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# Textiled Narratives: Branding, Consumption, and Mexican American Identity Construction at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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The NaCo apparel company out of Tijuana, Mexico, created a unique line of clothing and accessories in the late 1990s and early 2000s. With its success in Mexico, the brand chose to extend its reach into the lucrative US market. The company's focus on bicultural and binational images seemed a natural fit for a growing Latinx presence in the US. An analysis of the company's successes and failures in the new market highlights the continued importance of borders as separators of visual economies rooted in national histories and imaginations. Additionally, their experience reveals the complexities within Latinx communities that can at once divide and unite them. This pushes back against prevalent discourses that tend toward homogenizing the political and cultural beliefs in these communities.

**Keywords:** clothing, branding, Mexico-US border, NaCo, multicultural Latinx communities

La compañía de ropa NaCo de Tijuana, México, creó una línea única de ropa y accesorios a fines de la década de 1990 y principios de los años 2000. Con su éxito en México, la marca optó por extender su alcance en el lucrativo mercado estadounidense. El enfoque de la empresa en imágenes biculturales y binacionales parecía un ajuste natural para una creciente presencia latina en los Estados Unidos. Este análisis de los éxitos y fracasos de la compañía en el nuevo mercado destaca la importancia de las fronteras como separadoras de economías visuales arraigadas en historias e imaginaciones nacionales. Además, su experiencia revela las complejidades dentro de las comunidades latinas que pueden dividirlos y unirlos a la vez, al rechazar discursos prevalecientes que tienden a homogeneizar las creencias políticas y culturales en estas comunidades.

**Palabras clave:** ropa, marcación, frontera México-Estados Unidos, NaCo, comunidades latinas multiculturales

## Introduction

In 1999 Edoardo Chavarín and Robby Vient cofounded the NaCo clothing line after meeting at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. NaCo's numerous designs reflect the pair's bicultural experiences in Northern Mexico and the US. They gained notoriety for a wide array of T-shirts with logos, slogans, and images highlighting humorous and provocative cultural references to Mexican popular cultural, bicultural identities, and their interaction with global culture. The brand originated and was initially based in Chavarín's hometown of Tijuana. As a result, the brand has been associated with the rich cultural production coming out of Tijuana during the 1990s and early 2000s. It quickly expanded throughout Mexico with the backing of various big-name celebrities such as José María Yaspik, Diego Luna, and Gustavo Santaolla, as well as musical groups including Café Tacuba, Molotov, and Juanes. With its success in Mexico, the brand decided to extend its reach into the lucrative US market. The company's focus on bicultural and binational images seemed a natural fit for a growing Latino presence in the US.

NaCo and its US experience are a particularly notable object of study. The transnational nature of the brand and its origins on the border are unique and provide an opportunity to observe the way global flows and cultural interactions play out. Its transnational presence provides an interesting example of how existing discourses of identity surrounding nationality and ethnicity come to shape and modify the aesthetics and consumption of popular cultural products such as NaCo's T-shirt line.

This analysis will help to answer several important questions, including: How do national and regional identities dialog with global culture and transform it through two-way interaction? In what ways do borders break down, and how do they still matter? How do individuals and communities creatively construct bicultural or binational identities? As Néstor García Canclini posits, how do processes of hybridization operate through migration, tourism, and economic exchange (2005, xxvii)? Finally, through NaCo's challenges and failures in the US market, how might we better understand the complexities and contradictions of Mexican American and the greater Latino diaspora?

## The Meanings of NaCo/*naco*

NaCo's name is a linguistic and thematic play on the term *naco* and gets to the core motivation and intent of the founders of the US-Mexican clothing company. *Naco* is a word that can be difficult to translate into English, with complex meanings due to its long history and connection to race and class. Its origins can be traced back to the nineteenth century, and it evolved in tandem with the political elites' drive to

transform Mexico and modernize its indigenous peoples and their cultural practices. It is a word imbued with a sense of the incompleteness of the move toward modernity. In subsequent years the term acquired new meanings. It is often understood to mean “low-class,” “tasteless,” “backward,” or “primitive.” What’s *naco* is associated with the popular classes and their tastes and consumer practices. Those labeled *naco* stand in contrast to the upper classes or elites. *Naco* is the individual who has incompletely assimilated global or modern cultural practices. Such a person may or may not be aware of their *naconess*. The *naco* copies the cultural and consumer practices of the upper classes but in a way that marks them as copies or inauthentic.

The term *naco* drove the aesthetic choices of the brand. Rather than see *naco* as backward or retrograde, the brand embraces its hybridity or tackiness. As Chavarín explains: “Por *naco* hablamos de una falta de estilo, lo que no depende ni de la educación ni del dinero ni de la clase social. Es una forma de ser. Es pensar que estás bien y no lo estás” (qtd. in Velasco 2005, 3). For Chavarín, *naco* becomes something common that all share—a universal experience, those moments when each individual realizes they are out of step with everyone else.

Many of the T-shirts celebrate the incomplete assimilation of global culture and highlight how local culture, tastes, and especially language interfere with the total consumption and assimilation of foreign products. This was reflected in many of their more successful T-shirts, in which international brands and their company logos were transformed and Mexicanized. They stressed the bicultural or bilingual quality of much of the Mexican consumer experience. Their messages and images revealed contrasts and conflicts arising out of cultural contact.

One of the brand’s early T-shirt lines visually represented how linguistic interference transformed global brands in the Mexican marketplace. For the Mexican consumer, Pepsi became Peksi, the Beetles were los bitles, and Star Wars was Estar Guars (fig. 1). They represent cultural incompleteness or an in-between state in the consumption of these brands. Additionally, they communicate the subversive potential of everyday acts by Mexican consumers as they adopt, transform, and hijack global companies’ brands, products, and messages and then adopt them for their own uses.



Figure 1. Actor/director Jon Favreau wearing NaCo *Estar Guars* T-shirt at Comic-Con, July 2009<sup>1</sup>

Other T-shirt lines embraced regional and local cultural references or stereotypical images that can be seen as Mexican kitsch. While *El Chavo del Ocho*, *Cepillín*, *Juanito*, *quinceañeras*, or *telenovelas* may be disdained or looked down upon as provincial or “cheesy” for their low production value and mass appeal, the NaCo brand celebrates them for those very qualities and their connection to the national character and identity. These national products resist the homogenizing influence of global consumer products and media. They are *naco* because they may compare poorly to their global counterparts due to unequal resources behind these consumables and their limited appeal. This in turn becomes a point of pride and endears them to the *naco* consumer, as they represent and reveal something “authentic” and “real” about the national essence that is absent in global brands. NaCo’s use of nostalgia and humor was strategic to the revalorization of these products and the cultural images projected onto the clothing (Weissert 2005).

## NaCo Enters the US Market

NaCo’s foray into the US market coincided with several economic, social, and cultural factors that contributed to its success both in the US and Mexico. NAFTA’s implementation in 1992 drew the two countries together and created the expectation of increased economic and social ties. The 1990s and the early 2000s witnessed a growing economy that drew large numbers of Latino immigrants looking for work in the US. As a result, there was a marked increase in the number of foreign-born Latinos. By 2007 foreign-born Latinos made up 55% of the adult Latino population

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<sup>1</sup> *NaCo Blog*. <https://usanaco.wordpress.com/2009/07/>

and 40% of Latinos overall. By 2010 their number reached a record 18.8 million, and roughly 60% were of Mexican origin. (Krogstad and Lopez 2014).

Interest in the US-Mexico border and bicultural or binational identities increased significantly. Chavarín and NaCo saw an opportunity for growth. Their focus on bicultural messages and references to Mexican and Latino culture overlapped with an emerging youth market. Their company's origin and presence in Tijuana also meant that their products were already familiar to many consumers in the US, especially in the Southwest.

NaCo would go on to sell its clothing in over 200 outlets in Mexico and the US as well as online. The company would reach sales of over one million dollars (Johnson 2007). Edoardo Chavarín as the face of the successful clothing line would come to be seen as a potential source of knowledge and expertise by many companies seeking to market to the growing Mexican American and broader Latino youth market. His brand's bicultural flavor and avant-garde style were highlighted as the ideal means of reaching urban Latino youth (Wentz 2007). NaCo would partner with large national and international brands in the US and Latin America, including MTV, Tr3s, Volkswagen, Virgin Mobile, Target, Macy's, Urban Outfitters, Nintendo, Nokia, Pepsico (Yo sumo campaign), and the NBA.

The commercial move from Mexico to the US meant a reshaping and reevaluation of the NaCo brand and its aesthetic. Up to that point, NaCo's success had centered on an image cultivated and developed within Mexico and more specifically in the context of the border. NaCo had skillfully constructed a modern hip urban identity around the themes of biculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and the kitsch of Mexican popular culture. With its move across the border, the brand would come to realize that this branding and its meanings did not always correspond neatly with the differing cultural contexts of the Mexican and larger Latino diasporas in the US. As a practical matter, much of the wordplay, parodies, and cultural subversion that characterized the brand was dependent on Mexican nationals' interactions with global culture. While certain products were popular for the evocation of Mexican identity, the infusion of the local into the global culture was not always translatable to Mexican Americans who consumed and constructed a bicultural identity in rather distinct ways. Chavarín recalled: "Al principio dijimos: '¡Ah!, pues nada más imprimimos más camisetas'. Pero luego nos dimos cuenta que algunas cosas pierden el significado al ser traducidas. Así que tuvimos que reinventarnos para este mercado porque hay gente que es de tercera o segunda generación y ya no entiende los chistes que son muy mexicanos" (qtd. in Sarabia 2008). Importantly, apart from geographic distance and lack of direct contact with Mexico, US Latino youth are generationally remote from their country of origin. This separation creates impediments to cultural understanding regarding the clothing's referents.

As the quote suggests, NaCo confronted several issues in the movement across the US-Mexico border. First, they had to overcome their tendency to view bicultural identities as homogenous in nature. They quickly realized that living a bicultural existence and constructing such an identity in the United States is very different from how it is configured in Mexico. Chavarín stated that he himself “creció entre dos culturas, pero que nunca lo asimiló como tal. No fue hasta que llegó a radicar en este país [US] . . . que se dio cuenta de lo importante de este término bicultural” (Amador-Miranda 2011). Identity is dependent on national and social contexts in which consumers find themselves. Additionally, US purchasers of the NaCo brand brought differing levels of cultural knowledge to their connections to a Mexican identity. Their identification with or alienation from the NaCo brand, as a signifier of Mexicanness, was in some ways dependent upon their relational distance from Mexico and its culture geographically, temporally, or generationally.

Equally important, this distance would determine each consumer’s ability to understand the linguistic wordplay and references to Mexican culture or regionalisms. As Chavarín makes clear, language itself as a signifier of Mexican identity could present a potential barrier, because the US NaCo consumer may have limited knowledge of the Spanish language and the peculiarities of Mexican Spanish. Word plays or references to specific linguistic practices of, say, Mexico City or Sinaloa might have little relevance to Mexican Americans or, more broadly, US Latinos, another consumer target, who may have varied experiences with Mexico. These experiences are often indirect interactions through Spanish language media, immediate family members, and/or periodic travel to Mexico for visits with extended family. Language as a principal carrier of culture and national identity would require its reconfiguration within cultural codes of the US context and its system of codifying racial and ethnic identities.

Logos of global/US brands as cultural or linguistic signifiers would produce differing significations within the new US context. For example, the use of Spanish or Mexican cultural visual cues might signify Mexicanness as a regional or national identity category within a global context for a Mexican consumer. For the brand’s US consumers these visual cues readily become inscribed within the internal historical dialogue surrounding race, ethnicity, and immigrant experiences. Equally important is that their meanings may differ significantly between how the consumers of the T-shirts understand them and how the dominant Anglo social groups read them.

Sociologist Pablo Vila makes important observations about the complexities of narrative identities in his study of the US-Mexico border (2000). Proximity to the border or to border crossers—large communities of recent immigrants—can also determine the shape and intensity of the national identity narratives. Vila observed

that meanings associated with Mexico and its use as a personal and collective identity construct assume quite different forms. In the Northern Mexico border region, regional affiliation takes on particular importance in the construction of identity. Knowledge and performance of specific regional cultural practices and language usage help to configure these identities. The geographical proximity and the historical economic hegemony of the US have resulted in it serving as a convenient cultural referent. It is a ready means by which to illustrate cultural difference and delineate the contours of what it is to be Mexican. National identity narratives take shape by contrasting Mexicanness to its neighbor to the north. This has often meant that Mexicans see Mexican Americans as culturally distinct despite certain shared cultural practices and heritage. Their presence within US geographical boundaries means they have been inescapably tainted by the dominant US Anglo culture (21).

While NaCo's target market went beyond the US-Mexico border region, similar dynamics are at play in the configuration of identity groups, where their markets incorporated large Latino or Mexican American communities characterized by mixtures of various immigrant generations. Vila details how the construction of identity related to Mexico, both real and imaginary, changes significantly as people cross the border. Cultural codes, metaphors, and identity narratives are altered as individuals move across and are transformed by the national and regional contexts—specifically the border. Identity narratives are created and defined by the contact and proximity to geographic and/or cultural borders.

On the US side of the border, narrative identities manifest equally complex and unique configurations in relation to Mexico and Mexican cultural products. Distanced from the border or border crossers these cultural practices or symbols may in turn take on very different meanings entirely and be transformed further in the presence of other Latino groups.

## **Navigating the US Market**

As a response to these language and cultural issues, NaCo sought to develop new lines of T-shirts intended to bridge some of the cultural gaps. The brand emphasized iconic images that were easily recognizable aspects of Latino culture, such as the silhouette of a quinceañera cake or the nostalgic representations of Mexican television characters. T-shirts displayed easily understood phrases such as "Se habla español" or "Ser naco es chido."

The "Barrio" line departed from many of their previous creations. As the name implies, the T-shirts reproduced silhouettes of Latino urban life such as the bicycling ice cream vendor (*paletero*), a low-rider bicycle, or shoes hanging from overhead telephone wires. The T-shirts were purely representational and graphics-based. They

avoided language use altogether and did not make specific regional or national cultural references. While they retained a nod to Latin culture, they could apply to many Latin American or even US Latino urban spaces.



Figure 2. N is for NACA<sup>2</sup>

The other line specifically aimed at the US market and the bicultural consumer was the “N is for Naco” line. The T-shirts are basic in form and design. They are of one solid color with a message written in a simple font across the front. Each shirt took this same format as in figure 2 with the first letter of a word referencing some cultural element, which is a clear allusion to the program *Sesame Street* or its Latin American version *Barrio Sésamo*. The reference would be easily recognizable to a wide swath of Latinos or Latin Americans raised on the program.

In terms of its messaging, this T-shirt line goes in two discernible directions: one that seems more ambiguous and makes connections to home, family, community, and the nostalgic feelings they evoke. These shirts were emblazoned with simple phrases

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<sup>2</sup> Pablo Jaime Sáinz, “Are You a Naco?” *La Prensa San Diego*, July 27, 2007, <https://www.laprensa-sandiego.org/archieve/2007/july27-07/naco.htm>

and fonts that proclaimed "M is for mija," "A is for abuelita," or "N is for novela." They function as positive signs of Mexicanness/Latino identity. As Chavarín explains, the purchase of the shirts is "like bringing homemade tortillas. . . . Of course, they are going to buy it because it reminds them of home" (qtd. in Weissert 2005). These shirts deliver a cultural message similar to many of their other popular shirts specifically created for the Mexican market that reference popular culture touchstones.

NaCo's clothing lines function in a similar manner to certain foodstuffs, household products, or Latino brands promoted transnationally. Images or slogans on their shirts become sites of remembering, places that invoke and mediate history (Mankekar 2002, 197). Within the context of the US, the brands' cultural slogans and images become imbued with personal and cultural narratives. They can often be fragmented or imperfect memories but are important pieces in the creation of new Mexican American subjectivities with distinct meanings for each generation. For first-generation immigrants, the brand may be charged with national pride and nostalgia, while later generations look to connect to family, home, and an identity grounded in Latino culture.

In creating, producing, and validating positive signs of Mexican culture, NaCo provided a means of articulating established and emerging cultural identities unique to the US context. They show similarities in function to T-shirts that Marjorie Kelly observed in Native Hawaiian culture during this same period (2003, 192). The T-shirts became badges of social identity and symbols of communal values, despite the cultural assimilative pressures from wider Anglo society and global forces in general.

The other direction of the "N is for Naco" line staked out a more defiant and challenging position concerning Latino identity. These shirts display similarly constructed but provocative messages such as: "B is for Beaner," "C is for Coyote," "G is for Green Card," "I is for Illegal," "R is for Raza," and "M is for Mojado." The simplicity of the *Sesame Street* language in both cases implies how these negative labels are basic building blocks in the construction of the narrative of Mexican/Mexican American identity. They permeate American media and cultural production and are assimilated at a very young age.

This seems to be an attempt to portray and emphasize normally invisible labels that Mexican Americans and Latinos carry with them and suddenly make them visible. They function in much the same way as a generic food label. The product stands out in its sole purpose of denominating what is contained in the packaging. In the first group, they point to the family as the foundation of their Mexican heritage and produce warmth and nostalgia that are directed inward or toward others in the community. They build a positive identity centered on the pillars of Mexican American

identity. For the second group, the messages are meant to be disturbing to the viewer. They turn the mirror onto the other to reveal the harsh judgment that is often brought down upon the wearer. Readers are suddenly made aware of their own unconscious thoughts or feelings.

## **Selling Latino Pride**

NaCo's strategy with the more confrontational shirts from the "N is for Naco" line for the US market was, in part, to replicate their success in the Mexican youth market based on the concept of *naco* or *naconess*. In Mexico, they had appropriated the term *naco* traditionally used as a racial/ethnic epithet. More recently it became a pejorative term for crassness or being socially marginalized. They adopted and celebrated the term through humor, transforming *naco* into a hip, trendy symbol of Mexican kitsch and nonconformity. The marginality of being *naco* or in between global and local becomes a means of rebelling against global cultural pressures and reasserting a sense of pride in one's individual and national identity.

Chavarín and NaCo approached the US market with a similar goal. Chavarín sensed that a growing and more influential Mexican American and Latino community in the US was searching for clothing that expressed this growth and their mounting pride in cultural identity. Just as he had done with *naco*, Chavarín seemed to want to reverse traditional narratives surrounding what it meant to be Mexican American in the US. As we saw above, their strategy encompassed a two-pronged approach: NaCo would celebrate the positive and neutralize the negative narratives by embracing them through edgy humor, like similar strategies employed by other immigrant communities in other contexts (see Colchester 2003, 177).

The following statement from a consumer seems to express the varied sentiments that NaCo was attempting to capture in its new lines: "There's a reconquest that is happening. . . . My generation and others after it want to get reacquainted with our heritage, our culture, learning Spanish, using our language—as informal as it may be—to express ourselves as Mexicans, *pochos*, as Mexican Americans, whatever label they choose to use. That's how I see these t-shirts, as a way of relearning something that has been forgotten" (qtd. in Cabral 2006, 67). The informant's initial comment expresses the idea of the consumer's increasing confidence in their place within US society and the need to retake control of their individual cultural identity. It indicates the changing nature of the Mexican American community within the United States. Its growing presence and incorporation into the mainstream have increased its economic, political, and cultural clout. This creates a seemingly contradictory sense of confidence and caution in younger Mexican Americans. They become more confident in their place and role within US society but worry about the cultural costs associated with assimilation. This project of recuperation is made possible by the

increasing confidence in maintaining a clear identity as US citizens while expressing Mexican heritage. For the informant, the shirts serve to reverse the effects of the denigrating processes on Mexican American communities in the US. There exists a continuous threat to their perceived cultural identity from the hegemonic US Anglo culture that has historically produced negative narratives about Mexican American communities.

This statement, though short, is also notable for revealing the intersection of social forces. The informant recognizes the multiple and myriad ways in which Mexican identity is constructed in the US and Mexico. The ideas expressed reflect what Joane Nagel has observed: Mexican American and US Latino identities can be highly complex and unstable as they are shaped and negotiated by inside individuals and groups, as well as outside agents and institutions (Nagel 1994, 154). Each term mentioned indicates a distinct means of understanding and reconciling with this identity for each person and their peers. The shirts are both a means of reconstructing cultural forms through their references to cultural practices, language, and familial organizations, and an important new form of constructing culture by melding these cultural icons and practices with the youth culture of contemporary Mexican Americans (162). This adds to the complexity of establishing an individual and group identity. The shirts are a cultural artifact and tool that provides symbolic access to language, past histories, and cultural practices that are key to these constructions. They are both present and past: they spring from contemporary Mexican youth culture but ironically help to fix, for the wearer, a Mexico of the forgotten past.

As Mexican American youth increasingly interact with the assimilative forces of the hegemonic US culture, they may lose contact with the traditional markers of Mexican identity such as family, language, religion, or cultural practices that help them establish a firm sense of Mexicanness and how that is constituted within a Mexican American identity. This view is reiterated by another consumer informant, Deanna, who comments in an online review of her "Ser naco es chido" shirt: "My cousin gave me this shirt when I was visiting my family two months ago in Mexicali, BC. I always told her I liked it, and now when I wear it to school, all the white kids are like, 'What does that mean?' But my mexican friends are all, 'Ahahaha! No mames, ke chidooo!!! Me lo prestas??' " (Deanna from Arizona 2007). The gifted T-shirt has important properties for the wearer.

For this second informant, the shirt operates in two significant ways to create a feeling of community. First, it is a bridge across borders to family and cultural resources in Mexico. As we saw in the previous quote there is the self-perception that both space and time are weakening the cultural links of Mexican Americans with their Mexican heritage. It is an anchor and a vehicle for maintaining unity with familial and community origins across the international divide. Its consumptive value is

demonstrated by the desire of her friends to possess and wear the clothing. Their common desire and its expression through the clothing is constitutionally an act of great importance. It serves to create Mexicanness in the absence of perhaps more common means of national identity, such as language proficiency, physical presence in the home country, nationality, or certain food traditions. The humor and language establish an immediate bond between the informant and her fellow Mexican American students.

Second, the shirt is an important marker of difference. The NaCo brand, through its display of cultural referents and use of Spanish, separates the wearer from the dominant Anglo culture and other minority ethnic groups. While excluding, it simultaneously includes others who share the same cultural knowledge and identity affiliation. Furthermore, the quote illustrates an interesting reversal of the common power dynamic of inside/outside whereby contextually Latinos become the cultural insiders. The Mexican American youth and her friends are the arbiters of culture and determine the boundaries of who is in and who is out. If Anglo students are to understand the joke, they must depend upon their Latino classmates' knowledge and cultural authority. The comment illustrates an interesting potential transformation of ethnic identities within the US. As cultural diversity is celebrated and seen as a commodity of increasing value, it can have some empowering effects on traditionally marginalized ethnic minorities. It is an indicator of the subversive potential of the message and signals danger to dominant Anglo cultural groups. The sense of eroding cultural power and position has created the backlash to immigration that we are witnessing today.

Lastly, this also is a good example of how NaCo products are consumed and read in significantly different ways depending on the national context. The slogan of this particular T-shirt "Ser *naco* es chido," originally designed for the Mexican consumer, takes on wholly different meanings in this consumer context. Just as the original associations of *naco* with indigenusness or crassness were displaced by NaCo to connote cosmopolitanism, hipness, and individuality in Mexico, US ethnic, racial, and cultural codes have transformed *naco* into a general signifier of Mexicanness. For the informant and her friends, the shirts evoke their family and community heritage and help to define themselves as a group in contrast with "white" classmates.

The term *naco* and the use of Spanish take on the racial/ethnic signifiers of being Mexican American. There is an overlay of the traditional racial and ethnic discourse of the US, which has subordinated and often stigmatized Mexican Americans, onto the idea of the *naco* as an outsider or cultural misfit. Mexican American youth recognize the *naco* in themselves. In so doing, they are also appropriating this reversal of the traditional discourse. They celebrate their outsider status, transforming their social positioning into a point of pride. Of course, this is always a

tenuous transformation. Traditional negative narrative identities continue to rise to the surface and reassert themselves and frequently challenge, undermine, and resist newly emerging positive identities.

One last quote from a NaCo consumer reveals the complexity surrounding the consumption of these products. Mexican Americans often must walk a tightrope to navigate competing or conflicting narratives surrounding Mexicanness and incorporate those narratives into their understanding of personal identity. Miguel from Tucson, Arizona, reflects on why he likes his NaCo T-shirt with the graphic image of an older television set (pre-digital) and a wire coat hanger as the antenna (figure 3): “ `La razón por la que me gusta mi camiseta es que me puedo reír de mí mismo. . . . Yo tuve una tele cuando era chico que tenía una antena de gancho de ropa, y utilizaba unas pinzas para cambiar los canales. Eso sí que era de nacos. Pero no se preocupen, ahora ya tengo satélite’, aseguró Miguel de 26 años de edad quien estudia biología molecular y educación secundaria” (Duarte 2004). The shirts, like many cultural products, become part of this personal narrative and in turn generate multiple narratives that may contradict and conflict with each other (Vila 2000, 21).



Figure 3. NaCo television (Duarte 2004)

The above quote is notable for expressing the simultaneous embrace and distancing from the identity narrative that the T-shirt was designed to communicate. Much as the NaCo creators advocate, Miguel is recognizing and celebrating his naconess: that part of ourselves that we all have that reveals itself to marginalize us socially (Velasco 2005, 3). The image of the television set with the hanger for an antenna implies a common image of Mexico as a poor nation, one that has not completely developed economically and assimilated modernity. Simultaneously, it is a celebration of the resourcefulness and adaptability of Mexicans to make do and carry on with life by repurposing and utilizing found or cheap materials. The poverty of the people and nation generates unique creativity and inventiveness. It is akin to what Chicano artists have come to call *rasquache*.

The humor inherent in the image is the key to Miguel's embrace and distancing. He engages in a complicated dance that both accepts and rejects identification with the lower-class image projected by the shirt. Miguel sees a part of himself in the image,

but it is one that no longer has relevance, so it enables him to step outside the image. His life trajectory has placed him above the implied class status, thus permitting him to laugh at the marginal from a position within the center. This is a tenuous position, as the second part of the quote makes clear. He is eager to point out that he used to own a television set similar to the one pictured but, importantly, he now enjoys a different class status as denoted by his satellite television—a marker of middle-class consumer culture in the US as well as his position as a university student preparing himself for a future within that same middle class.

Equally important in this distancing is the T-shirt itself. Its cost would be largely prohibitive to individuals of limited economic means. NaCo and Chavarín assiduously cultivated a hip urban image that appealed to, and was priced towards, upscale Mexican youth consumers. The uneasiness of the informant Miguel regarding his relationship to the implied Mexican identity of the shirt is due to what Vila observed as a predominant identity narrative in the border region that sees poverty as synonymous with Mexican (2000, 84). To avoid this stigma of poverty Mexican Americans often create contorted and complicated identity narratives (82). Mexicanness as symbolized by the shirt is distanced temporally. For Miguel, this version of his Mexican identity resides in the past. It has shaped him as a youth and given way to a present and future self grounded in US consumer culture. Its position in the past permits its nostalgic restoration as a warm, humorous anecdote.

Miguel's anecdote serves as a building block in support of a common US immigrant narrative grounded in the mythos of US individualism. It celebrates individual accomplishments and constitutes the self through hard work and opportunities for social mobility. In "Horatio Alger" fashion the immigrant overcomes his humble beginnings to rise and take his place within US society. The shirt's consumption, message, and display may, in part, be an act of self-narration that connects to the story of the US and the role of the immigrant in its constitution. Mexican identity, as generated by the term *naco* and its association with the lower classes, is incorporated into the aspirational discourses that dominate the image of the US as the "Land of Opportunity." Recognition of the *naco* through its consumption can be a nostalgic look back at the consumer's personal history and also a means of measuring the trajectory of his life and movement toward the US ideal of material success. For Miguel, the NaCo T-shirt is a record of the path that he has trod and the progress made.

This last example can be seen as a contrast to the first and second consumer informants. Principally in the first and to some extent in the second case, consumption of the T-shirts is a constitutional act of Mexicanness that brings Mexico from the past or a distance to the present moment. For Miguel, this seems to follow an opposite trajectory, which makes clear the complexity and variation in the

responses to the T-shirts as a means of identity formation. This difference appears to be an indicator of each informant's perceived relational distance from Mexican identity. In the first informant's case, she felt more firmly grounded in US culture and needed to reconnect to and recuperate her lost Mexican roots. Miguel, in contrast, is secure in his Mexican identity and is attempting to incorporate it within wider US cultural narratives.

## **NaCo in Trouble**

Our presentation demonstrates some ways in which NaCo aesthetics and brand messages interacted and were assimilated into existing US national discourses on race, ethnicity, and other overlapping narrative identities in often complex and unexpected ways. This complexity signaled potential obstacles for NaCo as they attempted to configure their brand's identity utilizing a strategy that, perhaps, relied too heavily on ways of understanding Mexican culture and kitsch as they were configured in Mexico. The consumer testimonies indicate that Mexican cultural signs may be appropriated and/or read in ways that are wholly unexpected by the brand's creators within the context of US cultural codes. One of NaCo's significant successes and subsequent failures in the US suggests that the company and its partners indeed misunderstood this complexity.

In 2007 Macy's department store, in a bid to appeal to Latino youth, approached NaCo and Chavarín to sell selected items of its clothing line in seventeen of its stores in Texas and Atlanta. This partnership with a large national retailer was a major coup for the brand and had the potential to raise its profile, reach, and sales. It was also a signal of the brand's increasing popularity and cachet with Mexican American and Latino youth. This opportunity was to prove short-lived, as almost immediately Macy's received criticism from diverse groups. Conservative and right-wing individuals and organizations threatened a boycott because of some of the brand's messages. A shirt with the slogan "Brown is the New White" was singled out as particularly offensive (fig. 4). The other edgier shirts from the "N is for Naco" series discussed above, not sold by Macy's but found on NaCo's website or other online retailers, fueled further criticism due to the shirts' provocative messages. These were highlighted in coverage of the controversy in local news reports in the Dallas/Fort Worth area (Fox 4 News 2007).



Figure 4. Brown is the New White. (Wentz 2007)

Very quickly Macy's issued an apology, severed its ties with NaCo, and stopped carrying the shirts. In addition to condemnation from conservative Anglos, Latinos seemed to be divided in their opinion of the brand's apparel. While the shirts sold quickly before being withdrawn, they were criticized in the media by certain Latino-rights advocates such as Osvaldo Soto of the Spanish American League Against Discrimination (FOX – 17 WZTV 2007). Soto and numerous customers complained that the shirts were offensive and racist. Macy's determination to drop NaCo was a business decision. The company decided not to risk potentially alienating parts of its Anglo and Latino customer base, given the continued negative publicity generated by the clothing line. It seems Macy's had not comprehended the complexity of issues surrounding the construction of Mexican American identity and its relationship to Mexico.

In reporting the controversy many stories widely cited Latino marketing expert Edward Rincón who judged the Macy's episode as another failed attempt by a large retailer to understand the Latino consumer (Corley 2007). Rincón made the point that companies often fail in their marketing to Latinos because of their inability to distinguish between the different cultural demographics within the market. For example, they do not always understand distinctions between Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican Americans. In this particular case, Rincón cites the conflation of Mexican and Mexican American consumers and their tastes because of their shared cultural roots.

Rincón seemed critical as well of Macy's assumption that a Mexican apparel company such as NaCo would fully understand the Mexican American market. According to him, products that sold in Mexico would not necessarily appeal to the Mexican American community due to the differences between the two countries. Rincón's commercial observation also implied an important historical schism that complicates the relationship between Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals. Members of the Mexican American community often have viewed with suspicion any Mexican nationals or companies that purport to speak for them. This suspicion is grounded in a long history of chauvinistic and/or negative attitudes articulated by Mexican elites toward Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals living in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Rincón further suggested that NaCo's shirts could be offensive to the very Latinos whom stores were trying to attract. The shirts had an appeal that certain segments of the market were willing to pay for, specifically, young Latinos. Rincón implies that more conservative Latinos reject the practice of highlighting cultural and ethnic differences, preferring to minimize them and emphasize how Mexican Americans have incorporated themselves into the fabric of the nation. In some circumstances, Mexican Americans of higher-class status renounce ethnic identification in favor of constructions around a broader "American" polity (Vila 2000, 101–102). That is to say, they view themselves as part of the wider cultural diversity of the US. Their personal success is more emblematic of a broader American identity. The shirts' confrontational style, such as the "N is for Naco" line, stood in direct opposition to this identity position and potentially created a conflicting message within the Mexican American market. This difference in identity positioning points to the countless ways in which individuals navigate the construction of ethnic and national identities. It also signals the problems that arise for marketers and businesses trying to appeal to Mexican Americans and the broader Latino market.

Regional differences were another factor that may point to complications in the reception of the NaCo messages and aesthetics. NaCo had its roots in the Tijuana of the 1990s, and Chavarín had spent his time in the US living in Southern California. California was undergoing a demographic and cultural change during the 90s that witnessed the growth of Latino and minority populations in general, accompanied by increasing influence both politically and culturally within the state. Chavarín explained in an interview how the messages of his apparel line reflected this emerging reality: "Era como decir: 'Vienen los mexicanos con mucha fuerza, tenemos aquí un presidente municipal latino, tenemos a famosos directores mexicanos, a Gustavo Santaolalla ganando premios Oscar' " (qtd. in Sarabia 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> One widely cited example of this attitude is Octavio Paz's description of the pachuco in *El laberinto de la soledad* (1973).

Younger Southern California Mexican Americans, emboldened by the political and economic gains of recent generations, increasingly felt confident enough in their social position to make possible the appropriation of traditionally charged racial and ethnic language. NaCo and Chavarín were trying to communicate this growing sense of cultural empowerment, a sentiment expressed by the three consumer informants cited above. In the changing political and social contexts of the time, playful use of racially charged terms such as “white, brown, *mojado*, beaner” may not have seemed a great risk to the apparel makers. However, Latino communities in Texas or Georgia, where the legacy of racism is more palpable, and the political climate is more conservative, may have felt that their positions were precarious enough to warrant steering clear of such racially charged language. This may be especially true of older generations outside the youth demographic whose lived experiences differed significantly.

NaCo’s failure with Macy’s indicates the commercial limitations of positioning a company as edgy and pushing cultural boundaries. Their shirts may be laudable as artistic and social commentary, but those messages restricted them to a niche market. NaCo subsequently acknowledged that they had been caught unawares by the intensity of the political and social antagonisms surrounding race, ethnicity, and immigration: “Hubo gente a la que le pareció racista; digo, hay opiniones para todos, pero nosotros lo hicimos más como diversión” (qtd. in Sarabia 2008). NaCo was probably following the same successful path that the brand had in Mexico with its idea of *naco*. Designs incorporated content thought to be more appealing and specific to US Latino consumers, and NaCo continued the similar strategy of combining humor with cultural observations that pushed social boundaries.

Potentially offensive terms such as *naco* were refashioned into signs of urban kitsch or cultural pride. With the “N is for Naco” series there was a recognition that difference can be a site of political and social struggle or disruption. The controversial series openly acknowledged and made an attempt to subvert the historical and political legacy surrounding loaded terms such as “illegal,” *mojado*, *raza*, “beaner,” “green card,” “white,” and “brown.” It signaled their historical role in the oppression and subjugation of Mexican Americans in the United States. Through the use of humor, such racially charged terms were to be drained of power and inverted. In a similar manner to the use of the word *naco*, there seems to be an attempt to neutralize these ethnic markers. As Chavarín states: “When you embrace something, . . . I think the taboo is gone” (qtd. in Avila 2008). Through this embrace, the terms were to be transformed into signals of ethnic pride and a means of celebrating difference and identity. Once neutralized, they were then packaged for consumption in simple slogans on the clothing. It presupposed that their mere appropriation by Latinos was sufficient to neutralize them as tools of oppression and charge them with the task of liberation.

The complexity and problematic history of racism toward Latino groups perhaps made NaCo's endeavor naive. Past examples of successful appropriation of formerly offensive terms were commonly part of social or political movements that sought to bring about societal change. NaCo's images and slogans did not originate within such a movement but rather were tied to a commercial endeavor that used them to signal a young hip urban identity. Overlooked were the historical, institutional, and structural conditions that created these terms and perpetuated their existence. What NaCo did not fully understand is how these signs and terms are manifestations of existing power structures of racism. What worked commercially in Mexico with the term *naco* and its associated images was not easily replicated in this context. *Naco* in Mexico has lost much of its direct connection to racial identity and has become a more malleable concept with younger consumers, connoting a class or cultural identity. It more easily could be separated from race and appropriated for use in different identity categories. It is possible to perform *naconess*, to play at being a *naco*, and then discard the identity.

The most controversial shirt—"Brown is the new White"—is especially illustrative of this code confusion on the part of NaCo. It was the shirt that provoked the strongest reaction and anchored much of the discussion in news reports on the controversy. What may account for the difference is that in Mexico "Brown" and "White" can be seen in this context as placeholders for nationality. As the quote above demonstrates, NaCo and Chavarín indicate their use of those terms is more in line with cultural codes as they would be understood in Mexico. Brown equates to Mexicanness, *mestizaje*, or more broadly, *Latinidad*. Race in Mexico is, at times, a more fluid identity marker and more closely correlates with class and cultural practices than in the US, making it more fluid and less tightly controlled as an identity category. It is often deployed as an expression of cultural and national pride in contrast with US Anglo or White European cultures. Chavarín and NaCo use it in such a way to signal a rise in the cultural importance of Latinos and Mexican Americans within the US and globally during this period. The US cultural context changes these social codes rendering "brown" and "white" markers of racial and ethnic identity and bringing to the fore the long history that controls and defines them.

Within the Latino community, reactions were divided. Young Latinos appeared to read the shirts similarly to NaCo's playful intent of celebrating Latino cultural pride. Other segments of the Latino market found the shirts problematic and expressed a negative reaction to their message. Latinos are frequently viewed as not-Americans based on racial and ethnic markers, so they may often go to great lengths to stress their patriotism and fealty to the US, while simultaneously celebrating their Latino heritage (Vila 2000, 21). In the US context, racial and ethnic markers are much more difficult to elide and discard. They are often physical markers that are outward signs,

independent of dress. More importantly, such signs are much more politically and socially charged and anchored in social and institutional practices. Consequently, the deployment of these signs through dress has real material consequences.

## **Conclusions**

NaCo's experiences in the US, both positive and negative, teach us the power of clothing to provide agency in the construction of identity within the Mexican American and Latino communities. They signal the diversity of the communities and the complexity of Mexican American identity constructions that are made up of narratives that can both complement and contradict each other. We can see their success as an important example of how, in some ways, borders can break down, permitting cultural flows between nations. As a commercial endeavor, NaCo demonstrates the ease with which certain cultural currents can move across borders but that they may do so in incomplete ways. These currents often take divergent paths as they are interdicted and acted upon by the material and imaginary forces that mark the border and what it represents.

Specifically for products such as NaCo's, it is important to note and understand that visual economies rooted in national histories and imaginations dominate each side of the border, modifying and changing the perception of shared cultural images. When products and people cross borders, they activate and deactivate cultural codes and reconfigure meanings according to dominant discourses of national and racial identities. NaCo's experience complicates the idea that borders are becoming less relevant and signals instead their importance as real economic, political, and cultural dividers. While borders may often seem arbitrary and ineffectual in diverting global flows, they do have real material and cultural effects which must be understood even in an increasingly connected world.

Often noted are the cultural differences between US Latino communities of various national origins, but perhaps less well understood are the generational, regional, and class differences within these communities. The immigrant experience and one's real or perceived relational distance (in both time and space) from it can determine in significant ways the use of cultural products in the construction of identity narratives.

Finally, NaCo's experience in the US signals the salient rise in Latino cultural importance that accompanied the increased Latino immigration to the US in the 1990s and 2000s, and the backlash this sparked in other cultural groups into the first twenty years of the twenty-first century.

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