

Brujeria and the U.S.-Mexico Border Outlaw

by Rachel Conover

This paper investigates the death metal band Brujeria, their use of both traditional and contemporary outlaw imagery, and their connection to the narcocorrido, in order to examine the tenacity of the outlaw paradigm as an expression of resistance by subordinate groups in situations of social inequality. It deals with the contemporary figure of the outlaw in connection to the U.S.-Mexico border region, as influenced by outlaw traditions in the area, and as an expression of specific contemporary historical circumstances of that region, including Mexican economic crisis, globalization, and border conflicts surrounding immigration, drug trafficking, and labor.

The figure of the heroic outlaw has been used throughout history to represent the struggle of subordinate groups in adversarial power relations. The valiant outlaw, outnumbered but compensating for this with bravery and intelligence, fights against a corrupt and oppressive system, and thereby acts as a hero to the subordinate community. In outlaw folk hero traditions, “lawlessness serves as a normative response to oppressive conditions created and maintained, in most instances, by the law or, at the least, the socio-political system that it upholds.”¹ The traditional outlaw hero is viewed as going against the system and those in power, and acting on behalf of the people. The outlaw acts outside the rules of dominant society, and thus may be viewed as a criminal by those in power, but these crimes are seen as bringing good to the specific community that is represented. This motif is a tenacious and widespread paradigm, found in many different time periods and locations, but altered in each to reflect the particular circumstances relative to that community and the power dynamics therein.

On the border between the United States and Mexico, the contemporary persona of the outlaw hero reflects changing circumstances of transnational capitalism and border culture. These figures can be seen in popular music of the border region, including contemporary *narcocorridos*, evolved from the traditional Mexican *corrido* ballads, and the California-based death metal band Brujeria, which although musically unrelated shares much of the same thematic emphasis.

The *corrido* is a traditional form of Mexican balladry that often celebrates the exploits of the *bandido*, or bandit, as a popular hero, and is traditionally used to present issues relevant to social justice and oppression. The *narcocorrido*, as a contemporary form of the *corrido*, follows similar lines in many ways, but represents a new type of outlaw, glorifying the deeds of the *narcotraficante*, or drug trafficker. The music is generally still traditional, and the format remains the same, although there have been some alterations to this in incorporating more modern instrumentation, sampling, and some variations on the narrative structure. Most follow the conventions of the *corrido* in dramatizing real events and real people, but others have shifted to discussing fictional scenarios.

Despite these changes, “its membership in the *corrido* family is hardly in doubt.”² What remain controversial are the status of the protagonists and the role of the *narcocorrido* in the community. Instead of now socially acceptable revolutionary heroes, the bandits discussed are drug traffickers, and issues often involve violent confrontations with the law while smuggling drugs across the border. McDowell states that:

Drug dealers and their associates, like armed killers on the Costa Chica, are viewed by mainstream society as unworthy of admiration. They do not possess the stamp of historical legitimacy conferred by historical caveat on the heroes of the Mexican Revolution. Instead, they are seen as inappropriate models for young people, always within the celebratory premise that the *corrido* inspires emulation of the examples set by its protagonists.³

The subjects are violent, and the *narcocorridos* have been banned on Mexican radio stations and some stations in the U.S. as well. They have been labeled as destructive propaganda, which exerts a negative influence on young people and promotes drug trafficking. They are nevertheless popular, and circulate via oral transmission and recordings. Attempts to ban them only seem to add to their appeal, and they are often compared to gangsta rap and the movements to suppress it in the United States.

The comparison to death metal band Brujeria correlates more directly than this, due to the border-oriented nature of their lyrics and image. The band is based in the U.S., but its members have created fictional personas as Mexican drug lords, they sing in Spanish, and they use outlaw imagery, fake names, and masks. Unlike most narcocorridos, they sing in the first person, and embody themselves as outlaw heroes. They sing not only about drug traffic, but also about immigration laws and race issues, in addition to the usual death metal subjects of death and murder.

The band Brujeria uses the paradigm of the outlaw hero to construct an image of “Satanic Mexican Drug Dealers” and to express the resistance of subordinate groups in border culture. Although they are not Mexican, nor Satanic drug-dealers, they claim to be both of these in their fictionalized band biographies, and in their lyrics and imagery they personify the heroic narcotraficante sung about in narcocorridos. They use this persona, with its historically-rooted meaning drawn from the traditional outlaw hero, to discuss current border issues such as drug trafficking, race relations, and immigration. In addition to this imagery and subject matter, they also share traits of underground media transmission and cultural reception with the narcocorrido. Brujeria is a death metal band, and musically they bear no resemblance to the norteño style of the corrido or narcocorrido. However, death metal is a subcultural style listened to by a select audience, with lyrics that are often violent and offensive. Like the narcocorrido, Brujeria is a mass-media form with a transnational fan base, but due to the controversial subject matter is still underground, without much commercial airplay. Their songs, despite the constructed image of the band, are still seen by fans to represent a forbidden truth and a heroic persona. Due to the cultural resonance of the heroic outlaw persona, along with the fluidity of identity in post-modern border cultures, Brujeria is able to make use of these paradigms to create politically relevant material that connects with their fans, despite the constructed and theatrical nature of their image and the mass-mediated form of their music.

Brujeria was formed in Los Angeles, California in 1989, when a group of old high school friends, some of whom were now successful musicians, got back in touch. Grindcore was becoming popular at the time, and they noticed that the local extreme music scene was largely Latino. However, there were no extreme bands that sang in Spanish, and so they decided to create one.⁴ While some, though not all, of the band members were Latino, they decided to construct an image for themselves as specifically Mexican satanic drug dealers. This was partially due to their Latino heritage, but also partially in order to position themselves farther outside of the mainstream, due to the marginalized status of immigrants in U.S. culture, in addition to the already subcultural nature of the metal scene.

The name “Brujeria” means witchcraft in Spanish, and was part of the band’s original concept, which was, in addition to offering a Spanish-speaking version of music to the Latino audience, simply to be as offensive as possible. This offensiveness is a common part of the death metal subculture, but Brujeria tailored it specifically to their Mexican image, incorporating elements designed to offend both traditionally conservative, Catholic Mexican culture, and xenophobic Anglo culture. This resulted in lyrics and imagery mixing blasphemy and Satanism, along with murder, violence, drugs, and racial attacks. They chose the image of drug-dealing Satanists because, “that was what the Mexican ‘Boogeyman’ was all about. The ‘Anti-Catholic,’ savage, drug dealing image had a certain populist appeal.”⁵ As a subcultural group, part of their appeal to the margins is in their difference from the mainstream, and being offensive to the dominant culture(s) is one way to mark and maintain this difference.⁶ Later in their career, Brujeria became more directly politically oriented, and moved beyond offending the mainstream to actively crusading for the social margins. While their early work concentrates on the offensiveness of their image, later albums show a stronger emphasis on their assumed Mexican identity and growing use of the outlaw hero paradigm, as they address issues in border culture such as immigration, in addition to drug trafficking.

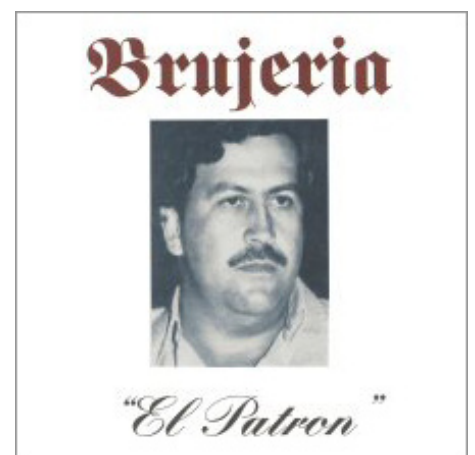
Because of the band members’ other projects, Brujeria already had record label connections, and they were able to release three singles and a full-length CD shortly after the band was formed, in the early 1990s. However, in order to concentrate on the theatrical concept of Brujeria, they did not want to draw attention to their other bands, and so refused to publicly reveal their identities. They gave themselves fake names such as Juan Brujo (John the Witch), Güero Sin Fe (White Man without Faith), and Asesino (Assassin), and wore masks in all of their appearances. They were also unsure of the reception that their music would receive, due to the extremity of the lyrics, and did not want to hurt their other bands with a negative reception (Anonymous). In addition to serving these functions, the masks and pseudonyms allowed their assumed narco personas to flourish, since no one knew

their real identities. These theatrical elements also added to their concept, because of their costumes' associations with the figure of the masked bandit, and the masks worn by Zapatista groups.

Brujeria's first two singles, "Demoniaco" (Demonic) and "Machetazos" (Machete Hackings), followed death metal conventions of violence, death, and anti-Christian themes, addressing topics such as molesting dead children, satanic sacrifice, and selling cocaine, in relation to the band's druglord personas. These themes acted to distance the band from the mainstream and mark them as part of the death metal subculture, where ideas of violence and blasphemy are common. Their first full-length CD was called *Matando Güeros* (Killing White Boys), and repeated many of the songs from the singles, along with a title track about killing white people, and songs further glorifying the band's image as Satanic druglords, such as "Leyes Narcos" (Druglord Laws), which gave rules for dealing with druglords, and "Narcos-Satánicos" (Satanic Druglords), describing drug trafficking. In these songs they began to discuss ideas important in border culture, by dealing with racial conflict and drug trafficking. They also had a song called "Cruza la Frontera" (Crossing the Border), which was critical of the border patrol and of "coyotes," who smuggle people across the border for high fees. However, this CD continued to concentrate on the blasphemous, and did not engage deeply in these topics as political issues, but simply suggested Satan as a protector. The "Machetazos" single and *Matando Güeros* album both used brutal images from the Mexican true crime magazine *¡Alarma!* on their covers, showing decapitated bodies, the bloody bodiless heads, and a suicide victim, again following death metal conventions of gore. However, the lyrics, given inside the covers, were all in Spanish, along with the album credits, emphasizing the band's assumed Mexican identity in addition to limiting their audience accessibility.

Despite the gory focus of this early work, in some ways Brujeria was making a political statement from the beginning. The very existence of a metal band from California singing in Spanish, especially at the time, had definite political overtones, in that they were offering representation to a minority group. In her article on music as politics, Susan McClary discusses soul music, which, while not lyrically addressing social issues, expressed an African-American method of construing the body through its rhythms, and thereby gave a voice to an alternate experiential world.⁷ She points out that political statements are not limited to espousing a particular issue or to lyrical content at all, but rather can be found in the music itself, or in the case of Brujeria, in the language.

The group's third single, "El Patron," was a memorial to the druglord Pablo Escobar, killed in 1993. With this release, Brujeria began to move beyond glorification of offense, by memorializing Escobar not simply as a criminal, but as a "godfather to the poor." In a direct parallel to common narcocorrido outlaw hero narratives, Brujeria's lead singer—Juan Brujo—described Escobar as "The great General leader of the guerilla natives, the great man who was a father to the poor," and said that Brujeria recorded the album to pay their respects to him (*Mexecutioner* liner notes). Moving away from strict gore imagery, the cover of the album showed a photo of Escobar on the front. On the back was a memorial plaque to the druglord saying, "En memoria de Pablo "El Patron" Escobar, Diciembre 1949 – Diciembre 1993" (In memory of Pablo "The Boss" Escobar, December 1949 – December 1993), along with the reproduction of a wanted poster for Escobar from the Mexican government. The title track, "El Patron," describes Escobar in heroic terms, as a strong leader and a benefactor to the poor:⁸



A soldier fell dead. Our boss was killed, who will lead us? Pablo Escobar was king of cocaine, made money from leaves. Was a great man, godfather of the poor. Was a general, sending native warriors. Was the boss, the best of all. / To the poor natives, he bought them houses. To the strong natives, he gave them guns. To the sold out cops, he gave them great bribes. To the stupid judges, he cut their throats /...Mr. Pablo Escobar was a visionary, the vision to take care of his own people. A family man and the godfather of the poor, he gave pleasure to the whole world. And now, now people we are going to the pantheon to bury the boss. Millions of people will miss him.

These lyrics bear a strong resemblance to common narcocorrido lyrics in their heroic portrayal of Escobar. They show the druglord as a strong and successful leader who evades authorities, and makes money while bribing police and killing judges. However, he is also shown as a family man and a benefactor to the poor, taking care of

his people, who depend on him. At the end of the song, this heroic role is taken up by Juan Brujo, as an anonymous Mexican asks him, “Who is going to take care of us?” and Juan Brujo answers, “I, el Brujo.” This characterizes Brujeria not only as murderous druglords, but as starting to take on the attributes of heroes as well. In saying that he will take care of the people now that Escobar is gone, Juan Brujo, in his assumed role of a satanic druglord, personifies the narco character as an outlaw hero.

Their identification with the marginalized groups in Mexican and border society continued and expanded on Brujeria’s next album, *Raza Odiada* (Hated Race). The subject matter, while still gory and blasphemous, also took a distinctly political turn, and addressed current events such as California governor Pete Wilson and Proposition 187, racism, and illegal immigration, in addition to drug trafficking. In the album’s title track, the song begins with a racist mock speech from Pete Wilson, with punk singer Jello Biafra as a guest artist acting as Wilson, in which he says,

They keep coming, savage brown skinned hordes, across the customs checkpoints in San Diego, between backed up cars on our freeways, they hang their laundry out the window, they do jobs white people are too cool to do themselves. I don’t care if it starts a race war, I don’t care if it brings every bigot out of the closet and gets every brown skinned savage beaten up on the street...Who cares as long as I, Pete Wilson, am governor and president?...I, Pete Wilson gave you proposition 187...In this country you speak English or you get out...I, Pete Wilson, will be president.

The last few sentences are interspersed with Spanish commentary by Juan Brujo and an anonymous Mexican man, who translates Wilson’s speech into Spanish for Brujo. They are horrified as they listen to Wilson talk of his hatred for immigrants, and when the Mexican man tells Brujo that Wilson said he wants to kill the (Mexican) race, Brujo asks for his gun. The speech ends with Wilson screaming and the sound of shots fired, implying that Brujo has killed Wilson. The song’s lyrics continue to call on illegal immigrants as brothers and criticize Wilson for his hatred of the Mexican race:⁹

Wetback brothers of the United States, who’s gonna fuck you the hardest isn’t Satan. We are the hated race in the white world. Chosen by American hands, Pete Wilson is full of hate. He’s looking to fuck up our race. / Mexican brothers, don’t be idiots. Holocaust of the race has already begun...First wetbacks, later niggers, purely white or purely dead.

This song emphasizes the issues of immigration and racism, and positions Juan Brujo in a heroic role by having him shoot Pete Wilson and warn against racist American power. It takes a directly political stance by critiquing the issue of Proposition 187, which had just been passed in California and was being fought over in federal courts when the album was released. The measure severely curtailed the rights of illegal immigrants, denying them many social services, including public education. Many protesters voiced the fear that this law would profile all Latinos as suspect, and lead to unequal education and increased discrimination.¹⁰ Brujeria echoes this protest in their lyrics, by calling discrimination against illegal immigrants the beginning of a holocaust that will lead to the death of all non-whites. This pro-immigrant stance is also clearly shown in the song “La Migra (Cruza la Frontera II)” (Border Patrol (Crossing the Border II)). This was Brujeria’s second treatment of the topic, which began with “Cruza la Frontera” on the *Matando Güeros* album discussed above, but “La Migra” was much more politically-oriented than the earlier song. The lyrics directly address immigrants, and are critical of both “coyotes” and the Border Patrol:¹¹

Thieving coyotes, they fuck you with the bribery. Follow El Brujo, I’ll bring you for free /...Fucking Border Patrol is waiting for you, they brought you back with a beating. / The border patrol found your grandmother in the desert, they order her to Tijuana bound with sticks. El Brujo has good contraband, Social Security numbers and green cards. / The same border patrol lets you pass for money...Follow El Brujo, I’ll bring you to the north.

Beyond its political criticism, this song also again puts Brujeria in a heroic role, stating that Juan Brujo will bring people across for free, in contrast to the “thieving coyotes.” In the video to “La Migra,” it shows him doing just that, while the Border Patrol is shown beating people and dumping dead bodies in the desert. The video for another song from the *Raza Odiada* album, “La Ley de Plomo” (The Law of Lead), also shows footage of immigrants crossing the border, interspersed with shots of the band playing, and ending with Brujeria capturing two border

patrol agents, letting them run into the desert, and then chasing them down in a jeep waving the Mexican flag. This shows Brujeria in a position of power as opposed to the fleeing border patrol agents, and as using this power to help the Mexican immigrants, which they are identified with by the flag in addition to their actions. By engaging political subject matter, taking a vocal stance on the issue of immigration, and positioning themselves within the immigrants' struggle, Brujeria solidified their personification of the outlaw hero who stands up for the marginalized against the power of the border patrol or racist politician.

Along with an increased lyrical focus on the heroic outlaw, the *Raza Odiada* album also began to feature images of bandits, making use of the historical associations of these figures as heroes to the oppressed. The cover, rather than the gory images of their earlier albums, featured a Zapatista figure on the front, along with a more traditional bandido image inside. Next to this is a letter written by SubComandante Marcos, who is reported to have endorsed the band by wearing their shirts.¹² This associates Brujeria not only with the connotations of the historical outlaw, but also with the current cause of the Zapatistas, as part of a revolutionary movement of oppressed peoples. The album contains several songs that refer to the Zapatistas as heroic figures, with songs such as "Revolucion" (Revolution) criticizing the P.R.I. government of Mexico and calling for revolt, with SubComandante Marcos as the leader. The use of this bandit imagery acted as a historical and regional referent that enhanced the band's anti-authoritarian message in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border. It drew connections between the paradigm of the traditional bandit as a hero to the people, the Zapatistas, the modern image of the narcotraficante as an outgrowth of this, and the band Brujeria as personifying these heroic characteristics.

The third album Brujeria released, called *Brujerizmo*, continued this theme, with the song "Division del Norte" (Northern Division) named after Mexican bandit and Revolutionary War General Pancho Villa's troops. This song calls again for revolution, and appeals to Pancho Villa, in addition to the Zapatistas, as role models:¹³

Pancho Villa has not died, I've got his spirit right here with me...Zapatismo has not died, I've got its spirit right here with me...Northern Division! So that Mexico can live! /...Long live our revolution, once again Villa will command... Get everyone together, cry out for war!

This song refers to Villa and the Zapatistas as heroic figures, and claims that their bandido spirit lives on in Brujeria. The band personifies the heroic characteristics of these outlaws, and will gather the people and renew the fight, acting for the good of Mexico.

Also on this album, Brujeria began to use themes of folk Catholicism, rather than the satanic sacrifices pictured in earlier works. Although the ideas are still strongly anti-Christian, they are portrayed as an alternate religion that makes use of elements common in the worship of folk saints, such as altars and candle offerings. This religion is called "Brujerizmo," and it uses Catholic iconography associated with saints, but altered to reflect Brujeria and the themes that they engage with. In conjunction with the bandit imagery, this reinforced the band's connection to Mexico and the border community, while also acting to parody the Christian religion. It also emphasizes the heroic nature of the bandido protagonist, and of the band Brujeria as their personification, by elevating them to sainthood.

The *Brujerizmo* album was the last to include all new material, although there have been two hits compilations released since then, *Mextremist Hits*, on former band member Billy Gould's Koolarrow Records label, and *The Mexecutioner: The Best of Brujeria*, on Roadrunner Records. There is a change in style evident between these two, as the band expanded their commercial appeal. The first to be released, *Mextremist Hits*, continues Brujeria's previous use of border-related paradigms, and the emphasis on their identification with these heroic figures and with Mexico. They use a mix of death, black magic, and bandido imagery on the cover, and as on the previous albums, include lyrics, credits, and band member's pseudonyms, all in Spanish. The band's biography on the Koolarrow website discusses these themes and their cultural relevance, saying that Brujeria's songs

invoke taboos that shake the very foundations of these conservatively Catholic, patently corrupt [Latin American] countries. Nevertheless, their degree of success only illustrates that in fact there is a connection being made between this politically incorrect group and a strong base of fans. And that, while many view them as destroyers of traditional values, many others actually see them as proponents of these values, and just another article in the history in a country that honors its' rebels and its' freedom.¹⁴

This is also the first album to include a photo of the band, and although it is an extremely washed out black and white image hidden under the CD holder, it still shifts focus away from the band's mythical persona by showing the real people behind it. It shows the band members posed in Brujeria baseball caps, their faces covered with bandanas or masks, so as not to reveal their identities, and also as a reference to the Zapatistas and traditional bandit imagery. Some are wearing Mexican serapes, and Juan Brujo, with the Mexican flag as his bandana, holds a machete in the foreground. In the center and behind the others is the figure of a traditionally dressed Mexican bandit; with bullets strapped across his shoulders and a sombrero on his head, but the face beneath the hat is that of Coco Loco, the decapitated head from the *Matando Güeros* album. This is not a traditional publicity photo, being disguised, hardly visible, and placed inside the CD cover, but it still marks the beginning of a stronger focus on celebrity status within the band.

After this release, Brujeria switched both line-ups, losing two members, and labels, going from the independent Koolarrow back to the larger Roadrunner Records, in relation to internal disagreement over this celebrity focus. A former member of the band said that Brujo, the group's leader, "began to see himself making Mexican history," and the group began to draw attention not only to their ideas, but to themselves as celebrity figures.¹⁵ While they had often glorified the band in their lyrics, as the inheritors of the bandido spirit and heroes to poor immigrants, this glorification acted to reinforce their ideas, not to draw attention to individual band members outside of their assumed personas. Due to their concept-oriented depiction of the band as satanic Mexican drug dealers, the association of band members with a heroic persona only reinforced the connection of their narco image with this heroism, since there was no identifiable real person involved in the association. However, coinciding with the *Mexecutioner* release, Brujeria stopped refusing to tour and do interviews, were actively promoting live shows, and also began to advertise the various members' connections to other bands, with press releases and stickers on their album packaging. While not officially revealing their true identities or changing their lyrical content, this nevertheless shifted the emphasis away from the heroic outlaw and to the celebrity band member.

The *Mexecutioner* release reflects these changing priorities by featuring a band photo on the front cover, shifting away from the concept-oriented art of their earlier works, where the covers referenced the lyrical subject matter, to a focus on the band as celebrities. The photo is similar to the one used on *Mextremist Hits*, with all the band members masked, but it is in color and clearly focused. Coco Loco is still present, but with his bandido garb exchanged for a button-up shirt, bandana, and Brujeria cap. This album also has promotional text on the back cover, written in English. Although it does not reveal the band's true identities, it does mention "rumors" that they are members of Fear Factory, Faith No More, Napalm Death, Cradle of Filth, and Dimmu Borgir, all well known groups. Inside the cover, rather than lyrics, there is a hype-filled history of the band, also written in English, and liner notes inviting the reader to see that "Brujeria is the only way of life." Underneath the CD, there is a reproduced newspaper article from the Houston Chronicle, where a photocopied image of the band's first CD cover was found shortly after a homicide, and thought by police to be a murder clue. This article emphasizes the controversy surrounding the band, but through real events, and thus as celebrities, rather than through the concept-oriented fiction of their druglord personas. The bandit references have not disappeared, there is an image of Bandido Coco inside the cover, but they have faded into the background, and most of the photos are from the band's recent live performances in the U.S. and Mexico. The effect of this album is drastically different than their previous work, eschewing the Spanish language lyrics and underworld imagery for promotional text in English and band photos, and thereby sacrificing part of the enigma of the band in favor of increased accessibility and celebrity. However, the lyrical content of the songs has not changed, the live photos are all masked, and the band retains their border focus. Thus the question of whether they have "sold out" is a complicated one often faced by underground media, where, as a mass media commodity, they need to be "mainstreamed" in order to reach a larger audience, but in doing so risk losing an element of their original appeal to the underground.¹⁶ In large part, the issue is one of content, and whether the message is altered in order to gain appeal. While Brujeria's increased emphasis on the band members as celebrities necessarily detracts from their role as satanic Mexican druglords, this image does not disappear, and neither do their politicized lyrics. The constructed nature of their image was not unknown before this, and it did not seem to detract from the relevance of their material. To some degree, promotional packaging unavoidably alters their message, but at the same time what remains can reach a larger audience, thereby increasing its potential effect.

Brujeria's live performances allow them to connect with their audience in a more directly experiential setting.

These shows are recorded on an underground DVD called *Permiso de Satán* (Permission of Satan), not commercially released, but available at performances and circulated among fans. It contains footage of live performances in Chicago, Monterrey, Mexico, and McAllen, Texas. These concerts are extremely theatrical, in that they make use of props, costumes, and calculated dialogue to create a performance art piece that seems to take precedence over the lyrical performance of the songs. The Chicago show begins with what appears to be a Border Patrol agent on stage, threatening to shut down the group like he “shuts down Mexicans at the border.” The stage is draped with Mexican flags and a Brujeria banner stating, “Viva Mexico, Viva la Revolución, Viva Brujeria!” (Long live Mexico, Long live the Revolution, Long live Brujeria!). There are two traditional bandido images also on this banner on either side of the band name with bandanas over their faces and a gun in each hand. The band members perform in masks and speak only Spanish between songs, never breaking character despite their consciousness of the celebrity role, as they are surrounded by adoring fans. This imagery is all consistent with the band’s thematic emphasis, as are the song videos included after the live performances, which are enactments of their border related subject matter. The performance art aspect of these shows acts to increase the atmosphere surrounding the characters, adding to rather than detracting from their message. This is politically motivated performance art, dealing with border issues, but found at a death metal show rather than an art gallery. As has been discussed frequently in performance studies scholarship, theatrics and politics often go hand-in-hand, and work together to involve people that might otherwise not be motivated by either.¹⁷ Brujeria’s performance art speaks the language of their death metal audience, both in terms of Spanish, for the largely Latino fan base, and in terms of subcultural style, including the outlaw persona, to articulate political content in a way that their audiences can relate to it.¹⁸

In some ways, this DVD does reflect the growing focus on celebrity that was also shown on Brujeria’s last album. Besides the concert and video footage, it contains a clip of Wee Man from the MTV show *Jackass*, dressed as a Brujeria member and learning to speak “Spanglish,” along with random footage of drug deals, pot smoking, and people hanging out in Mexico. Although the band members are always shown in masks, even when playing foosball at a bar, this video documentation nevertheless acts largely to reinforce their status as celebrities. While it demonstrates the band’s connection to drug culture, it once again shifts emphasis to the band Brujeria rather than their satanic druglord personas, or the heroic outlaws to whom they compare these personas. However, by showing band members interacting with fans and “hanging out” in Mexico, these clips also add to the band’s connection with their fans. The live shows, while a departure from their enigmatic refusal to play due to their supposedly “wanted” status, also strengthen these connections. They allow face-to-face interaction and personal experience of thematically focused performance art, which uses imagery of the heroic outlaw to direct awareness towards border issues.

The commercialization seen in Brujeria is similar to that of the narcocorrido, where groups have transitioned away from singing true tales of druglords’ lives and deaths, in the style of older heroic smuggler corridos. While narcocorrido groups do often have strong connections with the drug trafficking underworld, these songs often do not tell literal truth, and position the singer more as a celebrity than the bearer of news. Commercialization is part of the mass-mediated form, in which artists need to sell records in order to be successful. In the case of Brujeria, a decline in members’ other musical involvements led to a focus on the group as more of a business, and thus to more commercial means of promotion. Due to its commercial nature, mass media transmission removes some of the direct connection between artists, fans, and immediate local events, in an attempt to garner a more general appeal. This can result in the increasing emphasis on the artist as celebrity, common to both Brujeria and many contemporary narcocorrido groups such as Los Tucanes de Tijuana, who perform theatrical shows with the band members taking on the identity of drug traffickers. However, it is important to remember that although Brujeria and the narcocorrido are both mass-mediated, with a transnational audience, they nevertheless remain underground subcultural styles.

The music of these groups is listened to by select subcultural audiences that connect with their subject matter. These bands and audiences use the songs, and their associated costumes and imagery, to dramatize these concerns and express them publicly. The use of the traditional bandido image by narcocorrido groups and Brujeria follows subcultural patterns of homology, where there is a conceptual fit between their styles, in this case the bandido paradigm, and their focal concerns of pride in Mexican identity and rebellion against border authorities.¹⁹ In contemporary Mexico, border regions, and immigrant populations in the U.S., topics such as drug trafficking

and immigration are of central community concern, and both styles of music express this. The norteño style of narcocorridos appeals to a larger audience for Mexican music that might not listen based solely on the narrative of the narco as a heroic persona, while Brujeria appeals to a death metal audience drawn to the heavy music, gore, and anti-Christian themes common to that group, without necessarily relating specifically to border concerns. This broader appeal allows both of these forms to expand their listening audiences and to draw relational lines between already present values, such as Mexican identity in norteño music and taboo subjects in death metal, and the border issue of drug trafficking. As discussed earlier, mass media creates networks of transmission that can allow a subcultural group to expand beyond a specific region. The mediated form, as an expression of their identity, is able to reach others that also relate to their concerns.²⁰

Although mass media allows this broader dissemination of their music, both narcocorridos and Brujeria remain subcultural and underground. As subcultural styles, norteño and death metal both lack a large mainstream appeal, and may be featured on public or college radio programs, or Spanish stations in the case of norteño, but are unlikely to be heard on major broadcasting networks. Add to this the forbidden element of their subject matter, and the possibility narrows even more. Narcocorridos have been banned from radio play by the Mexican government due to their controversial subject matter. Similarly, when Brujeria achieved a radio hit in Mexico with their song “Don Quixote Marijuana,” it was quickly banned by government officials. Neither narcocorridos nor death metal are specifically prohibited in the U.S., but profit-oriented mass media oligopolies, combined with FCC content restrictions, effectively prevent airplay. This censorship has mixed results, both limiting their audience and increasing their appeal, since part of their success is due to their forbidden nature. Censorship only feeds this image, and both narcocorridos and Brujeria have exploited the controversy. Albums are often advertised as banned, and Brujeria gleefully reports every show that is cancelled as censorship action, along with reproducing on their albums such images as the newspaper article connecting their artwork to a homicide and the wanted poster, originally for Pablo Escobar on the “El Patron” single, later modified to name “Juan Brujo y banda Brujeria” on the DVD.

Despite this consciously constructed image, and the fact that their songs may not reflect literal truth, they are still seen by their fans as showing a form of truth that is forbidden in mainstream culture. This viewpoint is common to listeners of both narcocorridos and death metal such as Brujeria. While not many death metal bands deal with the border-specific issues of Brujeria, the majority of them do discuss gruesome aspects of death and blasphemous themes. Their lyrics are not interpreted by fans as literally true, in that the bands are truly murderous Satan worshippers, but they are still seen to discuss aspects of society that do exist. Like the narcocorrido fan, listeners of Brujeria see these issues as relevant to their lives and the songs as making a valid statement. Even if they are fictionalized accounts, they act as a representation of truth.

The image of Brujeria in particular was always a constructed fiction, even before emphasizing the band members’ role as celebrities. The members are not only professional musicians, rather than satanic druglords, but they are also, with the exception of one, not Mexican, and some of the current members are actually British. However, the fictional nature of their image does not seem to negatively affect their reception by fans. They are exceedingly popular in Mexico, one band member saying, “while most people in Latin America are bombarded by Anglo imagery in rock music, this group became one of their own” (Anonymous). A recent show review in a Mexican newspaper brings up the fact that they are not really Mexican, asking “how can a foreign group scream ‘¡Viva Mexico!’?” (Long live Mexico!). However, they conclude that Brujeria’s foreign origins and rudimentary Spanish do not matter to the fans, because the show was very popular and fans traveled from all over Mexico to see it.²¹ In the same way that the murderous satanic themes speak to a death metal subculture, the border-oriented focus on Mexican identity speaks to the Latino community in Mexico, the border regions, and other immigrant communities in the U.S. Fans, who appear to be mostly Latino, identify strongly with the band, sending in photos picturing themselves dressed up in the style of the band members, and discussing them in online message boards (Pagina Aficionados). The issues dealt with in their songs are important, whether directly political, such as Proposition 187, or more generally focused, such as their pride in a Mexican identity. They may not truly be from Mexico, but they still offer representation to the Latino youth involved in the extreme music scene. Their use of both the traditional bandido paradigm and the contemporary narco image add to their border related lyrics, to create a historically derived and powerfully resonant image of the outlaw on the U.S.-Mexican border.

This use of historical paradigms combined with present day imagery and a constructed transnational image is

associated with postmodern cultural production, and is often seen most clearly in border areas due to the meeting of cultures. As a form of deterritorialization, this makes reference to a disconnect between the popular and the national, in favor of a more fluid and transnational sense of identity. Rather than a strictly linked national popular culture, artistic production becomes part of the transnational networks that characterize postmodern society, and may use images from, and be consumed by a popular audience that stretches across national boundaries. At the same time, a new form of reterritorialization can take place, which examines this hybrid identity and situates the cultural form, and by extension its' audience, within the global system.²² This reterritorialization bases identity on this very hybridity itself, claiming it not as a mix of incomplete parts, but as a new multi-faceted whole. In border areas, constant cultural crossover creates a mix of contradictions, and to withstand these necessitates a tolerance for ambiguity. Capitalizing on the expanded possibilities of these multiple parts rather than their disagreements, a hybrid and fluid state of identity emerges. This fluid identity is suited not only to border societies, but to the postmodern global culture as well.²³ This globalized economy undermines many traditional foundations of social identity, but also opens up methods and resources for the self-fashioning of identity, as it becomes not only a category of birth, but also of choice and participation.²⁴

Brujeria exemplifies this fluid identity in their self-fashioned theatrical personas, demonstrating aspects of both deterritorialization and reterritorialization through their consciously constructed transnational image. They play on the flexibility of identity that allows them to invent themselves as satanic Mexican druglords, while examining their place, and that of their audience, in this transnational system by discussing border culture in their song lyrics and images. This examination is a form of reterritorializing in a postmodern world, and also suggests the cognitive mapping called for by Jameson, in order to make politically relevant postmodern art. While Brujeria assembles a variety of images from past and present in creating their own, this is neither the bricolage nor the pastiche for which Jameson criticizes much postmodern art, since these images are neither divorced from their original meanings nor randomly selected.²⁵

Instead, they are chosen precisely because of their historically-rooted meaning, in order to add to the transnational anti-authoritarian image of the band and to create a politically relevant discussion of border culture in the contemporary world.

Although Brujeria has begun to tour, interview, and project a celebrity image, this does not necessarily detract from their message, and may actually add to it, by spreading their music to more people and enabling fans to personally experience the performance. Their subject matter retains a border outlaw focus, expanded to include endorsement of the Zapatista groups, critique of Castro in Cuba, and other related issues beyond the physical border region. A recent Brujeria shirt depicts Juan Brujo once again holding up a severed head, but instead of Coco Loco, the face is that of George W. Bush. Thus they seem to be maintaining their border outlaw persona, despite its constructed nature becoming common knowledge. While the celebrity aspects of mass media may distract some from the concept, it has allowed them to expand the reach of the band beyond the physical border region, to a broader audience and subject matter.

The heroic model of the outlaw, with its historic roots in the Robin Hood type figure of the social bandit, is a tenacious paradigm used to express community struggles over unequal power relations. Through symbolic status reversal, the heroic outlaw figure allows subordinate groups to reclaim power denied to them in their real-life conditions.

In the contemporary period of border conflicts surrounding transnational capitalism, Brujeria continues this tradition in their personification of Satanic Mexican druglords. Through these theatrical personas, they dramatize concerns with the border-related issues of illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Like the narcocorrido, Brujeria is a subcultural form of mass media depicting drug trafficking heroes as resistance to the dominant system in a postmodern transnational context.

The heroic narcotraficante is a contemporary border manifestation of the outlaw hero as a "thick symbol," through which cultural understandings are expressed, contested, and disseminated. Although narcocorridos and Brujeria may be mass-mediated commercial compositions, their continued use of these motifs confirms their power.²⁶ Persistent social tensions and inequalities in the border area have created a cultural climate where the outlaw hero is an important aspect of community belief and identity, and contemporary border circumstances have put the

narco in this role.

Notes

- 1 John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 175.
- 2 John Holmes McDowell, *Poetry and Violence: The Ballad Tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 200.
- 3 McDowell, *Poetry and Violence*, 200.
- 4 Anonymous.
- 5 Anonymous.
- 6 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 19; Ian Christie, *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* (New York: Harper Entertainment, 2003), 248.
- 7 Susan McClary, *Same As It Ever Was: Youth Culture and Music Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, eds. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 34–38.
- 8 See [Appendix](#) for complete Spanish lyrics and English translation.
- 9 See [Appendix](#) for complete Spanish lyrics and English translation.
- 10 Rubén Martínez, *Prop. 187: Birth of a Movement? The Late Great Mexican Border: Reports from a Disappearing Line*, eds. Bobby Byrd and Susannah Mississippi Byrd (El Paso TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 1996), 149.
- 11 See [Appendix](#) for complete Spanish lyrics and English translation.
- 12 “Koolarrow Artist: Brujeria,” www.koolarrow.com/artists/brujeria.shtml (accessed March 5, 2005).
- 13 See [Appendix](#) for complete Spanish lyrics and English translation.
- 14 “Koolarrow Artist: Brujeria,” <http://www.koolarrow.com/artists/brujeria.shtml> (accessed March 5, 2005).
- 15 Anonymous
- 16 See Stephen Duncombe’s discussion in *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), 141–73.
- 17 David A. Schlossman, *Actors and Activists: Politics, Performance, and Exchange among Social Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 88, 111–19).
- 18 Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 178.
- 19 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 23.
- 20 Linda Dégh, *American Folklore and the Mass Media* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 23–24.
- 21 Gerardo Wario, “¡Abracadabronsísimos!: Brujería En El Café Iguana,” *La Rocka*, <http://www.brujeria.com/article.html> (accessed March 8, 2005).
- 22 Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. Lopez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) 229–41.
- 23 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 70–80.

24 Roger D. Abrahams, "Identity," in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, ed. Burt Feintuch (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 201, 212.

25 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 562, 584–87.

26 Mark Cameron Edberg, *El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 112.

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