

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF HIP HOP NOSTALGIA: INDIGENEITY, INTIMACY AND ‘ROOTS’ IN MEXICO

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways that hip hop musicians in Mexico City use their creative practice to perpetuate musical traditions associated with indigenous and national identity. Using the connected concepts of ‘cultural intimacy’ and ‘structural nostalgia’ it highlights how, while hip hop was explicitly used to critique Mexican neoliberalism, hip hop recording practices reflected some of the economic and ideological conditions created by neoliberal economic policy, and the historical ‘invention’ of Mexican cultural ‘roots’ in the period after the Mexican Revolution (1910–20). This article looks to bring out two main points: first, the ways that writing, recording, and performing songs formed a locus for sociality among rap musicians, and second, that the interaction between the ethnographer and these musicians opens up possibilities for experiences of social discomfort, as well as *bonhomie*, that can help to foreground the different cultural intimacies to which these actors are accustomed.

Keywords: cultural intimacy, ethnomusicology, hip hop, indigeneity, Mexico

INTRODUCTION¹

One phrase that stuck in my mind from conversations I had with a number of rappers from Mexico City during almost a year of fieldwork between 2012 and 2015 was ‘borders don’t have memories’. This phrase—which served a similar function to the common English phrase ‘what happens in [place] stays in [place]’—was used on several occasions as a way of convincing me, in jocular fashion, to engage in intimate relations with Mexican women; having a partner at the time living in another country, it was an appeal I often found

myself resisting rhetorically from the beginning (‘borders might not have memories, but I do!’; ‘borders might not have memories, but Facebook does!’).² This appeal can be interpreted in various ways. In a sense, it could be understood as a way of drawing me into the intimate lives of those making it, the same web of social relations, excitedly whispered secrets, and potential personal embarrassment that my consultants were themselves party to. It certainly *was* an attempt to have fun, create a running joke, and cultivate a meaningful, memorable shared experience. On another level, it could be seen to test the waters of our relationship, responding

to my status as an outsider using ethnographic research to scrutinize these individuals' social and creative practices. After all, the figure of the researcher who maintains 'neutrality'—or, better, 'disinterestedness'—by preserving social distance between themselves and their 'respondents' is potentially threatening to such webs of intimacy.

To a large extent, I was an outsider figure during my time in Mexico, whether I wanted to be or not: I came and went, never staying for too long in just one place; attended concerts, where I often took pictures and made recordings rather than dancing to the music; and in general existed as an awkwardly out-of-place, tall, pale-skinned 'sore thumb'. Yet this was a city to which I felt, to some degree, a close connection, having lived with a local family for several months on the metropolis' dusty peripheries while working as a volunteer in 2007, and having developed my own strong sense of longing for this area in the intervening years. I was also familiar with the trope of the *macho* Mexican man with multiple romantic partners which these rappers seemed, in however playful a fashion, to be invoking: the first Spanish-language conversation to which I had been party while in Mexico involved a male Mexican NGO manager explaining to an interpreting American volunteer that he had one lover for each state in the country, before asking her whether she wanted to run a chess club. One could perceive, in fact, a tinge of revolutionary nostalgia about such a (jocular) boast; this trope carries a particular association with the (now often highly romanticized) Mexican Revolution of 1910–20, when military leaders Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, who now figure as the purest icons of rebellion from this chaotic era, had many simultaneous long-term relationships with women in different places across the country. In other words, the appeal, 'but borders have no memories!' had

much to do with the close intersection between nostalgia and intimacy.

Stereotypes such as those I encountered surrounding Mexican *machismo* possess utility for structuring intimate social life in the present, and may be understood in relation to Michael Herzfeld's (2005) closely connected terms 'cultural intimacy' and 'structural nostalgia'. For Herzfeld, cultural intimacy constitutes the 'aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (2005: 3). Herzfeld cites the particularly revealing case of East and West Germany, 'mutually hostile but culturally inseparable states' which 'traded negative views of one another' sourced from 'a stock of pejorative stereotypes of Germans in general' (ibid.: 57). If such cultural intimacy forms a particular means of social cohesion, so does Herzfeld's conceptualization of 'structural nostalgia': the collective representation of 'an unspoiled and irrecoverable past (...) a time before time' (ibid.: 147). Structural nostalgia centres on a feeling of 'damaged reciprocity' or sense of 'mutuality that has been, perhaps irreversibly, ruptured by the self-interest of modern times' (ibid.: 149); as well as being frequently invoked as a basis for national identity, it has also proven attractive to anthropologists (ibid.: 150). Herzfeld sets out to demonstrate that engaging with these concepts allows students of nationalism to explore 'the relationship between the view from the bottom and the view from the top' (ibid.: 3).

Building on Herzfeld's work, a number of recent studies have focused on the ways that musical practice may form a locus for the cultivation of forms of intimacy within and across given social groups (Bigenho 2012; Stokes 2010; Butterworth 2014). In a study

on the performance of Japanese Andean music enthusiasts, for instance, Bigenho introduces the concept of ‘intimate distance’ to capture a sense, often reflected in musical performance, of ‘feeling simultaneously oh so close to and yet still so far from an Other’ (2012: 25). Examining the politico-emotional landscape of Turkey, meanwhile, Martin Stokes (2010) argues that the governmental liberalism that had, until recently, held sway in the country was refracted through a nostalgia defined in relation to popular musicians. For Stokes, this case study highlights the possibility for (music-focused) mass media to create and perpetuate forms of nostalgia and intimacy.

Hip hop is a genre whose reliance on sampling and frequent emphasis of the local opens up great possibilities for the production of these feelings. As Hegarty puts it, ‘[e]arly hip hop use of sampling for melodic fragments or beats to be looped explicitly set out to make audible the connections between forms of black American music, now becoming interlocked layers, and a history always available for reuse’ (2007: 185). As reflected in a good deal of scholarship to date (cf. Dimitriadis 2009; Schloss 2004), then, there is good reason to examine the ways in which the various expressive practices associated with hip hop are used to create, maintain, and challenge formulations of ‘self’ and ‘Other’ in variously close-knit and public settings. Equally, as Schloss (2014) emphasises, there are two central reasons that ethnographic approaches may provide an especially fruitful route into studying hip hop. First, ethnography constitutes a particularly useful research tool for investigating the relationship between hip hop creativity and localized forms of social interaction. Second, researching hip hop, as a set of artistic and social practices among highly mobile and often assertive actors, can

help to reflect attention back onto the process of conducting ethnography itself (2014: 6–7).

Studying hip hop in Mexico may provide a particularly revealing route into these questions, especially given hip hop’s status in this setting as a relatively novel creative and social practice that makes thorough use of new media technologies and whose origins lie in the derelict, post-industrial urban spaces of the United States. This, in part, speaks to the cross-border cultural relations between the two countries.³ But the richness of this genre for social life also reflects the ways that the practice of sampling allows hip hop creativity to be understood as a means of reviving or reconstructing the musical past. Indeed, the importance of ‘nostalgia’, ‘longing’, and ‘intimacy’ during my research with hip hop artists in Mexico City was heightened by the fact that several of these groups perceived their task to be the maintenance or preservation of cultural ‘roots’ associated with Mexican indigeneity. To this end, they deployed a technology embedded in domestic life: the digital home studio. This technology underpinned a practice of constructing tracks around sampled, manipulated Mexican musical ‘heritage’, often involving instruments associated with a longed-for, indigenous, pre-Hispanic past. In this way, Herzfeld’s notion of ‘cultural intimacy’ and more vernacular domestic, familial, or personal senses of intimacy came to coexist closely in my research.

In this article, I explore the varied and open-ended ways in which hip hop creative practice facilitated intimate forms of identity-making and sociality in the partially private, partially public context of the digital home studio. I foreground the multiple referentiality of the word ‘roots’ in this context, where it was associated both with the origins of the hip hop genre in the United States and Mexico’s

pre-Hispanic past. Equally, I discuss ways in which engaging ethnographically with the concept of 'roots' could highlight productive intra-group disagreement. Finally, I reflect upon the experience of conducting an ethnography of such 'roots' as a researcher acutely aware of their often comparatively recent top-down, state-led 'construction' as a source of national identity. Researching the ways that hip hop creative practice serves to produce nostalgia, I demonstrate, is an enterprise that draws the researcher into new webs of closeness, embarrassment, longing, and awkwardness—sensations which speak strongly to the experience of conducting ethnography.

LISTENING TO ROOTS

My doctoral research in Mexico City took place with activist musicians performing in support of the pro-indigenous rights, autonomist Zapatista movement, itself a political phenomenon whose members have paid much attention over decades to efforts to preserve and maintain forms of culture associated with indigenous identity (Barmeyer 2009; Bob 2005). These musicians—almost none of whom had achieved sufficient popularity or economic success to turn professional—played music of a variety of styles: rock, ska, cumbia, *nueva canción*, reggae soundsystem, and corridos, to name a few. What united almost all, however, was the notion of using music as a medium or vehicle for the transmission of political messages which were generally supportive of the Zapatista movement while explicitly criticizing the Mexican government and neoliberalism. This goal lent hip hop—a highly text-oriented genre (cf. Baker 2011: 114)—particular value, and this genre was, correspondingly, especially well-represented among the groups with which I conducted research. Nonetheless, it was perhaps surprising

that, within this milieu, hip hop tended to be marked out by the urge to refer to what were understood as pre-Hispanic musical and cultural traditions. This was perceptible not only in some of these hip hop groups' names—Teokalli (a term in Nahuatl meaning either 'place where the lightning strikes' or 'place of the gods'), To Cuic Libre (a hybrid Spanish-Nahuatl phrase meaning 'free song'), and Nahua Tecuani (a Nahuatl phrase signifying the 'clear sound of a beast/wild animal')—but also in their song writing and performance styles, which often featured indigenous languages, 'pre-Hispanic' instruments, and ritual allusions to indigenous beliefs in 'Mother Earth'.

Rap group Re Crew, for instance, performed the same ritual each time they gave a concert. In it, they asked the crowd to salute with them the 'seven paths of Mother Earth [*tonantzin tlalli*]', and subsequently turned to the east, west, north, south, the sky, the earth, and the heart, marking each path by blowing into a conch shell. The band told me that they had been performing this ritual since becoming active on the local rap scene, and valued it as a part of an essential national culture which they could work to preserve:

[E]ach time it takes shape more, but equally we can just stick with knowing more about our culture, and keep trying to transmit it to more people. Above all these are the essences (...) of Mexico, and we want to share it, share that good energy [*buena vibra*] in our way, native to here. (Interview, Higer, 27-04-13)

Another member of the band, Kiper, described the ritual as 'part of our culture' which they sought 'to rescue. It's not going to be, either, a hundred per cent, but if we can rescue a part that's good'.⁴ Thus, for this group, their

performances served as means of gaining access to an indigenous Mexican cultural past—tacitly made concrete, perhaps, in the admission that their performances could only partially capture such history.

Within Re Crew's music there emerged an important connection between indigeneity, place, and rootedness. The band was based in Chalco, a city on the south-eastern fringes of the Mexico City metropolitan area. Chalco had a long history of occupation by an ethnic group called the *chalcos* prior to the Spanish invasion—after which it was formally marked as an administrative unit—but had recently witnessed huge increases in crime and homicide (especially against women) linked to the activities of drug cartels. I had lived in neighbouring Valle de Chalco for four months in 2007 as a volunteer, just after the administration of Vicente Calderón, following a national election in 2006, had declared its now-infamous 'war on drugs'. One weekend during which I went to stay with Re Crew left me with the vivid memory of being driven around the city late at night to the tune of a song the band had recorded entitled 'Chalco', to which they sang along at full volume. This song juxtaposed Chalco's pre-Hispanic past with the deeply corrupt, violent nature of its present. While 'the ancient warriors came back again' as Chalco is 'reborn of asphalt', the present has fallen prey to 'dogs'—that is, politicians ('Dogs hunt behind an urn/ballot box'; 'Dogs on a podium, dressing up poverty').⁵ Indeed, within this song the act of remembering the city's grandiose indigenous past emerges as a catalyst for critiquing its present, ruined by the actions of politicians and criminals ('Despite the abundant shit, I give everything for my *barrio* [neighbourhood]/Chalco, we remember its beginnings/The government and crime, it's the same abyss').

Nahua Tecuani, meanwhile, was a hip hop musician from the state of Puebla, to the south-east of Mexico City, who I saw perform on several occasions in the capital. In his songs, the rapper sampled a variety of music to accompany his rapping, incorporating styles associated with the United States (such as heavy guitar riffs and harmonica solos) as well as those indexing indigeneity in Mexico and Latin America in general (like, for example, the salsa sample used as the base of his song 'Shouting War'). The rapper explained to me that, in his music, he tried 'to mix together the sounds of the city with the folklore of the peoples, the indigenous peoples from here, from Mexico'. It was this desire which led him to perform live with a *jarana*, a small, typically five-stringed guitar-shaped instrument used in *son jarocho*, a genre of music associated with the south-eastern Mexican state of Veracruz. Nahua Tecuani 'mixed' or 'fused' different musical styles within a broader rap framework so that 'people can identify themselves not only with the city, but with the [indigenous] peoples'.⁶

Indeed, this rapper's discourse around such musical fusion also placed great emphasis on a sense of 'damaged reciprocity' (Herzfeld 2005: 149), marking a point at which such an act became overtly political. Nahua sought to use his music to foment 'awakening' among a people which had its 'eyes closed', a goal most evidently reflected in his song 'Despierta Pueblo'. In this song, he raps 'awaken, now, sleep no more, open your eyes, see the truth', before going on to denounce Mexico's problems of violence, the high price of water, and violence against women ('the water is so expensive, the blood spilled; one woman was raped, another kidnapped'). Nonetheless, as in the case of Re Crew, critiques of the fallen present were accompanied by notions of an 'edenic past' (Herzfeld 2001:

102), linked to indigenous identity and defined by a common connection to the land and one another. During one performance I witnessed in Valle de Chalco, Nahua Tecuani introduced ‘Despierta Pueblo’—a song which opens with a sample of a reverb-laden wooden flute reminiscent of stereotypical musical depictions of the Andes—by painting an idyllic picture of such reciprocal, communal life:

When I sampled this, I was imagining all the *banda* [‘gang’ or ‘group’], we were all in a field of corn, but you know what the problem was? There was also genetically modified corn by the side—but we opened our eyes, the leaves, the *milpa* [agricultural smallholding for growing corn], we were waking up, we were finding each other, we were helping each other. This is (...) for all the men of the corn.

In this context, Nahua’s reference to corn had several important indexical possibilities. Directly, this concert took place at a time in which international biotechnology giant Monsanto was attempting to introduce a new, genetically modified formula for corn into Mexico, something perceived among many as a threat to the enormous existing diversity of corn species in the country. Corn is the basic ingredient in most Mexican cuisine (and the subject of a recent campaign in Mexico entitled ‘Sin Maíz, No Hay País’ [without corn, there is no country]⁷), but the phrase ‘men of the corn’ specifically refers to the Mayan origin myth in which human beings were formed, by gods, from cornmeal dough.⁸ The referential reach of ‘Despierta Pueblo’ was not limited to Mayan folklore; indeed, introducing the song with a sample of a wooden flute served to index a pan-Latin American version of indigeneity. Yet Nahua’s framing of this vision also served

to distance his *banda* from this utopic reality; reaching it was, first and foremost, a feat of the imagination (even if the present situation of urban alienation was depicted in his speech as the *real* dream).

Finally, of the rap outfits with which I conducted research, Instituto del Habla—a band with members and collaborators from across the eastern fringes of the city—was the group most explicitly concerned with the topic of Mexican nationalism. This was particularly the case for an album they had produced in 2011 entitled *Rap con sabor a México* (‘Rap with a Mexican Flavour’), which contained twelve tracks, almost all of which were based on a sample of music the band considered to exemplify what they labelled their national musical “roots”. For instance, the album’s fourth track, ‘La Bruja’, is based on a Mexican *son jarocho* folk song from the south-eastern state of Veracruz which tells the story of a witch whose seductive charms lure the singer into her home, where she transforms him into ‘a pumpkin and flowerpot’. In their version, Instituto del Habla play a sample from an old recording of ‘La Bruja’ at the end of the track, after having reshaped this recording into the acoustic building blocks of the track’s beat. On the album, this pattern also appears on ‘Somos’, ‘Seguimos en la Lucha’, ‘Intro’, ‘Malhaya’ and ‘Outro’. These songs, then, all seek aural continuity between hip hop and what the band conceptualized as their national cultural heritage.

Especially notably, many of these songs contain, at the beginning or end, the phrase ‘*Yeab*, preserving the roots of Mexican culture’. As I discuss elsewhere (Green, forthcoming), this line pointed towards a productive tension between the respective histories of rap and Mexicanness, opening with a loan word from English especially associated with American rap (and delivered in an American accent), followed

in Spanish by the affirmation of an essential Mexican identity that could be 'preserved' in hip hop. Such a tension also mapped onto the different interests of the band's two members, Laiko and Ajishar, at the time that I conducted research. Ajishar worked as a labourer in the outskirts of the Mexico City metropolitan area, and tended to emphasise the 'roots' of rap in the Bronx and, more broadly, iconize the figureheads of struggles of 'black and brown' ethnic minority groups in the United States, such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Laiko, meanwhile, was a primary school teacher specializing in folkloric dance who saw rap as a means through which a highly affective and personal sense of Mexican identity and heritage could be maintained. This productive tension was at play in an album the pair had released just prior to my research entitled *Tierra y Libertad Por Cualquier Medio Necesario* ('Land and Liberty by Whatever Means Necessary', a combination of the slogans of the Mexican revolutionary icon Emiliano Zapata and Malcolm X), but it could also be perceived in differences in background that the pair emphasised during interviews. Specifically, Ajishar had received no formal musical education and turned to hip hop as an available means of expression, whereas Laiko had studied Folkloric Dance at the National Institute of Fine Arts, and brought this background to bear within his hip hop creativity.

Instituto del Habla's music stood out for the way it reflected upon the practice of preserving heritage in music, and the nostalgic mindsets of many of the band's disenfranchised compatriots. 'Nostalgia', the eleventh song on *Rap con sabor a México*, is built upon a melancholy orchestral sample accompanied by a minimal drum beat, and occasionally interspersed with sampled recordings of pre-Hispanic whistles. Importantly, this song opens with a critique of the use of history as a political

tool ('silent and reticent is the people convinced by distorted history forged upon the defeated/ the tyrant always wins, the poor live in angst with broken spirits') accompanied by a gesture to take ownership of hip hop as a medium of expression ('I write because of a culture; hip hop is mine'). The Mexico depicted in this song is subject to a 'strange malaise', a place 'where hope fades of living through better times'. In this context, nostalgia is presented as a failure of the present: 'a sigh at this present, anxious for a tomorrow that is disappearing, and bleeds in its apparent liberty/held by the dosage in a crisis of identity'. This is 'the nostalgia of the worker' who, disenfranchised, 'suffers upon seeing that everything increases in price apart from his salary' and, condemned to a life of poverty, 'will have to suffer hunger so that their family can eat'. The force of these messages is amplified by the song's structure, which follows intense bursts of rap with instrumental segments featuring slow, moody orchestral breaks, allowing the listener space for contemplation and reflection.

In the search to rescue cultural 'roots' or 'traditions', each of these cases reflected, in different ways, the utopian 'time before time' that Herzfeld identifies as a recurring feature in the perpetuation of national sentiment (2005: 147). This was the case both for the aural signifiers of Mexicanness and/or indigeneity deployed in these bands' creative practice and the ways in which the very fact of using hip hop pointed towards political struggle in the United States.⁹ Yet songs such as 'Nostalgia' and 'Chalco' also reveal a strong political edge, alluding to the past as a means of critiquing the present and, in the case of the former, reflexively positioning the search for mythical 'roots' as an emotional response to very contemporary needs. Ultimately, therefore, these songs set out to challenge the Mexican neoliberal project. Equally, as I explore in the following section, these groups' hip hop

creativity was firmly imbricated in an urban, neoliberal socio-economic situation which, in key ways, privileged the private and domestic spheres.

CONTEXTS OF PRODUCTION

Most of the local hip hop artists with whom I worked had developed amateur, largely informal recording arrangements.¹⁰ One of the members of Re Crew had paid for and constructed a studio in his relatively spacious family home, in the dusty peripheries of Chalco, where the band recorded their music. Meanwhile, Instituto del Habla worked with a producer, DJ Iceman, whom they paid to use his digital home studio in the east of the city. This was located within a housing complex which shared a yard that bore marks of both the 'rural' and 'urban', home both to chickens kept to lay eggs, and scattered building materials indicative of the rapid construction occurring in this area. These microscopic details of social life figuratively captured recent developments on the meso-economic level. That is, much of the recent urban development at the margins of Mexico City—where most of the rappers with whom I conducted research lived—had taken place as a result of the economic failure of the countryside economy in and after the 1980s when, following a debt crisis, the government had pursued a series of neoliberal 'structural adjustments' which cut subsidies to the agricultural sector and forced large numbers of people to migrate to cities. Regarding cultural production and consumption, in the present century young people are the most significant consumers of (very often pirated) music and users of new media technologies, but also suffer high levels (almost seventy percent of twentysomethings in 2005) of youth

unemployment and informal employment (García Canclini 2008: 6).

The experience of living in communities that barely existed at the time of their birth appeared, for many young people, to heighten the importance of a particular search for identity and rootedness. In some ways, this observation may seem counter-intuitive in an anthropological context; Herzfeld, for example, associates urbanization with anthropologists' recognition of 'the porosity of borders and the negotiability of identities' (2001: 150). Yet the use of rap to affirm a stable, historically grounded, imagined identity served as a means of negotiating the geographic and social marginality that my consultants experienced. Tsing highlights ways that people often 'actively engage their marginality by protesting, reinterpreting, and embellishing their exclusion' (1993: 5). In the margins of the Mexico City metropolis, home to a high level of poverty, crime and unemployment—especially among young people—appeals to a reified past, as with the 'nostalgia of the worker' alluded to above, allowed for the possibility of emotional escape from the present. Such appeals also, however, permitted these people to 'reinterpret their exclusion' according to the narrative of a broken Mexican national project.

It is important to note, to begin with, that many of the musical genres these bands sampled in their songs had changed significantly over time—something which belied their characterization as cultural 'roots' that served as points of entry into a fabled 'edenic past'. In many cases, the contemporary manifestation of these 'traditions'—and, especially, their power to represent 'Mexico' as an entity—was strongly related to twentieth-century Mexican politics, and the changing cultural policies of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI)

which ruled the country between 1929 and 2000. In her 2008 book *La 'invención' de la música indígena de México: antropología e historia de las políticas culturales del siglo XX*, Marina Alonso Bolaños sets out to provide a critical perspective on the academic study of musical traditions associated with indigeneity in Mexico between 1926 and 1996. Citing Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), the ethnomusicologist argues that, during this period, the Mexican State sponsored 'large institutional projects' and 'studies about indigenous music' which brought about a 'process of "invention" of traditions' in service of post-revolutionary nationalist ideology (Alonso Bolaños 2008: 21). The Mexican Revolution (1910–20) was a time of deep insecurity and division, and in the 1920s the overthrown regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) was blamed by the country's newly established elites for a perceived lack of patriotism and failure to invest in Mexican musical traditions (Hellier-Tinoco 2011: 55–6; Velázquez and Vaughan 2006: 98–100).¹¹ In the decades after the Revolution, then, the cultural arm of the Mexican government—especially the Secretary for Public Education—invested in a conscious project to construct a cohesive Mexican national identity based around indigenous and popular culture. This project, although it neither inspired consensus among cultural elites nor agreement about how its goals should be fulfilled, nonetheless gained influence (Madrid 2006). It was particularly during this period, therefore, that the concept of Mexican national 'roots' gained importance as a driver of public cultural policy (Alonso Bolaños 2008: 25).

In her book, therefore, Alonso Bolaños strives to bring out ways that 'many rural musical cultures were adjusted and adapted, in large part according to postrevolutionary cultural policies, which sought to create a homogeneous identity

in order to shape a national identity' (2008: 23). The spread of music education in schools, the creation of state-funded radio programmes, and the state sponsorship of ethnomusicologists and folklorists conducting research in indigenous communities all served to transform the diverse musical cultures of Mexico's geographically vast territory—in many cases according to the expectations of cosmopolitan and international audiences—thus reconfiguring these traditions 'within new national subjectivities' without destroying 'local and regional identity' (Velázquez and Vaughan 2006: 114). Folklorist Vicente T. Mendoza, for example, systematically altered and excluded the *corridos* in his published collections in order to fit with a formulaic scheme for the corrido genre of song that, as it bore many similarities to the Spanish *romance*, could be dignified by association (Giménez 1991: 18). State-sponsored national radio programs such as XFX, meanwhile, sought to 'clean up (...) the musical practices of common people' in the songs they played, placing them through 'a complex process of selection and transformation' that involved 'bringing in [classically] trained musicians and orchestras to perform popular music' (Hayes 2000: 50). Furthermore, the creation of an extensive network of rural schools served to disseminate music from across Mexico which was now associated with the regional cultural diversity of the nation, and used to teach Spanish to speakers of indigenous languages (Alonso Bolaños 2008: 41–3). These projects, meanwhile, existed alongside commercial musics, such as *boleros*, which promoted forms of nationalism that existed in relation to romance and familial intimacy.

The search for 'Mexican' or 'indigenous cultural roots' that the bands with which I conducted research were carrying out, therefore, was itself strongly connected to

Mexico's recent history. Indeed, in a sense, this search pointed towards nostalgia not for the 'roots' themselves, but for the post-revolutionary moment—one imprinted, in fact, into many of the sounds they sampled in their music, such as the operatic version of the Veracruzian *son* 'La Bruja' sampled by Instituto del Habla in their song of the same name. Yet the neoliberal moment to which these hip hop artists directed their most critical attention can also be seen to have shaped their creative practice, particularly in relation to the use of digital home studios. In the 1980s, following a debt crisis, the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) that had governed Mexico since 1929 introduced a series of so-called 'structural adjustment' reforms designed to reduce trade protection, cut state spending, and privatize national industries. O'Toole (2003) argues that these policies accompanied an attempt to foment a more individualized sense of Mexican nationalism, as President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) began to reposition Mexicanness rhetorically not as a public project to create a unified identity, but instead as a private, personal sentiment.¹² Indeed, Claudio Lomnitz has pointed towards a late-twentieth-century 'weariness with the epic visions of revolutionary nationalism' within Mexico, suggesting that, at least in the art scene, tastes in the country shifted towards the intimate and domestic at this time (2001: 55–6). In relation to musical production, however, neoliberal economic policies also contributed to making the equipment necessary for digital home studios—such as laptop computers and recording equipment—cheaper and more readily available (Cross 2011: 308).

The multiple genealogies connected to these rappers' creative practices, therefore, served to link a Mexican nationalist form of 'structural nostalgia' with a means of musical production rooted in domestic life. Those

recording sessions I attended with Instituto del Habla, for instance, took place in an improvised recording studio comprising a microphone and computer, situated in the middle of a room in the house of the band's producer. This space bore the marks of everyday life; located between the kitchen and the bedroom, it was sometimes strewn with clothes, while half-finished food at times remained on a table by the microphone. The house in which it was situated was part of a gated complex of several small houses, facing onto a dusty yard and guarded by a number of dogs. Re Crew's studio was similar, located in a small room in the housing complex occupied by the extended family of Higer, a member of the band. Paul Théberge discusses the home studio as a site for the transformation 'of domestic space (...) into a production environment', as producers and musicians negotiate possibilities for the recording and mixing of music within their households (1997: 234). Drawing a contrast with the parlour piano, whose location 'in the main living rooms of the house or apartment made it a center of family life', Théberge highlights ways in which home studios often exist alongside, rather than integrated into, familial life (1997: 234–5). However (following Schloss, who found that for the hip hop producers with whom he conducted research, 'the sense of social ease and domesticity that a home studio can provide is one of its major selling points' [2004: 47]), during my research the domesticity of the spaces in which much hip hop creativity took place underlined the status of digital home studios as a locus of sociality.

To conduct research around Re Crew's recording practices, for example, was to become acquainted, on however superficial a level, with a network of familial relations. Our first interview was conducted during a weekend stay with the band in Chalco, over several beers,

late at night in the band's digital home studio; this space allowed for playful and humorous conversation between the band's members and was, clearly, a site for social interaction more generally. This studio had been created by Higer's brother, who went by the stage name DJ Washok and had tragically died around two years prior to my research with the band. After the interview, I shared evening sweetened coffee and *tamales* in the house's yard with Higer's grandmother and partner, before spending a night in his brother's now unoccupied room, which had become a kind of shrine to an individual remembered as a pioneer in the local hip hop scene. Meanwhile, during Instituto del Habla's recording and editing sessions the producer and band members frequently joked around, often gossiping about other musicians, while we also ate and drank tacos, crisps, and beer together in this space. The jocularity of some of these conversations served to mark the limits of my initiation into these individuals' shared (cultural) intimacy. Laiko and his producer particularly enjoyed making *albures*, a form of joke that involves inserting second meanings into seemingly innocuous phrases that, when answered directly, would implicate the unwitting target in sexual behaviour perceived to be transgressive. I frequently fell victim to *albures* (which are extremely difficult for non-native speakers of Spanish to detect) and my inability to participate in this level of conversation underlined my status as an outsider.

In these contexts, therefore, hip hop creative practice was a locus of cultural intimacy, sociability, and the structural nostalgia associated with a search for 'roots' grounded in Mexican post-revolutionary politics. In turn, the link between this discourse of 'roots' and the post-revolutionary era existed both historically and also, in some cases, at the level of these rappers' lyrical output. Alluding to this era allowed

these musicians to take 'dominant discursive fragments and [throw] them into relief' (Rose 1994: 102), while their creative practice, in other ways, strongly reflected processes of Mexican neoliberalism. Nonetheless, as highlighted by the differing perspectives of Ajishar (who lionized central figures in the US civil rights movement) and Laiko (whose creativity was oriented around sounds associated, in various ways, with Mexico), this search for rootedness could constitute a Janus-faced nostalgia that also reached back to the origins of hip hop in the United States. In the cases of some groups with whom I worked (in particular Instituto del Habla) such double nostalgias mapped onto productive tensions between band members which could, perhaps, be perceived most adequately through conducting highly personal ethnographic research. This was, therefore, a complex, multifaceted situation which, as I explore in the following section, presented challenges for the researcher.

DOUBLE INTIMACIES OF ETHNOGRAPHY

If, in this setting, longing for an indigenous past constructed as static and idyllic coexisted productively with a multiplicity of other idealized pasts, in another way the moment of field encounter brought together intimacies that were potentially far more difficult to reconcile. Herzfeld pays critical attention to forms of cultural intimacy that can operate 'at the level of scholarly discourse', citing the 'hardheaded common sense' that has often held sway in Anglophone historical research (2005: 99). This means, ultimately, that the study of cultural intimacy in the research 'field' ought to draw researchers to reflect on the forms of intimacy which are at play in the act of performing and representing ethnographic fieldwork.

The senses of nostalgia expressed by the individuals with whom I conducted research often drew me into an unfamiliar, and sometimes discomfiting, intimacy. For example, Higer told me, in late 2012, that the end of the fourth Mayan calendar on 21 December 2012 was to herald ‘the end of a cycle’: a ‘spiritual change’ that was going ‘to benefit the entire planet’. This view was supported by his bandmate, Danybox, who elaborated that the coming utopian era would witness the emergence of reciprocal social relations in which ‘we see each other as brother and sister’.^{13,14} When I asked the band about this predicted social transformation several months later, Higer stated that this transformation had indeed happened, consisting of a ‘change in awareness (...) a mental change in all the young people, just like in the music, the painting (...) to rely more on nature. So all the new generations became more interested in the environment, if you’ve noticed it [*si te das cuenta*]’.¹⁵ This statement pointed towards a practice of knowing in which a shared spiritual sensitivity occupied a privileged position, and in which I was invited—or challenged—to participate.

Several scholars have discussed ways in which rap can function as an alternative form of knowledge production (Gosa 2011; Akom 2009). Gosa, for example, examines the production of so-called ‘conspiracy theories’ in US hip hop, suggesting that ‘tales of clandestine plots’ recounted in rap can serve as a means of addressing racial inequalities in a supposedly ‘colourblind’ society (2011: 200). Conspiracy theories within hip hop thus function as a ‘challenge to expert knowledge’; playing, in a sense, a language game in which meaning is grounded not in scientific rationality but in a common experience of oppression (*ibid.*). Elsewhere, in defending a viewpoint tracing the origins of hip hop to Africa, Akom points

toward the fact that ‘many in the [hip hop] community believe [the genre] must be felt and experienced, in order to be understood and communicated’ (2009: 52–3). In these forms of cultural intimacy, then, just as that alluded to by my respondent above, meaning results from social processes far removed from those that scholars experience within academic institutions. Such disjunctions have often provided complications for individuals conducting ethnographic research. For instance, Dimitriadis writes of his disbelief at hearing stories that Tupac Shakur was still alive after his reported death: ‘I never believed such stories to be true, and I said so (albeit playfully) often (...) Clearly, an interpretive gulf existed between me and these young people’ (2009: 4).

As in the case cited by Dimitriadis, the regime of knowledge and meaning my consultant alluded to in his description of the beginning of a new Mayan calendar was drastically different to that in which I was most comfortable (or, perhaps more precisely, ‘at home’). It is difficult, however, to know how to address such a sudden, felt change in social relations using research techniques and modes of representation rooted in the ‘empirical’ and ‘observable’. This rapper’s gesture—an invitation to participate in a common spiritual sensitivity—served as a challenge to my own background, drawing me into a world of shared intuition and feeling rather than one of supposedly ‘objective’, neutral perception. Furthermore, these differences have deep political implications. The approach I have taken in the previous section, for example, reflects a common scholarly response to nationalist ideology: by using research tools broadly rooted in an empiricist epistemology to provide a history of the construction or invention of national origin myths, one demystifies them, thus dissipating their ‘force [with] critical

dissection' (Herzfeld 2005: 109). This strategy is especially appealing among groups who perceive nationalism as a negative thing which represents 'the imposition of an elite perspective on local cultural worlds' (ibid.:6), but might be understood to have more ambivalent effects in contexts in which 'the nation' is identified with the possibility of greater social justice within a collective experien

Ultimately, such field encounters draw attention to the 'language games' (as loosely defined [Wittgenstein 1999 [1953]; Shapin and Schaffer 1985]) of ethnography—the inclusion and exclusion of certain questions and approaches to solving them—and the forms of 'disciplinary intimacy' in which they are rooted (Herzfeld 2005: 223). For instance, it has been demonstrated that as well as highlighting the subjective nature of knowledge creation, the practice of reflexivity—which I have sought to use extensively within this article—can function to support the status of the researcher as a trustworthy source of information (Young and Meneley 2005: 3, 7).¹⁶ Reflection on the researcher's own biases, background, and assumptions—described by some as 'confessional ethnography' (Marcus 1998)—thus often fails to 'explode our fantasies about ethnographic texts being copies of reality' (Foley 2002: 473). In turn, more introspective models of 'auto-ethnography' or 'self-ethnography', an endeavour which requires the researcher 'to speculate on the larger social forces to which they themselves are subject' (Schloss 2004: 15) are rarely applied to intra-institutional field relations.¹⁷ We are left with deeply challenging questions about the ways that most ethnographers are trained and incentivized to interact with the open-ended and interconnected forms of cultural intimacy and knowledge production to which one is party in the 'field'.

This background highlights the status of the ethnographic encounter as a productive clash of intimacies: those of the ethnographer's 'consultants', and those of the ethnographer herself (Herzfeld 2005: 222–3). This status is frequently underlined by sensations of discomfort among those conducting ethnography—which reflect the awkwardness involved in being an observer, as well as that of being an outsider, and may be most noticeable when overcome. While attending recording sessions with hip hop groups, I was sometimes asked to participate in creative decision-making. Although I made sure to emphasise the pre-eminence of my consultants' own creative decisions, this invitation came as a relief; asking probing questions or performing detached observation comes naturally to few, and there exist few items whose use is more likely to lead to social awkwardness than a notepad. In other cases, the kind of intimacy into which one is being invited is simply unclear—as in the case of hip hop artists creating works of 'body art' in which they paint the naked upper torso of a (usually female) model. When one of my consultants, during research, showed me several pictures of a piece of body art he had recently created, it was difficult to know how to respond. What kind of observer was I being asked to be at this moment: a desiring one? A neutral appreciator of abstract artistic beauty? An educated critic attentive to the image's references to Mexican muralism? Such confusion may arise from the sense that it is difficult to respond to all of these interpretive possibilities in the moment that one is conducting research.

In *Making Beats*, Joe Schloss sets out 'to use the particular nature of my own experience, particularly moments of social discomfort or awkwardness, to implicitly question the value of the distinction between "home/academia"

and “the field”. For Schloss, moments of communicative disjunction between researcher and consultant can be extremely revealing. Building on research with hip hop beatmakers whose social orbits often crossed over into the academic sphere, he suggests that ‘a researcher’s self-conscious confusion over the nature of social boundaries can help to highlight the extent to which the researcher imposed those boundaries in the first place’ (2004: 7). Although Schloss is right to emphasise the constructed nature of the binary field/home distinction, the examples I have discussed demonstrate that breaking through this distinction is easier in some contexts than others; further, such an effort is made all the more difficult by the distinction’s roots in differing forms of cultural intimacy which, in turn, undergird divergent modes of knowledge production. It is largely for this reason that the challenging question that Higer’s invitation implied—‘if you’ve noticed it’—remains open.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have highlighted the status of hip hop creative practice as a locus for sociality, play, and cultural intimacy. In the production of nostalgic figures of nationhood, musicians developed forms of intimacy, which became frequently apparent during the course of research, that marked points of insider- and outsider-ness. Evoking indigeneity and Mexican cultural ‘roots’ appeared to serve very contemporary purposes, allowing my consultants to respond in different ways to their position of marginality within Mexican neoliberalism. Often, this involved the invocation of nostalgic and/or utopian social relationships reflecting reciprocity and conviviality, values which, for these musicians, the Mexican government had failed to safeguard. The practice of using

hip hop to maintain, preserve, or keep alive perceived cultural roots, furthermore, reflected the neoliberal moment in many ways: in the economic viability of the digital home studio; in the foregrounding of the home as a site for the expression of patriotic sentiment; and in the prevalence of unemployment and the informal economy. A search for rootedness, I suggest, may be understood as a response to rapid urban expansion and migration away from rural areas. In this sense, such rapid expansion can be seen not to provoke the emergence of fluid, porous, and negotiable postmodern identities (with which hip hop as a set of cultural practices has been commonly linked [cf. Potter 1995]), but to heighten a felt need for the construction of stable identities using the cultural tools at hand.

Donna Young has written about a research experience in which the traumatic collapse of ‘the distinctions between research, teaching, and friendship’ provoked a renewed appreciation of the contingency of the ‘antinomies that structure the discipline of anthropology’ and, in particular, the ways in which ‘the anthropologist (the self) and her subject (the other) belonged to very different worlds’ (2005: 213–4). For Young, the only honest response to this thoroughly upsetting experience is to ‘acknowledge the jarring contradictions and historical and social processes that shaped’ this encounter (ibid.: 214). In a similar vein, conducting ethnography among hip hop artists in Mexico City sometimes created social discomfort and communicative disjunction in a manner that reflected attention back onto the nature of the research methods I was employing. These experiences resulted from the conflicting intimacies of the point of encounter and the status of hip hop as a site for the production of a form of knowledge which asked different questions to those that tend to interest ethnographers and provided different ways of answering them. Ultimately,

these distinct regimes of knowledge production constituted assemblages which could only be meaningfully investigated through attention to specific historical, economic, and social processes (cf. Tsing 2015: 134–5). They undergirded modes of creative social action which must be understood in relation to the position of power occupied by both researcher and researched. The ongoing challenge emerging from such diverse language games concerns how to go ahead and forge solidarity and common interests anyway. To begin with, however, those conducting ethnography into hip hop creativity may respond best by learning to be comfortable feeling awkward.

NOTES

- 1 The author wishes to thank James Butterworth, Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra, Simran Singh, and the two anonymous reviewers for their many insightful comments and suggestions.
- 2 All translations from Spanish to English in this article are made by the author.
- 3 See, for instance, the famous lament erroneously attributed to President Porfirio Díaz ‘poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States’, or many Mexican-Americans’ nostalgia for ‘Aztlán’, a mythical pre-colonial nation whose borders incorporated the south-western American states formally annexed by the United States in 1848.
- 4 Interview, Kiper, 27-04-13.
- 5 It is notable that there are many stray dogs in both Chalco and Valle de Chalco.
- 6 Interview, Nahua Tecuani, 16-12-12.
- 7 <http://newint.org/blog/2013/05/24/vandana-shiva-mexico-monsanto-corn/> (accessed 24-04-16). For a discussion of the relations between food, kinship, and sociality, see Mintz (1985: 4–5).
- 8 See, for example, the Popol Vuh (1973).
- 9 Indeed, one could argue that these hip hop creative practices reflected many aspects of what Lena describes as a ‘traditionalist’ musical genre (2012: 46–52).
- 10 Teokalli was the only exception, renting a small soundproof studio in a small shop for graffiti enthusiasts located in the centre of Mexico City, and paying for it by charging rappers to record and produce their tracks in this space.
- 11 Velázquez and Vaughan argue that Díaz’s regime sponsored nationalist musical cultural to a greater extent than it has been credited, and, in particular, that Díaz was less of a Francophile than was alleged in the wake of the revolutionary wars: ‘If the Frenchification of Porfirian “high” musical culture has been exaggerated, the emergence of a nationalist popular music based on Mexican traditions has been ignored’ (2006: 99).
- 12 This discourse had important antecedents in the commercial mass culture of the 1940s which, for Lomnitz, tended to produce a ‘lighter form of nationalism’, placing ‘utopian ideals at the personal level’ (2006: 343). Crucially, then, the Mexican state cannot be understood to have exerted a hegemonic influence over nationalist cultural production at this time.
- 13 Interview, Re Crew, 11-12-12. A more common idea associated with this event was that it would witness a planet-wide environmental cataclysm, such as that depicted in Roland Emmerich’s 2009 disaster film *2012*.
- 14 Indeed, it was common for rappers to address me as *hermano* (brother).
- 15 Interview, Re Crew, 27-04-13.
- 16 Of course, reflexivity has a long history of working in this manner within (connected) scientific and anthropological practice, going back at least to the approach created by Robert Boyle in the seventeenth century that formed what came to be called the ‘scientific method’ and combined a ‘modest’ narrative style with allusions to potential errors and failures in one’s research as a rhetorical device which underlined the reliability of the witness—and, by extension, that which the witness perceived within experimental space (Shapin and Schaffer 1985: 64–7). As Simon Schaffer has pointed out, the emergence of anthropology as a discipline was marked by a similar logic, as early anthropologists sought to extend the practices of the laboratory into the research ‘field’ through a series of measurements and tests conducted with their consultants (1994: 22–40). In this context, paying attention to the perspectives and biases held by the researcher responded to a critique of the reliability of the researcher rooted in laboratory life; thus, ‘[i]n order to produce realistic effects on their audiences, these workers had to scrutinise the

material culture and techniques of their own world' (ibid.: 45–6).

- 17 Graeber points out that researchers rarely discuss the extremely hierarchical intra-academy power relations in which their research comes into being (avoiding any 'impolitic interaction[s]' with one's superiors, 'desperately trying not to step on any powerful toes before landing a permanent job', trying to second-guess the particular priorities of funding bodies during grant applications) for the simple reason, he contends, that to do so would be to risk 'committing academic suicide' (2005: 189). Notably, Graeber's suggested route out of this conundrum—'examining movements to which one has, in fact, made some kind of commitment, in which one feels oneself a part' (2005: 200)—leaves open difficult questions regarding the representation of these movements within scholarly discourse employing conventions that are sometimes alien to their participants.

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ANDREW GREEN
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC
ROYAL HOLLOWAY, UNIVERSITY OF
LONDON
Andrew.Green.2011@live.rhul.ac.uk