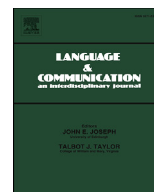
Language & Communication 44 (2015) 31–43

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom



Singing for the dead, on and off line: Diversity, migration, and scale in Mexican *Muertos* music

Paja Faudree*

Brown University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 11 February 2015

Keywords:
Ideologies of difference
Indigeneity
Online communication
Music
Scale
Mexico

ABSTRACT

This article examines the recent emergence of online debates about Day of the Dead music, one of countless sites worldwide where conversations about diversity take place in the shadow of state policies. There, people engage diversity not through the state-centric "managerial discourse" of "diversity talk" but through localized interpretations of sameness and difference. I discuss the social effects of semiotic processes through which people consider sameness and difference: the emergence of a regional venue for debating contentious issues and the consolidation of an implicit consensus of linguistic practice. Attending to local understandings of difference can reduce the risk of taking state-sponsored views of (linguistic) diversity as natural kinds while recovering diversity and surrounding ideologies as ethnographic objects.

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1. Introduction: Mazatec *Muertos* music and discussions about sameness and difference

In May 2012, I stumbled on a homemade video, uploaded to YouTube, of a Mazatec *Muertos* musical performance.[1] This style of music is widely popular in the Sierra Mazateca, a mountainous area of southern Mexico where I have conducted research since 2000. As an instrumental form, the music has been performed for decades, perhaps longer, by groups of musicians and dancers who embody and address the ancestors. Their performances are held in houses and graveyards across the Sierra as part of annual Day of the Dead celebrations (aka *Muertos*). As discussed elsewhere (Faudree, 2013, 2014), around 30 years ago this musical performance style was transformed into a sung tradition featuring lyrics in Mazatec. A tonal indigenous language, Mazatec has some 200,000 speakers, making it one of Mexico's most widely spoken.

The addition of sung lyrics and individual song authorship dates from the introduction of an innovative cultural and linguistic revitalization project: the Day of the Dead song contest. The contest's founders included a Catholic priest and several local catechists, all native Mazatec speakers who were heavily influenced by Liberation Theology; they invented the contest to promote literacy in Mazatec by encouraging local people to write and perform songs in their language. The contest has been wildly popular, garnering region-wide participation by groups entering the contest and attracting large audiences when it is held every year. Within a few years of its founding, the popularity of the contest and its music led to the emergence

* Tel.: +1 401 863 2638.
E-mail address: paja-faudree@brown.edu.

[1] Research for this article is based on online research as well as offline fieldwork conducted in the Sierra Mazateca over the last 14 years, beginning in 2000. I conducted 36 months of field research between 2000 and 2003 and 12 months across calendar year 2011; I have also made yearly trips to the region, mostly for summer stints. This research was supported by organizations that include Social Science Research Council, Wenner-Gren Foundation, Ford Foundation, Fulbright IIE, Fulbright-Hays, and National Science Foundation.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2014.11.004
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of a popular market in Mazatec *Muertos* music recordings. At first, these took the form of cassettes and occasionally analog video recordings. Now compact discs and digital video recordings of these musical performances are sold in town centers across the region.

This development further altered the musical style. Though it continued to be anchored to activities surrounding the Day of the Dead fiesta, the performance style was now loosened from the fiesta in important ways, as music from the holiday began to infiltrate the soundscape of daily life year round. The online migration of Mazatec *Muertos* music marks yet another transformation – and one that surprised me because the Sierra has relatively low rates of Internet access, stemming from the region's general poverty and poor infrastructure. In the last few years, however, there has been a dramatic explosion in the online availability of Mazatec *Muertos* musical performance videos. As of November 2014, there are more than 7000. This total is exponentially larger than the five hundred or so that I encountered when I first began tracking them in mid-2012, with more going up each week – and hundreds going up daily in the weeks surrounding the fiesta.

I have now reviewed and analyzed nearly 4000 of these videos, including their online commentaries. I focus on them here as a form of conversation – often contentious – about diversity, particularly about what counts as acceptable and unacceptable difference within such social categories as "Mazatec." The following examples offer an illustrative sample of these commentaries. They discuss the video of a performance that took place during the 2007 fiesta, featuring musicians and dancers from the small Sierra town of Chilchotla. The video discussed in these comments is one of the oldest and – with a view count of more than 21,000 – the most widely viewed on YouTube.[2]

patuka2008

naska tsu suni atunikanu nga nijkeneo,,,je nat'ni xi naskatsu si un na tsu,,,,jkua siene mi kja si chingajen kui jkuaxkunsunre chuta chingana,,,,tu si'ñuundatsu

It sounds beautiful, the music, put your heart into playing. The guitar sounds great, it sounds really good. It's a [sacred thing], doing this for our ancestors. It sounds really beautiful.

jumarlo76

jajajajaja no mames we me muero de las ganas porque ya se hacercan esos dias tan chidos esta pinche tradicion … saludos desde puebla … extraño la hermosa cultura que tenemos … exelente video … saludos a toda la raza imperio mazateco

Hahaha no way dude I'm dying of excitement because we're getting so close to those cool days, this fucking tradition…. Greetings from Puebla… I miss our cool culture…. Great video… greetings to the whole imperial Mazatec race

Before considering more examples, let me note a few general trends that occur across them. Like these, most of the comments made about Mazatec *muertos* music videos are overwhelmingly – and obscenely – celebratory. They frequently invoke ethnic solidarity, as when the poster above addresses "the whole imperial Mazatec race." Yet others introduce themes of diversity and difference, taking up assorted contentious issues related to ethnic belonging. Such points of contention include the meaning of folkloric tourism and cultural commercialization, regional rivalry between different Sierra towns, and musical piracy. These various disputes share a concern with the boundaries around past tradition and acceptable innovation. In addition, they rely on invoking and inscribing the borders around groups of people that adhere to or depart from "ancestral tradition," which in turn relates to the definition of ethnic social categories like "Mazatec" and "indigenous."

These conversations about sameness and difference are marked by a complex and shifting architecture of belonging, distinction, and exclusion that spans different scales and maps onto social groupings that are sometimes nesting or overlapping, sometimes conflicting and mutually exclusive. Posters sometimes reference social categories with clear, fixed spatial correlates: residents of the Sierra, residents of particular towns (including rival ones), migrants who have left the Sierra, and even would-be tourists. But they also invoke categories of indeterminate or shifting scale, which sometimes have conflated temporal and moral dimensions as well. This occurs, for example, when particular groups are positioned as opposed in a moral cosmos that locates value in fidelity to the ancestral past or alternatively in orientation towards innovation. Finally, these videos and their commentaries are overtly, even exuberantly multilingual, yet are undergirded by an implicit language politics. In addition to occasional words or phrases in English, the comments appear primarily in Spanish (as in the second posting given above). But they frequently feature postings in Mazatec, too (as in the first posting); often, both languages are used in the same comment. However, the songs are performed exclusively in Mazatec. These linguistic practices have important implications for the social work accomplished by the online circulation of *Muertos* performance videos and commentary about them. The socially productive nature of these videos and commentary turn around the process of making ethnic definitions and navigating the diverse challenges to ethnic categories.

I make two overarching points about that process of ethnic inscription. First, I claim that these online discussions of sameness and difference are helping to create a venue for conversation about ethnic diversity and identity that is regional in scale. Yet that scale in this case is not exclusively spatial: the scalar dimensions of this emerging forum are at least as ethnic

[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k288d-PIJ1Q (accessed May 24, 2014). Posters' user names appear in bold; my translations of the original entries appear in italics. Throughout, I have preserved speakers' orthographic choices, including punctuation and spelling.

and temporal as they are regional in the geographic sense. The locally specific ways that spatial scale is imbricated in temporal scale and ethnic belonging make these online conversations important loci for accessing emic perspectives on the perception of diversity. In turn, using these and similar conversations as data for analyses engaging with diversity can help to avoid the problem of taking "diversity talk" to be the universally valid register in which talk about difference occurs. In other words, taking this approach might help us sidestep the trap that both Silverstein (2015) and Moore (2015) identify, following Scott's *Seeing Like s State* (1998): namely, that of seeing diversity the way the state sees it. Thus these online conversations indicate not only what people in the Sierra find worthy of discussion but also what dimensions of sameness and difference they single out for debate. Just as crucially, however, these conversations offer up information about what people in the Sierra *do not* see as contentious, or what they do not view as open to discussion. My second point, then, is that these online conversations are helping to create, consolidate, and legitimate a pervasive consensus of linguistic practice: certain aspects of language use become collective habits that never emerge as focal points of explicit debate.

2. Theorizing diversity: shifters, regional publicity, and indirect indexicality

Scholars of language in social context have long tried to make sense of linguistic diversity: to preserve the ability to generalize about the social reality of language while simultaneously accounting for the patent differences among language varieties and the diverse ways they can become wrapped up in social processes. This longstanding scholarly project has been taken up in new ways over recent decades as scholars have attempted to understand the implications of "globalization" for language in social context. One particularly generative approach has involved research into the management of (linguistic) diversity as a state or institutional project. This literature stresses such themes as how linguistic diversity is the subject of ongoing "sociolinguistic regimes" of language management, or how debating or promoting diversity has become a robust genre of public discourse in contemporary social life (e.g., Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998; Gal, 2012; Urciuoli, 2010).[3]

In this paper, I draw on Urciuoli's work (2003, 2009, 2010) as useful for illuminating the social life and emic dimensions of talk about diversity — especially where such discussions are not directly tied to formal language policy. The case I discuss here displays the fluid boundaries and movement of people and things that have become salient indexes of "globalization": the "cyberization" of Mazatec *Muertos* music occurs in the context of increasing international migration out of the Sierra Mazateca and the rising influx into it of imported digital technologies. Yet conversations about Mazatec *Muertos* Music – rather than being tied directly to Mexican state projects aimed at managing the country's enormous linguistic diversity – occur in their shadows.

Urciuoli discusses how discourses about diversity are organized around key concepts that – like the term "diversity" itself – are "strategically deployable shifters." This concept denotes key discursive terms whose meaning changes across speech events even as they appear denotationally stable. In the examples I discuss below, people rarely use terms like "diversity" or "ethnicity" that would explicitly flag their speech as discussions about ethnic difference. Yet they nevertheless are measuring, assessing, and taking stances on what they perceive to be evidence of (ethnic) difference and sameness. And they rely on terms that function much like Urciuoli's "strategically deployable shifters." These terms – including "tradition" and "custom," "ancestral" or "[real, true] Mazatec" ways, and "[authentic] Mazatec" people – are found throughout the comments on Mazatec *Muertos* music. And their widespread mobilization depends upon and furthers the kind of structural semantic ambiguity that is at the heart of Urciuoli's concept.

Grammatical shifters play a crucial role in this process as well. Echoing cases discussed elsewhere (e.g., Hanks, 1990; Silverstein, 2005; Urban, 2001), the use of collective pronouns in these online conversations at once presupposes and creates a "we." Yet the indeterminacy of that "we," and the semantic "shiftiness" of the ethnic collectivity – "(we) Mazatecs" – to which it ostensibly refers, renders the categories of group membership dynamic and unstable. Crucial discursive labor is performed in these commentaries by pronouns and other canonical exemplars of shifters discussed in classic formulations of the concept (Jakobson, 1957; Silverstein, 1976). Here, however, these forms exhibit not only the generic grammatical dependence on context characteristic of all shifters, but also take on the qualities Urciuoli identifies with "strategically deployable shifters." This concept resonates with themes of enduring interest in the field, including work on semantic ambiguity (e.g., Duranti, 1994; Jaffe, 2009) and the referential indeterminacy of pronouns (e.g., Irvine, 1996; Faudree, 2012).

What I add to Urciuoli's work and related research on the indeterminacy of reference is an attention to the implications these features of language have for the invocation of *scale*. I take it as read that key discursive terms in debates about Mazatec Muertos music – such as "Mazatec," "tradition," and "culture" – are semantically fluid and ambiguous, much as Wirtz (2014) finds that the key terms in debates about race in Cuba function like "strategically deployable shifters." Indeed, the explicit debates about "Mazatec culture" and "Mazatec tradition" that feature so prominently in regional literature (e.g., Abse, 2007; Duke, 1995, 1996; Feinberg, 2003, 2006) can be read as enabled by the denotational fluidity of those terms, and the explicit attempts to fix their referents. I focus not on this indeterminacy per se, but rather on the scalar implications of this "semantic wobble" (Urciuoli, 2003: 400). The referential indeterminacy of the key discursive shifters in debates about Mazatec *Muertos* music allows a flexible, shifting engagement with scale, as people use discussions of diversity (and unity) to articulate

[3] See also the burgeoning literature on "superdiversity" (e.g., Vertovec, 2007; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Arnaut et al., eds., 2012). As noted in the introduction to this special issue (Faudree and Schulthies 2015), a 2013 conference on the theme held in Jyväskylä, Finland provided the impetus for this volume. That concept is discussed and critiqued by papers throughout this special issue.

membership in – or exclusion from – collectivities of varying size and complexity. Although debates about the music often involve the explicit assertion of identities attached to particular localities, they also feature a shifting semiotics of scale where collectivities of other scope are implicitly and inexplicitly invoked.

These debates help to construct Internet forums like You Tube (as well as other social media sites like Facebook, which has been enthusiastically embraced in the Sierra) as new interactional venues that are *regional* in scale – noting that here scale is not exclusively spatial but also has ethnic and temporal dimensions. The region is often elided in theorizations about social relations in globalized contexts, which tend to cluster around attention to local, national, and global frames. Yet here – and perhaps in other cases as well – the region is crucial not only because of its spatial spread but also because of how the region is mapped onto ethno-linguistic categories. The emergence of the region as an online interactional scale (Blommaert, 2007) constitutes new possibilities for asserting regional identities alongside those of different size and complexity (i.e., local, national, global scales). Furthermore, the consolidation of online forums as regional venues allows for broadcasting the diverse identities in play at a scale – i.e., above that of the municipality and below that of the state or nation – that established media institutions in the Sierra rarely address.

These developments have implications for how ethnic categories are mobilized in discourse. While there are certainly geographic boundaries around the Sierra, for many people the region exists less as a spatial entity than as an ethnicized one. It is delimited by shared use of the Mazatec language, particularly as it is used in writing and song performance. It is worth pointing out that even residents of small, rural, and seemingly homogenous regions can experience them as full as diversity. Like inhabitants of seemingly more overtly diverse settings, they can alternately view signs of diversity as troubling – a barrier to be overcome – or as exciting, a resource to exploit.[4]

In the Sierra, the Mazatec language itself can shift across this spectrum of possibility: its internal diversity – or, alternatively, its cohesion – are differentially stressed, depending on the attitudes of those taking positions on the language. People from distant parts of the Sierra cannot speak to each other in Mazatec; like most Oaxacan languages, Mazatec has numerous mutually unintelligible variants. Yet they can nevertheless understand each other – if imperfectly – in the context of written texts and performed songs. Language use in the Sierra is therefore implicated in multiple levels of indexical loading – what Silverstein (2003) calls "orders of indexicality." Language use indexes not only particular subjectivities but also particular scalar frames by invoking the collectivities to which they belong. Hence using Spanish rather than Mazatec, writing in particular Mazatec orthographies and not others, or using texting shorthand all have scalar implications, implying membership in imagined collectives of varying scope.

These differentially invoked scales are not only spatial and ethnic but temporal as well. In the Sierra, the temporal dimensions of scale come to the fore when people cast particular musical styles or groups as upholders or violators of "tradition." Such frames generally rely on a semiotics of affiliation wherein temporality is harnessed to political and moral distinctions. Occasionally, they may have stable spatial correlates as well – Chilchotla, for example, is often valorized as preserving the "traditions" that other Sierra towns have abandoned. In most cases, people talking about Mazatec *Muertos* music often draw upon the dead themselves as key figures: the relatively anonymous dead ("the ancestors") and also specific individuals who are now being memorialized in new ways through digital media. Video postings bridge the distance separating the present from the immediate past – commenters frequently marvel at the immediate public access afforded by the Internet. These uploaded videos also mediate between the present and the more distant past, as when a deceased musician's presence is revived through online commemoration. All the while, videos and commentary invoke the more distant "time of the ancestors" temporal frame that many people, online and off, elevate as a model for present behavior. Offline performances for local audiences are posted online for a wildly heterogeneous audience. It may consist not only of participants themselves but also other people whose connections to the commenters and music producers span temporal and spatial scales through identities bundled to other social categories: locals, migrants, tourists, regional rivals – even, perhaps, the dead themselves. As one Mazatec musician suggested, the dead surely are not hampered in death as they were in life by lousy computer skills, bad Internet connections, and crappy, second-hand machines.[5]

This development of the region as an interactional scale is linked in turn to the second argument I make: that a crucial aspect of discussions about sameness and difference in the context of Mazatec *Muertos* music concerns its contribution to forging a consensus of linguistic practice. Expanding on Hill's discussion of indirect indexicality (1998) and Silverstein's discussion of presupposing versus creative indexical orders (2003), I claim that a crucial aspect of discussions about Mazatec *Muertos* music concerns the indirect indexicality of language use. Debates about Mazatec *Muertos* music both presuppose and create certain linguistic norms – in the latter case, by disseminating linguistic norms at a regional scale and hence at novel levels of publicity. *Muertos* music conversations are shot through with disagreements about what constitutes appropriate musical styles and performance choices, which are in turn linked to additional indexical orders – whether *Muertos* groups are "traditional" or not, "authentic" representations of "Mazatec culture" or not. All the while, language choice – the exuberant multilingualism and codeswitching of the online commentary, and rigorous Mazatec monolingualism of the songs themselves – goes almost entirely unremarked. These language practices emerge as an established, implicit norm in these new

[4] I thank Dan Suslak for pointing this out.

[5] Interview with Primitivo Lopez, Municipio of Nda Xo, August 2012. Here, as elsewhere in this article, I use pseudonyms for the real names of people I spoke to offline.

online contexts. These practices simultaneously replicate and further offline practices, while doing so at an emergent scale of publicity, namely, that of the Sierra Mazateca as a region.

In drawing out the Internet-mediated dimensions of this case, I build on a burgeoning corpus of work examining online communities ethnographically (e.g., Boellstorff, 2008; Boyer, 2010; Coleman, 2010), including diasporic ones (e.g., Eisenlohr, 2006). Most of this work stresses the importance of conducting ethnography both on and offline, an approach I take here as well. This research strategy facilitates an understanding of how offline divisions and competing constructions of difference appear to be migrating online, even as the emergent practices surrounding digital media may enable new constellations of affiliation and animosity. Internet forums, such as You Tube commentary chains, are emerging as venues for voicing complaints about such contentious issues as musical piracy – and, crucially, I claim, they are becoming forums for doing so on a regional scale. This approach invites people beyond the limits of a given municipality to participate in and attend to a given conversation. At the same time, this development provides a venue more accessible to people in the Sierra than are appeals to state institutions, officially the next layer of legal recourse above that of the municipality. In conceptualizing the importance of piracy to this case, I draw on a robust body of literature in musical piracy and appropriation, including foundational work on the development of "world music" and its non-Western others (e.g., Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000; Feld, 1988); I also draw upon more recent studies on digital piracy (e.g., Dent, 2012). As do many of the author pursuing such research on musical piracy and online communities, I stress the social productivity of the densely entangled, hybrid forms of communication at the heart of this case. People in the Sierra, like many others around the world, engage in interactive practices that bridge offline and online communication, laminating mediated and face-to-face communication into complex expressive genres that trouble boundaries around public and private. Examining relations between online and offline interactions allows attention to the variable scales of intimacy and publicity at which social cohesion is experienced or, alternately, threatened.

3. The Day of the Dead Song Contest and Mazatec-language singing

The Sierra Mazateca is best known, in Mexico and beyond, as "the land of the magic mushrooms": hallucinogenic mushrooms grow throughout the area, and are used across the Sierra in curing rituals. The region has been the focus of "drug" tourism since the 1960s when the amateur mycologist and New York banker Gordon Wasson "discovered" the shaman María Sabina in Huautla, the Sierra's largest town. In 1957, Wasson wrote a sensationalist article about her in *Life* magazine (Wasson, 1957), which at the time had the largest circulation in the country. The article inspired Timothy Leary to try the mushrooms; his work publicizing their transformative potential kicked off an important chapter in the Psychedelic Revolution (Leary, et al., 1964). Thereafter, Huautla was flooded with mushroom-seeking hippies, inaugurating mushroom tourism in the region that continues today. Though now deceased, Maria Sabina has a massive online presence, as do narratives about the region's mushrooms, centering almost exclusively on Huautla (Faudree, in press). Local people from Huautla and the Sierra's other towns like Chilchotla are very aware that online and off the region is best known through this history, and frequently engage with it when posting online about Mazatec *Muertos* music. Yet as we will see in the examples discussed below, *serranos* (Sierra residents) interact with that history not only as a narrative of engagement with outsiders but also through the lens of regional rivalries. That frame becomes dominant, for example, when Sierra natives from towns other than Huautla claim, among other grievances, that *huautecos* (Huautla residents) have disproportionately and irresponsibly benefitted from the rise of the international mushroom trade.

The Internet is increasingly becoming a presence in the daily lives of people from the Sierra although the region's infrastructure remains poor even by the low standards of southern Mexico, the poorest part of the country. A rugged region where landslides are common and most roads are unpaved, the Sierra has limited cell phone service and few landlines, hardly any in private homes. People rely instead on community phone booths and Internet cafés offering glacial service on second-hand computers.

Prior to the rise regionally of the Internet, the leading venues for mass communication were municipal loudspeakers – whose reach rarely extends past town centers, a serious limitation in a region where most people live in dispersed rural settlements. The reach of the region's few radio stations is greater but, due to the Sierra's formidable topography, is still very limited in reaching beyond municipal boundaries. Huautla's radio stations, for example, can only be heard in some nearby settlements but not in the larger neighboring towns, including Chilchotla. To date, there are no regional print publications, either. One candidate would be the monthly cultural magazine *La Faena*, which is published in Huautla in Spanish, some Mazatec, and occasionally a little (broken) English. Yet *La Faena* has a very small circulation and is geared as much towards mushroom tourists as it is to the limited number of locals interested in "Mazatec culture."

The increasing presence of the Internet is changing the mechanisms through which people relate to each other in the Sierra. Among other things, this development marks the emergence of a venue for conversation and dispute that has the potential of extending across the entire region. While the Net is "still arriving," its influence on the lives of *serranos* has escalated dramatically over the last decade. However, it remains to be seen how broadly accessible this communicative resource will be. Young people have been the most active consumers of digital technology, but older people who five years ago had never been online now regularly check their email and Facebook accounts. People from both groups have embraced social media – especially Facebook and You Tube – as venues for displaying and commenting upon Mazatec *Muertos* performances.

This style of musical performance has roots not only in long-established practices attached to *Muertos* but also in a recent revival initiative: the Day of the Dead Song Contest. Though there are now spin-off contests throughout the region, the first song contest was founded in the early 1980s in Chilchotla. Like other *serranos*, people from Chilchotla are ambivalent about

Huautla's claim – rooted in its long history as the center of regional commerce and more recently of the mushroom trade – to being the "capital of the Mazatec nation." *Chilchotlecos* (Chilchotla residents) decenter Huautla's preeminence by claiming their town as the "cradle of Mazatec songwriters": birthplace of the oldest and largest *Muertos* song contest.

The contest was founded during the ascendance of Liberation Theology in southern Mexico (see Norget, 1997). The regional bishop, committed to Liberationist ideals, encouraged a local priest who happened to be from Chilchotla to translate songs into Mazatec for Catholic mass. The priest found this task difficult, given the pervasive structural and pragmatic differences between Mazatec and Spanish. So he began writing his own songs in Mazatec instead. Like most indigenous Mexican languages, Mazatec has no universal standardized orthography, and most Mazatec speakers are literate primarily in Spanish. So the priest devised his own alphabet and taught it to the region's catechists while disseminating his songs. In order to bolster this new vernacular literacy, the priest and catechists founded the Day of the Dead song contest, aiming to encourage people to write their own Mazatec-language songs.

The Day of the Dad song contest now inaugurates the holiday. The founders tied the contest to *Muertos* in order to harness the fiesta's enormous popularity, and to draw upon its perceived centrality to "Mazatec culture." The Sierra's most important holiday, it is celebrated even by Protestants and is the one time a year when migrants who have left the region reliably return. There is a robust body of literature on the Day of the Dead in Mexico, identifying the holiday both as a key venue for the consolidation of Mexican nationalism (Lomnitz, 2005) and as a fiesta that plays a crucial role in the social life of indigenous communities.[6] The enduring importance of the holiday helps make sense of the song contest's popularity, even as its innovative recasting of a holiday discussed as quintessentially "traditional" potentially poses ideological challenges. The fiesta's standing in the local symbolic economy also helps explain why members of the Mazatec diaspora – particularly migrants living abroad – respond so strongly to the emergence of a "virtual" version of the fiesta. Unlike domestic migrants, international ones are rarely able to return home for the holiday. Thus they have embraced the emerging "cyberfiesta" – videos of Mazatec *Muertos* musical performances now widely available online – as a new form of participation.

The deep resonance of Mazatec *Muertos* musical performances also stems from their strongly regional-ethnic semiotic loadings, and their continuity with well-established cultural practices. The contest's founders tied the innovations of songwriting, Mazatec literacy, and cultural competition to key, longstanding musical practices in the Sierra. Prior to the contest, purportedly, *Muertos* music was exclusively instrumental. Due to the limits in the historical record, I cannot assess the validity of the claim made by many musicians and composers that the contest recovered a "lost tradition" of singing. In this narrative, prior to the influence of state and church policies marginalizing the use of Mazatec, songs for *Muertos* were sung and only in the twentieth century became an instrumental tradition. Nor can I can say anything definitive about how much the music itself might have changed as a result of the (re?)-introduction of sung lyrics.

Whatever the deeper history of Mazatec *Muertos* music, the contest linked song authorship, literacy, and competition to musical practices that are distinct from those used to celebrate the holiday elsewhere in Mexico. Yet these practices are centerpieces of *Muertos* observances in the Sierra. The most important involve visits to homes across the fiesta's ten nights – in itself a departure from the nationally standard two-day norm – by groups of musicians and dancers called *chajma*, who embody the return of the ancestors. *Chajma* consist of a group of musicians and a few dancers dressed to embody the ancestors. Dancers and musicians are mostly male, often belong to the same extended family, and are generally headed by the group's lead composer. The instrumentation consists of one or two violins, one or two guitars, sometimes a guitarrón, a large drum, and other percussive instruments that may include rasps, tambourines, cowbells, or triangles. Occasionally, instruments like accordions are introduced – and along with them claims that the musicians are violating "tradition." The musical style, particularly in songs viewed as "traditional," is influenced by vernacular music heard throughout Mexico, including regionally associated types of *son* and *corridos*. Songs considered "modern" – though less prevalent in the contest itself, and often the locus of intense critique – resemble *cumbias*, *rancheros*, and musical styles associated with other parts of Mexico or Latin America.[7]

Written Mazatec lyrics now form the center of each contest entry, thoroughly embedding literacy in performance practices. Furthermore, the contest's organizers embrace orthographic heterodoxy: authors are allowed to write texts using whatever alphabet they choose. Both strategies are unlike those animating many revival projects found elsewhere in Mexico. In such cases, vernacular literacy is promoted through language standardization and through solo reading practices like those Benedict Anderson (1983) linked to the rise of nationalism. Historically, the development of the song contest paralleled the development and local implementation of Mexico's federal bilingual education program, which in some measure disseminated indigenous language literacy (see Feinberg, 2003; King, 1994). Ideologically, however, the contest largely opposes that program and its approach to vernacular literacy.

Nationally, the leading figures in promoting indigenous literacy are indigenous intellectuals who were credentialed through the national bilingual education program. One of the goals they commonly aspire to constitutes what I have

[6] The large anthropological literature on Day of the Dead in Mexico includes Brandes (1998, 2006), Norget (2006), and Nutini (1988).

[7] All types of *son* are generally performed by small groups and feature instrumental passages alternating with sung verses. *Corridos*, a type of ballad, are narrative songs with introductory and intervening instrumental passages between stanzas. *Rancheras* date from the Mexican Revolution and later became associated with mariachi and *norteño* bands from northwestern Mexico, linkages that make *rancheras* distinctly non-local for people from the Sierra; this "otherness" is highlighted by their instrumentation, which generally includes such instruments as accordions and trumpets rarely used in music marked as local. *Cumbias* are a form of tropical dance music that originated in Colombia; despite being practiced in Mexico since the middle of the twentieth century, they retain – certainly for people in the Sierra – a clear foreign identity.

elsewhere called an "alphabet first" approach to literacy. It stresses the importance of deriving a single standardized alphabet that can function across a given language's variants – what they call *normalización*. Once achieved, those involved in developing the new orthography often rigorously police deviations from it (Faudree, 2015). The Sierra's leading intellectuals take this approach; like almost all of the region's bilingual schoolteachers, they are from Huautla, which feeds region-wide ambivalence towards *huautecos'* perceived superiority. *Huauteco* intellectuals were involved in developing the government's educational materials for the Sierra, which promote literacy through printed books – rather than performance. They also employ a different alphabet from that used by the song contest's founders. In fact, the Chilchotla priest devised his own orthography in part over frustration with the governmental alphabet. For their part, the Huautla intellectuals – who unlike the priest are trained ethnolinguists – have been skeptical of his "unprofessional" alphabet. These competing approaches and ideological investments in Mazatec writing feed into broader regional rivalries, which animate offline talk in the Sierra – and now online talk as well. The regional rivalries concerning Mazatec *Muertos* music discussed below thus operate along numerous axes of differentiation. They include differential alignment with national and international institutions and their particular local instantiations, and involve competing investments in different alphabets.

The contest has been wildly popular. Every year, people travel from across the region to attend. Hundreds of participants compete, hoping to place a song among the top five entries, which win substantial cash prizes. Furthermore, the contest has anchored a broad revival movement involving the birth of popular Mazatec literacy and song composition and the emergence of popular markets in Mazatec video and sound recordings. *Chajma* groups now perform their own songs throughout the fiesta, taking them into homes across the region. Not long after the contest began, groups began producing cassettes of their music, and later CDs. In addition to its economic implications, this market has had an audible impact on the regional soundscape. Individuals, households, and businesses all have access to the music year-round. So, too, do regional radio stations (mostly located in Huautla) and municipal town halls, which regularly broadcast the music through loudspeakers heard across town. These activities help create – and make public – discourses about ethnic belonging. They provide novel opportunities for expressing and experiencing regional solidarity even as they retrench existing religious and political divisions (Faudree, 2013, 2014, 2015).

In some ways this development is surprising: how could the region's most "traditional" holiday become the venue for such powerful, productive innovations? Yet this trend can be found across the globe, in other cases where contests have been used to successfully resolve the threats that modernity poses to tradition. As others have discussed, competition is at the ideological heart of capitalism and modernity. In locations throughout the world, the introduction of competitions has transformed ritual events into popular culture, in the process providing key material for the expression and crystallization of nationalism.[8] This is true as well of the penumbra of activities now surrounding the Day of the Dead song contest, especially the market in Mazatec music recordings. These transformations often involve mediatization, in Agha's terms (2011), where processes of communication and commodification are linked.

In the Sierra, such linkages to commodification and market economies are precisely the sites were tensions about the meaning of modernization rise to the surface. Debates about sameness and difference are a resource in working through these conflicts. People mobilize debates about diversity to express dismay about how innovative aspects of the contest and its related activities violate the spirit of the fiesta, forsaking the ways of the ancestors. In some cases, *serranos* have established practices that provide a stable resolution to the perceived conflict between "tradition" and departures from it. For example, the contest's prizes routinely go to "traditionalist" songs that venerate the ancestors, while songs articulating with modern themes – songs about Mexico's drug violence or increasing levels of migration – may rank in the top five but rarely win.

Yet departure from perceived "tradition" can also elicit bitter debate. This is reflected in complaints that, to quote a Sierra resident, the contest has "made our ancestral traditions all commercial and about making money, like a TV show." Or as another put it, "Why did they have to make it into a contest? Now people only care about is the cash [i.e., the prizes], not about honoring our ancestors, doing it right." Such objections both further and draw upon interdiscursive linkages to related speech events, particularly complaints about the commodification of Mazatec mushrooms and shamanism. These ties suggest that musicians who modernize *Muertos* music are guilty of "cultural crimes" on par with those who have ostensibly gotten rich by selling "Mazatec culture" to mushroom tourists. In both cases, particular forms of cultural production become the locus of disputes over authenticity and cultural property, and also about unacceptable levels of variation in how people act as moral ethnic actors. As they move into "cyberspace," these online conflicts echo those taking place offline – and perhaps amplify them as well, given the Internet's potential for broadcasting messages at new levels of publicity.

Engagement with the Internet in the Sierra offers at least some of the affordances for an emerging regional conversation about ethnic solidarity and the challenges diversity poses to it. Yet if the Internet is providing the conditions of possibility for an emerging regional public venue, the implications extend beyond broadcasting contention and complaint – in other words, beyond the referential content of the allegations. What people do not discuss – do not recognize as sites where an unacceptable level of diversity has emerged – is equally important. Discursive norms that bracket certain conversations or construct them as unimportant likewise accomplish important social work. Certain conventions about language use go entirely unremarked, for example, indexically providing the substrate for a regional consensus of linguistic and discursive

[8] Beauty contests, religious festivals, and musical and sporting competitions are but a few such examples. The literature on this topic is vast; some examples include Bauman and Feaster (2005), Wirtz (2014), Guss (2001), Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), Dent (2009), and Hellier-Tinoco (2011). I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point, and for calling my attention to some of the relevant literature cited here.

practice. These online interactions involve social relations that span diverse spatial and temporal scales, and are intimately in dialog with engagements taking place offline.

4. Debating Mazatec *Muertos* music: difference, ambiguity, and scale

I turn now to more examples of online commentary on Mazatec *Muertos* music. In considering the implications of these debates about ethnic difference and solidarity, I focus on how the key discursive shifters used in them allow people to position themselves and others in scalar terms. Many comments, like the examples discussed in the introduction, draw on an implicit or explicit "we Mazatecs" discourse that invokes a conflated ethnic-regional frame of belonging. Yet these conversations frequently index migration and translocality as well, with implicit scalar frames that segment or cross-cut the "pan-Mazatec" imaginary. This is most evident in emergent identification conventions through which posters indicate where they are from in the Sierra and where they live now (Mexico, Puebla, New York, even Germany). As in the introductory examples, people often deploy these conventions, and their shifting scalar framings, while expressing strong emotions: excitement about the coming fiesta – even months before it begins – alongside sadness at being unable to attend. Such discursive conventions mirror those from offline talk, where in the months preceding the fiesta conversations about it become pervasive and nearly ritualized in daily interactions.

The online commentaries also echo another set of conventions from offline conversation: those governing talk between the living and the dead. Throughout the fiesta, people ritually address the dead – particularly, for example, when holding vigils at graveyards or interacting with altars in honor of the deceased. These speech events are similar in some ways to online conversations between migrants and Sierra residents: both are forms of surrogate participation through which those physically absent are included in collective imaginings. In this sense, digital media and online forums have elicited the emergence of new commemoration practices. The following is a comment on a recently uploaded video featuring the musician Mario Carreño, who died in 2012. For much of his adult life, Carreño was the leader of a musical group bearing his name (*Chajma Carreño*), which won the song contest in 2001.[9]

> **el poder de aguaespuma la herencia norteña**
>
> para estar mas unidos que nunka ya que los carreño no se va a perder, este año sera algo triste ya que el tio mario que empaz descanse ya no estara mas con nosotros, pero lo llevaremos siempre en nuestra mente y en nuestros corazones, porfa contesten todos ustedes esperamos verlos en el lugar de siempre el 27 de octubre nos vemos…
>
> *in order to be even more united than ever and that we don't forget about [chajma] carreño, this year it will be sad because uncle mario may he rest in peace will not be with us any more, but we will carry him always in our minds and in our hearts, please answer, everyone, we hope to see you at the place we always do on the 27th of october, see you there*

Postings like this one feature "shout outs" similar to those that migrants used in the introductory examples. In both types of commentary, similar discursive conventions are used to build and maintain intimacy between people in the Sierra and those who have left, whether through migration or death. And both types of conversation invoke complex scalar imaginaries that rely on the use of particular linguistic forms that, like "strategically deployable shifters," are inherently ambiguous. They are anchored by reference to local categories of belonging – for example, *chita ndaxo* (Chilchotlecos, or people form Chilchotla) or members of the *raza mazateca* (Mazatec race). But those categories take on ambiguity when they intersect with other salient categories. Do they, for example, include both the living *and* the dead, both those resident in the Sierra *and* those who are not? Similar ambiguity attends the use of grammatical shifters. Pronouns like "we" can invoke all Mazatec people or, conversely, all Chilchotlecos – either of which may include the living and the dead or, alternately, only the living as opposed to the dead. Referring back to the examples at the beginning of this article, note that once again this referential ambiguity, and the shifting scalar framings it makes possible, exists in both Spanish and Mazatec examples, though the latter requires speakers to choose between inclusive and exclusive forms. In the initial Mazatec example, inclusive first person plural forms are used (*na*, *-na*); however, the exclusive forms would have remained equally ambiguous with respect to many social categories, especially concerning the distinction between the living and the dead. This referential indeterminacy and flexibility, though a general feature of language, is amplified in online and other mediated conversations, which take place amid reduced contextual information in comparison to face-to-face communication.

Such referential ambiguity and shifting scales of alignment structure the following comments. They appeared as commentaries on videos featuring the well-known Chilchotla group Los Chamos. They echo the offline discourses encountered earlier, where fidelity to ancestral tradition is pitched against innovation. Here – as I frequently witnessed in offline conversations as well – *chajma* masks are a salient site of critique: wooden masks are praised as *kjua⁴qui²xi⁴* or *verdadero* (true, authentic) while plastic monster masks – Halloween masks – are disparaged as a foreign or modern contamination of ancestral custom:[10]

[9] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UNGfpukIgU (accessed May 24, 2014).

[10] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EkkFxcQd5c (accessed May 24, 2014). These comments feature three roughly synonymous terms for dancers and musicians who sing to and embody the dead: the Nahuatl loan *huehuentones* and the Mazatec words *chajma* and *cha xo'o*.

illimani55

PERFECTO, HASTA QUE VI MASCARAS DE VERDADEROS HUEHUENTONES, DE MADERA SIN ARREGLOS COMO DEBEN SER, HASTA EN ESO SE DEBEN PRESERVAR LAS TRADICIONES, YA QUE VI MASCARAS DE MOMIAS Y CALAVERAS HOLLIWOODENSES, ADEMAS DE MASCARAS DE VIEJITOS ESPAÑOLES EN OTROS VIDEOS, MUY BUEN VIDEO. LARGA VIDA A ESTE HERMOSO PUEBLO Y SUS TRADICIONES

Perfect, I even saw real huehuentones [chajma] masks, of wood, unpainted, the way they should be. This is the way to preserve our traditions, because I saw "Hollywood" masks of mummies and skulls, even masks of little old Spaniards in other videos, this is a really good video. Long life to this beautiful pueblo and its traditions.

Such complaints locate violations of "tradition" not only in ill-chosen visual signs but also in sonic ones. In these comments, posters accuse the group of having "commercialized" *chajma* music by turning their songs into *cumbias*, a Columbian musical genre now popular throughout Latin America.[11] In Mexico, the term *cumbia* is often used pejoratively rather than descriptively, denoting a range of disparaged musical styles perhaps best glossed as "dumb dance music":

Balam Zamná

¿Que celebran, día de muertos o haloween?… todo se está perdiendo que dirían los viejos si vivieran al ver que lo que ellos nos inculcaron se está perdiendo y para terminar de joder adaptan música comercial… lo originál de estado se está perdiendo que lástima.

What are you celebrating, day of the dead or halloween?… everything is being lost is what the old people would say if they'd lived to see that all that they'd taught us is being lost and to end it off you are fucking adapting commercial music… the most authentic [culture] of the state is being lost what a shame.

Simbiosisalfaomega

Espero que no adopten esa pendejada de adaptar las canciones populares (cumbia) a nuestra cultura… y que sea totalmente original y representativa de nuestra cultura.

I wish you wouldn't adopt this dumbass idea of adapting the music of our culture into popular songs (cumbia)… instead your music should be totally authentic and representative of our culture.

These comments echo a complaint found in similar form across many of the online commentaries about Mazatec *Muertos* music: namely, that people are commercializing *chajma* songs by turning them into *cumbias*. Such comments constitute metapragmatic discussions about what constitutes acceptable Mazatec singing and performance styles, talk where the borders between musical and performance genres are both transcended and asserted. In the process, the more fundamental and largely implicit category of "Mazatec (culture)" is at once subject to attempts at fixing its content while simultaneously destabilized through the shifting referents to which it is tied. All the while, other aspects of practice pass below the radar of reflexive critique. This is particularly true of language use. More specifically, it pertains to the linguistic habits whereby linguistic fluidity and codeswitching are both embraced in discussions about Mazatec *Muertos* music, whereas Mazatec language purism is inscribed in the songs themselves. Through indirect indexicality, this absence of discussion about linguistic practices bolsters those very norms. At the same time, their instantiation and dissemination in Internet forums – where they become accessible to people outside the region, including not only migrants who have left but also would-be tourists – amplifies their potential as vehicles of linguistic and cultural socialization, particularly for migrants and their children.

Despite these and related critiques about how *chajma* groups are departing from ancestral norms in the realm of dress and sound, language use appears free of such criticism. This is despite the fact that in other contexts language use is a salient site of complaint. In the comments on thousands of videos I have reviewed to date, I found no metalinguistic commentary whatsoever – no explicit discussions about language, whether spoken or written. I could not find any critiques or even discussions about how people write online, whether in Mazatec or Spanish, nor even about which language they choose to write in. Yet as is clear from the examples above, language choices vary widely, particularly regarding orthography. Doubtless this orthographic permissiveness is partly due to broader digital writing conventions: certain omissions and shorthand forms are clearly borrowed from Mexican or even broadly Latin American texting norms.[12] But I suggest that their alignment with broader writing practices in the Sierra, particularly regarding Mazatec *Muertos* music, simultaneously indexes identities more local or regional in scope.

The online tolerance for orthographic heterodoxy may reflect the same heterodox communicative ideologies governing the song contest, particularly where writing Mazatec is concerned. Many people I have interviewed offline about their online practices suggest they see writing online as less bound by rules. As one person said, "Nobody cares how you write things online, everyone knows that." For others, the song contest is an explicit frame of reference. "I write Mazatec on the Internet the same way I do for the contest," said one composer. "I try to make it regular [i.e., be consistent], but I don't worry if it moves

[11] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZMX9TpHI78 (accessed May 24, 2014).

[12] Adopting these conventions may index the kinds of globalized identities – hip, youthful, cosmopolitan – discussed by McIntosh (2010).

around." Note, too, that codeswitching is prevalent and likewise completely free of metalinguistic commentary. People switch fluently between Spanish and Mazatec, a form of linguistic production often disparaged in daily conversation in the Sierra. Yet all the while, the linguistic autonomy of singing Mazatec is tacitly preserved and goes unremarked: throughout the videos, singing takes place exclusively in Mazatec and never in Spanish.

A different scalar imaginary is invoked by comments expressing municipal pride – an interpretation of belonging that tacitly depends upon a larger regional framework that gives meaning to the agonistic semiotics of municipal differentiation. In the following comment – by the son of a well-known musician whose group has won the contest several times – the rivalry between Chilchotla and other towns is especially prominent. The pronouns index a countervailing collective to the ethnic "we" encountered above:[13]

ELVIOLINROJO1

HOLA SOY NOE DE LA CRUZ UN SALUDO A TODOS LOS QUE VISITAMOS ESTOS VIDEOS BUENOS, MUY BIEN POR TODOS NUESTROS GRUPOS DE CHIL, QUE POR MAS QUE NOS QUIERAN IMITAR OTROS LUGARES NUNCA SERAN IGUALES QUE NOSOTROS JO JO JO JO JO JOJO VIVAN LOS HUSHUES ....

*Hi, I'm Noe de la Cruz greetings to all who visit us through these great videos, very good for all the groups of Chilchotla, because as much as they want to imitate us in other places they'll never be as good as we are jojojojjo long live the [*chajma*]....*

The region-internal politics of differentiation come even more forcefully to the fore in comments on videos by Huautla groups, many posted by Chilchotla residents. Although they were posted in response to different videos, the following two examples represent this trend:

kaliman5891

pinche musica culera eso ya no es de huehuentones wey, para k sepas k es musica de verdad para el otro año ve a escuchar a chilchotla a los chammooossssss

fucking trashy music that isn't huehuenton *music, dude, why do you think this is the real deal, next year you should listen to Chilchotla, los chamossssssssssss*

neondaniel1

EL CONOCIMIENTO ACERCA DE LA LLEGADA Y PREPARATIVOS PARA LAS ALMAS, ESTA ES UNA MANERA DE PREPARAR SU LLEGADA, EXCELENTE...ADEMAS SON POCOS LO QUE ENTENDEMOS DE ESTO DE VERDAD ES UNA MARAVILLA...CUIDEMOS DE NO REVELAR A LOS EXTRANJEROS NUESTRA CULTURA MILENARIA...

the knowledge about the arrival and preparations for the souls, this is a way of preparing for their arrival, excellent... all the same, few understand what a true marvel this is,,, we need to take care to not reveal to foreigners our millenarian culture...

These and other posters voice specific critiques about Huautla's residents. They claim Huautecos monopolize the region's touristic markets – the mushroom trade but also the emerging market in Mazatec *Muertos* music. Whatever the latter's touristic potential – there are a few postings of would-be tourists interested in visiting the region to hear the music during *Muertos* – talk about it echoes a robust offline discourse in the Sierra wherein Huautecos are guilty of commercializing "Mazatec culture" and selling cultural secrets to foreigners for personal gain. Furthermore, they claim Huauteco merchants and musicians pirate the music itself: copying the CDs of other towns' *chajma* groups and not sharing the proceeds – or more egregiously, passing off another group's songs as their own.

While such complaints are now voiced on sites like YouTube, most take place offline and consist of intimate conversations that may make the public, online ones possible. The following example features a whistled conversation I overheard in Chilchotla's market.[14] Mazatec is tonal, with four pitch level tones that mark not only lexical but also grammatical distinctions. The central role tone plays in the language's structure has allowed for the development of a whistled register, famous among linguists and linguistic anthropologists (Cowan, 1948), wherein speakers can have entire conversations only by whistling. The conversation below was prompted by the *chajma* music playing loudly in the background by music vendors; in the months leading up to the fiesta, they often amped up the volume to try boosting sales. The ambient noise not only provided the content for the conversation but also elicited its mode: my research on whistle speech indicates that people often use the whistled register when speakers are surrounded by noise, including that of conversations taking place nearby. In such contexts, speakers tell me they find whistling a more effective, and sometimes less obtrusive, way to communicate:[15]

[13] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EkkFxcQd5c (accessed May 25, 2013); ELVIOLINROJO1 has since changed his user name to Noe Fuentes.

[14] I did not record this conversation: such conversations are hard to record because of the difficulty of capturing both participant parts, since speakers are often physically distant from each other. I worked with a native speaker to transcribe conversations live and, where possible, check our renderings afterwards with the participants. Whistle speech appears to be rarely used as truly private conversation; although people who whistle to each other regularly can be more creative in their speech than most – straying further from stock utterances – people know that anyone who speaks the language and pays attention to what is whistled can "decode" its meaning.

[15] Here and in the next example the speakers are identified using pseudonyms.

Adelfo:	1 2 2-4 4-4-1	**Ya tse disco rixkuan?** *What group is this, this CD?*
Joel:		2 1-3-3 2 **Jan tejao tse.** *They're from Huautla.*
Adelfo:	2 2 1-3-3 2	**An ga tejao tse?** *But really, they're from Huautla?*
Joel:		2 1-3-3 2 **Jaon, tejao tse.** *Yes, they're from Huautla.*
Adelfo:	1 2 2-1 3 4-4 2 2	**Tan ga majin la, chije ni jña.** *I don't believe that, they're thieves.*

This conversation mirrors those occurring in daily conversation across the Sierra, particularly as the fiesta draws near. I have regularly heard similar complaints about Huautla's musicians and merchants since I first arrived in the Sierra in 2000. It is thus not surprising that they should be echoed online; online comments about *Muertos* music videos, and how they alternately violate or preserve "Mazatec tradition," reflect pervasive discursive tropes that animate offline conversation as well. But it is worth contemplating whether the online emergence of such complaints has played a role in the development offline of what may constitute a new mechanism for dealing with such complaints. In recent years, there has been at least one case in the Sierra where complaints over piracy have resulted in formal censure by municipal authorities. One musician who had written a popular song was forced to pay a fine to the group lodging the complaint. In the view of local musicians I interviewed, this case is unprecedented: never before has one musician or musical group been held responsible by town authorities for in essence stealing the work of others.

The ostensibly pirated version of the song appears in a widely viewed YouTube video that features enthusiastic dancing by a well-known local drunk. However, its popularity across the region probably owes much to its serial airtime on Huautla radio station *Estereo Hongo: Alucinando Ideas* ("Radio Mushroom: Hallucinating Ideas").[16] It is also too early to know whether or not other cases of musical piracy will be modeled on this one. But my point is that the complex relationship between online and offline conversations has implications for how we theorize engagements across scale, and the role that referential ambiguity plays in how scalar imaginaries are invoked. The intimate, non-public or quasi-public conversations taking place offline doubtless play a role in structuring public ones. At the same time, the affordances of digital media and Internet forums – including the possibility of imagining and constituting audiences and "communities" of larger scale – may introduce the potential for new scalar imaginaries or, more modestly, for more powerful means of propagating them. These possible imaginaries include both regional and supra-regional axes of affiliation, as online conversations about Mazatec *Muertos* music are directed not only at people living across the Sierra but also at migrants who have left. The ability to mobilize concerns about piracy not only publicly but at a scale wider than that of a given municipality may give such claims greater traction than they otherwise would have had, bolstering appeals to municipal authorities for reparations that previously would have been more easily dismissed.

5. Conclusion: Mazatec *Muertos* music and scalar imaginaries

This case highlights important issues to consider in contemplating how linguistic and other semiotic resources are implicated in locally specific interpretations of difference and sameness. In places like the Sierra Mazateca, both amicable and antagonistic relations are dense, overlapping, and increasingly propagated through engagement with digital and online media. Such relations include those of small scale but also of kind: even people who do not know each personally can turn out to be multiply bound by cross-cutting ties involving formal kinship, ritual kinship, and common experience, including shared engagement with the Mazatec language. These frames of affiliation are often semiotically bundled – through linguistic, musical, and other practices – to a range of other social categories. In the Sierra, these include how people are connected to each other through diasporic ethnicity, collaborative and competitive ethnic tourism, municipal solidarity and regional rivalry, and harmonious and oppositional orientations towards cultural property rights and "ancestral tradition." In conversations about Mazatec *Muertos* Music happening both online and off, such relations are invoked in a variety ways, through a shifting semiotics of alignment and antipathy made possible by the denotational indeterminacy of the terms of belonging that pervade these conversations.

In the case discussed here, I claim that the social effects of these semiotic processes are twofold. First, debating the meaning of sameness and difference in the Sierra, through attention to Mazatec *Muertos* music, is helping create – alongside other online and offline practices – an emerging venue for collective conversation whose regional scope facilitates renewed

[16] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECnC5ajO5mU (accessed May 24, 2014).

engagement with ethnic categories of belonging. At the same time, such emergent conversations are helping crystallize and inscribe a specific consensus of practice, as widespread habits – particularly those tied to language use in this context of pervasive bilingualism – become implicit norms.

Within the Sierra Mazateca and the diasporic community of people attached to it, these developments are important in their own right. But there are broader lessons to be drawn from this case as well. Homologous discussions about difference and sameness occur in other places around the world where people struggle – at variable remove from state projects aimed at managing diversity – to understand the meaning of social attachment and distance and to locate their semiotic correlates. We obstruct our ability to see these lived stakes of social difference, and lose engagement with difference as an ethnographic project, if we focus on how in our globalized era the "diversification of diversity" poses challenges to existing categories. On the other hand, the antidote to this risk of "seeing diversity like the state" need not require a complex intervention. Rather, it involves a simple but powerful perspectival shift. It requires looking away from questions about what diversity is and how it has changed. And it involves turning instead towards questions about the social life of diversity: what forms of diversity are socially meaningful, why, in what context, and for whom.

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