Violence, Subalternity, and *El Corrido* 
Along the U.S.-Mexico Border 
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Abstract: The geopolitical divide that separates the United States and Mexico has long nurtured a region plagued by violence and conflict. However, its extent and political nature is often overshadowed and undermined by mainstream information outlets both in the U.S. and Mexico. In this context, the border region itself acts as a third space that gives birth to a distinct border gnosis, a unique form of knowledge construction among subaltern communities. Corridos (border ballads) have functioned as a form of subalternity that creates an alternative discourse to the imaginary of the border region. This study is an examination of the analysis and critique found in corridos that represent a critical communications of the violence at the nations’ shared edges—and its ensuing political implications. The cases used point to the politically charged environment of a border region that in becoming an increasingly militarized zone has also set the stage for a cultural battle amongst different forms of knowledge constructions and legitimization.

“El Corrido”
Como la corriente
De un río crecido
Que baja en torrente
Impetuoso y bravío

“El Corrido”
Like the current
Of a grown river
That lowers in an instant
Impetuous and brave

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In 1989, Los Tigres del Norte, considered by many the kings of the corrido, debut their song entitled "El Corrido" as a tribute to the very genre that has made them famous. The opening verses are their attempt to delineate the essence of a corrido. It is through the corrido that "[la] voz de nuestra gente," 'the voice of [the] people,' rises from a repressed call to attain the force of a river, unstoppable and daring. It is 'a valiant song,' "un canto valiente," that serves as a voice of the oppressed in which the people serve as a judge. As a voice of the voiceless, the corrido thus establishes itself as the populist form of knowledge distribution. It is from this description of the corrido that I wish to begin my discussion of corridos' function as an alternative discourse; one that emerges over the riverbanks of legitimized

1 The corrido is most commonly known as a type of popular folk ballad along the U.S.-Mexico border region. See Mendoza, El corrido mexicano, pp. vii-viiv, for a discussion of its history.

2 The word 'incident' or 'occurrence' have been chosen for the sake of remaining as impartial as possible to further the argument that word usage in distinct information outlets (an example being the use of 'riot; versus 'rebellion'
San Ysidro, California: and the May 20, 1997 death of Ezequiel Hernández in Redford, Texas. The cases are indicative of the politically charged environment of a border region that is becoming an increasingly militarized zone and has set the stage for a cultural battle amongst different forms of transnational knowledge constructions and legitimization.

The Rise of the Corrido as a Conductor of Knowledge

The exact birth of the modern corrido is still debated among several historians, yet they predominantly agree that nowhere is its importance as vital as during the Mexican Revolution. Vicente Mendoza, Mexico’s leading ballad authority, entertains the notion that the corrido has its roots in the Spanish tradition of romances, suggesting that the name ‘corrido’ came from the romances that were sung at a faster pace, called romances corridos, a rough translation implying ‘run through’ or at a faster pace (1939). In a later study, he states that the romances evolved into the decima, which in the larger portion of the nineteenth century were “the informative press of the people” (1954). Although he does not make the same claims for the modern corrido, which he insists only lasted between 1880-1930 (1954), the literature suggests that music played a strong sense of empowerment and influence in the daily function of Mexican lives, primarily along the border, as a means of carrying information al pueblo, to the people.

The fact that most corridos de La Revolución, as Tejano scholar Américo Paredes states, were sung of “Robin Hood-like outlaws in rebellion against [the dictatorship of] Porfirio Díaz” (1993) implies that the very nature of the corrido is one of ‘information exchange’—and in some instances a form of resistance. Paredes argues that the border corrido is a product of interethnic conflict along the U.S.-Mexico border rooted in Mexican resistance to Anglo hegemony (1958). Celedonio Serrano Martínez (1963) interpreted the idea of resistance in the corrido differently, suggesting that the origins lay in an indigenous Azteca/Mexica poetry; its resistive nature a response to Hernán Cortes and other invading forces. Regardless, these songs have indeed a history of emanating from working class people and operating through popular culture (Paredes, 1993). The contemporary corrido continues such tradition.

The corrido in its primary function serves to tell a story, usually of a glorious event, a tragedy or of heroic deeds and courageous men. By taking an active role in narrating the trajectory of the corrido, the corredista becomes part of the people, establishing a personal connection to the story in contrast to the ‘detached’ indifference common in news reporting. This form of relation to the event or person at hand has the effect of making the corrido more populist in its approach. According to Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony (1977) it is through storytelling that Native Americans construct their reality or understanding of the world. Similarly, it may be contended that for some corredistas and fronterizas/os, it is also through corridos that knowledge and reality is constructed, transmitted, and understood.

Several studies have been conducted on corridos, most notably the work of Américo Paredes, Vicente T. Mendoza, Maria Herrera-Sobek, and Jose Limon, among others, but they have primarily centered on older collections. Although important to contextualizing this study concerns a more contemporary corrido tradition. A recent sub-genre, the narco-corrido, also merged and deserves some mention, but is the subject for its own study. The narco-corrido sprouted from the corrido tradition, yet has been criticized for their content: the glorification of drug trafficking and the accompanying lifestyle. A discernable trend has led some scholars to believe that the corrido’s

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4 For a detailed study and critique of the ‘patriarchal’ and ‘chauvinist’ tendencies in the “male-dominated” genre see Herrera-Sobek, The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis.

5 The narco-corrido follows the same structure and scheme of traditional corridos, but its content, still generally one of violence and conflict along the border, focus on the reality of drug smuggling.

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mere relation to the border earns the ballad the latter term, *narco-cerrido*. However, this ill-advised classification, implying a tie to drugs and drug trafficking, taints the image of this music. Consequently, many *corridos* are dismissed as subversive folk music, rather than being critically studied as cultural productions embodying subaltern discourses and counter-narratives. This process of ‘folk-anization’ similar to the phenomenon of hip-hop being categorized as ‘gangsta rap’ despite many of its socially conscious messages, desensitizes the subaltern reality embedded in the lyrics of the two. Although there are *narco-corridos* that glorify drug trafficking, they (sometimes) differ from those that offer insight into and communicate knowledge about the violence involved when living *en la frontera*.

### Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border: A Historical Survey

Looking at the history of the United States-Mexico borderlands, we see a very unique experience. The history of the United States-Mexico borderlands, like that between many other countries, has been and continues to be a contested terrain since prior to the border’s inception in 1848. No two other neighboring countries share such sharp distinctions as do the U.S. and Mexico. According to Saldivar however, Frederick Jackson Turner’s personal account of such westward expansionism in the 1800’s championed ‘Courageous frontiersmen’ as accomplishing heroic deeds—under the guise of an objective western American history (1997). Such depiction denies the violence, pillage and genocide that many peoples encountered and endured at the hands of westbound travelers.

When a young Mexico opened its Texas territory to Anglo migration in 1821, feelings of superiority among Anglo immigrants towards Mexicans, and the notion that Mexicans could not govern over Anglos led to open hostility in Texas (Horsman, 1981). Such overt, racially motivated disputes culminated in the Texas Revolt,

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6 Gloria Anzaldúa employs the metaphor of una herida abierta (an open wound) to signal the violence prevalent living along the U.S.-Mexico border (see pg. 6), inflicted by U.S. economic and political dominance of its southern neighbor and transcending to various arenas.

7 Perhaps the most notable ones are Joaquin Murrieta and Juan Cortina, both of whom have had corridos speaking of them as heroes to counter the identity of bandit that most newspapers had baptized them with.

8 This refers to incidents that occur not just at the actual geographic line between the two countries, but also to those that extend into the ‘borderlands’, beyond...
With the establishment of Joint Task Force Six (JTF-6) in 1989, the U.S. Marines operative that placed military on the border, what is at question is the effect of the *corridos* in producing a counter-narrative to the dominant discourses that shape the violence-submerged border communities. It is also the dispersal of information about, from, and within the borderlands that becomes important and subject to inquiry herein. Many incidents go unreported. Similarly, there exists a selective process in determining what will be considered necessary information, and what parts of incidents, if not entire ones must go omitted. *Corridos* *frontieros*, in this regard, speak to (and of) the violence at the U.S.-Mexico border as commonplace in the space's daily function.

**Legitimization vs. Subalternity: San Ysidro, CA and Redford, TX**

News media in its ideal form is a collaborative nexus of objective reporting that transmits information in a way that is free of bias, with the sole purpose of informing. However, when something happens, all we can really know with certainty is that an incident occurred, it is then one of the various forms of media—the prime time news, the cover story, etc.—that informs and constructs our understanding of it that particular event. In many border communities the *corrido* as a 'way of knowing' serves as a vehicle for conveying information. While some people listen to *corridos* recreationally, others do so because they do not rely on mainstream outlets for substantive information. The lack of trust and accessibility are key factors in this decision. Our two cases, the McDonalds shooting and the death of Ezequiel Hernández, are well-documented incidents about which *corridos* were written for popular listening and to serve as informative outlets.

An examination of the two specific incidents provides examples of the *corridos* as conveyors of knowledge about incidents of border violence that sometimes differ with official accounts. The case of the just 30 geospatial miles, into territory whose socio-political, economic and cultural reality is shaped and defined by its relation to the U.S.-Mexico border and the history that informs it.

San Ysidro McDonalds Massacre is important, because it involves mass killings in public spaces. It also gave rise to self-proclaimed, civilian 'border militias' involved in detaining and/or shooting immigrants. The death of Ezequiel Hernández in Redford, Texas is a byproduct of the 'militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border'. Military servicemen, who otherwise would not have been on the border, were the ones who fired upon him. The *corridos* referenced below are those that are known to have been written about the San Ysidro Massacre or about Ezequiel Hernández' death:

- 1) *La Masacre de San Ysidro*, written by José Villarino and Oscar Galván;
- 2) *El Masacre de San Ysidro*, by Ramona Gallegos;
- 3) A version, title unknown, by Salvador Mora Sanchez; and
- 4) A version, title unknown, by Ray Frantzien;

- 1) *Ezequiel Hernández (El Pastor)*, Resplandor de Ojinaga;
- 2) *El Corrido de Ezequiel Hernández*, Santiago Jimenez, Jr. y Su Conjunto; and
- 3) *Corrido to Ezequiel*, Margarito Rodriguez.9

Those noted, as well as other corridos, emerge from people along the U.S.-Mexico border, gente de la frontera. Their subaltern perspective is one that usually remains absent from the mainstream.

One criticism of the *corridos* function as a legitimate source of knowledge has been the accusation of the use of sensationalism employed in the relaying of 'knowledge' to respective audiences. Although it is easy to presume that acts of sensationalism would occur in music, especially 'folk' music as *corridos* have been described, one cannot discount acts of sensationalism within both the *corridos* and mainstream outlets of information. An elaboration of the study will

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9The San Ysidro corridos were found referenced in Richard Griswold del Castillo, "The San Ysidro Massacre: A Community Response to Tragedy" in Journal of Borderlands Studies, Vol. III, No. 2. The Ezequiel Hernández corridos were gathered and collected by the author's own research.
then seek a clearer explanation as to how the general ambience of militancy and the adoption of military rhetoric, noticeable in mainstream outlets, leads to a desensitizing effect. The result consequently calls to question the information function of the corrido. The desensitizing is evident in the categorization of certain music as narco-cortidos—thereby de-legitimizing the music and subjugating it to ostracization from the mainstream.

Violence and Subalternity: San Ysidro, CA and Redford, TX

Although the massacre at the San Ysidro McDonalds pre-dates the ‘War On Drugs’ and JTF-6 by five years, it serves as an example of the type of violence present at the border. Considered one of the first major ‘random’ shootings at fast-food restaurants, this incident involved much more. In this particular case, a Vietnam veteran by the name of James Huberty walked into a local McDonald’s in the town of San Ysidro—a mile from the border and three from the Pacific Ocean. (Although the distance to the beach is very small, the reality of San Ysidro is shaped not by its relation to the coast, but by its relation to the border.) Huberty then began shooting at the predominantly Mexican customers. The shooting resulted in twenty-one people being killed. Eighteen of the deceased were Mexicans, seven of whom were Mexican nationals (Villarino 1992). Another nineteen were injured, including fourteen Mexicans. However, the San Diego Union-Tribune’s headline two days later read “They represented all walks of life” speaking of their occupations and ages, but not of their transnationality. The “sketches of victims of mass San Ysidro shooting” omitted the one characteristic that most shared: most of them were of Mexican descent.

According to San Diego Historian Richard Griswold del Castillo, “the media coverage of the shooting . . . varied according to geographical distance from San Diego. The local media reported events in great detail and for a longer period of time while the national press limited itself to more general overviews (1988). The incident was covered by the New York Times, the newspaper of record for the Library of Congress, as a man going insane, killing people at a McDonalds “on the Coast”11, rather than of an American with ties to white supremacist groups killing Mexicans at the border, which was reported in alternative press on both sides of the border as well as establishment newspapers in Mexico.12 Similarly, the corridos attempt to relate the events of that day, assert that Huberty was a racist, and highlight the massacre’s meaning for the community.13 One corrido that documents the events has not been released as music, only as text. According to the composer Pepe Villarino it will not be put to music until twenty-five years after the massacre to avoid possible trauma for the survivors.14 The point here though, is that for James Huberty the idea of a ‘war’ on the border was indeed a reality in 1984, and the corridos attempt to relay this perspective.

The second incident, the killing of Ezequiel Hernández, bears additional scrutiny. Most news stories in late May of 1997 focused on the fatal shooting of a ‘suspected’ drug smuggler by a Marine on an anti-narcotic operation, after the victim reportedly shot at the Marine; an investigation later acquitted the Marine of any wrongdoing.15 Only as more information materialized was it revealed that the ‘suspect’ was actually a third generation U.S. citizen of Mexican descent, a high school student nearing graduation, shot dead by a Marine while tending his goats as he had done every morning for the last three years of his life. An oversight investigation commissioned by Congress revealed what it called “a series of failures on the part of the Justice  

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12 Griswold del Castillo, p. 72.
13 Ibid. p.74.
14 Phone interview with the corrido’s composer, June 26, 2000.
Department and Defense Department personnel. Despite the acquittal of the Marine Clemente Bañuelos, the government paid a $1.9 million dollar settlement to the Hernández family for Ezequiel’s death. The payment, however, received nowhere near the attention in the mainstream media that Bañuelos’ acquittal did, for it would imply a partial responsibility for the tragic death. The various corridos written about the incident do bring light to those details. The cover of the album to Santiago Jiménez Jr.’s rendition of El Corrido de Ezequiel Hernández is itself a subaltern critique of the killing. To this day reports still disagree on the events, ranging from one to three alleged shots being fired, but what the incident did is highlight many unanswered questions regarding the military’s role on the border.

There has since been a temporary halt to the continued deployment of military personnel to the border pending subsequent investigations.

As is the case with the McDonald’s corridos, it is my contention that the three corridos written about Ezequiel Hernández also provide just as valuable insight and critique into the tragic incident. Violence on the U.S.-Mexico border exists simply as everyday background imagery to the hostility that has been increasing, most notably with the acts of civilian ranchers rounding up, detaining and/or shooting Mexican immigrants in Arizona. Although JTF-6 was not implemented until 1989 as part of the ‘War on Drugs’ launched by former-President Ronald Reagan and furthered by former-President George Bush, the presence of military, and by default, complementary violence has long existed on the U.S.-Mexico border. This perspective and knowledge is well chronicled in the corrido, but not as prevalent in the mainstream news sources.

Conclusion

President Clinton has since continued the ‘war’ and taken his place as the president responsible for the largest increase of military and border patrol agents between the two nations. The INS budget has nearly tripled between FY 1993 and FY 1999 (from $1.5 billion to $4.2 billion), and much of this growth has been targeted toward beefing up the Border Patrol. Between FY 1993 and the end of FY 1997, the size of the Border Patrol along the southwest border grew by 82 percent—from 3,389 agents to 6,213 agents. The project budget for FY2001 is $5.2 billion, an ironic increase in a time of general government downsizing. Consequently, violence along the same divide continues to escalate; JTF-6 and other get-tough Border Patrol operations have been partly blamed. Appropriately, corridos speaking to border violence continue to emerge.

Given the emerging field of Border Studies and the current militarization of the border, without further research we cannot completely discount alternative possibilities relating to the violence and death. However, it would be a dishonor to deny the effect that JTF-6 has played in the development of a ‘border culture’—one derived from a history of conflict and faced with the growing reality of a quasi-police/migra state. Similarly, one cannot discount the role of corrido as a counter-narrative to that same violent tale. The corrido fronterizo is thus a different account of these events. It is an act of border thinking, or notions of border gnosis, that gente de la frontera use to make sense of familiar concepts that bring meaning to their lives. For the most part, life along the U.S.-Mexico border permeates with violence of various forms. It is out of violence itself that the social and cultural divide was created, only incorporating and appropriating the geospatial dimensions of the Rio Grande, and other rugged terrain, for political purposes.

Although a river usually flows in one direction, as does status quo media, when the contents of it are so abundant that they can no longer be contained, the river flows into new terrain. The water eventually gives rise to new life. The river that is now the border between the United States and Mexico flows in various directions. It contradicts the modern conventions of geopolitics, and in doing so it

16 Ibid.
18 Gwynne, S.C., pp. 40.
flows and spills over, north and south, south and north, east and west, Western and non-Western. The corrido likewise, exceeds the limitations of legitimized information to give rise to new life, a new subaltern knowledge. In this sense, the corrido tradition indeed functions to forge an alternative discourse along the U.S.-Mexico Border. One that is sure to intrigue, amaze, educate, and even puzzle Border scholars for years to come.

Works Cited


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