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# “Los Músicos”: Mexican Corridos, the Aural Border, and the Evocative Musical Renderings of Transnational Youth

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*In this research article, Cati V. de los Ríos examines US-Mexican transnational youths’ engagement with the Mexican musical genre corridos, border folk ballads, and its subgenre, narcocorridos, folk ballads that illuminate elements of the drug trade and often glamorize drug cartels. She draws from ethnographic methods to present empirical knowledge of four young musicians’ critical readings of these genres and their place-making and community-binding practices across their public high school. She demonstrates how these transnational youth draw from their communicative practices to construct meaningful communities on their school campus and details how their evocative musical school performances serve as a cultural resistance to contemporary anti-migrant sentiments. Rather than positioning youth consumption of narcocorridos as simply a “deviant” activity, the findings argue that youth engage critically, intellectually, and aesthetically with narcocorridos as a popular culture practice and that some songs carry important transnational critiques and lessons on capitalism, state-sanctioned violence, and globalization.*

*Keywords:* migrant children, consciousness raising, music, popular culture, literacy

The collective consciousness of people, especially for those who belong to migrant communities, is often rooted in place, tradition, locality, and music (Chávez, 2017; Schmidt Camacho, 2008; Simonett, 2001a; Stokes, 1994). Music can deeply inform one’s sense of place as it “evokes and organizes collective memories and presents experiences of place with intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity” (Stokes, 1994, p. 3). Mexican regional music—musical compositions that differ in style and instruments by

state—fill the life soundscapes of many transnational youth, especially those living along or near the US-Mexico border (de los Ríos, 2018). Of the distinct genres of Mexican regional music—which include Tejano, norteño, corridos, conjunto, mariachi, trio, banda, tropical/cumbia, among others—the corrido, accordion-driven border folk ballad, is arguably the most popular (Amaya, 2014). Traditional border corridos amplify the struggles of the working poor, transnational exploitation, and the necessary migration of people in their pursuit of economic survival (McDowell, 2012; Paredes, 1958; Schmidt Camacho, 2008). In contrast, the narcocorrido, a modernized subgenre of the corrido, is characterized as “a ballad that describes, apotheosizes, comments, or laments the deeds of those involved in the drug cultivation and trade” (Simonett, 2006, p. 3). While narcocorridos are criticized for negatively influencing youth (Arcos, 2013), they can also be understood as a medium through which transnational youth engage and negotiate a range of local and global discourses, identities, and popular cultural practices.

Scholars have urged educators to not discount the creativity, dimensions of learning, and importance of youth popular culture (Gaztambide-Fernández & Gruner, 2003; Morrell, 2004). As Gaztambide-Fernández and Gruner (2003) contend, “Whether we like it or not, popular culture touches all of our lives and the lives of our students” (p. 256). Yet few studies have examined the youth cultural production, performativity, and agential potential of corridos and narcocorridos (which I hereafter reference as *narco/corridos* when referring to both) within the field of adolescent literacy. This article highlights how young people are shaped by transnational globalization, politics, and popular culture and often take resistive stances—tactical and strategic dispositions and actions of dissent (Scott, 1990)—to transnational dynamics of power that maintain and exacerbate poverty and exploitation in Mexico. Taking heed of Petrone’s (2013) call for literacy scholars to continue to document youth popular culture and literacies, this study asks: how do focal students decode and appropriate the transnational discourses found in narco/corridos?

To answer this question, I explore the ways in which the youth musicians engage and make sense of narco/corridos in their daily lives and how they negotiate local arrangements of politics, language, literacy, and culture through narco/corridos, simultaneously redefining local cultural and linguistic practices. In particular, I examine the ways youth engagement with narco/corrido cultural practices mediates a variety of social, cultural, linguistic, and educational processes that impact transnational youth. This research demonstrates how transnational youth are deeply situated in what Kun (2005) calls the “aural border,” the soundscape of the US-Mexico border where “disqualified knowledges” and “subjugated subjectivities” thrive as they “unveil the many multivalent ways the very idea of the border gets constructed and disseminated through sound and music” (p. 143).

## Mexican Corridos as Literacy, Social Practice, and Performance

One of the oldest and most popular literary traditions in the history of Mexico, corridos are short ballads often made up of 6–16 stanzas of 4–6 lines each and up to 10 syllables per line (Paredes, 1958). Corridos have largely been understood as a form of social protest and as a medium to challenge the status quo (Simonett, 2001b). With its roots in the nineteenth century, the corrido tradition—considered a “border rhetoric” (Noe, 2009)—amplified forms of repression and countered the hegemonic discourses of print journalism in Mexico (Paredes, 1958; Westgate, 2013). Corridos chronicled the histories of those who were being systematically dispossessed by US expansionism and of Mexican communities’ collective defiance of US colonial domination (Paredes, 1958; Saldívar, 1993). The ritualized performance of corridos “instantiated the idea of a unified and legitimate subject whose life of struggle was worthy of being told” (Saldívar, 2006, p. 153). In *With His Pistol in His Hand*, border anthropologist Américo Paredes (1958) offers a groundbreaking analysis of the corrido as both a literate practice and a resistant cultural form against White racial supremacy.

At the end of the twentieth century, corridos transformed from the quaint musical form that celebrated the lives of heroes and movements for justice in Mexico to a highly commercialized, controversial, and increasingly popular musical genre—especially among youth—played on radio stations across the Americas (Edberg, 2004; Wald, 2001). While not all corridos are controversial, its subgenre, the narcocorrido, has taken center stage in defining the contemporary corrido. The narcocorrido is connected and adapted to a social and historical context of conflict (Dávila, 2013) and, hence, continuously maintained and updated. Narcocorridos cannot be understood without attending to the historical, social, and cultural environment in which they occur (Dávila, 2013; Simonett, 2001b). Two musical ensembles coexist as the mediums to interpret narco/corridos: *norteño*, a genre categorized by a small arrangement of musicians that includes a bajo sexto (twelve-string bass), drums, guitar, and button accordion; and *banda*, a larger arrangement of musicians who also use wind instruments, mostly brass and percussion (Simonett, 2001b). Los Angeles is the production epicenter of narcocorridos because multiple Latinx-operated record companies are located there—the two most prominent for corridos are DEL Records and Rancho Humilde Records—and because a corridista (balladeer) is less likely to be physically harmed or killed in the US (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011). Misra (2017) notes that it is easy to link a “repertoire of killing” (p. 10) and narco-homicide to Mexico, where narco-violence is often a public exercise and numerous narcocorridistas have been killed for their songwriting, including the high-profile deaths of Chalino Sánchez, Sergio Gómez, and Valentín Elizande.

Conversely, according to Jimenez (2016), that dominant framing of hyper-violence lacks critical, historical, and sociopolitical context. Jimenez main-

tains that violence in Mexico inextricably invokes centuries of US domination through “the corruption, cynicism, impunity and crime” (p. 119) that derives from unregulated global capitalism and exploitation (e.g., free-trade agreements). Colonial conditions and the US’s historically extractive relationship with Mexico, in part, birthed the narcocorrido genre as a political machine (Arcos, 2013). Mexican migrants have endured a global capitalist economy that has exploited their labor for more than a century and deprived them of democratic rights, upward socioeconomic mobility, and social welfare in both the US and Mexico (Schmidt Camacho, 2008). This historical foregrounding is critical to understanding the ways in which music, violence, and literacy coalesce transnationally via the narco/corrido medium.

### Conceptual Framework

Critical frameworks are beginning to catch up with the transnational historical realities that have produced many of the youth popular cultural products and practices that researchers and literary critics seek to interpret (Alim, 2011; de los Ríos, 2018; Morrell, 2004, Skerrett, 2015, 2018). The following bodies of literature centering transnationalism, youth resistance practices, migrant imaginaries, and communicative repertoires provide an analytic lens to my research with the focal students.

#### *Global Capitalism, Transnationalism, and Transnational Literacies*

The US-Mexico border has “sanctioned the violent conversion of poor, working-class, and exiled peoples into persons without a place” (Schmidt Camacho, 2008, p. 2). Despite White nationalist policies that tout the expansion of increased border security, borders create and enforce austere economic disparities and facilitate the tragic deaths of thousands of migrants each year who attempt to cross them out of dire precarity (De Leon, 2015). Jones (2017) argues that at the core of the disastrous and inequitable impacts of globalization are “borders that are open for corporations, capital and consumer goods but closed for workers and regulators [which create] dramatic inequalities in wealth and opportunity within individual countries and at a global scale” (p. v). As myriad US factories have closed, workers in poorer nations have seen an increase in unregulated and low-wage jobs devoid of job security, worker rights, and benefits (Jones, 2017). In addition, oppressive working conditions, US foreign policies, and destabilizing political, economic, and social forces have forced millions of people in Latin America to leave their homes in search of economic opportunities for their families (Abrego, 2014; Grandin, 2005; Portes, 1999). Moreover, suffering from a global recession and, with it, increasing unemployment rates, many children and parents have migrated from Latin America to the United States to reimagine futures and reconnect with relatives who emigrated before them (Abrego, 2014; Dreby, 2010; Oliveira, 2018).

*Transnational* is "the space in which distinct national localities are linked together by migratory flows, and the diaspora formed by this migration" (Schmidt Camacho, 2008, p. 5). As families are pressed to move, transnational youths' everyday literacies are ongoing assemblages of knowledge, identities, ideologies, experiences, and specific cultural practices (de la Piedra & Guerra, 2012; Jiménez, Eley, Leander, & Smith, 2015; Kim, 2016; Skerrett, 2015). Transnational literacies engage social, political, and economic relations that spread across national borders (Jiménez, Smith, & Teague, 2009; Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Warriner, 2007). Yet, the daily language, literacy, and cultural practices of transnational youth remain an understudied phenomenon (de la Piedra, 2010; Skerrett, 2015). Scholars aligned with literacy and language as a social practice have called for ongoing ethnographic research on how local practices connect to transnationalism, globalization, and socio-historical influences (Bartlett, 2007; Canagarajah, 2013; Ghiso, 2016; Lam, 2013; Lam & Warriner, 2012; Sánchez, 2007; Skerrett, 2015; Street, 1984; Vieira, 2011). This study, therefore, investigates transnational youths' engagement with and understanding of narco/corridos as translocal literacies, or literacies in the global context of displacement and resettlement (Appadurai, 1996), and how these practices "produce cultural meanings that sustain transnational networks and make possible enduring translocal ties" (cited in Warriner, 2007, p. 201).

#### *Transnational Youths' Everyday Resistance Practices*

For migrant and transnational young people, marginalization and resistance are in constant flux and are often manifested through students' literacy and language practices. Alim (2011) terms "ill-literacies" as the creative, astute, and resistance literacy practices engaged by racially minoritized and transnational youth around the world—"the *ill* in ill-literacies refers not to the lack of literacy but to the presence of skilled literacies" (p. 122). Alim urges educators to closely attend to linguistically and racially marginalized young people's ingenuity and forms of resistance. Building on Scott's (1985, 1989, 1990) notion of "everyday forms of resistance," Robin D. G. Kelley (1993) maintains that "despite appearances of consent, oppressed groups challenge those in power by constructing a 'hidden transcript'" (p. 77), a dissenting political culture that manifests itself in daily discourses, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices. Similar to hip-hop, narco/corridos tend to use "coded language . . . which is often used to critique dominant discourses" (Alim, 2011, p. 122) and can be "seen and understood as sites of contest" (Simonett, 2001b, p. 315). For example, in a previous case study (de los Ríos, 2018) of Joaquín (also a participant in this study), I explored the ways in which his daily family literacy practices and clever decoding of narcocorridos helped him critically read his larger exacerbated sociopolitical world. Joaquín's case detailed a "corridista consciousness" (p. 1), a critical transnational, bi/multilingual,

and intergenerational engagement with both narco/corridos and the world in which performance is orchestrated to assert a fuller humanity.

Many transnational youth translanguaging as an everyday resistance practice because of its inherently transgressive nature (García & Wei, 2014) that challenges the perceived boundedness of languages (García, 2009; Rymes, Flores, & Pomerantz, 2016). Translanguaging describes the fluid language practices that bi/multilingual speakers use “without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, p. 283). A person’s linguistic and semiotic features are not static but are instead strategically and selectively enacted through dynamic social interaction (García & Kleyn, 2016) to express meaning making, creativity, and criticality (García & Wei, 2014). Essentially multimodal in nature, translanguaging mobilizes multiple semiotic resources for action and communication (Canagarajah, 2013; García, Ibarra, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017); however, few studies have documented youths’ multimodal expression of their “translingual sensibilities” (Seltzer, in press) or, rather, the multilingual stances that enable them to challenge negative and deficit perceptions of language-minoritized youth. As a critical discourse practice, translanguaging can release the voices of “subaltern groups that have been previously fixed within static language identities and hierarchical language arrangements” (García, Flores, & Woodley, 2012, p. 48). Hence, transnational youths’ dynamic translanguaging abilities allow them the potential to disrupt linguistic and racial hierarchies that span home, community, and school (de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017).

Current draconian anti-immigrant practices and discourses continue the hysteria of the 1990s, when electoral officials and far-Right activist groups purposefully stoked public fears about “criminal-immigrants” (Abrego, Coleman, Martinez, Menjivar, & Slack, 2017; Gonzales, 2013; Simonett, 2001a; Zepeda-Millán, 2017). The 2010 legislative attack on Mexican American studies in the Tucson Unified School District and the dismantling of bilingual education programs across the country demonstrate some of the ways that schools are implicit in anti-migrant and anti-Latinx sentiments (Cammarota & Romero, 2014; de los Ríos, 2013; Gándara, 2000; García, 2009). Despite these sociopolitical climates, adolescents resist; but less research has documented how transnational youth demonstrate resistance to anti-migrant sentiments in school settings through their critical transnational literacies. Simonett’s (2001a) ethnographic research on the rise of techno-banda music among working-class adults in Los Angeles explored how people’s performances of banda music indexed cultural resistance to legislations like California Proposition 187, which sought to deny public education and health care to undocumented families. Scant research has documented working-class adolescents’ inventive literacy, language, and musical performance practices as a similar form of everyday cultural resistance.

*Migrant Imaginaries, the Aural Border, and Communicative Repertoires*

Close attention to the transformation and embodiment of transnational youths' communicative practices can shed light on changing power relations and how they are negotiated in young people's everyday lives (de los Ríos, 2018; Rymes, 2014; Sánchez, 2007; Skerrett, 2018). A salient component of US-Mexican transnational students' communicative landscapes are their migrant imaginaries, which Schmidt Camacho (2008) describes as "the world-making aspirations" (p. 5) of Mexican border communities. Migrant imaginaries represent the ways in which people come "to understand and describe their social being" and, specifically, how their "repertory of symbolic representations and practices that constitute daily life may exert material force in the everyday existence of people" (p. 5). Schmidt Camacho's concept of migrant imaginaries is concerned with the cultural forms produced by US-Mexican transnational people to represent their experiences, including songs, music, performance, paintings, testimonios, photographs, literature, and film. Furthermore, central to transnational youths' migrant imaginaries is Kun's (2000) concept of the "aural border," the hybridity and fluidity of languages, music, and sound that capture the histories of hostile clashes of dissonance, culture, racism, and colonialism at the US-Mexico border. Transnational youths' cultural productions and performances of narco/corridos across the aural border collectively signify subaltern subjectivities and embody a sense of relatedness to specific places, times, and sets of socioeconomic conditions.

Recent conceptualizations of language have resulted in more expansive understandings of students' communicative assets and abilities, including calls to see transnational dispositions and translanguaging as the normative practices of people around the world (Canagarajah, 2013; De Costa et al., 2017; García et al., 2017). Building on Gumperz's (1964) concept of "verbal repertoires" to represent the intricate deployment of varied linguistic resources, Rymes (2014) coined "communicative repertoire" to encompass other significant elements of communication beyond language. Rymes (2010) defines communicative repertoire as "the collection of ways individuals use language and literacy and other means of communication . . . to function effectively in the multiple communities in which they participate" (p. 528). Many young people hone their translanguaging and communicative repertoires in transnational contexts "as they negotiate relationships across local and distant territories using multiple languages and modes of communication" (Lam, 2013, p. 821). In an increasingly globalized world, Rymes (2014) emphasizes how people engage in a range of semiotic modes of communication—including routines, cultural practices, accessories, body movement, musical performance, media, and style of dress—to function effectively across various communities. Thus, this understanding of a repertoire more holistically encompasses transnational bi/multilingual youths' embodied creativity and expression to communicate their meaning making, identities, and affiliations across cultural



communities. Moreover, communicative repertoires reimagine youth social spaces as those where a sense of camaraderie, especially around shared interests and collective practices, can be honed (Rymes, 2014).

### Setting, Positionality, and Methods

My research design is informed by literacy and language scholarship that foregrounds the mutual overlap between the local and the global (Canagarajah, 2013; Ghiso, 2016; Kearney, 1995; Lam, 2013; Medina, 2010; Skerrett, 2015). This orientation uses locally situated ethnographic methods to examine how globalization pervades people's everyday lives, interests, experiences, families, cultural and linguistic practices, and literacies. My analysis is based on thirty months of research at a Southern California public school that I call La FERIA High School (LFHS) (names and cities are all pseudonyms). According to the California Department of Education data, at the time of the study 85 percent of the students were Latinx, 12 percent African American, and 3 percent undisclosed; 81 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and approximately 42 percent were classified as English language learners. Important to note, LFHS has offered college-preparatory ethnic studies courses since 2008 and had a significant number of teachers of color at the time of the study who were either graduates of LFHS and/or lived locally, in the neighborhood, which I found to be uniquely supportive to immigrant students and multiculturalism across the school. Despite these positive features of the school campus, however, harmful intra- and intergroup social hierarchies were at times demarcated by LFHS students themselves.

Having taught at LFHS from 2006 to 2011, I maintained contact with the teachers, students, families, administrators, and community members for well over a decade. I also lived in this city during the early years of my childhood and had family members who attended and taught in the school district. This background facilitated my reentry into the community as well as my initial participant observation, which I undertook for a pilot study and then later prolonged research from 2014 to 2017. During my initial pilot study research, I examined the nature of literacy in a secondary Chicana/Latina Studies course in which I worked closely with eight focal students over the course of ten months in 2014–2015. Two of those focal students, both avid corridistas, helped connect me to other adolescents who regularly listened to, read, and performed corridos both inside and outside of school.

This type of respondent-driven sampling helped me identify two more adolescents who strongly identified as “músicos” (musicians) and/or “corridistas.” The two initial students, Joaquín and Antonio, often practiced and played Mexican regional music with the additional two focal students, Germán and Rogelio, with whom they had an existing comradeship. However, Joaquín and Antonio had their own conjuntos (bands) that they regularly practiced with

outside of their school performances with Germán and Rogelio, who were also skilled solo musicians. One of the ethnic studies teachers, Mr. Miranda, referred to these four students as “some of the most popular kids on campus” due to their regular performances at school. All four students (ages fifteen to seventeen) were from working-class immigrant households, bilingual, and of Mexican descent, and each occupied different points across the “continua of biliteracy” depending on the language and literacy task at hand (Hornberger, 2003). Germán and Rogelio were born in the United States (one of whom went back and forth to Mexico until the age of six), and Joaquín and Antonio emigrated from Mexico during elementary school (see table 1).

All four adolescents recalled listening to traditional border corridos as a regular family literacy event (Heath, 1983), where corridos were frequently recited orally in their homes as well as at church functions, Christmas *posadas*, birthday parties, *quinceañeras*, and *bautizos*, to name a few occasions. All noted that they were apprenticed into this discourse community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) by their parents, *abuelos*, uncles, and older cousins (de los Ríos, 2018). In addition to traditional border corridos, students shared a range of corridos that they were exposed to and sometimes consumed through popular culture, including cartel corridos (about specific cartels), trap corridos (US-based, mixed with elements of trap music), corridos verdes (about marijuana), and corridos callejeros (urban street corridos). The youth practiced their musical instruments at home daily and practiced together a couple times a month after school near the basketball courts. All four shared that they first listened to and memorized the songs and lyrics, and then checked the accuracy of lyrics using bilingual websites like [www.musica.com](http://www.musica.com).

I draw from thirty months of biweekly participant observation (documented through analytic memos and field notes), three semistructured interviews with each of the four focal students, and three focus group interviews to provide a glimpse into these youth musicians’ critical and close readings of narco/corridos and musical performances at school. Specifically, I took ethnographic field notes on informal literacy practices inside and outside of the classroom, including their collective musical performances during school lunch, and individual performances in their ethnic studies and Spanish classrooms, their rehearsing and practice at school, as well as their talk about the role of narco/corridos and Mexican regional music in their lives.

Over the course of my research, I interacted directly with the focal students across their classrooms (primarily their Spanish and ethnic studies courses) as they engaged in their daily routines, often assisting them with their classwork when asked, engaging in informal conversations, working with individual students and/or small groups, and helping assess assignments. I occasionally spent lunch breaks with students, following them to the lunch area, eating with them, and talking with them about their own lives and experiences as well as my own. One limitation to this study, however, is that despite students talk-

TABLE 1 *Backgrounds of student participants*

| <i>Student</i> | <i>Background</i>  | <i>Musical instruments played</i>                           | <i>Favorite corridistas</i>  |
|----------------|--|---|--|
| Joaquín        | Born in Baja; immigrated at age 6 but went back and forth to Tijuana until age 10                | Button accordion, guitar                                    | Ramón Ayala, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, Chalino Sánchez, Valentín Elizande, El Cachorro, Gerardo Ortíz        |
| Germán         | Born in Huntington Park (Los Angeles), moved to Zacatecas at age 2 and then to La Feria at age 6 | Bajo sexto (bass)   | Ramón Ayala, Los Tigres del Norte, Calibre 50, Gerardo Ortíz, Uriel Valdez, Roberto Tapia, Grupo Codiciado |
| Antonio        | Born in Sinaloa and emigrated at age 4   | Requinto (six-string guitar), button accordion, lead vocals | Ramón Ayala, Los Cadetes de Linares, Grupo Codiciado, Buknas de Culiacán, Régulo Caro                      |
| Rogelio        | Born in East Los Angeles and raised in La Feria; parents emigrated from Sinaloa                  | Percussion, drums, guitar, vocals                           | Ramón Ayala, Chalino Sánchez, Traviezos de la Zierra, Ariel Camacho, Roberto Tapia                         |

ing about their practices that spanned school and home, I collected most of the data at LFHS, which captured students’ recitation, engagement, and performance at school, not at home.

During their monthly musical performances, I took videos on my iPhone whenever possible and then wrote field notes on the lyrics, students’ introductions to the songs performed, and the transnational dispositions of los músicos. I audio-recorded the semistructured interviews and focus groups, which lasted between forty and sixty-five minutes and primarily took place on campus, either during lunch or after school. The three interviews explored the following questions, respectively: (1) How and when did corridos become a significant element of their life and identity? (2) When did students start performing and which artists are they drawn to? (3) How do they read, appropriate, and decode their favorite corridistas’ lyrics? I conducted the three focus groups on campus after school. The first focused on how and when students practiced (collectively and individually); the second explored when and how they came to be loosely known as “los músicos” on campus; the third sought to understand how they viewed their collective performance within a heightened anti-migrant social climate.

For data analysis, I used both inductive and deductive approaches (Maxwell, 2013) to understand the complex social conditions in which these youths’

transnational identities, popular culture practices, and musical performance were being made and creatively expressed. I developed deductive codes from existing empirical literature and my pilot study at LFHS, which included translinguaging practices, critical translanguing literacies, youth cultural production, resistance to dominant and oppressive narratives, readings of their social/linguistic/cultural worlds, and linguistic creativity. I derived inductive codes from data analysis in which I adapted Luttrell's (2010) three-step analytic process of sorting, indexing, and reading through data three times looking for reoccurring patterns, phrases, images, and ideas.

To arrive at my two primary findings, I analyzed my in/formal conversations and interviews with focal youth about their lived experiences and “migrant imaginaries,” their meaning making of their social and transnational worlds (Schmidt Camacho, 2008), along with documents (song lyrics) and observation data. Throughout the data collection process, I saw how these youth were at times positioned by school actors as deficient and “not academically serious” due to labels imposed on them like “long-term English learner.” Thus, I aimed to challenge these racialized positionings by elevating these youth as the astute musicians, poets, and intellectuals that they are. In addition, I member-checked my understandings of the youths' articulations in subsequent interactions with them primarily through social media and phone conversations.

Students in the study were often surprised that I was aware of and even enjoyed certain corridistas. As a Chicana raised in an immigrant household, I grew up listening to corridos. And when I taught at LFHS, listening to corridos was one of the literacy practices that most connected me to my primarily Mexican immigrant students. Behar (1993) reminds scholars engaging in prolonged research in vulnerable communities to consider not only how we enter but also how we exit our research sites. As I documented the youth musicians' communicative repertoires and transnational literacies, Behar's perspective remained pressing. As someone who spent significant years of my childhood in the same neighborhood, I tried to never assume cultural knowledge (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993). Instead, I endeavored to position myself as a socially responsible “ethnographic translator” (Behar, 1993) and remain reflective about my ties to the community as well as my positions of privilege—particularly my researcher identity and citizenship status. Open lines of communication with los músicos and their families continue to this day.

### The Evocative Musical Renderings of Transnational Youth

The findings across the data reveal the salient musical renderings of los músicos—specifically, the ways in which students' engagement with narco/corridos was a way for them to engage with and critique the political global economy and how their musical performances at school helped them reclaim space and assert resistant subjectivities.

*Intellectual Engagement with and Critique of the Political Global Economy*

Like hip-hop, narco/corridos are consumed not just for their visual or material aesthetics but also for their analysis, critique, and evaluation of social and political systems. The focal students' listening, recitation, and performance of this musical genre was an intellectual engagement with the political global economy, which included their critical thinking about how the United States is complicit in the manufacturing of global inequality. All four músicos shared that there is one theme across all narcocorridos: childhoods rooted in dire poverty across Mexico, where possibilities to advance through formal schooling are scarce.

To communicate these phenomena across narcocorridos, Antonio borrowed corridista Ariel Camacho's verse from his song "El Karma" to contextualize the difficulty of attaining upward social mobility in Mexico: "Como dice Ariel Camacho . . . 'buscando billetes para progresar' [Like Ariel Camacho says . . . 'hustling for social and economic mobility']" (Ariel Camacho y Los Plebes del Rancho, 2014). He shared that, musically, "El Karma" is his favorite song to listen to and perform, but the lyrics "are sad." It chronicles "a humble man whose children are kidnapped and he wants to find the people and get revenge, but the carteles end up just killing [the dad]," Antonio said. "The dad was kinda involved [with the cartels], but not really, and [it] just shows . . . how even people on the sidelines get killed."

The theme of violence within the narcocorrido genre is usually magnified by the mainstream media, but students like Antonio often fashion alternative readings of these songs, especially those that offer some critique of the harm emerging from warring drug cartels. While the description of violent killings has decreased over the last ten years within the genre's lyrics (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011), they still commonly discuss the "dealings, business aspects of, or resistance" to drug trafficking. Drawing from his "disqualified knowledge" within the aural border (Kun, 2000), Antonio mentioned that some narcocorridos have been deemed so dangerous for young people that they have been "banned from [mainstream US and Mexican] radio stations," noting that "instead of going after the actual problems and corruption . . . they [the government] ban the songs."

Similarly, in an interview, Rogelio noted how

Ariel Camacho and Grupo Codiciado start their songs with talking about being very poor . . . or not being able to go to school as little kids. There aren't a lot of opportunities, so some of [the songs] talk about how getting [involved with drug trafficking] is one of the only ways people think they can make money for their families . . . One of the messages is to work hard, though, not necessarily hacerse un narco [become a narc], you know? Grupo Codiciado has a song called, "Gente de Accionar"—basically like saying [Mexicans are] hard workers and doers [within the drug trafficking business] . . . Some songs through code language also criticize the reality that people are *so* poor and have nothing, and how that's both Mexico and US's fault because of the demand for drugs in the US, and how some people feel forced to go into it . . .

There are bigger messages than what people think. It’s not like we listen to them and are like, “Yeah, ok, I’m gonna do that, too.” No, para nada [not at all]. At least not for me . . . And there are others, like Sinaloense [from Sinaloa] Régulo Caro’s song “La Tiendita,” where he chooses not to go into [the local cartel] even though all his childhood friends feel forced to. Instead he makes a small living through his tiendita [store] even with the violence in his town. So there’s some resistance to it in this music, too.

Rogelio fluidly moves between English and Spanish to dynamically communicate his translingual sensibilities and resist the negative perceptions of youth who listen to narcocorridos. His acknowledgment that “there are bigger messages” beckons us to move beyond simplistic understandings of this genre as exclusively corruptive. In many ways, narcocorridos are a medium through which complex moral lessons are critically interpreted, and not necessarily a blueprint for how to live and act in the world (Simonett, 2001b; Edberg, 2011). Furthermore, Rogelio’s assertion “no para nada” demonstrates his strategic and selective use of translanguaging (García & Kleyn, 2016) to transgress monolingual norms and critically emphasize that narcocorridos are not passively consumed by young people. He highlights how the US is, in part, at fault in the manufacturing of impoverished communities in Mexico and represents how students listening to narcocorridos might be seen as a form of subversion to US diplomacy and domination.

The idea that narcocorridos, if left unmonitored in the hands of youth, will turn innocent children into violent adolescents reveals the assumption that youth, “perhaps as a result of diminished rationality,” are incapable of “reasoning through the influences of those texts” (Moje & van Helden, 2005, pp. 213–214). While, undeniably, there are problematic aspects of narcocorridos, listening to and performing them can be critical ways that youth draw from their communicative repertoires and translanguaging practices to create social spaces of dissent that work to disrupt their continued systemic marginalization in broader society.

Joaquín, like his friends, listened to narco/corridos daily—on the way to and from school, between periods, at lunch—and was often seen blasting narco/corridos through his gray Sony headphones. In an informal conversation at lunch one day, Joaquín noted that many of the corridistas help young people “become aware of what’s happening” in Mexico. To him, not only were narco/corridos a form of reading and writing in his everyday life, but they were also a medium to develop his social and political consciousness. Elsewhere (de los Ríos, 2018) I outline some of Joaquín’s emic interpretations of the song “El Rancho” by corridista Mario “El Cachorro” Delgado, which details and critiques some of the state-sanctioned violence in Mexico. In a subsequent interview with Joaquín in 2015, he revisited the premise of the corrido:

El Cachorro’s song “El Rancho” uses code language . . . It takes place on a farm, and everyone in the song is a farm animal. “Los pollitos desaparecidos” in the song are actually the 43 normalistas que se desaparecieron en Ayotzinapa

[student teachers who disappeared in Ayotzinapa] . . . In the fifth [stanza], El Cachorro sings, “No se hagan tontos, sigue faltando en la granja *más* de 40 pollos [don’t be stupid, we’re still missing over 40 baby chicks in the farm].” He’s calling out the corruption, but on the low, through animals, and how the killings of the teachers were supposedly done by people connected to the Beltrán Leyva Cartel. Which is sad, because, like, no one can escape death if you get tied up in it or speak out against the corruption in Mexico, like the teachers did . . . But El Cachorro calls out [Mexican president] Peña Nieto in the song, reminding him that this is all on *his* watch.

Joaquín’s critical decoding of this narcocorrido demonstrates an evolved literary understanding of allegory and metaphor (de los Ríos, 2018). However, his knowledge of and reference to the Beltrán Leyva Cartel’s alleged connection to the mass killing of teachers is not explicitly mentioned in the song itself; he knows of it through his critical engagement with popular culture, globalized discourses, and transnational media.

Joaquín demonstrates how the aural border functions within transnational youths’ communicative repertoires as a sonic space that can mediate and help negotiate their engagement with rhetorical devices and build political consciousness, even as they are rooted in the everyday suffering of migrants and people in Mexico. In our conversations, he made it clear that not all, but a number, of these songs do “talk about politics.” In the case of El Cachorro’s song, the corridista skillfully took on complex transnational issues like the impacts of drug trafficking and state-sanctioned violence in Mexico. Despite the illegal activities that many of these songs describe, the sonic migration of their lyrics can also carry epistemic potential for critiquing, disrupting, and resisting hegemonic discourses and material realities.

Moreover, in response to the sensationalized media coverage on the forty-three normalistas who disappeared—were assassinated—on September 26, 2014, in southern Mexico, Marco A. Jimenez (2016) notes:

What happened to the students of the Rural Teachers’ College of Ayotzinapa, in the state of Guerrero, is not the product of the craziness of a primeval and underdeveloped savage culture that likes killing itself . . . It is a sample of the corruption, cynicism, impunity and crime that comes from what we know as globalized capitalism. (p. 119)

Jimenez contends that the hyperviolence cannot be understood outside of sociohistorical contexts. But as a popular culture text, narcocorridos can offer a glimpse into transnational youths’ extensive communicative repertoires and their existing knowledge of and engagement with the sociohistorical contexts.

### *Performing Resistant Subjectivities and Reclaiming Space in Schools*

As sites of assimilation, schools have been widely understood as unwelcoming spaces for migrant and transnational students, places where xenophobia and nativism are often reproduced (Patel, 2013, 2018; Valenzuela, 1999) and

high pushout rates persist (Contreras, 2011). Despite these contexts, Schmidt Camacho (2008) contends that migrants and transnational people “wage ardent struggles to resist their conversion into life that has no value” (p. 317). While transnational students struggle to find cultural belonging in traditional academic spaces, their resistance is performed in the interstitial spaces of the school, appropriating the locker, the last five minutes of class, breaks between periods, and lunchtime. For los músicos, occupying these interstitial spaces and refusing pushout meant remaking the campus into an aural border where they intricately negotiated their sense of membership through literacy, music, and sound. The high school was part of los músicos’ landscape for rehearsal, practices, and performance that indexed larger historical, political, and cultural meanings.

Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed how these transnational students often resisted anti-migrant sentiments and subverted oppressive raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015) through their reappropriation of stigmatized Mexican musical genres, language practices, literacies, and cultures (Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018). For example, in one focus group, los músicos shared the various places across campus where they exerted a sense of belonging and enacted their cultural and performative agency. For Rogelio and Antonio this involved carrying their guitars around school and playing corridos in their Spanish classes to assert linguistic and cultural pride, most often during the last five minutes of class. For Joaquín it meant keeping his accordion in his gym locker and occasionally taking it out at lunchtime to perform resistive stances and identities, primarily through Ramón Ayala covers like “Cruz de Madera,” which chronicles the life of a humble working-class man who does not desire lavish things, just dignity and respect from those in power and a live banda at his funeral. Germán and Joaquín both shared that they often played their music in their ethnic studies classes, especially since some of the conceptual themes explored in class included, as Joaquín described it, “immigration, racism, and politics.” Joaquín was especially engaged when his ethnic studies class explored the traditional corrido as a writing genre, an approach to writing that echoes Rymes et al.’s (2016) argument that the best scaffolding tools for empowered literacy learning are often those that are situated within students’ current communicative repertoires.

Students named lunchtime and their Spanish and ethnic studies courses as the most welcoming to their popular culture practices, border discourses, and translingual sensibilities. As Rogelio shared, “It’s not like I sing or play ‘corridos alterados’ [hyper gangster and violent corridos] in class . . . even though I sometimes listen to those songs, too.” Instead he noted, “I play some more popular ones for my friends, like I take requests and perform whatever they want, like Gerardo Ortíz [and] Régulo Caro covers or more older [love ballads] by Ramón Ayala.” His words serve as a reminder that although many transnational youth enjoy, produce, and perform problematic popular cultural texts like narcocorridos, these individuals cannot be reduced to those



texts (Morrell, 2004). Informed by the contradictions and tensions, just like the beauty and violence of the aural border, Rogelio cautiously performed his transnational identity. He recognized both that his performance of narco/corridos bound him to his racialized linguistic community and that he was under surveillance—even if performing at times in coded language—as a Mexican, Spanish-speaking young person enduring the increasingly hostile racialization processes of Donald Trump’s US presidency.

Morrell (2004) and Camangian (2015) have noted the aesthetically brilliant urban youth productions, texts, and performances that are rooted in hegemonic discourses but that assist young people in naming their worlds in ways that interrupt existing social orders. Similarly, for los músicos, listening to narco/corridos was in part about centering US-Mexico transnational experiences of political upheaval that also worked to problematize and push Whiteness to the periphery. For example, a couple of times a month, these students performed narco/corridos at lunchtime as sonic and performative transgressions, and they always had a crowd. Before one of those lunchtime performances, Antonio told an audience of about fifty students, “Éste corrido lo dedicamos a todos los migrantes . . . porque ‘no somos animales’ [This corrido is dedicated to migrants. . . because ‘we’re not animals’].” Los músicos then performed a corrido called “Si No Somos Animales” by the norteño ensemble *Traviezoz de la Zierra* (2015). This song is an impassioned critique of US Border Patrol’s and Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s racial and linguistic profiling practices against migrants and brown-skinned people. While *Traviezoz de la Zierra* are known for their corridos with politically charged lyrics, los músicos found this corrido to be especially relevant to their friends, given the political climate. The lyrics challenge the stereotypical narrative of the “criminal migrant” and instead proclaim, “Oficial, no me vea como si fuera un criminal / Sé que mi color de piel no es de su agrado / . . . La verdad es que yo no vine aquí para robar [Officer, do not see me as a criminal / I know my skin color is not of your taste / . . . The truth is I am not here to steal].” Students’ musical and artistic renderings, and their performance of this song in particular, serve as an “an audible signifier of an otherness” (Chávez, 2017, p. 25) deeply felt by los músicos and their peers.

The transnational students I observed undoubtedly recognized the school as an important site where they could contest racial narratives. As poetic tellings, los músicos’ lunchtime performances drew together young people who had a collective consciousness of their racialization and criminalization, identities that followed them to and from school. In bringing their aural border to campus, transnational students asserted resistant subjectivities and their corridista consciousness (de los Ríos, 2018), where they appropriated the narco/corrido to affirm their place-making and community-binding and drew from their multiple semiotic resources and translanguaging practices to be the storytellers of their communities. Finding these safe spaces at school for identity performance—from the ethnic studies or Spanish class to the lunch period—

reflected the dialogue these students had with school as an institution as they developed their own unique “pattern[s] of resistance” (Scott, 1989, p. 36). Marginalized students press and prod at traditional academic boundaries to find malleable spaces in which to not just survive but to exist and thrive. Through their agentive forms of cultural expression, los músicos deftly demonstrate the creative and critical ways youth translanguage across modalities and engage literacies to invert deficit-laden perceptions of bilingual, transnational, and migrant youth communities.

I asked los músicos about “Si No Somos Animales” and some of the other songs they performed at lunch that day. Germán said that Traviezos de la Zierra’s song is powerful because “no somos animales . . . We’re hard-working immigrants, and our families contribute a lot to this country.” Rogelio added, “To be able to perform for your friends and school is special, because it’s like, aquí estamos, unidos [here we are, united] . . . And also, we love playing [corridos], and we can share a part of who we are with the bigger school.”

Transnational youth listeners, practitioners, and performers of narco/corridos carry with them their “expressive archives” (Chávez, 2017). Central to Rymes’s (2014) concept of communicative repertoire are the ways in which people in social settings come together through shared interests and endeavors to sharpen their communication practices. In many ways, youth performances of narco/corridos at lunch and in their Spanish and ethnic studies classrooms worked to reframe them as “gifted citizen sociolinguists” (Rymes, 2014) whose flexibility with, awareness of, and metacommentaries on their language practices, literacies, and popular culture enabled them to challenge the oppressive discourses that marginalize them. Moreover, Kun’s (2000) metaphor of “hearing the fence” points to how young people not only see and physically experience the US-Mexico border but also *hear* it through the “dissonant clashing” (p. 2) within border music. As a soundscape of the US-Mexico border, narco/corridos allow youth to hear narratives of migrants, forced migration, border patrol agents, drugs, cartels, global capitalism, love, and survival within heavily surveilled national borders. Youth performances of narco/corridos within the aural border are a “prime stage for witnessing the performance of interstitial hybridities and identities-influx” (Kun, 2005, p. 143) that have roots in US domination (Paredes, 1958).

The migrant imaginaries of transnational youth—their world making, their social aspirations, their ideals of justice—are, in part, a response to the economic imperatives that have forced their families’ movement into the United States (Schmidt Camacho, 2008). Los músicos and their school performances offer evocative musical renderings of ongoing sociopolitical events, histories, and discourses that speak to the marginalized young people who serve as their loyal audiences. Situated within the aural border, students’ popular cultural and performance practices—as a locus of aesthetics and signifying practices—reveal salient insight about the literate lives of transnational youth. Youth employ narco/corrido literacies not only to challenge hegemonic con-

structions of stereotypical, static, one-dimensional relationships with borders, languages and cultures, but also to creatively express intimate migrant imaginaries as a means to work toward a collective social transformation. Despite the focal students' families' displacement and migration, they—like many other transnational youth—carve out interstitial spaces that are both a part of and separate from Mexican and US nationalism, an oppositional space in which they construct, affirm, and critique their transnational worlds (Schmidt Camacho, 2008).

### Discussion and Implications

As a US-Mexico transnational soundscape, rather than simply a “deviant” activity, students' critical reading and appropriation of narco/corridos assisted their reading and negotiation of their sociopolitical worlds and their everyday resistance practices within heightened hate-saturated discourses directed against Mexican migrant communities. Los músicos help us think more deeply about the conceptual underpinnings between literary reasoning with narrative genres outside of school (Lee, 2007) and the ingenious ways US-Mexican transnational youth “hear the fence” (Kun, 2000). Alim (2011) has documented the internal conflicts and inconsistencies found within youth popular culture and how they can be both “oppressive and progressive . . . where resistance is partial, where some hegemonic discourses are countered whereas others are bolstered, or where new hegemonic discourses are produced” (p. 131). Thus, orienting educators' critical listening to the aural border of transnational students' lives and its attending popular culture and literacies holds untapped potential for opening up new ways of understanding their ingenuity, agency, sophisticated translanguaging practices, and intellectual work outside of school and how to better interpret and respond to youth manifestations of these practices on school campuses.

I recognize the deeply misogynist, violent, and heterosexist features of narco-corrídos, and my research does not negate or downplay those elements. Rather, this study responds to Ali's (2017) timely call for scholars to simply listen to and learn from communities and, most importantly, to “conduct research and develop analysis to address, elucidate, and understand issues and tensions felt on the ground by people living within the crucible of American empire” (p. 390). Thus, the focal students' regular engagement with narco/corrídos as a literary genre was one way in which they critically read and felt the “crucible of the American empire” within the physical, spiritual, metaphoric, and aural US-Mexico borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987). As educators listen, learn from, and meet students where they are within harmful sociopolitical climates, they are also able to push them to hone their critical understandings of their cultural practices. For migrant and transnational youth living a precarious existence in the United States, “the border operates as a critical juncture for imagining community and exerting claims on either nation” (Schmidt Camacho, 2006,

p. 842). In this context, the daily cultural, linguistic, musical, and social crossings themselves can alter and shape the social and political dispositions of students’ larger transnational community on school campuses.

Ethnographic research on transnational students’ communicative repertoires can harvest generative tools to understand students’ stigmatized communicative practices in school settings. As researchers and educators, the underrecognized features of transnational students’ communicative repertoires, including those deemed “illicit” and/or “inappropriate,” call us to work to understand the nuanced literacy and cultural skill sets honed in transnational life and the ways in which teachers can leverage their evolved bi/multilingual literacies. More research should attend closely to the range of transnational youths’ invisibilized popular cultural practices and how they come to assert their resistance and belonging across school settings. Such an examination could “perhaps help us develop global/local or translocal practices, where . . . students’ identities, histories, and imaginations are at the core of how they understand literacy” (Medina, 2010, p. 58).

Moreover, leveraging youths’ translocal literacies of power dynamics remains especially promising in secondary ethnic studies classrooms, academic courses that are rapidly expanding across the US—though not yet in all school districts—and often explicitly foreground understandings of overlapping colonialisms, globalization, racism, and racialization processes in literacy instruction (Buenavista, 2016; de los Ríos, López, & Morrell, 2016; de los Ríos, 2017, 2018; Pulido, 2018). The story of los músicos can be used to push educators to take seriously the epistemic promise of ethnic studies orientations to literacy instruction that are not always afforded in dominant English language arts and English as a second language settings. Ethnic studies classrooms, due to their transdisciplinary nature, are spaces that can go beyond the critical textual interaction of decoding texts like narco/corridos and work to also understand how diasporic youths’ “world-making aspirations” (Schmidt Camacho, 2008, p. 5) via popular culture function at more complex aesthetic and epistemological levels that span novels, films, documentaries, telenovelas, and visual arts. These courses, with their robust interdisciplinarity and fidelity to antiracist and humanizing pedagogies, remain critical in the envisaging of literacy curricula that take seriously migrant and transnational youths’ epistemic, bi/multilingual, and cultural engagements with the world.

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