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Drug trafficking stories: Everyday forms of Narco-folklore on the U.S.–Mexico border

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Abstract

The United States government's so-called "War on Drugs" is predicated on the idea that drug consumption and drug trafficking are unequivocally harmful and dangerous activities that the country's population will fear and reject. Yet, ethnographic findings from the U.S.–Mexico border indicate that drug trafficking has become such a common activity that it has generated its own sub-cultural style, including music and folklore. To date, anthropological studies of border drug-trafficking culture have mainly focused on *narcocorridos*, a genre of Mexican folk/pop music that celebrates and chronicles the drug trade and the lives of high-level traffickers. These studies provide valuable insights into the inner workings of drug organizations and the cultural context from which they emerge. However, most workers in the drug trade are not the wealthy superheroes or villains portrayed in narcocorridos. They are common people whose primary motivation for engaging in drug trafficking is economic survival. Drawing on a rich folklore about drug-trafficking that has become pervasive in the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez border region, this ethnographic study shows how drug commerce has become a "normal," expectable part of everyday life. The quotidian folklore surrounding drug trafficking indicates the degree to which the drug trade affects border residents on multiple levels. The desensitizing of the population to drug trafficking, as illustrated by everyday drug folklore, and its very mundaneness in the border region, are a direct challenge to the idea that the government is winning the "Drug War."

Keywords: Mexico; Border; Drug-trafficking; Folklore

Introduction

Drug-traffickers and drug users are often feared and despised by mainstream society because they are associated with taboos and symbolically threaten the social status quo (Douglas, 1978; Szasz, 2003). Fitzgerald and Threadgold (2004, p. 409) state that members of drug subcultures "by virtue of being outside the social order, are labelled dirty, dangerous and taboo and further marginalized from the rights of normal citizens." State prohibition, however, inevitably breeds illegal business opportunities (Heyman, 1999). In major drug-trafficking centres like Ciudad Juárez/El Paso, the narcotics economy is so extensive and pervasive as to become a "normal" part of daily life. That is to say that the stigma of drug-trafficking activity is lessened and transformed by sub-cultural differences, social networks (Duff, 2004, pp. 390–391; Fitzgerald & Threadgold, 2004, p. 409), and the ubiquity of the drug economy in specific regions (Molano, 2004). In such places, quotidian drug-trafficking and the stories it generates become, in De Certeau's terms (2002), a "tactic" of everyday life.

In drug hubs on the U.S.–Mexico border, the presence of the illegal narcotics trade is reflected in how people make a living and in elements of expressive culture such as music, clothing, jewellery, and consumer items like fancy trucks and flashy, expensive homes (Marez, 2004). It is also evident in how people speak and the stories they tell about the narcotics trade. To date, because of the violence and danger associated with it, there is far less ethnographic literature on drug trafficking (e.g., Adler, 1985; Bourgois, 1995; Malkin, 2001; Morales, 1990), than there is on drug consumption (Bourgois, 2002; Duff, 2004; Curtis, 2002; Clatts, Welle, Goldsamt, & Lankenau, 2002; Maher, 2002). This article, in an effort to

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lessen this gap in the literature, is a study of the normalization of drug trafficking through folklore on the border. It is specifically concerned with manifestations of this issue in El Paso (located along the Rio Grande in far west Texas, bordering New Mexico) and its immediately adjacent sister city, Ciudad Juárez, the largest town in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua.

One reason for the normality of drug trafficking on the border is that the region is one of the poorest in the U.S. El Paso is the most impoverished large American city and its population ranks consistently below national averages for income, employment and educational levels.[1] Drug trafficking is a practical, quick way poor people can increase their incomes. Thus, for example, for driving a car loaded with cocaine from El Paso to Chicago a person can earn $10,000. Driving a drug car from Ciudad Juárez across the international bridge to El Paso—a trip that can take as little as 5 min—may be worth $1,000 or more to the driver. Merely allowing a drug courier to store a duffel bag in one's apartment overnight can net $200. By selling drugs just a few times a month or year local people can significantly increase their incomes. Consequently, large numbers of people succumb to such temptations; indeed El Paso and Juárez have been contraband centres for at least 100 years (Martínez, 1978). Drug trafficking, then, is a predictable adaptation of relatively poor people to poverty and has become a part of the self-identity of border communities (Campbell, 2004).

Drug-trafficking folklore and culture

As Vila (2000) has shown, ethnic and other identities are constructed through narratives. This article concerns the kinds of identities and senses of self and community constructed through drug stories. Edberg (2004) analyzes the cultural persona of the drug trafficker in Mexican pop songs known as *narcocorridos*. The polysemic narcotraficante persona portrays drug sellers as border-crossing social bandits, tragic heroes, and daring rags-to-riches entrepreneurs (Valenzuela, 2002). Yet narcocorridos are representations of drug merchants by musicians and songwriters, some of whom may also be traffickers, but most of whom are primarily artists who do not speak from first-hand knowledge or experience (Wald, 2001). Narcocorridos are part of a pop music industry that glamorizes the drug trade but through a commercialized prism and an entertainment medium far removed from everyday life. The stories presented below, to the contrary, were told by direct participants in the trade or their immediate relatives and friends. Most of these stories were recounted in workplaces and social gatherings and often by friends or relatives. I did not seek out these stories. I learned them within the normal course of my life in a U.S.–Mexico border community. Other local residents might have more such stories, others less, but few border residents could claim to be unaware of or untouched by the phenomena these stories address.

The pervasiveness of drug-trafficking stories, and the strong popularity of narcocorridos, indicates the degree to which narcotics' trafficking is accepted by the general public as a normal, unexceptional aspect of life on the U.S.–Mexico border. In spite of this, the only English language newspaper in the El Paso area, the *El Paso Times*, provides little coverage of the drug trade, although the Ciudad Juárez papers (*El Diario* and *Norte*) carry stories about drugs, especially bloody drug killings, almost every day. Indeed, the *Cártel de Juárez*, Juárez Cartel, known by some, such as Mexican journalist Eduardo Valle, as the *Cártel de El Paso/Juárez*, is one of the largest drug-trafficking organizations in the world (Bowden, 2002; U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2004). The impact of the drug trade is evidenced at the El Paso federal prison, where 70% of the prisoners are drug offenders, according to a prison guard I interviewed. (Nationally, in 2004, 54% of federal prisoners were drug offenders, see Federal Bureau of Prisons Quick Facts, 2004.)

Even though the El Paso news media has chosen to minimize coverage of narcotics, local residents know that the illicit drug business is all around them. Apropos of this, Fitzgerald and Threadgold (2004, p. 416) apply the ideas of Deleuze to "make clear the ontological proximity of drug users, city and self." Likewise border drug-trafficking stories demonstrate that traffickers, like drug-users, "may be victims, perpetrators, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters (Fitzgerald & Threadgold, 2004, p. 416). Moreover, El Paso is largely composed of Mexican immigrants who may have suffered at the hands of U.S. border or immigration officials and a substantial portion (perhaps 15%) of the population is undocumented (i.e., illegally in the U.S.). Within such a population there may be many who sympathize more with law-evaders than law enforcers. For example, at a small Mexican restaurant in central El Paso, I saw a gumball machine (proceeds of which normally go to national social service campaigns) which had a sign on it saying "for the illegals who don't have papers" ("*para los ilegales que no tienen documentos*"). Thus, there may be a higher tolerance of drug trafficking in border communities than in the interior of the country.

Narcotics selling along the U.S.–Mexico border is a modus vivendi for thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people. The part-time nature of some drug-trafficking, the fact that individuals may engage in this activity for only a small portion of their lives, yet still make considerable money, may decrease the stigma of the activity in the minds of its practitioners and their peers. In an interview, a border customs inspector called drug-trafficking "a culture on the border." In such a context, the moral and political condemnation of the narcotics trade, which emanates from the United States federal government and conservative right-wing politicians, simply does not have the same impact it has in the mainstream cultural "heartland." In fact, some border residents I

[1] Demographic information taken from the presentation "Census 2000 Data Conference, Making Cents of El Paso" by University of Texas-El Paso sociologist, Cheryl Howard, Ph.D. on 9/26/02.