# Narcocorridos and Moral Panics; the Case of Cartel TikTok and #Chapiza

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**Abstract**

TikTok has become a popular platform among a group of people known in popular culture as "Chiquinarcos": a subculture that emerged particularly in North and Northwest Mexico, whose fundamental characteristic is the expression of admiration and emulation towards certain figures and practices within the world of drug trafficking. In this work, I analyze the "Chapiza" hashtag on TikTok and how it has been used and circulated. I ground the theorization in the broader socio-political context of the war on drugs, the U.S.-México border conflicts, and the region of Culiacán, México. I argue that these cultural expressions of narcoculture have been the object of governmental condemnation and state-driven moral panics that have failed to consider these communities in their rich and complex history.

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**Introduction**

Cultural expressions around the world of drug trafficking in México have been the object of both concern and fascination. The fascination has somehow managed to reconcile the violent and devastating outcomes of the war on drugs with the mythologization and romanticization of the drug lord and a presupposed life of honor, adventure, and luxury. The concerns take place in the public conversation in the form of moral panics and restrictive legislation; it even has gotten into the international diplomatic conversation in regards to gun control policies, especially those in constant flow from the U.S. towards México.

What I refer to as "narcoculture" is not the media genre that has become increasingly popular in TV Series and films. Narcoculture is a highly visible subculture, especially in Northern Mexico. Perhaps its main characteristic is the admiration, respect, or desire for emulation towards the way of life of a drug dealer. The main subjects of this admiration are the well-known figures like El Chapo or Pablo Escobar, heavily dignified and romanticized in contemporary pop culture. However, the history of the cultural expressions around narcoculture, like the narcocorrido, can be traced back to the 19th century border bandits and the initial statecraft narratives of the outlaw and the fugitive. Two contemporary cases are useful to thinking about this subculture; they can be of help in overcoming the dichotomy between lawful and unlawful, good vs. bad, or civilized vs. uncivilized, ever present in the state narratives and the collective imaginaries at both sides of the border. First, by looking at the example of the Culiacán Sinaloa community —one that has been the epicenter of the world of trafficking by decades— we can see a community with a rich and complex history highly influenced by trafficking, in which a large portion of its population would participate, in one way or another, of these subcultures, without participating at the same time in any criminal activities. This exemplifies the complexities of analyzing these phenomena,

where there is a condemnation—by the government but also the Mexican society at large—towards these cultural expressions, but at the same time there are whole communities embracing them. Secondly, the use of social media, particularly TikTok, by people who are sympathizers towards the narco figure opens up the possibility of looking into their everyday lives from a different point of view, in their moments of work and leisure. In this work, I argue that these cultural expressions are the object of moral panics and governmental condemnation that have failed to consider these phenomena on its full socio-historic and political context, distracting the public conversation and the government's attention away from the core causes of the security crisis.

TikTok has become a popular platform among a group of people known in popular culture as Chiquinarcos: a subculture that emerged particularly in North and Northwest Mexico, whose fundamental characteristic is the expression of admiration and emulation towards certain figures and practices within the world of drug trafficking. I focus in the context of the U.S.-México border, where the world of trafficking is highly influenced by the U.S. drug and gun markets, and by the war on drugs strategies at both sides of the border. The particular characteristics of the borderlands and the state's strategies to tackle the illegal flow of drugs towards the United States, has balkanized the region into several plazas —territories in dispute or controlled by one particular cartel— which at the same time has created their own peculiarities and their own communities, practices, and modes of self-expression. In this analysis, I focus on Culiacán city and the Sinaloa region in Northwest México, a plaza that has been controlled for many decades by the Sinaloa cartel and its leader, Joaquín —"El Chapo"—Guzmán.

Within the broader umbrella term of Chiquinarcos, a subgroup exists located particularly in Culiacán, Sinaloa, and is composed by low and middle tier workers of the Sinaloa cartel as well

as by admirers and sympathizers. This group has agglutinated on TikTok around a particular hashtag and using a particular language and codes. As an illustration of the amount of cultural, political and economic capital that the Cartel lends them, they participate in a series of exhibitions and performances worth of analysis, as they can offer an entry point to studying a current phenomenon of criminality that moves away from their condition of members of a particular criminal organization, and situates them as members of a community and a particular culture with its own modes of self-expression.

Last August, 2021, the Mexican government announced through its Foreign Affairs Secretary that they were filing a lawsuit against 10 American gun manufacturers in a U.S. federal court. The accusation argued that gun makers purposefully marketed the firearms towards the drug cartels, causing a bloodshed in the country. The rationale behind this claim, is that they used images of historical figures and suggestive names as part of the gun's design and marketing (Image 1). Names like "El Jefe," "El Grito," and "Emiliano Zapata," in addition to golden and silver paraphernalia that were the elements being linked to cartel violence in México by the Mexican government. According to Mexican political analysts and experts in the bilateral relation, this measure seems to be a symbolic attempt in order to force U.S. policymakers to strengthen gun regulation. This move exemplifies an empty diplomatic measure, a performance inscribed in the context of the late stage war on drugs. Meanwhile, cartel violence in México and fentanyl flow to the U.S. do not look like they will diminish anytime soon.

Joaquín Guzmán Loera, the kingpin of the trafficking world by antonomasia, was arrested for the third time in January 2016, and he has been in a maximum-security Colorado prison since 2019, a few months after he was extradited to the United States. Around 6 years afterwards, his cultural legacy and local influence in certain parts of México haven't lost traction. Hundreds,

maybe thousands of TikTok videoclips circulate everyday with the hashtag #cha [pizza emoji], or "Chapiza" in reference to members of El Chapo's outer circle of admirers, collaborators, and lower tier workers. From people working as street observers, looking after police officers or enemies from other gangs, to average young men and women from all over the country, standing in front of big pick-up trucks, holding a stack of cash and guns. Some of these TikTok users portray themselves as rich, powerful, and beyond the rule of law. an activity that should be hidden (criminality), becomes visible in the most unapologetic and fearless defiance towards the state's incapacity to contain and control criminal activity; however, what is known as Cartel TikTok and the #Chapiza community comprises many expressions that include the ironical, critical, and humorous,; and the community at large participates in different ways that have nothing to do with criminal activities. How to dissect and identify the subtle differences between subcultural self-expression, aesthetic tastes, and mere criminal behavior?

The phenomenon of narcoculture shows the ironies, ambivalences, and contradictions that exist at the core of a crisis that has devastated large regions of México and the U.S.-México border since, at least, the last 20 years. How does the glamour of golden weapons get reconciled with the tragedy of cartel violence in the minds of these TikTok users? How does the mythology existing around drug lords and their odysseys, portrayed all over the media, meets with the truth of a failed state, unable to keep control of vast national territories, especially in north and southwest México? How did the borders between fiction and reality, between mythology and mundanity, became so blurry?

Within large portions of the Mexican youth, from all over the country, a feeling of admiration and glorification towards the drug lord prevails. According to the logic behind the government's lawsuit and restrictive legislation, this community participates in a certain form of

delusion: one in which thousands of Mexican citizens are following a way of life, a set of values, and a life project that, when it stops being an aspiration and slowly starts to become real, goes too far. Some of the most radical claims made about Cartel Tiktok, insinuate that drug trafficking industry, and all the other criminal activities happening around it, is eager to recruit laborers, and that something sinister within this subculture is operating in order to portray the belonging to this group as something admirable and valuable, perhaps even beyond the economic incentives.

**Image 1**

*Note:* Imaged used to support some of the claims included in the lawsuit, released to the press by the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs. ("To criminals, they are a symbol of status. They arrive to México in big quantities due to illegal practices committed by the companies being sued").

In section one, I provide a brief analysis on how the use of media technologies by criminal organizations has been usually theorized, and pose the consideration of Cartel TikTok as a novel entry point of research to these communities, one that privileges embodied self-expression and includes the exhibition of a mixture between leisure and labor. As an example, I describe the figure of the "Punteros," a group of low tier workers of El Cartel de Sinaloa, whose

job is to keep an eye open and inform the whereabouts of the state authorities while, in the meantime, use and participate in #Chapiza. In section two, I describe the phenomena ofof Cartel TikTok, specifically the community of users who have grouped around the hashtag "Chapiza," and how Culiacán is the perfect geographical space to look at these phenomena, given the visibility and social currency of several cultural expressions around the world of drug trafficking. Here, I also introduce the "Chiquinarco," a term that I borrowed from a narcocorrido which shows a generational shift from the traditional narco figure towards a younger character whose modes of self-expression are aligned with an urban and more privileged life than that of their parents or older siblings. The figure of the "Chiquinarco" is relevant because it illustrates a shift in the codes of honor and glory within the world of trafficking. In the collective imaginaries of these communities, a "Chiquinarco" is enjoying the money from drug trafficking, not necessarily earning it. If Cartel TikTok features expressions of admiration and emulation towards certain narco figures, these figures look more like a Chiquinarco rather than like the traditional "macho" and mostly rural drug dealer.

In section three, I locate the analysis in the geography of Culiacán and the geopolitical context of the war on drugs. Culiacán is a paradigmatic example of the territoriality that goes hand in hand when studying Cartel cultures. It has been controlled by the Sinaloa Cartel for many decades and its relative peace allows these figures end cultures to be more visible than in other, more violent regions. The human infrastructures of the "Puntero," casted all around Culiacán, would not be possible in any other major city in México. Additionally, I situate the theorization of the cartel territories in relation to the U.S.-México border and how the two statecraft narratives have made use of certain languages of crisis, emergency, and disorder in order to advance a particular national narrative and particular security policies. These state-

driven condemnation and moral panics, I argue, distracts the attention from the real security crisis in México and fails to consider the cultural expressions of "narcoculture" as the object of reprehension, instead of the geopolitical reasons and market forces playing a role in this equation.

In section four, I shift towards thinking about the most important cultural expression within the world of drug trafficking: the narcocorrido. I locate this cultural object as having roots in the original border ballads of the nineteenth century, where bandits and fugitives saw in the new border the main threat, and how the early figures of smugglers and outlaws and the early tropes of honor and glory started to appear. By including this cultural element to my analysis, I intend to show a small fragment of how these cultural expressions of the outlaw, the smuggler and —later— the drug trafficker, have a rich and complex history marked by its constant conflict with the state, long before the slogan "War on Drugs" was coined.

In section five, I move towards a legal analysis that exemplifies the state-driven moral panics against these cultural expressions. The municipality of Chihuahua decided to ban narcocorridos from being played in public events during the peak years of the security crisis. I use this example, in addition to the current lawsuit that the Mexican government filed against gun manufacturers in the U.S., in order to show two instances in which the government focuses the conversation only in certain cultural aspects rather than in the root causes of the security crisis.

**Section 1: Criminality and the Use of Media Technologies**

Narcoculture in México is located in a site of displacements. Displacement of illegal substances and displacement of undocumented immigrants both happen in the same heavily charged region of the world. That's why this phenomenon cannot be understood if we don't look at both sides of the border. A continuous flow of drugs and racialized bodies towards the north

find its contraflow of weapons and money towards the south, creating the disruption, violence, and state of crisis, feeding a self-perpetuating cycle. According to the logics of the Mexican state's narratives, besides policy interventions, security measures, and bilateral collaboration, more attention needs to be paid to the appeal, illusion, and glamour of narcoculture. This appeal was just strong enough for a successful and popular actress like Kate del Castillo to compromise her career and potentially her freedom, as well as to incite Joaquín Guzmán Loera to commit several key mistakes that ended up facilitating his re-capture, according to political analysts.[1] An analysis of northwest Mexican narcoculture as its expressed on TikTok offers a direct observation to elements of gender and class dynamics, diminished state authority, and several tropes that have been present in the imaginaries long before digital social media became popular. Looking at TikTok and the online communities built upon a hashtag or particular norms and codes can add to the understanding of this local phenomenon. The images described and analyzed are the reflection of a complex reality in which narratives of the state, the nation, the U.S.-México border, and the security and health crisis are in constant conflict.

On November 28, 2020, the New York Times published an article in which a sense of surprise and shock was expressed towards Cartel TikTok. One of the arguments being made in this piece, was that cartels were using these spaces in order to recruit laborers and marketize illegal substances.[2] What Cartel TikTok shows is the ambivalent nature of these online spaces and how the community understands them and appropriates its symbolic dimensions. Why would someone willing to work for the cartel wait for Cartel TikTok to appear in order to join, when they know who are the people they could get in touch with —directly and personally— in order

[1] See Kate del Castillo, Sean Penn and El Chapo's controversial meeting
[2] See "Guns, Drugs and Viral Content: Welcome to Cartel TikTok", *The New York Times,* 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/world/americas/mexico-drugs-cartel-tiktok.html

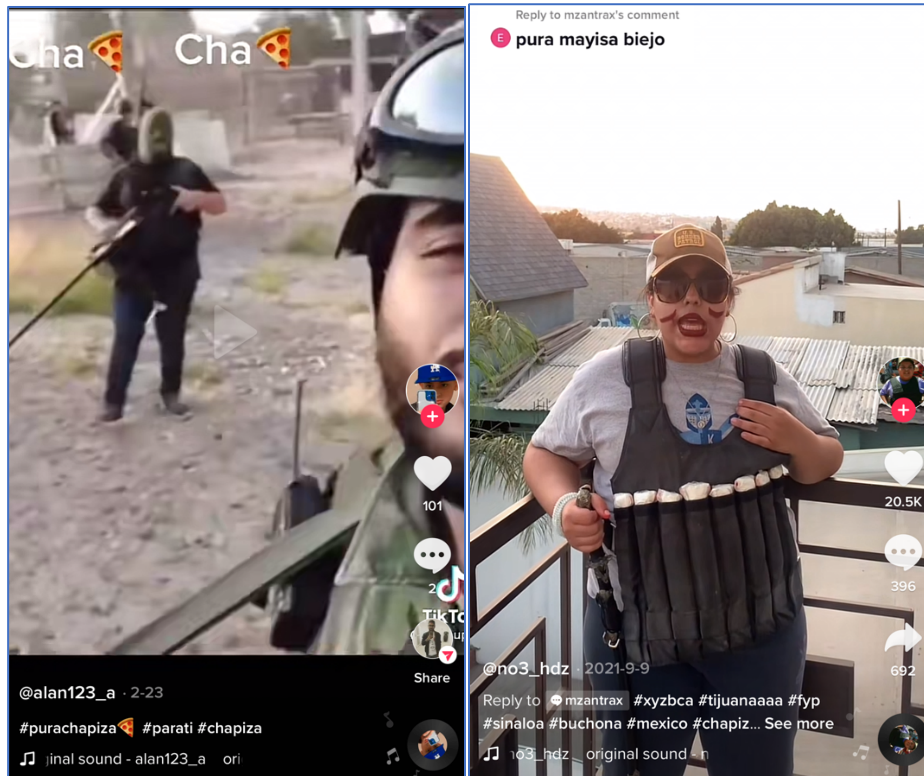
to do so? What the New York Times piece failed to understand is that the cartel members all over the country are not hidden. They are part of the community, and I would even argue that many of them want to be seen. The romanticization around the world of trafficking has also influenced those that are very well a part of it, not only the sympathizers or emulators. This visibility does not only happen in small or middle size towns in Northern México. Even in cities with millions of inhabitants and highly industrialized like Monterrey (the wealthiest city in the country including México City); Chihuahua, the second most competitive city after Monterrey and the highest ranked in the Human Development Index (0.84); and Culiacán, a city with a population of 1 million.

Although the cultural expressions of narcoculture that I have found on TikTok offer a new entry point to these communities —one that privileges the publicity of leisure rather than labor, and favors a more embodied self-expression— the use of media technologies by communities in relation to criminality is not new. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have proven to be efficient as information and communication tools for the drug cartels in México. The academic literature on the use of technologies by crime-related organizations in México focuses mainly on the three main cartels: the Sinaloa cartel, the Zetas, and the Caballeros Templarios. However, it mainly studies these organizations in their homogeneity: organizations trying to advance a unilateral strategy of acquiring power and dominance. This perspective collapses the media use by the cartels only into a means to a unilateral end. Under this scope, they use media technologies to do what cartel members "are supposed to do." It also collapses the dimensions of social media into a simple tool of active, direct, and purposefully tailored communication. Two main uses of social media have been studied under this scope, which fall under the umbrella of public relation strategies: recruitment tactics and threatening messages toward public officials or

rival organizations. As an example of this scope of study, Nilda García has provided a comprehensive analysis on how cartels use media technologies in order to increase their chances of survival or increase their overall logistical capacities. I believe that this perspective poses the risk of considering these organizations as antisocial entities operating in the dark, made visible only upon societal commotion or security crises.

These phenomena that I am analyzing on TikTok, on the other hand, allows us to move the analysis towards the cartel's leisure and entertainment activities rather than in the economic goals they share. #Chapiza is a site where we get a glance of their everyday lives. This is not to say that everyone using the hashtag is an active member of the Sinaloa cartel, but rather that the hashtag has discursively agglutinated sympathizers, self-proclaimed members and the overall community of Culiacán, who might engage in the conversation in a humorous, ironical or critical way (Image 2). #Chapiza functions as a window to analyze a community that precedes the arrival of TikTok and influenced directly how TikTok is used and what TikTok is in this particular region. This community shares some aesthetic values and cultural practices that are intrinsically linked to drug cartels and drug trafficking activities. Although my purpose is not to look out for evidences of actual links to criminal activities, there are certainly cases when the hashtag is used to exhibit certain objects, scenes, or behaviors that could potentially implicate them in unlawful activities, like carrying weapons, without wearing the proper uniform and identifications, that only the Mexican army is legally allowed to carry, or that show direct connection to places, events, or personalities that imply the belonging to the Sinaloa Cartel (Image 2). This makes the analysis of this hashtag more relevant, for it opens the door to consider these cultural expressions not only as emulation and admiration towards the world of trafficking, but also as the self-expression and cultural identities of certain subgroups of the Sinaloa cartel in Culiacán.

**Image 2**




*Note:* **Left image**: This user records himself and a group of around eight other men carrying assault-like weapons and wearing unofficial military protective gear. **Right image**: Another account from Culiacán that uses the same hashtag making fun of this type of content. Without being offensive or derogatory, she imitates the voices and dress codes.

Now the question is whether TikTok makes possible a distinctive mode of self-expression, and how these communities take advantage of this platform to express their selves. TikTok is still an unexplored area of research in Latin America. There seems to be an effort, however, on building a network of scholars focused on this platform, placing a particular emphasis on interdisciplinary and multi-method approaches, as well as in bringing perspectives from the margins, the Asia Pacific and Global South regions (Abidin & Bondy, 2020).

Digital media platforms, as noted by Burgess, have increasingly become the center of an ecosystem that used to be decentralized. Between 1990 and 2005, Western digital media

elements coexisted within the World Wide Web that served as a shared platform (2021). This gravitation of the once relatively heterogeneous World Wide Web, towards an ecosystem of distinct platforms, is what some scholars have called *platformization*. Some of the examples that I analyze in the following chapters show the Sinaloa cartel's laborers deployed throughout Culiacán —the so called "punteros"— and one of the ways in which the overall community identifies them is by their use of several radio communication devices, often hanged visibly from their jeans, and one or two smartphones in their hands. These punteros, while looking out for suspicious activity worth of notifying their superiors, open TikTok and sometimes post their daily activities, exhibiting something like a mixture between their work duties and their leisure moments. This human infrastructure of punteros that the cartel has deployed in Culiacán uses radio devices, and possibly WhatsApp, as the main form of communication. In regards to how their uses of social media platforms like TikTok interact with these preexistent practices of communication is potentially a fertile area of study employing a different methodological approach. What caught my attention is how TikTok has become a site where the Culiacán Community posts videos of punteros, mocking them or just expressing their identification as such, and how these laborers use the platform in their moments of leisure (Image 3). These preexisting practices, that shape the social interactions, need to be part of the analysis on their use of TikTok, on how the platform is tailored regionally, and how it is received and used by communities. Anne Helmond defines the platform as an infrastructure and economic model that shapes the social uses of the internet (2015). At first sight, a platform can be conceived as an infrastructure of interactions within an online space, or as a port of entry into a digital network; in terms of their influence, platforms have made the borders between the online and the offline porous and blurry. Their distinct architecture organizes the interaction among users, but their

reach shapes our lives and societies offline (Gehl, 2011). Van Dijck looks into these inner logics and identifies three main elements of a platform anatomy: data, algorithms and interfaces; and three main elements of formal organization: ownership relations, a particular business model, and user agreements (2018). Steinberg and Li suggest to analyze platforms from a regionalist perspective (2017). This regionalist perspective does not imply the study of how platforms arrive from somewhere else and how they are adopted by a particular group. More importantly, it refers to how platforms are "inherently regional," in that they often presume or even construct regions. A good example of this process of regionalization is how Douyin and TikTok were adapted in two very different contexts, even though they are —by many standards— the same. Kaye et al. look at the examples of Douyin and TikTok in China and identify a new paradigm that might be emerging, one that differs from the traditional strategies of regionalization: parallel platformization (2020). Looking at ByteDance, they observe a dual process that matches audience preferences and privacy settings, for instance, in two very different contexts —one global and another national. Here, it is important to highlight the necessity of thinking about platforms and online communities not only in their interactions online, but how those interactions and the intrinsic platform affordances permeate, influence, and get influenced by the offline world that preceded the arrival of these media technologies.

**Image 3**

*Note:* **Left image:** Someone poses as a puntero, using an audio where two other individuals are sharing what sounds like tactical information. **Right Image:** This user makes fun on another audio circulating. In the original audio, someone is reprehending someone else for having failed to identify the whereabouts of a military caravan. This user mocks that situation pretending he was asleep.

## Section 2: La #Chapiza and Cartel TikTok

La Chapiza is what a group of low tier workers and admirers of Joaquín Guzmán Loera call themselves. Their aspirations, according to their expressions on social media, are aligned to that of the *chiquinarco* described by Los Tucanes de Tijuana in their famous narco-corrido (2004). They belong to a larger community of Culiacán citizens, where a vast population express respect and admiration towards El Chapo (Guerrero, 2016). As I will explain in the following pages, Culiacán is a relatively safe space for these communities, which allows them to be more visible and more likely to express themselves on social media. One can assume that, in other

contexts, the belonging to an organization linked to organized crime would be kept hidden or more discreet. It is not the case of la Chapiza in Culiacán, due to its relative peace and generalized control by one particular Cartel, in contrast with other regions that are in dispute and therefore more violent.

TikTok became available in México in 2018, and its reach grew rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic. By March 2022, TikTok had around 40 million users in the country, surpassing Snapchat. The use of social media by cartels and criminal groups is not a new phenomenon. Facebook groups and YouTube in particular had been used especially as practical means of communication with each other, with rivals or with the overall community. El Blog del Narco is a paradigmatic example of such strategies of narco-propaganda (Amaya, 2017). This blog operated as a unique communication tool (even for journalistic purposes) when reporting on cartel violence became more dangerous. When traditional news outlets stopped redistributing messages found in “narco mantas” (written messages that appeared in public places, often next to victims of murder), El Blog del Narco did not. These massages usually included threats to other gangs or the police.

However, #Chapiza is an online community that goes beyond the logics of cartels. In addition to making their labor as cartel members public, they laugh, dance, and post stories about their social life and night adventures. Posting a video on TikTok is something they can do in situ, opening the possibility of an analysis that shifts the focus from a purely criminalizing point of view to a more nuanced consideration of this phenomena as a subculture, located in a particular time and place, visible and very well connected to the overall community of Culiacán. The question that remains is how their identities and self-narratives reconcile leisure and friendship with the violent outcomes of the war on drugs.

The prevalence and diversity of merchandise that references La Chapiza and El Chapo's son (Ovidio Guzmán) points to the cultural currency of these figures. A variety of caps, shirts, stickers, and jewelry are produced by well-established industries and sold all over Culiacán in tobacco shops, grocery stores, flea markets, and at traffic lights. These items make explicit or implicit allusion to this subculture using a few signifiers, all at once or individually. First, the self-explanatory imprint of "Chapiza"; secondly, the number "701"code makes reference to their symbolic leader Joaquín Guzmán; additionally, an image of a mouse is often used, in reference to Joaquín Guzmán's son (nicknamed, "Ratón")[3]; and lastly, another common signifier is an imprint of the pizza emoji, which was linked to La Chapiza, especially on social media, due to the resemblance between both terms.

The popularity of Chapiza merchandise shows how a communicative tool that is endogenous to social media, like the use of emojis with a particular semantic dimension, was transferred to a different industry keeping its original meaning and its value within the subculture from which it emerged. These caps, stickers, and jewelry are displayed not only throughout social media, accompanying a particular hashtag, but in social gatherings and public spaces in Culiacán (Image 4 & 5). This merchandise then denotes the belonging to a subculture highly visible outside of the online spheres, which renders the same logic of *us* versus *them* —partially behind the logics of narcocorridos— and the same support to Guzmán Loera's legacy through his son and supporters.

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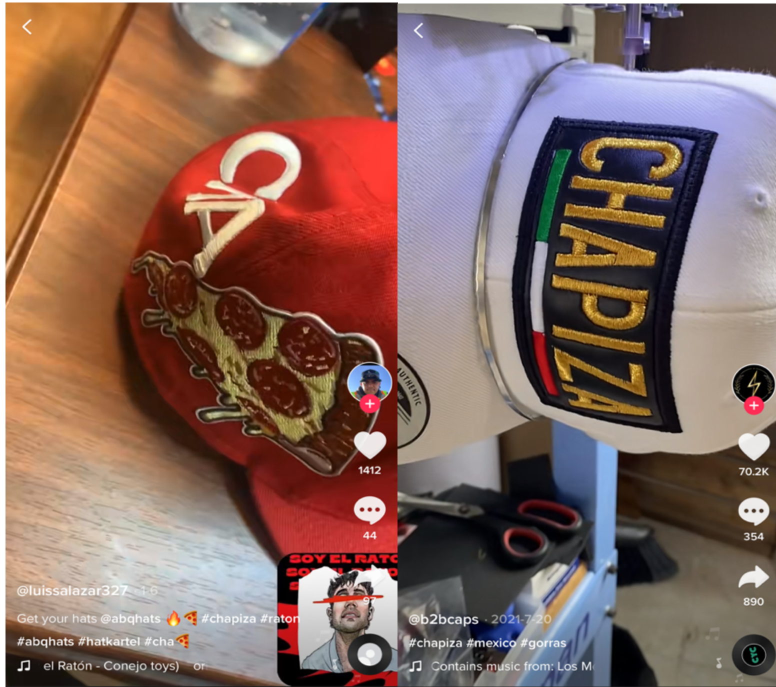
Ovidio Guzmán is currently living in Culiacán and has become, very publicly, one of the heads of the Sinaloa Cartel after the imprisonment of his father.

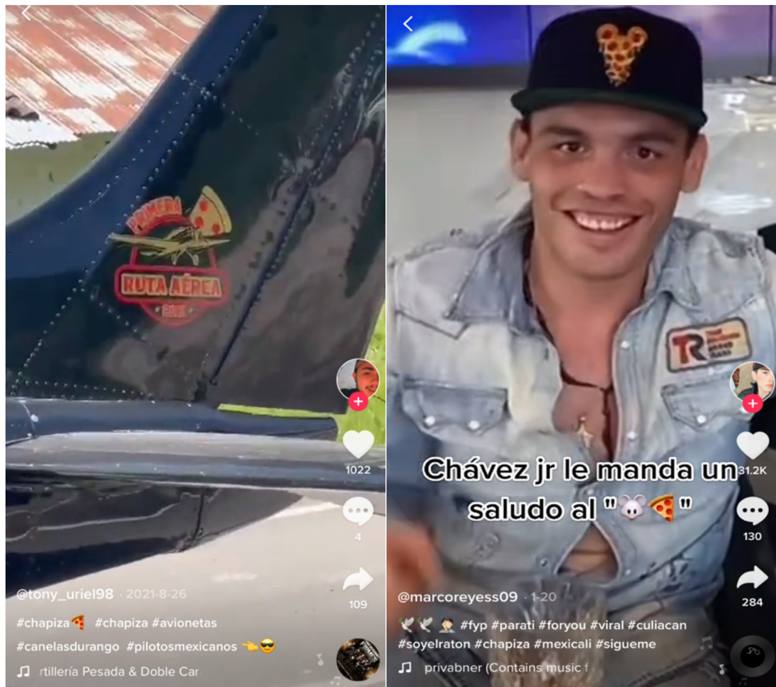
## Image 4




*Note:* **Left Image:** a “Chapiza” cap, using the pizza emoji.

**Right Image:** Cap production in Culiacán

## Image 5



*Note:* **Left Image:** A private aircraft with a pizza emoji illustrates how the use of this hashtag has popularized and permeated different sectors in Culiacán. In this case, this user is a self-proclaimed member of the Sinaloa Cartel. **Right Image:** Julio César Chávez Jr., son of the famous Mexican boxer, wears a chapiza cap and sends greetings to Ovidio Guzmán.

*The Chiquinarco*

The emergence of La Chapiza is newer compared to a distinct figure within the imaginaries of drug trafficking. This is the so called "chiquinarco." The origins of the term chiquinarco are not exactly clear. Within the popular culture it refers to the sons and younger siblings (especially male) of renamed drug dealers. A certain form of camaraderie was stablished under the assumption that one of them had the other covered, mainly in terms of money but also in terms of social prestige and political leverage. The first popular appearance of this term was in the song *Los Chiquinarcos* by Los Tucanes de Tijuana (2004), a modern narco-corrido that narrates the character and lifestyle of young and admirable men within or in close contact to the world of trafficking. This narco-corrido (like many others) starts with the sound of engines and sets the scene: big pick-up trucks or airplane sounds in the background, people arriving or departing from a big party, and gun-shots, in this case in a celebratory, festive fashion. The song is illuminating in how well it describes most of the characteristics, imagined and material, of these subcultures: "how well the music band is blasting; people remain in the party; gun-shots in the air, that's how they celebrate; guns are their toys and, their delirium: the ladies." [4] The very first line lays out a narrative related to a context of clandestine activities, the social currency of gun possession, and gender dynamics: "The law does well in better not to investigate, they know so well who's involved, the so-called *Chiqui-Mafia*, but no one ever says anything, because the gang is in charge." It goes on with another important trope of narco-media: the defiance toward

[4] Translations are my own

the state's authority and control. The song does not express mystery, authority or fear; on the contrary, it's a song about a celebration that invites the listener to celebrate along. If the Corleone family has a halo of mystery and otherworldliness, the narco figure is a friend, perhaps stronger, braver, richer, but a friend nonetheless: "Clever with business; flirty with women; friends of friends; brave and happy."

Los Tucanes de Tijuana have more than 6 million listeners on Spotify, but were popular long time before the platform. Their first album "Guitarras y Cervezas" (Beer and Guitars) was released in 1992, and was comprised mainly of narco-corridos. Their second album "Los Meros Padres del Corrido con Banda," released in 1995, contained a song dedicated to "Jesús Malverde," a peculiar religious icon and saint that takes care of drug-dealers and the world of trafficking according to thousands of believers. *Los Chiquinarcos,* due to its popularity, its narrative resonance, and its many important elements of narcoculture, offers an entry point to analyze narcoculture as a spatial and regional subculture. It contains some of the key icons: guns, pick-up trucks, and airplanes. It sets a common scenography for many of the most popular narco-tales, like the usual private party, in a remote location and with important attendees. It also opens the door to thinking about gender, power and class dynamics, and how women, the state, and the rule of law are conceived within these groups. *Los Chiquinarcos* illustrate a spatial and itemized reality of narcoculture: the celebration, the women, the friends, the airplanes and pick-up trucks, all constituting a key element of a common identity and—aspired or actual— way of life.

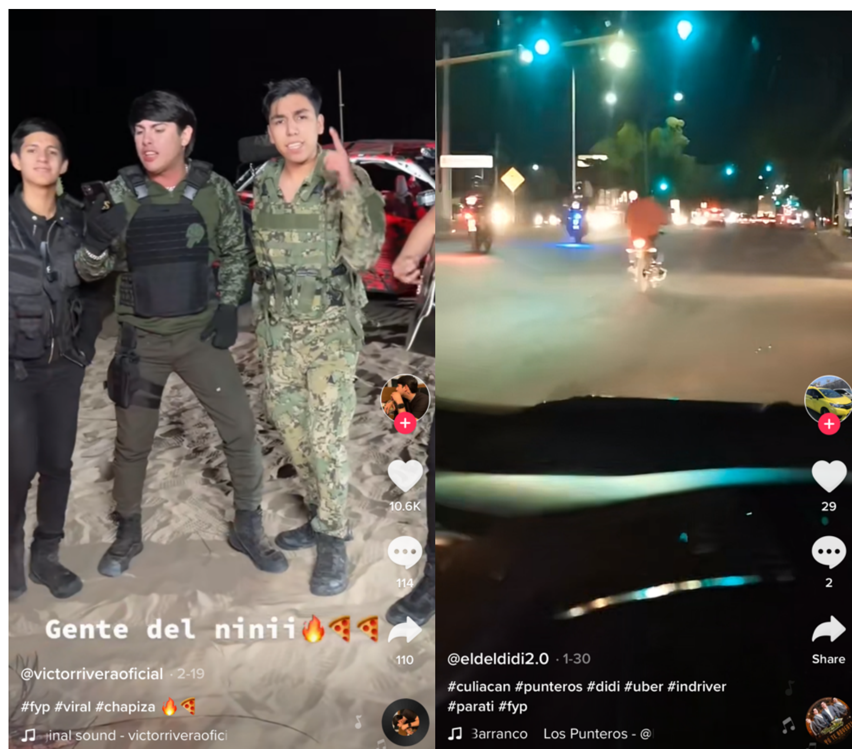
An equally famous Mexican band, Los Tigres del Norte, is also well known for its narco-corridos. Perhaps the most famous one, *Contrabando y Traición* (1984), is worthy of analysis and contrast vis a vis *Los Chiquinarcos*. Héctor Amaya analyzes the world of trafficking as an eminent site of displacements, in its relation to the U.S.-Mexico border and the perpetual

movement of goods and people, documented or not (2021). While the first narcocorrido was focused in a site of permanence, a celebration and a local gathering, the other side of the coin is the narco narratives happening precisely while its characters are doing what they are supposed to do: moving market goods. Amaya focuses on *displacements* in his analysis of narco-culture in the U.S. and México. *Contrabando y Traición*, he notes, illustrates displacements in several of its elements: "They departed from San Isidro, coming all the way from Tijuana, the car tires were packed with the devil's weed." In contrast with the celebration of the rich and young, this song is not about their leisure but their labor: moving towards the north, crossing an international border, and every twist and turn of these stories, are the main elements of this other form of narco-tales. This element is important to highlight because the figure of the Chiquinarco as described previously in Los Tucanes de Tijuana's song, cannot be separated from its character of privilege. They are not working at the moment. They are young and enjoying the money, not earning it. This is the privilege that many aspire to and only few actually have. In *Contrabando y Traición,* after having finished the journey to L.A., and having received the money, Emilio tells Camelia, with whom he had some sort of relationship, that she should take her part and leave, and that he is headed to San Francisco with his true love. Camelia ends up killing Emilio, taking all the money and escaping. The tone and story are not to celebrate. Both in tone and plot, it is a tragedy, and it portrays a darker side of the world of trafficking. The lifestyle and experiences that the real-life admirers are trying to achieve, fake or emulate, is obviously the life of a *Chiquinarco*. This perhaps shows a generational shift in these subcultures. Along with the neoliberal policies taking place during the 90's and early ought's, the emergence of an incipient middle class in the country, and an exodus from rural areas towards bigger cities, the narco

figure started to shift from a "macho" and mainly rural character, towards someone younger and with an urban life, as illustrated in *La Chiquimafia* (2004).

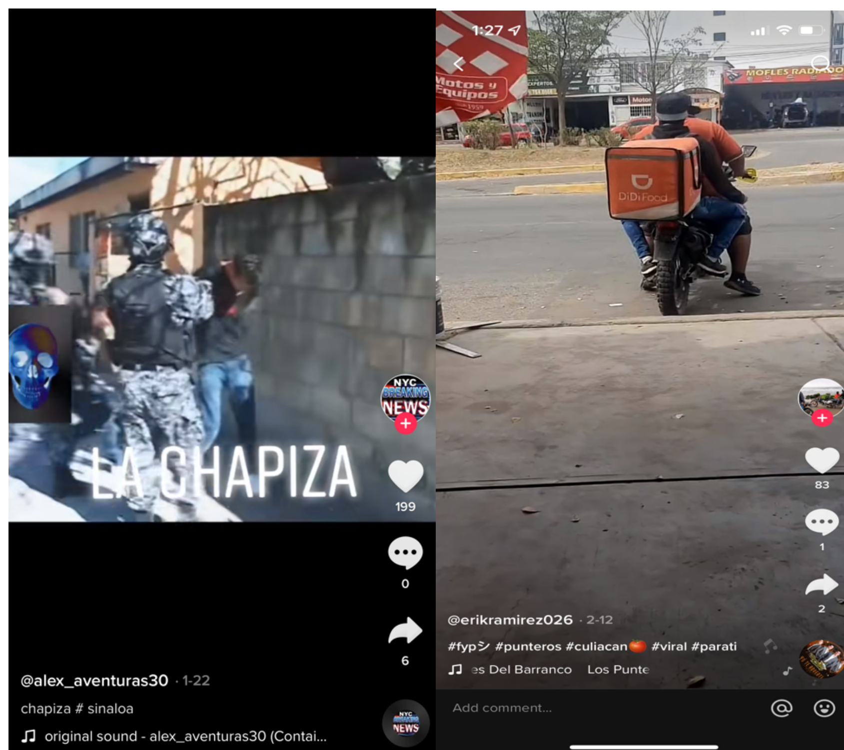
Culiacán is located around five hundred miles from the border. As I will explain in one of the following sections, it has both a strategic location and a considerable distance from the "hot zones." This condition of relative stability makes Culiacán a privileged location to theorize about the Chiquinarco, precisely because it is, in many ways, the place where someone could have the type of life that someone enjoying the money from drug trafficking would want, without being at direct risk. It is well known in the community of Culiacán that the families and friends of the Sinaloa Cartel enjoy a semi-public life in the city, and their leisure activities are often celebrated and emulated.

**Image 6**




*Note:* **Left**: Three young men singing and dancing at a Culiacán party wearing non official military gear. **Right:** A user records what it seems to be a puntero following two police elements. They often share their location on real time through WhatsApp, so following their whereabouts is in order to know where the police go.

**Image 7**




*Note:* **Left:** Two alleged punteros being detained by the police. **Right:** A user mocks his friends, calling them "punteros," when they drive a food delivery motorbike.

## Section 3: Culiacán and the War on Drugs

Culiacán, the capital city of the Mexican state of Sinaloa, is an emblematic region in the drug trafficking imaginaries. It is located in Northwest México and its strategic location is due to being in between a natural barrier respect to the inlands (the Sierra Madre Occidental), its connection to the Pacific Ocean, and its relative closeness to the U.S. border (Image 4). Culiacán metro area is inhabited by around one million people, being the 19$^{th}$ largest city in México. It's a vibrant, economically prosperous and dynamic city that exists at the epicenter of narcoculture. The influence of drug money can be seen everywhere, as studied by Anajilda Cota (2020) and Eduardo Guerrero (2017). Cities like Culiacán nowadays (and for the last several decades),

similarly to Guadalajara a few years ago, or Mérida, occupy a peculiar place in the imaginaries of narcoculture. There is the popular belief that drug cartels tend to create “safe zones,” restrained from disturbances and acts of violence in certain areas, specifically in those where their families supposedly live. Narco capitals like Culiacán is perhaps the best example of these type of relatively safe zones. Even though the war on drugs in México, started in 2006, changed some of the unwritten rules, Culiacán remains relatively safe; not because the Cartel of Sinaloa is not there, but precisely because the cultural, political, and economic power it holds allow them to coexist in peace with other forces like the state and to keep the rival groups out (Guerrero, 2017; Castañeda, 2020). This strong cartel presence, accompanied not only by the control of the illegal activities, but also by a huge economic influence in every aspect of the life in Culiacán, has created a cohesive spatial community where the urban, quotidian life is merged with the illegal activities and criminal infrastructures.

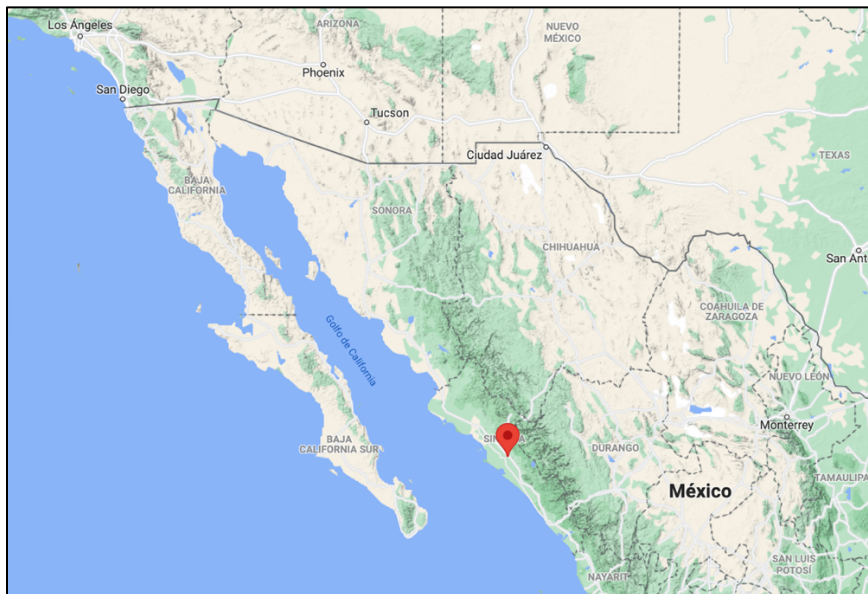
The sense of space is in close relation with the imaginaries of drug trafficking for several reasons. Perhaps the most important being the scarcity of land and sea access to the big market of the United States. Cartels themselves build their identity as criminal organizations in relation to the portion of land they control. This might be for the intrinsic characteristics of an imagined community, tied to a piece of land and particular idiosyncrasies, but also in part because that will determine the nature of their business, i.e. the type of transportation required, the authorities involved, the strategies of hide and defense, etc.

The state’s strategies to tackle and control cartel violence are aligned with this logic of spatialization. A clear example of this phenomenon is the mapping of México as a site of cartel dispute and control. Both policy strategies and media coverage use the same rationale in order to explain the dynamics of trafficking (Image 5). Cartels are imagined communities in an analogous

way that Anderson would theorize the national state (1983). Their borders are fluid and their imaginaries are inserted within a bigger national community. These clan or tribal relations emerge and flourish when the bigger community fails (a "failed state"), or when for some reason, the bigger community is unable or unwilling to include certain subgroups. These notions of a failed state are useful to thinking about cartel violence and the type of clan and tribal relations that emerge in opposition or resistance towards the state's authority. Even when the state as a whole is not collapsed, clan and tribal communities emerge when they are not included or do not feel included in the national narrative. As an example of this we can think about immigrant communities like the Italian mafia in the U.S., the Russian mafia in post-Soviet states, or the Yakuza in parts of South Korea and California. Culiacán is a place where a cohesive and complex community organize their lives among, within and throughout the subcultures in close relation and close contact with the world of trafficking and criminality.

**Image 4**

*Culiacán, Sinaloa, México.*




*Note.* The Sierra Madre Occidental serves as a natural barrier between Culiacán and the rest of the Country towards the east, while the Pacific Ocean, on the West side, serves as an entry point of drugs coming from Central America. At the same time, the Sinaloa Cartel controls the vast majority of land that goes from Culiacán all the way up to the

U.S. Border, adding up to the strategic location of Sinaloa in general, and Culiacán in particular. (Google Maps, 2021)

**Image 5**

*Cartel Mapping*

*Source:* El País, "Grupos delictivos de alto impacto y agrupaciones menores," https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/01/09/mexico/1452317954_119003.html

In Image 5*,* the blue areas represent the territory controlled by the Sinaloa Cartel; the gray lines within represent the territories that are in dispute with Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG). This map shows that Culiacán remains controlled in relative peace entirely by Cartel de Sinaloa, which might be partially the reason why narco-cultures in Culiacán can afford to be more visible than in other, more violent regions. Geographic space is at the core of identity building among Cartel members. The Cartel mapping used by the security agencies and journalists in order to understand the world of trafficking, serves additionally to situate and

identify the subcultures territories and which cultural elements can be present in their processes of hybridization (Amaya, 2020), i.e., the Cartel de Sinaloa and its links with L.A. gangs, and the Cartel del Golfo (pink areas) and its relation to communities in Southeast Texas.

Some authors have placed these singularities of Border Narco Cultures in the territoriality: Mexican Cartels need to gain and keep control of entire parts of the territory alongside the border. Other cartels around the world are often able to relocate their routes or their sites of production and manufacture (Flanigan, 2012). This is a crucial element to consider because it serves a solid base upon which to support the notion of a narcoculture intrinsically connected to the U.S.-México border.

*The War on Drugs*

"Cartel Wars" is the umbrella term referring to the socio-historical context that is being fictionalized in an ever increasing number of media products. Examples of cartel wars can be found worldwide. However, this war acquired a particular tone and characteristics in the context of the production and distribution of illegal drugs, particularly those who are produced with the further intention of being sold in the United States. Oswaldo Zavala has argued that the term "Cartel" is impossible to define in practical terms (2018). The Cartel is not an easily identifiable structure but rather a symbolic construct that has been used to justify the use of state forces (Boullosa & Wallace 2016). The world of drug trafficking, and particularly that of the Colombian and Mexican production and distribution cannot be structured in such simple terms of the state and the people against the cartels. Following Zavala's argument, the state has a direct benefit from building the narrative of a cohesive enemy behind the world of trafficking. Campbell and Hansen refer to Narco-Violence as a complex phenomenon within which the state is not exempt from direct responsibility (2014). According to this perspective, cartel violence is

in fact an effect of wrongdoings of local governments, U.S. interventionism in the global south, and an extensive failure of neoliberal policies in the region (Albarrán Torres, 2021; Acosta, 2018). This complex relationships between the transnational political, economic, and violent forms of power, inscribed in the context of a highly profitable market of illegal and paralegal goods, is the core narrative structure of Border Narco Media.

The history of the American addiction to narcotics has been traced as far back as early as the 1900's, when opium was overprescribed to patients (Trickey, 1973), illustrating a sinister prelude of the ongoing fentanyl crisis. The Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914 made opium a highly controlled substance, creating the market pressures that eventually led to the popularization of heroin use (Brown, 1973). The collective imaginary of a national state founded on the basis of puritanical ideals pushed the causes of this health crisis towards the borderlines. It was not a local health crisis but rather a foreign drug invasion. A recurrent trope in border narco media shows a clear narrative distinction between these two crises, and the state's response at both sides of the border: the health crisis and moral panics were situated in the north, while the war, the production, and the government corruption were in the south (Amaya, 2021). While the variables have changed in nature, the equation remains the same. From the opium crisis and its prohibition to the passing through the heroin boom, the Colombian cocaine trail, Ronald Reagan, methamphetamines, Felipe Calderón, assault-like weapons manufacturing, George W. Bush, Oxycontin, and big pharma, the equation remains essentially the same. This socio-political structures within the region are worth considering when analyzing Narco Media. Narco Culture is a global phenomenon, but some aspects are highlighted depending on the particular contexts and its local/global dynamics.

The discourses about failed states have been historically used in order to justify U.S. interventionism. México as a failed state, or the discourse around this, are not there to justify U.S. interventionism —this interventionism already takes place— but it is there in order to demarcate a distinction between the civilized versus the uncivilized, the order and the disorder that is rampant south of the border. Amaya looks into evidences of the ideological biases and semantic dispositions of the U.S. cultural elites in regards to the construction of the idea of the south as a place of chaos, and argues that the whole narrative is centered on a poorly demarcated idea of disorder (2021); however, one important distinction among these discourses is that in the case of México and contrary to that of other nations such as Congo, Somalia, and Haiti, the idea of a failed state does not have anything to do with political crisis, but rather it places the emphasis on the security crisis due to organized crime. Amaya poses the question of whether crises are built in language. If that is the case, I would ask, what are the implications and who benefits from this language of crisis applied to criminality south of the border? Is there a connection between this language of crisis and the discourses of Indian difference that was put in motion in the early colonial period of the New Spain and the original thirteen Anglo colonies? Scholar María Josefina Saldaña looks into the historical and legislative archives, literature and film, and traces the emergence of a representational "national space" that emerged in the 18th century and remains until today. Saldaña refers to these dynamics as the spatial productions of racial nationalism (2016):

> "These speech acts triangulate the globe, a triangulation made through the Middle East enabled by the racial geographies of the borderland that are historically and cartographically specific yet heuristically and discursively diffuse, disentailed from the

> actual Mexico-U.S. border through the explanatory power of the heterotemporal and multispatial Indio bárbaro" (Saldaña, 234).

The Indio bárbaro occupies an heterotemporal and multispatial dimension in the colonial narratives since the 18th century. Traces of them remain in the modern discourses of the U.S. and Mexican statecraft. The same Indio bárbaro, the main character in the constructions of the racial geographies along the border (and through time), has an afterlife in the contemporary state and the discourses about the "failed state," security crisis and terrorism. Saldaña notes how the state's narratives around drug trafficking in the case of México, and terrorism in the United States, resonate yet again with the same violent displacements. If the example of Culiacán shows how these cultural expressions are well embedded in the community, with a rich and complex history, there is a place to argue in favor of dissecting carefully what is exactly that the Mexican state is discursively fighting and perhaps not focusing on the main issues regarding the security crisis. Saldaña identifies two key moments exemplifying this point: on May 2nd, 2011, a Navy Seal team killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistán, and the phrase that announced the success of this mission, and the one that got solemnly distributed around the media, was "For God and Country, Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo […] Geronimo Killed in Action." Perhaps a coincidence too hard to ignore, Saldaña points out that while we are not sure whether this phrase was a shorthand for the mission itself (code named "Operation Neptune Star"), for Bin Laden (code named "Jackpot"), or for the act of killing Bin Laden, the coincidence too difficult to ignore was that the name of Geronimo was linking Osama bin Laden's evasion of the U.S. authorities for ten years at the beginning of the 21st century, with the Apache leader's evasion of the Mexican and U.S. military forces for ten years at the end of the nineteenth. Geronimo against the Christian God and the Nation: "Geronimo and bin Laden were savvy and resourceful, perhaps even brave, but

ultimately they were beaten (and conjoined) as 'terrorists' in the nation's military memory and popular imagination" (p.233). The same year, in México, a massive demonstration was traveling around the country after the assassination of Mexican poet Javier Sicilia's son. After almost 5 years of Felipe Calderón's presidency and the somewhat extended narrative of "Se matan entre ellos" ("They are killing each other"), as a way to downgrade the extent of the security crisis, the assassination of Juan Francisco Sicilia and his friends, when they unluckily got into a verbal fight at a bar with one of the sons of an alleged member of the Pacífico Sur Cartel, put an end to this narrative. One of the most important claims of this demonstration, called the "Marcha por la Paz con Dignidad y Justicia" ("March for Peace with Dignity and Justice"), was for the president to put an end to the war by getting into peace negotiations with the cartel leaders, advancing the legalization of certain types of drugs for local use, and stop fighting the movement of drugs towards the U.S. "Estados Unidos pone los dólares, y México pone los muertos" ("The U.S. is putting the dollars and México is putting the deaths") was the main slogan that the movement was using in order to move the strategy from the logics of war, on both sides of the border, towards a logic of a health crisis.

The second moment that Saldaña recovers from this event was when President Calderón was asked by Sicilia himself to end the war against the cartels and start peace negotiations with their leaders as the only viable way to stop the bloodshed. Calderón responded that he was willing to have a conversation with the peace movement, but he would never enter into negotiations with "esos bárbaros en el norte" ("Those barbarians in the north"):

> "The speech acts of the navy Seal to Obama and of Calderón to the national media remind us as well of the transnational complicity between the two nations, foregrounding the histories of war against the Apache and the Comanche that link the U.S. and Mexican

> state building and they reiterate the colonial and national representations of the Indio Bárbaro […] The invocation of the indio bárbaro in the name of Geronimo and in the allusion to "pueblos bárbaros" signals the transposition of the racial geographies of the border onto other places and other times" (p.235).

The point is not to establish a direct relation between the "Indio Bárbaro" and the cartel violence or international terrorism. What this exposition from Saldaña exemplifies is how the collective and national psychic notion of the barbarian, the uncivilized, and the other, conditions responses by the state to contemporary problems, whether that is made evident in the moral panics towards narcocorridos and cultural expressions around the world of trafficking, by the state's legislative efforts in order to restrict in one way or another the public exhibition of these cultural products, or by denying the possibility of any negotiations with the leaders of this multimillion dollar market, due to their "barbaric" nature, yet displacing the conversation from the intrinsic contradictions between free movement of market goods, including arms (but not drugs), and free movement of capital (but not labor), across the border. Moral panics against cultural expressions like narcocorridos have happened in many communities around the world. UK Drill is an example of the over-policing of a genre that emerged similarly from communities with complex histories of marginalization and dispossession. Rap Music in the U.S. is also another example of these type of cultural products being under constant state's surveillance linked to an "anti-social nature" (Scott, 2020).

**Section 4: Border Ballads, Corridos and Narcocorridos**

The first narco narratives in México found a fertile and popular media to be transmitted: the "Corrido." Corridos are still a popular music genre characterized for its story-telling structures and usually simple and repetitive guitar chords. They were popularized during the

Mexican Revolutionary War in the 1910's as a way to send messages to far communities, to immortalize battle heroes and revolutionary odysseys, and to improve the troops' morale. The first known hybridization of a narco-corrido is traced back to the 1930's (Amaya, 2020; Edberg, 2004), and this perhaps signals an emblematic moment in which the world of trafficking began to permeate to pop culture. Narcoculture infiltrated all aspects of life (Córdova, 2011; Ovalle, 2005) and the histories of narco-corridos began to develop certain tropes, such as the rise and fall of important drug-lords, legendary friendships and betrayals, stories of tragic love, and the eventual appearance on the female narco-reina.

Before the Mexican revolutionary war popularized the corrido, the origins of these type of story-telling can be traced to the border ballads. During the period from the 1830's to the 1940's, these types of folk songs were already present in the border regions, particularly in the Mexican northeastern region of Tamaulipas, but generally along the whole Río Grande settlements. Scholar Américo Paredes calls these folk expressions "the border ballads," and traces its origins on the Spanish romance, décima, and copla: forms of ballads brought most likely by the first settlers around the mid nineteenth century (2015). Since its very beginning, even before the rise of the corrido, these short lyrical stanzas, were likely on fugitive local events.

The similarities between the original corrido of the borderlands with the modern narco-corrido are not only in terms of their structure and legacy. The border as a site of displacements is at the core of both literary traditions whether this is in regards to the border bandit, the fugitive of the nineteenth century, or the drug trafficker that came afterwards. Around the year of 1836 and to the late 1930's, the corrido slowly displaced the former décima as one of the main narrative forms. The décima*,* while not completely extinct, started to be more of a vintage form, one

dealing mainly with non-violent stories within the domestic sphere. Alongside were the satiric, humorous, didactic, and obituary. The century that witnessed the emergence of the border corrido was characterized by violent changes within the Spanish provinces, particularly in the Nuevo Santander region (Paredes, 2015). It was also the century in which the imaginaries of honor and glory were filled with border bandits, fugitives, and —a few decades later—the drug lord.

The first ballads about border conflict that were written and distributed during the first few decades are lost. According to Paredes, the first favorite subjects for these ballads must have been all sorts of raids, fights, and struggles to stablish the Republic of the Río Grande, and other guerrilla-like conflicts. As to exactly what shape these corridos had, in terms of tempo and musicality, is impossible to know based on the known archives. Américo Paredes is again the only source that can help us trace the corrido back to its origins. In his book, he makes reference to a great-aunt of his: María del Jesus Cisneros, a woman who was born in the 1850's and would mention, according to the author, that as a young girl, she remembers having heard "corridos" about the figure of General Cortina, a prominent guerrilla leader —a "caudillo—whose family had owned big portions of the land from Tamaulipas to where Brownsville, Texas, is today. When the Treaty of Guadalupe was signed by Santa Anna, his family state was divided and a large portion of it became part of the United States. Cortina was perhaps the most popular and celebrated regional leader.[5] Another Source that Paredes was able to collect, was a three-stanza fragment from Zeferino González (1954), who also claimed that there were a number of "corridos" about Cortina when Zeferino was young. This first fragments of the earliest border ballad were probably composed between 1859 and 1870.

[5] Some of his nicknames included, for instance, "the Red Robber of the Río Grande" and "the Río Grande Robin Hood."

| | |
|---|---|
| Ese general Cortina | That general Cortina |
| Es muy libre y soberano, | Is very sovereign and free |
| Han subido sus honores | His honor has increased |
| Porque salvó a un mexicano. [6] | Because he has saved a Mexican. |

This piece, and Cortina as a corrido hero, are the earliest example of a ballad of the border conflicts. Even in its incomplete form, it is illuminating how the emphasis in honor and glory is already there. On a different tone, the first complete border corrido that we know of is "El Corrido de Kiansis." It is about an important dirt road, known today as the Chisholm Trail, that was used to move cattle between the Río Grande valley and Kansas, from 1867 to 1884. Contrary to that of conflict among men and between the incipient state imaginaries, this ballad was about the hardships of nature and the trail life. This corrido was personally collected by Paredes from a man named Hilario Cisneros, who supposedly learned it from a man who had made the trip. The next phase in this early corridos that I want to highlight is that of the first few appearances of the outlaw corrido and how they constitute a form of hybridization between the trope of the border hero (whose characteristics were exemplified in the figure of the General Cortina) and that of the outlaws against Porfirio Diaz and his regime. According to Paredes, one main distinction between these two forms of the early corrido was the difference made between the border hero and the outlaw from greater México. In the first case, the heroic border struggles were lived by a figure completely apart from the imaginary of criminality. The border hero was a "robin hood" because the border itself was the threat, not the Mexican state. The first

[6] Translation in Paredes (1951)

characteristic of the corrido that emerged in central México was its opposition towards the dictatorial regime of Díaz. This new form of the outlaw corrido borrowed some elements from the border corrido but the narratives shifted away from a site of conflict along the border to a journey towards Mexico City and the participation in the revolutionary endeavors against Díaz. Almost at the same time, when the 19th century was ending, the figure of the smuggler started to be present in these literary forms. Smuggling had become a well-known practice in the region of Brownsville-Matamoros and textiles were the main item to transport (Guerrero, 2007). The first corrido that I was able to find was also in Américo Paredes' works, and the song has been preserved and reproduced in modern formats. "El Corrido de Mariano Reséndez" is perhaps the first corrido about the illegal transportation of market goods in the U.S.-México border. Also known as "El Contrabandista" (The Smuggler), Reséndez was a Mexican land owner famous and celebrated for having a well-organized group of men who would engage in fights with soldiers if they were caught. While this was not quite yet about the trafficking of narcotics, el "Corrido de Mariano Reséndez" is the first that we know of to imply an outlaw and the border between the two nations. Finally, "El Corrido de Laredo" by Cornelio Varela focuses directly in the fights with the "Rinches" (the Rangers). They focus, on the other hand, on the fight with the rangers itself rather than the act of smuggling: "El día tres de diciembre, / qué día tan señalado, / mataron tres gallos finos / esos rinches desgraciados" (On the third day of December, / What a well-remembered day, / Three cocks of the fighting breed / Were killed by those wretched rangers). It is also perhaps one of the first to establish a disbalance of power. The ranger has the advantage of having the surveillance structures along and north of the border, and in order to fight the smugglers they need to employ ambush like strategies: "Los rinches son muy Valientes / no se

les puede quitar; nos cazan como venados / para podernos matar" (The rangers are very brave / That cannot be denied / They have to stalk us like deer / In order to kill us).

After this first few examples of the early border ballad, the history of the corrido as a narrative form took many different shapes. When the Río Grande Valley, for instance, saw the arrival of the railroad, the smuggling endeavors changed in their logics and therefore a different type of story emerged along the years. This is not to trace back the narco-corrido using a precise timeline. Addressing that the historization of any event or series of events is often misguided, often looking more like a mental shortcut we employ in order to evoke a sense of understanding, I am interested in identifying some of the early and exemplary ballads, and the first tropes that now resonate in the contemporary cultural expressions within the world of drug trafficking along the U.S.-México border, and how this border —the actual border but also the imaginaries and psychic characteristics of *a border*— were playing a role since then. These two borders persist in modern cultural expressions around the world of drug trafficking, in the statecraft strategies on both sides, and in the discourse of the "Indio bárbaro," the "unlawful," and the undocumented. All these elements play an important role in the construction of a cohesive narrative for the emergence and sustainability of the national state.

*Ovidio's Corrido, a contemporary narcocorrido*

As noted previously, the history of the narco-corrido can be traced back to oral histories and folk music of the 19th century, borrowing elements from the border ballad of the Río Grande valley. The Corrido Revolucionario is an interesting parallel to a narco-corrido in that it often employs similar tropes of honor and glory: "I am a Pancho Villa's soldier, among his troops I am the most loyal, I don't care losing my life, it is a men's deal to die for him." (Yo soy soldado de Pancho Villa, de sus soldados soy el más fiel, nada me importa perder la vida, si es cosa de

hombres morir por él.)[7]. However, it is also true that another, more utilitarian dimension of the corrido is often forgotten. The original corrido also served as an important communication tool. During the Mexican revolutionary war in 1910, this format was used not only to build useful mythologies, immortalize certain battles, or to boost the troop's mood, but also for plain and simple transmission of messages from one battalion to another, or to the overall community. Perhaps due to its lack of festive or epic dimensions, most of these Corridos were lost, but there is a contemporary example of a narco-corrido doing both: employing tropes of honor and glory and communicating a different type of message to the community at large. El Ratón is the narcocorrido about Ovidio Guzmán, who is also known as "El Ratón" among his friends. It is unclear whether he participated in the production, tailoring it to his desires, or if it emerged organically from the narco-corrido industry; the former is more likely. The song starts by identifying him as the son of El Chapo: "Guzmán de apellido es Ovidio, también como apodo le dicen Ratón; un jefe con mucho cerebro, un hijo del Chapo, aquél señorón" (Guzmán is his last name, also by nickname is known as *El Ratón;* A boss with a big brain and son of *El Chapo,* that great man). It goes on to say where he's from, an extremely common feature of narco-corridos, and to describe a few other characteristics of him, like "de sangre caliente y acción" (a man of action and hot blood). Notably, the narration transitions to the first person, and it is here where the other communicative dimension of the narco-corrido is more clearly seen. Ovidio is talking to the overall community, saying that he is sorry for the violence that he and his group caused during the incident known as El Culiacanazo: "Soy el Ratón, soy Ovidio, soy Guzmán, hijo del Chapo; soy hermano de Alfredito y Archivaldo y, por cierto, me disculpo por lo del Culiacanazo" (I am El Ratón, I am Ovidio, I am a Guzmán, son of El Chapo; I am a sibling of

[7] Corrido Villista

Alfredito and Archivaldo and, by the way, I am sorry for El Culiacanazo). El Culiacanazo had been one of the events that cost him and his group the most cultural leverage and popular support among his close community of Culiacán, and he was using this corrido to apologize for it. The song was quickly introduced to the cultural scene, being played at parties, concerts, and other big events.

Two elements of "El Ratón" are unusual. First, parts of it are narrated in first person, an uncommon feature even among narco-corridos that refers to lower-tier or "wannabe" Chiquinarcos: they among anybody else would be interested in having a narco-corrido made about them as if they were already known and famous. This refers to them in third-person rather than in first-person, which could make it seem more evident that they had tailored and paid for the corrido to be produced in the first place. Here, I argue that a proper vehicle for an apology is partly the reason why a section of this corrido is narrated in first-person. It had to be Ovidio talking directly to Culiacán.

Second, it is also unusual for a Chiquinarco to be sorry about anything, let alone to the overall community. It is almost as if the production of this song faced that cultural contradiction: Ovidio had to apologize to the community of Culiacán but he also had to remain in character. The next verse illustrates a way of sorting this contradiction: "Yo no peleé, pues la vida de mis hijas fue primero; pa' que sepan que yo no conozco el miedo, un Guzmán no se intimida, menos con los del gobierno" (I did not fight, because the lives of my daughters was put first; just so you know, I know no fear; a Guzmán is not scared, let alone by the government). The apology is followed by a reaffirmation of his honor and glory, and a call for empathy to him for being a protective father. This particular verse is also making reference to a video that circulated during the most critical moments of El Culiacanazo. All over social media, footage of Ovidio being

arrested by army officials outside of his residence were rapidly spreading. It shows him giving himself up to the authorities and not resisting or dying on the scene as the trope goes. The image of him not fighting in order to protect his daughters would help him to keep his honor. Narco-corridos do more than entertain. After the incident called El Culiacanazo, the Cartel Sinaloa compromised their "good standing" in the Culiacán community. This apology, yet unusual in a narco story, might have served the purpose of getting their trust back. Ovidio's corrido is one of the most popular corridos on TikTok #Chapiza.

**Section 4: Case Study - the prohibition of narcocorridos in the municipality of Chihuahua**

In recent years, narcocorridos have become very popular in Mexico, which has put them at the core of the public conversation and grabbed the attention of the district and state authorities. The most popular and legalist argument is to consider that narcocorridos are some kind of apology of crime and can endanger the public order. This led the Chihuahua City Council to ban them. This measure seemed to be an empty legalist approach, designed more to appease the moral panics of the middle and upper class than to solve the security crisis. To think of narcoculture as a foreign threat to eradicate, rather than as a subculture that emerged in communities with a rich and complex historical background, would be to emulate the U.S. narrative of the outlaw, the savage, and the enemy, in this case without having a border to contain them and without a collective psychological dimension where to render them as *the other*.

*Constitutional Rights in the Mexican Context*

It is important to consider that constitutional rights in the Mexican context refer to those that are considered essential to the proper functioning of the political system and linked to an ideal of human dignity as portrayed in the Constitution; they differ from human rights in the

mechanisms of implementation and adhesion. E.g., there are human rights protected by the Mexican State that might not be properly stablished in the Federal Constitution, but have been adhered to by joining international treaties, after the signing of a decree, or the promulgation of a law. The Mexican Constitution establishes that any international treaty regarding the protection of humanrights signed by the Mexican State automatically and immediately acquire constitutional status, whether or not it has been included in the body of the Constitution. At the same time, human rights need to be protected and guaranteed immediately and always, whereas some constitutional rights in the Mexican context are stablished as aspirations. In this case, the freedom of expression is considered a constitutional right per the Mexican Constitution and a human right according to the international treaties signed by the Mexican State.

Narcocorridos, as noted in the previous section, are classified as a subgenre of corridos, particularly northern corridos highly influenced by the border ballad of the 19th century with which they share a narrative and musical structure. In the 1970s, "Trafficking and Betrayal" by Los Tigres del Norte inaugurated a boom in the popularization of these genre. Los Tigres del Norte "paved the way for productions characterized by the stories of drug trafficking" (Aviña, 2018). Over time, narcocorridos became more popular and also more explicitly violent. The groups that perform them have grown exponentially and the last couple of decades saw the emergence of Norteño Bands whose repertoire is composed almost entirely of narcocorridos. Since their great boom in recent years, municipal and state governments have spoken out against them, considering that their content generates an apology for violence, motivates organized crime, and incites the emulation towards certain attitudes informed by the archetype of the "drug lord." Several municipalities such as Chihuahua, Querétaro, Culiacán, Cajeme, and Sabinas, among many others, have banned —or tried to ban— narcocorridos to be performed at public

mass events, nightclubs, and broadcasted on the radio. This prohibition was enforced by different measures such as fines, the suspension of permits to sell alcohol, or the cancellation of official advertising contracts.

The first paragraph of Article 13 of the Convención Americana sobre los Derechos Humanos establishes that "everyone has the right of freedom of thought and expression. This right includes the freedom to seek, receive and distribute information and ideas of all kind, whether orally, in writing, artistically, or by any other means of choice." The Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CoIDH) has added a double dimension in regards to this right: "when the freedom of expression of any individual is illegally restricted, it is not only the right of that individual that is being violated, but also the right of everyone to 'receive' these information and ideas." Under this interpretation of the law ratified by the Mexican State, not only no one can be arbitrarily prevented from expressing their own thoughts and ideas but also implies the community's right to receive any information and be allowed to get to know about the expression of other people's thoughts.

**Review of policies applicable to this case**

Two main legal systems that the Mexican state has adhered two are directly related to the issue of cultural expressions and the right to free speech: The Inter American Human Rights Court and the Mexican Constitution. In Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights, one of the international treaties that the Mexican state has signed, freedom of expression, is defined and protected as follows:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought and expression. This right includes the freedom to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas of all kinds; either orally, in writing, artistically, or by any other medium of choice.

2. The exercise of this right, provided in the preceding paragraph, may not be subject to prior censorship but rather to subsequent responsibilities, which must be expressly established by the written law and must ensure: a) respect for the rights or reputations of others, or b) the protection of national security, public order, public health or the public morals.
3. The right of expression may not be restricted by parallel measures or means, such as the abuse of official or private controls over newsprint, radio frequencies, or any equipment used in the dissemination of information.
4. Public events may be subject by law to prior censorship for the sole purpose of regulating access for the protection of children and adolescents, avoiding any prejudice to the requirements of subsection 2.
5. All propaganda in favor of war and any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to violence or any other similar illegal action against any person or group of persons, shall be prohibited by law.

The second legal system that matters is Article 6 of the Mexican Constitution, which establishes that the expression of ideas shall not be prosecuted by the state. The exceptions to this article are those instances where this manifestation of ideas result in a threat to 1) moral, 2) private life, and 3) third parties' rights. The prohibition to express oneself freely could also entail a violation of the right to the free development of the personality, which has been defined by the National Supreme Court of Justice as "the State's recognition of the natural faculty of every person to be individually as they want to be, without coercion or unjustified controls, in order to meet the goals or objectives that they have set for themselves in accordance to their values, ideas, expectations, tastes, etc." and that includes aspects that are "part of the way in which a person

wishes to project himself and live his life and that, therefore, it is up to them alone to decide autonomously."

In accordance with this definition, by restricting the freedom of expression of those who are dedicated to the interpretation of narcocorridos in the musical field, as well as their publics, their right to develop their individuality in a particular way is being threatened. That is to say, any citizen who might enjoy narcocorridos, or any person who wants to have fun attending events in which this musical genre is performed, would have their rights limited. The right to express their tastes and ideas is also being threatened. In this case, the individual has the right to express themselves through a particular musical genre and to live their life the way they see fit, expressing through these songs a reality that, although it may be reprehensible, is lived, in one way or another, in many regions of the country.

Freedom of expression is a right for all people, with certain limitations such as: respect for private life, the rights and reputation of third parties, as well as the protection of national security, public order, public health, and morals. Only to these instances can the state adhere if it intends to restrict freedom of expression; however, all of these exceptions have the characteristic of being abstract concepts, so the authorities cannot simply invoke one of the clauses and apply the restrictions. The authorities in this case are required to properly justify their restrictions accordingly to the parameters of proportionality, necessity, and applicability.

It must be remembered that the Chihuahua City Council stated that narcocorridos "have led to an effect on public opinion that translates as the normalization of violence and certain customs in language, images, stories and expressions grouped around violence," issues that it intends to address with this ban. However, in regards to the free development of the personality, the state cannot intervene in their private life. Considering that a certain musical genre can influence the

customs, the way of speaking, and the tastes or preferences of the individuals, this measure would attempt to obstruct the aforementioned right. By prohibiting narcocorridos, not only freedom of expression is threatened, but also the way in which people consider appropriate to develop their individuality. According to the aforementioned law, the rights must persist “even in regards to expressions that can be considered deeply offensive.”[8]

*Arguments made by the Chihuahua Council*

The two legal systems cited above, when speaking of freedom of expression, refer to public order as a reasonable cause for the restriction of its exercise. This limitation is the one adhered to by the City Council of Chihuahua when it prohibits the performance of narcocorridos. This can be deduced from the last paragraph of the press release cited above, in which its argued that the American Convention presents limitations to this right that are “necessary to ensure, among other things, the protection of public order, so this proposal does not imply a position of censorship prior to any public spectacle.”

Similarly, in the modifications to the Police and Good Government Edict, the prohibition of interpreting songs that advocate crime was included in Article 7, which establishes infractions “against order and general security.” This is also clear from the statement by the Chihuahua major at that time, who stated to a news outlet: “We are doing everything in our power to avoid falling back into the conditions of insecurity that we experienced years ago,” referring to the situation of violence caused by organized crime in the state of Chihuahua in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

*Problematization of the concepts of “Common Good” and “Public Order”*

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[8] See: Observación General No. 34 del Comité de Derechos Humanos de la ONU.

Based on this, an analysis should be made of “public order” as a restriction on freedom of expression, to determine whether in the case of study the provisions that could be subject to litigation conform not to what is established in the Constitution, in the American Convention, and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Public order is undoubtedly one of the restrictions that the legal order allows to impose on freedom of expression; however, this limitation is not absolute either, but rather, according to the interpretations of the provisions that contain said restriction, it must meet certain characteristics in order to be applied.

Faúndez mentions that “for a restriction on freedom of expression to be legitimate, it must be aimed at protecting some of the rights or interests specifically mentioned in international human rights instruments” (2017). He also explains that public order and other restrictions established in the American Convention “do not constitute empty concepts that the State can determine freely or arbitrarily, but rather they configure what in legal doctrine is known as indeterminate legal concepts.” And he goes on to say that when instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights invoke the public order, despite the difficulty in establishing its scope, everything indicates that the meaning that was intended to be given to this term is that of “social peace, public tranquility, crime prevention, or absence of public disorder (...) that is, what ordinarily corresponds to maintain and safeguard by the police forces.”

On this subject, the CoIDH has recognized the difficulty of unequivocally specifying the concept of “public order” and the fact that it can be used to threaten the individual’s rights, as well as to justify limitations to the rights in the name of collective interests. Likewise, it determined that “in no way could ‘public order’ or the ‘common good’ be invoked as means to suppress a right guaranteed by the Convention or to distort or deprive it of real content” and that

when these concepts are invoked as grounds for limiting human rights, it "must be the object of an interpretation strictly limited to the just demands of a democratic society that takes into account the balance between the different interests at stake and the need to preserve the object and purpose of the Convention."[9]

On the same note, the CoIDH determined that "it is also in the interest of the democratic public order, as conceived by the American Convention, that the right of every human being to express themselves freely and the right of society as a whole to receive information, be scrupulously respected." The above is reaffirmed by Faúndez, who mentions that "the inclination in favor of public order cannot be automatic either; it is not enough that there is any conflict between these two rights for it to necessarily be resolved in favor of social peace. The public order that is protected is the public order of a democratic society, and compatible with the validity of human rights."

*Necessity and proportionality of the measure*

In attention to the interpretation and arguments just mentioned, we can say that, although public order is one of the possible limits to freedom of expression, this right is also part of a democratic public order, so the state cannot simply invoke it in order to establish a restriction, but rather it must justify the restriction through measures of proportionality and necessity. This was established by the UN Human Rights Committee, when interpreting the restrictions established by Article 19 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (similar to those established by the American Convention) by mentioning that these "must meet strict tests of necessity and proportionality," so that when a State intends to restrict freedom of expression "it must demonstrate in a concrete and individualized manner the precise nature of the threat and the

[9] Corte Interamericana de derechos humanos (13 & 29)

necessity and proportionality of the specific measure that has been adopted, in particular establishing a direct connection between expression and threat."[10]

Following this argument, I would argue that even when it can be ensured that narcocorridos normalize crime by narrating violent acts and praising the deeds of criminal groups and drug traffickers, we cannot be certain that their interpretation alters public order, as presumed not only by the City of Chihuahua, but also by some other municipalities in which the narcocorridos were censored after violent events that occurred in the places they were performed. For example, the municipality of Cajeme, Sonora, where "the measure is given after the murder of the singer Tomás Tovar Rascón, better known as Tito Torbellino" or the state of Coahuila, where the violent acts did not occur in an event of this type, but the ban was given after "the murders of two minors committed by his brother and his cousin" whom supposedly were listeners of this music.[11]

Although the analysis of this case is carried out mainly in accordance with the provisions of the American Convention and the interpretation made by the Inter-American Court, we can take into account resolutions of other instances, such as the European Court, or even national courts, since it is common for the Inter-American Court to endorse interpretations made by various entities. For instance, an analogous case in which the Austrian authorities refused to distribute a magazine to their military, on the grounds that it had generated friction in one of their barracks, is interesting to compare. In this particular case, "the European court stated that the particular situation of barrack was not serious enough to justify a measure whose effects extended to all military installations." Under this argument followed by the European Court, it

[10] Observación General No. 34. Comité de Derechos Humanos de la ONU.
[11] EL Universal. Coahuila: Tras muerte de dos niños, prohíben narcocorridos. Disponible en https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/estados/2016/03/2/coahuila-tras-muerte-de-2-ninos-prohiben-narcocorridos

could also be said that particular violent events that have occurred in public venues where narcocorridos were performed should not be an argument to generalize and claim that their realization entails a climate of violence and, therefore, be prohibited.

Based on these considerations, the Chihuahua City Council failed to establish the need for the prohibition of interpreting narcocorridos to avoid incitement to violence or disturbance of the public order. On the contrary, in the aforementioned press release it mentions that "although the psychological impact generated by these musical phenomena has not been specified, there is a unanimous position that distinguishes the messages transmitted through said interpretations, as a new form of violence."[12] The same authority that imposed the ban accepts that there are no scientific elements to demonstrate the alleged negative consequences of narcocorridos on individuals and also issues an unfounded opinion by saying that there is a "unanimous" position (without specifying whose) that the messages contained in these songs are a new form of violence.

It should be noted that the true importance of the right to freedom of expression "does not lie in the right to privately hold the opinions that seem convenient to us, but precisely in the possibility of expressing them, being able to express them and transmit them to other people, and especially to those who may have a different point of view from ours."[13] It is also important to highlight that, even if there was evidence of the disturbance of public order caused by the interpretation of narcocorridos, it must be taken into account that its prohibition would not be enough to put an end to the security crisis in the country in the first place, mainly because they would continue to be broadcasted on the radio, on television, through the Internet, the sale of records, in nightclubs, and at private events or in those that do not require a permit from the

[12] Announcement on a Press release, Chihuahua Council, 2011.
[13] See Faúndez Ledezma Héctor. Op, p. 112.

municipality. Secondly, it would be absurd to consider that, even when narcocorridos represent a source of violence, they are the only cause for it, since, as already mentioned, they are a reflection of the reality of cohesive communities with rich and complex histories of marginalization, displacements, and security crises. Not only these measures get into complicated legalist argumentations when defining public order, good morals, or when establishing a causal relation between narcocorridos and violent outcomes; additionally, the desired restriction would not have the effect they are attributing, so the criteria of necessity is also absent. In addition, it is also important to highlight that there are other forms of expression, outside the scope of the restrictions that the City Council could establish, such as movies, series, books, magazines, blogs, newspapers, and other media, which could —following this argument— advocate for crime and normalize drug trafficking issues, so prohibiting the interpretation of narcocorridos in certain specific circumstances would not go far in order to stop an alleged disturbance of public order. The need for the ban is not justified, and it does more to justify the moral panics of certain sectors of society, rather than solve the real security crisis.

In a paradigmatic case, *Herrera Ulloa vs. Costa Rica*, the CoIDH stated that, in order to determine subsequent responsibilities for the abusive exercise of freedom of expression, three requirements are necessary: "1) they must be expressly established by law; 2) must be designed to protect either the rights or reputations of others, or the protection of national security, public order, public health, or morals; and 3) must be necessary in a democratic society."
In the case of the Chihuahua Council, the first of the requirements is met, since the fines imposed on those who interpret narcocorridos are established in the Police Edict and in the Entertainment and Show Business Regulations; however, the second point is not in compliance, given that it was not demonstrated that the prohibition of narcocorridos actually protects the public order. The

third point is not met either, given that by not demonstrating the causal relationship between the public performance of narcocorridos and disturbance of public order, the need for a sanction cannot be determined either. In addition, the Inter-American Court established that "the necessity and, therefore, the legality of the restrictions on freedom of expression based on article 13.2, will depend on whether they are aimed at satisfying an imperative public interest. Among various options to achieve this objective, the one that is less restrictive towards the protected right must be chosen. This condition applies to laws, as well as to executive decisions, administrative actions and to any manifestation of state power."[14]

In conclusion, narcocorridos have become increasingly popular in México approximately since the 1980's; although these songs somehow normalize crime by talking about drug traffickers, violent acts, and other activities related to organized crime, they also reflect a reality in the country. Freedom of expression, in its double dimension, is a fundamental right recognized in international human rights instruments to which the Mexican State is a member. Freedom of expression can be restricted when other rights or the society as a whole are affected, but it can only be limited in attention to the provisions established by international treaties. The sanctions established by the City Council of Chihuahua against the organizers or promoters of musical events in which narcocorridos are reproduced, as well as to the musical groups that perform them, represent a restriction on freedom of expression and the city council has failed to justify the measures in light of the existing legal system.

**Conclusion**

When I started this project, a sense of surprise towards the world of narcoculture in México was the main fuel. How did these figures acquire a god-like aura in the collective imaginaries? Why

[14] Corte IDH. Caso López Álvarez Vs. Honduras. Fondo, Reparaciones y Costas. Sentencia de 1 de febrero de 2006.

was El Chapo a fan of the fictional character of Teresa Mendoza and the real actress Kate del Castillo? Isn't he the object of fascination, who should be —almost by definition— above the world of these representations? Isn't he the *real deal*? Is Queen Elizabeth a fan of *The Crown*?

When the news about the interview that Kate del Castillo and Sean Penn had done with El Chapo, when he was still hiding, and after his lawyer got in touch with the actress trying to arrange the meeting, I was shocked. Months prior to the interview, in one of the failed attempts to capture El Chapo, the police found a set of CDs of "La Reina del Sur" in the apartment where they were hiding. To watch a TV series, highly popular in the country, while hiding and being the "most wanted" fugitive, is one thing; to get in touch with the actress and getting her and Sean Penn access to your ranch in the middle of the Mexican sierra is completely different. I don't know if that was the key mistake that facilitated his recapture, as many analysts think. And I don't know if Kate del Castillo had gotten a little bit too much into the character of Teresa Mendoza, or if she and Penn were only after the interview. What I knew at that time is that a very popular actress, who lived in L.A. and comes from a rich Mexican family, was willing to meet up with the leader of an organization linked to human trafficking, money laundry, drug trafficking, and the assassination of probably tens of thousands of people. When the short video clip of El Chapo facing the camera and answering some of Kate and Sean's questions was released, what I saw was not —by any stretch of the imagination— the mastermind behind an extremely profitable international organization, who had escaped twice from prison: the first time in a trash can, and the second one through a tunnel that he somehow managed to get built while being in the "safest" prison in México. What everyone saw and heard was a very simple, almost rustic, man. I couldn't get my head around the question of where was the line between fiction and reality; between mythologies and mundanity. I was trying to imagine what does an

industry that is worth approximately 5 billion dollars a year —only considering the so called "Mexican" cartels— represent in the international markets, the security policies, the border, and the statecraft narratives, and where is the necessary huge and complex system that runs the whole thing, now that the kingpins are vanishing.

When I started reading, I found a lot on narcoculture as a literary/media genre, a lot on criminal organizations and their use of technology, and a lot of moral panics, expressed in many forms, around narco culture, including alleged recruitment strategies and poorly justified legislations in order to ban small portions of these cultural expressions. None of these three points of entry seemed to match what I had experienced in Northern México and what I see in Cartel TikTok and #Chapiza. The state's narratives fail to consider how entrenched in these communities these cultural expressions are, even before the slogan "war on drugs" was coined. It also fails at seeing these cultural expressions as the object of reprehension —which resonates in the two national discourses with the racial geographies and racial violence inherently tied to the border— instead of addressing the bigger geo-political causes and implications of the war on drugs.

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