

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

# STUDIES: MUSIC & FILM

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## **Con Machaca y Mitote: NAFTA, Music and Text as a Narrative of Self**

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

-- Steven Feld

Established critiques against discourses on the omnivorous power and sweeping presence of capitalism have stressed the ambiguity, uncertainty and subtlety imbedded in a social capacity of cultural response. In these terms, the urban constellation emerges as a space for negotiation framing modern musical and cultural senses where inherited concepts of tradition are interrogated. Indeed, urban cultures have become the primordial arena for historical hybridities.

Struggles over musical property are themselves political struggles over whose music, whose images of pleasure or beauty, whose rules of order shall prevail. This struggle in itself has become a basic principle not to denote a weakening of domestic identity, but rather, to re-iterate the historical question of the making *home* in modernity. The advent of an open-market economy in Mexico triggered an immediate social response encompassing a series of concerns and desires that underscored an unyielding economic anxiety in society at large. The overnight flood of American commodities during the early 90s, paired to a sudden break of the local economic infrastructure, were the catalysts for the clash of local and foreign cultural forces. As spokesmen of the events of this period in the north of Mexico the band *El Gran Silencio* musically depicts the diverse socio-economic factors operating in this struggle. Its musical hybridity is a prime representation of a prevailing social tension between hegemonic and subaltern forces.

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

### **A Folk Mystique**

Since the arrival of the Spaniards Mexico has been an arena for racial blend. As a consequence of this phenomenon of *mestizaje* conscious social differences based solely on race diluted. And even though race is still an active element in the delineation of social distinctions, the truth is that all considerations in order to mark social categories in Mexican

society are, first and foremost, based on economic grounds. On the other hand, under the umbrella of established political and educational institutions the entire social spectrum—traditionally encompassing lower, middle and high class strata—is united through a social bond that has helped to produce a common sense of socio-political awareness.

Along with the declaration of independence of nation-states throughout Latin America came a concern to adopt strategies for the development of national societies that would reflect Western standards of progress, and Mexico was not the exception to this tendency. The educated—and socially dominating—elite began to promote efforts for the adoption of European cultural models in order to give their new society a civilized image and status in the eyes of European countries, considered to be models for progress and evolution. In music, all types of activities derived from the lower classes were dismissed as archaic, barbaric representations of social regression (Carpentier, 1975). This tendency is reflected in the number of manuscript and printed sources of Italian and French music that survive from the 1700s. In addition, the proliferation of operatic repertory—mainly arias—reflected the ongoing European trends. The musical vocabulary used by composers in the Americas was directly influenced by the Italian style of the eighteenth century, and eventually the German school took its toll in composition during the nineteenth century as well.

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

At the turn of the twentieth century the nationalist trends sweeping throughout Europe came to touch a sensible chord within the consolidating socio-political structures of Latin American countries. Eager to find a distinctive sound that would reflect the voice of a national soul for their country, musicians turned their attention to local musical manifestations. In Mexico, popular *sones*, along with attempts for the re-construction of a lost Aztec musical practice, were incorporated to instrumental languages and genres favorite of theaters and concert halls. The music of the streets, of the masses—*el populus*—came to be identified as the vernacular voice of a true cultural model with national resonance. Pictorially conceived as fixed, monolithic, and disregarding the dynamics of its social reality *el populus* arose as folklore, as a symbolic social construct flexible in nature, fluid in meaning, sensitive to a diversity of perceptions and social factors acting upon it as

agents in the creation of identity models. With this, identity became a construction that relied not on the nature of the rhetorical image of *populus* created, but on the social dynamics of appropriation of this mold and the meaning inscribed to it as a result of this process. As icon, *populus* is subjected to a plurality of meanings characteristic of the social reality of the appropriating classes, a process that Richard Middleton calls *the struggle among classes* (Middleton, 1990).

### **Populus: Populi**

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

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

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

### **A Socio-Musical Semblance**

There is no doubt that the proliferation of communications media throughout the second half of the twentieth century was crucial in the proliferation of social spaces for the circulation of music. Radio, LP and tape recordings have always been the main means for

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

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

But although this social interaction, reflected in the plurality of music styles engaged in the dynamics of social exchange of the above mentioned celebrations, has been a phenomenon with clear historical precedent, a hybridity reflecting musical practices in The United States did not manifest itself until the mid-nineties, and there are several factors to take into account for this matter.

### **Socio-Economic Historicity: The GATT**

Outside from the efforts to translate American rock music during the 60s by mainstream artists, the national rock scene in México remained to be an underscored activity that merely mimicked American musical styles (i.e. rock and blues). The impact of such music was rather low and practically disregarded throughout the 60s and 70s, mainly because realities in the United States and México were so different for any ideological material to be transferred. Rock musicians knew there was little local interest in Mexican rock groups compared to other music coming from the northern neighbor. The rock musician—*rocker* or *rockero*—was perceived as a non-adapted social outcast, not in the sense that rock musicians are considered to be social renegades, but as individuals separated from a socio-economic local reality, unable to produce genuinely local music styles resonant to the concerns and inquiries that the American youth came to articulate through rock music in the United States.

The hermetic character of the local social environment was the result of important economic factors operating in the country during the 60s, 70s and 80s. Through these three decades Mexico formed part of the *General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade* (GATT), a multilateral treaty to which more than ninety countries, accounting for roughly four-fifths of world trade subscribed. Aiming for the establishment of an open, liberal and competitive trading system, the GATT's central principle was a nondiscrimination policy among trading partners, although the treaty allowed for some amendments. If a given country wished to accord *protection* to its domestic products it could do so only by the use of custom tariffs. Moreover, the GATT creators allowed the implementation of further restrictions when a country was in severe balance-of-payment difficulties, even on a discriminatory basis against imports from a country whose currency happened to be *scarce*. It was under this provision that Mexico continued for a few years to limit or even restrict imports from the United States. With the further advent of currency devaluations in Mexico during the 70s and part of the 80s it is not surprising that the country endorsed a close-door economic policy. American goods did not circulate in stores and the political landscape did not allow for the incursion of foreign businesses. The dollar was expensive, American products reflected an improved quality of life and purchase power was the key to it. As a result, a shopping trip to the American border—to buy goods from American stores and shopping malls—tended to reflect the privileged social status of those who could afford it.

The music circulating during these years, on the other hand, reflected local aesthetics formed under these operating conditions. Mainstream artists performed songs in local pop styles that had very little similarity—if any at all—to American music styles. Local party bands obeyed to the demand based on these tastes as well. All songs were covers from mainstream music, either foreign or local. Fewer bands who wrote their own

music were usually recording artists (and therefore more expensive to hire), most of which fell under the *cumbia* or *música norteña* styles.

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

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

### **Creating Freestyle Norteño**

In their own words, the music of *El Gran Silencio* is a devastating proof of the eclecticism and level of [musical] maturity that the group has reached. They continue:

But eclecticism does not mean the mixing of rhythms and styles only to adopt a pose of *new Mexican rock*. Perhaps due to the use of acoustic guitars and percussion instruments some people wanted to call [our music] *Latin American ethno-rock*. May be it is more correct to affirm that in our tunes there are elements of rock, hip-hop, ska, polka, quebradita, vallenato.<sup>1</sup>

Such eclecticism, however, did not appear out of nowhere; there is indeed a history behind these *Libres y Locos*. It was during the days of middle school when Cano and Papo Hernández would climb to the roof of their house to compose songs with a borrowed acoustic guitar and a Japanese harmonica of dubious quality. Moved by curiosity some of

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<sup>1</sup> El Gran Silencio, interview, *El Norte*, newspaper, Xardiel Padilla and Enrique Martínez, July 7, 1998, B2.

their friends offered to *help* with choruses and percussion, using such original instruments like a can, a laundry basket and a cooking pot. Tony, a close friend of the Hernández brothers and student of visual arts, would bring to their attention from time to time their pervasive use of faulty tones and rhythmic inconsistency (this in addition to him being fed up with the brothers constant *borrowing* of his guitar while he was not at home.) By then Tony was an experienced guitarist having participated in a local band called *Amnesia*, a quite suitable name: nobody remembers the group anymore. In 1993 Tony came on board to significantly shape the sound of the band since, after all, he knew how to tune the guitar. Their first formal gig came through an invitation by the *Partido del Frente Cardenista*, a political party of the socialist opposition, to play at their political youth meeting.

During that year some local bands—like *Acarniences*, *La Ultima de Lucas* and *Koer Voz de Malta*—featured young talents that eventually would form prolific bands such as *Plastilina Mosh* and *Control Machete*. At the *Feria de Monterrey '93*, among electric guitars, synthesizers, and digital-effect boards of other participating bands the simplicity in the sound of *El Gran Silencio* caught the attention of Arturo Meza, an institutional figure in the Mexican rock movement, who asked if the used can was a *huehuetl*, since he could not believe that it was only that, a can. From that point on, the band began a series of presentations at school, parties, clubs, plazas and even buses, where they would make the most money according to them. As a result, their instrumentation was not further seen as symptom of poverty and became an element of personal identity.

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



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

### **Güe-güepa!**

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

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

Indeed the incursion of American businesses—Walmart, HEB, JC Penny among others—woke up society from a government-induced opiate dream of economic progress: on January 6<sup>th</sup> 1994 every Mexican citizen realized that half of the value of his/her money had disappeared, new established standards of production eventually forced a substantial amount of the small industry sector out of business and the held promise of increasing the job market only achieved to turn a large sector of the population into work force for foreign capital.

The NAFTA syndrome swept the country with homogenic impetus. American businesses offered an opportunity for everyone to participate in consumption strategies until then regarded as privileged. The American market was at reach, anyone could now find a shopping mall located just around the corner and go to Dillard's or Foley's. Cable television was cheap and *in demand*. The American experience was here and for everyone

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<sup>2</sup> *El Gran Silencio, Libres y Locos*, EMI Music, 1998.

to take part on it. In this fashion, NAFTA was surely accelerating the evolution of a monoculture with the proliferation of films, television and education, further pressurizing the country to endorse the *cultural services* of foreign companies and individuals. A sense of national sovereignty was eroding by the need to alter a wide range of laws and policies in order to conform to the agreements of the new North American economic doctrine with regards to external trade, domestic self-sufficiency, foreign investment, intellectual property and technology.

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

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

Con machaca y mitote! Y si una guacharaca suena dentro de un camión, la cumbia te pega en el mero corazón, y si te prende el alma cuando suena el acordeón, la cumbia colombiana revuelta con rap, tocando un bugi-bugi en mi guitarra de Paracho Michoacán.<sup>3</sup>

### Re-thinking self

*Everybrodi dancing cumbia, everybrodi...dancing now. Chanki go home por la sangre mexicana...aquí la cumbia no se acaba con la Tropa Colombiana. Suena el acordeón, cumbia rap y rock n' roll, cuando toca El Gran Silencio, Jirgüigo! Jirgüigo!*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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

Sigue este ritmo que tanto te fascina, lo traje en español para América Latina, si quieres tu gozar y la vida disfrutar olvida tus problemas y empieza a rapear!<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, *Libres y Locos*—title of the band’s first album released by EMI Music Mexico and recorded in New York in 1998—was not just a call to the dance floor, it was a cultural phenomenon and a boom in the Mexican music charts that soon reached platinum status. In this very first recording the band displays the plurality of music styles, circulating in Monterrey during the late nineties. Soon after its release the circulation of the band’s music became indeed a mirror of the social conditions in Monterrey.

A practice representing not a social status but a common situation that resonated at all levels of society. Cumbia became a mainstream phenomenon; some of the most exclusive night-clubs were leaving aside Madonna and Shakira and turned to play *lo nuestro*. The national response was overwhelming: exclusive chat rooms, unofficial web pages and fan-clubs of devoted fans were in charge of the large-scale dissemination of *pura sabrosura*. The euphoria further intensified when the band was scheduled to play at the South by Southwest Music Festival, being the first local band to break into the American scene. *Güepa, pura yesca*, phrases that before carried low social connotations became part of a regional form of colloquial rhetoric. *Libres y Locos* was a dynamic that endorsed the conflict affecting the local community with regards to their cultural identity. In 1998 the band stated:

Decadencia. Dosis de distintos géneros y encuentros de diversas tendencias hacen ésta. Que muestra que todo es parte de lo mismo y presenta una realidad mundial. El egoísmo y fiaca social en el que la raza humana se sumerge, mostrando que sabemos, que estamos enterados pero carecemos de conciencia, así de simple! El chiste es ser tan proactivo como reactivo.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> El Gran Silencio, interview, *El Norte*, newspaper, Xardiel Padilla and Enrique Martínez, July 7, 1998, B2.

Culture contact is always deeply penetrating and transforming. Passivity is not an option, in fact it is never contemplated. A process of re-action soon conjugates in pro-action in favor of continuity in the evolution of *self* and not the *other*. A process of enculturation is depicted on the capacities of individuals to change their cultural profile through processes of internal re-configuration. Therefore, a manipulation of circulating elements—either local or foreign—lies at the core of the creation of a true semblance of historical continuity. To use Steven Feld's words, this essay is an attempt to illustrate the skill and imagination with which local musicians take over hegemonic musical forms. But not in order to create *icons of cultural identity*, but rather as an effort to unfold a process of historical continuity. It is true that this is not a case of *complementary schismogenesis*, a process in which the persistence of two acting forces reaches a dynamic equilibrium. Balance of economic forces? Not with the recent tax increase, nor with the persistent polarized local social economy. The central problem of globalization is the tension between homogenizing and heterogeneous forces in society. And it is in the dynamic process of cultural production that a space exists for this conflict of creative contestations, an increasing hegemonic-subaltern struggle in the realms of musical style. In this light, identity cannot longer subsist as icon but rather as a process of continuity, of historical dimensions and local repercussions, in which self becomes a constant.

*Mas si tú sientes una contradicción, que al dormir te despiertas y al despertar te duermes. Pero en este sueño tú estás sumergido, mas no te sientas nunca afligido, porque en este sueño tú estás protegido, y aunque te sientas un poco distante tu alma lo dice a cada instante...*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> El Gran Silencio, *Libres y Locos*, EMI Music, 1998.