

El TRI: Memory, Imagination and Politics?

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This article is an analysis of the commemorative recording of the urban rock group *El TRI*. The author examines the plurality of memories that are combined and celebrated at *El TRI*'s 35-year commemoration concert and the celebration of the anniversary of the group's first presentation, which was held on October 12, 1968, ten days after the massacre of Tlatelolco. In this paper, she investigates how such occurrences in Mexico's national history have shaped the backdrop of *El TRI*, the band's leader (Alex Lora), and Mexican rock in general. She also analyzes the many tensions and even contradictions that occur between the different memories that are associated with the band during the concert. Finally, the author suggests that *El TRI*'s commemoration concert serves as a platform for Alex Lora and *El TRI* to compile an alternative rhetoric for their own history and, more importantly, for Mexico's national history.

During the 1960s, in the wake of the youth uprising in Mexico, national rock became a space for the denunciation of authoritarianism and social protest and a vehicle of collective memory. Given its performative nature, rock songs and *gigs*¹ turned into acts of denunciation and a recollection of the repression, injustice, and oppression of large, urban, popular sectors of Mexico City. When the promise of "progress for everyone" failed, rock became one of the tools for cultural and political impugnation used by postwar and Cold War generations and passed on to new generations through mechanisms of recollection and memorization of events and experiences materialized in the songs constantly repeated on the radio, the TV, the walkman, and the Internet or at parties, *gigs*, and live concerts.

It is a fact that the nonconformist nature of rock has constantly been menaced by the cultural industries that have systematically tried to reabsorb and dissolve it. However, rock continues to express elements of criticism and impugnation in complex and contradictory ways.

For this paper, I will start by analyzing the commemorative recording of the urban rock group "*El TRI: Alex Lora 35 años y lo que le falta todavía...*" ("*El TRI: Alex Lora 35 years and what is still left...*") released by Warner Music in 2004. The recording corresponds to a live presentation of two concerts held on April 12th and 13th, 2003 in the National Auditorium of Mexico City. According to the leader of the rock group, Alex Lora: "This recording sounds so f***** like we played it; it has no dubbing or tricks to soften it."² Therefore, it constitutes a document and an authentic piece of evidence of the event and its performative load.

Here, I will analyze how a plurality of memories are combined and celebrated in the commemoration concert of the 35 years of *El TRI*. The celebration of the group's anniversary comes first: the first presentation was held on October 12, 1968, ten days after the massacre of Tlatelolco. In the context of national history, the students' movement would be the backdrop of *El TRI*. Both the memory of Mexican rock and the history of *El TRI* and its leader, Alex Lora, are inscribed in this setting. During the commemorative concert of the 35th

anniversary, the different memories that come into dialogue clash in multiple tensions and contradictions. Alex Lora and *El TRI* exercise their right to narrate national history as well as their own history, as an alternative version to the official discourse.

The two-record album includes 26 songs. Among them, *Las mujeres de Juárez*³ (“Women from Juárez”), *Sería horrible* (“It would be horrible”), *Las víctimas invisibles de Nueva York* (“The Invisible Victims of New York”⁴), and *Ahí pa’ la otra* (“Until next time”) are “rolas nuevas” (new songs), as stated on the record itself. The other 22 songs – especially *Chilango incomprendido* (“Misunderstood Chilango”⁵) and *El Rey* (“The king”) – express the group’s production carried out through their 35 years of musical creation.

The Anniversary of El TRI and the Myth of National Identity

Many symbols were gathered to celebrate *El TRI* and Lora as genuine representatives of national rock in the concerts on April 12th and 13th, 2003. The staging in the National Auditorium showed that to be an “authentic” Mexican is to be a “mestizo;”⁶ that is to say, to be a part of the “race,” and thus demands the recognition of indigenous roots.

Faithful to the “official” definition of national identity, *El TRI* starts its live presentation with a song in the Nahuatl language, with the accompaniment of traditional instruments, such as the flute and percussions used by *concheros*.⁷ These two elements refer to “the indigenous,” and in a paradoxical way, contrast with the popular vision of “the race” associated with the taste for rock music, the ‘reventón’ (parties that include alcohol and different kinds of drugs), and the ‘desmadre’ (going wild, out of control). This is expressed with sarcasm in the song *La raza más chida* (“The most beautiful race”):

“We, Mexicans ... are made of the mixture of *tequila* and *mezcal*⁸ ... we are the only ones capable of laughing at our disgrace ... we are the most beautiful race... of the whole animal kingdom” (*El TRI*, 2004, CD 2, # 7).

Lora puts forward a discursive synthesis between “race” in reference to the meaning attributed to the word by the nationalist discourse of the Mexican state, and “race” as it is employed to denominate a group, the mates, as employed by popular sectors. Symbols such as the national flag with an obscene sign, as a sort of shield to represent the group, contrast with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe printed on the shirt Lora wore at the concert. Another example of a contesting symbol is the song “Virgen Morena” (Dark-skinned-Virgin). Its lyrics say:

“Your race sings this song to you ... Virgin of Guadalupe... little dark-skinned of Mexico”⁹ (*El TRI*, 2004, CD 2, # 9).

The name of the group itself, which is shared with Mexico’s national soccer team, makes *El TRI*’s rock an “authentically Mexican rock.” As Lora repeated over and over again during the concert with his characteristic cry:

“It’s *El TRI* of Mexico... ¡Viva Mexico b*****!”¹⁰

To be an “authentic Mexican” is to belong to the “race” as expressed in the song *De la raza pa’ la banda* (“From the race to the band”). The song, which opens the concert, explains and renews the compromise of *El TRI* and of Lora with popular sectors to which the group intends to give voice:

“What people say is what I sing to them
what people think is what I tell them.”¹¹

By the end of the concert, Lora confirms the mutual compromise between the “race” and the band when he says:

“What allowed this music to exist after 35 years is the race, b*****”¹²

The concert and the gig are the rituals through which the rock community is formed. Particularly in this concert, sacred and profane elements are present, and they stand out and contrast with each other. The second part of the concert oscillates between solemnity and mockery. Here, the group includes multiple elements that ironically play with the classical components of a religious ritual: organ music and solemn/mocking choir voices that contrast with electric guitars, drums, shouts, and insults from the hoarse voice of Lora. It starts with a kind of ‘laudatory speech for the deceased’ and he requests a minute of ‘*desmadre*’ (going wild) to remember the whole “race” “that got ahead of us and would like to be here with us.” He ironically says good-bye, like a rocker and like a priest ending the Mass:

God bless the race
God bless you,
Kids, rock & roll is a sport ... practice it
Long live rock & roll¹³

Places of Memory: The Spaces of Rock and its Meaning

The concerts in the National Auditorium are not just ordinary gigs; they symbolize “the triumph of rock” (and in some way, its institutionalization) as they win the right to openly and publicly perform in the main spaces for concerts in the city: the National Auditorium, the Metropolitan Theater, the Sports Palace, among others, as well as in previously restricted urban spaces, with a strong political meaning, such as the “*zócalo*”¹⁴ of the capital, including also popular areas and dirt roads.

The above mentioned concerts recall, celebrate, and re-enact each of the gigs that had place in the funky holes (“*hoyos funky*”) of the 1970s and part of the 1980s. These gigs were organized at the margins of cultural industries in some marginal districts of Mexico City. Due to the illegal nature of these acts, such places became drug dealing spots, and for this reason, they were constantly and carefully watched by the police, who were always ready to blackmail organizers and participants.

The gigs carried out in funky holes (“*hoyos funky*”) and those that today take place in different spaces, with more or less autonomy regarding cultural industries, were and still are the rocker expression *par excellence*. The gig is the ritual through which (by means of lyrics,

music and “look,” gestures, and staging) the band (the musicians) and the race (the audience) constitute a community and celebrate the freedom claimed by institutions.

Rock and Social Protest

In the 1970s and 1980s, rock in Spanish became a way of expressing social protest, which, in its particularly political manner had been repressed and expelled from public space. Its most prominent symbolic moments were the October 2, 1968 massacre in *La Plaza de las Tres Culturas* (The Square of the Three Cultures), in Tlatelolco, and the violent repression during the demonstration of June 10th, 1971. After the concert of Avándaro, celebrated on September 11th, 1971, where the Group *Three Souls of my Mind*¹⁵ participated, the Mexican government censored rock as an anti-authoritarian cultural expression, gigs and concerts were forbidden, and cultural industries (recording, radio, and TV broadcasting) rejected its productions, sales, and exhibitions.

Since then, rock spread and developed in Mexico through two informal and semi-clandestine circuits. It could circulate, firstly, through the exchange of international rock records among young middle-class people; and, secondly, through the participation of middle class rock groups in gigs at funky holes (“*hoyos funky*”) in popular areas, organized by clandestine organizers. In order to survive with minimal resources, homemade rock was forced to break with musical virtuosity and became rock in Spanish to express the experiences of popular classes. Maritza Urteaga points out that: “*El TRI*’s track tells about this important shift. Its two first 1970-1972 LP records are totally recorded in English, but the third one, 1973, all songs (“*rolas*”) are in Spanish” (Urteaga, 1998, p. 111).

Ironically, the group, with its original name “Three souls of my mind,” started its concerts on October 12th, Columbus Day – “*Día de la Raza*” (Race’s Day), in Spanish. A discourse that later would be the key issue of Lora’s song and the identity of the group. However, at that time, any identification with “race,” was denied.

Rock made in Mexico by Mexican musicians also transformed its contents, and this transformation became evident after *El TRI*’s fourth record, released in 1974 and called *Chavo de onda* (“Cool guy”). This record included the song *Abuso de autoridad* (“Abuse of authority”), where, for the first time, the government was openly criticized, police repression was denounced, and the silence, as a general response provoked by fear among the population, was condemned.

To live in Mexico is the worst
Our government is wrong
And nobody can go mad
Because they shut you up

Nobody wants to go out anymore
Nor do they want to tell the truth
Nobody wants to get in trouble
with the authority

Too many *cops* in the city

Abusing all the time
No, I don't want to see them anymore

And the gigs of rock
They want to take them away from us
Only the son of Diaz Ordaz¹⁶
Will be able to play¹⁷

Through the song, the singer denounces, names, puts into action, and makes visible the irregular, abusive police behavior. Then, he makes it circulate in that alternative circuit – alternative to the official circuit – of rock gigs and the alternative, homemade production of records.

Rock and Collective Memory

Injustice, oppression, love, drugs, and rock-and-roll are *El TRI*'s favorite subjects. Lora's songs consist of two different forms of collective memory: a recollection of events and fiction narratives that do not refer to specific events but to world reality.

In the first case, the events that appeared in the newspapers as short-lived news, due to the laws of daily obsolescence, are rescued by the songs and tirelessly reproduced and memorized to become a live memory that repeats itself each time the song is sung. Through repetition and memorization of songs, denunciation turns into memory. The song allows us not only to recall events but also to transmit them from generation to generation as a part of collective memory. Thanks to songs, events, repression, and the government's acts of corruption remain alive in our memory. Otherwise, all this would have fallen into oblivion. Thus, rock becomes a way of resistance against oblivion.

The song *San Juanico* (1984) narrates the gas explosion of November 1984; *Donde quedó la bolita* ("Where the pellet remained") refers to the gas pipeline explosion in Guadalajara on April 22, 1992, and to the concert to collect funds that never arrived at their destination; and *Las víctimas invisibles de Nueva York* ("The Invisible Victims of New York") (2001) refers to September 11, 2001 events. All these songs, among others, denounce corruption and injustice, the political – not natural – character of events, and the government's responsibility for these deaths, which were due to the vulnerability of certain sectors of the population who are the privileged victims of these accidents because of their marginal condition.

Libertad bajo fianza ("Freedom under bail"), refers to the clashes between Latinos and the LA police in April and May, 1992 and *Las Mujeres de Juárez* ("The Women of Juárez") (2003) narrates the feminicides; these songs denounce the impunity, the violence, the racism, the police connivance, the government's corruption, and the injustice against male and female Mexicans, victims that live on both sides of the northern border of the country.

In other songs, *El TRI* recreates daily life situations in the city and expresses the experiences and the points of view of marginal social sectors of Mexico City. *El rey* ("The King") refers to economic politics, and the effects of inflation; *Tómame la foto* ("Take yourself the picture") deals with the identification of the voter as a governmental mechanism keeping population under control; and *El peje*¹⁸ *atajo* (*The peje's shortcut*) makes reference to the

traffic chaos produced by the road works for the second deck of a ring road freeway called the “periférico.” All of these songs reflect popular feelings against certain governmental acts.

Conclusion

Through the celebration of Alex Lora’s anniversary as a rock musician, singer, and composer, as well as the anniversary of the Mexican *EL TRI* as the oldest Mexican rock group, Lora and *El TRI* placed themselves as symbols and live testimonies of a generation. Because of the style of their concerts, such celebrations commemorate not only Lora, the race, and the band, but also national rock as authentically Mexican and popular.

Rock as an act of enunciation in the present turned into a space of denunciation of corruption, injustice, and bad government, as well as an act of recollection as an instrument of collective memory. Moreover, it is a chronicle of the city and of urban life, which offers an alternative narrative to the official version of the events. A glance over the 40 records produced by *El TRI* throughout their 37 years of musical experience gives evidence thereof. *El TRI*’s recordings offer us a vision of national life from a different point of view than the one offered by newspapers and official history.

Throughout these years, in addition to the denunciation of injustice and oppression, *El TRI* has become the chronicler of urban life and of a particular age and, while giving voice to the popular sectors of Mexico City: their way of living and of enduring both the city and the socioeconomic and political situation of the country, their ways of having fun, their joy and anxieties, but especially the fragility of their lives.

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Notes

¹ *Tocada*: rock performance.

² "Esta grabación se oye igual de pinche que como tocamos, no tiene doblajes ni trucos que la alivianen."

³ Since 1993, almost 400 women and girls have been murdered and more than 70 remain missing in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, Mexico (whose killers were not found and judged until now).

⁴ Victims of September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks.

⁵ Nickname of Mexico City citizen.

⁶ half-caste

⁷ “Concheros” are indigenous groups of traditional dancers who play and dance pre-colonial music outside churches like “La Villa de Guadalupe” during religious festivities.

⁸ Mexican distilled spirit made from the maguey plant.

⁹ “tu raza te canta esta canción... Virgen de Guadalupe... morenita de México.”

¹⁰ “Es El TRI de México... Viva México cabrones.”

¹¹ “Lo que la gente dice es lo que yo les canto/ lo que la gente piensa es lo que yo les digo.”

¹² “lo que ha hecho que esta música exista después de 35 años es la raza cabrones.”

¹³ Que Dios bendiga a la raza/ que Dios los bendiga/ niños, el rock and roll es un deporte... practíqueno/ Y que viva el rock and roll !!!!

¹⁴ Mexico City’s main square. Place of social protest, ritual and national celebration.

¹⁵ The group’s original name was in English.

¹⁶ Mexican President (1962-1970).

Vivir en México es lo peor
nuestro gobierno esta muy mal
y nadie puede desvariar
porque lo llevan a encerrar.

Ya nadie quiere ni salir
ni decir la verdad
ya nadie quiere tener
más líos con la autoridad.

Muchos azules en la ciudad
a toda hora queriendo agandallar
no, ya no los quiero ver más.

Y las tocadas de rock
ya nos las quieren quitar
ya solo va a poder
tocar el hijo de Diaz Ordaz...

¹⁷ Mexico City Mayor’s (2000 - 2005) Nickname. López Obrador is frequently referred to as *el Peje*, an abbreviation of *pejelagarto*, a species of fish (complete with lizard-like head, hard scales and sharp teeth) found in his home state of Tabasco.