

Alejandro L. Madrid. 2008. *Nor-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### Reviewed by Gavin Mueller

The burgeoning field of electronic dance music (EDM) scholarship has drawn from a number of theoretical and methodological perspectives. In particular, the disciplinary *mélange* that is cultural studies, whose rise in academia coincided with EDM's rise in popular music during the 1980s and '90s, has proven an effective tool for researchers seeking to understand the social worlds and political and economic contexts in which EDM sounds and styles arise. Alejandro L. Madrid's *Nor-tec Rifa!* is one such effort, a sorely needed piece of research in a non-Western EDM scene, when academia in general has lagged behind popular publications and blogs in the documentation and analysis of global EDM.

The book's purported object of analysis—a Tijuana-based scene knit together through aesthetic practices rooted in the appropriation of the sounds and images of northern Mexico—is appropriately conceptualized for a cultural studies approach. Furthermore, as an ethnomusicologist familiar with cultural theory, Madrid can undergird arguments rooted in post-structuralist theories with solid ethnographic data drawn from participant observation among artists and fans. In the author's words, this is "primarily a book about borders" (3), and these borders are a potentially rich site of investigation, since the music's home base of Tijuana is nestled between worlds, while the "heterogeneous music whose styles are as diverse as the number of musicians, producers, and DJs that compose it" (9) nudges up against several genres of EDM. Yet the topic makes for a frustratingly abstract project that overwhelms with concepts casually plucked from critical theory: a book that "explores the intersection of individual choice and hegemonic discourses on ethnicity, class, desire, and difference in the construction and negotiation of individual and collective identities," in which *Nor-tec* music figures as "a strategy invented to come in and out of the web created by the multi-ideological conditions of both radicalized modernity and postcoloniality" (23). This is a vast and compelling project, but Madrid's reach exceeds his grasp, and the initial chapter promises more than the book fulfills. While filled with useful ethnographic observations on EDM practices, the book's focus on the discursive negotiation of identity makes too little use of it.

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The book's strengths are the extensive historical and ethnographic research Madrid has conducted with Nor-tec members, analysis of material culture such as CDs and flyers, and participant observation at Nor-tec events in several geographical settings. He begins with the history of electronic music in Tijuana that coalesced into a particular cultural scene. Music in Tijuana is "a truly glocal phenomenon" (31) in which trends from the global music industry are localized through Spanish-language cover bands and through original works in the style of globally popular genres, such as industrial, punk, and techno-pop. Eventually, the founders of the Nortec Collective made a self-conscious decision to craft electronic music "that could be identified as Mexican" (34). Their method was "to articulate the modern in the sounds of electronica, a reevaluation of tradition in the form of popular norteña music, and a sense of identification with nostalgia and kitsch" via sampling—a technique with a visual counterpart in Nor-tec graphic design work (37). Madrid interprets their appropriation of "traditional and ethnically marked musics" (42) into contemporary forms as an ambiguous response to globalization, at once an admission of the desire for modernity while also a negotiation with the kinds of stereotypes of Mexicans common in global modernity as constructed by people of the United States and Europe. Nor-tec producer Pepe Mogt used traditional Mexican music samples "to strategically position himself within the European discourse of difference," gaining access to European audiences by drawing upon and resignifying the music the West associates with Mexican musicians (45). Madrid concludes that "[t]he sampling of norteña music originates in a desire to authenticate current musical practices in their relation to the past, and results in music that rewrites the past" (47).

Yet the Collective's rewriting is selective and ideological, in ways that Madrid neglects to address. Nor-tec fans and artists actively dislike the rural popular musics from which the Collective's samples derive. This attitude is not a desire to validate or authenticate *norteña* or *banda*, but rather stems from "a type of kitsch and camp sensibility" (50). Madrid purports to "identify the aesthetic criteria behind Nor-tec's appropriation" of rural styles with the claim that this sampling "challenge[s] conventional assumptions of tradition and cosmopolitanism, heritage and modernity, center and periphery" (52). What follows are succinct examinations of *banda sinaloense*, *norteña*, and *onda grupera* styles, in which Madrid makes the case that they, too, are modern, hybrid, and transnational, not representative of an "authentic" or "essential" Mexican character. This assertion comes across as a digression. Madrid argues that "traditional" genres are actually "responses to a combination of collective desires for cosmopolitanism" (62) in their audiences, but the sampling of *banda* and *norteño* in Nor-tec music derives from the way

these styles sound traditional and Mexican in the contemporary moment. It remains unclear how deconstruction of these naturalized traditions sheds light on Nor-tec practices and discourses of authenticity, which center on “the sounds and timbres themselves” (67).

A more thorough examination of discourses of authenticity in EDM as well as sampling practices—drawing from available literature on both topics—might have better complemented this section. For instance, Sarah Thornton (1996) argues that “the ideological categories of ‘black’ and ‘white’ define the main axes within dance music” (1996:72): blackness is associated with body and soul, while whiteness is associated with futurism and technology. How does Madrid’s ethnography of music produced by Latinos, who sample Mexican music, complicate this binary? What rhetorics of body and mind does Nor-tec engage in, and how do these relate to the samples deployed? Existing work on sampling, often from studies of hip hop, might have better elucidated Nor-tec’s relationship to the past. Tricia Rose claims that hip hop sampling “affirms black musical history and locates these ‘past’ sounds in the present” (1994:89), while Kodwo Eshun argues that the “functionalism” of sampling is “[i]ndifferent to tradition” (1999:14). Joseph G. Schloss puts forward a theory of “aesthetic purism” in which a producer’s adherence to “certain musical gestures . . . confers authenticity” (2006:64). Nor-tec sampling touches on all three positions; indeed, Madrid argues the adherence to musical gestures of campiness is essential to the Nor-tec aesthetic sensibility (80), placing its sampling practices in an ambiguous zone between Rose’s self-conscious reverence and Eshun’s functionalist modernism. A deeper analysis of these practices would illuminate Nor-tec’s relationship to other Mexican music, allowing a fuller discussion of the way it values the past.

Madrid alludes to the modernist style of Nor-tec productions, an observation that hints at a significance of the kitschy appropriation of *norteña* and *banda*. Modernism contains its own values, as described by Clement Greenberg (1987, 1989), including originality, experimentalism, and difficulty. These are values that Pierre Bourdieu (1987) associates with a bourgeois class position that constructs distinctions between itself and the working class. That Nor-tec articulates these values precisely by decontextualizing and exaggerating images and sounds of working-class migrant populations suggests that it may work to reify class distinctions. Madrid reads the distancing moves by Nor-tec as a form of “empowerment” that reappropriates “cultural icons from foreign discourses” (83). But his treatment is muddy: there is no sustained attention to what constitutes the “dominant culture” that Nor-tec supposedly subverts. Is it the Orientalizing gaze of the United States? The official discourses of mainstream media and

politicians? Or are Nor-tec participants themselves exercising a power to distance themselves culturally from poorer audiences who listen to *norteña* and dress as *vaqueros* (Mexican cowboys) without irony? A more explicit treatment of how Nor-tec practices contest some aspects of hegemony while reinforcing others might have provided a much-needed organizing principle to this chapter. Drawing from Bourdieu might have allowed Madrid to treat class analytically rather than as a neutral marker of identity.

Chapter 3 returns to what Madrid does best in *Nor-tec Rifa!*: transforming fieldwork into an articulate narrative of a music scene. Madrid argues that “besides the processes of production and consumption, the process of distribution is fundamental in shaping the identity of any cultural project” (87), and his work here is of interest to any scholar researching the contemporary political economy of music, particularly how independent musicians negotiate a terrain in which mainstream distribution channels such as television and radio are controlled by corporations and where recordings are easily pirated. After initial disappointments with major labels, Pepe Mogt of Fussible founded an independent label to distribute Nor-tec tracks. “The idea was to develop a loyal fan base that incorporated audiences from Tijuana and southern California” (90). Crucial to their marketing strategy was the free distribution of MP3s, perhaps one of the earliest and most successful deployments of this type of promotion. “The logic behind this plan was that the wide circulation of the music would eventually lead audiences to request the presence of the Collective in live concerts” (92). This has since become a marketing strategy that even major labels undertake.

The Nortec Collective has carefully managed their relationship to the mainstream, cultivating a local underground identity understood as “authentic” by tightly controlling their artistic collaborations, marketing strategies, and types of venues in which they play. They even resorted to pirating their own work when major label hurdles obstructed the release of new music. According to Madrid, “the gaze of the international electronica community, with its desire for otherness and its validating cosmopolitanism, played a crucial role in the glocal development of such an aura” (97). What Madrid suggests is that “underground authenticity” was itself a strategy to garner attention from outside of Mexico, providing the Nor-tec scene with an even greater cultural cachet at home and abroad. Madrid further points to the new modes of licensing and branding that are ever more critical in the distribution of both major-label and independent music. Nor-tec music has appeared in television commercials, video games, and films. Rather than producing tours with sponsors in a top-down manner that would appeal to a homogenous Latino market, “grassroots strategists . . . more sensitive” to differences within the Latino community have organized successful Nor-tec

events (112); major brands then provide sponsorship with minimal involvement in the tours' execution. Invoking Walter Benjamin, Madrid concludes that the underground appeal of Nor-tec, even when corporate sponsors have bolstered it, stems from "the audience's nostalgia for an aura, for authenticity, grassroots community, and a rejection of commercial marketing and commercial products . . . which provides the grounds for the restitution of aura itself" (113).

In contrast, chapter 4 is considerably less concrete. Madrid argues that "Nor-tec-related expressive culture offers young *tijuanenses* alternative ways to territorialize and reterritorialize public spaces as well as hegemonic discourses of race, class, morality, and belonging" (115), a framework that draws from Deleuze and Guattari. Madrid summarizes this reterritorialization as thus:

Nor-tec has appropriated the myths and stereotypes about the city, turning them into goods for consumption, merchandise, and exchange value which permits *tijuanenses* to question alienating discourses from within. In this form, Nor-tec culture works as an institution that challenges the dominant discourses of national and local identity and, therefore, notions of center and periphery. (*ibid*)

An earlier mode of cultural studies might have termed this challenge as "resistance," though without a critical account of his use of Deleuze and Guattari, it is unclear what this approach gains over a Gramscian one. Furthermore, Madrid's description of the territorialization of Tijuana—its urban restructuring, gentrification, and tourist economy—sits uncomfortably alongside his unwavering focus on Nor-tec as discourse. According to Madrid, "[i]t is important to take into account the discursive level of mythology and simulacra . . . as it is at this level that Nor-tec articulates a process of cultural reterritorialization" (115). Yet this account is oddly divorced from the previous chapter's description of Nor-tec's engagement with globalization. Nor-tec may indeed have carved out a discursive territory from hegemonic forces, but it has also created economic and spatial ones by crafting and marketing a sound that would appeal to a global audience. Madrid describes Nortec City, an event the collective's label put on to garner international press attention as a "reevaluation of spaces and discourses about Tijuana," but it is also an attempt to market a different side of Tijuana to tourists uninterested in hoary clichés of donkey shows. As Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands (2003) have argued, urban nightlife, including club culture, has become an important way for urban property owners to reshape and gentrify cities in favor of capital accumulation. Yet Madrid does not attend to these more material forms of reterritorialization,

even as he quotes his informants decrying the gentrification of their city. The Nortec Collective memorializes certain urban spaces through their songs—do they have material effects on the city’s geography as well?

Chapters 5 and 6 address expressive practices in live performances by the Nortec Collective and by their audiences, respectively. These chapters should prove useful to other ethnographic investigations of electronic dance music. Nor-tec productions have been moved over time from a more abstract and “difficult” sound towards something more crowd-pleasing and club-friendly, due to the pressures of building an audience. “[W]e realized that if we wanted to promote the Nor-tec sound we had to play in discotheques. There were no other places to play in,” Nor-tec producer Melo states (150). Performers had to become “competent in the codes of communication that allow the collective shaping of the event’s atmosphere” (151). Because of this mutual shaping, “successful live performances of EDM require skillful improvisers” (153). Each track is continually mixed and remixed; thus, “its ultimate moment of collective signification is its performance . . . its authenticity is created in performance and consumption” (167). The artist works continually to create both the music and the audience that will consume it dialogically. Additionally, Nor-tec fans engage in their own expressive practices through the consumption and performance of hybridized Mexican stereotypes: “*chicharrón*, *birria*, *lucha libre*, and *norteño* outfits (the *onda vaquera*) are rearticulated in the modernity of high technology (with synthesizers, by DJs, on computers, in electronic music)” (163). Madrid argues that these performances of working-class identities by middle- and upper-class youth are a form of “nostalgia for that which never took place” (164), but once again, Bourdieu’s theories might have helped him better illustrate the class distinctions being drawn through this type of parody and kitsch.

Madrid’s analysis of Nor-tec dance in chapter 6 is subtle and instructive, uncovering hybrid practices that “combine dance steps typical of ravers and clubbers . . . with movements that seem extracted from the choreographies of traditional *norteño* dances” (174). Here Madrid is more observer than participant, and relies on analyzing dancers’ moves textually, supplemented by interviews with fans. Nor-tec, as a modern and cosmopolitan alternative to traditional Latin dance music, facilitates an “activity of gender empowerment which would not be possible in traditional Latin dancing” for one female dancer, “which allows her to express her sexuality without being institutionalized as a sexual object” (181). She has been freed from the passive position reserved for women in traditional Latin couples dancing. Other observations, such as “[t]he dancing bodies of Nor-tec fans reveal that their desire is to be equal members in a global economy” (187), could use more evidence. Dance is certainly a text—and can be analyzed with the

tools of textual analysis—but Madrid’s ethnographic work among Nor-tec fans could have been better integrated into his theorizing to strengthen his conclusions.

The book closes with a contrast between the fantasy of globalized borderlands—“the happy meeting of two distinctly different worlds”—and Nor-tec’s “complex and ironic performative act that negotiates the contradictions of everyday life in a multi-ideological world” (193). The members of the Nortec Collective explicitly disavow any kind of political engagement through their work, even performing for hire at political rallies (though the reader is not told which rallies). Yet Madrid wants to insist on their progressive political force, arguing that it is “an audiotopic endeavor that transcends politics to intervene in the sphere of the political, thereby informing us of the power relations and agencies that allow individuals to respond to the ideological web that surrounds them” (199). If this seems like a watery conclusion, it is because Madrid has not done justice to the research he has accumulated. The struggles against major labels, the unique marketing practices, and the heavy importance of visual culture to the Nor-tec scene cannot be understood as audiotopic, or even strictly discursive, yet they certainly have political implications. By the end of *Nor-tec Rifa!* The bevy of hegemonic forces—major labels, global capitalism, US stereotypes, bourgeois morality—has bewildered rather than provided a proper grounding to judge in what ways Nor-tec might work against (or support, an option Madrid never really addresses) power structures. The discursively crafted agency that appears throughout the book comes more from Madrid’s theorization than from his ethnographic work, and his ethnography is shortchanged by strategy. Nor-tec is a fascinating and worthy topic, and the attempt to analyze it while bridging the divide between ethnomusicology and cultural studies is admirable. Unfortunately, the pick-a-mix approach to cultural theory obscures Madrid’s fieldwork as often as it both elucidates and limits his project’s impact.

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