

## Contesting Resistance, Protesting Violence: Women, War and Hip Hop in Mexico

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article endeavours to push scholarship away from analysing resistance from a universalist (white, liberal, masculinist, global northern) perspective by exploring how an intersectional framework facilitates taking an anti-essentialist approach to both resistance and resistant subjects. By examining how young women protest against the high numbers of homicides, systematic violence and widespread impunity in Mexico through rap music, this article argues that a focus on activist discourses has tended to result in essentialising resistance, thereby erasing certain tensions, marginalised experiences and oppositional voices. The article centres around ethnographic encounters with two rappers: Oaxaca-based activist, Mare Advertencia Lírika, and Torreón-based non-activist, Rabia Rivera. It provides a detailed analysis of their participation in a written rap battle on the theme of 'war'. It reveals that rap songs encouraging introspection can be as political as explicitly activist songs, and that the aim of both can be to shift people's understandings and promote change. This is significant because it is only by attending to distinct actors' positionalities, to their similarities and differences, that negotiation can be collectively enabled to fight violence in Mexico.

### **KEYWORDS**

Rap music; violence; resistance; woman; Mexico

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## CONTESTING RESISTANCE

This article emerges within the tension of contesting notions of resistance on the one hand, and political intersectionality, on the other. In the space between these forces, I analyse the contradictions and opportunities that women rappers develop around violence in Mexico. First, I outline frameworks for thinking about resistance and intersectionality; second, I present the socio-political context of Mexico; and third, I interrogate the experience of two Mexican rappers, Mare Advertencia Lírika and Rabia Rivera, and explore the ways an intersectional approach allows us to challenge prevailing universalist (white, liberal, masculinist, global northern) approaches to resistance and critiques of violence. I understand resistance as intentional everyday and/or organised opposition to institutionalised or other manifestations of power, oppression and/or other violence.

After a flurry of academic activity around discourses and practices of resistance in the 1970s and 1980s, epitomised and propelled by Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) and James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), a tendency to romanticise resistance in scholarship came under heavy attack in the 1990s. Famously, Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) argued that the intersecting webs of power that actors are entwined in, and related ambivalences, must be foregrounded in any analysis of resistance (so, for example, white, liberal feminists who resist patriarchal oppression often simultaneously maintain a system of oppressing working class women of colour). Building on Abu-Lughod's criticisms, Sherry Ortner propounded in 1995 that the majority of studies of resistance lacked ethnographic depth, being "thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity — the intentions, desires, fears, projects — of the actors engaged in these dramas" (Ortner, 1995, p. 190).

Despite Abu-Lughod's and Ortner's interventions, romanticised, ethnographically-thin studies of resistance have continued to emerge, in part because resistance circulates as a vernacular concept, but also because scholars continue to be drawn to its utopian promises, its often liberal individualism. So again, in the 2010s, a wave of scholars critiqued analyses of resistance, for example, as widely applied to cultural production and consumption in the Middle East (see Swedenburg, 2013; Nooshin, 2017; El Zein, 2017). In her examination of Arab cultural production, for instance, Rayya El Zein (2017) argues that scholars often: 1) treat research subjects as if they are non-descript and have no agency prior to their resistant acts; 2) imply that it is academics' insights which enable resistant acts to be identified; 3) assume "a more or less united front against a single, hegemonic foe" (El Zein, 2017, p. 99); and 4) ignore and invisibilise the processes leading up to acts of resistance. She propounds that an idea of resistance circulates in academia that:

relies on the liberal conceit of the sacred rights of the individual to express, bemoans the censorship of this expression by other powers, and celebrates the creative power of individual dissent (El Zein, 2017, p. 94).

When interrogating the complexity of dissent, we must attend to whether universalist notions of the individual, freedom, creativity and resistance are circulating or otherwise, and what is being elided. In other words, we must take an anti-essentialist approach to notions of resistance, ensuring that we neither essentialise the resistant subject nor values attached to sites of resistance. El Zein (2017) goes on to reject resistance as an analytic category to understand political refusal and subversion, instead attending to affective processes, assemblages of

grievances and oppressions. In this article, I explore how Black feminist work on intersectionality provides tools to analyse dissent without essentialising resistance.

The term intersectionality was famously used by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as a means to interrogate the gendered, racialised dimensions of violence against women of colour (although she was not the first to do this, see Collins and Bilge, 2016). Critiquing both essentialisms of feminism (white, middle-class, womanhood) and Blackness (Black manhood), Crenshaw (1989) argued that additive approaches did not describe the oppressions experienced by women of colour. Instead, she proposed employing intersectionality as a methodological, theoretical and political framework to enable us to: 1) investigate how sameness, difference and power operate; 2) ensure marginalised actors' experiences are not erased; and 3) negotiate differences in order to facilitate group politics (Crenshaw, 1989). A broad field of intersectional studies has since emerged and, as Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013, p. 785) explicate, the term intersectionality has since been widely applied in three areas:

the first consisting of applications of an intersectional framework or investigations of intersectional dynamics, the second consisting of discursive debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm, and the third consisting of political interventions employing an intersectional lens.

I am interested in the latter in this article. I ask: what does an intersectional lens reveal about oppressions, relationships of power, and dissent? I explore this question through an analysis of how young women protest against the high numbers of homicides, systematic violence and widespread impunity in Mexico through rap music. For the purposes of this article, I use the terms structural and bellicose violence, aware that defining violence is slippery and that distinct forms of violence overlap and include physical, psychological and/or symbolic injuries. I refer to structural violence to include poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism and other forms of humiliation, disrespect and oppression. I refer to bellicose violence to include kidnappings, forced disappearances, torture, homicides and other forms of brutality.

Mexico is a country where there is officially no war, yet bellicose violence is pervasive. Like 2010s' Palestine and Syria analysed by Achille Mbembe, "conditions of necro-power" (Mbembe, 2008, p. 40) prevail in many areas: "the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred" (Mbembe, 2008, p. 40). In such contexts, to speak of resistance or dissent at all may seem obscene, but discourses of resistance do circulate, particularly amongst activists.<sup>1</sup> It is activist discourses that have tended to be sought out by researchers. However, merely focusing on activists too easily results in essentialising resistance and, crucially, erases certain marginalised experiences and oppositional voices. In order to understand violence in Mexico, a diversity of actors must be included in the analysis. Here, I use rap music as an epistemological and methodological tool to do justice to how young people protest from perspectives that have critical similarities and differences, reflecting their

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<sup>1</sup> Evoking notion of resilience (recovery in the face of adversity) is inappropriate in necropolitical Mexico (see MacKinnon and Derickson, 2013 for a critique of the notion of resilience). I have not heard discourses of resilience circulating amongst Mexico's hip hop artists, so do not address the term here, despite it being a theme of this Special Issue.

complex relationships to structural forces of power, oppressions and/or bellicose violence.

This article is part of a larger project that investigates empirically how disenfranchised young people living in Mexican cities experience, promote and critique the intense forms of violence they are subject to through rap. The study is not a comprehensive survey of hip hop in Mexico, but instead analyses young women's and men's experiences of violence through: 1) *narco rap* commissioned by and about organised criminals; 2) *rap del barrio* (neighbourhood rap) produced in marginalised urban neighbourhoods, which is sometimes linked to gangs; and 3) in this article, rap that criticises the high numbers of homicides, disappearances, systematic violence and impunity enjoyed by state institutions and criminal organisations alike. Although some rappers write music in several of these areas (both contesting and promoting violence, see Malcomson, 2019), the women referenced here do not produce music promoting violence. This does not diminish the similarities and differences that they, as actors, may have in their relationships to the necropolitical contexts in which they live and work (as members of friendship, acquaintanceship, employment and other networks).

Methodologically, the article brings together lyrical analysis with fieldwork and interviews I conducted from 2015 to 2019 in Chihuahua, Coahuila, Estado de México, Jalisco, Mexico City, Oaxaca, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. It is a text that draws from my position as a white, British, middle class, middle-aged woman, privileged enough not to live in war-like conditions, interviewing young, lower-middle and lower-class mestiza/o and indigenous Mexican women and men.<sup>2</sup> This positioning determines the possibilities and limits of this discussion. Musicians often treat interviews and academic publications as forms of publicity and this impacts on what information is foregrounded. For example, some research participants' desire for publicity implicated their relationship to politics, as did their relationships to hip hop culture. In his study of the late twentieth century hip hop scene in Sydney, Ian Maxwell argued that although many rappers talked about hip hop as political, they were more interested in "the groove of it" (Maxwell, 2001, p. 266). There are certainly resonances with hip hop in Mexico, yet necropolitical conditions complicate understandings of who is straight-forwardly political and activist.

I do not examine hip hop performance socialities and practices here, nor do I explore the sexism and other oppressions within Mexican hip hop scenes. Instead, I interrogate how women rappers engage with structural oppressions and with bellicose violence through their music. Women, well-known on the Mexican hip hop scene, have been particularly vocal in protesting violence, notably Zapotec activist, Mare Advertencia Lírika (Mare 'Lyric Warning') based in the city of Oaxaca and Batallones Femeninos ('Women Battalions'), a collective which primarily brings together rappers based in Ciudad Juárez and Mexico City. Together with other activist rappers with whom they form transnational networks (including, Rebeca Lane of Guatemala and Las Krudas Cubensi of Cuba), Mare Advertencia Lírika and Batallones Femeninos have been the subject of numerous studies (e.g., De La Peza Casares, 2014; Motta, 2014; Silva Londoño, 2017). Here I bring such activists' voices together with that of mestiza rapper Rabia Rivera ('Rage' Rivera), whose response to the necropolitical context of Torreón, Coahuila,

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<sup>2</sup> Mestiza denotes a woman of 'racial' and cultural intermixture, mainly of indigenous and Spanish peoples. The discourse of mestizaje is strongly linked to nation building projects in Mexico.

complicates understandings of how young people contest violence. I focus on a rap battle between Mare Advertencia Lírika and Rabia Rivera where ‘war’ was a prescribed theme to analyse what it teaches us about dissent in 2010s’ Mexico. I argue that if we are to use music to listen to young, marginalised people’s experiences and critiques of violence, we need to complicate our understanding of their relationships to their musical projects, to politics, and ensure we do not elide ambivalences and tensions in their lives and work. To begin, I review the necropolitical context of twenty-first century Mexico.

### NECROPOLITICAL MEXICO

Rabia Rivera and rapper W. Krónico explained to me that the violence in their city of Torreón:

RR: generates fear in society. Horrible.

WK: Yes. Like, suddenly ... they started ... It was: they killed one person. They killed another. ... And suddenly: without a head. I mean, sadistic.

RR: And suddenly: without a foot.

WK: Without a foot. And they cut off the penis, and it was in their mouth ... and lots of things like that.

RR: Really creepy (Rabia Rivera and W. Krónico, interview with author, Torreón).<sup>3</sup>

Horrific, sadistic gore has created a terrified population, as Rabia and W. Krónico explicate. The complexities of violence in early twenty-first century Mexico are well encapsulated by Sayak Valencia’s notion of ‘gore capitalism’, which she uses to refer to:

the undisguised and unjustified bloodshed [...] the many instances of dismembering and disembowelment, often tied up with organized crime, gender and the predatory use of bodies [...] as tools of *necroempowerment* (Valencia, 2018, pp. 19-20).

Bellicose violence in Mexico is marked by being spectacular: people are not just killed; their butchered bodies are displayed publicly and their images broadcast in the media. It was in the 1990s that violence became increasingly spectacular, famously in the border city of Ciudad Juárez where hundreds of young, brown, working class, *maquila* (assembly plant)-employed women were raped and killed, their mutilated, dismembered bodies discarded in public spaces. As Mariana Berlanga Gayón (2015) amongst others has argued, the murdered women of Juárez were stigmatised and inculpated in their own deaths, often alleged by the media and state authorities to be implicated in sex work and criminal activity. The families of victims were similarly stigmatised and their calls for justice fell on deaf ears. Ciudad Juárez became known for femicides in the plural, rather than for individual women whose deaths provoked public outrage and prompted serious investigation. From the 2000s, spectacular murders became common in other parts of Mexico and, in addition to women, increasingly included young, brown, working class men. These men were similarly stigmatized and branded as ‘delinquents’: “the line between guilty and innocent parties became completely blurred [...] and] the stigma of being a delinquent impinged on justice”, as Berlanga Gayón (2015, p. 106) contends.

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<sup>3</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.



A culture of silence, suspicion and distrust grew, abetted by pervasive police corruption and collusion with organised crime, where it became unsafe for civilians to report or investigate crimes. Berlanga Gayón (2015, p. 110) has argued that what also emerged was indifference: “we have become indifferent to the repetition of a phenomenon which should move us, because in this context, insensitivity is a form of survival” (Berlanga Gayón, 2015, p. 110). This was particularly the case for those able to distance themselves from the phenomenon, to be insensitive. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a majority of middle class and elite Mexicans reproduced a hegemonic insensitivity to the increasing plague of brutal murders of young, brown, working class men and women. That was, until 2014 when middle class and elite consciousness was shifted slightly when dozens of students from the Ayotzinapa teachers’ college were forcibly disappeared and/or murdered by state forces in Iguala (see Hernández, 2016).

Factors contributing to this necroscape include Mexican and US government policies on tackling organised crime over many decades (see Astorga, 2005); shifts in government, specifically the unseating of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 2000, a party which had held power since 1929 and had established alignments with organised criminal factions; the so-called “war on drugs” declared in 2006 by then President Calderón which resulted in intense militarisation and fissioning of organised criminal groups; and state corruption. Valencia argues that:

the new State is not controlled by the government but by organized crime, primarily the drug cartels. Through the literal adoption of market logic and violence as a tool of empowerment, Mexico has become a narco-state [...] locking the government and organized crime in a constant battle for power’ (Valencia, 2018, p. 47).

The state does not have a monopoly on violence in Mexico but struggles with criminal organisations to control necropolitics.

Rabia made an argument chiming with Valencia’s (2018) when she explained to me, more viscerally:

I don’t think that it is cool that the mass media talks about ‘the war on drugs’. It was not a war of that [...] they did it with the intention that the people, the world thinks that *narcos* were just fighting for territories (*la plaza*). But no. The things that were most scary didn’t even have anything to do with drugs and money. What was scary was to go to a bar and be gunned down. There were two cases here in Torreón [in 2010 ...] Two bars: *Las Juanas* and *El Ferrie*. I think 70 people died in El Ferrie. [...]

Imagine: They arrived; They were outside the bar; They took out machine guns, and

tz tz tz tz tz tz tz tz.

[Rabia imitates voice of those firing] ‘They stood up!’

Tz tz tz tz tz tz tz.

‘They got a firearm out!’

Tz tz tz tz tz tz ... tz tz tz tz.

‘Is there anybody left?’

Tz tz tz ... tz tz ... tz tz ... tz tz.

‘They moved!’

Tz tz ...

[Rabia returns to narrating] And that happened to two friends of mine from secondary school (Rabia Rivera, interview with author, Torreón).

Many deaths and disappearances, of civilians and otherwise, are not reported. Thus, official figures tell us only part of the story.

Between 2008 and 2018, there were officially 269,183 homicides in Mexico (INEGI, 2019), and over 36,265 people are officially registered as disappeared (by April 2018, SEGOB, 2019). 89% of the homicides between 2008 and 2018 were of men (INEGI, 2019), and of the people disappeared, 75% are men (SEGOB, 2019). Young people predominate as victims and perpetrators: 53% of Mexico's 269,183 official homicides between 2008 and 2018 were of young people under 35 years old (INEGI, 2019), as are 59% of the 36,265 people registered as disappeared (by April 2018, SEGOB, 2019). For decades, policing, judicial and state mechanisms have failed to protect people. In 2018, the impunity rate in Mexico was 69% and there were states with almost no justice system (Le Clercq Ortega and Sánchez Lara, 2018, p. 7).

Moreover, to speak of Mexico as homogeneous in terms of bellicose violence is misleading. There is heterogeneity in the intensities of narco-related violence, in state violence and state-narco entanglements, and in the precarity of everyday lives. These intensities are classed, racialised, aged and marked by spatiality and temporality. For example, in the southern state of Oaxaca, where Mare lives, there were officially 8,270 deaths between 2008 and 2018 (INEGI, 2019), 191 people are officially registered as disappeared (by April 2018, SEGOB 2019), and the impunity rate in 2018 was 75% (Le Clercq Ortega and Sánchez Lara, 2018, p. 7). Much of this violence took place in the south of the state, rather than in Mare's city of Oaxaca. During the same period, Rabia's northern state of Coahuila counted 5,081 official deaths (INEGI, 2019), 1,753 official disappearances (SEGOB, 2019), and an impunity rate of 78% (Le Clercq Ortega and Sánchez Lara, 2018, p. 7). There was particularly intense violence in Rabia's city of Torreón, from 2007 to 2012: organised criminal groups contested the territory of La Comarca de la Laguna ('the region of the lagoons') of which the conurbation of Torreón (Coahuila) and Gómez Palacio (Durango) forms the nucleus. Rabia told me about acquaintances who had been beheaded and hung during this time; about witnessing a distraught neighbour mopping up his dying son's blood with his shirt; about what she described as more routine events such as shootouts and narco-blockades.

Northern Mexico is renowned for being more violent than southern Mexico, however this is a stereotype that must be nuanced with structural, personal, spatial and temporal circumstances. I bring out some of these distinctions in the following detailed analysis of a *Secretos de Sócrates* written rap battle between Mare Advertencia Lírika and Rabia Rivera staged at Mexico City's Museo Universitario del Chopo in December 2015. Neither Rabia nor Mare participate in rap battles often, and in interviews with me both lamented how battles were often based on gossip and detracted from the poetry of rap (including the showy, freestyle [improvised] *batallas de gallos* ['cockfight' battles] sponsored by Redbull). Mare and Rabia were personally invited to participate in the *Secretos de Sócrates* battle by the organisers, rapper Danger Alto Kalibre and Zoë Salazar. *Secretos de Sócrates* battles are marked by not proclaiming winners or losers, and for being written rhymes with pre-defined themes. Mare's and Rabia's approaches to this battle should thus be read with this in mind: both focus on broader issues than more immediate competition.

## MARE ADVERTENCIA LÍRIKA VERSUS RABIA RIVERA: WAR

Darkened stage, filmed and projected onto back wall. Spotlights. Gangly DJ at decks: no discs being spun. Showcased, emerging artists done, final act to come: Mare Advertencia Lírika ('Lyric Warning') versus Rabia ('Rage') Rivera (see Figures 1 and 2). A twenty-minute battle to be performed live, streamed and circulated online. Themes assigned months in advance: time for research, writing rhymes, memorising. Round 1: *guerra* (war). Round 2: *fama, calle, cambio* (fame, street, change). Round 3: *libre* (free). The MC, *Indho*, a rapper well-known from the group *Caballeros del Plan G*, enters stage left, demanding applause from the 200-odd seated audience: mostly men aged 20-35 sporting trainers, jeans and black T-shirts emblazoned with the name of some hip-hop-group; short hair; the odd black baseball cap. With a drawn-out holler, Indho introduces the contestants to claps and whoops from the audience:

*"Ra-bia Ri-ve-ra, yyyyy ... Ma-re Adver-tencia, Lí-ri-ka"*.



**Figure 1. Rabia Rivera:** Still from Secretos de Sócrates rap battle (Advertencia Lírika and Rivera 2015).

Rabia. 26. Black woollen bucket hat overshadows dark, wide eyes with pencilled lids. Nape-length, black hair. Chunky chain earrings. Red lipsticked lips over perfect teeth. Light brown skin. Rough-edged, black sleeveless T-shirt falls off her left shoulder to reveal a blurred, inked blue, red and green sound-wave yantra tattoo, some five centimetres wide. White lettering on her T-shirt reads: '*Traigo estricto HIP HOP en la sangre*' (I carry strictly HIP HOP in my blood). Rabia got into rapping in her early teens with her older brother and their mates, she told me. Some fifteen years on, she has two albums and now often collaborates with W. Krónico (see Rivera, 2019).





**Figure 2. Mare Advertencia Lirika:** Still from Secretos de Sócrates rap battle (Advertencia Lirika and Rivera, 2015).

Mare Advertencia Lirika ('Lyric Warning'). 28. Deep brown hair drawn back into a perfect single plait. Thick brows fading to mid-brown skin. Pensive, dark eyes. Earrings archaeological, iconic. Thick, unpainted lips. Gentle smile. Black hoodie, laces dangling, with 'NOT YOUR EXOTIC' inscribed in gold, together with an Egyptian spread-winged human-headed falcon. Mare's love of activist poetry began at school, she explained to me. Then hip hop culture became popular in Oaxaca in the mid-1990s. By 2003, aged sixteen, she was rapping, first in a trio and then alone. She now has three albums to her name (see Advertencia Lirika, 2019).

"*Vámonos pues* (Let's go then). Round 1, [pause] *guerra* (war)", the MC, Indho, whoops, exiting. The battle begins and Rabia goes first. They have three minutes each, with no beat to support them in the first two rounds. Rather than providing a transcription of the battle here, I bring Mare's and Rabia's rhymes together to draw out what an intersectional approach reveals about how they comment on violence from very different positionalities in relation to location, intellectualism and intimacy, parenthood, ethnicity, activism, feminism, and how these relate to notions of resistance.

### **WAR, INTELLECTUALISM AND INTIMACY**

Rabia begins by evoking the intense violence of her northern city of Torreón:

*Allá en el norte desaparecieron a DJ Luixter por el narco y su guerra.  
¿Cuarenta y qué? Cuarenta miles.*

Up there in the north they disappeared DJ Luixter for the narcos and their war. Forty how many? Forty thousand (Rivera, 2015).

With '*¿cuarenta y qué?*' (Forty how many?), Rabia emphasizes her incredulity at the public outcry at the forcible disappearance of 43 students in Iguala in 2014 (see Hernández, 2016), given the tens of thousands of disappearances and killings that have been ignored. By naming her friend and DJ, Luixter, who was forcibly disappeared from 2009 until now, Rabia signals that her relationship to bellicose violence is intimate, and she goes on to state explicitly that it is pain that informs her perspective rather than intellectualism. Rabia has a university degree in communication, but she does not mention it, comfortable not to demonstrate her academic credentials.

*Más que un tema intelectual, para mí es un caso doloroso. [Her voice strains]. Tengo dos hijos pequeños y veo el futuro tenebroso.*

More than an intellectual issue, for me it is painful. [Her voice strains]. I have two small children and I see a scary future (Rivera, 2015).

Rabia's pain is exacerbated by her position as a mother of two living in Torreón. Across Latin America, mothers, grandmothers and other women have famously led protests at the forced disappearances and killings of their loved ones and others, and here, as in the other cases, it is her position as a mother that Rabia highlights. It is pain and grief, the destruction of her neighbourhood, and the seeming pointlessness of this violence that, Rabia states, has propelled her to speak out and she asserts a forceful rallying cry:

*No pude aceptar: aceptar ver morir a mi familia, haber derrumbado mi barrio por culpa de sus estúpidas decisiones políticas [...] sus pinches intereses materialistas. [...] tenemos la necesidad de pedir y gritar: 'no más, no más actos criminales'.*

I could not accept: accept seeing my family die, my neighbourhood destroyed because of their stupid political decisions [...] their fucking materialistic interests. [...] we also need to ask and shout: 'no more, no more criminal acts' (Rivera, 2015).

Rabia cries out for listeners to act, whoever we are, to denounce the violence of narco-state entanglements.

Rather than intimacy, Mare's discourse appears at first sight to be marked by more abstract, intellectual analysis, both in relation to hip hop and to war. Mare explicates that she is rhyming about gang and colonialist wars, about struggles for territory past and present. Mare uses academic literature to back up her intellectual credentials, citing Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's *México Profundo* in this battle. She has a deep interest in hip hop knowledge and begins the battle by referencing the early history of hip hop in 1970s' New York where hip hop battles emerged as alternatives to gang wars. Instead of knives, competitors fought using hip hop (graffiti, rap, DJing, break dancing), often in the physical or metaphorical space of a cypher, a space created by an often highly-critical, yet supportive audience forming a circle around the performer. The notion that hip hop is an appropriate way to solve violence would become a core value of the genre and both Mare and Rabia suggest that it is an appropriate tool with which to address war, to bring people together to take action.

In a discussion of Mare's album lyrics, political scientist Sara Motta (2014) suggests that Mare represents a decolonial subject, an organic intellectual, providing alternative knowledge. Mare told me: "I learn not just reading, but seeing concepts in practice" (Mare Advertencia Lírika, interview with author, Oaxaca). Practical, intellectual activism pervades Mare's work, as does her sharp critique of structural violence. On her website, Mare Advertencia Lírika describes herself as:

*Rapper, Zapotec, feminist, migrant, woman born in Oaxaca [who ...] puts uncomfortable themes in discussion. She reflects on the condition in which women live within society, social inequalities, racial segregation, but always in the constant search for her own identity and the vindication of her history (Advertencia Lírika, 2019).*

Mare participates in events denouncing violence, particularly against women, and calls out racism and sexism in her songs from her position as an intellectual

indigenous migrant women activist. Mare told me that her activism draws from her life experience. Her father was killed in an agrarian dispute when she was young, forcing her mother to move to the city of Oaxaca to work and for Mare to care for her younger siblings. Like Rabia, Mare has experienced intense grief.

Mare states in the battle that the personal is also political, articulating that her perspective on social issues draws on the tensions and ambivalences of life. These ambivalences are exemplified by her relationship to being Zapotec. She explained:

the cosmovision, the way in which we were brought up, the way in which we relate to each other, is from this [Zapotec] region, its linked with Zapotec identity (Mare Advertencia Lírika, interview with author, Oaxaca).

Mare identifies as Zapotec, but does not speak the Zapotec language (the marker of indigeneity employed in Mexican censuses). While Mare positions herself very clearly in political terms, she is extremely careful about what she places in the public domain about her private life, in contrast to Rabia. This is, Mare claims, because of the gossip on the rap scene, and she raps that it is no one's business who she has in her bed. So, while Rabia is a mestiza, working class, married mother who claims to rap from an intimate place of pain about war, Mare is indigenous and takes a more intellectual, analytical approach, keeping more of her life private.

### **CULPABILITY, SILENCES, AND PATHS TO CURB VIOLENCE**

When addressing those responsible for war, there are also significant similarities and differences between Mare's and Rabia's discourses in this battle. Both rappers reference the entanglement of the arms industry, organised crime, political forces and the media. Rabia's spatial and temporal breadth is wide (the Middle East, Julius Caesar in 51 BC), yet she does not name the Mexican state, its institutions or other organisations. Mare is more specific about the mechanisms she sees as giving rise to violent capitalism, alluding to intentional links between war, impoverishment and debt; to international bankers, arms manufacturers and businesses as beneficiaries of war. She explicates:

*De un lado. Los mismos que dicen ser los buenos del conflicto. Los mismos que de cada saqueo son favorecidos. Los mismos que te hablan de paz con tanto cinismo. Los mismos. Míralos bien, que son los mismos. // Y es que hay que buscar bien en la historia. Cuando la verdad se tapa. Sea guerra por petróleo, sea por odio, sea por plata. Daños colaterales que los conflictos atrapan. Pero es que las apuestas corren, cuando de pelear se trata. // Mientras las secuelas en los cuerpos no son cuestionadas. Miles de hombres mueren a diario en los campos de batallas. Miles de mujeres por la guerra violadas y secuestradas. Pero en los acuerdos de paz, las cifras son maquilladas.*

On the one hand, the same people who claim to be the good ones in the conflict. The same people who are favoured by each looting. The same people who speak to you about peace with so much cynicism. Look at them closely, they are the same people. // And you have to look closely at history, when the truth is concealed. Be it war for oil, for hatred, or for money. Conflicts involve collateral damage. But betting is in operation when it comes to fighting. // Yet the repercussions on bodies are not questioned. Thousands of men die every day on the battlefields. Thousands of women are raped and kidnapped because of war. But in the peace accords, the figures are massaged (Advertencia Lírika, 2015).

By repeating the word ‘*los mismos*’ (the same people), Mare clarifies why a binary notion of resistance is inappropriate in grasping narco-state entanglements in Mexico. There is not a clear foe. The same people who benefit from these conflicts claim to be good and deliver peace.

In terms of seeking paths to curb this violence, and akin to her initial reference to hip hop history, Mare urges us to examine history to uncover truths and solutions. She goes on to address the complexity and risks involved in doing this:

*Y es que parece que hablar de guerra es fácil. Aunque reconocerla no lo es tanto. ¿Ustedes podrían asegurar que México es democrático? La dictadura perfecta como algunos han nombrado, por que parece estar bien. Pero no entendemos el grado de complicidad entre crimen organizado y estado. Los medios de comunicación masiva que nos tienen controlados, imposición de un gobierno. Militarización justificada en el narco. ¿O es que acaso te sientes mas seguro con la gendarmería en tu barrio? El peor territorio para ser periodista sin guerra.*

And it seems that talking about war is easy. But recognizing it is not. Could you confirm that Mexico is democratic? Some people have called it the perfect dictatorship, because it seems to be fine. But we do not understand the degree of complicity between organized crime and the state. The mass media that controls us, imposed by a government. Militarization justified because of narcos. Or is it that you actually feel safer with the paramilitaries in your neighbourhood? The worst territory without a war to be a journalist (Advertencia Lirika, 2015).

Moving from the global socio-political context to the national, Mare argues here that it is hard to recognise war in Mexico because it is a “perfect dictatorship”. She quotes Mario Vargas Llosa’s famous (1990) televised critique of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which held power for most of the twentieth century by stoking up nationalism (through education, *mestizaje* logics and cultural practices) to sustain clientelism and corporatism. Although the PRI lost power for some years from 2000, the logics and ideologies of Mexico’s “camouflaged dictatorship” (Vargas Llosa, 1990) persist in large part. In the early twenty-first century, *state-narco* entanglements continue to be hard to unpack, the state controls official mass media and, in some areas, the streets are patrolled by paramilitary police and/or the military.

Mare evokes the extreme risks of investigating and providing detailed information about state corruption and criminality by referencing the dangers of being a journalist in Mexico (144 journalists were officially assassinated between 2000 and 2018, CNDH 2019). There are silences in Mare’s and Rabia’s messages about those culpable for wars: neither rapper points a finger at specific actors or provides incriminating details during this rap battle or in other public fora. These silences chime with the broader silences in Mexico, which they are also criticising while acknowledging that it is extremely dangerous to do otherwise. As an aside, a well-known rapper told me how he posted a song on Youtube that implicated a local politician in criminal activities: the next day, two heavies arrived at his home threatening his family if he did not remove the song. He obeyed.

While Mare emphasises structural issues when proposing paths to curb Mexico’s violence, Rabia focuses more on individual culpability. She reveals this as much through descriptions of herself, as of others.

*No soy yo quien venga a presumir y describir una guerra. O presumir y tirar una cátedra. Soy la mujer más imperfecta. Puedo romperme el pie a patadas cuando alguien intenta dañar a mi familia [...]. No me quedaré callada, no lo haré, por eso soy Rabia.*

I'm not the one who comes to show off and describe a war. Or to show off and give a lecture. I'm the most imperfect woman. I could break my foot kicking anyone who tries to harm my family [...]. I won't stay shut up. No I won't. That's why I'm Rabia ['Rage'] (Rivera, 2015).

Rabia does not claim a morally righteous position. She states that she is "imperfect", willing to act violently to anyone who threatens her family and will not stay silenced. She states that her artist name, Rabia (Rage), is proof that she will not stand by if wrongs are enacted. By breaking down dichotomies between the morally flawed and the righteous, the culpable and the innocent, Rabia contributes to destigmatising and disabling the discursive power of *narcos* and the *narco-state* as the distant and unrelatable Them, in contrast to a blameless Us. By nuancing notions of good and bad, Rabia nods to how We, as complex human beings, can both contribute to and dismantle necrocapitalism (such Us-Them dichotomies are explored further in Malcomson, 2019).

Moreover, echoing Adorno (1991) and other members of the Frankfurt school, Rabia claims that we are susceptible to propaganda ('programmable') and that answers will be provided by others, when she raps: "*¿Como encontrar un punto medio si para eso nos programaron? Si nos metieron en la cabeza: 'no busques en tu interior, afuera puedes encontrarlo'*" (How can we find a half-way point if they programmed us for this? If they put in our heads: 'Do not look inside yourself, you can find it outside') (Rivera, 2015). She articulated this clearly, when she told me:

The thing is that education is what fucks up the system, because it doesn't want switched on people [*gente trucha*], it doesn't want people to be on the ball [*lista*]. And it's something we try to say in rap: it's not so much resistance, it's like wake up, just open your eyes and realise that there is a world that is quite scary [*culerón*] that wants to use you (Rabia Rivera, interview with author, Torreón).

Both education and the media are to blame, Rabia contends, but the main culprits are ourselves, individual humans. Rabia goes on to suggest in the rap battle that the powers-that-be have convinced us that individually we are not personally responsible for war. Nevertheless, she proposes that through introspection we can find our own answers.

Rabia's proposed solution to war is introspection grounded in spiritual universalism, for example when she raps:

*no podemos conformarnos con un puño izquierdo arriba. [...] Hay incertidumbre. No sirve rendirse. Solo le ruego al universo que el fuego del infierno logre extinguirse.*

we cannot settle for a left fist raised [...] There is uncertainty. It does not serve to surrender. I only beg to the universe that the fire of hell goes out (Rivera 2015).

Rabia contends that a leftist struggle ('a left fist raised') is not enough; that she is "begging to the universe". Her hope is that spiritual universalism will end this hellish violence and save her two young children from a "dark future". She goes on



to reproduce this view in her *Luz Púrpura* (Purple Light) album of 2016 which promotes meditation. While not claiming to have achieved enlightenment herself, Rabia advocates changing the world via critical introspection which, she implies, will give rise to action. This idea references not only universalist ideologies, but also hip hop. Rappers and other hip hop artists express themselves, predominantly through their individualism, through a learned practice. Rabia's solution to war involves individual work to facilitate collective action.

Both Mare and Rabia argue that Mexican national subjectivity must change in order for bellicose violence to stop. Rabia raps: "*Ignoramos los crímenes de guerra. Como mexicanos rechazamos la idea de aliarnos a una bandera*" (We ignore war crimes. We Mexicans reject the idea of allying to a flag) (Rivera, 2015). By referencing a flag, Rabia links Mexicans' silence specifically to a national subjectivity where violence is folded in, incorporated rather than being collectively rejected. She implies that Mexicans follow the flag and the instructions of the state, rather than assuming collective responsibility and developing other forms of collective action.

Mare similarly evokes national subjectivity by quoting the national anthem: "*Y es que lo dice bien nuestro himno: 'mexicanas al grito de guerra'. Pero no por su patriotismo, sino por nuestra autodefensa*" (And it's that our hymn rightly says: 'Mexicans to the war cry'. But not for their patriotism, but for our self-defence) (Advertencia Lirika, 2015). Mare dismisses the patriotism which underpins national subjectivity. And where Rabia calls for collective introspection, Mare promotes *autodefensa* (self-defence). The term *autodefensa* brings to mind the *autodefensa* movements which self-organised in Michoacán and Guerrero from 2012 to create unofficial local, armed police forces to fight organised crime, but Mare probably is also nodding to the popular movements of Oaxaca (including the renowned 2006 protests led by APPO, the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca). Mare calls for collective action which begins with self-action. The basis of this action, Mare explicates, should be recognition of the symptoms of structural violence.

*Puedo hablar de genocidio, de xenofobia, de feminicidio, de gentrificación. Y podrían quedarse en conceptos para sentirme superior. Sin embargo son los síntomas que definen el problema. Porque si no somos capaces de nombrarla, de entrada ya perdiste la guerra.*

I can speak of genocide, of xenophobia, of femicide, of gentrification. And they could remain concepts to feel superior. However, they are the symptoms that define the problem. Because if we are not able to name it, then from the beginning you've lost the war (Advertencia Lirika, 2015).

Mare is clear that if we are to understand the mechanisms underpinning Mexico's necropolitics, we need to be able to name them. She is not protesting or suggesting resistance, understood as pushing back or withstanding. Mare is advocating analysis followed by action to enact change. The difference may seem academic, but it is important. Mare's and Rabia's critiques are not romanticised or utopian pleas for resistant action, they are voicing strategies for systemic change, the only form of change which they foresee could end the atrocities of war.

Further differences in Mare's and Rabia's approaches to systemic change and dissent are made explicit in their respective relationships to feminism. In this rap battle, Rabia appears to be explicitly anti-feminist: "*Mama like to fuck. Tú en tu rollo feminazi. Yo promuevo hacer blowjob. Pero, 'ah me encanta'*" ('Mama like to fuck.' You with your feminazi thing. I promote doing blowjobs. But, 'oh I love

it') (Rivera, 2015). By employing the pejorative term '*feminazi*' (popularised by a US radio show host from 1989) and mentioning blowjobs, Rabia is depicting feminists as radical separatists, as distinct from heterosexual-sex-loving women. Yet the complexity of her relationship to feminism was brought out in a discussion we had about her work with the feminist Mexican women hip hop artists' collective *Mujeres Trabajando* which, Rabia told me, is maligned as: "*feminazi* and like that, but it's not like that" (Rabia Rivera, interview with author, Torreón). Again Rabia employs the pejorative term *feminazi*, but she defends her participation in *Mujeres Trabajando* workshops teaching young women to rap, arguing that this is not a feminist act. She was adamant that she is not a feminist, asserting:

I am grateful to the social movements who work for women's rights. I am grateful that they have succeeded in getting the vote for women, and that we can intervene in many things, so much that I consider myself to be free. But I believe that putting labels on things doesn't guarantee anything. Calling it feminism is only a word. But really, those women who want change have made changes without knowing about the culture or the education of feminism. I was brought up in a matriarchy (Rabia Rivera, interview with author, Torreón).

While Rabia acknowledges the gains of first and second wave feminism, she does not consider it helpful to name them. Here again, she proposes that change occurs beyond collective knowledge, as her mother, a matriarch, exemplified in their household.

Meanwhile, Mare's relationship to feminism has shifted over time. Although she has consistently protested social and political wrongs throughout her rap career, it is only since 2014 that she has identified as a feminist. She told me that she realised that 'you do not have to be looking for a feminism that represents you, because you create your own feminism' (Mare Advertencia Lírika, interview with author, Oaxaca). She echoed critiques of white, liberal, global northern feminism that have been made by Black feminists for decades (e.g., Carby, 1982; Frankenberg, 1993). Mare explained to me that:

I have reclaimed feminism now, having come from the social movement, that is, there are things that are very normal for me, like the question of the assembly, the question of working horizontally (Mare Advertencia Lírika, interview with author, Oaxaca).

Mare has created a feminism for herself that draws from her experience of social movements, specifically notions of horizontality and the assembly as a basis for decision making. These are the elements that inform her vision of dissent. Her feminism is also influenced by historical and contemporary women leaders, including those she evoked in the battle with Rabia: Chicano and workers' rights activist Dolores Huerta; Peruvian indigenous leader Micaela Bastidas who headed a rebellion against the Spanish alongside Tupac Amaru; 'La Comandanta' Nestora Salgado who led a community police force in Mexico; and the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who campaign to find their forcibly disappeared children. Mare argues for a form of feminism where women do not fight amongst themselves and where oppressions are not reproduced (a view articulated in her *SiempreViva* album, 2016). Moreover, this indigenous intellectual presents feminism as a tool, rather than a solution to overcoming bellicose violence, unlike social theorist Sayak Valencia (2018) who sees transfeminism and the reshaping of masculinities as a key component in overcoming "gore capitalism". Additionally, Mare propounds, hip hop battling is a solution, not only to

competition, but for the social good. For both Mare and Rabia, the hip hop cypher is the appropriate space in which to engage, comment on and work towards ending war.

## CONCLUSION

Earlier in this article, I suggested that academics have tended to focus on activists when assessing how people voice resistance to violence. Such an approach elides the voices of the actors who are not shouting the loudest or calling for action in expected ways. Through an intersectional analysis of a written rap battle, contextualised by ethnographic data, I hope to have revealed how two young Mexican rappers, Mare Advertencia Lírika and Rabia Rivera, approach war. While Mare is a renowned activist, Rabia is better known for her songs about apparently non-political aspects of her life. Yet, by analysing this rap battle, together with contextual ethnographic material, it becomes clearer how their broader oeuvres relate to politics and how their specific positionalities mark the ways they voice dissent, as well as tensions and ambivalences.

As I have argued, Mare Advertencia Lírika is a working-class, indigenous activist from southern Mexico. She has a deep knowledge of hip hop and takes an intellectual approach tainted by intimacy to analysing war and the causes and solutions to violence in Mexico. Influenced by a politics of horizontality and her own version of feminism, Mare alludes to structural changes which need to take place to enable a collective politics. However, Mare does not complicate notions of human culpability.

In contrast, as a working-class, mestiza, married mother and a non-activist northerner, Rabia's approach is marked by intimacy tainted with intellectualism. As a university-educated woman, there is no need for Rabia to prove her intellectual credentials. Rabia draws on spiritual universalism to propose that, through introspection, collective action is possible. Moreover, if we are to understand introspection as a basis for change, as Rabia contends in her *Luz Púrpura* album (Rivera, 2016), then we must also understand that her songs encouraging meditative introspection are as political as Mare's explicitly activist songs (Advertencia Lirika, 2019). However, while Rabia complicates notions of human culpability, she does not specify how collective action might occur.

Where Rabia dismisses feminism and may withstand sexism, Mare critiques systemic causes of war. Both allude to broad forces (the entanglement of organised crime and state forces, the arms industry, the media), and both are acutely aware that they must remain silent about the details of those culpable: in this necropolitical context, naming names is akin to suicide. So, too, is resistance, understood in romanticised terms. Yet, as these rappers demonstrate, dissent and hope exist. Both rappers contend that by shifting people's understandings of media propaganda and national subjectivity, change is possible. In sum, by analysing the similarities and differences in these rappers' approaches, and by attending to their positionalities, it is clear that if a collectivity is to be brought together to fight violence in Mexico, a multiplicity of voices must be heard and understood, and negotiation enabled. While hip hop battles such as this one may provide a forum for voicing perspectives, a mode of collective action is also required to take ideas forward.

In relation to scholarly analyses of resistance, I have argued that a universalist notion of resistance is not helpful. Instead, an anti-essentialist approach is required when examining ideas of resistance and resistant actors. I hope to have shown that one way to achieve such an anti-essentialist approach is to employ an intersectional

framework, one that facilitates interrogating similarities and differences between actors' voices, particularly those who are marginalised by (white, liberal, masculinist, global northern) universalism.

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