

Soundscapes of Narco Silence

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Abstract

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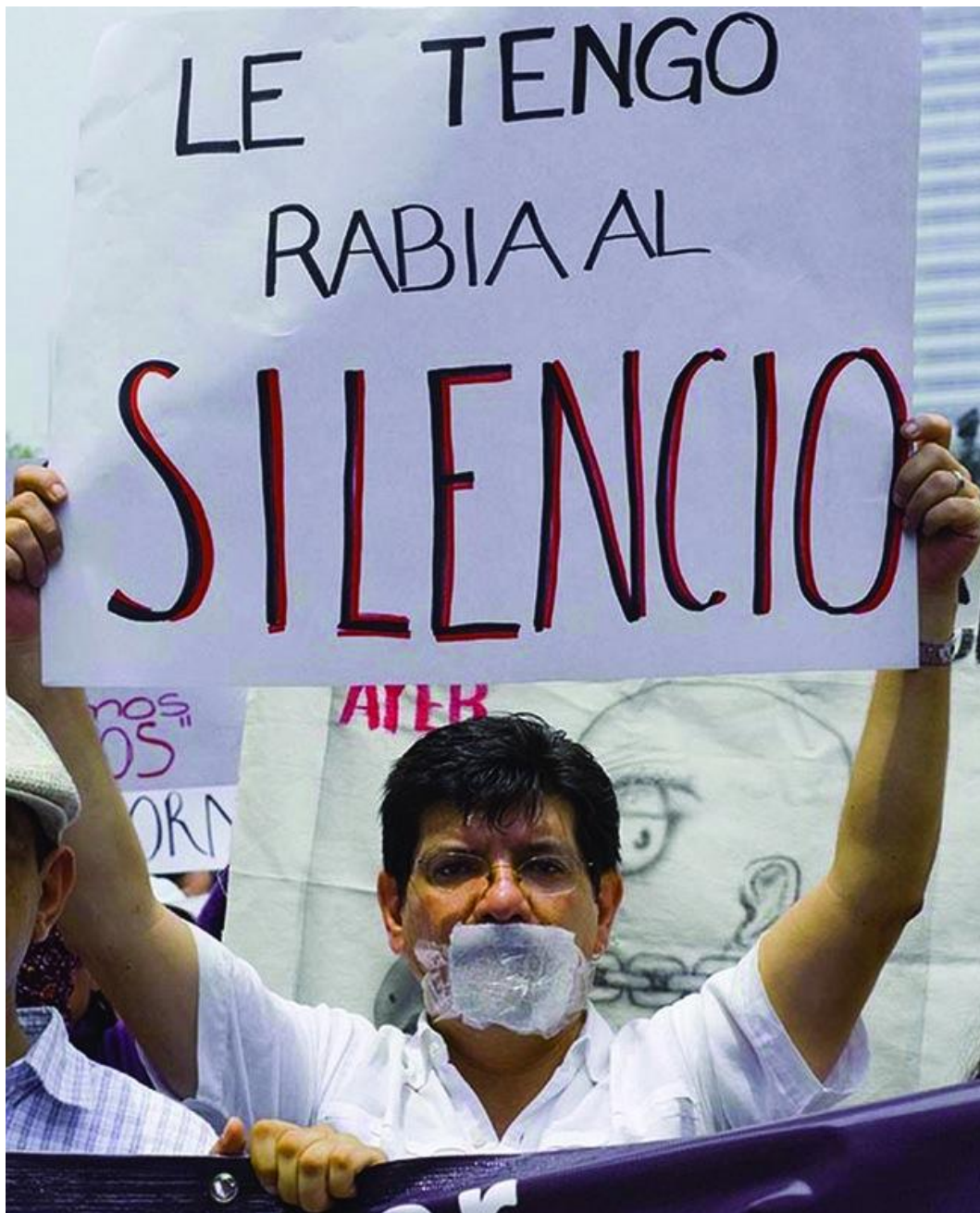


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Journalists protest in silent march in Mexico City, Courtesy of the Knight Foundation

Since the drug war began, the lives of approximately 95,000 people have been claimed, with an estimated total of 26,000 disappearances ([“Continued Humanitarian Crisis at the Border” June 2013 Report](#)). At the University of Texas, Pan American – an institution located 25 miles north of Reynosa, Mexico (a Mexican city that has been hard hit by drug violence in recent years) – I teach students who have been dramatically impacted by drug war violence. Many have close relatives affected or hear horrific stories of those who have been kidnapped by the cartels; many fear traveling to Mexico to visit loved ones as a result and, in some cases, they report having relatives involved in the drug cartel business. Dinorah Guerra, psychotherapist and head of the Red Cross in

Reynosa, describes the devastating psychological and physical toll: “There is a huge risk for people’s self esteem. They cannot speak about what they have seen or what they have heard. [They] lose [themselves] and lose [their] identity” (qtd. in [Pehhau 2010](#)).

I name the space of the drug war and its resulting terror in the U.S.-Mexico border the “soundscape of narco silence.” This soundscape includes death and intimidation, from the brutal killings of news reporters by cartel members to the decapitation of citizen-activists who use online media to alert communities of narco checkpoints. It also consists of those powerful acts that call attention to silence as a tactic of terror. [The Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity](#), for instance, brought together tens of thousands of people in Mexico to speak out against drug violence through silent marches. Cultural productions, such as narcocorridos, or contemporary drug ballads that document the cross-border drug economy, also become part of the soundscape. The narcocorridos function as a powerful critical response to silence and fear because they enable those in Mexican society, as Jorge Castañeda, author of *El Narco: La Guerra Fallida*, explains, “to come to terms with the world around them, and drug violence is a big part of that world. The songs are born out of a traditional Mexican cynicism: This is our reality, we’ve gotten used to it” (Qtd. in [Josh Kun 2010](#)).

In this blog post, I focus on the role of U.S. Latina/o theater produced in the South Texas border region as it responds to the soundscape of narco silence. Building on David W. Samuels, Louis Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa, and Thomas Porcello’s definition of “soundscapes” in [“Soundscapes: Towards a Sounded Anthropology”](#) as “the material spaces of performance and ceremony that are used or constructed for the purpose of propagating sound” (330), I suggest that soundscapes of silence in theater function as material spaces of performance that focus the public’s attention on silence – with the intent of intervening in acts that propagate silence and fear. Soundscapes of narco silence are characterized not only by violence and terror, but by cultural productions that function as forms of critical resistance – those works that focus the publics’ attention on the economy of silence and fear that fuels the drug war, and in the process, enable communities to cope with narco violence.



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To closely listen to the soundscape of narco silence, I engage with the play script and production of Tanya Saracho's play *El Nogalar* at South Texas College Theatre (STC) under the direction of Joel Jason Rodriguez in McAllen, Texas in June 2013. The play was first produced at the Goodman Theater in Chicago in April 2011, with a West Coast premiere at the Fountain Theater in Los Angeles in January 2012. I critically analyze the STC Theatre production's incorporation of a multi-genre soundtrack that included narcocorridos, rancheras, and nortec (norteño + techno). I argue that this soundtrack focused audiences' attention not only on the devastating effects of silence, but also the function of silence as a form of capital for those most excluded in society. I also offer a brief critical listening of the script's rendering of silence through character dialogue and stage directions.

El Nogalar tells the story of an upper-class Mexican family comprised of three generations of women (Maité, Valeria, and Anita) whose land and home in the fictionalized estate of Los Nogales in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, and its adjacent nogalar (pecan orchard), are under threat by the maña (drug cartels) moving into the region. The play focuses on the women's responses to the drug war economy as a result of their different relationships to home (both their estate and the space of Mexico). It also centers the experiences of Dunia, their maid, and López, a former field worker who now works for the maña.



STC Theater Production of El Nogalar. Photo Credit: Miguel Salazar

Cecilia Ballí, in her article “[Calderón’s War: The Gruesome Legacy of Mexico’s Antidrug Campaign](#),” explains the particular circumstances of marginalized men in this society: “The worst casualties of this ‘civil war’ were the estimated 7 million young men to whom society had closed all doors, leaving them the options of joining a drug gang or of enlisting in the military, both of which assured imprisonment of death” (January 2012, 48). With the characters López and Dunia, the play asks audiences then to listen to the impact of the drug war on the most vulnerable populations in Mexico and the US-Mexico border region.

The play script conveys how “narco silence” can be used by those who either seek to preserve traditional class hierarchies (the story of the matriarch Maité) or to survive and profit in the new drug economy (the story of López). “Narco silence,” a term coined by reporter Jonathan Gibler in his book [To Die in Mexico](#), refers to “not the mere absence of talking, but rather the practice of not saying anything. You may talk as much as you like, as long as you avoid the facts. Newspaper headlines announce the daily death toll, but the articles will not tell you anything about who the dead were, who might have killed them or why. No detailed descriptions based on witness testimony. No investigation” (2011, 23). In an early exchange between López and Dunia, López defends “narco silence” as a strategy of survival:



STC Theater Production of *El Nogalar*. Photo Credit: Miguel Salazar

DUNIA: *Why are you the only one they leave alone, Memo?*

LÓPEZ:....

DUNIA: *All the men your age. Killed. Why Memo? (Beat).*

LÓPEZ: *Because I know when to keep my mouth shut which is not something I can say for you....*

DUNIA: *So that's all it takes to be best of friends with the Maña? That doesn't seem so hard to do? ([American Theatre Magazine July/August 2011, 74](#)).*

Later in the play, Dunia, heeding López's advice, offers a powerful observation of how "narco silence" enables her community to cope with death: "We all just walk around like we're a movie on mute. *You can see people's mouths moving but all you hear is the static* (my italics)" ([American Theatre Magazine July/August 2011, 73-74](#)).

The STC Theatre production enhanced the script's soundscape of narco silence through its sound design, with a soundtrack that included rancheras, narcocorridos, norteño and nortec. This music provided audiences with a connection to the world of Los Nogales and captured each character's process of coping with narco violence. For example, Maité's soundtrack consists of several rancheras, such as Lola Beltrán singing "Los Laureles" and Chavela Vargas's powerful rendition of "Que te vaya Bonito." Beltrán's "Los Laureles" – a canción ranchera that includes Beltrán's powerful female vocals and mariachi orchestra instrumentation – invites audiences to hear Maité's nostalgia and desire for an idealized Mexican society and her wish to preserve traditional class hierarchies.

<https://youtu.be/eM05xVy6LbY>

Vargas's powerful rendition of "Que te vaya Bonito" captures Maite's pain and suffering as she loses her home to the cartels. In Vargas's version of "Que te Vaya Bonito" – a song about love and abandonment – audiences hear Vargas's choking and sobbing voice, accompanied by a single guitar.



<https://youtu.be/wuEO77NZnP4>

Vargas's voice conveys, what Lorena Alvarado powerfully argues, is "the body's dilemma between the hysteria of sobbing and the intelligibility of words, between resignation and retribution" (2010, 4). Vargas's powerful singing also conveys, as Alvarado further describes, "un nudo en la garganta," a common expression in Spanish that describes "the knot in the throat, when one cannot speak because words will not come out, but the desperate, or quiet, breath of tears" (Alvarado 2010, 5).

To sonically register the drug cartel economy and lifestyle underlying the "new" Los Nogales, the soundtrack also included narcocorridos. The first sounds we hear in the play are from the narcocorrido "El Carril Número Tres" – which includes two acoustic guitars and an electric bass – by Los Cuates de Sinaloa.



<https://youtu.be/Ghxpbu4oTb8>

“El Carril Número Tres” – tells the story of a secret “lane number three” that allows a Mexican drug lord to freely go back and forth between the US and Mexico because he makes a deal with the CIA and DEA. With this focus on the US government’s involvement in the drug trade, the song centers how silences north of the US-Mexico border have perpetuated drug violence.

The music also included nortec, with songs by the Mexican Institute of Sound, particularly the track “Mexico,” which is a critique of the Mexican government’s complicity with the narcos.



<https://youtu.be/5fikNzorfOs>

With “Mexico,” audiences hear a fusion of norteño, electronic, and hip-hop with lyrics that use the symbols of Mexican national identity and culture to focus the public’s attention on violence and

terror. With the lyrics “green like weed, white like cocaine, red your blood” (referencing the Mexican flag) and “at the sound of the roar of the cannon” (alluding to the national anthem), the song powerfully invokes the visual and sonic soundscape of violence that terrorize Mexican residents. With this charged critique of government corruption, “Mexico” momentarily interrupts the soundscape of narco silence rendered in the play script and rest of the soundtrack.

Ultimately, the production’s combination of rancheras, narcocorridos, and nortec captured the class tensions in Mexican society and emphasized the play’s critique of class structures that have enabled drug war violence to persist. With this range of music, the director explains he wanted to “maneuver between the [various] aspects of [the story]: the nostalgia, the corridos, the narcocorridos, and also this fusion of saying ‘we want something more,’ and so that was the whole aspect of it; the blending of the old, the new, and what the present is” (Interview with author July 2013).

The production also deliberately incorporated the sound of silence, particularly in the final scene. By the end, López buys the Los Nogales estate, thereby increasing his class status and social power. Saracho’s stage directions in this final moment indicate “an interpretive sound of trees falling. Now don’t go cueing chainsaws because it’s not literal. Just make me feel trees are falling. Along with the upper class” (87). The play’s reference to the staging of “an interpretive sound of trees falling” brings to mind the philosophical question: “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” We might then interpret the final sounds of *El Nogalar* as inviting audiences to listen attentively to the soundscape of narco silence, implicating audiences as social actors in the politics of the drug war that continue to devastate Mexican society.

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Featured Image: Journalists Protest against rising violence during march in Mexico, Courtesy of the Knight Foundation

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Marci R. McMahon received her Ph.D. from the University of Southern California with affiliations in the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity. She is an assistant professor at the University of Texas, Pan American, where she teaches Chicana/o literature and cultural studies, gender studies, and theater and performance in the Departments of English and Mexican American Studies. She is the author of [Domestic Negotiations: Gender, Nation, and Self-Fashioning in US Mexicana and Chicana Literature and Art](#) published by Rutgers University Press’ Series Latinidad: Transnational Cultures in the United States (May 2013). Her essays on Chicana literature and cultural studies have been published in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*; *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of MALCS*; and *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*. Her second book project, *Sounding Latina/o Studies: Staging Listening in US Latina/o Theater* explores how contemporary Latina/o drama uses vocal bodies and sound to engage audiences with recurring debates about nationhood, immigration, and gender.

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