal justice and educational systems, policing and schooling practices overlap in what is often referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline (Giroux, 2010), which is a concept used to explain the ways in which young people's school abandonment, expulsion, and failure are complicit in marginalizing and criminalizing them *a priori*, hastening delinquent behaviors that ultimately track them into the criminal justice system. Studies have demonstrated the disproportionality of school authorities' suspension and expulsion of Black and Latino students across the United States (see Gregory et al., 2010; Vavrus & Cole, 2002). The ways in which students enact resistance to marginalizing educational policies such as exclusionary discipline, and practices such as detention, suspension, and placement into corrective behavioral classes (all of which I understand to be precursors of school expulsion and abandonment) greatly interests me.

The understanding of schools as persistent institutional enforcers of established and hidden curricula that attempt to inculcate specific identities in students, and that punish non-compliance with exclusion (which expedites school failure, youth delinquency, and the reproduction and ultimate prevalence of social inequalities) has become central to my research. In the study of this very complex phenomenon, Latinx Critical Theory (LatCrit) emerged as an epistemic framework that was well suited for the exploration of the realm of cultural capital, the discussion of cultural identity, and the elucidation of minoritized students' active resistance to cultural erasure. LatCrit is meant to study Latinx experiences specifically, because it allows us to examine these on the basis of immigration status, phenotype, and language, and the ways in which categories like these are used to subordinate Latinxs. This critical lens also allows

incorporates data gathering methods that validate Latinx-heritage artifacts and traditions (such as corridos, testimonios, and oral histories) as sources of data. Therefore, it was a framework well suited for integrating the social theories discussed in the theoretical framework, which is described in a subsequent chapter, where I articulate the intersectionality of the social phenomena I discuss in this study.

Drawing from my previous academic research experience, I also consistently rely on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), even as I don't explicitly point it out. As with LatCrit, I have political (no te be confused with partisan) inclinations that draw me to the discipline. One of these inclinations is perhaps best described as righting social wrongs. In CDA, "social wrongs" (Fairclough, 2015, p. 226) are "aspects of social systems, forms or orders which are detrimental to human well-being [...] poverty, forms of inequality, lack of freedom or racism" (p. 235). Fairclough (2015) places the specific responsibility of understanding, critiquing, and ameliorating or eliminating these wrongs on researchers. In order to do this methodologically, the author argues, CDA must look at the ways in which we reproduce "macro" structures like hegemony, identity, ideology, and power through "micro" discursive events, such as verbal interaction (p. 31).

Because CDA focuses on the power of language, it provided a useful perspective, alongside LatCrit, that informed the ways in which I began attempting to design a study to understand narcocultura in a methodical manner. The convergence of these two perspectives helped me to feel reassured of the fact that I would be, from the academy, helping to effect the type of social change that liberates people from oppression. Another aspect of my research in which I wanted to feel reassured, was knowing that I was not going to unintentionally silence voices of study participants. In order to present these voices as authentically as possible, and in

order to understand the ways in which participants and I made sense of our societal roles (Burke & Stets, 2015) in the contexts of the study, I designed the dissertation (drawing on sum aggregate of my experiential and academic foundations) as an online ethnography (Hine, 2015) an emerging form of anthropology, which I found to be a valid way for me to elucidate the role of narcocultura in digitally-mediated, self-representative, self-constructing identity work (Davis, 2016).

Personal Conflict with—and Academic Interest in—Narcocultura

I grew up in Ciudad Juárez, a city located on many borders. The most pronounced border is that of the United States and México; less obvious is the fact that it not only shares borders with El Paso, Texas, but also Santa Teresa, New Mexico. Juárez also exists on the border of modernity and postmodernity (Lomelí, 2012; Pérez, 2011). Many socioeconomic global dynamics and cultural narratives converge on this border. For example, Juárez has an economy that is at the same time almost completely deregulated; both by institutional design (if you are a transnational corporation) and by institutional incompetence (if you are trading goods irregularly); and severely regimented, if you're an average taxpayer without political connections (López Aspeitia, 2010). It is a place that thrives on the blurring of economic borders, while at the same time experiences the evermore stringent policing and demarcation of borders, not only between countries, but also between social classes (Herrera Robles, 2010).

Ciudad Juárez is also notorious for being among the most violent cities in the world (Monarrez Fragoso & Gómez 2013; Nassif, 2012), I lived through the worst period of what some law enforcement agencies call “the battle for the Juarez plaza” (El Paso Police Department, internal documents, 2019). In 2008 alone, there were 1,608 murders (1,510 men and 98 women) which equate to little more than 11 percent of all murders in México for that year (Monarrez

Fragoso & Gómez 2013). How these young men and women died amidst the turf war between the Juárez and Sinaloa cartels was well documented by the media, which gave audiences a day-by-day account of who was being murdered, where, how and by whom. The warring parties publically sent each other messages every day; they would post arrays of written messages and threats all over the city, they had radio transmitters by which they called each other out to fight, and used them to play music which told audiences about their exploits. More surprisingly, they had streaming videos feeds where they posted the interrogations of captured enemies, as well as their executions.

I experienced the battle for the Juárez plaza at a closer range than most Juarenses because I was an actor within it, albeit a reluctant one. Years before said battle began in 2008, I had started my professional career at age 19 in emergency medicine—a career I practice to this day—as a paramedic for the International Committee of the Red Cross. By 2005, I had years of first-responder experience in the field and had just graduated from university with my Bachelor's (for which I had trained as a photographer). This unique combination of experience and education made me particularly well suited to tackle my first job out of college, which was as a scene photographer and videographer for the Juárez Municipal Police. This job not only gave an insight into police culture in that particular agency, but on how corruption was seen within it as a necessary evil, as something that trickled down from the civilians at the helm of the municipal administration, more than a personal flaw on behalf of individual agents (what police officers are called in Mexican police jargon).

I realize that I partook in that corruption. Admittedly, I had only obtained the job by establishing connections within the party in power at the time, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), and was only able to keep it by promising to conceal any wrongdoing by the

agents I worked alongside. What stood out to me, more than anything, was the fact that even as I was working for the municipal government, all my pay—inconsistent as it was—came from a bank account belonging to party members. I quickly realized, that even many uniformed agents were not permanently contracted by the city, and that this scheme was a long-standing mechanism of keeping individuals who were not yet considered trustworthy in a state of financial vulnerability, which almost always guaranteed that we would turn a blind eye to corruption in the hopes of someday being offered a permanent contract.

My stint in the Municipal Police lasted less than a year. Among the many reasons for my departure was the growing atmosphere of confrontation among fellow agents. Lieutenants, I was told, were not divvying up Juárez Cartel payoffs fairly, which was causing some bad blood within the rank and file. This became the ultimate undoing of the Municipal Police as I knew it—and of the Juárez Cartel itself, according to some agencies (Beittel, 2018)—because it allowed the Sinaloa cartel to co-opt the malcontent agents into revolting (Ainslie, 2013). Starting in 2008, they began assassinating their former supervisors and colleagues, beginning with my former Lieutenant. By year's end, 71 Municipal Police agents had been murdered (see Dudley, 2013; Vilalta & Muggah, 2014).

Fortunately for me, I was nowhere near the Municipal Police ranks when this was happening, as I had opted to begin my post-graduate education at the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales (ICSA) of the UACJ, where I wrote that aforementioned thesis about the challenges facing public safety institutions in Juárez from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective. During these years, I also worked as a part-time professor at the Instituto de Arquitectura, Diseño y Arte of the UACJ, where I taught photography, cinema, composition and other liberal and fine arts related classes. It was here that I realized that higher education is perhaps the field I most enjoy

professionally⁶. By mid-2010, I was trying to balance full-time employment at a local maquiladora, part-time work at the UACJ, and finishing my thesis as the monthly homicide counts of the battle of the Juárez plaza began to steadily decrease (EPPD, 2019). However, the city had been ravaged by the war, and job opportunities for a soon-to-be graduate Master of Social Sciences were grim, so I began looking for opportunities to emigrate outside of México. The most accessible option seemed to continue my studies abroad, and The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) offered an affordable option, as it has a long tradition of allowing Mexican students to pay in-state tuition; it did not, however, offer a Doctorate in Social Sciences. My master's thesis director at the time was also a professor of political science at UTEP and mentioned that the College of Education offered a Doctorate in Teaching, Learning, and Culture (TLC), and that the latter might encompass my research interests.

Positionality as a Soldier

I began working on preparing my application to the Ph.D. in TLC, but interrupted my efforts when I became aware that the U.S. Army was allowing non-citizens to enlist into certain military occupational specialties under a program known as Military Accessions Vital to National Interests (MAVNI) as part of the troop “surge” efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan (Green & Ward, 2017). These focused on recruiting professionals in the fields of foreign languages, intelligence, and medicine. Throughout the years, I had kept my paramedic certifications current, and, before I could even pick up my master's diploma, I enlisted in the U.S. Army as a Combat Medic. The branch of the Army I enlisted in, was the New Mexico National Guard (NMARNG),

⁶ Thanks to Critical Pedagogy related courses I later took in the Ph.D. in Teaching Learning, and Culture (TLC) program, I have come to realize a number of things: first, that when I first started teaching—and even as I added years to my experience—I was probably pretty bad at it. That realization (I hope) came from the development of a critical consciousness; It wasn't that I didn't know the content I was lecturing on, or that I couldn't explain it in front of a group, the fact was that I was undoubtedly lecturing a lot, and educating very little, because I didn't allow for a multipolar dialogue in my classes.

due to the fact that this was the component that offered the nearest available medical MAVNI vacancy, and that I could undertake the complicated process of accrediting my eligibility and in-processing from El Paso.

In early 2011, the medical evacuation (MEDEVAC, in military jargon) Company of the 171st Regiment of the NMARNG was activated for service in Afghanistan. Medics from my unit supported the 171st, serving in Helmand Province, they evacuated fellow soldiers, marines, Afghan forces, and injured civilians from the site of injury to higher levels of medical care. My relative inexperience and lack of training at that time meant that medics with more experience, training, and seniority deployed in my place, and I found myself back in El Paso by the summer. However, thanks to Executive Order 13269 (signed in July 3, 2002 by then President George W. Bush) and my few months in what is considered as Global War on Terrorism Service (GWOTS, or “geewhots” in Army jargon) by the Department of Defense, I was a newly minted American citizen and found myself eligible for a G.I. Bill.

I resumed my application to UTEP’s Ph.D. in TLC, and was accepted to the program in the Fall 2011. I began navigating the program’s courses accompanied by what amounted to an obsession with what I had witnessed the years of the battle for the Juárez plaza. I would weave my compulsion to better understand the sociocultural implications of the use of multimedia platforms by the cartels during the plaza war (and the *drug wars* in México more generally) into any class assignment that offered even the slightest opening. Being momentarily immersed in this conflict gave me an insider perspective as a cog in the neocolonial war apparatus, and broadened my understanding about the political motives which can drive people to commit violence against compatriots, against their neighbors, even against their family.

A nuanced understanding of narcocultura emerges

The neocolonial nature of the second Iraq war is perhaps more evident than the inherent neocolonialism of the so-called “war” on drugs, so I use work by González (2017) in the study’s review of literature in order to make it more clear. Personally, I wasn’t able to see the two under the same light until I experienced both in the flesh. They both felt equally futile, both were being fought by the lower classes of the involved societies, and I realize now that both were being directed by highly positioned political classes without any sort of skin in the game. This realization nuanced my previously negative perspective on narcocultura. I was once again able to enjoy the folkloric undertones of narcocorridos and appreciate the ways in which the construct their “moral heroes” (Basham, 2016), while at the same time being critical of their violent and misogynistic content. There is a perennial personal tension throughout this dissertation, between finding narcocultura engaging, and finding it repulsive.

It is perhaps ironic that serving in the “geewhot” allowed me to distance myself from the plaza war, and that my newly obtained status as an American scholar (and citizen) allowed me to better understand my own perspectives about what I considered my role to be in Mexican society. Going back to Juárez after having experienced other conflicts, I got the sense that we (Juarenses) had long lost our sense of relationship, and that we relinquished our processes of identity building, and civil participation to a political class that embodies the worst parts of ourselves. As I admitted to earlier, I was a reluctant but silent participant in the culture of corruption that permeated the Juárez Police. However, I never felt like I was inherently dishonest or malicious; I honestly thought I could make a difference in that system, which I later realized was not erected to protect the public—as the name “Secretaría de Seguridad Pública” may have suggested—but to protect the corrupt system from the public; and it is that realization—that persistent problems in public safety are systemic, and that actors adjust their moral compasses to

survive within those systems—is one that now accompanies me throughout my scholarly development.

A confluence of experiences and education, has allowed me to look at the so-called “narco” violence perpetrated to this day in Mexico as having to do more with asymmetric relations of power and enduring hegemonies, than with narcotrafficking. Freire (1968) explained it as the dialectic relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, Foucault explicated it as positions of dominance versus dominated situations (Dillon & Neal, 2015), the fact is that if we understand society as a field where power relations exist, we can argue that these relations permeate the complete spectrum of cultural expression. By that premise, I attempt to understand narcocultura not as the generating point of violence, but as a valid set of cultural representations that challenges once-hegemonic institutions to establish new means of identity legitimation. However, I still find that in resisting dominance, narcocultura almost always enacts the imperialist, post-colonial idea of amassing power and money as the ultimate end of all men (masculinity withstanding), and espouses achieving this through any means, violence included (and vindicated), vindication which presented me with serious ethical challenges as a researcher.

Ethical Considerations and Challenges of my Study: Narcocultura as Taboo

In my experience, narcocultura can be very negatively regarded in borderland society, not only because by its very nature it is associated with crime and violence, but because it is also a referent for low social class. Two of the participants in the study made explicit references to both these perceptions in the course of the study, and it led at least one of them to revoke his consent for using the imagery that I had collected in relation to his Facebook activity. All participants eventually revoked the consent they had granted me initially to utilize edited versions of images they had posted to Facebook in the study. It goes without saying that I immediately honored

these revocations, and even as they posed a setback, I was not completely surprised by them. In fact, throughout the course of the data collection process, I constantly felt that I was attempting to protect the privacy of participants who were not protecting it themselves. A lot of the data I gathered as part of the study, such as photographs, videos, and comments, was posted openly on Facebook in ways that make it incredibly easy for anyone to trace it back to the source. That is, if I were to quote the exact comments that participants posted openly on Facebook as part of the analysis, a simple Google or Facebook search would have pointed to the user, regardless of any pseudonym I may have given them.

For reasons like the latter, throughout all the processes that shaped this dissertation (data collection, analysis, and drafting of the findings) I actively reminded myself about the potential harm some of the information my participant shared could cause them, especially because the very negative connotations that narcocultura carries. One participant in particular, Cinco Siete, disclosed that the reason he was asking me not to use some of the data I had collected about him was that he was afraid that it would hurt his chances of getting a better job. In Cinco's case and in every other, I did everything in my power to protect the privacy, safety, and dignity of study participants as well as other Facebook users.

As I have mentioned, I understood that informed consent was a un-rigorous agreement that needed to be revised constantly. Much like the American Anthropological Association's Principles of Professional Responsibility (2012) suggest, the process of consent was implemented by design throughout the various stages of the study, and characterized by dialogue and negotiations, during which I always made a conscious effort to avoid deception, by statement or omission, as well as any misrepresentation of the motives and goals for this study. Well into the conversations that shape this study, I realized that my perceptions about participants' efforts

to deceive me were playing a central role in the way I was understanding our relationship. Specifically, there were two participants, Edgar Quintero and Luis Coronel, who made claims of participation in criminal activity, which I generally disregarded as not genuine, but at times attempted to corroborate. Both dismissal and verification deviate from my academic goal of unpacking the identity work behind participants' online activity, and thus detracted from obtaining potentially richer data for analysis. Having realized this, my position on veracity in the context of the dissertation is that I am the only one obliged to conform to strict standards of transparency, while the participants' statements constitute part of their online identity work, which was to be analyzed through social theory lenses, not law enforcement ones, and this made these sporadic attempts at verification unnecessary. As Mendoza-Denton (2008) suggests, academics sometimes have a difficult time isolating the non-criminal aspects of criminalized identities in research, and in my case, I found that I had to actively remind myself that verifying whether participants in the study were criminally affiliated was a question I was not seeking to answer.

After having carefully considered the potential consequences that disseminating such sensitive information can have for the participants, I attempt to present my findings not only responsibly, but truthfully. Even when I make efforts to clarify participants' statements by translating and transcribing them for an academic audience, I include them in their original textspeak form, in order to ensure their content is presented factually. I do this in order to ensure that participants' voices are not misunderstood or misrepresented, and thus have clarified the ways in which I made sense of those voices throughout the dissertation, and attempted to always place them in context. Contextualization entails explaining to readers the empirical and theoretical bases upon which my analysis stands, being forthcoming about my philosophical

stances, as well as being forthcoming about the limits of my academic expertise, and the ways in which my political and other biases limited this work.

Ethical tensions reached an impasse when my developing expertise in delinquency shifted from the academic to the professional in 2017, as I became a criminal intelligence analyst for the El Paso Police Department. This career move happened as I was still member-checking data with some participants, with whom I had been open until then in regards to my professional experiences. All participants knew that I was an academic at the University of Texas at El Paso, and that I was conducting a study on narcocultura. However, I sensed that disclosing my new career path in law enforcement would have shifted the power dynamics in our relationships in ways that would have disrupted the trust they had deposited in me and our interaction altogether. These considerations led me to discontinue contact with participants, sporadic as it had become by then.

In the following chapter, I present a review of literature that discusses phenomena that lay the groundwork to develop a better understanding of the ways in which narcocultura and youth identities intersect. I overview some work about the ways in which hip-hop culture has been found to be of great significance for the construction of Black identities in the United States, a phenomenon that I find has parallels to the ways narcocultura is used in Latinx communities. In order to explain these similarities I present a section of literature on the parallels between hip-hop culture and narcocultura. Subsequently I review contemporary academic work about narcocultura, specifically about youth, belonging, and narcocorridos; the narcosphere (González, 2017) and imagined narcoscapes (Cabañas, 2014), and narcoviolenca (Halvey, 2018).

Online Ethnography

Designing an ethnography to take place exclusively on the internet posed some challenges, first of which was to define the name one gives to such an endeavor. It is challenging to define ethnographic research exercises where fieldwork is conducted primarily by digital means as purely virtual or online because, as Hine (2015) explains, the internet is embedded and embodied across a number of offline domains too. The author explains that the internet is increasingly embedded into our connected devices, such as personal computers and smartphones, which in a lot of communities (even marginalized ones) have become ubiquitous. The ways in which these devices have become integral to our domestic and working environments mean that we access the internet at a rapidly expanding number of locations, and for a multitude of purposes (recreational, professional, etc.). Therefore, Hine suggests that social networks have become enablers that amalgamate our online and offline lives into an inseparable networked continuum.

By characterizing the internet as “embodied”, Hine (2015) aims to illustrate the way in which the internet has become part of the infrastructure of our everyday social existence. As it has increasingly become a part of our everyday lives, we experience the internet not only as a communication tool, but also as a way of understanding and becoming ourselves, and of being visible to—as well as constructing—others. The author explains:

It has increasingly become apparent as internet use has become embedded in everyday life that, rather than being a transcendent cyberspatial site of experience, the internet has often become a part of us, and that virtual identities are not necessarily separate from physical bodies. We do not necessarily think of ‘going online’ as a discrete form of experience, but we instead often experience being online as an extension of other embodied ways of being and acting in the world. (Hine, 2015, p. 41)

What conceiving the internet as embedded and embodied means, in terms of designing ethnographic studies of online communities, is that fieldwork requires an active process of embedding and embodying (Hine 2015). This may be true for all types of ethnography, but in online ethnographies, the existence of “the field” does precede the fieldwork, rather, fieldwork brings the field into being (Hine 2015, p. 81). Hine explains that, as ethnographers, we may decide to follow a particular group of people in pre-existing online spaces, but it is the specific activities we choose to observe and research, through the lens of preconceived theoretical frameworks, and framed by our own preoccupations and curiosity, that bring the fieldsite for a particular study into being. Therefore, from this perspective, ethnographers embody the sites of digitally mediated ethnographic fieldwork into which we embed ourselves, because we construct them around our particular everyday use of the internet.

From a CDA perspective, Van Dijck (2013) points out that digitally mediated social networks such as Facebook are simultaneously technological platforms, economic enterprises, social structures, and cultural constructs; this means that all of these domains play significant roles in the networked lives Hine (2015) describes. Thus, Hine posits that ethnography of the (embedded and embodied) internet should be concerned with observing and experiencing the complex ways in which these domains interconnect in everyday practice. The ethnographer is portrayed by Hine (2016) as a participant who embodies the setting of the study. For Hine, the boundaries of the field site are dependent of the ethnographer’s consciousness and agency in defining them. “To explore the Internet as an embedded social phenomenon and as a component of contemporary lived existence,” (Hine, 2016, p. 411) the author writes, we need to acknowledge the multiple ways in which we engage with online spaces, our calibration of ourselves as social beings, and have a reflexive understanding of our place in the world.

Study Design and Data Collection

In terms of methods, I designed the study from the perspective that social media spaces such as Facebook, are not exclusively virtual, but a part of this amalgamated network of online-offline life that we experience as embedded, embodied and everyday (Hine, 2015). I subscribed to Hine's premise of the "embodied internet", thus, I did not consider conversations conducted by digital means as happening in a metaphysical cyberspace, but as embodied experiences for the participants and myself. As Hine (2015) suggests, I relied heavily on reflexive and autoethnographic methods due to the "diversity and highly personal nature of the online experience" (p. 14), which means that on occasion, I was left only with my own experiences "as a source of insight into the unresolvable uncertainties and tensions" (p. 82) that presented in the course of the study.

The dissertation study was a yearlong ethnography, where I actively participated in narcocultura-oriented Facebook groups, and held conversations with group participants via Facebook messenger, and to a lesser degree, the messaging app Whatsapp⁷. I selected various Facebook groups in which I participated by reacting and commenting participants' post to the groups wall, and by engaging participants in message exchanges through the messenger function and app; some of these exchanges were very brief, and some developed into conversations that spanned for weeks, and some for months. The groups in which I participated regularly were named "La Plebada Alterada", and "Corridos al Millón"; additionally, I occasionally participated in a women-centric, narcocultura-oriented group named "Sicarias Cabronas", which later splintered into two groups: "Sicaria Cabrona" and "Cabronas Sicarias".

⁷ Whatsapp use was circumscribed to Cinco Siete and Reina Rivera. I provided all participants with my phone number (a prerequisite for using the app) as part of the process of obtaining informed consent, but only Cinco and Reina ever messaged me through it. No Whatsapp conversations were coded, as they did not pertain to the research questions, and were not covered by the informed consent agreement.

Initial “public” interactions (exchanging likes, replying to comments in posts), and private conversations were the starting point of the subsequent private conversations I held with participants over the course of a year. Since Facebook allows us to construct autobiographical stories that can be constantly re-written and re-edited, based on almost immediate feedback by our followers, I attempted to address these editorial intricacies in my conversations with participants. I aimed to deconstruct these multimedia self-portraits with their authors, firstly, by addressing the construction of my own online persona openly, in the hopes that this would engender a reciprocally candid response.

My overall intention was to capture the complexity of social interaction online, scrutinizing the reproduction of narcocultura in-depth and in rich detail. In order to do this, in addition to engaging group participants in conversation, I collected and analyzed various forms of multimedia such as videos, song recordings, “selfie” self-portraits, and memes, all of which I refer to as “digital artifacts”. I also attempted to follow participants’ everyday life on Facebook, paying close attention to anything that may shed light on how social identification processes are shaped by online interaction and the weaving of online and offline cultural life. This sort of deconstruction of multimedia stories, required multidimensional analyses that accounted for the intersecting moments (historical and personal) that participants used and referenced in the process of creating digitally-mediated, self-representative, self-constructing narratives (or identity work, as defined by Davis (2016)).

These multi-domain, digitally-mediated spaces which I co-constructed with study participants by embedding participation in these Facebook groups into my everyday digitally-mediated social practices, emerged as the embodied field across which I attempt to set forth critical, reflexive, aesthetic, and narrative analyses of how participants’ constructed their

multimedia-enabled exhibitions of self-representation for their imagined online audiences. Fieldwork was embodied to such a degree, that in its analysis I draw heavily on my own positionality, offline, and online experiences in attempts to help me develop understandings of participants' sense-making processes, or at least informed conjectures about their identity work; in some ways, methodology was therefore a state of mind rather than a script.

Data Analysis

In regards to data management, I began by saving all Facebook messenger conversations as Word text files and compiling one file per participant including all of our individual conversations. I then created a working copy of these four files and formatted these into two-column documents. I kept the original textspeak on the left-hand column and transcribed it, word-for-word, into standard Spanish. When I finished this process, I saved the transcriptions as PDF documents. To begin constructing the analysis, I developed a coding scheme by revisiting the various bodies of gathered data, beginning with the compilation of each participant's posts (written) and images, and comparing them with the field notes and memos I made around the same time those postings happened. I then coded the standardized version of the conversations in Nvivo, taking notes about what I felt was powerful, important, and the reasons behind said feelings. I identified the generic uses of written and visual language wherever possible (Rymes, 2012), and used these reiterations as labels for in-vivo codes. Other codes came from "ways of being" (Gee, 2007, p. 3) or discourses that amalgamate values, beliefs, and attitudes into social identities. I attempted to de-construct these ways of being into in-vivo codes by looking at descriptions and depictions that referred me to commonplace narratives within narcocultura.

The coding scheme represents my attempt to isolate thematic categories as they emerged in the data in order to describe the ways in which participants made sense of the ways in which

narcocultura is important to their Facebook self-images; and the ways in which other cultural capital informed these processes. As such, the major in-vivo codes that emerged were “aparentar ser pesado”, “lo chacaloso”, “buchonas y buchones”, “how women are”, “aquí andamos”, “the legitimation of violence”, and “sicarias y sicarios”. All these codes are unpacked in the following chapter, which presents a descriptive account of the decisions I made regarding interactions in this study; particularly about the ways in which I interpreted conversations with participants and our relationships developing throughout time, but also about the digital and cultural artifacts they shared in these networks.

The conversations with study participants are presented in their original textspeak form—that is, exactly how they were typed into Facebook messenger—alongside their transcription into standard Spanish. I do this, as I mentioned, in order to ensure that participants’ voices are not misunderstood or misrepresented, but also to allow readers to build upon or challenge my interpretations of words, conversations, and decisions regarding identity work that participants conducted via textspeak. In the following sections, I present these evolving interactions and reflections in detail, beginning with the ways in which I selected the Facebook groups I embedded into my online life, and followed by the ways in which I gained entry into participants’ digitally-mediated everydayness, and my interpretations of the conversations that ensued.

Selecting Facebook Groups for Study

In April of 2016, I identified three narcocultura-oriented Facebook groups, out of the dozens that exist, to include in my study. These were “La Plebada Alterada”, “Corridos al Millón”, and “Sicarias Cabronas”. I actively participated in these forums for months, and engaged in online conversations with group participants through Facebook messenger.

Ultimately, five in-depth discussions directly developed from my participation in the groups, these also took place online, and spanned between four to six months in two cases, and for more than a year in another two. Initial criteria for selecting the groups La Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón was the amount of members they had, which was in the hundreds. From looking at their home pages, I could tell these groups had participants identifying as men and women who were interacting with each other by posting original content such as selfies and self-authored videos, sharing corridos and corrido videos, and using meme-generators to create and share memes to these pages. Sicarias Cabronas, which was a meme-oriented group (meaning that most of its content came in the form of memes) also had more than a hundred users, but I selected it as part of my study for more complex reasons, which I explain in the following.

The first group I chose to participate in was La Plebada Alterada; this group was one of the narcocultura-oriented Facebook groups with the most members at the time of my study, and because it was an open group in which participants' posts were public, there was no need to ask group administrators for permission to follow, like, or interact with group members. The group's name meant, in my perspective, that the group would be most likely populated by narcocultura insiders, that is, Facebook users who identified (and identified with) the group's title as part of "El Movimiento Alterado". The second group I deliberately chose to include in my study was one named Corridos al Millón. This group also had more than 100 members, and was an open group. The title suggested to me that it was a group that coalesced around corrido music, not necessarily narcocultura, since some corridos are not narcocorridos. This subtle distinction is one of the ways in which I planned to explore the tangents, overlaps, and intersections of the musical genre known in the United States as "regional mexicano" (or "música ranchera" in México) and the overarching phenomenon of narcocultura, which extends beyond the music, and into other

forms of media. *Corridos al Millón* complemented *La Plebada Alterada* in another way, as the latter overtly caters to music and videos from the *Twiiins Culiacán* label, associated with the *Sinaloa Cartel*; so, by choosing to participate in a group which did not advertise its alliances overtly, I hoped to encounter forms of *narcocultura* produced outside *el Movimiento Alterado*.

The decision about including the third group I ended up participating in for the study stemmed from a similar attempt at a balancing act. When I began interacting with group participants in the “*Plebada*” and “*Corridos*” groups, I was moderately successful in engaging participants who identified themselves as men in protracted conversations about music, trucks, firearms, and other topics evidently linked to a shared understanding of masculinized roles in our respective societies. On the other hand, I struggled to engage participants who identified as women in anything else than brief, one-liner, conversations characterized by monosyllabic answers. Through conversations with men who would later become participants in the study, I learned that this was probably due to the ways in which interaction with the opposite gender in these groups is largely circumscribed to courtship. I believe that my attempt to engage women in conversations outside this dynamic, may have struck them as unfamiliar or uninteresting.

Narcocultura is notorious for promoting a narrow array of feminized identities in which women are largely regarded as ornamental, which depict them as subordinate, disposable, sexual objects (Vásquez Mejías, 2016). However, there are some identities that are not subaltern to masculine ones; one such role is that of the “*sicaria*”, which is a gunfighter for hire. Therefore, I decided to begin participating in a female-oriented *narcocultura* Facebook group *Sicarias Cabronas*, hoping to engage in conversation with women who identify with *narcocultura*, not through passive, ornamental identities, but through active, empowered ones (even if this empowerment comes from the exercise of violence, a staple of *narcocultura*) that place them in

roles traditionally held by men. My hope was that women in this forum had different expectations about online interactions with men, and that this could ultimately help me engage women in long-term conversations. This expectation ultimately did not come into fruition, so no interactions with members of this third group are included in the analysis (although I collected and analyzed a number of artifacts shared to this group), which relies only on conversations with participants of the Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups.

Table 4.1

Data Points for Facebook Groups Included in the Study

<u>Group Name</u>	<u>Members</u>	<u>Followers</u>	<u>Likes</u>	<u>Content Type</u>
La Plebada Alterada	394	4,017	4,019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Autobiographic videos ▪ Content centered on exploits of Sinaloa Cartel members. ▪ Corridos, narcocorridos, and narco-videos primarily from Twiins Culiacán record label. ▪ Facebook Stories (feature available by 2017) ▪ Memes (mostly pesado and sicario-oriented)^a ▪ Selfies ▪ Videos with non-narco content (humor, current affairs)
Corridos al Millón	1,414	2,058,087	1,625,327	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Autobiographic videos ▪ Corridos, narcocorridos and narco-videos from various record labels and artists ▪ Facebook Stories (feature available by 2017) ▪ Memes (“pesado” and sicario-oriented, humor, etc.) ▪ Selfies ▪ Videos with non-narco content (humor, current affairs)
Sicarias Cabronas	398	276,951	274,264	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Memes (almost exclusively sicaria-oriented) ▪ Videos with non-narco content (humor, current affairs)

Notes. Figures reflect 2019 data available from Facebook “community” statistics. Facebook group members receive notifications of all interactions within the group, followers often are notified when their friends interact in the group, likes reflect how many users like the group but not necessarily follow it.

^a See Chapter 8, Section “Sicarios y Pesados”.

Participant Selection

My participation in Facebook groups followed similar patterns; I began by visiting the group’s pages and reading through the history of posts its members had published. In all groups, these ranged from original self- portraits (selfies) and pictures to shared music videos and memes. I collected shared images like memes and videos as artifacts for analysis, none of which

featured group participants themselves, but rather were taken from other media outlets and shared within Facebook. I spent long periods just *hanging-out* in these groups, mainly logging in from mobile devices, observing interactions among participants, taking notes on anything I found remarkable, and participating wherever I felt comfortable. I shared a number of videos and links to audio myself, as well as links to news stories and opinion pieces about the “drug war” and narcocultura. I used these posts to construct my own image within these forums, walking a fine line as a narcocultura insider and as a researcher. This online persona (I hoped) resembled a journalist, or a novelist, more than an “investigador” (which to me could have had law-enforcement overtones). Thus, my posts were often accompanied by requests to “help me understand” the appeal of narcocultura-related artifacts.

The ways in which I began interacting with participants also followed a similar evolution; an individual would share a picture, video, or story to the group’s wall, and I would click “like” or comment on it, or publicly like or reply to a comment an individual had made on another group participant’s post. When an individual liked my comment or replied, I would message her or him privately in the hopes of beginning a conversation; all but one of my attempts to recruit participants into the study more or less followed this dynamic. The exception was Reina Rivera who I first met in person during the course of my offline life, and who I later realized was a member of the Corridos al Millón group. There was no set selection criteria. Most conversations did not evolve from two or three replies, and only conversations with four people got far enough for me to obtain informed consent.

Table 4.2

Data Points for Participants in the Study

<u>Participant Name</u>	<u>Descriptors</u>	<u>First Contact</u>	<u>Typical Communication</u>
Cinco Siete	Identified as a heterosexual man of Mexican heritage living in the United States. Participated in La Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups.	Through Facebook in 2016, via interactions (likes, comments, and replies) within his posts in La Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups.	Primarily through Facebook Messenger, occasionally via WhatsApp ^a Replied consistently in textspeak using Spanish in short sentences to conversations that I initiated and questions I posed.
Edgar Quintero	Identified as a heterosexual man living in México. Participated in La Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups.	Through Facebook in 2017, via interactions (likes, comments, and replies) within his and other users' posts in La Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups.	Exclusively through Facebook Messenger Replied sporadically in textspeak using Spanish in short sentences to conversations that I initiated and questions I posed.
Luis Coronel	Identified as a heterosexual man living in México. Participated in La Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups.	Through Facebook in 2017, via interactions (likes, comments, and replies) within his and other users' posts in La Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups.	Exclusively through Facebook Messenger Replied sporadically in textspeak using Spanish in short sentences to conversations that I initiated and questions I posed.
Reina Rivera	Identified as a heterosexual woman of Mexican heritage living in the United States. Participated in Corridos al Millón groups, liked and followed Sicarias Cabronas group	In person, 2016	Primarily through Facebook Messenger, occasionally via WhatsApp ^a Replied consistently in textspeak, codeswitching English and Spanish in short sentences to conversations that I initiated and questions I posed.

^a No WhatsApp interactions were covered under the terms of the informed consent agreement.

Out of the three participants that I met online and that agreed to participate in more comprehensive conversations, two (Edgar Quintero and Luis Coronel) made vague claims of being active participants in organized crime syndicates. I always regarded these claims as aspirational rather than genuine. What this means is that I considered these claims part of the online identity work these participants were conducting on Facebook and not as a factual. I consider that the reason participants had for making comments, in groups, and in private conversations, that hinted that they occupied spaces as important members of criminal organizations (which always remained unnamed) was that these actions allowed them to position themselves as authentic “narcos” in the eyes of other group participants (and mine as well). This shroud of authenticity placed them high in the hierarchy of the Facebook groups, and gave them authority when discussing narcocultura. My objectives for this study never included ascertaining the truthfulness of such claims, thus, my position on “truth” throughout the dissertation was that I would concentrate on unpacking the identity work behind participants’ actions, rather than gauging their veracity.

The four participants, Cinco Siete, Edgar Quintero, Luis Coronel, and Reina Rivera are all described in detail in the following chapter, in what I call retratos (portraits) that are meant to paint a rich picture to readers of the ways in which our conversations began and developed, and about how I made sense of them through a mix of personal experience and academic research. The retratos begin at initial contact and continue up to the time when I discontinued contact with them. They include participants' explanations about the choices behind their pseudonyms, as well as explanations about being narcocultura insiders. I also illustrate how different participants allowed dissimilar amounts of access to different dimensions of their identities, and what I was

thinking at the time of our conversations, and how I interpret my own reactions and attitudes toward them.

Chapter 5: Retratos of the Participants

In this chapter, I introduce the participants in five sections. The first two participants, Reina Rivera and Cinco Siete, are introduced in a section each; while the other two, Edgar Quintero and Luis Coronel, share a single segment. This disparity is due to the differences in the amount of gathered data available for each participant, where Reina Rivera and Cinco Siete provided an abundance of personal information throughout our conversations. In contrast, Edgar Quintero and Luis Coronel who were far more succinct in their answers, and at times were deliberately cryptic about their identity. I discuss the multiple dimensions that set apart Cinco and Reina in a separate section, in order to help readers better understand why these two participants have individual subsections of analysis, while Edgar and Luis share one.

While presenting each of the participants, I explain how for each of them, their pseudonym became a site of commentary about the types of identities they were constructing. I also introduce readers to several of the key phenomena of identification that were used in the group, such as courage, resolve, and strength of character expressed in ideas such as “rifársela” (literally “to raffle”, but more closely meaning taking big risks), “chingarle” or “andar en la chinga” (“to be in the fray”), and being tough. Additionally, I explain participants’ recurring ways of explaining the distinctiveness of narcocultura identities such as “chacaloso”, as well as the ways in which some participants examined the legitimacy of other Facebook users claims of narco-insiderdom, explaining they were making these “por mamones” and to “aparentar ser pesado”.

Reina Rivera

Reina Rivera and I met because we both worked for the same school in late 2016. She was in her mid-twenties at the time and identified as a heterosexual woman, a second-generation American of Mexican heritage, born-and-raised in El Paso Texas. I found out she listened to narcocorridos by accident, when I walked by her desk and she was in the middle of a discussion with a colleague, arguing about the reasons why she enjoyed them. I could not help but joining in on the conversation, Reina sampled some of her favorite corridos for us, she particularly enjoyed ones by Gerardo Ortiz, all of which I recognized by song title almost immediately, as I am very familiar with his music. Both Reina and her colleague commented on how my familiarity with the genre struck them as odd, since I did not fit their stereotypes of narcocorrido listeners. I remember them making a reference of how I looked “fresa” (literally *strawberry*, a popular way of referring to people who make it a point of showing off their higher class) to which I did not take offense, I get called that all the time, so there’s probably some truth to it. Chaparro (2016) explains that some of the most common associations made in borderland society about the *fresa* social persona are:

High social class or economic status and the privileges that accompany this social position; for example, attending private schooling institutions, driving expensive cars, wearing expensive clothing, owning vacation homes, extensive international travel, being fluent in English and other languages, etc. (p. 52) [and] phenotypically depicted as light-skin and European descendant (p. 61).

Fresas do not listen to narcocorridos, or watch narco-novelas (at least we claim not to). In the social circles I grew up in, these artifacts were reserved to the uneducated, who (the classist discourse went) were too lazy to pull themselves out of poverty in ways that were not related to narcotrafficking, and thus found the get-rich-quick message in these narratives appealing. I really

can't do much about displaying what some regard as a fresa demeanor. Growing up in Juárez, I was brought-up in an educational environment, at home and in school, where showing people that you were "cultured" was desirable. This specifically meant appreciating artifacts, fashions, products, and looks associated with European culture (for example, one of the most prolific fashion chain stores in México is called "Fábricas de Francia"). In contrast, this meant distancing oneself from artifacts and culture associated with México's agrarian population, regarded as "uncultured" and indigenous. Additionally, the "correct" use of academic Spanish was constantly policed, and while learning European languages was highly desirable, mixing English and Spanish—specifically—was actively discouraged, as it allegedly signaled the inability to use either one of them correctly. I do not espouse any of these classist ideologies about culture and language, but I realize they are probably ingrained in me. To this day, for example, I never wear cowboy boots or hats (to avoid looking "rural" or low-class), get all my fashion cues from European magazines, and subconsciously refrain mixing English and Spanish when I speak.

In regards to my initial conversation with Reina, being aware of all this baggage quickly made me realize that, given the very negative discourses addressing listeners of these songs in borderland society, Reina may have been experiencing anxiety because we were discussing narcocorridos in our workplace. I therefore reassured Reina that my interest, appreciation, and even enjoyment of the genre was genuine by going into a very short monologue about my developing understanding that prevailing discourses about listeners of narcocorridos—such as the idea that they are uneducated, low class, or even somehow complicit in the wave of crime and violence that have engulfed México in the last decade—are rooted in simplistic understandings of the narcotrafficking phenomenon that frame it in terms of "los buenos contra los malos" (good guys versus bad guys), leaving no space for nuance. Immediately after my soliloquy, Reina

explained that what she found most engaging about narcocorridos was their narrative nature, stating that “cada corrido cuenta una historia” (each song tells a story). Reina, our colleague, and I ended up conversing for the better part of an hour about the ways in which we make sense of these stories, which parts we thought were true, which were fictitious, and how they both interwove.

Months later, I noticed that Reina was a member of the Corridos al Millon Facebook group, and decided to contact her via Messenger. Since by that time I was no longer Reina’s coworker, I reminded her of our conversation, explained the scope and objectives of my study, and invited her to become a participant. Reina accepted, and chose the pseudonym “Reina Rivera” a composite, as she explained it, of “La Reina del Sur” a popular, fictional character in narcocultura, and Jenni Rivera’s last name. Jenni Rivera was a popular American-born “Banda” singer of Mexican heritage who died when her private jet crashed in 2012. Banda is a musical genre that combines corridos, ballads, and pop; it is played by orchestras of 15 or so musicians, it’s heavy on brass and percussion, that produces “a music that recalls polkas and in fact derives in part from German influence in areas of northern México” (Morrissey, 2014).

Excerpt 5.1 - *Questions about Reina Rivera’s pseudonym*

Participant	Text as typed	Text translated
Emiliano	So... Reina Rivera hu? Why that name?	So, “Reina Rivera” hu? Why that name?
R. Rivera	Lol yea	LOL, yeah.
Emiliano	Reina, like la reina del sur?	“Reina” like “La Reina del Sur”
R. Rivera	Andale	Ándale.
Emiliano	Como la Kate?	Como la Kate? (del Castillo)
R. Rivera	Yup	Yup.
Emiliano	Why?	Why?
R. Rivera	Cuz she tuff	Because she’s tough.
Emiliano	Kate o Teresa Mendoza?	Kate or “Teresa Mendoza” (character)?
R. Rivera	Both lol	Both, LOL.
Emiliano	Why not Teresa Rivera then? Or Teresa del Castillo? That last one has a nice telenovela ring to it, no?	Why not “Teresa Rivera” then? Or “Teresa del Castillo”? That last one has a nice telenovela ring to it, no?

R. Rivera	Lol nah rivera cmo jeni	LOL, no, “Rivera” como Jenny.
Emiliano	Jenny Rivera?	Jenny Rivera?
R. Rivera	Y	Yes
Emiliano	Why her?	Why her?
R. Rivera	Cuz she tuff too!!!!!!	Because she’s tough too!
Emiliano	LOL, I see where this is going... U tough too?	LOL, I see where this is going... You are tough too?
R. Rivera	U knw it!	You know it!
Emiliano	Makes sense then	Makes sense then.

Reina’s construction of her pseudonym reflects the overlaps between narcocultura and banda music in that narco-music is mostly banda music (there is such a thing as narco hip-hop), but most banda music is not narco-music. It’s noteworthy that the two characters Reina combined to build her avatar are regarded as strong independent women in spheres where women are relegated to subordinate roles: *La Reina del Sur* (from which Reina Rivera borrowed her first pseudo-name) is a novel by Spanish author Arturo Pérez-Reverte (2011), its protagonist Teresa Mendoza is a woman who begins the story as drug trafficker’s girlfriend, but through her savviness for business and dispassionate brutality comes to dominate the highest echelons of the drug oligarchy over the men who traditionally run it “by building her professional life on calculated courage and by defying conventionally assigned roles and boundaries” (Pobutsky, 2009, p. 273). The character of Teresa Mendoza was brought to television in two separate series, one of which was broadcasted by Telemundo and starred Kate del Castillo, a popular Mexican actor who gained international notoriety for having accompanied American actor Sean Penn to meet with El Chapo 2016.

Reina had followed del Castillo’s career closely since she incarnated Teresa Mendoza for Telemundo’s *La Reina del Sur* and the actor’s exploits would be at the center of our conversations throughout the year. Pobutsky (2009) considers that readers of *La Reina del Sur* will recognize that the greatest obstacle that the fictional Teresa had to overcome in order to

become La Reina del Sur, was the gender-determined position of subalternity in which narcocultura places women (Vásquez Mejías, 2016). I believe that for Reina Rivera, Kate del Castillo's rendition of Teresa Mendoza seemed to represent the ways in which she felt a woman can be equally capable than men, even in violence-ridden enterprises characterized by the ruthlessness of their protagonists, areas that have long been considered exclusively masculine (Pobutsky, 2009).

Reina Rivera's complementary choice for her pseudonym, Jenni Rivera, is also widely regarded as a figure who challenged said subalternity. Morrissey (2014) explains that a performer in a genre dominated by men, Jenni Rivera was able to construct an aggressive critique of the social order, as well as the values of a dominant male culture. Garcia-Hernandez (2016) has called Jenni Rivera's music "Feminist Sonic Bootcamp" (p. 427) because the author found that its consumption has help listeners to "create a women-centered space where daughters and mothers could transmit sonic pedagogies of working-class struggles, motherhood, girlhood, race, and sexuality" (p. 436), Morrissey (2014) considers that the singer became an icon of womanly strength and resilience, and points out that the singer presented herself as "full of the same grit and brio" (p. 415) as her masculine counterparts. I think that Reina's description of Jenny Rivera and Kate del Castillo as "tuff" symbolized a recognition of the type of grit Morrissey (2014) alludes to.

From my perspective, La Reina del Sur and Jenni Rivera, represented positive feminine identities from which to address narcocultura, a topic characterized by its misogynistic discourses. In my online conversations with Reina, I kept this interweaving of two female icons in mind, one fictional and one real, both considered non-subservient to masculine hegemonies. I also kept them in mind during the analysis of our conversations, as she had selected them to

represent her online persona. To me, illustrating the ways in which she made sense of the prescriptive roles available to women within narco-trafficking mythology and the banda music scene, selecting some elements within these characters as important to her own identity (like being “tuff”), while resisting others (like being a criminal).

Cinco Siete

I spoke to Cinco Siete on-and-off for the better part of eight months; he represented my first successful attempt to recruit someone I hadn’t met in person into the study. Cinco Siete is a Facebook user who identifies as a heterosexual man of Mexican heritage living in the United States. By the time I sent Cinco Siete a private message, I had already interacted within the Plebada Alterada grupo for a few weeks. What captured my attention about Cinco Siete’s interaction in the group was that, in addition to sharing the type of carefully curated selfie that a lot of users also posted to the group’s wall (ones in which participants seemed to be wearing their best outfits suggesting they were preparing to “go out”), he posted a lot of live videos of his daily life, where you could see him working, wearing sometimes stained mechanic’s overalls. Once we started chatting with some regularity, and he agreed to become part of the study, I asked him about these videos:

Excerpt 5.2 - Question about Cinco Siete’s live videos

Emiliano	A cada rato subes videos en vivo... sobre todo cuando andas en el trabajo, por que?	A cada rato subes videos en vivo... sobre todo cuando andas en el trabajo, ¿por qué?
Cinco Siete	Pa k la plbada vea k ando chingandle	Para que la plebada vea que ando chingándole

“Chingarle” has no easy translation into English, but it became a recurring theme in my conversations with participants who identified as men. I will expound on what “chingarle” means in the forthcoming chapters, but it is a way of expressing pride in one’s hard work. Cinco also shared many videos and photos of himself shooting firearms, especially the controversial AR-15

semiautomatic rifle, which looks like its military service rifle cousins the M16 and M4, and was banned under federal law under the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act enacted in 1994, which expired in 2004, allowing the public to purchase it. I'm particularly fond of this type of firearm, and it was this shared enthusiasm for arms that helped me establish initial rapport with Cinco. When it came time to pick a pseudonym, Cinco decided he wanted to be referred to as "Cinco Siete" (alluding to 5.7×28mm, an armor-piercing firearm cartridge that is popular in narcocultura) perhaps in reference to our shared interest in firearms, which was the starting point in our relationship. The following excerpt of one of our conversations illustrates how proficiency in the manipulation of firearms was central to Cinco's online persona, and the construction of masculine identities within the group:

Excerpt 5.3 – "*Por mamones*"

Emiliano	Ponen muchas fotos de armas... tu también, no?	Ponen muchas fotos de armas... tú también, no?
Cinco Siete	Mi unico visio preja	Mi único vicio pareja
Emiliano	Jajaja el mío también hermano ... Pero tu eres casi el único que sale jalando el arma, le he rascado y las mayoría de las fotos son de otros lugares, no las toman ellos. Por que crees que suban fotos de armas que no son tuyas?	Jajaja el mío también hermano ... Pero tú eres casi el único que sale jalando el arma, le he rascado y la mayoría de las fotos son de otros lugares, no las toman ellos. Por qué crees que suban fotos de armas que no son tuyas?
Cinco Siete	X mmones nms	Por mamones nomás
Emiliano	Que quieren aparentar?	Qué quieren aparentar?
Cinco Siete	K andan en eso pero ni es sierto	Que andan en eso, pero ni es cierto
Emiliano	Tu no andas en eso pero pones fotos con tus erres, por qué?	Tú no andas en eso pero pones fotos con tus erres, por qué?
Cinco Siete	Pa k vean k no se tiene k andar en eso pa rifarcla	Para que vean que no se tiene que andar en eso para rifársela

In this last vignette, I asked Cinco about the prevalence of imagery within the Plebada group that depict men and women holding firearms. The majority of these images, I argued, did not feature the authors of the post; rather, they were obtained from other electronic sources and then shared into the forum. However, Cinco's pictures and videos featured him holding and

firing weapons. I asked about his thoughts on the subject, “you are the only one who is featured firing the weapon, I’ve researched it, and most photos are sourced from other places, not authored by the people who post them. Why do you think these people are posting pictures of guns that are not theirs?” Cinco’s answer was not surprising to me: “por mamones nomás”.

“Por mamones” was a common explanation that participants gave about their perspective about what motivates other users to post pictures where firearms or vehicles are featured, sometimes doctored to reflect affiliation to a particular cartel or sicario crew—such as the Anthrax group or the Sinaloa Cartel—or turned into memes. To be “mamón” is to be phony, a poser, and in my experience, posing as a sicario was a very sought after endeavor in the Plebada group. For example, I will argue in later stages of this dissertation, that two other participants in the study (pseudonyms “Luis Coronel” and “Edgar Quintero”) seemed to be very invested in maintaining their sicario personas, and committed to them throughout our conversations, claiming that the group was populated by mamones who were posturing while they were genuine sicarios. Cinco, on the other hand, never claimed to be a sicario, actively distancing himself from that identity therefore his assessment that others were posturing and he was genuinely “rifiándose” struck me as more believable.

“Rifársela” would come up on almost every conversation I had with the participants in the study, generally, it means something akin to “living on the edge” and taking risks, often as they relate to potential bodily injury or death. In Cinco’s case, we talked a lot about the ways in which he believed he was rifándose on a daily basis, not by engaging in organized crime, but by working hard, long shifts in the oil and gas fields of the southeastern United States, a potentially dangerous job. “You don’t have to be a part of that [narcotrafficking] in order to rifársela”. Cinco’s complex understandings of chingarle and rifársela—which are mainstays of

narcocultura, featured consistently in narcocorrido lyrics— became a segue into conversations that transcended narcocultura, we talked about the value of hard work, the difficulty of finding good paying jobs, the roles Latino men are expected to play, the particularities and difficulties that transnational, mixed-status families like ours shared in the Trump-era. The following excerpt illustrates a conversation we had about transnational politics:

Excerpt 5.4 – *El Chapo vs. Trump*

Emiliano	Pusiste una foto en la que se ve al Chapo como presidente de México	Pusiste una foto en la que se ve al Chapo como presidente de México
Cinco Siete	Jajajajajaa si	Jajaja si
Emiliano	Pero tu no vives en México	Pero tú no vives en México
Cinco Siete	Jajajajajaa no	Jajaja no
Emiliano	Aun así te importa la política mexicana?	Aun así te importa la política mexicana?
Cinco Siete	Ps no mucho	Pues no mucho
Emiliano	Pero sigues las noticias del narcotráfico?	Pero sigues las noticias del narcotráfico?
Cinco Siete	Afirma	Afirma
Emiliano	Y te gustaría que el Chapo fuera presidente de México?	Y te gustaría que el Chapo fuera presidente de México?
Cinco Siete	ajajaajaja si	Jajaja si
Emiliano	Por qué?	Por qué?
Cinco Siete	Jjaja Pa k le caye la bocal trump	Jajaja Para que le calle la boca a Trump
Emiliano	Cómo crees que le haría el Chapo- presidente para callarle la boca a Trump?	Cómo crees que le haría el Chapo- presidente para callarle la boca a Trump?
Cinco Siete	Con el puro miedo	Con el puro miedo
Emiliano	A Trump le temblaría con el Chapo como presidente?	A Trump le temblaría con el Chapo como presidente?
Cinco Siete	A guebo!!!!!! Pajajaja	A huevo! Jajaja
Emiliano	Neta?	Neta?
Cinco Siete	A guebo	A huevo... ya ves que cuando lo
	Ya vs k cuando lo agraron asta dijo	agarraron hasta dijo
Emiliano	Si, si dijo que le daba alivio, no?	Si, si dijo que le daba alivio, no?
Cinco Siete	Cómo?	Cómo?
Emiliano	Que se sentía como más tranquilo porque ya habían agarrado al Chapo	Que se sentía como más tranquilo porque ya habían agarrado al Chapo
Cinco Siete	Si fue el unico k le bajo sus guebos	Si, fue el único que le bajó sus huevos

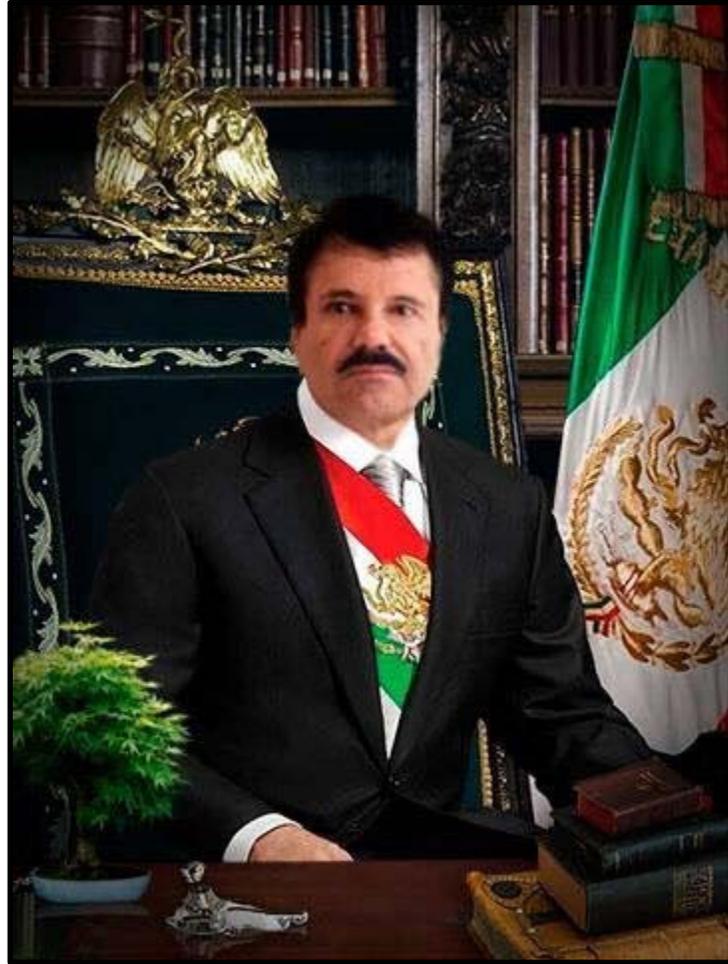


Illustration 5.1 – “El Chapo” as President

Cinco posted the above picture to the Plebada Alterada group wall; in it, popular drug lord Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera appears as president of México, which garnered Cinco’s post hundreds of likes. El Chapo was already a folk hero on both sides of the border long before Donald Trump announced his candidacy for U.S. president in June of 2015—and immediately centered his campaign around anti-Mexican rhetoric—but after his second escape from a Mexican maximum security prison, Guzmán’s status became deity-like (Jimenez-Villalobos, 2016). Trump utilized his escape to further stoke the flames of his anti-México rhetoric, mainly through tweets on July 12 and 13, 2015:



Illustration 5.2 – Trump tweets about El Chapo

On July 15, 2015, one of the Twitter accounts allegedly controlled by Guzman’s sons tweeted the following—it roughly translates to “keep at it and I will make you swallow your words”:

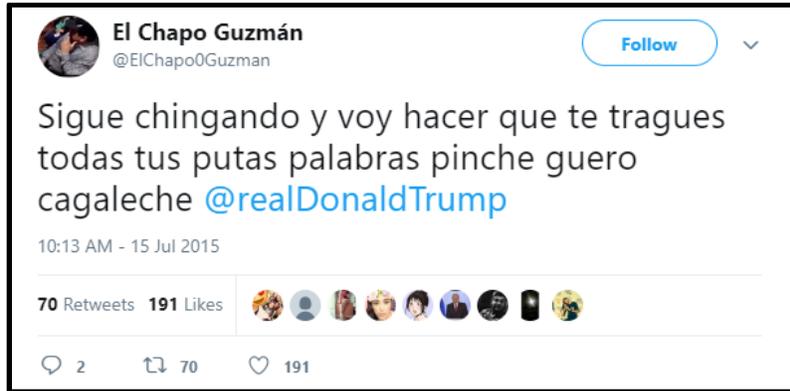


Illustration 5.3 – El Chapo tweets about Trump

A month later, when Trump called immigration “a killing machine” on Twitter, the El Chapo Guzmán account responded with a tweet that roughly translated to “you’re the only immigrant here, I own the United States so shut your mouth”:



Illustration 5.4 – El Chapo tweets back at Trump

This Tweeter feud prompted news reports that Trump had asked the FBI to investigate the threats made through the El Chapo Guzmán account (ABC News, 2015); from my perspective, whether or not the bureau took that request seriously made no difference in the amount of notoriety Guzmán gained by being inserted into U.S. politics and headlines. When Guzmán was re-captured in January 8, 2016, Trump expressed relief that he had been caught at a campaign rally the very next day (C-SPAN, 2016). This mass-mediated ordeal was illustrated in a variety of memes and comments in the Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups, where Trump was depicted as genuinely afraid of Guzmán, and was the episode Cinco and I were referencing in our conversation.

In an overtly cynical way, Cinco expressed that he wished Guzmán was put in charge of México, as he was the only one capable of shutting Trump up, just out of fear, that is, “con el puro miedo”; fear that was corroborated (in Cinco’s perspective) by Trump’s remarks on the January 9 rally. “Fue el único que le bajó a sus huevos”, Cinco commented; “huevos” in this context is a common slang term to male bravado—making reference to testicle size—where “muchos huevos” correlates with a lot of bluster, and consequently a request to tone the machismo down is often expressed in terms of “bajarle de huevos”. From my perspective, looking at the El Chapo versus Trump Twitter feud and its consequences unfold, was a defining moment because it mainstreamed narcocultura into English-speaking, broadcast U.S. media like ABC, CBS, and NBC. Whereas news content shared in the Plebada Alterada group usually came from Mexican news channels, or amateur blogs such as Blog del Narco, the insertion of El Chapo into the U.S. electoral campaign meant that stories from U.S. based broadcasters, mainly Spanish-speaking Univision, and Telemundo—which were covering the feud—got likes and shares in these narcocultura-oriented forums.

I remember getting the sense that for the group participants who were sharing and commenting on news broadcast covering Guzmán Loera's alleged tweets threatening Trump, the sudden advent of El Chapo into the U.S. evening news signified a sort of vindication of their own appreciation for narcocultura. El Chapo was standing up to Trump when no Mexican politician dared to, and Trump seemed genuinely worried. One of the most prominent living patriarchs in contemporary narco-narratives was defending migrants, claiming that he, a Mexican, now owned the U.S. at a time where Trump was beginning to stoke the fires of xenophobia, while promising to have México pay for a border wall between the two countries.

On a personal level, I couldn't help but feel congratulatory for Guzman's second escape, which for me, revealed to the world the depth of the enduring unscrupulousness and incompetence of the Mexican regime, which was at the time tooting its own horn as being in the midst of a deep reform to root out corruption. Conversing with Cinco I realized that the Twitter feud episode illustrated the ways in which the criminal-oriented identities and characters of narcocultura had garnered such a huge following and influence, as both Cinco and I had come to the same conclusion: that the Mexican regime was not any less criminal than the cartels, and that El Chapo seemed to be the only standing up for people like us (transfronterizos, people of Mexican heritage in the U.S.) and our families by occupying the leadership vacuum left by Mexican politicians who were unwilling to confront bully Trump. In a way, for people as different as Cinco and I, El Chapo had emerged as our best hope at a leader, not any less legitimate than the Mexican president.

Cinco Siete *cleanses* his online presence of “chacaloso” content

Cinco surprised me when—after a few weeks without contact— after sending him a message asking about using some of the images he had shared to the Plebada Alterada group (all

of which I had heavily modified in order to protect his identity), he responded by asking me not use any of them. I immediately reviewed his Facebook page, and discovered that he had taken down most of the content, except for a few profile pictures. Obviously, I agreed not to use any of the pictures, except for the El Chapo as president portrait, which was not of his authorship. Cinco also expressed some anxiety about the ways in which I would use our saved conversations. I reassured him that nothing could be traced back to him, and he replied by asking that I leave out some sections where we talked about our families, and I agreed. Cinco was still willing to let me use most of the less intimate conversations, and agreed to go on record about the reasons behind his rather sudden attempt to change what he perceived was a negative self-image he had been constructed through his social media presence.

Excerpt 5.5 – Cinco takes down his photos

Emiliano	Bajaste todas las fotos de que habíamos platicado	Bajaste todas las fotos de que habíamos platicado
Cinco Siete	Ey	Si
Emiliano	Y eso?	Y eso?
Cinco Siete	Ps nunca sabes kien t puede estar biendo pareja	Pues nunca sabes quién te puede estar viendo pareja
Emiliano	Simona, si te entiendo Tuvo que ver lo que platicamos?	Simona, si te entiendo... Tuvo que ver lo que platicamos?
Cinco Siete	Jajajajaj A lo mejor pareja	Jajaja, a lo mejor pareja
Emiliano	Sorry viejón, no iba por ahí mi tirada	Sorry viejón, no iba por ahí mi tirada
Cinco Siete	Yo se k no pareja	Yo sé que no pareja

“Nunca sabes quien te puede estar viendo”–“you never know who could be watching”; when Cinco told me this, I reminisced about how that was precisely what I thought when I first encountered his posts in the Plebada Alterada group. Now, I sensed that his awareness about his posts’ audience had shifted, in previous interactions, he had referred how proud he was about sharing the moments depicted in his live videos, to let everyone see he was “chingándole”, but now he had decided to remove all of that content, both from Facebook and from my data. I

couldn't help but feel that our conversations had made him more aware about the distinctiveness of his social media presence, so I flat out asked “¿tuvo que ver lo que platicamos?”, or “did our conversations have anything to do with it [your decision]?”. Cinco answered that perhaps (“a lo mejor”) it had, so I apologized and reiterated that that was not “mi tirade” (my aim).

Excerpt 5.6 – Cinco’s reasons for taking down photos

Emiliano	Te entró el nervio?	Te entró el nervio?
Cinco Siete	Ds trs	Dos tres
Emiliano	De que?	De qué?
Cinco Siete	Ps la gnt k pueda verlo	Pues la gente que pueda verlo
Emiliano	Gente movida?	Gente movida?
Cinco Siete	Gnt d toda	Gente de toda
Emiliano	TODA?	TODA?
Cinco Siete	Ey	Si
Emiliano	Jajaja... estás buscando jale, o que?	Jajaja... estás buscando trabajo, o qué?
Cinco Siete	Jajajajajaj Ey	Jajaja, si.
Emiliano	Ya sabía parejón NTC, no sabía, pero algo así me imaginé...	Ya sabía parejón; no te creas, no sabía, pero algo así me imaginé...
Cinco Siete	Ajajaja na pareja k ps Esk siempre t andan buskndo en los trabajos	Jajaja no pareja qué pues? Es que siempre te andan buscando en los trabajos
Emiliano	Si, eso es neto Pero, que tenían de malo esas fotos?	Si, eso es cierto... Pero, qué tenían de malo esas fotos?
Cinco Siete	Ps nada	Pues nada
Emiliano	Entonces?	Entonces?
Cinco Siete	Ps ntc si estaban mdio chaks	Pues no te creas, si estaban medio chakas
Emiliano	También bajaste los fb lives	También bajaste los Facebook lives
Cinco Siete	Ey	Si
Emiliano	Esos también estaban chakas?	Esos también estaban chakas?
Cinco Siete	Mso	Más o menos
Emiliano	Que crees que los del jale hubieran pensado?	Qué crees que los del jale hubieran pensado?
Cinco Siete	kandaba movido jajajajajaj	Que andaba movido Jajaja

I asked Cinco if he had become nervous about this content, he said “dos-tres”, which meant he had. “Dos-tres” is a common way of saying “so-so” or “más o menos” in Mexican slang. Even as I had apologized by saying that “por ahí no iba mi tirada” I couldn’t help but feel

like I should have expected such an outcome. Cinco explained that he was just worried that anyone, not just “gente movida” (people engaged in organized crime), could see his photos and videos. I asked if this had to do with Cinco applying for a job, “¿estás buscando jale o qué?” (“jale” being slang for work) to which Cinco replied “ey”, or “yes”. The reason for my suspicion was that I had also recently undergone a similar *cleansing* of my social media presence, precisely because I had applied to a job in law enforcement, an episode that I will address in a subsequent section. “Siempre te andan buscando en los trabajos” Cinco commented, something I know to be true—that employers often look at potential employees’ social media accounts for any signs of possible conflict. “But, what was wrong with those photos?” I asked (knowing full well he had curated his image to reflect elements of narco-cultura). Cinco’s first answer was that there was nothing wrong with the photos, something I agreed with, inherently, there was no illegal or violent activities being depicted; but I pressed him on the matter, “¿entonces?” (“so?”); “No te creas, si estaban medio chakas”, Cinco’s response was along the lines of “just kidding, they kind of did depict me as a gangster”.

What Cinco mentioned, “chaka”, is short for “chacaloso”, which literally translates to “jackal-like”. Lo chacaloso is a way to refer to attitudes that denote traits characteristic of criminal identities, such as the exaggerated use of gold jewelry, wearing lavish animal print clothing, or the display of customized, chrome or golden firearms. Narcocorrido artists have been the trendsetters for chaca fashion, and the narcocorrido industry has willfully adopted and exploited the term; for example, Latino Alternative Television (LATV), a spanish-speaking digital television channel widely available in the U.S., had an hour-long music video show aptly titled *Las Chakalozas* which played narcocorridos videos presented by an alternating group of very scantily clothed women who were referred to as “Las Chakas”. The sales pitch for the

program, which can still be found in LATV’s Facebook was “las morritas más buenas y los corridos mas perrones juntos en Las Chakalozas de Regional Music Television” (LATV, 2018). “The hottest chicks and the baddest corridos together in Las Chakalozas” is how I can best translate the slogan for this program, which had a rendering of a gold-plated, ruby-encrusted hand grenade as a logo. A memo I wrote as I researched *Las Chakalozas* reads “this would never fly as a hip-hop show”, meaning that I gathered that the depiction of violence, drug-use, and use of foul language displayed in this open-access show had gotten past censors largely because it was broadcasted exclusively in Spanish. I cannot imagine any way in which an hour-long gangsta rap show could make it past the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and play openly on American television.

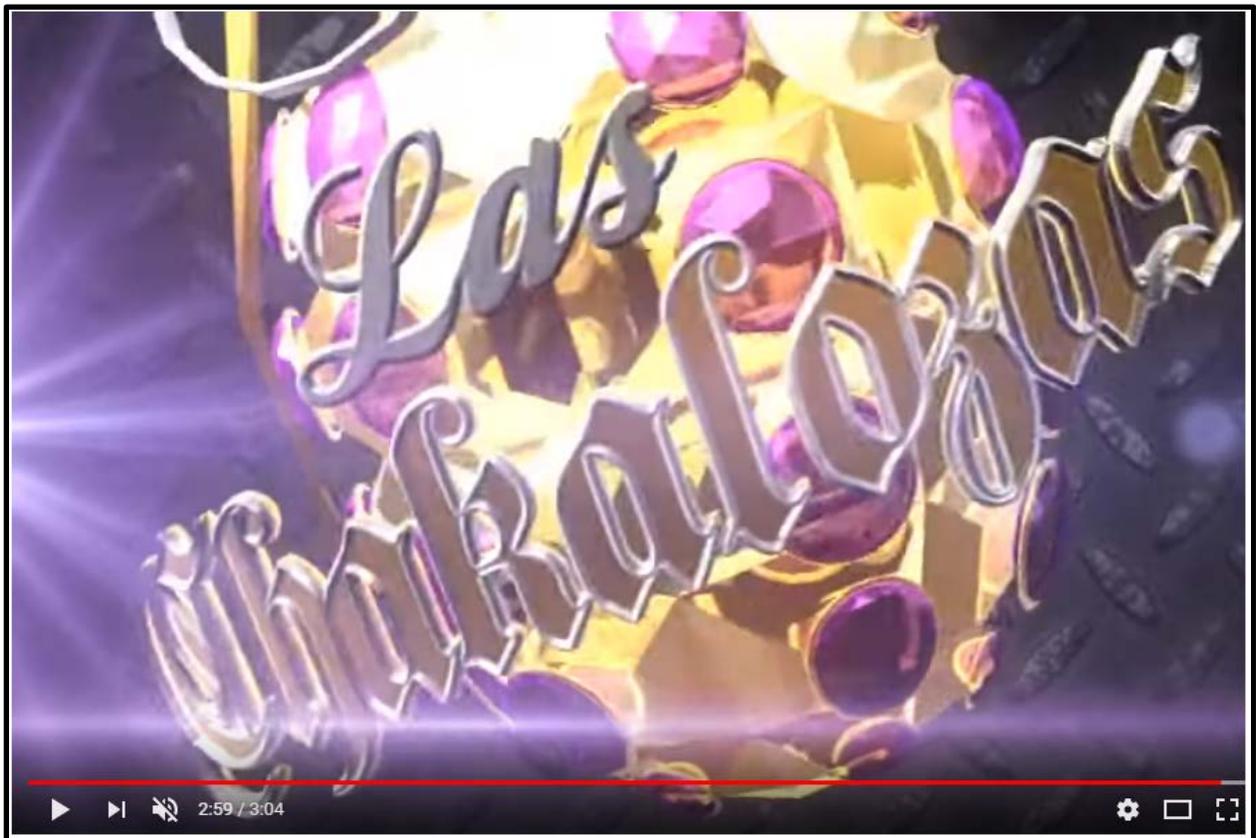


Illustration 5.5 – *Las Chakalozas* opening graphics

Cinco's decision to walk-back what he perceived as the chaca elements of his Facebook persona illustrates the dilemma I believe he was in; on the one hand, he enjoyed presenting himself surrounded by many elements central to narcocultura, like flashy jewelry, "tricked-out" trucks and rifles. As well as sharing his admiration of El Chapo's exploits and audacity, and his taste for narcocorridos, in an effort to display that like the heroes of narcocultura, he was always *rifándose* (without having anything to do with illegal activity). On the other hand, Cinco was aware of that those very elements he was proudly displaying as part of his identity could be negatively regarded by people unfamiliar with the subtleties of narcocultura. Cinco did not want anyone to mistakenly think that he "andaba movido" ("was on the move"), a term used to describe participation in the moving ("la movida") of drugs. Therefore, even as displays of *rifársela* implied showing how hard of a worker Cinco was, despite being in a challenging, physically demanding (perhaps dangerous) job, he ultimately decided to erase all references to the term in his Facebook page, both authored by him or mentioned in the content he was sharing, because of the risk of alienating potential employers. I recognized the reasoning behind Cinco's decision, as in the course of my own life, I have both experienced and witnessed the negative feelings that elements of narcocultura can engender.

How Reina Rivera and Cinco Siete's multiple dimensions set them apart

Reina is obviously different from other study participants because we know each other offline, and because she is the only woman who I conversed with on the record. This is important because it made it easier for me to enter into deeper conversations with her concerning some layers of meaning regarding her identity work and world making, especially on discourse about gender roles. Reina was also the only participant who was able to react to my offline self (which she quickly recognized as *fresa*), which also enriched our interactions. In the following

sections of the dissertation, I will illustrate how Reina appropriated certain symbolic elements from crime-oriented role identities, like “La Reina del Sur”, while maintaining other social identities, such as “buchona” and “hoe” at a distance. I will also present examples of the ways in which Reina recontextualized (Rymes, 2012; Broome, 2015) meanings surrounding all of these identities, depending on the nature of the interaction; for example, the ways in which she used disdaining terms like buchona and fresca as terms of endearment among friends.

Reina clearly enjoyed narcocorridos and narco-novelas, and was aware of the ways in which they were negatively regarded in discourse by borderland society, but also enjoyed (perhaps in private) by a large section of its Latinx population. She was also aware of the limited role identities available to women in narco-narratives, but was able to negotiating these realities, partly by making grit the discursive center of her identity work. Grit, is a positively valued identity trait that Reina was able to extract from negatively valued cultural products. While she sometimes reproduced oppressive discourses about women in our conversations, this instance is an example of the ways in which Reina used narcocultura (which is very misogynistic) to subvert oppressive stereotypes about women.

Cinco Siete also made grit a recurring distinguishing quality in his identity work, referencing it in ways such as “andar en la chinga” or “rifársela”. Like Reina, he was able to extract meaning of strength and resilience from narco-centric role identities, characters, and narratives of narcocultura. Cinco was very forthcoming about his personal life, not just to me, but using Facebook in general, which allowed me to form a clearer picture of the ways in which he recontextualized narcocultura and shifted the meaning of terms like rifársela or “andar al cien” across contexts, appropriating them from sicario-oriented role identities, to his own, which was

centered around grit, working hard, and living life to the fullest whilst remaining a law-abiding citizen.

This multi-dimensional picture of Cinco I was able to piece together with his help, contrasts and sets him apart from other participants who identified as men. In constructing his online persona, Cinco gave audiences great insight into his everyday life, which always gave me the sense that his offline and online personas genuinely resembled each other. This sense of “genuineness”, subjective as it was, is not something I felt interacting with the other participants which I recruited exclusively through online interactions and who identified as men. I will elaborate on this in subsequent sections, but what this meant for the study is that the data I collected from interactions with Cinco did not always fall neatly into the categories of analysis that emerged with other participants who identified as men.

Cinco’s appropriation of narcocultura to subvert oppressive racial and class discourses is evident in the portrayal of El Chapo as México’s leader. In allegedly instilling fear in then candidate Trump, and in ridiculing the administration of then president Enrique Peña Nieto, El Chapo represented a figure that was standing up to both Trump’s xenophobic discourse and México’s exclusive political class. Like Reina’s, Cinco’s awareness about the negatively-regarded status of narco-cultural production became evident when he decided to delete all narco-related content from his Facebook profile, even that which could have been even tangentially related to narcocultura, like the videos where he went shooting or took his truck off-road. This attempt to distance himself from anything “chacaloso”, to “no verse chaca”, so people wouldn’t think “que andaba movido”, illustrates that the imagined audience for his online persona suddenly shifted, from like-minded individuals (narcocultura insiders) to potential employers (narcocultura outsiders). Identity work to distance oneself from lo chacaloso came in stark

contrast with the pesona-building work the two other male participants displayed throughout the study.

Cinco Siete was not the only participant that referred to chaca identities. “Luis Coronel” (pseudonym), a participant I also recruited online, explained that looking chacal involves portraying oneself as a narco trafficker, or in his words “aparentar ser pesado”:

Excerpt 5.7 – “*Aparentar ser pesado*”

Emiliano	Cómo le explicarías a alguien que nunca ha oído eso de verse chacal, lo que quiere decir verse chacal?	Cómo le explicarías a alguien que nunca ha oído eso de verse chacal, lo que quiere decir “verse chacal”?
<i>Luis Coronel</i>	Ps aparentar ser pesado	Pos aparentar ser pesado

The adjective “pesado” or “heavy” is a term that has evolved to become synonyms with being involved in narco trafficking and organized crime. It originally referred to the added weight a shipment of drugs adds to any vehicle transporting it, but it is now used in reference to anyone who is a well-placed insider in organized crime; therefore conversations with participants were filled with mentions these insiders, or “gente pesada” (“heavy people”). Núñez-González (2018) explains that in Sinaloa, “la etiqueta de pesado se utiliza para referirse a un narcotraficante que posee los capitales en grandes cantidades, una jerarquía alta, mucho dinero, mucha fuerza armada o muchas relaciones de apoyo” (p. 85). In other words, to be a pesado means to be a well-connected drug trafficker with a lot of money, and a lot of firepower. In the following section, I will explain how, from my perspective, “aparentar ser pesado” was important to Luis Coronel and a fourth participant, Edgar Quintero, in the construction of their online identities.

I have grouped Edgar and Luis in a single section for a number of reasons. Firstly, I have less data collected from them compared to Reina Rivera and Cinco Siete, this is not only due to our conversations being shorter, but because our interactions had much less depth. I attribute this

shallowness to the significantly different relationship I developed with Edgar and Luis compared to Reina and Cinco. Whereas the rapport with these last two participants meant that their answers were rich and elaborated (as far as texting goes), conversations with Edgar and Luis were succinct and consisted mainly of short answers that used commonplace narcocultura platitudes. Edgar and Luis used such clichés so often, that I had a hard time distinguishing their transcripts during data analysis. This led me to place them in a single section of this chapter of the dissertation, as I didn't feel as if I had enough material to develop segments with anywhere near the richness of the other two participants. For these same reasons, I feel compelled to disclose that I never really got a sense of how much Edgar and Luis' online and offline personas actually mirrored each other.

Edgar Quintero and Luis Coronel

Both Edgar Quintero and Luis Coronel were active members of the Plebada Alterada and Corridos al Millón groups. Luis Coronel identified online as a heterosexual male in his twenties living in México, I conversed online with him over the space of a month, and having no real insight on the reasons behind his choice of pseudonym, I began by asking him to expound upon the rationale for choosing it:

Excerpt 5.8 – Luis Coronel's pseudonym

Emiliano	Órale pues, como te había comentado, de aquí pal real todo lo que me contestes lo voy a usar para mi investigación Si me contestas algo que luego no quieres que use, no hay pedo, nomás me dices y yo no lo uso Cómo la ves?	Órale pues, como te había comentado, de aquí pal real todo lo que me contestes lo voy a usar para mi investigación, si me contestas algo que luego no quieres que use, no hay pedo, nomás me dices y yo no lo uso... cómo la ves?
Luis Coronel	Chingon krnl Aki andamos palo k sele ofrezca.	Chingón carnal, aquí andamos pa' lo que se le ofrezca.
Em	Es todo! El nombre que escogiste... "Luis Coronel"... por qué ese cantante?	Es todo! El nombre que escogiste... "Luis Coronel"... por qué ese cantante?

<i>Luis</i>	No se	No sé, porque me gusta bastante su
<i>Coronel</i>	Pk m gusta vastante su musik	música...
Em	Neta? Nunca he visto que subas o le des like a un video de Luis Coronel en el grupo...	Neta? Nunca he visto que subas o le des like a un video de Luis Coronel en el grupo...
<i>Luis</i>	Neta?	Neta?
<i>Coronel</i>		
Em	Neta carnal... puros corridos alterados contigo, apoco no? Jajaja	Neta carnal... puros corridos alterados contigo, apoco no? Jajaja
<i>Luis</i>	Jajajajajajaj	Jajaja... es que no me conoces afuera
<i>Coronel</i>	Es k no me conoses afuera pareja	pareja

In this conversation snip, I began by warning Luis that he was now on-the-record, but that if there was anything he didn't want included in the study he could just reach out and tell me. The way in which Luis replied is noteworthy, he wrote "aquí andamos" which means "we are here" or "we are around", which I found to be characteristically chaca, a way of suggesting "I'm part of something bigger" without saying it outright. I found that referencing oneself in the plural was a common identity practice among male participants of the Plebada Alterada group, and "aquí andamos" was commonplace in phrases like "aquí andamos al millón", or "aquí andamos activados".

I asked Luis about his choice of pseudonym because—to my surprise—he did not choose to be named after a narcocorridista. Luis Coronel (the artist) is a popular singer of regional norteño Mexican music, he does not record corridos, but his videos and music did occasionally make it to the groups' walls (much less frequently than narcocorridos). I pointed out that Luis (the participant) had never liked or shared any of Luis Coronel's (the artist) media in the group, yet he declared himself a fan ("me gusta bastante su música"). I again pointed out that from what I could tell, he only seemed to like corridos "alterados", to which he replied "es que no me conoces afuera", meaning "that's because you don't know me outside of Facebook"; which was

among my first indications that Luis’ online persona was carefully curated to aparentar ser pesado.

Like I mentioned, I did not expect Luis to pick a pseudonym so detached from the alterado style of music; Edgar Quintero—a participant in the same Facebook groups who agreed to be part of the study weeks after Luis—on the other hand, decided he wanted to be named after one of the most iconic singers of narcocorridos:

Excerpt 5.9 – Edgar Quintero’s pseudonym

Emiliano	Estás usando el nombre de un cantante famoso para esta investigación, podrías explicarme quién es?	Estás usando el nombre de un cantante famoso para esta investigación, podrías explicarme quién es?
<i>E. Quintero</i>	Edgr kintero?	Edgar Quintero?
Emiliano	Simona	Simona
<i>E. Quintero</i>	El el kntante d los bukanas	El el cantante de los Bukanas
Emiliano	Los Bukanas de Culiacán, verdad?	Los Bukanas de Culiacán, verdad?
<i>E. Quintero</i>	Afirma	Afirma
Emiliano	Por qué los escogiste a él de todos los posibles nombres que te pudiste haber puesto?	Por qué los escogiste a él de todos los posibles nombres que te pudiste haber puesto?
<i>E. Quintero</i>	Ps pk me gusta su musica Ellos fueron los k empezron a tokr altrado	Pues porque me gusta su música, ellos fueron los que empezaron a tocar alterado.
Emiliano	Entonces él es como el fundador del movimiento alterado?	Entonces él es como el fundador del movimiento alterado?
<i>E. Quintero</i>	Ndale el y alfredo rios	Ándale! El y Alfredo Ríos

In the excerpt above, Edgar (the participant) credits Edgar Quintero (the artist) and Alfredo Ríos “El Komander” as the first artists to perform in the alterado style. Both artists are featured in the documentary “Narcocultura” (Schwarz, 2013) which has been available from streaming in platforms such as Netflix since 2014. This film follows Quintero (the artist) through his rise to fame in the Movimiento Alterado, following in the footsteps of his idol, Alfredo Ríos, a notorious narcocorridista with the stage name “El Komander”. In the documentary, Edgar Quintero is placed at the helm of a band called “Los Bukanas de Culiacán”, even as he—a Los Angeles native—has never been to Culiacán, a city located in the Pacific coast of the Mexican

state of Sinaloa. In the film, we can see Quintero curating his mass-mediated persona in order to bring a sort of narco-legitimacy to his crime-oriented band. I asked Edgar (the participant) about this apparent disconnect between the Bukanas de Culiacán’s name and L.A. origins:

Excerpt 5.10 – “*Los Bukanas de Culiacán*” are actually from L.A.

Emiliano	Sabes de dónde es Edgar Quintero?	Sabes de dónde es Edgar Quintero?
E. Quintero	LA	Los Ángeles
Emiliano	Simon! Entonces por qué la banda se llama “Los Bukanas DE CULIACÁN”?	Simon! Entonces ¿por qué la banda se llama “Los Bukanas DE CULIACÁN”?
E. Quintero	Pk ai sta todo el movimiento D ai son los jefes	Porque ahí está todo el movimiento, de ahí son los jefes.
Emiliano	Entonces por eso todas las bandas se ponen “de Culiacán”?	Entonces por eso todas las bandas se ponen “de Culiacán”?
E. Quintero	Afirma Ai sta la edición tmbien	Afirma, ai’sta La Edición también
Emiliano	Tu conoces Culiacán?	Tú conoces Culiacán?
E. Quintero	Afirma	Afirma
Emiliano	Que tiene Culiacán que lo hace tan especial para el movimiento?	¿Qué tiene Culiacán que lo hace tan especial para el movimiento?
E. Quintero	Ai empeso tdo	Ahí empezó todo
Emiliano	Todo... el Movimiento Alterado? Todo el narcotráfico?	Todo... el Movimiento Alterado? Todo el narcotráfico?
E. Quintero	Los dos	Los dos

If Edgar Quintero (the artist) is from L.A., “why is the band called Los Bukanas de Culiacán?” I asked; Edgar’s answer was that the name is not to denote the band’s geographic origin, but it’s ideological one: “the whole movement is from there, the bosses are from there,” he explained. “Do you know Culiacán?” I continued, to which Edgar replied with the Mexican slang term for affirmative, “afirma”. When I went over this conversation again, many months after it happened, I realized that I asked that question in a colloquial way that does not really translate to “have you been to Culiacán?”, perhaps to give Edgar some creative leeway in case he, like his idol Edgar Quintero (the artist), was in the position of having created his entire online persona around the Culiacán imaginary without ever really having been there.

Ascertaining whether or not Edgar (the participant) had ever been to Culiacán was unimportant at the time in comparison with my desire to know more about how that city is at the mythological center of narcocultura, and in answering my question about the things that make that city so special, Edgar summed the whole thing rather succinctly “that’s where it all began”. Like Edgar, Luis consistently answered my questions briefly (even by texting standards) and in these sorts of insider codes which I constantly attempted to clarify. Here’s Luis, for example, on the subject of aparentar ser pesado:

Excerpt 5.11 – *¿Por qué aparentar ser pesados?*

Emiliano	Tu crees que en el grupo tratamos de aparentar ser pesados? No nomás tu y yo, si no todos...	Tú crees que en el grupo tratamos de aparentar ser pesados? No nomás tú y yo, si no todos...
<i>Luis</i>	Ai mucha gente que si	Hay mucha gente que si
<i>Coronel</i>		
Emiliano	Por qué será?	Por qué será?
<i>Luis</i>	Ps pr mamnes	Pos por mamones
<i>Coronel</i>		
Emiliano	Entonces nomás los hombres andamos de mamones aparentando? Las mujeres no?	Entonces nomás los hombres andamos de mamones aparentando? Las mujeres no?
<i>Luis</i>	Ser pesados si	Ser pesados si, las morras no sé
<i>Coronel</i>	Las moras no se	
Emiliano	Cómo distingues entre la raza que si es pasada de neta y los que nomás aparentan	Cómo distingues entre la raza que si es pasada de neta y los que nomás aparentan
<i>Luis</i>	Uno k anda en eso siempre save kien es	Uno que anda en eso siempre sabe
<i>Coronel</i>	kien	quién es quién

I suggested to Luis that him and I were both partaking in a bit of online posturing, trying to aparentar ser pesados, and asked if he believed anyone else was doing the same. Luis did not deny that he was in any way posturing, and mentioned that there were a lot of people that were pretending to be gangsters in the Plebada Alterada group. I followed my initial question with a quick “why is that?”, to which Luis replied with an equally quick “pues por mamones”, meaning that he deemed that a good amount of group participants were posers, fake pesados. Luis did use

the masculine form of the adjective, so I sought to clarify if there was a reason behind this and asked if it was just us men who were posing. Luis told me that only men posture as *pesados*, and he didn't know if women did that. I wanted to know what Luis' processes of online social identification looked like, so I asked him how he could tell the posers from the real *pesados*. His answer was brief and characteristically cryptic: “uno que anda en eso siempre sabe quién es quién” or “it takes an insider to know who's who”.

Núñez-González (2018) explains that it is common that “los miembros del narcotráfico llegan a mentir o exagerar sobre su posición, para así ser considerados como importantes. Incluso no-narcos pueden mentir sobre su pertenencia a esta industria o de ser cercanos a un *pesado*, pues quieren mostrarse importantes” (p. 85). This means that low-level narcos, or non-narcos commonly claim to be *pesados* in order to attain importance. Growing up in Juárez and coming across my fair share of fake *pesados* so I was fully aware of this before I began this study, an expectionism that biased my interactions with Luis and Edgar. These participants made recurrent claims of insiderdom in-group conversations and in our private ones, and their self-authored online images were carefully curated to support identity work for their online personas. I asked them both to elucidate upon these processes—my findings more thoroughly explained in a subsequent chapter—and one of these conversations led me to ask Edgar, why although he claimed to be a narco-insider, he never posted pictures of drugs:

Excerpt 5.12 – “*Puro pájaro nalgón*”

Emiliano	Nunca he visto que subas fotos de drogas	Nunca he visto que subas fotos de drogas
E. Quintero	No no k paso parejon	No no, que pasó parejon
Emiliano	Pos no que muy arreglado compa? NTC Jajaja	Pues no que muy arreglado compa? NTC Jajaja
E. Quintero	Jajaja	Jajaja
Emiliano	Hay gente que si sube fotos de drogas al grupo, no?	Hay gente que si sube fotos de drogas al grupo, no?
E. Quintero	Afrima	Afrimativo

Emiliano	Que piensas de eso?	Qué piensas de eso?
E. Quintero	Puro pajaro nalgon	Puro pájaro nalgón
Emiliano	Cómo le explicarías eso de “puro pájaro nalgón” a alguien que no es de México?	Cómo le explicarías eso de “puro pájaro nalgón” a alguien que no es de México?
E. Quintero	K namas kieren apantayar Ls patrones no andan con sas mmdas	Que nada más quieren apantallar, los patrones no andan con esas mamadas.

Edgar’s response denoted that he was a bit offended by the me asking if he ever had posted pictures of drugs, to which I replied with a taunt “pues no que muy arreglado compa?” meaning that I was jokingly mocking his alleged insider status by asking “aren’t you supposed to be in on it dude?”. After a few minutes, I reopened my query by asking about other people who had uploaded pictures of drugs to the group’s main feed, “What do you think about that?” I asked open-endedly. Edgar replied with a Mexican slang term that is meant to evoke an image of testicles and a penis (“pájaro nalgón”), and is commonly used to refer to something as ungenune. I immediately realized that my academic audience would probably need more insight into “pájaro nalgón” and asked Edgar to elaborate: “how would you explain that to someone who’s not from México?”, his answer was that it meant that people just want to impress, and that the real bosses—“los patrones”—don’t play those games, or “no andan con esas mamadas”.

Edgar and Luis both claimed to be able to sort the mamones from the real insiders because they were insiders themselves. Both participants made veiled assertions of participation in organized crime, and I was interested in understanding the how and the why they were curating their narco-insider online personas. A few days into our conversations, Edgar revoked his consent for me to include any of the photos he had posted to the group (selfies) as part of my data, I did not inquire as to the reason because it followed a conversation where I felt like I may have come across as too eager to verify the authenticity of his claims, which at one point made me feel like he may leave the study altogether:

Excerpt 5.13 – *Los de abajo se te van a querer subir*

Emiliano	Serafín Zambada, el subía fotos de drogas a cada rato, leones, viejas, dinero y la chingada...	Serafín Zambada, el subía fotos de drogas a cada rato, leones, viejas, dinero y la chingada...
E. Quintero	Eske si tienes poder ay k enseñarlo	Es que si tienes poder hay que enseñarlo
Emiliano	Por qué?	Por qué?
E. Quintero	Pake no se t kieran subir los piojos	Para que no se te quieran subir los piojos
Emiliano	Cómo le explico eso a la gente que no sabe que quiere decir?	Cómo le explico eso a la gente que no sabe qué quiere decir?
E. Quintero	K siempre ls d abajo se t van a kerer subir si los dejas	Que siempre los de abajo se te van a querer subir si los dejas
Emiliano	Quiénes son los de abajo?	Quiénes son los de abajo?
E. Quintero	Todos losalcones sicarios mulas	Todos... los halcones, los sicarios, las mulas
Emiliano	Todos quieren estar arriba?	Todos quieren estar arriba?
E. Quintero	Si y si t dejas te tumban	Si, y si te dejas te tumban
Emiliano	Tu cómo sabes todo eso?	Tú cómo sabes todo eso?
E. Quintero	K paso viejon en k aviamos kedado	Qué pasó viejon? En qué habíamos quedado?

In the above excerpt, Edgar and I continued to discuss users posting self-authored pictures and videos of drug use to social media. I brought the case of Serafín Zambada, one of the heirs to the Sinaloa Cartel (son of Vicente Zambada, founder of the cartel), to his attention by mentioning that he used to share pictures of drugs, his pet lion cubs, women, money, etcetera. I went as far as using a disparaging term when I listed women—“viejas”—and a curse word for etcetera—“y la chingada”—because I was trying to “sound” like an insider myself.

Edgar’s focus shifted after I mentioned Serafín Zambada. Previously, he had declared that real bosses didn’t do things like post photos of drugs, now, he claimed that what Zambada was doing was a show-of-force: “es que si tienes poder hay que enseñarlo” (“if you have power you have got to display it”), and that such behaviour was necessary in order to prevent “lice” (“piojos”) from getting on him, that is, to discourage lower-level cartel spotters, enforcers, and

traffickers (“los halcones, sicarios, mulas”) from trying to topple him. “Si te dejas te tumban”, or “they will topple you if you let them” Edgar declared, to which I replied “how do you know that?”; his response was “qué pasó viejón? En qué habíamos quedado?” which translates to “what’s up with that question? Hadn’t we agreed that you wouldn’t ask that?”. I therefore rephrased my question and asked if anything like that had ever happened to him:

Excerpt 5.14 – *Me quisieron tirar*

Emiliano	Bueno, entonces contéstame esto: te ha pasado algo así a tí?	Bueno, entonces contéstame esto: te ha pasado algo así a tí?
E. Quintero	Afirma	Afirma
Emiliano	Te quisieron tirar o te quisiste subir?	Te quisieron tirar o te quisiste subir?
E. Quintero	Tirar	Tirar

Edgar answered with a single word: “tirar”, which meant he was telling me that he was in a position of power, above the enforcers and traffickers, and that someone had tried to topple him. I remember this made me feel anxious, not because I was convinced that Edgar Quintero was a big-time narco (or even a mid-level narco), but because from my perspective, his posts, selfies, and our conversations suggested he wasn’t, and that he was—in the words of Luis Coronel (participant)—trying to aparentar ser pesado. For example, Edgar did not know whom some of the most notorious members of the cartel he allegedly worked with were:

Excerpt 5.15 – *El hijo del Chapo ya no es jefe*

Emiliano	Alfredo Guzmán tenía Twitter y todo el pedo	Alfredo Guzmán tenía Twitter y todo el pedo
E. Quintero	Kien	Quién?
Emiliano	El hijo del Chapo	El hijo del Chapo
E. Quintero	Ese wey ya no es jefe	Ese güey ya no es jefe

When I tried to make a comment about El Chapo’s son Alfredo social media presence, saying that Alfredo Guzmán had Twitter and “todo el pedo” (or “the whole thing”, in reference to Alfredo’s notorious presence across various platforms such as Facebook) Edgar did not know whom I was on about. When I mentioned that I was talking about El Chapo’s son, he

immediately deflected by saying “that dude is no longer a boss” (“ese güey ya no es jefe”), a statement that, given the available information on the state of affairs inside the Sinaloa Cartel, was very inaccurate. In hindsight, I probably should have attempted to redirect our conversation away from the topic of Edgar’s exact position in the criminal enterprise he claimed to be part of, as it differed from the study’s goals, which were never to ascertain the legitimacy of any of the participants’ claims. Instead, I inquired further by asking Edgar to tell me what had happened:

Excerpt 5.16 – *Los hiqué*

Emiliano	Y que pasó?	Y qué pasó?
E. Quintero	Los inke	Los hiqué
Emiliano	Apoco?	Apoco?
E. Quintero	Afrima prjea	Afrima pareja
Emiliano	Salió en las noticias?	Salió en las noticias?
E. Quintero	A guevo	A huevo
Emiliano	Me pasas la página donde salió? [...] Digo, si se puede...	Me pasas la página donde salió? [...] Digo, si se puede...
E. Quintero	Buskle tu viejon	Búscale tú viejon
Emiliano	OK, al rato le busco...	OK, al rato le busco...

“Los hiqué” (or “I made them kneel”), my anxiety spiked as I realized a participant in my IRB-sanctioned study was claiming to have had someone killed. I understood “hincar” (to kneel) to be a common code word for having someone shot while on their knees as a way to humiliate them. My incredulity got the best of me and I replied almost immediately with the incredulous version of “really?” (“apoco?”), and a “was it on the news?”. Edgar stated that the story was absolutely (“a huevo”) on the news, but told me to go find the story myself when I politely asked for a website to check it out on (“si se puede” in this context means “if possible”), without giving as much as a hint as to when or where it happened. I took this to mean that I should discontinue my line of questioning, so I just said I would go look for it “later” (“al rato”, the kind of “later” that in Mexican Spanish means I would not). Edgar Quintero and I continued to text each other later that day (and for many more), but when a few days later he asked me not

to use any of his images in this study, I had a feeling that my mismanagement of our conversation about his alleged violent exploits had something to do with his decision.

The decision to rescind permission for me to use the selfies participants were sharing on Facebook was one that all my participants made eventually. Edgar Quintero asked for this a few days into our conversations, while Reina Rivera, Cinco Siete, and Luis Coronel made that decision when I contacted them a few months later while I was conducting data analysis, and was ready to share the edited pictures (meant to conceal their identity) with them. Reina and Cinco agreed to have conversations during this data triangulation period on-the-record (although Reina did not want her reasons for this repeal made public), while Luis declined, and Edgar simply did not answer any of my messages regarding triangulation of his data.

Even as participants decided not to make any of their self-authored imagery available, I have included other images in the dissertation, all of which were publicly available at the time of data collection. Images featured in the dissertation include memes, screen-shots of narcocorrido lyrics, and Instagram images that served as the source material for memes posted by administrators and participants of the Facebook groups I participated in. These images are included in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation. The analysis that follows differs from the current one in that I no longer have given participants different sections, but have instead grouped the findings as codes that emerged in the data. The following chapter explains two of these: “buchonas y buchones” and “how women are”.

Chapter 6: Narco-Discourses about Gender and Class

This chapter has two sections: “Buchonas y Buchones” and “How Women Are”. These are named after codes that emerged in the analysis of data. The first refers to terms that were coined by narcocultura outsiders to refer to narcocultura insiders in disdainful ways, but were later appropriated by insiders. The second one refers to the code I used every time participants made generalizing comments about the ways in which they understand women’s motivations and actions, both in the context of the narcosphere, and in everyday life. I analyze both codes and provide historical background and sociocultural contexts for them. In order to illustrate the underlying discourses about the roles of women in the narcosphere, I draw academic explanations of the aesthetics of narconovelas and narcocorridos, as well as illustrating them.

Buchonas y Buchones

In this subsection, I succinctly present “buchón” and “buchona” as gendered identities that have been constructed by narcocultura outsiders as a disdainful term used by outsiders, but later appropriated by narcocultura insiders. These terms appeared in several of my conversations with study participants. One such instance emerged as I attempted to redirect my conversation with Edgar Quintero after the exchange presented in the previous section, where I pressed him to produce a news story in which he suggested one of his exploits as a *pesado* had been published:

Excerpt 6.1 – *Buchones*

Emiliano	OK, al rato le busco [...] Oye, volviendo al tema de las fotos, uno de los comentarios de tu amigos en una foto dice “pinche buchón □” te dicen mucho eso?	OK, al rato le busco [...] Oye, volviendo al tema de las fotos, uno de los comentarios de tu amigos en una foto dice “pinche buchón □” te dicen mucho eso?
E. Quintero	Jajajaj pinch envidioso	Jajaja pinche envidioso
Emiliano	Yo o él?	Yo o él?
E. Quintero	El	El
Emiliano	Que quiso decir con eso de “buchón”	Qué quiso decir con eso de “buchón”
E. Quintero	Asi disen los mugrosos a veces Pork no conosen lo bueno	Así dicen los mugrosos a veces, porque no conocen lo bueno

Emiliano	Tu no te consideras buchón?	Tú no te consideras buchón?
E. Quintero	No parejita K paso???	No parejita, qué pasó?
Emiliano	Aunque te gusten los videos de “Los Buchones de Culiacán”?	Aunque te gusten los videos de “Los Buchones de Culiacán”?
E. Quintero	Es diferente	Es diferente
Emiliano	No entiendo, es bueno o malo ser buchón?	No entiendo, es bueno o malo ser buchón?
E. Quintero	Ls ds	Los dos
Emiliano	Pero te enoja que te lo digan?	Pero te enoja que te lo digan?
E. Quintero	Depend	Depende
Emiliano	De que?	De qué?
E. Quintero	De kien	De quien
Emiliano	Arre, ya entendí. [...] Entonces no cualquiera te puede decir buchón sin que haya pedo...	Arre, ya entendí. [...] Entonces no cualquiera te puede decir buchón sin que haya pedo...
E. Quintero	Afirma	Afirma
Emiliano	Quién si te puede decir buchón?	Quién si te puede decir buchón?
E. Quintero	Namas unos kompas La gente del movimiento	Na’ más unos kompas, la gente del movimiento

In this excerpt, I asked Edgar about a comment that one of his friends posted on a selfie Edgar had published on the Plebada Alterada group page. It read “pinche buchón” (with the laughing face emoji), which literally translates to “damn male pigeon”, but in this context was used as a Sinaloan colloquialism that references—disparagingly—men who display what are regarded as classic fashion choices made by traffickers, such as flashy shirts (opened at the chest), gold chains and watches, and brand-name aviator sunglasses, among other things.

Edgar explained that he considered that whoever posted that comment was jealous (“envidioso”), and that he sometimes gets labeled a buchón by people of lower class (the “mugrosos”, or “filthy ones”), who don’t know about the good things (“lo bueno”). Edgar, Luis, and Cinco, all seem to carefully curate their online images to reflect their capability to obtain “lo bueno”, which meant their personal Facebook pages were filled with images of them driving trucks, posing with guns, and wearing brand-name clothing. Edgar also explained that he does not consider himself a buchón, even as he listens to, and shared videos featuring, a famous

narcocorridos group called Los Buchones de Culiacán, and that being called a buchón can be both good or bad, depending on who’s using the term. According to Edgar, the only people that could call him buchón “sin que haya pedo” (without there being problems) were “la gente del movimiento”, a group identity, narcocultura insiders who also identify as part of the movimiento alterado.

Núñez-González (2018) explains that “el término [buchón] se relaciona no solo a narcotraficantes, sino también a aquellos que en sus prácticas incorporan elementos de la narcocultura, aún sin ser narcotraficantes” (p. 83) which means that buchones are men who integrate narcocultura practices into their identity practices, but are not necessarily drug traffickers. Buchón has even engendered a term to define its feminine counterpart, the “buchona” (Núñez-González, 2018), a woman “[a quien] se critica por entablar relaciones con narcotraficantes por una cuestión de racionalidad económica” (p. 86). The author underlines that buchonas are women who are criticized in Sinaloan society because it is understood that their motivations for establishing relationships with drug traffickers are purely economic⁸. In my experience, buchona is often used to refer to (or disparage) women who hang around men who are labeled buchones, or who display similar traits that are construed as proprietary of narcocultura-oriented feminine identities, such as fake-blond hair, lavish fingernails, revealing tops, tight-fitting designer jeans, etc. In the following passage, Reina Rivera tells me about her perspective about –and experience with–the term:

Excerpt 6.2 – Buchonas, hoes, and fresas

Emiliano	...los protagonistas de las novelas siempre tienen dos amores, no?	...los protagonistas de las novelas siempre tienen dos amores, no?
R. Rivera	I know y las otras k ni quieren	I know, y las otras que ni quieren
Emiliano	Yeah, they’re knee deep in women LOL	Yeah, they’re knee deep in women LOL

⁸ In my study, I found this notional linkage between sexuality and economic gain at the center of feminized identities in narcocultura, and will expand on it in subsequent sections.

R. Rivera	LOL hos	LOL hoes
Emiliano	So if a woman is attracted to money and power... she be a hoe?	So if a woman is attracted to money and power... she be a hoe?
R. Rivera	Kinda yeah	Kind of, yeah
Emiliano	LOL do you know what they call that type of girl in Sinaloa?	LOL do you know what they call that type of girl in Sinaloa?
R. Rivera	Buchona	Buchona
Emiliano	Exactly... that word comes up in corridos all the time, no?	Exactly... that word comes up in corridos all the time, no?
R. Rivera	Yeah	Yeah
Emiliano	Has anyone ever call you that for listening to them?	Has anyone ever call you that for listening to them?
R. Rivera	LOL yeah	LOL yeah
Emiliano	Who?	Who?
R. Rivera	Una amiga fresa de Jrz	Una amiga fresa de Juárez
Emiliano	Was she mean?	Was she mean?
R. Rivera	No Me ase bulying namas Asi de pinchi buchona Y yo de fresa bitch	No, me hace bullying nada más así de “pinche buchona” y yo de “fresa bitch”
Emiliano	LOL OK seems like you’re good friends then	LOL OK seems like you’re good friends then
R. Rivera	But fresas like narcos too!	But fresas like narcos too!
Emiliano	They do?	They do?
R. Rivera	Todas son iguales	Todas son iguales

This part of my conversation with Reina stands out to me because it included at least 3 terms used to define different borderland identities. This conversation evolved from our discussion of narco-novelas, which are television series (in the same vein as soap operas) which dramatize narco-cultura related stories and characters. Notable narco-novelas include “El Señor de los Cielos”, which is based (loosely) on the stories surrounding Amado Carrillo Fuentes, deceased leader of the Juárez Cartel, who sported that same moniker, and La Reina del Sur, based on the fictional character created by Arturo Pérez-Reverte in the novel of the same name, and from which I believe Reina Rivera partly got her pseudonym. In the conversation, I regarded these type of novelas as generally having plots in which it is commonplace for the male protagonists to have more than one female love interest. Reina agreed that my assessment was

correct, and suggested that additionally, these male characters are usually involved with women they don't even love ("las otras que ni quieren"). When I jokingly used the allegory that narco-novela protagonist are knee-deep in women, reina signaled that she was laughing out loud and replied with the word "hos", in reference to these fictionalized women that chase after the pesado characters depicted in the series.

"Ho" is a vernacular, shortened version of the derogatory term "whore", it is typically used in hip-hop culture, not only in reference to prostitution, but to characterize women as willing to exchange sexual favors for money, power, or social status (Oliver, 2006). The term is also common in border slang, so I wasn't surprised that Reina—a Latinx borderland transfronteriza—used it to describe women who are attracted to narcos. I sought some clarification from Reina, as to confirm that she was commenting on how women who are attracted to money and power were hoes. After she reaffirmed her statement, I asked if she knew what the equivalent role identity for what she described as hoes was in Sinaloan slang, to which she replied "buchonas". Even though buchona may be the feminized version of buchón (with perhaps equivalent emphasis on flashiness), the term entails a derogation based on sexuality which portrays women as exercising a sort of unprincipled promiscuity. In sharp contrast, buchón evokes no comparable perception about mens' sexuality. This double standard which makes buchona a critique about a woman's sexuality, may explain how it correlates in this context with the term "ho", one which Oliver (2006) describes as perpetuating "internalized misogynistic messages that provide justifications for engaging in acts of violence against Black women" (p. 927), and which is also part of the imagined narcoscapes by which narcoviolenca (especially violence against women) is explained in the imagined worlds of the narcosphere.

I knew Reina made no secret out of her enjoyment of narcocultura, so I asked her if anyone had called her a buchona for listening to narcocorridos. She told me that a “fresa” friend from Juárez had called her that, not in a mean way, but in an endearing one; the type of insult that only close friends can tease you with. As I have mentioned, “fresa” in the Mexican lexicon is used to describe individuals and things, which are devoid of roughness or grit, which overly attempt to project “haute culture”, or high social class. Reina characterized her friend—endearingly—as a fresa, and mentioned that fresas are also attracted to the type of men that narconovelas depict. In her words “todas son iguales”, that is, buchonas and fresas (women) are all the same, in that they are equally attracted to men of wealth and power.

This “todas son iguales” discourse, which I found to almost ubiquitous in my conversations, limits the identity roles that women are afforded in the context of narcocultura to heterosexual personas with preeminently sexual roles. In the case of Reina however, the idea that “todas son iguales” seemed to be in tension with the more independent and empowered characters of Teresa Mendoza and Jenny Rivera. These types of characters are part of an emerging trend within banda music and narcocultura, of women claiming and asserting power in ways similar to men, being through sexual prowess, devising and leading criminal enterprises, or executing acts of violence on their behalf. One example of the latter are the emerging “sicaria” identities, which are discussed in a later part of this chapter, which contrasts with the more common exclusively sexual roles reserved for women in narcocultura. “How women are” (iguales) was a discourse at the center of the ways in which male participants constructed their imagined audiences, and it therefore guided their identity work.

How Women Are

The sexualized, ornamental, and disposable roles given to women in narcocultura can perhaps be best illustrated by the “sin tetas no hay paraíso” (“there is no paradise without breasts”) narratives and discourse. *Sin Tetas no Hay Paraíso* is a novel written by Bolívar Moreno (2005), work that gave way to a Colombian telenovela that first aired in 2006 and to which the phrase owes its role as an imagined narcoscape to explain how poor women behave in the narcosphere. The plot of both the novel and telenovela follows Catalina Santana, a teenager who lives in a poor neighborhood of Pereira, Colombia. Catalina makes a living by recruiting other young women into high-end prostitution rings that serve powerful narco traffickers. Catalina perceives becoming this type of prostitute as something she desires for herself, but is repeatedly rejected for such roles because of the small size of her breasts. Catalina therefore works throughout the series on being able to afford breast-augmentation surgery and ends up scaling to the top of high-end prostitution rings.

The telenovela was very popular (Cabañas, 2012) and spun-off a re-make in Spain as well as a U.S. produced remake by Telemundo, which began to air in 2009. The series is named *Sin Senos no Hay Paraíso* (perhaps because the word “tetas” can be regarded as vulgar in some varieties of Spanish). The plot of the series centers on Catalina, and other female recruiters for Colombian and Mexican prostitution rings catering to powerful drug lords. *Las Muñecas de la Mafia* is another Colombian telenovela, which began airing in 2009 with a similar plot. These teleseries depict women as the main facilitators of sexual trafficking, sometimes even facilitating the killing of other women (for example, traffickers kill most of the female protagonists, including Catalina). They also depict sexuality and hyper-sexualized bodies, modified by plastic surgery, as the only marketable good poor women can aspire to use in order to escape marginalization:

These telenovelas ambiguously reinforce the hypocrisy and contradictions of neoliberal societies. The male gaze in their production reinforces gender differences and presents women as victims in need of saving by a gentler patriarchy. This patriarchal gaze is the most important element of fantasy in the telenovelas that distort the reality of women impacted by the drug trade. (Cabañas, 2012, p. 86)



Illustration 6.1 – DVD covers for *Sin Tetas/Sin Pechos no Hay Paraíso* (2006)



Illustration 6.2 – Ads for *Sin Senos no Hay Paraíso* and *Las Muñecas de la Mafia*

In 2011, recording artists working with Twiins Culiacán debuted the song “Sin Tetas no Hay Paraíso” (Soto, 2011). The song was authored and performed by the lead singer for Los Buchones de Cuilacán, and its lyrics refer to Colombian narco-novelas (as well as briefly

mentioning sicarias) and lay out the fetishized, hypersexual image of women at the center of contemporary narcocultura:

Lyrics 6.1 – “*Sin Tetas no Hay Paraíso*”

Original Lyrics

Son las diosas de la mafia. Son bien locas y alteradas cuando andan bien pisteadas. Parecen hasta vampiras y no les hecho mentiras, porque salen en la noche a chupar whiskey o tequila [...] Las morras son bien cabronas, no se paniquean con nada; si les gusta algún chingón se lo tumban esas gatas, si se ponen bien roñosas las arrodillan y rapan [...] Son sicarias, son mafiosas, son cachondas, bailadoras, desmadrosas, resbalosas, son jareosas, locochonas y sus tetas nos provocan. Donde quiera que ellas andan todos tuercen el pescuezo todos quisieran tenerlas pero se muerden un huevo, ellas no andan con jaladas no andan con cualquier pendejo [...] Son calientes pervertidas unas lobs en la cama, ya nos tienen bien ondeados las nenas depravadas. De los capos y los hombres son el dulce preferido, mujeres despampanantes que te roban un suspiro; las muñecas de la mafia, lo más rico es lo prohibido [...] Hay para todos los gustos de todas clases sociales y el único requisito es que las tetas no les falten, una cintura de avispa, unos labios carnuditos [...] si el billete no te alcanza, sin tetas no hay paraíso (Soto, 2011).

Translation

They are the mob's goddesses. They are crazy and altered when they are drunk. They resemble vampires because they go out at night to suck on whiskey and tequila [...] They are bad, they don't panic; if they like some badass dude they will rip him away from any slut, if sluts get pissy they will kneel them down and give them a buzz cut [...]

They are sicarias, they are horny, they like to dance and party hard; they are lascivious, insatiable, insane, and their tits provocative. Wherever they go, they turn heads around, everyone wants to have them but they can't, they don't just roll with any dumbass [...] They are always aroused, perverted, animals in bed, they have all of us drugged with their depravity. They are the bosses' and every man's favorite candy, stunning women that take your breath away; the mob's dolls, delicious but forbidden [...] They exist for every taste, they're only required to have tits, a waist like a wasp, and thick lips [...] if you don't have enough money, there's no paradise without tits.

While this song did not emerge in the study's data, I consider it to be a kind of epitome of the *sin tetas no hay paraíso* narrative, which defines the look most women in narcocorrido videos sport. As the song explains, breasts, a small waist and thick lips are construed and displayed as the most desirable traits. Role identities for women in narcocorrido videos are almost exclusively ornamental (which is hardly a trait exclusive to narcocorridos in the music video world) and even when they are displayed holding firearms, they appear scantily clothed (see lower-right frame in Illustration 6.3). This *sin tetas no hay paraíso* aesthetic has parallels to the "todas son iguales" discourse, in that they are based on a patriarchal premise (constructed from and for the male gaze but reproduced by women as well) that women's bodies are most valuable as sexual objects, and that their sexuality is often exploited in pursuit of establishing transactional sexual relationships with powerful men. As Cabañas (2012) explains, the male gaze is the most important element in the construction of the hypersexual fantasy of women in the drug trade (p. 86).

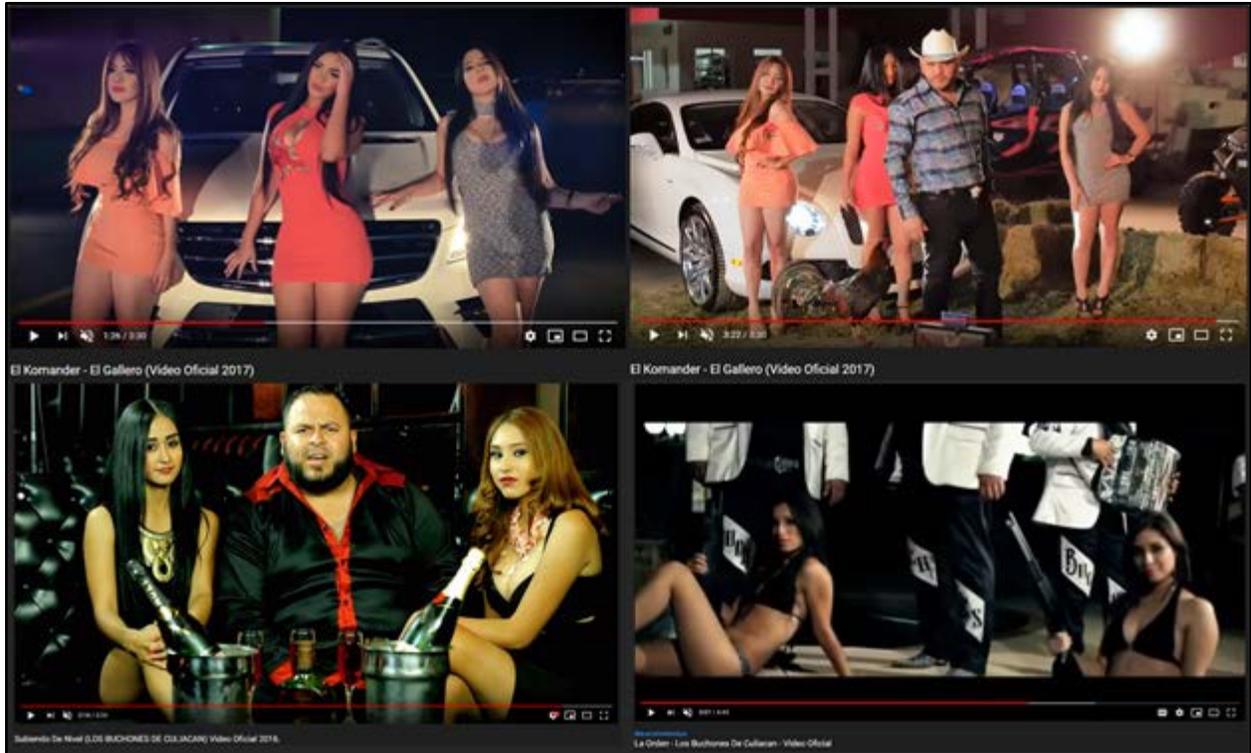


Illustration 6.3 – Women in Los Buchones de Culiacán and El Komander videos

Unequivocally, all of the participants in this study imagined narcoscape’s included a heteronormative understanding of relationships, making generalizing statements about what heterosexual women look for in a relationship, and how heterosexual men have to curate their personas accordingly, in order to become attractive to them. I found that narcoscapes were shaped by narcocultura mythology, which was often referenced as a benchmark for the ways in which relationships work. I use the notion of “narcocultura mythology” to refer to the group of narratives and characters that have been positioned at the core of narcocultura, by a mix of narcocorridos, narco-novelas, social media platforms, and more traditional news media outlets.

One such myth is that El Chapo and Kate del Castillo were in a romantic relationship that ultimately turned into el Chapo’s downfall. This narrative, that has not been confirmed by either del Castillo or Guzmán, was a central theme and point of reference in my conversation with Reina Rivera, and one that I regarded as something that Reina used support her understanding

that “todas son iguales”. If a famous fresa actor like del Castillo liked narcos, then liking narcos is indeed fresa. In the following exchange, Reina and I are discussing weather our respective spouses indulge in narcocultura, and she expounds on the reasons why she was certain that Kate was attracted to El Chapo:

Excerpt 6.3 – *What women want*

Emiliano	Does your hubby like corridos?	Does your hubby like corridos?
R. Rivera	Yeah he likes them	Yeah he likes them
Emiliano	How about the novelas?	How about the novelas?
R. Rivera	Notso much	Not so much
Emiliano	What do you think that is?	What do you think that is?
R. Rivera	IDK Mbc novelas are more romantic and sht	I don’t know... maybe because novelas are more romantic and shit
Emiliano	Even the ones about narcos?	Even the ones about narcos?
R. Rivera	LOL yeah	LOL yeah
Emiliano	Do you think narcos are romantic?	Do you think narcos are romantic?
R. Rivera	IDK	I don’t know
Emiliano	I mean... they do kill A LOT of people	I mean... they do kill A LOT of people
R. Rivera	I know	I know
Emiliano	But they still have romance in their lives?	But they still have romance in their lives?
	LOL	LOL
R. Rivera	LOL yeah Ya vez la kate	LOL yeah, ya ves la Kate
Emiliano	Kate del Castillo?	Kate del Castillo?
R. Rivera	Yeah she had like a thing for el chapo	Yeah, she had like a thing for El Chapo
Emiliano	I think el Chapo had a thing for her, no?	I think el Chapo had a thing for her, no?
R. Rivera	Na I bet she had a thing for him	Nah, I bet she had a thing for him
Emiliano	Why?	Why?
R. Rivera	Bc of all his power	Because of all his power
Emiliano	Just because of his power?	Just because of his power?
R. Rivera	Well yeah No?	Well yeah, no?
Emiliano	So the fact that he was the most wanted man on Earth didn’t make her say “mejor no”?	So the fact that he was the most wanted man on Earth didn’t make her say “mejor no”?
R. Rivera	No al revez	No, al revés
Emiliano	So, the fact that he WAS the most wanted man on Earth made her want him more?	So, the fact that he WAS the most wanted man on Earth made her want him more?
R. Rivera	Yeah!!!	Yeah!

The idea that heterosexual women are attracted to powerful outlaw men was one that I repeatedly encountered in conversations with study participants. Both Luis Coronel and Edgar

Quintero's identity work curated their online personas to adjust them to this notion. They repeatedly posted pictures wearing brand-name clothing, designer sunglasses, and flashy jewelry and watches. Vehicles were also a common thread amongst the three male participants, Luis, Edgar, and Cinco constantly shared images of what they claimed were their trucks, all of which featured modifications such as custom rims and lift-kits. These modified trucks represent not only economic power, but physical power as well. Predilection for these large, aggressive-looking vehicles can be perhaps understood in part through what Dagget (2018) defines as "petro-masculinity", "a kind of hypermasculinity" in which "the explosive power of combustion could be crudely equated with virility" (p. 32). According to the author, petro-masculinity is a socially constructed identity based on "mid-20th century fantasies" (p. 34) about hegemonic masculinity, that imagines men ruling their households uncontested, and being able to support stay-at-home housewives and children. Thus, such displays resonate heavily with (for example) Luis' explanation of the importance of displaying "que tengo con qué" ("that I have the means"—Excerpt 6.5)

Barber (2017) delves further into the intersections of pickup trucks, class, identity, and hegemonic masculinity, explaining that the vehicles' origins as rural workhorses can symbolize a gendered ideal of household economy, that espouses patriarchal gender relations and the sexual division of labor. In these terms, I regarded trucks as a mainstay way of showcasing one's masculinity, accompanied with other exhibitions of economic and physical power that involved "tener con qué" and "andar al cien", categories which are explained in detail in the following sections of this chapter. These prominent exhibitions were often geared towards wooing what participants construed as heterosexual women's shared desire for powerful men. For example, in the next excerpt, I asked Luis to clarify what audience ("público") his selfies were intended for:

Excerpt 6.4 – *Fotos para impresionar*

Emiliano	Para qué “público” dirías que son tus fotos?	Para qué “público” dirías que son tus fotos?
L. Coronel	Ps pa kien kiera verlas ajajaja	Pues pa quien quiera verlas jajaja
Emiliano	Jajaja pos si verdad? Déjame lo pregunto de otra manera... quién quieres que te comente las fotos? El que quiera? El que sea?	Jajaja pos si verdad? Déjame lo pregunto de otra manera... quién quieres que te comente las fotos? El que quiera? El que sea?
L. Coronel	Ps kien kiera puede comentrle	Pos quien quiera puede comentarle
Emiliano	Y te da lo mismo si le comento yo a que una morra te ponga un ☐?	Y te da lo mismo si le comento yo a que una morra te ponga un ☐?
L. Coronel	No pos como pareja!!!	No pos como pareja!
Emiliano	Ah! Entonces si las pones pa impresionar, no te hagas! Jajaja	Ah! Entonces si las pones pa impresionar, no te hagas! Jajaja
L. Coronel	Ps a guebo pareja!! Tu no o k??	Pos a huevo pareja! Tú no, o qué?
Emiliano	A güevo! Jajaja...	A huevo! Jajaja...

At first, Luis claimed that he did not share photos in order to purposefully reach an imagined audience, and that his photos were there for whomever wanted to see them (“pa’ quien quiera verlas”). I regarded this as partly accurate, as the groups where he was active were public, but thinking that they seemed carefully curated, I reformulated my question. I asked if he valued comments on these photos any differently depending on the person who posted them. When Luis answered that anyone could post comments (which was true), I quickly replied with a hypothetical scenario, asking if he felt the same about me commenting or about a “morra” (a girl) posting a kiss emoji on them, he replied with what can be equated to “hell no!” (“no pos como pareja”).

As it is evident from earlier section of this chapter, the moniker of “pareja” was one that study participants constantly gave me, it literally translates as “couple”, but in this context, it is meant to mean “partner”. “Pareja” is a mainstay of narcocorrido lyrics. For example, in the lyrics of “Gente del Pareja” by Calor Norteño, the voice of the narrator describes how he is a gunman under an unnamed “patrón” (boss):

Lyrics 6.2 – “*Gente del Pareja*”

Original Lyrics

Yo soy gente del pareja, porto mi pistola escuadra, también un R cortito, yo no me ando con jaladas... yo siempre me la he rifado, pues cuando el patrón pitea, la fiesta nunca ha faltado... a la orden del pareja, siempre estaremos al tanto (Mercado, 2017).

Translation

I'm el pareja's people, I carry my pistol and a short AR-15, I don't fool around... I've always taken risks, because when the boss drinks, partying is never in short supply... at el pareja's orders, we're always on standby.

Therefore, I took the use of pareja as a signal that participants held me in some degree of regard, while knowing that pareja is not a term that signals complete insider status in the movimiento. That group role goes to “pariente” which means relative (as in blood relative, although no family ties are necessary to don it upon an associate) and was made popular by narcocorridistas such as El Komander, who in the lyrics to “El Diablo”, for example, describes how he fights alongside someone who he regards as a pariente:

Lyrics 6.3 – “*El Diablo*”

Original Lyrics

Amarramos con mi troca, con mi rifle sigo echando tiros. Me sobra el parque que traigo por eso es que lo descargo. Me comienzo a acelerar cuando se me mete el Diablo, por que esto no se acaba hasta que se acaba pariente (Ríos, 2012).

Translation

We're strapped to my truck and I keep firing my rifle. I have more than enough ammo

and that's why I keep on shooting. I start to get exhilarated when I'm possessed by the Devil, because this isn't over till it's over pariente.

So, even as I was not considered a pariente, being called pareja at least signified to me some degree of empathy and insiderdom. I took advantage of this rapport to facetiously accuse Luis of uploading photos “para impresionar, no te hagas” (“to impress, you're not fooling anyone”), to which he answered with “of course! don't you?”, which I ended up admitting. Then, immediately after admitting that I too only upload photos that I regard as impressive, I asked Luis about the thing he thought his imagined audience of women found attractive in the types of photos he posted:

Excerpt 6.5 – “*Tengo con qué*”

Emiliano	Que crees que les gusta a las morras de las fotos que subes?	Qué crees que les gusta a las morras de las fotos que subes?
L. Coronel	Pos k tengo con k	Pos que tengo con qué.

“Tener con qué” roughly translates as “having the means,” which interpreted as having the means to spend money lavishly, something that to me, resonated with the idea that men's display power makes them desirable, so I asked Luis to elaborate on the idea of tener con qué:

Excerpt 6.6 – “*Enseñar que tienes con qué*”

Emiliano	Arre... cómo le explicarías a alguien que no sabe que es “tener con que” lo que eso significa... que significa “enseñar que tienes con que”?	Arre... cómo le explicarías a alguien que no sabe que es “tener con qué” lo que eso significa... qué significa “enseñar que tienes con qué”?
L. Coronel	Ps k tienes feria	Pos que tienes feria
Emiliano	Nomás?	Nomás?
L. Coronel	Feria pa gastar	Feria pa gastar
Emiliano	Cuál es la diferencia entre tener feria pa gastar y nomás tener feria?	Cuál es la diferencia entre tener feria pa gastar y nomás tener feria?
L. Coronel	K no t da miedo gastarte la feria en ellas, En la pda En el fieston	Que no te da miedo gastarte la feria en ellas, en la peda, en el fiestón

Luis summed it up in a phrase: “Pos' que tienes feria”. “Feria” is slang for money, and my follow-up of “nomás” means that I asked something like “just having money?”. Luis

elaborated that tener con qué not only meant having money, but having money coupled with the willingness to spend it on—specifically—women, drinking, and partying. Note that Luis used the word “fiestón” and not just “fiesta” to reference partying. “Fiestón” literally means “big party”, but the use of the superlative “-ón” in this case indexes Sinaloan slang, and was used by all the male participants in words like “trocón” (truck), “parejón” (partner), “viejón” (old friend), to signal their Movimiento Alterado insidership, while subverting classist and racist discourses of academic Spanish (de los Ríos, 2019).

Tener con qué and tener feria were themes that also emerged in interactions with Edgar Quintero. I asked Edgar similar questions about the ways in which he decided when and how to share self-portraits to the Facebook groups we interacted on. After a quick review of the history of images he had shared, I made some observations about how he never seemed to share photos that weren’t carefully curated. Hypothetically “recién levantado” (just awakened), which he seemed to find unfathomable:

Excerpt 6.7 – “*Qué van a decir las plebas?*”

Emiliano	Siempre sales bien vestido en las fotos, no veo que subas fotos recién levantado o algo así, por qué?	Siempre sales bien vestido en las fotos, no veo que subas fotos recién levantado o algo así, por qué?
E. Quintero	No k paso pareja Ps kmo voy a subir fotos rezien lebantado	No, qué pasó pareja, pos cómo voy a subir fotos recién levantado
Emiliano	Por qué no?	Por qué no?
E. Quintero	Pk k vana decir las plebas	Por que qué vana decir las plebas?
Emiliano	Que van a decir?	Qué van a decir?
E. Quintero	Ps k no traigo nda	Pos que no traigo nada
Emiliano	Nada de que o que?	Nada de qué o qué?
E. Quintero	D feria	De feria
Emiliano	Ah! entonces las fotos que subes son pa que las vean las morras?	Ah! entonces las fotos que subes son pa que las vean las morras?
E. Quintero	Jajaja afirma Algo ai deso	Jajaja afirma, algo hay de eso
Emiliano	Y k vean k tienes feria	Y que vean que tienes feria
E. Quintero	Jajaja a k viejon este afirma pareja!!!	Jajaja a que viejon este, afirma pareja!

“¿Qué pasó pareja?”, Edgar’s reply meant that he was asking “how could you suggest that?”. “Why wouldn’t you?” (share images of you straight out of bed), I asked. “What would the girls say?” he answered. Edgar explained that the whole reason to share self-portraits to the Facebook groups he frequented was to show his imagined audience of women he had feria. Luis Coronel, after having clarified somewhat what Luis meant by “tener con qué”, explained to me why it is so important that girls know that you have money and the willingness to spend it:

Excerpt 6.8 - What morras like

Emiliano	Eso es importante para las morras?	Eso es importante para las morras?
L. Coronel	Claro parejita A las morras les gusta k las sakes y k les pages	Claro parejita, a las morras les gusta que las saques y que les pagues

“Girls like for you to take them out and pay for them”; in this blanket statement, Luis laid out his rationale for presenting an image of someone that is willing to spend money, which to him justified his decision about sharing images of him going out and partying. I wanted to know the specifics about the ways in which he made sense of his decisions about what to include in other kinds of photos, ones where he, rather partying, seemed to be the central theme:

Excerpt 6.9 - What women like

Emiliano	Y de las selfies? Que les gusta de esas?... en esas no andas en la fiesta	Y de las selfies? Qué les gusta de esas?... en esas no andas en la fiesta
L. Coronel	Ai tmbn se deve ver k tienes con k K se vea el carro Los lentes El reloj si puedes	Ahí también se debe ver que tienes con qué... que se vea el carro, los lentes, el reloj si puedes...
Emiliano	Si puedes? Acá sordero o qué?	Si puedes? Acá sordero o qué?
L. Coronel	Simona Aka como k no	Simona, acá como que no...
Emiliano	Carro, lentes, reloj, camisa?	Carro, lentes, reloj, camisa?
L. Coronel	Simna	Simona...
Emiliano	Esas son las cosas que llevan a una mujer a darle like a una foto en el grupo?	Esas son las cosas que llevan a una mujer a darle like a una foto en el grupo?
L. Coronel	En el grupo y en todos lados pareja	En el grupo y en todos lados pareja...
Emiliano	En serio?	En serio?

“In these [selfies] you also need to show you have the means”, Luis explained; “show your car, sunglasses, and your watch if you can”. In a brief parentheses, I asked him to clarify what he meant by “if you can”: “¿acá sordero o qué?” Sordero or “a la sorda” means to do something while pretending not to do it, or to do something inconspicuously, which echoes Davis’ (2014) definition of identity work and genuineness. Luis reaffirmed that he meant that exactly, and proceeded to directly ask him if he thought that cars, sunglasses, watches, and shirts were what drive women to like photos on Facebook; Luis not only verified this assertion but went further by stating that displaying these makes women like you on Facebook and everywhere else (“en el grupo y en todos lados”), making an overt reference to the continuum of his online-offline life. Expensive clothes and accessories also emerged in my conversation with Edgar Quintero, when I posed him questions about his thoughts about the importance of displaying one’s wealth, and if having *feria* was the only thing that mattered:

Excerpt 6.10 – *Andar con todo*

Emiliano	La feria es lo único que importa?	La feria es lo único que importa?
E. Quintero	No	No
Emiliano	Qué más?	Qué más?
E. Quintero	K zepan k les vas a dar su lugar K las vas a cuidar	Que sepan que les vas a dar su lugar, que las vas a cuidar
Emiliano	Y eso cómo pueden saberlo namás viendo tus selfies?	Y eso cómo pueden saberlo na'más viendo tus selfies?
E. Quintero	Pos k se vea lo k traes	Pos que se vea lo que traes
Emiliano	Como qué cosas?	Como qué cosas?
E. Quintero	Los lents El reloj La ezclaba La kmisa	Los lentes, el reloj, la esclava, la camisa...
Emiliano	Eso qué dice de tí?	Eso qué dice de tí?
E. Quintero	K andas cn todo K andas arreglado	Que andas con todo, que andas arreglado
Emiliano	Arreglado de vestir? Arreglado con la mafia? Arreglado drogado?	Arreglado de vestir? Arreglado con la mafia? Arreglado drogado?
E. Quintero	Las trs jajaja	Las tres jajaja

In the above excerpt, Edgar explains that no, having money is not all that matters, and that giving women “their place” and caring for them is also important. I remember thinking that statement broke with the whole macho persona Edgar projected, and with the “all women care about is money and power” discourse I had encountered throughout the study, so I asked Edgar how women could know that just by looking at his selfies. “Pos que se vea lo que traes” (show what you have), he replied, “sunglasses, watch, bracelet, your shirt”; I took this to mean that he thought that women regard “their place” in materialistic terms, and that “caring” for them means buying them stuff; therefore, displaying expensive clothes and accessories in a selfie could signal to heterosexual women his ability to provide these, which in sum referred me back to the imagined world where *todas son iguales*, money and power make men desirable, and *sin tetas no hay paraíso*.

After Edgar finished enumerating the fashion items that he regarded as important in curating his online image, I asked him what he believed displaying expensive sunglasses, watches, bracelets, and shirts said about him. Edgar answered that these were all elements that signaled “*que andas con todo*” (“that you are giving it your all” or “that you have everything”), and “*que andas arreglado*” (“that you are fixed up”). Being fixed up in this context could have had many meanings, so I asked Edgar to clarify what he meant by *andar arreglado*, either fixing oneself in terms of fashion (“*de vestir*”), getting one's fix in terms of drugs (“*drogado*”); or a third possibility, that *arreglado* actually meant that he had an arrangement (“*arreglo*”) with a criminal enterprise (“*la mafia*”, what drug cartels are sometimes called by *movimiento* insiders). Edgar quickly replied that all three meanings applied to his statement, this being one of many veiled statements he made throughout our conversations, which hinted cartel insiderdom, and

which I interpreted as another way of asserting legitimacy and power both to me and other Facebook users.

Andar arreglado, pareja, and pariente, are some of the words and phrases that have become insider codes, or coded language, in narcocultura. I found that narcocorrido lyrics played a central role in the ways in which I attempted to make sense of my conversations with Cinco Siete, Edgar Quintero, and Luis Coronel. In the next section of this chapter, I present and illustrate how users of the Facebook groups that I interacted in shared narcocorridos. These songs were not exclusively shared by participants in my study, but by group participants at large, the ways in which they were shared them was either by embedding—or linking—audio and video, or by transcribing their lyrics (Illustration 6.4).



Illustration 6.4 – User shares video with entire Jorge Santacruz album

By presenting and analyzing narcocorridos lyrical imagery, I illustrate the ways in which these songs are central in producing and reproducing the coded language of narcocultura, and in

popularizing the use of particular code words or phrases. The meaning of these is often only accessible to movimiento insiders, and unpacking the ways in which participants appropriated their significance was instrumental in the construction of questions I posed to them. One of the most important codes in developing and understanding of imagined narcoscapes, narcoviolenca, and the ways in which participants asserted cultural belonging, is the many uses of the term “andar”, a code which I found to be widespread and polysemic, and one I unpack it the following chapter.

Chapter 7: *Aquí Andamos al Cien, al Tiro, Activados*

Participants in this study consistently referred to themselves pluralizing what literally amounts to the verb “walk” (andar, i.e “aquí andamos”). However, I regard the meaning of this reference as much more closely resembling hip-hop’s use of the expression “to roll with” (Oware, 2011). In this chapter, I illustrate the ways in which I made sense of participants’ use of “andar” and “andamos”, like in the conversation depicted in Excerpt 6.10 “Andar con todo”, which shows how Edgar Quintero thought his selfies, would let people know “que andaba con todo”. It is not easy to unpack what “andar con todo” meant in this context. Many variations of “andar ” emerged in the study, for example “andar al tiro”, “andar arreglado”, “andar al cien”, or “andar al millón”, all of which seemed to reference an intense state of existence, where exploiting the excitement of the moment is more important than the consequences it may bring. This type of attitude was something that Cinco Siete also used in the construction of his online persona, as he explained to me when I asked him about videos he had uploaded of him racing his truck:

Excerpt 7.1 – Andar al cien

Emiliano	he visto muchas [fotos] de tu troca	he visto muchas [fotos] de tu troca
Cinco Siete	Jajajaaj si	Jajaja si
Emiliano	Quemando llanta y la chingada	Quemando llanta y la chingada
Cinco Siete	Jajajaa si	Jajaja si
Emiliano	Que te da por quemar llanta?	Qué te da por quemar llanta?
Cinco Siete	Nose Jaajaja	No sé Jajaja
Emiliano	Deja tu quemar llanta... qué te da subirlo en vivo al face?	Deja tú quemar llanta... qué te da subirlo en vivo al face?
Cinco Siete	Jajajaa uno k anda al cien pareja!	Jajaja uno que anda al cien pareja!
Emiliano	Andabas pedo	Andabas pedo
Cinco Siete	Ey Jajaaja	Ey Jajaja
Emiliano	Y qué culpa tienen tus llantas?	Y qué culpa tienen tus llantas?
Cinco Siete	Jajajaa k sepan k m vale madres!!!	Jajaja que sepan que me vale madres!
Emiliano	Tus llantas?	Tus llantas?
Cinco Siete	Todos	Todos
Emiliano	Eso es andar al cien?	Eso es andar al cien?
Cinco Siete	Afirma	Afirma

“What’s the point of burning out your tires?” (“quemar llanta”) I asked Cinco; “and, why would you uploaded to Facebook?” I continued; Cinco explained that he was “al cien” at that moment, which meant he was drunk (“pedo”) but also wanted everyone to know that he didn’t care about his tires (“me vale madres”), and told me that was precisely what “andar al cien” meant that he didn’t care about ruining his expensive tires and wanted to show everybody. An alternative explanation to what “andar al cien” can mean comes from a previous section, where I discussed how “rifársela” emerged across our conversations as a central component of the type of role identities male participants in the study appropriated:

Excerpt 7.2 – *Rifársela*

Emiliano	Cómo explicarías eso de “rifársela”?	Cómo explicarías eso de “rifársela”?
Cinco Siete	No se	No sé
Emiliano	Es como “jugársela”?	Es como “jugársela”?
Cinco Siete	Como k ndas al 100	Como que andas al cien
Emiliano	Al millón?	Al millón?
Cinco Siete	Ey	Ey
Emiliano	Andar al cien con alguien o cómo?	Andar al cien con alguien o cómo?
Cinco Siete	Andar con todo	Andar con todo
Emiliano	Todo como qué?	Todo como qué?
Cinco Siete	Pisto Mujeres Troques	Pisto, mujeres, trocones

“How would you explain rifársela?” (Which literally translates to “to raffle it”) I asked Cinco, “is it like taking risks?”; “It’s like when andas al cien” he explained. I continued by stating “al millón?” in the form of a question (this can be translated as “a million percent?”), which is a common phrase used in the context of narcocultura in order to exaggerate one’s level of commitment to a certain activity, group, or person (as in the Facebook group *Corridos al Millón*). I continued to drop questions on Cinco, “to be one hundred percent with or behind somebody?”; “andar con todo” he finally responded, which can be translated to “to roll all-out”; I quickly replied: “everything like what?”, booze (pisto), women, and trucks (trocones), he replied,

using the “ón” (trocones) superlative that is commonplace in Sinaloan slang, and to which I was growing more accustomed. Rifársela and andar al cien then had some parallels, and at least for Cinco, they entail a type of attitude that involves taking great risks but can reap high rewards, which one must enjoy to the fullest extent.

Cinco’s elucidations on andar con todo, andar al cien, and rifársela, were the only clear instances of recontextualization (Rymes, 2012; Broome, 2015) of these narocultura mainstay concepts among participants. Rymes (2012) explains that “communicative repertoires”; that is, the collection of ways individuals use not only language, but also “mass-mediated cultural elements, circulated, often, via viral Internet sources like videos found on YouTube”; have “highly recontextualizable bits—because they are often catchy, memorable, or dramatic” (p. 216). These means that by shifting the contexts in which he was using them (from a sicario-oriented context, to a work-related context) Cinco was able to shifting the meaning of the various forms of andar and of rifársela. Cinco also added added layers of meaning to his use of these words, for example, when saying that his posts were “para que vean no se tiene que andar en eso [el narco] para rifársela” (Excerpt 5.3 “Por mamones”), a phrase which echoed with my own appreciative tensions regarding narocultura (meaning that I find some appeal in its aesthetics, but reject its inherent violence). On the matter of recontextualization and layering, Broome (2015) explains that:

Recontextualization is the placement of such existing images in new contexts to generate new meanings for viewers. Layering is the overlaying of multiple sources on top of one another, further changing the meaning, intensifying complexity, and sometimes obscuring the original “real” source from new constructions. (p. 35)

Recontextualization and appropriation can be understood to be ways of achieving the same goal. In a way, it seemed to me that Cinco was distancing himself from the parts of narcocultura that he did not want associated with his persona while embracing the more distilled meanings and aesthetics he found appealing. Working to be perceived as somewhat dismissive of the consequences of living life al cien (occasionally), and willing to rifársela (professionally). I call this willingness to take risks (rifársela), a mainstay of narcocultura, because it is something highly valued in the lyrics that describe narcocorrido protagonists, like in this verse from “Carteles Unidos” by Alfredo Ríos “El Komander”, featuring band Los 2 Priimos (“cousins” written with a “ii” to denote affiliation to the Twiins Culiacán record label):

Lyrics 7.1 – “*Carteles Unidos*”

Original Lyrics

También sin pechera ya se la ha rifado. Su clave es el uno le apodan “ondeado”. Sin remordimiento se mancha las manos de sangre caliente, sin que haya cuajado (Ríos, 2010).

Translation

He has risked it without body armor. His codename is “one” but they call him the crazy one. Without remorse, he stains his hands of warm blood before it has dried.

Going back to the conversation depicted in Excerpt 6.10 “Andar con todo”, Edgar Quintero told me that he curated his image to reflect this kind of risk-taking attitude, to show “que andas con todo, que andas arreglado”. As I mentioned before, the “arreglado” part caught my attention in particular because I have encountered in different contexts, some of which are closely related to narcocultura. The more innocuous meaning the term “andar arreglado” is that of being “well put together” that is, presenting a clean-cut, well-dressed appearance (“arreglado

de vestir”). From personal experience, I knew that “andar arreglado” was something Municipal Police agents in Juárez would say about people that had made arrangements (“arreglos”) with government officials, or the Juárez Cartel leadership that placed them outside the reach of law enforcement. I also have heard alleged, former cartel members talk about how they would consume cocaine in order to “arreglarse” (“fix themselves up”) when they were tired or about to do something important. Because of this plethora of meanings, I sought clarification from Edgar by asking which of the three he was making reference to, to which he just answer with “all three!” (“las tres”).

This wasn’t the first time Edgar made veiled statements about being an active participant in organized crime groups. Along with Luis Coronel, he repeatedly made reference to himself in the plural (for example by saying “aquí andamos”, as in phrases such as “aquí andamos al millón”, or “aquí andamos activados”).

Excerpt 7.3 – “*Andar al cien con la gente*”

Emiliano	Hay otras cosas que dices mucho, como eso de andar activado, cómo le podríamos explicar eso a la raza que no sabe?	Hay otras cosas que dices mucho, como eso de andar activado, ¿cómo le podríamos explicar eso a la raza que no sabe?
E. Quintero	Es andar al 100 con la gent	Es andar al cien con la gente
Emiliano	Con cualquier gente?	¿Con cualquier gente?
E. Quintero	No pareja K ps???	No pareja, qué pues?
Emiliano	Pos yo sé que no, pero quiero que me lo expliques viejon! Jajaja	Pos yo sé que no, pero quiero que me lo expliques viejon! Jajaja
E. Quintero	Ps s estar al tiro pareja D lo k se le ofresca al viejo	Pues es estar al tiro pareja, de lo que se le ofrezca al viejo
Emiliano	Ánda pareja.... ves? qué te cuesta?	Ánda pareja.... ves? qué te cuesta?
E. Quintero	Jajaja	Jajaja

According to Edgar Quintero, andar activado “es andar al cien con la gente” which means to be one hundred percent with, or behind, “the people”. When I asked if he meant just any people, Edgar replied with a characteristically Mexican “no, ¿qué pues?” which in this case

meant something like “no, of course not” and implied that I was playing dumb. I admitted that I just wanted him to explain it to me, while I used Sinaloan slang (*viejón*) in an attempt to endear myself to him. “Es estar al tiro” Edgar responded, “de lo que se le ofrezca al viejo”⁹, which is something along the lines of “to be alert, ready for whatever the old man may require”.

“Andar al tiro” is something I also discussed with Cinco Siete. In Chapter 5, I discussed how Cinco, at one point in 2017, decided to remove all digital artifacts related to narocultura (even tangentially) from his Facebook profile because he was concerned that potential employers would negatively perceive the “movido” image he had been constructing until then. The following portrays our discussion immediately following the conversation depicted in Excerpt 5.6. It begins by me asking Cinco why he no longer uploads narcocorridos to his Facebook page:

Excerpt 7.4 – *Corridos are misunderstood*

Emiliano	Si, eso si Y ya no pones corridos en tu fb?	Si, eso si... Y ya no pones corridos en tu Facebook?
Cinco Siete	Na	No
Emiliano	Por?	Por?
Cinco Siete	Ps pa k no piense mal la gnt	Pues para que no piense mal la gente
Emiliano	Qué crees que piensa la gente de los que ponen corridos en su fb?	Qué crees que piensa la gente de los que ponen corridos en su Facebook?
Cinco Siete	Na ps kien sabe	No pues quién sabe
Emiliano	Entonces pa' qué los quitas?	Entonces para qué los quitas?
Cinco Siete	Ntc ps no los ben bien	No te creas, pues no los ven bien
Emiliano	Con qué crees que los relacionan?	Con qué crees que los relacionan?
Cinco Siete	Kn crimen Drogas	Con crimen, drogas...

⁹ Of note is that Edgar did not use *viejón* to address this figure, “el viejo”, because he was making reference to a supposed boss in the criminal organization he allegedly worked for, and that would have been considered disrespectful. Classic narcocorridos often make reference to cartel bosses as “el viejo” when their lyrics don’t disclose their identities, like in this excerpt from “Era Cabrón El Viejo” by Paulino Julián Garza:

Original Lyrics

Venia bajando del cerro, en su cuaco cimarrón. Huyendo de aquel teniente, al mando de un pelotón. Lo que no sabían los güachos, era que el viejo era cabrón (Garza, 1999).

Translation:

Coming down the hill, in his wild stallion. Fleeing for that Lieutenant, commanding his platoon. What the soldiers didn’t know, is that the old man was a fiend.

Emiliano	Pos de eso hablan! Jajaja	Pues de eso hablan! Jajaja
Cinco Siete	Ajajajaaj ey	Jajaja si
Emiliano	Pero para tí no namás se tratan de eso, no?	Pero para tí no nada más se tratan de eso, no?
Cinco Siete	No	No
Emiliano	Si te preguntan de qué más se tratan los corridos (aparte del narcotráfico) qué les dirías?	Si te preguntan de qué más se tratan los corridos (aparte del narcotráfico) qué les dirías?
Cinco Siete	Dandar al tiro Andar al cin	De andar al tiro... andar al cien
Emiliano	Y eso es algo positivo?	Y eso es algo positivo?
Cinco Siete	Ps si no	Pues si, no?
Emiliano	Supongo que si	Supongo que si

Cinco explained that he had deleted all of the instances where he has shared a narcocorrido video, and refrained from sharing any new ones in order to keep people from thinking ill of him or getting the wrong idea (“para que no piense mal la gente”). After overcoming an initial reluctance to answer my question about the things other people may think about users who post narcocorridos, Cinco responded that in his experience people relate these to crime and drugs. “Well that’s what they talk about!” I replied, as we shared a digital laugh. I knew narcocorridos had a deeper significance for Cinco, so I asked a rhetorical question: “but for you, they aren’t just about that, are they?” I followed my rhetorical question with a hypothetical one: “If someone were to ask you what corridos are about (besides narcotrafficking) what would you tell them?” In his answer, Cinco again brought up the matter of *andar al cien*, this time preceded by “*andar al tiro*” (something like “to be on the alert”) which is something Edgar Quintero also mentioned. I therefore asked Cinco to explain it to me:

Excerpt 7.5 – *Andar al tiro*

Emiliano	Qué es eso de “andar al tiro”	Qué es eso de “andar al tiro”
Cinco Siete	Komo novas a saver parjea	Cómo no vas a saber parjea
Emiliano	Pos es que qué tal que no es lo mismo para ti y para mí?	Pues es que qué tal que no es lo mismo para ti y para mí?
Cinco Siete	Aber expliklo	A ver, explícalo...
Emiliano	Es andar siempre alerta	Es andar siempre alerta
Cinco Siete	No nms eso	No nada mas eso

Emiliano	Qué más?	Qué más?
Cinco Siete	Activado	Activado
Emiliano	Como sicario?	Como sicario?
Cinco Siete	Ajajajaajja no!!!!!!!	Jajaja no!

Cinco, like Edgar, accused me of playing dumb by asking “¿cómo no vas a saber pareja?”, which translates to “how can you not know that partner?”. I had a positive outlook about these interactions, where participants called me out when they thought I was asking something I knew already, as they made me feel like I may have established an insider status, at least as a narcocultura consoeur. “What if it means a different thing to me than it does to you?” I replied, “explain it then” Cinco responded. “It means to be on the alert,” I explained, to which Cinco added that it also meant “andar activado” (literally “to be activated”). Andar activado is a recurrent theme in narcocorridos, I find it to be part of narcocorridos about sicarios, and a phrase closely related to acts of violence in their narratives, exemplified here by the lyrics to “Somos Efectivos” by band Los Alcapones De Culiacán (literally “The Al Capone’s of Culiacán”), which lyrics Edgar Quintero transcribed in a post to Corridos al Millón (see illustration 8.1):

Lyrics 7.2 – “*Somos Efectivos*”

Original Lyrics

Todos los plebes andan armados, R-15 y carros blindados. Con cuernos y radios, muy bien activados, calibres 50 accionando. Pa’ ajustar al contrario pasando, no creo que viva pa’ contarlo. No somos violentos, pero sí efectivos a la hora de hacer el trabajo en equipo (Sánchez, 2013).

Translation

Every young man is armed, AR-15s and armored cars. With AK47s and radios, very well activated, shooting .50 caliber [firearms]. To set enemies straight as they go by, I

don't think he'll live to tell it. We're not violent, but we are effective when it comes time to work as a team.

Since I had such a negative connotation of the phrase “andar activado” that I immediately asked Cinco if what he meant was that he was activado “like a sicario?” to which he replied with a digital laugh and a determined “no”. He went on to explain that what he actually meant by andar activado had to do with working hard or to be “en la chinga” (the fray), as I put it, or ‘búscandole’, as Cinco elucidated, which can be loosely translated as “looking to make ends meet”:

Excerpt 7.6 – *Andar activado*

Emiliano	“Activado” cómo?	“Activado” cómo?
Cinco Siete	Trabajando	Trabajando
Emiliano	En la chinga?	En la chinga?
Cinco Siete	A guebo Vuscandole compa	A huevo.... Buscándole compa
Emiliano	Al tiro con el jale? Viendo qué sale y cómo hacerle pa sacar feria?	Al tiro con el jale? Viendo qué sale y cómo hacerle para sacar feria?
Cinco Siete	Andale	Ándale
Emiliano	Arre ya entendí Entonces porque andas al tiro mejor borraste las fotos y los fb lives del grupo?	Arre ya entendí... Entonces porque andas al tiro mejor borraste las fotos y los Facebook lives del grupo?
Cinco Siete	Ps si Nimodo	Pues si, ni modo

After sensing that I had grasped what the concept of andar activado meant for Cinco, I presented my newfound knowledge to him in the form of questions, I asked if andar activado meant that he was al tiro con el jale (on the lookout for jobs) and looking for legitimate opportunities to make money, and if the reason for removing narco-related content from his social media was precisely that—that he was in al tiro con el jale. All of which cinco confirmed with a “pues si, ni modo”, which is a way of saying “yeah, I didn't have much choice”.

Cinco’s understanding of the attitudes presented in narcocorrido narratives seemed to me as emerging from decanting process by which he appropriated the seminal meanings from the exercise of violence in order to recontextualize them to his own life experiences. For him, andar activado had nothing to do with killing, but was still a “bit” (Rymes, 2012) he used in his identity work to construe his persona and role as a hard worker. This contrasts with Edgar Quintero’s and Luis Coronel’s explanations of the many instances of andar (i.e. activado, al cien) which I regarded as far-less recontextualized, and exhibiting bits of narcocultura that I found commonplace . Illustration 7.1 depicts one of the many images that were shared to the Corridos al Millón group, which featured some variation of the “aquí andamos” theme, the text in the image reads something like “sometimes awesome, sometimes shitty, but here we are, are we’re not backing down”. The word “verga” means “penis” and it can be used in Mexican slang to characterize something as awesome or worthless, depending on how it is used (so the author’s use of it consecutively in such a short phrase could be considered clever):



Illustration 7.1– User shares meme to “Corridos al Millón”

When I tried posing a hypothetical question to Luis Coronel (very much like I did with Cinco Siete), in the hopes of getting a more in-depth explanation of what “aquí andamos al cien” meant, I found his answer evasive (which was a common occurrence whenever I attempted to ask him what I thought were in-depth questions). The following excerpt illustrates my attempt to have Luis explain what he meant by the phrase, not to me, but (hypothetically) to someone who is not an insider (“alguien que no anda en la plebada”). However, my initial phrasing seems to be unclear, eliciting a “Komo???” (which could be interpreted as a “how?” or a “what?”) and I re-formulate it by asking Luis to explain it as if he were addressing someone who is not Mexican (“alguien que no es Mexicano”), with scant results:

Excerpt 7.7 – *Andamos al cien*

Emiliano	Oye, sigo sin poder explicar eso de “aquí andamos al cien” ... yo lo entiendo, pero cómo se lo explicarías a alguien que no anda en la plebada?	Oye, sigo sin poder explicar eso de “aquí andamos al cien” ... yo lo entiendo, pero cómo se lo explicarías a alguien que no anda en la plebada?
L. Coronel	Komo???	Cómo?
Emiliano	Supongamos que alguien que no es mexicano te pregunta: “Por qué pones ANDAMOS, como si anduvieran varios, si sólo andas tu solo”?	Supongamos que alguien que no es mexicano te pregunta: “Por qué pones “andamos”, como si anduvieran varios, si sólo andas tú solo”?
L. Coronel	Ps pk nunk ando solo	Pues porque nunca ando solo...

My line of questioning was perhaps too inquisitive. I spoke hypothetically, at first: “let’s assume (“supongamos”) someone who is not Mexican asks you...”; then I presented Luis with what I believed were the facts: “why do you use the plural form of andar (‘andamos’, which literally means to walk in a group) as if you had company, when you’re only by yourself?”. Luis answered with a phrase that I found to be common in narcocorrido lyrics “nunca ando solo”. Narcocorrido protagonists often use this phrase when find themselves alone and confronted with enemies or an authority figure, as a way to intimidate them. One such example comes from the lyrics to the song “El de los Lentos Carrera” by the group Revólver Cannabis, which is a corrido

that presents the voices of three protagonists; Ángel del Villar (founder of the record label which produced the album in which the song is featured, playing the part of a pesado with ties to the Sinaloa Cartel), a Federal Police agent who pulls him over, and the narrator:

Lyrics 7.3 – “*El de los Lentos Carrera*”

Original Lyrics

Narrador: Reporto una patrulla en la carretera...

Agente: Paré un deportivo alta velocidad. Quitese señor esos lentes Carrera, porque la cara la quiero mirar. Ponga sus manos donde pueda verlas.

Narrador: Y un cuestionario empezó el Federal...

Agente: ¿Sabes que es delito andar burlando leyes?

Del Villar: No sabía que es delito el andar alegre.

Agente: ¿Por qué andas tan solo en la madrugada?

Del Villar: Yo nunca ando solo... (Cabrera, 2014).

Translation

Narrator: A police car reported from the highway...

Agent: I just pulled over a speeding sports-car. Sir [to Ángel del Villar], please remove those Carrera sunglasses so I can get a look at your face. Place your hand where I can see them.

Narrator: And this Federal agent started asking question...

Agent: Do you know breaking the law is a crime?

Del Villar: I didn't know happiness was a crime.

Agent: Why are you out by yourself so late?

Del Villar: I am never by myself...

The story of this particular narcocorrido ends in the agent figuring out he had just pulled over a powerful cartel figure and apologizing immediately, Del Villar then hands him an amount of money equivalent to his “sueldo por todo un año” (salary for a whole year) and speeds off into the distance. Another example of how common the phrase “nunca ando solo” is in narcocorridos lyrics comes from the song “Así es la Vida” by Gerardo Coronel:

Lyrics 7.4 – “Así es la Vida”

Original Lyrics

Pacas de verdes las que manejó, y se preguntan por qué, trabajó un día a la semana, aunque a veces hasta tres. Se quiebran la cabeza al andar mitoteando, “¿en qué trabaja ese güey?”. Si me miran contento, es que ando celebrando y no pregunten por qué. Nunca ando solo pa ningun lado, por si se llega a ofrecer. (Coronel, 2014)

Translation

I handle green bales, and everyone wonders why I only work one day a week, but sometimes I work up to three. They break their heads wondering “what does that dude do for work?” If I seem happy, it’s because I’m celebrating, don’t ask why. I’m never by myself, in case something needs doing.

Both songs, “El de los Lentos Carrera” and “Así es la Vida”, use the phrase “nunca ando solo” to veiledly convey that their protagonists are members of a criminal group. The veil is much less apparent in the case of Gerardo Coronel’s song, as the mention of green bales suggests the protagonist traffics marihuana in such quantities that he handles huge bundles of it. Some narcocorridos forgo the veil altogether, and present a clear illustration of the threat that “nunca

ando solo” conveys when used in the context of narcocultura. One such example is “100 Casquillos” (100 bullet casings) by band Jorge Santacruz y su grupo Quinto Elemento:

Lyrics 7.5 – “100 Casquillos”

Original Lyrics

Soy tranquilo y buena gente, pero siempre estoy en uno pal’ combate. No me puedo confiar ni de mi propia sombra, el gobierno y los contrarios ya quieren dormir tranquilos, pero no los deja mi cuerno de chivo. Aparte nunca ando solo, siempre traigo a mis muchachos, con la pechera tatuada, bien alerta y bien armados. Siempre con tiro arriba, el dedo en el gatillo. Siempre frente a la muerte, listo pa’ defenderme de cualquier enemigo (Santacruz, 2015).

Translation

I’m a calm good person, but I’m always ready for combat. I can’t even trust my own shadow, the government and my opponents want to sleep soundly, but my AK keeps them awake. Besides, I’m never by myself, I’m always rolling with my boys, with bullet-proof vests, always alert and well armed. Always with a round in the chamber and with fingers on the trigger. Always facing death, ready to defend me from any enemy.

In Santacruz’ (2105) lyrics, it is plainly evident that the protagonist of that particular song is never by himself because he is accompanied by a band of loyal gunmen who protect him. In México, the individuals who make up this type of security detail are often referred to as “guaruras”. Folklorically, it is said that the term is derived from the word for governor (“wárura”) in the Raramuri language of the Tarahumara original people who live in the northern state of Chihuahua. As the story goes, when Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz visited the

región in 1969, the locals referred to his bodyguards as “wáruras” because they thought they were government officials rather than armed escorts (Coen, 2007). In use, the term “guarura” then evolved to “guarro”, which also means “dirty”, and is a pejorative way of referring to bodyguards in norteño (northern slang). Therefore, when I asked Luis Coronel if what he meant by “nunca ando solo” was that he was in the company of some sort of armed escort (escolta), I also used the term “guarros” to refer to the type of gunmen that narcocorridos like “100 Casquillos” depict in their lyrics:

Excerpt 7.8 – *Bodyguards*

Emiliano	Traes guarros? Escolta? Andas acompañado?	Traes guarros? Escolta? Andas acompañado?
L. Coronel	Algo asi parejita	Algo así parejita

Luis did not answer this particular question in a straightforward manner; rather, he told me that he meant “algo así” (something like that). Previous experiences had taught me not to push these types of questions past a certain point. I interpreted the use of the diminutive “parejita” as Luis’ way of reminding me that while our relationship was cordial, he still regarded me as an outsider in the notional hierarchy he was kept making references to.

A good illustration of why I decided not to keep asking Luis questions on the subject is that Edgar Quintero had already told me in no uncertain terms that type of thing is something you just don’t say (“eso no se dice compa”). This happened when I asked him to elaborate on why he almost exclusively made reference to himself in the plural, even when his own photos depicted him by himself (“en las fotos sales solo”); during that conversation, Edgar made it clear to me, that—like the protagonists in “El de los Lentos Carrera”—the utterance of “nunca ando solo” signals the end of whatever line of questioning is ongoing:

Excerpt 7.9 – *Nunca ando solo*

Emiliano	“Andamos”... quiénes? En las fotos sales solo.	“Andamos”... quiénes? En las fotos sales solo.
E. Quintero	Nunk ando solo viejon	Nunca ando solo viejon
Emiliano	Con quién andas o qué?	Con quién andas o qué?
E. Quintero	Eso no se dice kmpa	Eso no se dice compa

I would like to note that my understandings about these “nunca ando solo” interactions are in flux. On the one hand, I feel like participants were treating me like narcocorridos portray their protagonists treating police agents; which would mean that they may have been attempting to equalize an uneven power dynamic with an authoritative figure (me) by warning me about how they nunca andan solos. On the other hand, I felt like the phrase was a ready-made bit, part of a narcocultura communicative repertoire (Rymes, 2015), that one uses to answer pestering questions about what you’re doing, or about who you roll with. In any case, I regard the constant reference of male participants in the study to themselves in the plural—in the form of “andamos”—as them asserting cultural belonging (de los Ríos, 2019) to something larger than themselves, by transforming a single speaker into multiple, making an individual a group, whether literally or figuratively.

What that “larger” thing was for Luis and Edgar is unclear to me, but in the context the narcocultura-oriented Facebook groups we all frequented, nunca andar solo meant that you were rolling with some echelon of a drug cartel. The latter is suggested in the lyrics of “100 Casquillos” but the song stops short of suggesting that the protagonist is affiliated to any specific cartel. Other narcocorridos are far more specific, one example is the song “El Calaca” (the skeleton), as performed by singer Jorge El Real, which uses the phrase “nunca ando solo” and the attribute of “activado” alongside mentions of notorious figures of Mexican organized crime, namely “L-50”—moniker of Iván Velázquez Caballero, captured Gulf Cartel lieutenant (SEMAR, 2012)—and “Tony”, as in “Tony Tormenta”, alias of Antonio Ezequiel Cárdenas

Guillén, a Gulf Cartel leader killed in 2010 by Mexican marines in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas (SEMAR, 2010):

Lyrics 7.6 – “*El Calaca*”

Original Lyrics

Con 15 años entramos a la chamba. Me inicié de pistolero, L-50 me metió al equipo. Entrenamiento y respaldo para accionar. Otro Jefe como El Tony en esta mafia ya no habrá. Si se trata de pelear siempre estoy listo, para eso me pinto solo. Cargo un cuerno de disco y si la cosa se pone más seria, tampoco nunca ando solo, me respalda mi equipo. Ando al tiro con los plebes, traigo el radio en la mano, estoy pendiente por donde pasan los guachos, bien activado, nunca se me han rajado (Anzures, 2012).

Translation

I was 15 years old when I was initiated into the job. I started as a gunman, “L-50” inducted me into the team. Training and backup to act. Another boss like Tony in this mob we’ll never have. I’m always ready to fight, I’m great at it. I carry an AK with a drum magazine, and if things get serious, I’m never alone, my team backs me up. Me and the boys are always on our toes, I have the radio at hand, I’m aware of the military’s whereabouts, well activated, we never back down.

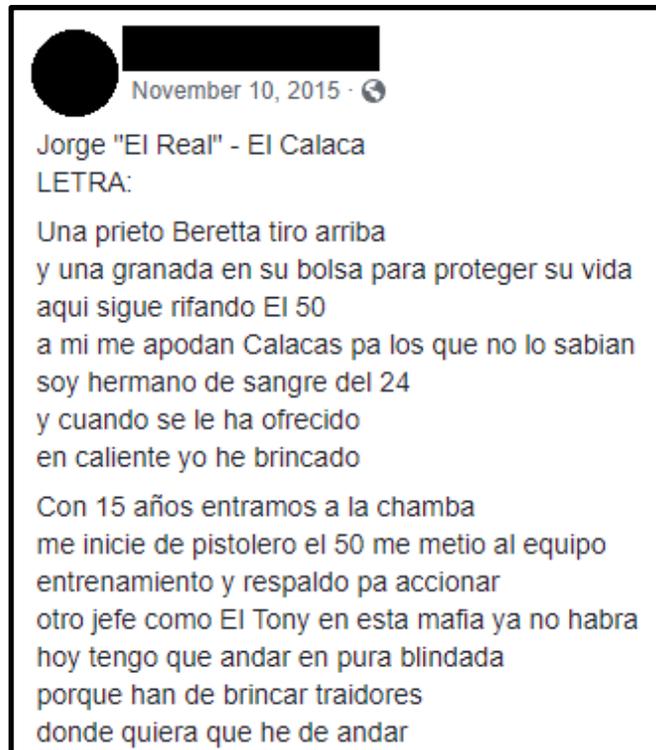


Illustration 4.2.4 - User shares lyrics for “El Calaca”

Describing himself as “bien activado” the protagonist “El Calaca” declares he is part of a group of sicarios ready to engage the Mexican military at a moment’s notice, also using a sicario-oriented meaning of “andar al tiro”. These meanings contrast with Cinco Siete’s explanations of both “andar al tiro” and “andar activado”, which were work-centered, and didn’t conjure images of crime or violence; however, the sicario-related meanings—especially in the use of “activado”—that emerged in the study, far outweighed work-related ones. The lyrics for “El Calaca” also depict the protagonist as being initiated as a sicario when he was 15 years old by saying that “con 15 años entramos en la chamba”. Child soldiers are a central narrative component of narcocorridos, and I discuss these “niño sicario” characters, which are abundantly referenced in narco-narratives, in the following chapter, alongside emerging characters called “sicarias”, which are less commonly found in narcocultura artifacts.

Chapter 8: The Legitimation and Appropriation of Violence

This chapter continues the analysis of sicario-related meanings of the many forms of “andar”, picking up my conversation about narcocorrido “Somos Efectivos” with Edgar Quintero. Analysis of this conversation leads to an account for the sicario identities that emerged in the study, which besides sicarios, include niños sicarios and sicarias cabronas. There is also an analysis of the differentiation between sicario identities and the narcotrafficker identity that participants called “pesado”. These identities are portrayed in the narrative of the chapter as they emerged in the conversations with participants. I present these conversations followed by their analysis, and I illustrate them using narcocorrido lyrics, and images obtained from the Facebook groups in which I participated in. Following the analysis and illustration of sicario and pesado identities, I discuss how these identities embody the legitimation of violence, crime, and dehumanization, and I present the sections of conversations with participants and snips of Facebook group users’ contributions that best depict this legitimation, alongside the artifacts that shape these narco-narratives.

Niños Sicarios y Sicarias Cabronas

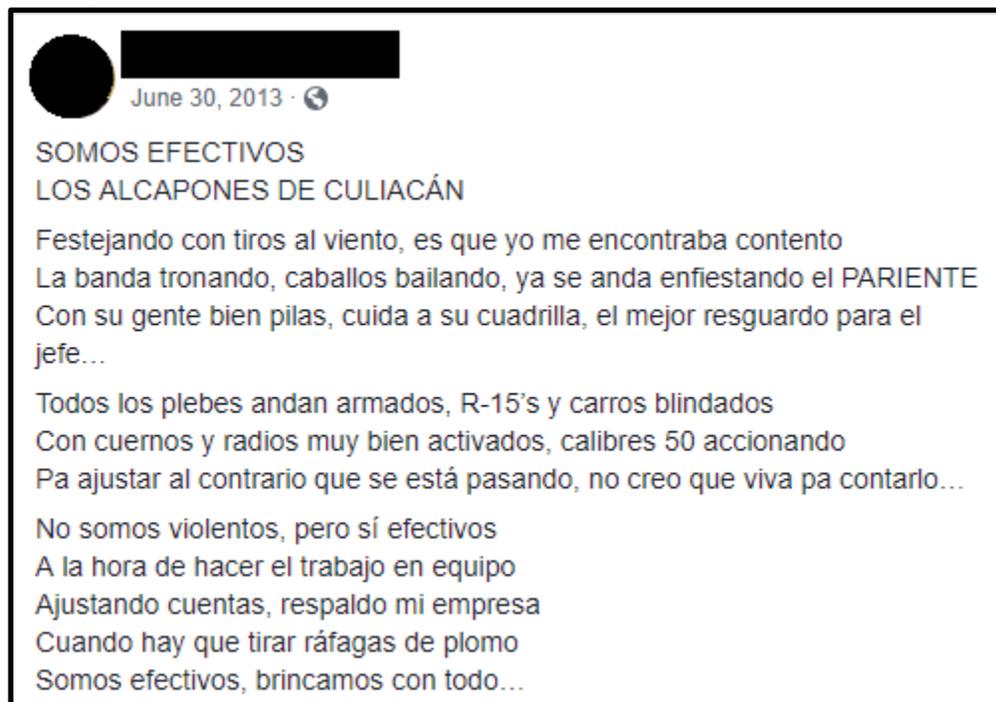


Illustration 8.1 – User shares lyrics to “Somos Efectivos”

As I mentioned, the song “Somos Efectivos” by Los Alcapones de Culiacán was one of the many corridos shared by users such as Edgar Quintero, this narcocorrido features lyrics that read “no somos violentos, pero sí efectivos a la hora de hacer el trabajo en equipo” (Sánchez, 2013), which means, “we’re not violent, yet we are effective when it comes from teamwork” (the teamwork being killing people). These lyrics, like those of Jorge Santacruz’ “100 Casquillos” in which the protagonist claims to be “a good person” with “vengeance in my mind, and anger in my blood” –“la venganza está en mi mente y el coraje está en mi sangre” (Santacruz, 2015)– struck me as profoundly contradictory. This led me, to ask Edgar point-blank “¿qué pedo ahí?” (something like “what’s the deal there?”), on the subject of the lyrics to “Somos Efectivos”, hoping that he would give me some insight into how a cartel gun-for-hire could consider himself as non-violent:

Excerpt 8.1 – *Killing a sangre fría*

Emiliano	Hay muchos corridos que dicen eso de andar activado... vi que subiste un corrido de los alcapones... la letra dice “no somos violentos” pero también dice que matan a sus enemigos, qué pedo ahí? Como se puede matar sin ser violento?	Hay muchos corridos que dicen eso de andar activado... vi que subiste un corrido de Los Alcapones... la letra dice “no somos violentos” pero también dice que matan a sus enemigos, ¿qué pedo ahí?, ¿cómo se puede matar sin ser violento?.
E. Quintero	Con sangre fría no namas a lo puerko	Con sangre fría, no nada más a lo puerco.

I bluntly asked Edgar “how can you kill without being violent?”. His answer translates to “in cold blood, not just like some pig”. I understood this to mean that, in the context we were situated in, killing indiscriminately (“a lo puerco”) is something that is very negatively regarded, while killing selectively and unemotionally (“con sangre fría”) does not necessarily make you a violent person. This distinction merits some clarification, to an outsider audience “killing in cold blood” usually means killing without justification, but in the context of our discussion, “cold blood” means something akin to “keeping your cool”, that is, killing selected victims without letting emotions get in the way. Even as I was aware of this distinction, I asked Edgar to elaborate on it:

Excerpt 8.2 – *La diferencia*

Emiliano	Cuál es la diferencia?	¿Cuál es la diferencia?
E. Quintero	K namas es al k te pongan O si t topan	Que nada más es al que te pongan... o si te topan

“What is the difference?” I asked. “You only kill a man if he’s marked... or in clashes”, is how I understood Edgar’s answer. Edgar used two key words which gave insight into his reasoning “pongan” and “topan”; these come from the verbs “poner” (to place) and “topar” (to head-butt), which I’m respectively translating as “being marked” and “clashing”, because these

resemble the ways in which I’ve seen them utilized in the context of narcocultura¹⁰. My immediate follow-on question to Edgar was “even if these are women and children?”

Excerpt 8.3 – *Women and children*

Emiliano	Así te pongan mujeres, niños?	¿Así te pongan mujeres, niños?
E. Quintero	Si las plebas andan metidas	Si las plebas andan metidas
Emiliano	Niños?	¿Niños?
E. Quintero	Ai ninos metidos también Ninos sicarios	Hay niños metidos también... niños sicarios
Emiliano	Conoces niños y mujeres sicarios?	¿Conoces niños y mujeres sicarios?
E. Quintero	Namas viejas	Nada más viejas

Edgar answered with a phrase that amounts to “las plebas (girls) are in on it too”, which I knew to be true. Even as narcocultura has a limited array of sexualized role identities, the “sicaria” character had prevalence in the Facebook groups Edgar and I frequented, and was central to a group that exclusively posted sicaria-related content. Named “Sicarias Cabronas” (something like “wicked sicarias”), this group had administrators who posted content almost completely restricted to memes, which I discuss and illustrate in the following section. In “Una cartografía de la Narco-Narrativa en Colombia y México (1990-2010)” Fonseca (2016) explains that ““a mujer-sicario se aleja de las convenciones de la violencia del narcotráfico como esencialmente masculina y misógina. Está *femme-fatale* rompe los estereotipos de género y señala la emergencia en la narco-narrativa de personajes femeninos con agencia y fuerza” (p.159), meaning that the sicaria is an emergent narco-oriented role identity through which agency and physical strength are appropriated by the characters of women assassins.

Edgar Quintero also assured me that children also play the role of sicarios. Plenty of stories of “niños sicarios” have emerged in the media, most notably the story of Edgar Jiménez Lugo alias “El Ponchis”, a 14-year-old sicario for the Pacífico Cartel (Barragán, 2015). A

¹⁰ I unpack these two concepts in a subsequent section about the legitimization of violence.

number of narcocorridos reinforce the narrative that sicarios start their lives as soldiers being teenagers, but few put it more bluntly than “El Niño Sicario” by band Calibre 50. Many versions and iterations of this song were shared consistently in the Facebook groups I studied, and has a narrative where an older, more experienced authority figure tells a young man:

Lyrics 8.1 – “El Niño Sicario”

Original Lyrics

Plebe ya te manchaste las manos de sangre, ni modo, ya no queda de otra, solo queda entrarle. Te enseñaste a matar temprano, y has tomado el mal camino. No cumples ni los 15 años y aún tienes la cara de niño. No llores ni te sientas mal, así todos empezamos. Bienvenido al mundo real, ahora ya eres un sicario (Cabrera, 2012).

Translation

Kid, now there’s blood on your hands, there’s no other way, you have to step up. You learned to kill early in your life and have taken the wrong path. You haven’t even turned 15 and still have the face of a child. Don’t cry or feel bad, that’s how we got our start. Welcome to the real world, you’re a sicario now.



Illustration 8.2 – “El Niño Sicario” was recurrently shared by various users

Edgar Quintero claimed to be an insider of the world songs like “El Niño Sicario” describe, as did Luis Coronel. When I asked Edgar if he knew any sicarias or niños sicarios himself, he replied that he only knew “viejas”, that is, women (referred to in a disparaging way) who were or claimed to be sicarias. Throughout the study, I did not come across any Facebook user who claimed to be a sicaria, in fact, even images shared in the group “Sicarias Cabronas” were appropriated from non-narco media outlets and altered. This phenomenon really caught my attention, because I was almost immediately able to identify these images, as I had previously seen them in my Instagram feed. This had nothing to do with me following any accounts even remotely related to narcocultura, but with the fact that I follow plenty of Instagram accounts belonging to U.S. Armed Forces veterans.

One such example is Lidia Porter, a former U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman, whose Instagram account I sporadically follow. “Corpsman” is what the U.S. Navy calls healthcare specialists, that is, their medical technicians (even if they are women). As a practitioner of combat medicine myself, I partake in social media interactions across a number of platforms with what is a relatively small online community of combat medicine practitioners. Lidia is part of this community, and in her Instagram feed, she routinely posts pictures of herself at the firing range, training with many types of firearms. Therefore, I immediately recognized her when I found one of her pictures posted to the Sicarias Cabronas Facebook group. In the image, Lidia can be seen reloading an AR-15 magazine with the rifle in her lap; the meme reads, “You wish me death? Hahaha. Stupid [woman]... Death and I are comadres”.

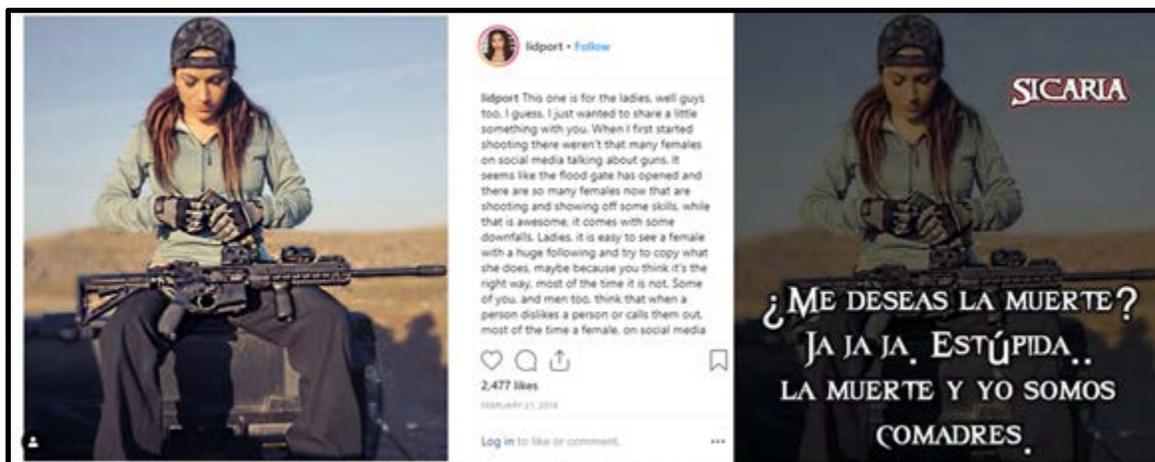


Illustration 8.3 – Image by Lidia Porter used as meme

The imagery overlap among my Instagram feed and these type of memes posted by the administrators of Sicarias Cabronas did not stop there. Clayton Haugen is a Scottsdale, Arizona-based photographer who is famous in veteran online circles for working with women veterans, service members, law enforcement officers, and competitive women shooters. Although I find that his earlier work over-sexualized the models, I regard his more recent imagery as accentuating the warrior qualities of these women, rather than—or at least placing equal emphasis

on—their sexuality. Almost every single image found on Clayton’s Instagram feed can also be found posted as a meme to Sicarias Cabronas. Evens as the base images are exactly the same, the intended audiences are different. I believe like Clayton’s photos, whether they accentuate models’ sexuality or warrior qualities, are meant for male consumers. In contrast, I feel like most of the memes posted to Sicarias Cabronas were meant for a female audience, and that they were supposed to have an empowering message (a subjective estimation), but I often found these images to be rationalizations of gender violence that reproduced problematic gender roles, and placed women in a subaltern social echelon.

As the example in Illustration 8.3 shows, many memes featured texts that I interpreted to voice aggressive language towards women, from the women depicted in the meme. For example, in the case of the meme fabricated by using Lidia Porter’s image, I believe the female voice of the protagonists calls another woman “estúpida”. However, the memes that used Clayton’s photos, sometimes did seem to convey messages of strength and independence, such as “each treason makes you stronger, and each letdown smarter” (Illustration 8.4) or “if you (directed at men) want to judge my path, you can borrow my shoes” (Illustration 8.5).

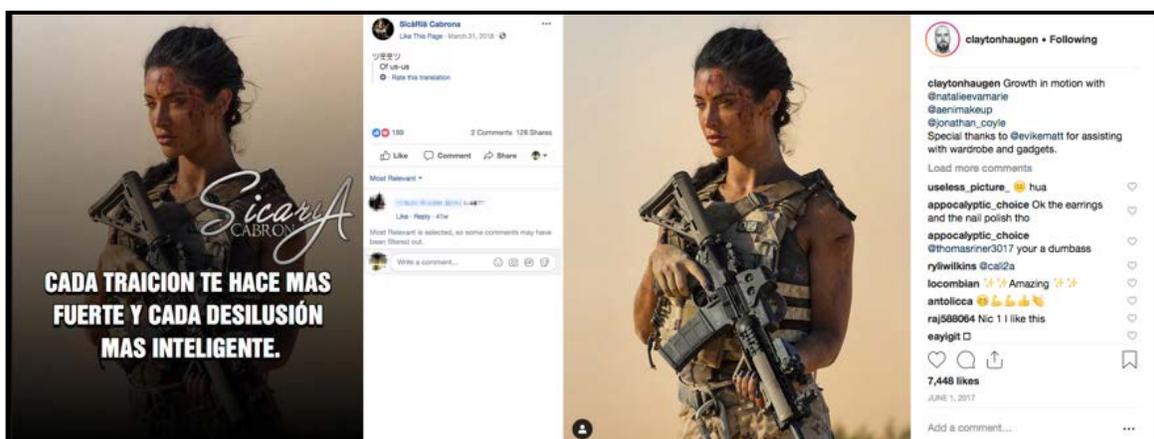


Illustration 8.4 – Image by Clayton Haugen used in Sicarias Cabronas meme

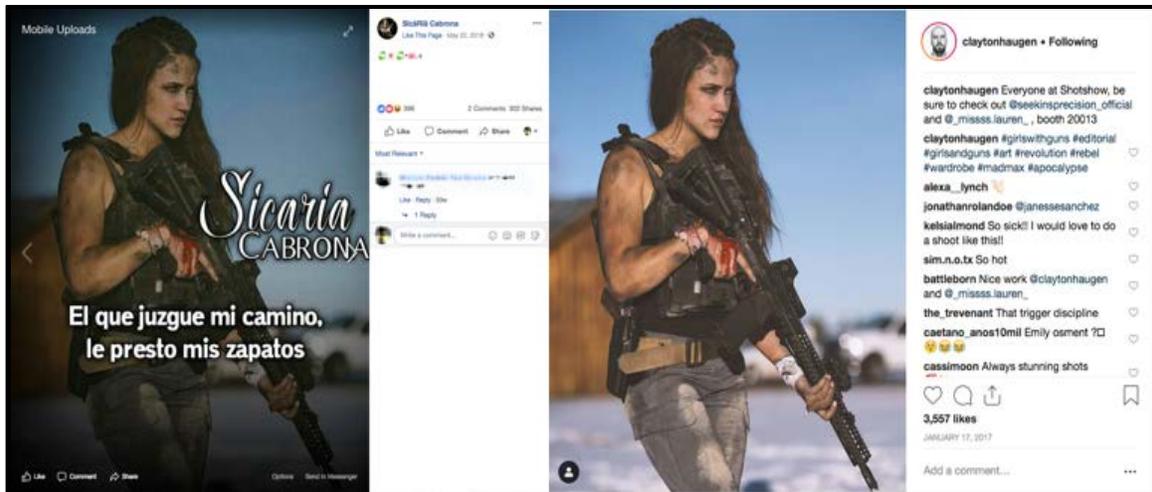


Illustration 8.5 – Image by Clayton Haugen used in Sicarias Cabronas meme

What I found most interesting about the imagery in these memes is that it never used images of actual sicarias as a pictographic base. Admittedly, in contrast to their male counterparts, photos of actual sicarias are scarce as there have been relatively few news stories of drug cartel gunwomen, such as Juana “La Peque” (Méndez, 2016), a sicaria for Los Zetas (a Tamaulipas-based cartel) who’s last name was never made public because she became an informant for Mexican law enforcement agencies after her arrest; or Melissa “La China” Calderón, a Sinaloa Cartel assassin who actually rose up through the ranks of that crime syndicate to become a mid-level lieutenant (Baverstock, 2015). However, I never saw any pictures of these sicarias posted to Sicarias Cabronas. I found and retrieved images 8.6 and 8.7 from news sources reporting on La Peque and La China’s stories using a simple Google search. Their relative simplicity and quality contrasts with the images of idealized sicarias in the Sicarias Cabronas memes, which relied on heavily edited, high-quality staged depictions of athletic White women constructed and shot by Clayton Haugen from and for the male gaze. According to my knowledge of his work, Haugen’s art features few women of color, which may help to explain why White women are featured so heavily in this meme feed.



Illustration 8.6 - Juana "La Peque"



Illustration 8.7 - Melissa "La China" Calderón

However, Race also played a large role in the ways in which women were depicted in memes constructed via images of characters starring in narco-novelas, most notably “El Señor de los Cielos” and “La Reina del Sur” (the latter being part of Reina Rivera’s pseudonym). Photos of actor Fernanda Castillo, who played fictional cartel showrunner “Monica Róbles”—a character very loosely based on Enedina Arellano Félix, head of the Tijuana Cartel since 2008 (Jiménez Valdez, 2014)—in “El Señor de los Cielos” (itself a narco-novela based on the life of Amado Carrillo Fuentes, head of the Juárez Cartel, which took ample licenses with the story) and Kate del Castillo, who played the aforementioned Teresa Mendoza in “La Reina del Sur”, served as the base for most memes.

These actors are also White women, and for the most part (and in contrast with the memes that used Clayton’s photos) featured women voices aggressively disparaging other women. For example, Illustration 8.8: “Do I envy you? No darling, I don’t envy dirty women”; Illustration 8.9: “He tells me everything... even when he falls for dumb bitches like you”; Illustration 8.10: “That girl thinks she’s better than everyone because she has a ton of men behind her... The saying goes ‘low prices attract more clients’”; Illustration 8.11: “When the dog plate has an owner (female), bitches like you always get hungry”; Illustration 8.12: “A lioness doesn’t pay attention to a barking bitch”; Illustration 8.13: “They seek me because I’m intelligent, they seek you because you’re easy, don’t compare yourself to me”. All of these memes feature images of women, and I interpret the text to be their voices. These voices seem to be speaking to other women in what I interpret as adversarial conversations. What leads me to understand that the intended audience for the images is women is that these voices seem to be directed towards “mugrosas”, “perras”, and “pendejas”.



Illustration 8.8 – Fernanda Castillo meme



Illustration 8.9 – Fernanda Castillo meme



Illustration 8.10 – Kate del Castillo meme



Illustration 8.11 – Fernanda Castillo meme



Illustration 8.12 – Fernanda Castillo meme



Illustration 8.13 – Kate del Castillo meme

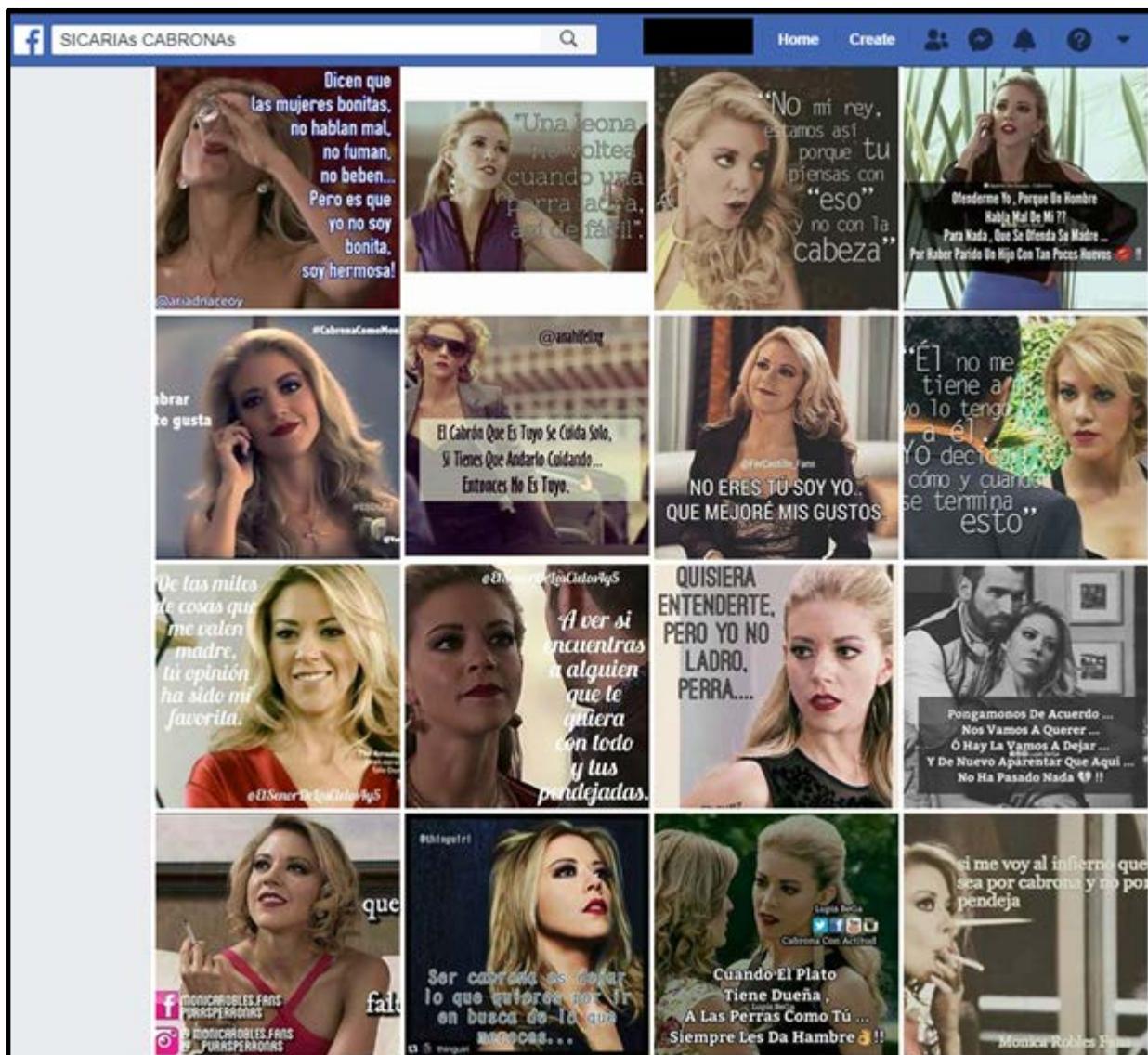


Illustration 8.14 – Snip of “Sicarias Cabronas” image timeline

Illustration 8.14 portrays how heavily actor Fernanda Castillo (in and out of character) was featured in the memes that users and administrators were posting to the Sicarias Cabronas group. As I realized that her narco-novela character, “Mónica Robles”, had become a sort of *icon* of online narco-cultural production, I began to research the character. I found that Mónica was portrayed as the head of a Tijuana-like drug cartel; the character breaks with more sexualized narco-novela women characters by embodying masculine characteristics, being depicted as an

aggressive, strong, bloodthirsty, cartel showrunner. However, the character retains stereotypical gender traits common to female novela characters; for example, Mónica’s sexuality consistently undercuts her success. I exemplify this by the fact that Mónica falls in love with the head of the rival cartel “Aurelio Casillas” (loosely based on Juárez Cartel head Amado Carrillo), despite the fact that he had murdered her two brothers, and that she spends more time fighting off rival women than rival cartels. Despite this, I believe that the Mónica Robles character was different from traditional novela female characters in ways that allowed it to become an icon for women who self-identified as “cabronas” (something along the lines of “bad-assess”, or “savvy”). The character at times seems to break with the “todas son iguales” (women are all the same) and “sin tetas no hay paraíso” narratives I often came across in the study, which reproduced the notion that women’s only valuable asset is their sexuality (which they exploit in pursuit of establishing somewhat transactional relationships with powerful men). The tension between stereotypically feminine and masculine characteristics at the center of the sicaria cabrona identity is illustrated by the contrasting images in the following example:



Illustration 8.15 – “Sicarias Cabronas” memes with the same message

Illustration 8.15 depicts the contrasts between the two types of images that gave form to memes featured in *Sicarias Cabronas* (the ones based on images like the ones by Clayton Haugen

and Lidia Porter, and the ones based on narco-novela characters). Both memes in the illustration present the same message: “a smart woman doesn’t get sad, she gets prettier”, but the underlying images seem to suggest different definitions of what “pretty” may mean. I do not know why no images of actual sicarias were used in memes posted to Sicarias Cabronas. In the images of “La Peque” and “La China” (which are but a Google search away for anybody) we see strong women in control, doing actual work for crime syndicates, in some cases leading men, but not once were they used in any content I came across in the fieldwork (memes or narcocorridos). I repeatedly sought to engage Sicaria Cabróna’s users who identified as women in conversation about these evident complexities, but without any fruitful results.

My inability to productively engage with women participants was a source of continuous personal frustration throughout the many months in which I conducted the study, and I have devoted copious amounts of reflection to the fact. I gather that, at least partially, this inability to connect in meaningful ways was the result of my lack of familiarity and perspective about the things that drive the women users of narcocultura-oriented Facebook groups, compared to their masculine counterparts, with whom I more easily identified. However, the fact that administrators and users of the group Sicarias Cabronas used images of strong, fierce-looking women (who I know are U.S. military veterans, law enforcement agents, and athletes) to represent their sicaria personas, contrasts with the hyper-sexualized stereotypes of women at the core of narcocultura, which are constantly featured in narcocorrido videos and narco-novelas, in which are largely portrayed as disposable.

To my (still, male) gaze, Clayton’s images differ greatly to those of the narco-novelas and narcocorrido videos discussed. While many elements of the first can be regarded as fetishized (the firearms, the blood, and the debris—that I keep referring to these elements as

somehow highlighting “warrior qualities” likely underlines their fetishistic significance). Clayton’s images of women certainly pull on the strings of American militarism (the original images, as opposed to the memes); but there are no comparable images being produced by or about women in México, which is how I suspect they ended up being used in *Sicarias Cabronas*. Unlike the images of real sicarias, the images of idealized sicarias are constructed from (and for) the male gaze. This means they have cultural elements akin to the “sin tetas no hay paraíso” imaginary, which allows them to fit into narcocultura’s sexualized depictions of women without completely breaking with it them, while having other less sexualizing elements that place them in tension with the subaltern, sexual workers, disposable, and purely ornamental roles traditionally offered to women in narco-narratives.

Sicarios y Pesados

In contrast with the scarcity of imagery depicting images of real sicarias (images I could not trace back to sources other than their authors), images featuring men posing as sicarios (wearing body armor and wielding firearms) were much more prevalent across the Facebook groups (Illustrations 8.16 through 8.19). Many self-identified male users uploaded such pictures claiming that they were self-portraits, alongside messages such as “I used to be good, I still am, but not to everybody” (Illustration 8.17), or “I don’t hate, or insult, or criticize. I don’t give a crap about anyone’s life” (Illustration 8.19). I believe this illustrates how the sicario identity is well established compared with the sicaria counterpart. I asked Luis Coronel what his thoughts were on the authenticity of such claims, based on his assertion that most of the guys posting these pictures were doing so “por mamones” in order to aparentar ser pesados.



Illustration 8.16 – “Your time to cry”



Illustration 8.17 – “I used to be good”



Illustration 8.18 – God’s shield



Illustration 8.19 – “I don’t hate”



Illustration 8.20 – “If you’re not a good killer then you’re a good kill”

Excerpt 8.4 – *Nomás de mamones*

Emiliano	Entonces la raza que sube fotos empecherada realmente nomás está de mamona?	Entonces la raza que sube fotos empecherada realmente nomás está de mamona?
L. Coronel	Unos si	Unos si
Emiliano	Unos si nomás están de mamones? O unos si son de verdad sicarios?	Unos si nomás están de mamones? O unos si son de verdad sicarios?
L. Coronel	Nms d mamnes	Nomás de mamones
Emiliano	Pero hay otros que si de neta son sicarios?	Pero hay otros que si de neta son sicarios?
L. Coronel	Pos sicarios no se Pero si son raza psada	Pos sicarios no sé, pero si son raza pesada
Emiliano	Cuál es la diferencia? Entre sicario y pesado?	Cuál es la diferencia? Entre sicario y pesado?
L. Coronel	Ai sicarios que nms eso asen	Hay sicarios que nomás eso hacen
Emiliano	Y eso no los hace pesados?	Y eso no los hace pesados?
L. Coronel	Ps a lo mejor le trabajan a un pesado Pero ellos no son pesados	Pos a lo mejor le trabajan a un pesado, pero ellos no son pesados
Emiliano	Entonces para ser pesado no puedes ser nomás sicario, tienes que ser jefe.	Entonces para ser pesado no puedes ser nomás sicario, tienes que ser jefe.
L. Coronel	Ps no Pero no nomas sicariar	Pues no, pero no nomás sicariar
Emiliano	Moverla? Venderla?	Moverla? Venderla?
L. Coronel	Las dos	Las dos
Emiliano	Arre, ya te entendí	Arre, ya te entendí.

“So the people–la raza–who post pictures with body armor–empecherada (pechera means breast plate)–really is just being mamona?” I asked. “Some of them are” Luis answered, to which I sought further clarification: “some of them are just being mamones? Or some of them really are sicarios?” Luis responded that he in fact meant that some users we were referencing were only being mamones (unauthentic). My questions continued: “but are there some that are truly–de neta (as in something that is net, such as weight, worth, etc.)–sicarios?”, “I don’t know about sicarios, but some are in fact raza pesada” Luis assured. I immediately followed with “what’s the difference?” to which Luis replied, “sicarios are just sicarios”; meaning that sicarios are only trigger pullers, a subservient type of identity. “That doesn’t make them pesados?” I asked; “they may work for a pesado, but they are not pesados” Luis clarified. “So to be a pesado, you can’t

just be sicario, you need to be someone's boss," I wrote, in an attempt to have Luis check my logic. "Not exactly" he said, "but you can't just work in assassinations". Still looking for enlightenment, I asked "do you need to move it, sell it (it being drugs)?", "both" he told me, to which I responded with "all right, I get it".

What "I got" from the line of inquiry described in this last excerpt was a breakdown of the strata of role identities of narocultura, as Luis explained, being a sicario doesn't make you a pesado. A single person could be identified with both, but not all sicarios are pesados. To be considered a pesado, you have to be actively trafficking drugs in distributable quantities, not just selling it by the dose. Then, the sicario seems like an identity removed from the acts of trafficking and selling narcotics, while still being very prevalent in narocultura. This is interesting because it is a soldier-like identity exclusively concerned with the exercise of violence, but also because despite being a sort of subservient mercenary identity, as the illustrations, songs, and memes in this chapter suggests, it has become a desirable aesthetic to incorporate into narco-centric personas being constructed across Facebook. This to me illustrates how the power to exert violence is becoming more central within the narrative of who is powerful and who is not within narco-centric identities, partly displacing the monetary power that allegedly comes from being a cunning narco trafficker.

The Legitimation of Violence, Crime, and Dehumanization

I found that recontextualizable bits (Rymes, 2012) of pesado and sicario role identities were used in identity work by all of the men who participated in the study. These identities, are inherently violent and crime-oriented, and throughout the span of my interactions with group participants I could not help but feel some aversion towards instances where I found them being used in identity work. Sometimes this meant that I felt outright contempt for the individuals who

were weaving bits of sicario and pesado identities into their online personas. Hoping to better understand the appeal these roles seem to have for the hundreds of Facebook users who I was *hanging out* with, I took advantage of Luis Coronel’s self-proclaimed insider status in order to help me understand if my prejudice was unjustified:

Excerpt 8.5 – *El movimiento*

Emiliano	Órale pues... entonces sabes cómo está todo el movimiento por allá?	Órale pues... entonces sabes cómo está todo el movimiento por allá?
L. Coronel	Siempre	Siempre
Em	Y qué quisieras que la gente supiera acerca del movimiento? Desde morrito me han dicho que el narcotráfico está mal...	Y qué quisieras que la gente supiera acerca del movimiento? Desde morrito me han dicho que el narcotráfico está mal...
L. Coronel	Ke aka pura gnt chingona K no es como dise el gobierno	Que acá pura gente chingona. Que no es como dice el gobierno.
Emiliano	El narcotráfico? Los narcocorridos?	El narcotráfico? Los narcocorridos?
L. Coronel	Todo	Todo
Emiliano	Cómo dice el gobierno que es?	Cómo dice el gobierno que es?
L. Coronel	Ps malo	Pues malo

I began by reaffirming Luis’ insiderdom by asking a leading question: “you know everything about the movimiento? Right?” to which he answered with a confident “always”. “So...”–I continued–“ what would you like people to know about it?”, and added, “Since I was a kid (morrito) I’ve been told narcotrafficking is wrong”, in an attempt to make my prejudice known. Luis explained that the movimiento was comprised of pura gente chingona (something like “only badass people”) and that things are not “like the government says they are”. In order to clarify what he meant by “things”, I asked if was talking about narcotrafficking and narcocorridos, to which he answered that was making reference to “everything”. So, “how does the government portray everything?” I asked, perhaps knowing the answer already; Luis–maybe letting me know that I should know better than to ask such an obvious question–told me “well (which in this context can be read as something akin to *obviously*) bad”. Still, I needed to

understand how Luis reconciled the movimiento's justification of extreme acts of violence with his assessment that it is not an inherently bad thing:

Excerpt 8.6 – *Los contras no son gente*

Emiliano	Entonces me estás diciendo que en el narcotráfico no hay gente mala? Aunque todas las canciones hablen de lo alterado que son los jefes? Cortando cabezas y torturando...	Entonces me estás diciendo que en el narcotráfico no hay gente mala? Aunque todas las canciones hablen de lo alterado que son los jefes? Cortando cabezas y torturando...
<i>L. Coronel</i>	A ls contras nomas	A los contras nomás
Emiliano	Y los contras no son gente?	Y los contras no son gente?
<i>L. Coronel</i>	No son gente buena parejita	No son gente buena parejita
Emiliano	Pero me acabas de decir que en el narco pura gente chingona... lo contras no están en el narco?	Pero me acabas de decir que en el narco pura gente chingona... lo contras no están en el narco?
<i>L. Coronel</i>	A kbron parejon Ya me izo pnsar	Ah cabrón parejón, ya me hizo pensar

I continued by asking/stating “so you’re telling me that there are no bad people involved in narcotrafficking? Even as all the songs talk about how alterados the bosses are? Cutting heads and torturing...” Luis’ answer was short, but it incorporated a word that can be commonly found in narcocorrido lyrics: “only [beheading and torturing] the contras”. “Contras” is short for “contrarios”, which is what opposing criminal forces (not government forces) are referred to in narcocorrido lyrics, for example (as the song title suggests) in “Tumbando Contras” by singer Diego Segura:

Lyrics 8.1 – *“Tumbando Contras”*

Original Lyrics

Su R-15 en mano y granadas al pecho, siempre están alerta a la fé de los hechos.
Contras y los GAFEs, gente del gobierno, no intenten toparlos porque no es muy bueno. No es bueno con contras, experto en las armas, saben apuntar, destrozan las almas. No pierde la calma en el lugar de la acción, se mueve entre brechas, usa discreción (Segura, 2017).

Translation

With his AR-15 on hand and grenades on his chest, always alert to what's going on.

Contras, and army special forces government people don't try to confront them, he's not good. Not good to the contras, firearms expert, he knows how to aim, destroying souls. He remains calm under action, he moves on the backroads, and uses discretion.

“Are contras not people?” I asked Luis, who quickly replied saying “they are not good people parejita”. I then presented Luis with his own argument that narcos were all gente chingona, and that the contras are also narcos (and by that logic, they could be considered gente chingona). Luis replied with an expression akin to “holy crap!” and after a few seconds he wrote “now you got me thinking”. Luis didn't write anything else for a few minutes, but before I could write something myself he wrote what was perhaps the longest message I ever received from him:

Excerpt 8.7 – *Real power*

L. Coronel	La vrdad es que si esta mal Pero no es peor k lo que ase gobierno Nms rovando y no quieren k nadie mas suba	La verdad es que si está mal, pero no es peor que lo que hace el gobierno... nomás robando, y no quieren que nadie más suba.
Emiliano	Suba? A dónde? Al gobierno?	Suba? A dónde? Al gobierno?
L. Coronel	Al poder pareja	Al poder pareja.
Emiliano	El poder y el gobierno no es lo mismo?	El poder y el gobierno no es lo mismo?
L. Coronel	El poder dea de veras no	El poder de a de veras no.
Emiliano	Quién tiene poder de a de veras?	Quién tiene poder de a de veras?
L. Coronel	Los patrones	Los patrones
Emiliano	Cuáles?	Cuáles?
L. Coronel	Eso no se dise pareja tu sabes	Eso no se dice pareja... tu sabes
Emiliano	Arre... pero los corridos siempre lo dicen, con nombre y apellido. Y tu los subes a cada rato.	Arre... pero los corridos siempre lo dicen, con nombre y apellido. Y tú los subes a cada rato.
L. Coronel	Eso es diferente parejon	Eso es diferente parejón
Emiliano	Por qué?	Por qué?
L. Coronel	Pk eyos tienen el permiso del patron	Porque ellos tienen el permiso del patrón

“The truth is that [narcotrafficking] is wrong” Luis message began, “but it’s not worse that what the government does... always stealing and not wanting anyone to rise up”. Given my own understanding of the Mexican government as historically authoritarian and repressive, I found Luis’ reflection incredibly valid, in an effort to further clarify it, I asked him what he meant by “rise”, to which he replied: “to power”. “So power and government are not the same thing?” I followed up with, “no real power” Luis answered, “then who has real power?”—I wrote expecting Luis to say exactly what he replied—“the patrones (bosses)”. I insisted, as I had done in the past—perhaps out of frustration with what I regarded as Luis’ continuing attempts to *aparentar ser pesado*—that he tell me “cuales (which)” patrones he was talking about, but he reminded me, again, that names of patrones are something you don’t tell outsiders. I in turn reminded Luis that narcocorridos always tell outsiders the names of the patrones “con nombre y apellido”, but he countered by explaining that the difference is that narco-corridistas have the patrones’ blessings to do so.

This last conversation with Luis illustrates how narcocultura-oriented identities can be regarded as constructed in resistance to an unjust state of affairs, where narco-related crime is justified by comparing it to that perpetrated by corrupt political class. This struggle for legitimacy between el narco and the State transfers over to the justification of violence. As narcocorridistas illustrate with lyrics of songs like “El Niño Sicario”, the narcoscapes imagined to make sense of narcoviolenca narratively construct characters that rise from powerlessness, meaninglessness, and hopelessness to occupy meaningful roles in narcotrafficking. In the discourse of narcocultura, acts like murder and torture are viciously committed by righteous characters, sicarios who always exercise discretion, only killing *al que les pongan, or si los topan*.

“Nada más es al que te pongan... o si te topan”

When Edgar Quinter explained that the difference between killing *con sangre fría* and killing a *lo puerco* was that you only kill “al que te pongan... o si te topan”¹¹, he was using two key concepts that form the imagined narcoscapes of *narcoviolenencia*: *poner* and *topar*. “Poner” means to be marked for being an enemy, a rival, or for being a traitor. For example, in the classic *narcocorrido* “Carga Fina” by group Los Originales de San Juan, “poner el dedo” (literally, “to place a finger”) is something that “madrinas”—police informants (Fondevila, 2009)—do to traffickers. In this song, a trafficker asks “que mi caja sea corriente, yo no quiero cosa fina, pues yo sé que en el infierno también ha de haber madrinas, me van a poner el dedo, porque llevo carga fina” (Díaz, 2001). In essence, the protagonist asks to be buried in a simple coffin, because he’s certain that there will be “madrinas” in hell too, and they will mark him—“poner el dedo”—because he will be transporting a “precious load” (“carga fina”).

In the context of *narcocultura*, “poner a alguien” or “to place someone”, means to betray them, as illustrated by the lyrics of song “El Gallo Fino” (which means something like “the purebred rooster”) by old-school *narco-corridista* Beto Quintanilla, who sings: “me gusta andar a mi solo, me muevo a donde yo quiero y si hago algun movimiento nomás yo sólo me entero, evito que me traicionen y que me pongan el dedo” (Rodríguez, 2004). Quintanilla’s sings about how he prefers “andar a mí solo” (to roll by himself) because in that way he can prevent “que me traicionen y que me pongan el dedo” (to be betrayed or becoming marked or “placed”).

“Topar”, the other key concept in Edgar Quintero’s answer, is employed in Mexican Spanish as an expression used when unwillingly bumping—or running—into something or someone; or to say you unexpectedly came across someone on something. In *narc-narratives*, the

¹¹ See Excerpt 8.2 – *La diferencia*

meaning more closely resembles a sort of search-and-destroy attitude signaling a willingness to engage one's enemies in "topones" (word which sports the -on superlative suffix popular in Sinaloan slang; i.e. trocón, viejón, etc.) which can be loosely be regarded as "clashes". Of the many narcocorridos shared among the users of Facebook groups such as Corridos al Millón and La Plebada Alterada, "El Comandante Metro 4" by the group Banda MS, provides one of the best illustrations of how topar and topón can be used in this context:

Lyrics 8.2 – *"El Comandante Metro 4"*

Original Lyrics

Lleva nueve años peleando y siempre al pie del cañón. Con su cártel va a la punta hacia toparlos al topón. Le da leyenda a su gente, bien pilas con el patrón. Trae comandos a su mando y toda su gente fiel. El Cártel del Golfo rifa, andamos todos al cien. Peleando por la bandera que nos dejó el jefe Osiel. Si caen los verdes y azules hay que defender la plaza con sicarios de la mafia y salirles al topón. (Lizárraga, 2011).

Translation

He's been fighting for nine years, always at the canyon's edge. He spearheads his cartel toward clashes at the topón. He's a legend among people, completely behind the boss. He has commandos under his command, all his people are loyal. The Gulf Cartel rules, we're all at 100%. Fighting for the flag left behind by boss Osiel. If greens (soldiers) or blues (police) drop by, we have to defend the plaza with mafia sicarios, and meet them out at the topón.



Illustration 8.21 – User shares fan-made video for “El Comandante Metro 4”

The song’s protagonist is Commander “Metro 4”, which was the alias used by Héctor David Delgado Santiago, a once high ranking member of Mexico’s Gulf Cartel, now deceased (Fox, 2013); and “jefe Osiel” is Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, head of said cartel, who was captured in the city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas on March 14, 2003 (SEDENA, 2008). El topón emerges in this narrative as something akin to a battle, where enemies clash (se topan). Topones are not event descriptions exclusive to narcocorridos telling the exploits of Gulf Cartel leaders. In the song “El Cargo del Cholo Vago”—which loosely translates to “Wicked Cholo’s Rank” (or position of responsibility)—by band Los Bohemios de Sinaloa, the protagonist is Iván “El Cholo Vago” Gastélum Cruz. Gastélum was the chief sicario for Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera, until the day they were both captured (PGR, 2016). In this corrido, one can find a collection of the terms I have discussed so far, to include “andamos activados” and “toparlos”:

Lyrics 8.3 – “*El Cargo del Cholo Vago*”

Original Lyrics

Aquí andamos activados. No le saco a los chingazos. Al señor Guzmán las gracias y le mando un fuerte abrazo. Coordinando con mi equipo, con mi rifle bien cargado, nomás me pelan los ojos, cuando he llegado a toparlos [...] Táctica y planes de ataque, cuando viene un genocidio, con mi gente brinco en chinga [...] Un comando fuertemente armado nos sigue de respaldo en la guerra [...] Aquí es guerra entre nosotros, los inocentes no cuentan [...] no hay respeto para el enemigo, sin piedad reviento con mis hombres [...] (Cuardas, 2015).

Translation

We are (rolling) activated. I'm not afraid of a fight. Thanks to Mr. Guzmán, I send him a strong hug. Coordinating with my team, with my rifle loaded, I can see the white in their eyes when we've come to a clash [...] Tactics and plans of attack, when genocide approaches, I spring into action with my people [...] A well-armed commando has our back in the war [...] The war is amongst ourselves, innocents don't count [...] no respect for the enemy, without mercy I blow them away with my men [...]



Illustration 8.22 – Video and lyrics for “El Cargo del Cholo Vago” recurrently shared to group

I use “El Cargo del Cholo Vago’s” narrative as an illustration of the many ways in which the narcoviolencia (Halvey, 2018) is legitimized by those who claim to be cartel insiders, and how these justifications are then inserted into narcocultura. This narcocorrido’s video, recording, and lyrics were shared into the groups I was studying on numerous occasions; in the song, Los Bohemios de Sinaloa—embodying the supposed voice of the Sinaloa Cartel chief sicario—claim that innocents are left out of what they call “the war”. Even as the literal translation of “los inocentes no cuentan” is “innocents don’t count”, I interpret this line to mean that innocent outsiders are intentionally disregarded, rather than viewed as disposable. Thus, when los Bohemios de Sinaloa say that “aquí es guerra entre nosotros, los inocentes no cuentan” they are illustrating an imagined narcoscape that attempts to make sense of narcoviolencia by placing the blame on its victims, as it construes all casualties as willing participants of a war that never claims innocent lives. This imagined world however, is not a construction that originated in narcocultura, but a continuation of a classist discourse that has long existed in Mexican society. I discuss this and other findings related to the characterization of the narcosphere as a war, in the following chapter.

Chapter 9: Discussion and Limitations

The discussion in this chapter begins by following the analysis of the previous section, regarding an imagined world that characterizes the narcosphere as a war and construes victims of narcoviolenca as complicit in their own demise. I connect the discourses about violence embedded in narco narratives with enduring discourses of race, class, and gender in Mexican society. In this context, *pesados*, *sicarios* y *sicarias* as subversive identities. As the identities of *sicarios* in particular, are imagined to exist in the context of a war, I illustrate the intersections of *sicario* identities with American militarism, with my own sense of identity as a member of the U.S. military, as well as aspects of hegemonic forms of masculinity. Preoccupations with killing and death are depicted in the chapter as a nihilism underlying *sicario* identities, which have become commodified and highly sexualized. I also discuss the limitations of the study in this chapter, because I consider that these were characterized by an over-reliance on hegemonic masculinity as the means to gain entry into the groups I studied.

Pesados, Sicarios y Sicarias as Subversive Identities

The imagined world where the casualties of narcoviolenca are always suspected to have been targeted because they were willing participants of *el narco* (González, 2017), was not one originally created by *narcocorridistas*. Holguín Mendoza (2012), considers that upper and middle class discourses about narcoviolenca in México have long imagined it (despite evidence to the contrary) as something that primarily targets “racialized others” (p.424), who are envisaged as active participants “within the system of illegitimate drug trading” (p. 422). In other words, narcoviolenca is considered as something that happens only to those who are somehow criminally affiliated, and who are killing each other, or who are being righteously killed by State forces. These “scapegoats of social anxiety” (p. 423) are construed through the social structures

of class, gender, and race, as poor, lazy, indigenous, and promiscuous and are therefore considered disposable.

“Dining with the Devil: Identity Formations in Juarez, Mexico,” is an article stemming from ethnographic research the author conducted in Juárez, the same borderland city I grew up in. In it, Holguín Mendoza (2012) analyzes narco-narratives and popular myths about El Chapo in particular, and concludes that:

The narco-trafficker is actually viewed as an imaginary redeemer, a fighter against those who have been traditionally in power; the narco dealer is the one who terrorizes the time-honored upper classes in society. This imaginary narco-trafficker, a former farmhand himself, emerges as the hero of the peasants who become recipients of his generosity [...] the narco becomes a celebrated hero who justifiably rises to power and wealth by defying police and governmental authorities, widely known to misuse both state control and capital (p. 417).

Armed defiance of State authorities and their forces has given rise to “a herd of mercenaries” (p. 422)—sicarios—not only because it represents a profitable activity for marginalized young men, Holguín Mendoza (2012) explains, but because it represents a subversion of perennial patriarchal, hierarchical class system in México. In a country that privileges men, whiteness, and wealth, the author argues, these identities are becoming increasingly displaced by an “emerging hybrid masculinized trafficker identity” (p. 422). In this context, the sicario is imagined as “a fighter against those who have been traditionally in power [...] the one who terrorizes the time-honored upper classes in society” (p. 417), a hero that emerges as “part of a popular myth that normalizes the fact that violence in Juárez is committed and reinforced by armed people who can be anyone from any sector of society” (p. 418).

This myth is powerful because it subverts the legitimacy of State-exercised violence, which in México has historically and disproportionately targeted vulnerable populations, and shifts it towards ideals of justice alien to traditional class and race discourses. The myth of the sicario is empowering, because sicarios can appropriate the legitimacy of violence and exercise it against both contras and agents of the State. In doing so, the sicario instills fear, and therefore respect, in types of people who marginalize, other, and dehumanize him. Thus, the emergence of the sicario and sicaria identities can be understood in the context of struggles against class, race, and gender oppression because the violence these identities reproduces is rooted in subverting asymmetric relations of power. I see these identities not only as disruptive of the historical deficit of firepower oppressed people have had against the State, but as imagined pathways to political and economic power that circumvent long-standing social and racial hegemonic roadblocks to socio-political empowerment.

In my study, participants indexed sicario identities by using phrases such as “andar activado”, “andar al cien”, as well as “andar/estar al tiro,”¹² and “nunca ando solo”¹³. Narcocultura insiders (myself included) recognize these expressions as ways of referencing sicario identities because narcocorridos about sicarios such as “El Calaca” and “100 Casquillos”¹⁴ use them consistently to describe the ways of being of sicarios. The emergence of these identities illustrates the process of “social metamorphosis” (Holguín Mendoza, 2012, p. 423) “in which current subjectivities are producing more multifaceted and contradictory identities among different social groups in countries like Mexico” (p. 428). This social metamorphosis shifts the meanings of what is considered justice and legitimate violence in ways

¹² See Excerpt 7.3 – “Andar al cien con la gente”.

¹³ See Excerpt 7.9 – “Nunca ando solo”.

¹⁴ See Lyrics 7.5 – “100 Casquillos” and Lyrics 7.6 – “El Calaca”

that have “pervaded popular culture of *narco-themes*, which have instilled certain values among the masses, constructing a normalization of these topics and thus making them part of Mexican society” (p. 418). However, the author cautions, “violence in Juarez must not be interpreted as upsurges outside the control of the state, but rather as by-products of the same economic system” (p. 419). That is because “narco-themed” values also center on the exercise of violence in the pursuit of power, both economic and political. As Holguín Mendoza (2012) suggests, political and economic violence is a characteristic that the States implicated in this study (the Mexican and American States in particular) exhibited long-before this metamorphosis began.

Intersections of Sicario and Sicaria Identities with American Militarism

The legitimation of violence as being perpetrated by men (and women, to a lesser degree) who are not inherently violent certainly resonated with my years of experience as a Soldier in the U.S. Army. I drew heavily on said experience, along with the interpretation of narcocultura artifacts, narratives, and mythology to make sense of the ways in which violence was continually justified, legitimized, and glorified, in narcocorridos and by study participants. When Luis Coronel equated the actions of el narco to those of “el gobierno,”¹⁵ he was discursively subverting the hegemony of State-sanctioned violence. This illustrates how in the discursive struggle for the legitimacy of violence, narcocultura shifts the meaning of what constitutes justice away from the monopoly of the State and towards the ideals of justice of the young men and women who commit acts of violence in the name of crime syndicates.

For example, in Calibre 50’s song, “El Niño Sicario”¹⁶, the lyrics tell the story of a kid who is not yet 15 years old, for whom the streets have been like a school, and who has lived a

¹⁵ See Excerpt 8.7 – “Real power”.

¹⁶ See Lyrics 9.1 – “El Niño Sicario” in the following section.

life of vandalism (“Las calles han sido tu escuela y el vandalismo tu vida”), who has endured hunger and sadness, but now found a family in the crime syndicate (“pasaste hambres y tristezas, la mafia ahora es tu familia”), who he can take care for, and who will take care of him (“tú me cuidas, yo te cuido”). The song goes on to recount how this once marginalized kid became an expert sicario in a relatively short time (“pasaron tan solo dos años y el novato se hizo experto”) and went out on missions as part of an elite militarized group (“salí de misión aquel día y me integré a mi comando”). These lyrics show how ideals of justice and belonging shift towards el narco, and how sicario role identities are imagined as pathways to subvert class marginalization.

Out of all the lyrics in “El Niño Sicario”, “salí de misión aquel día” is the phrase that most resonates with my own sense of identity. “Going out on mission” is something I have very meaningful experiences with as a member of the U.S. Military. In my experience, to “go out on mission” takes a special kind of soldier, and is not something all soldiers get to do. “Going out” (or “to go outside the wire”) is reserved for combat arms elements, that is, members of units organized and trained to engage in direct combat. In Army jargon, it means leaving the relative safety of fortifications in order to perform combat-related tasks, the units that perform these are by and large are made up by infantry soldiers. “Infantry” derives from the Latin term *infans*, which literally means infant. The term was first used by the Spanish military of the 16th century, were soldiers who were too young and inexperienced to ride horses (“infantes”) instead marched into battle (Clonard, 1856). In “Raising an Army: The Geopolitics of Militarizing the Lives of Working-Class Boys in an Age of Austerity”, Basham (2016) explains that the infantry is one of the most notable institutions that legitimize youth and gender violence, even above other branches of the military. In the author’s native Britain, like in the United States, it is legal to recruit 16 year-olds into the military, and these child recruits find themselves overwhelmingly

going to the infantry. In 2014, the author explains, 89% of all Army soldiers under 18 years of age were infantrymen (Basham, 2016).

“Infantryman” is an occupational specialty title the U.S. Military began to rethink in 2015, when infantry positions opened up to women, with the Marines changing the designation for their infants to “infantry Marine” and the Army for “infantry specialist” (Harkins, 2015; Myers, 2017). According to Basham (2016), women’s exclusion from the infantry, notwithstanding individual merits, reproduces gendered and sexualized practices that are products of social structure, such as the idea that “women will provoke sexual competition among men in a unit” (p. 264) and hurt cohesion. This makes combat roles something akin to the ultimate form of masculinity, the author argues, as militarized practices of all types already privilege masculinity, and reinforce gendered discourses where men are expected to be productive, and women, reproductive (Basham, 2016).

The “Warrior Ethos” every soldier in the Army memorizes reads: “I will always place the mission first, I will never accept defeat, I will never leave a fallen comrade”. This discursive emphasis on mission, victory, and camaraderie is something I have interwoven into my identity with a great sense of pride, and it is something I recognize appropriated by the discourse of narcocorridos like “El Niño Sicario”. Basham (2016) explains that military ethea are based on the premise that the self-sacrifice that military service entails contravenes the individualism that allegedly characterizes civilian life, and thus elevates soldiers to a higher moral plane because in discourse, we place the collective good over our individual needs. The author argues that the governmental discourse around military service is that it produces “socially productive moral heroes” which makes it especially attractive, as well as a powerful resource of social capital, for

working-class young men who have seen the economic productivity of their work diminished in the age of neoliberal governmentality.

This moral heroism at the core American militarism means that in the United States, military violence is regarded as a “moral activity” (Basham, 2016, p. 270) that justifies killing for God and country, and makes it socially acceptable for 16 year-olds to join the ranks of our military, a fighting force whose lethality is often celebrated by the at large public. If the moral high ground that absolves soldiers from the consequences of killing other human beings in the context of war is underpinned by political discourses about the greater good, and predicated on the basis of individual sacrifice, I can see how in the context of the “war or drugs” (Cabañas, 2014) the legitimation of violence in the name of “the greater good” has shifted away from the State. In analyzing the discourse of many narco-narratives, especially those of narcocorrido lyrics, I find that the values of moral heroism, as well as the masculinized archetypes of narcocultura, mirror those of American militarism.

As a soldier, I have first-hand experience with navigating the contradictions that the legitimation of violence presents for identity work, where attributes such as viciousness and righteousness coexist as desirable character traits, and where violence is the crucial form of power (Martinez, 2017). I found that the legitimation of violence in narcocultura, its artifacts, and sicario identities in particular are imagined through moral hero discourses that parallel those of American militarism. I argue this because in my experience, the culture within combat arms units of the U.S. Army embraces this amalgamation of violence and heroism wholeheartedly. As former U.S. Defense Secretary General James Mattis illustrated with comments made to 1st Division Marines in Afghanistan, when commanded that unit during 2003-2004: “be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you meet” (Ricks, 2006, p. 313); or as Lieutenant

Colonel Christian Cabaniss did as he rallied infantry troops deployed to Afghanistan in 2008 by saying: “make no mistake, we are experts in the application of violence” (Gaviria & Smith, 2009). Narco-narratives celebrate a similar type of expertise in the identity of sicarios, where violence is perpetrated viciously but by righteous characters, who always exercise discretion.

Just like the “professional warriors” of the U.S. Armed Forces have role models—if not outright patriarchal (Connell, 2005) figures, General Mattis and Lt. Col. Cabaniss only a pair of these among a multitude—sicarios have figures such as “el L-50” (in “El Calaca” by Jorge El Real), or the unnamed mentor who recruits “El Niño Sicario” in the song of the same name by group Calibre 50. I also found this sort of warrior ethos present in imagery related to the sicaria identity. So much so that depictions of these characters were almost exclusively constructed by imagery borrowed from a single artist (Clayton Haugen), who accentuates the warrior qualities of U.S. female veterans by photographing them holding firearms, in fighting stances, donned in tactical apparel, and covered in makeup that resembles blood and debris. In all, the narrative underpinnings of sicario and sicaria narratives parallel my own experience in the military with such proximity, that I feel like I understand the potential appeal that imagining oneself as a sicario can have. Especially for young Latinx who identify with these characters, who become part of something bigger than themselves, and rise from powerlessness, meaninglessness, and hopelessness to occupy meaningful roles in narco-trafficking.

Nihilism in Narco-Narratives

In narco-narratives, nihilism as defined by Kubrin (2005)—“bleak surroundings with little hope, pervasive violence [...] and preoccupation with death and dying” (p. 444)—remains a mainstay of life, even after characters join the ranks of the Mexican drug cartels. As the voice of the niño sicario professes in the narcocorrido of the same name, for him “sólo hay dos cosas

seguras, la cárcel o la muerte (there are only two certainties, jail or death)” (Cabrera, 2012).

From my perspective, this perpetual underlying nihilism, where jail or death are the only possible outcomes, evokes the types of parallels that Morrison (2008) and Edberg (2004) identify between narcocorridos and gangsta rap (Oliver, 2006), who remind us that nihilism, coupled with the vindication of the exercise of violence in the pursuit of wealth, fame, and power is not exclusive of the narcosphere.

I find the equivalencies among the gangsta rap and narcocorrido genres transcend the mere vindication of outlaws and actually constitute a window into the shared struggles of marginalized Latinx and Black communities who coexist in neoliberalism’s peripheral spaces (Halvey, 2018). As an example, I find that comparing the lyrics to Calibre 50’s song “El Niño Sicario” to the lyrics from Tupac Shakur’s song “Heavy in the Game”, can illustrate how issues of nihilism, narcotrafficking, and violence are at the center of both styles of narrative, and how both genres simultaneously denounce social inequality, and exalt the individuals who profit from narcotrafficking or savagely execute acts of violence:

Lyrics 9.1 – “El Niño Sicario”

Original Lyrics

Narrador: Las calles han sido tu escuela y el vandalismo tu vida. Pasaste hambres y tristezas, la mafia ahora es tu familia. Escucha bien lo que te digo, pondré esta pistola en tus manos, tú me cuidas, yo te cuido, me traicionas y te mato. Pasaron tan solo dos años y el novato se hizo experto, ya no sentía remordimiento...

Niño Sicario: Ser sicario ahora es mi vida, escogí este camino y ya no hay marcha atrás. Salí de misión aquel día y me integré a mi comando. La cita se volvió una trampa, los socios se hicieron contrarios, resistíamos con balas en medio del

fuego cruzado. Pero eran demasiados, ya no había escapatoria. Cayeron todos mis aliados y vacía quedó mi pistola. Los impactos fueron certeros, un frío recorre mi cuerpo. Hay sangre por todas partes. Tú sabes que yo no soy malo, la vida me ha llevado a esto, soy culpable y he pecado, falte al quinto mandamiento Dios. En la mafia sólo hay dos cosas seguras, la cárcel o la muerte, me encontré con la segunda y tan solo tenía 17 (Cabrera, 2012).

Lyrics 9.2 – *Heavy in the Game and El Niño Sicario Lyrics Comparison*

“Heavy in the Game”	“El Niño Sicario” Translation
<p>I’m just a young black male, cursed since birth. Had to turn to crack sales, if worse came to worse. Headed for them packed jails or maybe it’s a hearse. My only way to stack mail, is out here doin’ dirt. Made my decisions do or die, been hustling since junior high. No time for asking why, gettin’ high, gettin’ mine. Put away my nine, cause these times call for four-five. Cause life is hell and everybody dies. What about these niggas I despise, them loud talking cowards shooting guns into crowds, jeopardizing lives. Shoot’em right between them niggas eyes, it’s time to realize, follow the rules or follow them fools that die.</p> <p>(Parish, 1995)</p>	<p>Streets were your school, vandalism your life. You were hungry and sad. The mob is now your family. Listen as I put this pistol in your hands, I’ll take care of you and you’ll take care of me, Two years have passed and he became an expert without remorse. I went on a mission that day and fell into a trap. We resisted but there were too many of them, there was no way out, my gun ran dry, accurate shots and I felt cold and blood was everywhere. You know I am not bad God, I had no choice in life. In this business, there’s two outcomes, jail or death, and I just ran into the second one at only 17.</p>

There are two protagonist voices in “El Niño Sicario”, one is the unnamed character who recruits him from the streets and trains him as gunman, and the other is the voice of the now-17-year-old who pleads with God as he realizes he is dying. Both el niño sicario and Tupac, protagonists in each of the songs, claim that their current status as criminals was inevitable, and

that they are aware that they will surely die or be incarcerated. They also both explain that their social circumstances at birth meant that they had to begin their offenses as teenagers, and that although they have committed murders; they have done so under a strict moral code. Long before my conversation with Edgar Quintero, Tupac Shakur tried to make sense of the violence that surrounds dealing drugs, and denounced “them loud talking cowards shooting guns into crowds”, who were killing a lo puerco. Morrison (2008) suggest that these similar discursive structures, have to do with the analogous and intertwined conditions of marginalization of the communities that produce gangsta rap and narcocorridos; that is, segregated Black urban communities in the United States, and economically marginalized rural communities in México. Young people in both these communities navigate this marginality, which both States often enforce through force and political violence, in ways that parallel each other, and defined the emergence of gangsta rap and narcocorridos.

Martinez (1997) and Oliver (2006) account for the ways in which gangsta rap evolved from rap, a lyrical art form which emerged in the mid 1970s out of the social and structural disarticulations of the postmodern urban climate of the South Bronx, New York, in denunciation of institutional racism, and as sung illustration of the urban decay in the inner cities (Martinez, 1997). Martinez explains that institutional racism, the systematic domination and subjugation of racialized communities and the preservation of White privilege were all originally brought upon Black (and Native) people by violent means that enslaved and then segregated them. Furthermore, the State continues to reproduce this violence via the systematic withholding of social, economic, and political power, which amounts to preserving inequality through institutional means; State violence therefore precedes and engenders the gang, drug, and gender violence that gangsta rap narratively illustrates. I find that this explanation is consistent Holguín

Mendoza's (2012) description about the ways in which narco violence emerged as a byproduct of the State more than a challenge to it.

Therefore, like narco-narratives allow marginalized Latinxs to imagine alternative routes to empowerment, gangsta rap narratives present alternate routes to material and social success for an underclass of Black youths (Oliver, 2006). Oliver (2006) explains that gangsta rap goes beyond describing the rage and anger that exists in "the ghetto", to commend the violent and/or criminal means that it's protagonists are willing to use to transcend poverty and hopelessness, who (like their sicario and pesado counterparts) achieve significance as "players" and "ballas" who become criminals as a means of achieving the American dream (Oliver, 2006). The author argues however, that contemporary gangsta rap has become a commodified, exploited, sexist, and materialist pop-cultural form that glamorizes our obsession with achieving status through material acquisition.

The Commodification of Narcocultura

Oliver (2006) suggests that previous generations of lower and working-class Black youths learned the content of urban-gangsta-street culture socialization by physically observing and emulating the attitudes and behavior of seasoned players and hustlers. Quite differently, Oliver argues, contemporary Black audiences acquire crime-oriented ways of being—"that is, values, norms, roles, and behavior associated with the streets are often depicted in hip-hop music videos and gangsta films and reinforced by lyrics and video images that tend to glorify life in the streets" (p. 924)—by being exposed to commodified media products. I contend that my findings suggest that something similar is happening in the context of narcocultura, and that the emergence of commercially successful narco-novelas like "El Señor de los Cielos" illustrate the commodification of narcocultura. This is best illustrated in my study by the prevalence of the

narco-novela character “Monica Róbles” (as depicted by actor Fernanda Castillo) as the primordial imagery in the memes posted to the Sicarias Cabronas Facebook group.

Commodified products like lavishly produced narcocorridos, videos, and narco-novelas emerged in my study as some of the principal repositories of mass-mediated cultural elements (Rymes, 2012). For example, I attribute the similarities in the communicative repertoires of my participants (exemplified by the use of phrases such as “andar activado”, “andar al cien”, “andar al tiro”, “nunca ando solo”, and “rifársela”) to the reproduction of popular mass-mediated cultural elements contained in narcocorridos. When I mention commodified repositories of mass-mediated cultural elements, I’m paraphrasing Rymes (2012) in reference to commercial artifacts such as teleseries, songs, and videos which provide their audiences with “highly recontextualizable bits” (p. 216), that is ready-made phrases, identities, and meanings. Although this does not mean that these phrases held ready-made meanings for all participants. My conversations with Cinco Siete suggest that he made complex recontextualizations of what these expressions meant in his context; for example, Cinco used the terms “andar al tiro” and “andar activado” to describe hard work, which contrasts with the meanings these terms hold when used in sicario-centered narcocorridos.

Also highly recontextualizable, are narco-themed values (Holguín Mendoza, 2012) like the exercise of crime and violence in the pursuit of wealth and power. As Holguín Mendoza (2012) suggests, these values have been normalized and made part of Latinx societies to the point they now represent commodities that are sold by Spanish language television production giants such as Telemundo. This is exemplified in my study by the ways that (outside of self-authored images) women’s identity work almost exclusively illustrated by using narconovela characters. Another example of how these commodified cultural elements were appropriated

from narconovelas to inform gender discourses and identity work is the imaginary created around the *sin senos no hay paraíso* narcoscape (which resonates with the “todas son iguales” discourse my participants continually referenced). I credit this imaginary with my findings that, without exception, participants in the study addressed heteronormative relationships through the perspective that heterosexual women are almost naturally attracted to rich and powerful men (or as Reina Rivera put it “todas son iguales”).

In this imagined world, cartel bosses like “El Chapo” or the fictional “Aurelio Casillas” are made to be sexually irresistible to even the most successful and independent of women (real or fictional). I found that this idea was central to the imagined audience participants constructed, which in turn made displays of “tener con qué” one of the primordial factors that male participants used in their identity work. I saw something alike to this “todas son iguales” discourse even in the *Sicarias Cabronas* group, where I interpreted the voices depicted in some of the imagery as underlining the notion that women are cabronas in the measure that they are savvy or ruthless when competing for men’s companionship against other women. In the context of this gendered competition, it was commonplace to construe other women derogatorily as “perras” or “pendejas”.

As I have repeatedly mentioned, not being able to engage with any female Facebook users (other than Reina Rivera) in any of the groups I studied is perhaps my greatest frustration as far as this study pertains. During the course of the fieldwork, I frequently took note of how ill equipped I found myself to be regarding this task. I was able to identify with the “cultural imagery of masculinity” (Connell, 2005, p. 31) that abounded in the groups, to connect to participants using “warrior and hero” (p. 213) masculine identity archetypes in my identity work, as well as to recognize the patriarchal “structural basis” (p. 235) of certain discourses. All of this

allowed me to engage and make sense of conversations with other self-identified men who were also using these elements for identity work across Facebook. However, I had no equivalent or complementary sources of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and imagery that allowed understanding the complexities of the identity work that self-identified women were undertaking.

Limitations of the Study

In hindsight, perhaps I relied too heavily on the co-construction of patriarchal forms of masculinity in gaining entry and communicating in the Facebook groups I studied. At times, I used my online persona to say (write) some things “por mamón nomás”, things that I otherwise actively discourage myself from thinking, let alone saying, on or offline. One such example was the use of the term “viejas” in reference to women, which I utilized attempting to establish insider status and fellow macho credibility through a shared machismo (Connell, 2005, p. 31). I realize that deconstructing my own identity work in such instances, shed light on my imagined audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In other words, it shows that I construed my participants as inherently machistas, perhaps a-priori, and that I presented myself as someone reproducing those patriarchal, hegemonic archetypes because I felt participants would self-identify with them immediately.

Seeking identity feedback in such a way required not only that I recognize the prevalence of macho archetypes in the social structures I was observing, but that I understand them well enough to reproduce them authentically. More than illuminating the misogynistic discourses of narcocultura, the authenticity of my macho performance illustrates how ingrained patriarchal structures are within my own sense of social identity, and how I rely on them to make sense of other’s social behaviours. For example, although it was obvious to me that Luis and Edgar’s (and

to a lesser degree, Cinco's) main concern and objective for posting content to Facebook was to impress an imagined audience of women. I was able to quickly pick up on, and talk to them about a wide range of other interests, such as firearms, trucks, alongside perceptions and understandings of what drives both men and women ("how women are"), all while filtering my online voice through a decidedly, unapologetic heteronormative, masculinized persona.

Another hindrance to more fruitful communication with participants was my constant policing of the authenticity of Edgar Quintero's and Luis Coronel's identity work. As a theorist of digitally-mediated identities, Davis (2012) explains how social media platforms and social network sites in particular, have been called labor-exposing spaces. This references the exposure of identity work as "users are afforded the time and technological capability to carefully and thoughtfully craft images of the self" and that "research shows that social media users actively police authenticity, censoring those who try too hard" (p. 153). Falling into this common practice, more than once, I sought evidence to authenticate the performances of Edgar and Luis whenever I felt they were trying too hard, failing to fully understand that their explanations of others' performances and exhibitions as ungenue, of their motives as "por mamones", and their goals as "aparentar ser pesados", were actually windows into their own processes of curation and self-representation, and that I should have constructed alternative lines of questioning in order to elicit more complete accounts of these.

I feel I missed opportunities to gain insight into the motivations that underpinned Edgar and Luis' need to make claims of cartel insiderdom by repeatedly asking them for proof that substantiated such claims, and that I should have asked them to explain, for example, what was it about an image that led them to believe that a particular person was not genuinely who or how they were presenting themselves as; or how they believed the "posers" were constructing their

online personas and what they believed motivated said posers to attempt to pass for pesados, sicarios, etc.

Ultimately, I believe that misplaced attempts to ascertain the authenticity of Edgar and Luis' identities distracted me from what is actually important, which is elucidating on the why and the how of their identity claims. The pressing question of the study was not whether these participants were narcos, but why would they were actively working on being perceived as such. As a researcher, this obsessive interest with authenticity, crime, and violence got the best of me and ultimately hindered my research. This is exemplified by moments like the one depicted in Excerpt 5.16 "Los hinqué", where pushing Edgar to verify his claims to criminal activity immediately produced a defensive response from him. Getting distracted by questions of realness was a constant struggle that kept me from focusing on why participants would want to to be recognized via narco-oriented identities, rather than whether they were that kind of person. Policing authenticity was common practice among the study's participants, and something I fell right into. This is illustrated in Excerpts 5.3 and 5.11 where Cinco and Luis both explained that the reason young men in the Facebook groups wanted to seem like narcos was por mamones. However, the answer "por mamones" doesn't really answer the question "why is that?" as it denotes a subjective assessment that others are faking it, but doesn't answer the much more important question of "why do young people want to seem like narcos?"

In the final chapter, I synopsise my findings into something resembling an answer to the above question. Issues of policing authenticity and attempted authentication are relevant to that analysis in more than one way. Regarding language and identity, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) explain, "authenticity has been tied to essentialism through the notion that some identities are more 'real' than others" and that "authentication highlights the agentive processes whereby

claims to realness are asserted” (p. 385). From this perspective, while there were instances where I policed participants’ authenticity by questioning their claims to realness (especially those by which they alleged insider status in unnamed criminal enterprises), I wholeheartedly accepted and adopted more subtle claims to realness, namely, participants identity work using elements of Sinalense speech, such as “viejón”, “pareja”, and pluralizing (“aquí andamos”). I use these and other characteristics of our communicative repertoires to explain how study participants’ subversive identity work has implications for critical pedagogy, and how my study should be understood as part of a larger scholarly struggle to understand the hegemony-disruptive cultures of American people of color.

Chapter 10: Conclusions and Implications

Academics, educators, and policy analysts need to understand how narco-cultural production in digital spaces interweaves with identity development in order to begin to address the forms of violence it reproduces. In this chapter I summarize my findings regarding participants' identity work on Facebook and connect my academic struggles to understand the life-affirming importance that narcocultura had for them with other academic struggles to understand and explain this phenomenon. I also urge readers to imagine ways in which we can use narcocultura as part of critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies, discussing the ways in which this has been done with hip-hop, but making important distinctions and addressing concerns about bringing it into our classrooms. Finally, I address the personal tension that provides the throughline for the dissertation by explaining how I understand my own role in the war on drugs, clarifying my own preoccupations with the prospect of committing violence in the name of something bigger, and how I see this warrior role and preoccupations mirrored in the identities of narcocultura.

Learning to Be Narco

Participants in my study used cultural elements that I identify as part of narcocultura in their communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2012), examples include the use of Sinaloense slang; characterized by the use of superlatives such as “viejón” or “trocóna”; as well as the use of phrases like “andar activado”, “andar al tiro”, “nunca ando solo”, “rifársela”, and “andar al cien”; and language practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004) such making reference to themselves in the first-person plural (“andamos”). They also appropriated (de los Ríos, 2019) elements of crime-oriented role identities such as the pesado, the sicario, and the sicaria, to construct their Facebook personae. They conducted identity work (Davis, 2016, 2019) in such ways in order to establish

and maintain claims of movimiento alterado insider status because this allowed them to challenge and subvert class, race, and—in some cases—gender subalternity. Narcocultura offered life-affirmation to these young people by allowing them to challenge political correctness, to identify as being part of something bigger than themselves, and to use narcoscapes (Cabañas, 2014) to construct imagined worlds where it is possible to circumvent the class, race, and gender stratified status-quo of Mexican and American societies, as well as making sense of narcoviencia (Halvey, 2018).

I found that the Mexican state of Sinaloa, and the city of Culiacán in particular, were at the imaginary center of the Movimiento Alterado, and that this center was repeatedly and directly indexed through our language practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). This is relevant because Sinaloense speech differs greatly what is regarded as “proper” Spanish. Often referred to as “Academic Spanish” (Gerrero, 2017) it owes its name to the Real Academia de la Lengua Española, a normative body located in Spain, which is often idealized as the cradle of proper Spanish in certain circles of Mexican society, and was legitimized as the only permissible variety in school curriculum throughout all of my formal educational experiences.

Bucholtz & Hall (2004) contend that ideologies about proper and improper varieties of language often “organize and enable all cultural beliefs and practices as well as the power relations that result from these” (p. 370). In the context of my study, this means that speakers of unsanctioned varieties of Spanish are often considered subaltern (Flores, 2013), are often racialized, or regarded as uneducated. However, during our discussions, our predilection for speaking Sinaloense illustrates the shifting power that the narcosphere has effected on some sectors of Mexican and American societies, where young men use it agentively in “highly deliberate and self-aware social displays” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 380). An example of such a

performance was always referencing oneself in the plural, a stylization (p. 381) that highlights and exaggerates ideological associations to organized (collective) crime, which indirectly invokes not only economic power, but the power to exert violence, which are ways of subverting subalternity and marginalization.

Subversion of marginalization can be the driving force behind many young Latinx decisions to align their identity with stereotypical crime-oriented identities, this is a phenomenon observed by other researchers in U.S. classrooms (Valles, 2015). Much like it limited my study, a narrow understanding of what drives people to display demeanors and fashion that we may perceive as crime-oriented can lead to the criminalization of students, rather than to an effort to understand the reasons behind such identity decisions, or to trying to understand why young people of color would want to sport a gangster look. In the dissertation “Educational Impacts of Discipline Policies on Chicano students in Utah: A mixed-method Critical Race Theory and Latcrit Analysis”, Valles (2015) explored and explained how educators can be complicit in catalysing adoption of these crime-oriented fashions and demeanors by “hyper-criminalizing” (p. 94) students of color, that is, construing them—a priori—as criminals. In Valles’ study, a Latinx participant named Cesar, recounts how he was subjected to at least 10, weeklong, suspensions during his high school career. He recalls first being suspended for selling candy to classmates on school grounds without a vendor’s license. Valles explains that Cesar was criminalized for a creative and innovative way of fundraising for his lunch money, and that first suspension seemed to criminalize him in ways that brought upon subsequent punitive actions; soon, Cesar began “feeling like a fuck up...straight like a fuck up...like I was born to get in trouble...it happened so much that it became natural” (p. 97).

Valles (2015) explains that, consequence of his multiple suspensions, Cesar's grades suffered, and he began taking less rigorous courses and began buying into the deficit view some teachers had of him (p. 95). The author also illustrates how stereotyping and criminalization at school had multidimensional consequences for Cesar, and how this was significant in multiple social settings, which transcended school:

Cesar: If you think I'm a fuck up, if you think I'm a gang banger, if you think I am the type of person that is going to graffiti up the school, then fuck it, I'll do it, and I'll do it bigger and better than you ever think (Valles, 2015, p 99).

The author calls this transformative resistance, an empowering way of "rebellious back" (Cesar quoted in Valles, 2015, p.89) that is informed by historical and contextual understandings of one's place in the world. In the case of Cesar, a non-gang affiliated student began to "own" his gangster persona because he felt school authorities had imposed it on him, and understood that the only avenue to empowerment available to him was to embrace and embody it fully. Valles makes it a point that Cesar never joined any gangs, and that eventually, after leaving high school's repressive environment, went through a process of conscientization (Freire, 1970; Valdes, 1996) that enabled him to dispense with his internalizing of criminalization and obtain a degree from the University of Utah.

Another one of Valles' study participants, Oscar (a Los Angeles native of Latinx heritage), describes how teachers often affiliated him with gangs as a result of his style of dress, and how he was in utter disbelief that teachers would accuse him of such involvement, and categorize him in that way. The author explains that Oscar eventually internalized the deficit view he received from his teachers, and that this affected his performance at school and his future, illustrating this situation with this quote:

Oscar: I wouldn't want to go [to college]. I would just rather work and make a living with hard labor! I don't care. I don't need it. I don't need that kind of shit in my life. I don't need anybody giving me any negativity. That's what I thought about myself, it was like, fuck – if they don't care about me then I'm not going to care about me (Valles, 2015, p 108).

Valles' study shows how oftentimes, students of color can resist oppression and criminalization by deciding to embrace and embody the dangerousness that some educators have affixed to them based only on perennial racist discourses, which persist in school disciplinary structures and curriculum. Embracing gangsterdom may seem self-destructive and dangerous, but Valles argues that the young Latinxs who participated in her study believed it was a legitimate avenue of resistance and felt empowered by their defiance.

I contend that political violence, marginalization, subalternity, and racialization have engendered narcocultura in similar ways in which they have engendered other forms of crime-oriented cultural production, these parallels are illustrated by the shared narratives of narcocorridos in particular and gangsta rap. These types of cultural productions challenge hegemony by not only effacing political correctness and dominant forms of language, but by challenging parts of their societies' hegemonic discourses (while reproducing others) about who can exert violence justifiably in their lyrics, therefore shifting political power dynamics. The importance that Clay (2003), Edberg (2004), and Oliver (2006) place on the marginalized, subaltern social stratification that audiences of narcocorridos and gangsta rap suffer, alongside academic findings in Valles (2015) lead me to consider that the reasons why young people find being perceived as *pesados*, *sicarios*, *sicarias* (etc.) appealing, is that this attitude involves a form

of political defiance to oppressive class, gender, and race, stereotypes; as well as to oppressive political institutions in both México and the United States.

In all, I found subversion of class, race, and—in some cases—gender subalternity to be directly or indirectly associated with most of the curating decisions participants in the study made regarding the creative processes of their online personas and self-representations across Facebook. For example, Reina Rivera and other self-identified women participants of narcocultura-oriented Facebook groups often had to draw-upon cultural products that exist outside the narcosphere in order to contest the narrowness of the identities available to women in this context, interweaving character traits borrowed from singers like Jenny Rivera, or the type of imagery produced by Clayton Haugen. Self-identified men in the study often were preoccupied with displaying the means of “tener con qué” and “andar al cien”, in their self-authored videos and selfies, attitudes espoused by characters (real and fictional) and narratives within the narcosphere, where organized crime is construed as a valid circumvention of the historic social injustices that have marginalized Latinx communities on both sides of the México-U.S. border.

As narcocorridos feature a speech that openly challenges political correctness and presents circumventions to the class and race stratified status-quo of Mexican and American societies, they are upholding a discourse that promotes forms of violent resistance from the relative safety of its lyrics. It seems to me that the genre’s existence represents a form of resistance to dominant political power, its institutions, and the authorities that personify it. The appeal of narco-identities would then reside in the feelings of anger and disillusionment prevalent among their audience; sentiments strengthened by the perception that the forces shaping their futures in México and the United States are beyond their means.

The Interconnection of Struggles

The advancement of social justice through the academy requires that we continue to look at phenomena like gangsta rap and narcocorridos as artifacts emerging of interconnected struggles. To look more deeply into crime-oriented forms of cultural production can inform not only educational practices, but law enforcement policies as well. Academics, educators, and policy analysts need to understand how narco-cultural production in digital spaces interweaves with identity development in order to begin to address the forms of violence it reproduces. The overlap between education and policing may be evident in this study because these are the two fields in which I have developed professionally, but I believe the connections go beyond this factor. Both fields can benefit from developing a better understanding of Narcoscapes (Cabañas, 2014), the Narcosphere (González, 2017) and Narcoviencia (Halvey, 2018).

As the theoretical frameworks used to make sense and give meaning to the events of the so-called drug war, narcoscapes allow Facebook users to construct idealized images of sicarias from images produced outside the narcosphere. This illustrates how the same image in two different contexts renders completely different interpretations, one construed as negative and violent (the sicaria) and the other as positive and heroic (the sexy female warrior). Narcoscapes also allow us to understand how looking, talking, and acting like a narco can be construed as empowering, and may present itself as a viable identity for young Latinx. These types of identities cannot exist decoupled from narcoviencia, because they emerged as ways to make sense of the political violence that engulfs the societies from which they came. Understanding these identities thus necessitated delving into narcoviencia, which entailed a level of risk that presented significant challenges in getting this study approved in the first place, which I mitigated by moving the study to Facebook.

Facebook emerged in the study as rich but challenging sites of research, they afforded a degree of acceptable risk that other forms of in-person research would not have in the study of narcocultura, which was construed as eminently dangerous by the Institutional Review Boards that examined the original proposal for this study (perhaps rightly so), I imagine this condition is also true for similar institutions, which makes ethnographies of the internet (Hine, 2015) an important—if not the principal—methodology to delve into the narcosphere. This means that academics interested in conducting ethical, critical research of communities that connect across Facebook need to continue to work on developing valid methods of conducting digitally mediated ethnographies that take into account the evolving literature of the ways in which we socially exist in an offline-online continuum.

Using Narcocultura in Critical and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

Narcoviencia, or the acts of violence associated with the narcosphere, which often involve a cruelty that goes beyond the act of killing, is often something that transnational criminal organizations—which should be understood to include drug cartels and parts of the Mexican State—use to terrorize and divide the public (Halvey, 2018). Narcoviencia shuts down the public sphere in ways that rob us of opportunities to openly discuss the political and criminal violence that surrounds our daily lives in the borderland. Narcoviencia is something that; “has often successfully relegated the public to the private sphere” (Halvey, 2018, p. 14). In this context, narcocultura becomes the only avenue for discourses and narratives about the narcosphere to make it to the ears and eyes of young Latinxs who find themselves surrounded by narcoviencia on a day-to-day basis. Narco-narratives become the primordial scaffolding for the imagined narcoscapes through which the public attempts to make sense of the political violence occurring in public, but is something that can only be discussed in private.

This makes social media like Facebook, a platform which constructs an approximation of the public sphere but that is essentially and embodied, private experience, the ideal space for the exchange of ideas and imaginaries related to the narcosphere. By contrast, it makes borderland classrooms, spaces that are already constrained in terms of acceptable political speech and discourse, the least likely locations for a dialogue regarding the narcosphere. This means that any proposal of curricula centered on an open discussion regarding narcocultura inside classrooms, with students, as widely implemented educational policy, would undoubtedly spark strong responses and concerns among some stakeholders. I anticipate that these reactions and consternations would be legitimate: why would we legitimize a genre of cultural production that is unapologetically crime-oriented by bringing it into the curricula of our classrooms? Would we be causing harm to our students by exposing them to the levels of narrative and graphic violence associated with narcocorridos and videos? Isn't narcocultura unequivocally misogynistic?

Halvey (2018) explains that the reluctance to bring narco-narratives into the public sphere is that these actually expand spaces of political discussion, because they allow generally oppressed perspectives to take a central role in explaining politics even if the main political tool in these narratives is narcoviolencia. Thus, narconovelas and narcocorridos “open different ways of understanding which experiences count as political, and whose voices the public should consider” (p. 13). Expanding pedagogical spaces that prioritize the perspectives of those who are oppressed is something that Akom (2009), Alim (2007), and Hill (2009), do using hip-hop.

Akom (2009) proposes critical hip-hop pedagogy as a tool for socio-political analysis that prioritizes the voices of marginalized youths through cooperative learning. Among many pedagogical exercises, the author suggests allowing learners to deconstruct hip-hop's linguistic, musical, dance, and fashion performances in ways that help them reflect and comment on the

social structures such as race, class, and gender within hip-hop, as well as the ways in which these performances reflect and comment on the larger world. This places understanding of hip-hop as a highly valued form of knowledge, subverting Black vernacular's racialized subalternity. Alim (2007) considers that this subalternity is due to the preference that traditional education systems have for non-racialized forms of knowledge, and that hip-hop centered learning challenges this by instead privileging cultural practices and products of people of color.

Alim (2007) explains that hip-hop centered pedagogies offer meaningful and powerful insights for learners to understand sociopolitical and sociocultural issues. For the author, hip-hop can be central to Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP) because it offers opportunities for deconstruction, meaning making, and praxis. What this means is that hip-hop artifacts can be examined critically in order to unpack the social issues present within them, but at the same time the use of these artifacts challenges hegemonic notions of what legitimate knowledge is. In praxis, critical examinations of hip-hop are transformed into critical examinations of the world through hip-hop, meaning that knowledge about hip-hop is developed into knowledge about power, which can then be disseminated through hip-hop performances.

In operationalizing hip-hop critical pedagogies, Hill (2009) proposes exercises were students and teachers criticize the meanings behind the power relations of race, gender, and class that are depicted in rap lyrics. However, Hill (2009) cautions practitioners about using the cultural elements of hip-hop uncritically, with the intention of passing moral judgements on hip-hop itself, or for the purpose of ridicule. Hill (2009) also cautions about the risks that uncritical uses of hip-hop in the classroom can pose in glamorizing materialism, misogyny, heterosexism, racism, and violence. It is important, the author argues, for educators to develop an understanding of how specific hip-hop artifacts can be used in pedagogical exercises, because

hip-hop has complex educational functions that coexist: it discursively shifts the balance of power to the cultural products and knowledge created by people of color, it places their perspectives as the primordial lens for understanding the power dynamics of the world, and it functions as a creative practice to create, connect, and disseminate knowledge in culturally sustaining ways.

In Akom (2009), Alim (2007), and Hill (2009) the use of critical pedagogies of hip-hop, always has the objective of developing empowering, constructive experiences for all learners, and these authors propose using hip-hop culture in critical ways subvert race and class hegemonies, and can help deconstruct gender ones. Critical educators and academics can similarly stand to benefit from the critical use of narcocultura in pedagogical exercises geared towards developing critical consciousness among students. Would we legitimize narcocultura by bringing it into our classrooms? I don't believe so. Findings in studies such as mine suggest that the discourses of narcocultura are already displacing the legitimacy of institutions of the State, especially in regards to justice, an ideal so central to peaceful coexistence, that we should not allow its discussions to be confined to private spaces by narcoviencia.

Would be causing harm to our students by exposing them to the inherent violence associated with narco-narratives? By far, that harm has already been done. Narco-narratives are no longer being construed in the fringes of cultural production, obscure blogs and cassette tapes sold by street vendors; they are mass-mediated artifacts that surround the lives of our students. When the drug war sometimes referred to as (then) Mexican president Calderón's "lucha contra el narcotráfico" initiative (Cabañas, 2014) began in 2006, mainstream media gave audiences detailed accounts of narcoviencia. Since then, narco-novelas have flooded the airwaves of Spanish-speaking channels, and narcocorridos are played in radio stations across the continent.

By not bringing narcocultura into the classroom in critical ways, we are relegating some of our student's principal ways of making sense of their world. These narcoscapes, polemic as we may find them, constitute legitimate, "politicized funds of knowledge" (Gallo & Link, 2015) that can underpin meaningful learning experiences.

What about the misogynistic, sexualizing discourses characteristic of narcocultura? Narcocultural production intensifies genderizing discourses of misogyny and masculinity but it borrows the baseline gender hegemony from the society at large. This means that by helping learners deconstruct the sexualizing discourses of narconovelas, or the hypermasculinity of narcocorridos, we can actually provide them with tools to question, examine and even subvert the dynamics of gender and power of mainstream society. I found that narcocultura provides many Latinx youths with cultural elements of subversive identities, which they appropriate into their own identity work in ways that shift the meaning of some very-negatively valued ideas, exemplified by Cinco Siete's recontextualization of "andar activado", which he used to portray very positive traits regarding his hard-worker identity. Understanding the dynamic nature of identity is key in developing CSP (Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017), and narcocultura provides us with a trove of complex subversive identities that both challenge and reproduce hegemonies.

"Identity sampling" (Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017, p, 254) is a hip-hop centered way of critically understanding identity work. Gutiérrez and Johnson (2017) explain that we extract and rearranging fragments of identities extracted from the media flow to actively craft our own identity, much like DJs rearrange existing songs in order to create a beat (p. 255). Gutiérrez and Johnson (2017) explain that digital media flow provides us with a barrage of information and ideas that we use in identity sampling, and that it is important to understand how we use these, because they are key elements of the ways in which we understand ourselves and others. The

authors' argue that "robust pedagogical practices must incorporate understandings of the complex nature of youths' cultural lives, that is the way young people engage media [as] a form of remixing" (p. 257). This is because Gutiérrez and Johnson (2017) draw great attention to the ambivalence of these remixed identities, that is, the contradictions between liberating and oppressive traits—something that I've illustrated in this study through my own sense of identity and as the contradictions of sicario identities—and propose that educators utilize this ambivalence to "help youth wrestle with the multiple feelings they may have about the cultures they belong to and the media texts they enjoy" (p. 256), in looking at the contradictions, the authors argue, we open the possibility to reject the hegemonic discourses embedded in the cultural bits we may have sampled.

The ways in which hip-hop CSPs can inform a developing narcocultura critical pedagogy are vast. However, we must also pay attention to the difference in contexts. For example, looking at identity sampling contradictions requires the acknowledgment of opposing, negatively and positively valued traits in all identities. As things stand, narcoviencia makes it difficult to suggest to an audience of educators, that there are positive values in sicario identities, for example. We must be aware, however, that narcoviencia happens at a much larger scale than the violence associated with hip-hop, that it has reached all classes of society in México, that it is characterized by a level of cruelty that differentiates it from the one described in gangsta rap, and that it has a component of political terrorism to it. Despite this, we must strive to bring the cultural artifacts of narcocultura into the center of robust pedagogical practices because for many Latinxs, these have provided significant building blocks for their identity and worldviews. In order to reclaim the public sphere from narcoviencia, we must ask ourselves, how can we use narcocorridos as part of critical pedagogy? Could we design critical exercises were we examine

both the subversive and hegemonic discourses embedded narco-narratives? Could we use narcocultura both as a critical lens, and as liberating praxis? As Gallo and Link (2015) explain, rather than accepting the status quo of silence around issues that may be positioned as dangerous, as teacher educators we need to foster dialogue and exploration to prepare educators for the realities they will face.

Addressing my Conflicts with Narcocultura and the Wars on Drugs and Terror

Throughout this dissertation, I have strived to portray how coming of age in a border city in the midst of the “drug war” influenced my interest in narcocultura. Narcocorridos are featured prominently in the study because they were the first narco artifact that I became in contact with, and there was one in particular (“Quitapuercos en Chihuahua”) which to this day strikes deep, emotional chords in my psyche because I associate it with the deaths of former colleagues. I have tried to portray a transition from that guttural distaste (if not hatred) of narcocultura to a more complex understanding of the phenomenon through the lens of my own experience. As the violence and destruction of the social fabric in Juárez (my hometown) pushed me out of the city and the country, I chose to emigrate by becoming a soldier in a different war, the so-called “war on terror”. It seems that everything in this story happens within the notional confines of wars, and wars need warriors.

I am a warrior in a war I find absurd. Drugs produced in Latin America feed an insatiable recreational drug market in the United States, yet communities in these countries are not allowed to sell their most (and sometimes only) profitable product (recreational drugs) to a market that has a very high demand for it. American elites have established a continental free market while at the same time attempting to subdue the parts that they find morally objectionable. Therefore, in essence, the drug war is a moral war, a crusade in which producing and selling illegal drugs

carries high risks of being construed as “the enemy” by me and my colleagues in law enforcement and the military (the drug warriors).

Just because I picked the side that is seen as legitimate in this absurd war doesn't mean that the appeal of being a sicario or a pesado is lost on me; beyond the imagined paths to wealth and sex, these identities are often construed under the umbrella of becoming part of a family, becoming a “pariente”, a team member, part of an “equipo”, and something bigger than oneself; this is something that I've always sought, and it manifested in the types of career decisions I've made throughout my life. Some of these decisions have involved situating myself in circumstances in which taking another person's life was not only possible but likely, and have required me to find ways in which to justify having placed myself in that position.

Killing, in the roles that I've voluntarily decided to occupy, has always been sanctioned by a Nation State, seen as heroic, as serving a higher purpose, even celebrated; yet I do not consider myself a violent person. Thus, when I listen to narcocorridos claiming that sicarios are “efectivos, pero no somos violentos”¹⁷ (Sánchez, 2013) I have a personal frame of reference that allows me to understand that seeming contradiction. One can be an effective killer, but not violent, because violence is killing without purpose, violent people attack the innocent, and I have somehow convinced myself that the people that I may encounter and kill in my role as a soldier will, almost by default, not be innocent. I am fully aware of the absurdity of my thought process, and understand that innocents are disproportionately killed in war; yet, I choose to risk being the one killing them in the name of becoming part of something bigger than myself.

But what if there is no country to fight for? Worse, your country's military seems to be at war with the civilian population? What if they are fighting a war that seems to be aimed directly

¹⁷ See *Lyrics 7.2 – “Somos Efectivos”*; Excerpt 8.1 – *Killing a sangre fría*

at you? These are the questions that I fear young Mexicans ask themselves on a daily basis. As Halvey (2018) suggests, Mexican federal, state, and local administration have for decades used the police and military to exert violence on the most vulnerable under the guise of the drug war. Narcocultura exhibits and exalts the ways in which the most vulnerable have reproduced that very violence, empowered by a drug trade that seems to enlarge despite the so-called drug war. It comes as no surprise to me that this violence, exercised by crime syndicates and gangs, has also found justification in the increasingly mainstream narratives that narcocorridos and narco novelas reproduce, which young Latinxs are using to inform their identity work, that is, to learn how to act, talk, and look narco. In the sicario-oriented posts that abound in the Facebook groups I studied, for example, I can recognize the urge to become part of something bigger, to prove your warrior mettle, while at the same time understanding why becoming a warrior for “the right side” was not a viable alternative for these young men and women like it was for me.

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Vita

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