

¡Me Gusta Hip-Hop!: Evidence of Popular U.S. Culture Among Mexican Border Youth

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Abstract: This paper examines a fragment of the evident cultural exchange occurring along the U.S. – Mexico border in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. Many Nogales youth are absorbing American popular culture through purchasing American popular culture commodities, such as music. The paper raises questions of how and why the Nogales youth purchase their pop culture commodities, and of the interpretations the Nogales youth make of said commodities' symbolic significance. After methodologies and context of the study are discussed, the paper defines popular culture and its relationship to commodity production. It then focuses on how the youth access their pop culture products and the factors that influence their buying decisions. At its end, the paper compares the interpretations of the Nogales youth with those of American youth in terms of pop culture goods.

Key words: culture, pop culture, commodities, hip-hop, maquila

As an intern for the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology (BARA), I was assigned to the Ambos Nogales Revegetation Project in which an ecologically focused community in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico and Nogales, Arizona, works with BARA interns and staff towards community goals. The community in Nogales is composed of teachers, students, neighborhood residents, government officials from both sides of the border. Each BARA intern working on the Nogales project is assigned to a specific group or institution within this community. I was assigned to a 20-student ecology club at the Escuela Tecnológica de Nogales¹, a school for students ages 14-18 in Nogales, Sonora. The projects I worked on with the students were all ecologically focused, and included growing and maintaining a nursery of native plants on the school grounds, developing and perfecting a composting system, experimenting with the construction of greenhouses from scrap

¹ The actual name of the school will not be used for protecting confidentiality. This name is fictitious.

materials, and making connections between the club and community members outside of the school for the sharing of resources, ideas and labor. However, throughout the year and a half I spent there, I observed a number of behaviors and commodities displayed by the students that reflect popular U.S. culture while working on these projects, and that has greatly interested me.

For example, I heard a student reciting the chorus to a recent and successful U.S. hip-hop song while standing on top of a roof attaching components for a greenhouse. Knowing that this student spoke no English, I asked him if he knew what the English lyrics meant. He admitted he did not. After I translated the lyrics into Spanish for him, he decided he liked the track even more. I met another student who was dressed entirely in black, with his hair dyed black and spiked upwards and wearing black steel-toe boots. On his shirt he wore a pin for the Misfits, a famous 1980s-era U.S. punk band. When I asked him if he liked the Misfits, he responded with an enthusiastic yes. He did not speak any English either, but was unquestionably into the Misfits' music and dress style, despite the language difference. Furthermore, almost every time I enter or exit the school grounds, I hear a U.S. hip-hop track being blasted from someone's car. When the club's students are asked what kinds of music they prefer, the responses are usually English words that are pronounced with a Spanish accent, such as "pop," "hip-hop," "rock" or "rap." Only two students in the club are at least conversationally proficient in English. As a final example, I remember seeing a female student wearing a sweater embossed with the word "Hottie," a logo on clothing very popular with girls at the University of Arizona. When I asked her if she knew what the word meant, she said she did not. The word was then translated for her by the ecology club teacher, who was present, as *una chica caliente*.² The girl became uncomfortable upon hearing this translation.

² This translation of "Hottie" into Spanish made by the ecology club teacher was not entirely accurate, and would have been better translated as *una guapa*, meaning an attractive girl. *Una chica caliente* in northern-Mexico Spanish has a sexual connotation to it, like a woman in heat, and this points to the heart of the issue at hand: how and if this group of Mexican individuals interpret and translate the significance of popular U.S. culture and commodities, and if those interpretations parallel ones U.S. citizens would make.

Noting and observing these behaviors, commodities and interpretations raised several questions that formed the topic of this independent study project. First, what were the social, economic and cultural mechanisms responsible for the prevalence of U.S. pop culture commodities among these Mexican border youth? What influenced their decisions to consume and display them? Second, what interpretations did the students make, if any at all, of the symbolic significance of their U.S.-origin pop culture commodities? Did those interpretations parallel ones U.S. youth would make? Third and finally, how did language differences play a role in all of this?

In answering these questions, I intended to discover and understand a small part of the evident and large scale cultural exchange occurring along the U.S. – Mexico border while developing a working hypothesis on popular culture production. The project began in September 2005 and lasted four months. I continued working as a BARA intern at the school's ecology club throughout the research period. The methodology was composed of formal and informal interviews with the students, participant observation during club and outside activities, and a selected body of readings to provide a conceptual framework and background information. For the sake of keeping this research on a manageable scale given time constraints, I focused largely on music.

The interview process was divided into two parts. First, I administered an anonymous questionnaire to the entire population under study, the twenty students in the school ecology club. The purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain basic information from each student, leaving more personal information, such as what certain musical genres symbolically meant for the students, for the formal follow-up interviews. Before handing out the questionnaire, I orally introduced the project to the students during a normal club day, defined what I wanted to study and how the information would be used. I also let them know that any information they gave me, if they chose to do so, was confidential. All of the students agreed to participate. I then handed out twenty copies of the questionnaire for them to fill out.

The second part of the interview process, conducted throughout the research period, consisted of the formal one-on-one interviews with selected students. The purpose of these interviews was to obtain more personal information, such as what role language differences played for the student in interpreting cultural messages sent through music.

Instead of doing formal interviews with each student in the club, I selected ten, and from that group managed to complete six. I selected ten students out of the twenty because time constraints on the project did not allow for interviews with each student while still performing normal work at the club. Furthermore, I was more socially familiar with these ten students making them more likely to provide information openly during the interview process. When I asked for the interview, I restated the purpose of the project, and that the information given was confidential. I also stated that a translated copy of the final product could be made available for the students to read, though none responded that would be necessary. The interviews were recorded by hand in note form. As a participant observer, I partook in ecology club activities, went to certain stores in the downtown Nogales, Sonora area with interviewees and spent some time at their houses listening to music and watching television. On these occasions, I observed informant behaviors and noted commodities displayed in any of the given contexts and paid special attention to the origin of the goods (i.e., U.S. or Mexican) and their availability in stores. I also gave special note to what television shows were available within informants' residences and what commercials for products were commonly shown, in an effort to uncover patterns between television advertising and the pop culture commodities the youth consumed.

The final part of the methodology for this project, the selected body of readings that provided a conceptual framework and background information, focused on defining "popular culture." First and foremost, culture will be defined here in the Geertzian sense, in that it is a semiotic system -- a set of attitudes, values, beliefs and symbols -- which informs social action (Geertz 1973). The literature on popular culture, however, both adheres to and deviates from this narrow definition of culture, and can best be seen as divided into two camps.

The first camp, which has traces of the Geertzian definition of culture in its conceptual workings, is what I term the "mass culture" camp (e.g. Strinati 1995, Stavenhagen 1983, Colombres 1987). This camp maintains that popular culture is precisely what its name implies, a semiotic system which informs action that is popular, or widespread, among the masses. An important conceptual divide is created in this

camp in that the “masses” are distinguished from “elites” in society.³ “Popular culture” is seen as synonymous with “mass culture,” and juxtaposed with “elite culture,” which belongs to a select few. According to Strinati, theorists such as Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt school argue that mass culture is a thing mass produced and standardized, packaged even, to be fed to the masses, which are like cultural sponges absorbing anything they are fed. Adorno goes on to say that the spread of mass culture is causing the erosion of high or elite culture with its relentless march, and is a cultural shortcoming of the industrial age (Strinati 1995).

The second camp, which I call the “popular commodities” camp, posits that popular culture is the collection of generally available, or popular, goods or artifacts that a society produces -- i.e. music, movies, books, art, foods etc. (see Strinati 1995⁴, Habell-Pallan 2002, Hebdige 1988). This camp ties into the “mass culture” camp in that discussions of the mass production of these commodities are placed in the context of standardization for mass appeal and consumption. However, a major shortcoming of this camp’s mode of thought is the lack of definitional boundaries for what is and is not popular culture. In modern society there are few products that are not “generally available,” as almost everything is mass produced for society-wide consumption. Thus, within these definitional boundaries, there is little in modern society that does not qualify as popular culture. This is a definition that I find analytically unwieldy.

Instead of choosing from either of these camps to define popular culture for this project, I have chosen aspects from each and used Geertz’s position on culture to formulate my own definition. For the purposes of this essay, culture is a semiotic system – a set of values, attitudes, beliefs and symbols – that inform action, as is popular culture. However, while popular culture can be interpreted as part of a larger

³ Elites are essentially those individuals with high levels of income, strong political influence, elevated levels of education, upper echelon government officials etc., while the masses, simply put, qualify as everyone else (Strinati 1995).

⁴ It should be clarified here that Strinati does not argue there are two popular culture camps; the ‘two camp argument’ is something I developed after reading his 1995 book, which is essentially an overview of major theories on popular culture.

system of culture, is distinguished from culture in general in that it is a semiotic system tied to mass marketing, consumption and social identification processes.

To begin with, semiotic systems are “harvested” from the masses⁵ by marketers as they search for prevalent values, attitudes, beliefs and symbols to use in advertising schemes for commodities -- e.g. music, movies, clothing etc. These marketers then standardize and “attach” the harvested semiotic system to various commodities through advertising. The commodity, with its field of advertised or marketed symbolic significance, is then sold to the masses. Finally, the commodity is consumed as a pathway of identification with the attached semiotic system (Dávila 2001). What results over time is a mass marketed and consumed semiotic system that weighs in on social identification processes for individuals and collectivities. This is popular culture.

A few points here require clarification. Instead of operating under the assumption that the consumer simply absorbs whatever semiotic system is fed to them through commodities and their advertising schemes (like a “sponge,” as Adorno might have it), I use the idea that consumers can enact a dialectical interpretation in which the consumer may creatively interpret the marketed symbolic significance of the commodity for themselves (Strinati 1995). The symbolic significance of commodities therefore does not only lie within marketing schemes and is not only produced by marketers. Instead, given that consumers can interpret the significance of commodities for themselves, and that marketers look towards the masses, or the consumer base, for the values to attach to commodities, commodities have a social significance outside of marketing schemes. This means that one can consume a commodity not only as a pathway of identification with its marketed significance, but its socially recognized and self-interpreted significance as well. To clarify, by “socially recognized” I mean the significance of the commodity to the consumer’s social circle, as in friends, family, coworkers etc. By “self-interpreted” I mean the significance of the commodity for the individual consumer.

⁵ The idea of “masses” here comes from the “mass culture” camp discussed previously. It is important to note that marketers look to the “masses” for semiotic systems to harvest as opposed to societal “elites,” making the masses the consumer base which marketers target in the process of popular culture production.

It is of critical importance to reinforce that the commodities themselves are not popular culture. Instead, the semiotic system which is harvested and attached to commodities through mass marketing, then consumed, interpreted and identified with by individuals or collectivities, is. A useful analytical division about the nature of commodities can thus be drawn: those commodities that serve as pathways of identification for individuals or collectivities are pop culture commodities, while others are not. This means that commodities like some medicines are generally not pop culture commodities, as they serve a utilitarian purpose and are not commonly marketed as nor consumed as pathways of identification. Things that are more frequently marketed and consumed as pathways of identification are clothing and music, placing them in the pop culture commodity category.

For example, t-shirts with the famous image of Che Guevara would qualify in the pop culture category of commodity. This is because Che Guevara t-shirts are consumed as pathways of identification with values of independence and rebelliousness, things that Che Guevara is marketed and socially recognized as representing. Again, the Che Guevara t-shirt itself -- the fabric and technology it is made from -- is not popular culture, as culture is defined here as a semiotic system which informs action, not the material products or technologies of a society. Instead, the values and symbols of independence and rebelliousness that the Che Guevara t-shirt represents in marketing and to the consumer and his or her social circle, are popular culture.

As a final note on methodology, I emphasize that this is a preliminary research project which addresses only one side of the evident cultural exchange occurring along the U.S.-Mexico border. Furthermore, time constraints and a lack of access to U.S. youth did not allow me to interview a set of them to compare with the Mexican youth under study, in terms of the social recognition of and identification with their consumed U.S. pop culture goods. In an effort to fill in this methodological gap, I have used myself and my friends as standards from which to make these comparisons. My friends and I are U.S. youths and students (though slightly older than the population under study) who have spent their lives consuming similar pop culture goods as the Mexican border youth. The combination of my friends' and my own understanding of the U.S. significance of these goods has since provided a base for making comparisons. Finally, I have used literature

on subjects such as hip-hop (e.g. Dyson 2004, Habell-Pallan 2002) to gain a background on the significance and history of pop culture and its commodities for others.

To begin the discussion of evidence of popular U.S. culture among the Mexican border youth, it is best to start with how the youth under study access and consume their pop U.S. culture commodities or goods. This will include a brief discussion of economic relations between the U.S. and Mexico. From there, interview results will be discussed explaining how, if at all, the students interpret and identify with the pop U.S. culture commodities they consume, and whether or not the students' interpretations parallel those of my friends and me as U.S. citizens.

My initial hypothesis was that the Mexican youth bought their displayed pop U.S. culture commodities in Nogales, Sonora. I knew from previous casual conversations that that the majority of these youth did not have cars, computers or internet access at home, and I thus hypothesized they were largely limited to buying goods of any kind within the Arizona-Sonora border region. I had also assumed a position for testing that U.S. capitalism had crossed the border and brought U.S. commodities and products into the stores in at least Nogales, Sonora. Furthermore, I hypothesized that U.S. origin commodities were in larger availability than Mexican origin commodities in the Nogales, Sonora stores, because of the international capitalistic expansion of many U.S. businesses and products. Were this true, it would have in part explained the prevalence of pop U.S. culture commodities I had seen; it is a simple logical step to see that commodity availability affects the choices of consumers. One can only buy what is within one's reach.

Simply put, pop U.S. culture commodities were prevalent among these youth because they formed the majority of goods available for consumption. For the sake of reference, I call this hypothesis the "imperialist hypothesis," in which the U.S. capitalism has "imperialistically" dominated the markets in Nogales, Sonora.

However, the information I received from the administered questionnaire provided some contrary information regarding this hypothesis. It turned out that the youth under study bought most of their clothing, music and movies -- their pop culture commodities -- in the United States, either Nogales, Arizona or Tucson, Arizona, and not in Nogales, Sonora. The most common stores listed on the questionnaire

concerning where they bought their music, movies and clothing were Ross, JC Penney, Wal-Mart and Sears, all of which are in either Tucson or Nogales, Arizona, and none of which are found, as of the writing of this paper, in Nogales, Sonora. As a matter of fact, only two Nogales, Sonora stores were listed on the questionnaire as places where they purchase pop culture commodities: Discorama, a music and movie store, and Soriana, a Mexican super-store akin to Wal-Mart. Every other store listed was located in the United States.

This caused me to ask the youth why they bought almost all of their goods in the United States instead of in Mexico. Their answer was fairly simple: goods in general were cheaper in the United States. More often than not, they told me, they would accompany their parents on shopping excursions to the United States. During those excursions, their parents would normally purchase necessities such as groceries, which were generally cheaper in the United States than in Mexico. In the midst of this, the informants would buy their music, movies and clothing – their pop culture commodities – either with their own money earned from work or chores, or money given to them by their parents.

This is a fact I corroborated by visiting a variety of stores in the Nogales, Sonora area, including Discorama and Soriana. I found that on the whole commodities and products were more expensive at these stores than at those U.S. stores given as responses on the questionnaire. Pop culture commodities specifically, however, remained close to prices in the United States, meaning that the average price of a CD at Discorama in Nogales, Sonora was near the average price of a CD at Wal-Mart in Nogales, Arizona (from \$12 to \$13, or 120 to 130 pesos approximately).

What this suggested was fairly far from the “imperialist hypothesis.” Rather than the youth buying U.S. pop culture commodities on the Mexican side of the border because U.S. commodities were more prevalent there than Mexican ones, they buy them mostly in the U.S. itself, specifically Tucson and Nogales, Arizona. Shopping for products and commodities in general takes place for them and their families in the United States, as the commodities and products in general were cheaper thereat. Prices for pop culture goods specifically remained generally the same on both sides of the border, and the youth did their pop culture commodity shopping largely in the United States during shopping excursions with their parents.

An explanation for why commodities and goods in general are cheaper in the United States than in Mexico lies in the economic relations between Mexico and the United States. Since the North American Free Trade Agreement's (NAFTA) enactment in 1994, the United States, among other foreign nations, has greatly increased the number of *maquilas* (factories) they own on the Mexican side of the border producing things like textiles and electronics due to the new open economic borders. *Maquila* goods are then exported back to the United States at a discount. Under NAFTA, U.S. corporations can take advantage of cheap and available Mexican labor, factory location in close proximity to U.S. markets, lax environmental regulations in Mexico, and the ability to export goods produced in Mexico back to the U.S. tax-free (Landau 2005). The labor force for these foreign owned factories comes largely from rural farmers who cannot compete against massive, subsidized American farmers importing cheap corn and related goods into Mexico under the new trade agreement. Having given up on farming, many of these individuals flock to the border and urban areas in search of work, while Mexico subsists largely on imported and cheaply sold produce from the United States (Pollan 2004).

Thus, as of the present, Mexico has been importing much of what it consumes, as much of what its national labor force produces is being exported to other countries. This means that the imported goods that Mexico largely relies on do not enjoy the same cost-cutting benefits that the U.S. does, for example, thereby resulting in cheaper goods and commodities in the U.S. than in Mexico. Consequently the Nogales, Sonora youth and their families did most of their shopping in either Tucson or Nogales, Arizona.

However, the fact that the youth, accompanying their families, did most of their shopping in the U.S. could not be the only deciding factor in their choice to consume U.S. pop culture commodities. As I visited the stores listed on the questionnaire, I found that most of the stores offered solid mixture of both U.S. and Mexican-origin pop culture goods. This meant that the youth had a choice of Mexican or U.S. pop culture products to consume. For example, the Wal-Mart in Nogales, Arizona, one of the most prevalent stores listed on the questionnaire, offered music CDs that had Spanish and English artists in all variety of genres as hip-hop, rock, and rap, including Mexican music artists from both the same genres and from more traditional northern Mexico genres such as

tejano and *norteño*. Wal-Mart also offered movies in both Spanish and English of both Mexican and U.S. origin in relatively equal amounts.⁶ Furthermore, Discorama, the only Nogales, Sonora music and movies store listed as a response y the youth on the questionnaire, is one of the only stores in the area to offer a mixture of U.S. music and movies alongside Mexican ones.⁷ In short, the places where the youth told me they did their shopping offered a solid mixture of Mexican and U.S. origin pop culture commodities.

This suggested that the youth were making a choice to consume more pop U.S. culture commodities than Mexican, given that they had the option and I had seen them display a wealth of U.S. pop culture commodities in my time there. Why, then, were they making this choice? What were the real factors that influenced their decisions to consume and display these commodities? And what did that imply for the meaning or value of these commodities, if any, for the youth?

In the formal interviews, the students told me that U.S. music artists from genres as hip-hop, rock and rap are unquestionably, though not overwhelmingly, more popular among people of their age cohort than Mexican music artists from the same genres. This included those artists from more traditional northern Mexico genres as *tejano* and *norteño*. Each of the youth I asked responded similarly, in that U.S. music artists from these genres have undeniable popularity at least in the Nogales, Sonora area. However, each youth also responded that the further one travels into Mexico, the less and less one sees evidence of U.S. pop culture and its commodities. Therefore, they stated, the primary reason for the prevalence of U.S. music in Nogales, Sonora is mostly due to Nogales, Sonora's proximity to the United States.

I then asked them if proximity to the United States was the only reason for U.S. music's prevalence in the area. At this point in the formal interview process, all the informants stated that U.S. hip-hop, rap and rock artists are popular also due to the quality of their music. In other

⁶ Time constraints did not allow me to take specific counts of commodity origin in these stores, so as to have a percentage available of each. (i.e. X% Mexican origin, X% U.S. origin). However, from what I saw, I would argue that a 50/50 mixture of U.S. and Mexican origin pop culture commodities were available for the consumer in Wal-Mart, Discorama and Soriana.

⁷ At Discorama, all the U.S. origin movies had their titles translated into Spanish, and were either dubbed into Spanish or had Spanish subtitles.

words, the informants liked the way artists such as Eminem, 50-Cent, Slayer and Britney Spears sounded, regardless of language difference. In short, the primary reasons U.S. music artists were popular among these youth were the availability of U.S. music given the proximity of Nogales, Sonora to the United States, and the quality of U.S. artists' music which they enjoyed.

A point came up in the context of this portion of the formal interview process that illustrates some of the cultural background of the U.S.-Mexico border as it is seen by Mexican border youth. When discussing the popularity of U.S. music among people their age, two informants asked me if I knew the meaning of the word *pocho* in Mexican Spanish. *Pocho* is a somewhat derogatory slang term that refers to *nortehños*, or Mexicans that live in northern Mexico along the border, who behave or want to be more like *estadounidenses* (people from the United States) than Mexicans (de Mente 1996). The reason they asked me this question was because they wanted to make sure I knew that being a *pocho* was something generally looked down upon, and that consuming U.S. music, according to them, does not make one a *pocho*.

It appeared here that the students were concerned I was researching whether or not they were *pochos*, and wanted to make sure I understood that they considered themselves anything but. Their stance was almost defensive as they told me this. This illustrates much of the cultural tension between the United States and Mexico, because while the United States is looked upon favorably for its power and cultural influence, it is also despised for the same reasons by many Mexicans. This is part of old Spanish colonial legacy, where lighter skinned folk in Mexico (i.e. Spaniards) were looked upon with approbation, and yet hated for their positions of power and privilege which they exploited. Much of that legacy remains today, and elements of it can be seen within the Mexican concept of the *pocho* and the conversation I had with these students.

To add to this conversation, I brought to them what I had heard from other Mexicans who herald from deeper in Mexico. All of these other Mexican individuals have adamantly told me that Nogales, Sonora, let alone the state of Sonora and the other northern states, are not Mexico. In the eyes of these individuals, the "real" Mexico exists in the central and southern areas. I asked these other Mexicans to clarify, and they said that the flavor and culture of life in northern Mexico was so

different from that in central and southern Mexico that they didn't even consider much of northern Mexico to be the same country.

To a great degree, the informants in this study agreed with that concept. All the informants I had spoken to of it, be it in formal interviews or casual conversation, agreed that Nogales, Sonora, at least, was not Mexico. Some disputed that the entire state of Sonora was also not Mexico, only feeling that border cities as Nogales, Sonora qualified "un-Mexican." I then asked them what Nogales, Sonora was, if not Mexican. The two most common responses I received concerning this were *fea* (ugly), and *una mezcla* (a mixture). The informants who said that Nogales, Sonora was *fea* said so mostly because to them, Nogales, Sonora was a city concerned with industry and immigration, and therefore was literally *sucia* (dirty) and *fea* due to the unregulated growth and industrial wastes. The informants who stated that Nogales, Sonora to them was a *mezcla* clarified that it was a *mezcla* of U.S. and Mexican societal influence, and therefore was not genuinely, or purely, Mexican. Speaking carefully, I asked them whether or not they thought Nogales, Sonora being a *mezcla* of U.S. and Mexican society was a negative thing, and they unanimously responded it wasn't. To them, Nogales, Sonora simply was a *mezcla*, and that carried neither positive nor negative connotations.

These conversations suggested to me that U.S. music for them does not hold a certain social value that makes it more popular than Mexican music of similar genres. In other words, it is not as though U.S. hip-hop, pop, rock and rap artists are popular among these youth simply because they are from the U.S., as buying U.S. music solely for that reason might make one a *pocho*. I deliberately asked them if that was true in the formal interviews, to which they all responded yes. To support their argument, some stated that reggaeton, a musical style of indisputable Latino origin with almost all U.S. and non U.S. Latino artists, is actually taking over as the most popular style of music among youth their age in at least the Nogales, Sonora region. These particular informants expect that in a matter of years, reggaeton will usurp hip-hop, for example, as the most popular style of music among Mexican youth their age throughout Mexico. Thus, it cannot be assumed that U.S. music was popular among these youth simply because it was U.S. in origin.

The next step in the formal interview process was discussing what role language difference played for them in terms of understanding and

interpreting the messages sent through the U.S. artists they listened to. I began this discussion with the informants by asking them whether or not languages other than English were offered at the schools in Nogales, Sonora. To my surprise, they told me that to their knowledge, all the schools in the area offered no other language classes beyond English. When asked why they think that is, they said again that proximity to the U.S. was the primary reason. In other words, skill with the English language was seen as a great asset given the geographic closeness with which individuals in Nogales, Sonora lived to the United States. That is why, they believed, English was the only language being offered. Two informants specifically stated that knowing English would lead them to greater economic security, as it would open many doors in terms of job opportunities both in the U.S. and in Mexico.

From this point in the interviews, I returned the informants to the discussion of U.S. pop culture, specifically U.S. music, and the role language difference played for them in interpreting the symbolic significance of various U.S. music artists and styles. The first youth I formally interviewed adamantly stated that understanding the language, (in this case English) of a particular music artist was not necessary to understand the values, attitudes, symbols and beliefs -- the semiotic system -- that said artist displayed or represented socially and in advertising. For example, Slayer, a popular U.S. death metal band that this informant particularly liked, represented to my friends and me attitudes, values and symbols of death, violence and rage. These were things traditionally considered in U.S. society to be negative, but that the band held in a positive light giving them their niche in the market. When I asked this informant what this band symbolized to her, the answer I received paralleled the interpretation of my friends and I of this band. To this informant, the U.S. death metal band Slayer represented being angry (*estar enojado*), dark things (*cosas oscuras*) and an explosive attitude (*una actitud explosiva*).

Somewhat unsurprised that this informant interpreted the symbolic significance of this band in a fashion very similar to my friends' and my own, I then asked her through what means she made this interpretation. In other words, given that she spoke very little English and could not -- without the use of a dictionary and some time -- understand what the lyrics, song titles and album names meant, what was it that allowed her to make this similar interpretation of Slayer?

Her response outlined four things. First, the images displayed on the album cover and in its booklet pages were representative to her of those values, attitudes, beliefs and symbols. A CD of Slayer she showed me had drawn images of violence, the symbol of an upside-down star in a circle often associated with satanic cults, and heavily shadowed pictures of the band members' faces grimacing at the viewer. Second, she had seen posters in stores, though in English, advertising their latest CD releases with similar imagery. Third, the style and mood of the band's music suggested these attitudes, symbols and values to her. She described the style and mood of the band's music as being very loud, fast, and aggressive, with a singer who screams more than sings (*un cantante que grita más que canta*). This suggested to her songs with themes of rage and violence. Fourth, and evidently most influential and important, she knew of and listened to other Mexican bands from a similar genre that represented an analogous semiotic system. She interpreted the semiotic system of these bands through their style of music (loud and aggressive), advertising for the bands in television, magazines and on posters in stores with similar marketing schemes for Slayer, images on their CD covers and booklets analogous to those of Slayer, and band members who physically looked like Slayer's with long hair, goatees, tattoos and dark clothing. Furthermore, these bands had lyrical themes that turned out to parallel Slayer's (such as violence and rage), though in Spanish which the informant could understand.

According to this informant, then, four things allowed her to make an interpretation of Slayer's symbolic significance, despite language difference, that paralleled that of my friends and I: the mood and style of Slayer's music, advertising for Slayer, images from Slayers CD covers and booklets, and Mexican bands who she determined as symbolically equivalent through their images, musical mood and advertising schemes. Nowhere in this situation did the informant's lack of English proficiency prevent her from making that parallel interpretation.

After discussing this with the informant, I asked her if she identified herself with the semiotic system Slayer represented as she had interpreted it and as she recognized her social circle as interpreting it, given she bought their music. She responded that while she enjoyed Slayer's music, she did not necessarily endorse violence, rage, *cosas oscuras* and the like. These were not things she herself valued. She

added that the primary reason she bought their music was because she liked the high energy and driving rhythms it offered.

Thus, this informant's interpretation of the symbolic significance of the U.S. band Slayer paralleled its significance for U.S. persons, being my friends and I. Furthermore, it appeared that this informant did not buy Slayer's music as a pathway of identification with their semiotic system as she interpreted it and as she knew others to interpret it. Instead, she bought it largely for reasons of musical preference.

This example illustrates well the responses I received from the other informants during their formal interviews. All the informants believed that understanding the language of a music artist was not necessary to understand what that artist wanted to, was marketed to, and was socially recognized to represent. Three of these informants knew, for example, that 50 Cent, a popular U.S. hip-hop artist whose music these informants bought and liked, was an individual raised in the urban ghettos of the U.S. and thought that the themes of his music revolved around that fact. They were not surprised when I confirmed this for them. They also knew that hip-hop had its roots among poor African American and Latino urban youth in the 1980s in the United States, and understood that hip-hop's themes often related to the struggles and difficulties of impoverished urban living and gang life (Dyson 2004, Habell-Pallan 2002). The factors they told me which allowed them to reach such accurate conclusions about the nature of U.S. hip-hop were making comparisons to Latino and Mexican hip-hop artists, having discussions with persons knowledgeable about the subject and seeing the images and representations of the artists in advertising and on album covers or booklets.

When I asked these informants if they identified themselves with what they interpreted artists as 50 Cent representing, I received a variety of answers. One informant said that he didn't identify himself with 50 Cent specifically, because he didn't consider himself a gangster (*cholo*), which he saw 50 Cent being marketed and socially recognized as.⁸ He did however, like the female informant previously discussed, enjoy the style and sound of 50 Cent's music, and considered it, like much U.S. or Latino hip-hop, good to dance to. Another informant felt that he could

⁸ This is an interpretation my friends and I would agree with. Much of the literature on hip-hop (e.g. Dyson 2004, Habell-Pallan 2002) speaks of the controversies over hip-hop due to its violent and gang-related themes.

relate to hip-hop's roots, considering himself a youth raised in a poor urban *barrio* from Nogales, Sonora. This informant consumed U.S. and Latino hip-hop and identified himself with its symbolic significance as he interpreted, and as he knew his others in his social circle to interpret it. It was something he enjoyed blasting out of his friend's car as they drove down the streets of Nogales, Sonora, so that others would identify him with that marketed and socially recognized symbolic significance as he and his friends interpreted it.⁹ The third informant in this case stated that while he did enjoy much U.S. hip-hop, he did not necessarily identify himself with it, for similar reasons as the first informant discussed here.

In short, it appeared that each of the youth interviewed were capable of interpreting the symbolic significance of the U.S. music they consumed in a fashion at least similar to, if not parallel with, a U.S. interpretation coming from my friends and I and the literature. They were capable of doing this despite the language difference of the U.S. music they listened to. Whether or not the informants identified themselves with the symbolic significance of the U.S. music they consumed varied. Some consumed it for musical preferences, while others did identify themselves with the music's symbolic significance as they interpreted it, as they saw it in advertising, and as they knew their social circle to interpret it.

In closing, the evidence of popular U.S. culture among the Mexican border youth at ETN's ecology club in Nogales, Sonora was explained by a series of factors. First, economic relations between the United States and Mexico have resulted in most commodities and goods being cheaper in the United States than in Mexico. The Mexican youth's parents or relatives would thus travel to the United States to purchase their basic necessities, and more often than not the youth would buy their pop culture commodities, such as music, while accompanying their parents or relatives on such excursions. Second, the youth were then faced with

⁹ This youth made no mention of whether or not he thought others perceived him the way he wanted to be perceived by blasting Snoop Dogg, as he stated, out of his friend's car. He seemed to be operating under the assumption that the way he and his social circle interpreted Snoop Dogg was the same way others on the streets in Nogales, Sonora would interpret it. In other words, he appeared to assume that those on the streets would accurately identify him and his friends with their interpretation of Snoop Dogg's symbolic significance as they drove by.

a choice of buying either U.S. origin or Mexican origin pop culture commodities, as a variety of both were available at all the stores they shop at listed on the questionnaire. Third, the youth purchased more U.S. pop culture commodities, specifically music, than Mexican, because of U.S. music's availability given the proximity of Nogales, Sonora to the U.S., and because its style and quality adhered to their musical preferences. It is important to restate here that I found pop culture goods to be generally equal in price on both sides of the border, whereas other general goods, such as groceries, were cheaper in the U.S. than in Mexico. Thus difference in price was not a factor in the students' buying decisions. Furthermore, they made the choice to buy U.S. music operating under the overarching perceptions of *norteños* and *pochos* by other Mexicans which they were aware of.

Fourth, in consuming U.S. music, the youth have demonstrated to me that they can make parallel interpretations of the symbolic significance of these U.S. artists and styles that my friends and I hold, as U.S. youth who are though slightly older but who consume similar commodities. The Mexican youth were able to do this through making comparisons to other Mexican artists from the same genres, interpreting images on CD booklets and in advertising, interpreting musical mood and style and speaking to others knowledgeable of the subject. Nowhere in this equation did the lack of English proficiency among these Mexican youth prevent them from reaching those parallel interpretations.

Finally, whether or not this small group of Mexican border youth identified themselves with the U.S. music they consumed varied. There appeared to be no pattern by which one could predict if one of these Mexican youth would consume U.S. music as a pathway of identification with a marketed and socially recognized semiotic system. There is no question that these youth made interpretations of the U.S. pop culture commodities they consumed, music included, and that those interpretations largely paralleled ones my friends and I might make as U.S. youth. However, this did not necessarily mean that the Mexican students would take that interpretation, and buy the music or commodity as a pathway of identification with it.

Despite this, the two "pop culture camps" previously discussed still do not provide an adequate framework from which to analyze and study popular culture in a context as this. Simply labeling popular culture as either the "culture of the masses" or the widespread group of products

that a society generates does not address the issue at hand. The issue at hand involves interpretations of pop culture commodities across international boundaries and cultural messages sent through things like music, as well as how the interpretations of messages sent through things like music tie into processes of identification for individuals and collectivities. Neither of the two camps provide an adequate framework for studying, because they lack explicit discussions of the cyclical process of popular culture production in modern society.

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