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Recommended Citation

de Jesús Muñoz Serrano, José (2002) "Migration Corridos: The Point of View of Undocumented People and Its Implications for the Mexican Origin Population in the U.S.," Diálogo: Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 3. Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol7/iss1/3

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol7/iss1/3
Migration Corridos: 

THE POINT OF VIEW OF UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MEXICAN ORIGIN POPULATION IN THE U.S.

by José de Jesús Muñoz Serrano

The migration of Mexican people to the United States began as soon as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848. This Treaty ended an unjust war that lasted two years and in which Mexico lost half of its territory to the United States. According to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Mexican people that decided to stay in the U.S. side of the new border were granted all the rights equal to the rest of U.S. citizens deserved. These rights included rights to land ownership, the use of Spanish language, political participation and access to education. The Treaty and the new border geographically separated families, but not family networks. Mexican people on both sides of the border continued migrating back and forth in order to maintain their family networks. Decades later, starting in the 1890's more Mexican people began to migrate to the U.S. side of the border in search of work and to escape the violence caused by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Despite the fact that the Mexican migration to the United States dates back to over 150 years, it is in the last two decades that crossing the border has become more dangerous. The militarization of the border in the last ten years (Dunn 1996) has obligated the new immigrants to cross the border through more dangerous areas. Since the militarization of the border in 1993, over two thousand people have died in the deserts of Arizona, California and Texas and in the waters of the Colorado and Grande (Bravo) Rivers. It is important to state also that most of the Mexican migration to the U.S. displays two main characteristics. The first characteristic is the act of crossing an obstacle, in this case the political line that tries to separate the two countries. The second characteristic is the act of crossing a cultural border and its adaptation to U.S. mainstream culture. These two characteristics of migration, or crossing a physical and cultural border have been the theme of numerous corrido songs that narrate this experience.

In the last decade due to the militarization of the border, the migration narratives, which include corrido songs, have taken new perspectives in the whole socio-political discourse and this paper focuses on this new perspective. These migration narratives, about success, at other times comic, often filled with empowerment, and other times tragic, will be analyzed in this work. In this essay I argue that the same behavior (crossing the border without documents) that the United States law criminalizes, is glorified, "heroized", and is used as a source of empowerment by the immigrants in this continual migration.

IMMIGRATION BACKGROUND

The mass movements of Mexican people to the United States began in the 1890's during the peak of President Diaz's term. The social and economic policies implemented under his thirty-three years presidency dislocated many peasants from their private and communal lands with no other choice but to work for the haciendas or the industrial shops of the urban centers. The new landless peasants found at least two problems in their transformation to wage earners. First there were slave wages in the haciendas that condemned them to endless debts, and secondly, the lack of available industrial
jobs in the cities. The people that were lucky enough to get jobs in the industrial and mining sectors also encountered low wages and difficult working conditions. These harsh working conditions were reflected on the strikes of Rio Blanco, Veracruz and Cananea, Sonora just to mention a few. By 1910 Diaz's government was very weak. Several conflicts contributed to its failure, including internal divisions in the government, lack of authentic democracy and the popular discontent associated to the harsh economic and social conditions prevalent all over the country.

The violence and economic chaos of the Mexican Revolution pushed thousands of people into the U.S. These immigrants were also attracted by agricultural, mining, railroad and industrial jobs in the Southwest and the Midwest. During the 1890's and 1920's, over one million Mexicans migrated to the north establishing the path and social networks for future generations. The migration of Mexicans declined by the 1930's when the crash of the stock market lead to an economic crisis in which Mexicans were used as scapegoats and blamed for the difficult situation. During the 1930's thousands of Mexicans, U.S. citizens and immigrants, were deported to Mexico. However, ten years later the migration of Mexican workers continued its destiny with the implementation of the Bracero Program. The U.S. and Mexico governments implemented this program in 1942 as a way to supply labor to the United States during War World II. The program, while conceived to work only during the war times, extended until 1964. During the twenty-two year duration of the Bracero Program, 4.5 million Mexicans migrated to the United States to work on a temporary and permanent basis.

This second wave of migration consolidated the social networks that contributed to the third and more numerous exoduses of Mexican people. The migration of the third wave began after the Bracero program ended, increasing the number of movements during the 1980's as a direct cause of the economic crises in Mexico. The third wave of migration is a process that continues until today.

**CORRIDO TRADITION BACKGROUND**

In a study about the Spanish Romance and the Mexican Corrido, Mexican music ethnologist, Vicente T. Mendoza (1939) states that the corrido is a direct descendant of the Old Spanish Romance. The origins of the Spanish Romance date back to approximately the 14th century because according to Mendoza, by the 15th century this type of musical expression was already popular among the highest literate people of Spain. Mendoza also mentions in the introduction of his book, how when he was an engineer in Michoacán in 1926, the famous corrido La Delagadina was already very popular and very similar to the Old Spanish musical romances. Mendoza also considers that the more direct connection of the corrido mexicano and the romance español is found in the corridas andaluzas, or romance corrido. Mendoza also states that the corrido songs style was widely accepted in Mexico, especially in the central states of Michoacán, Guanajuato, and Jalisco, but also in the southern states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Puebla among others. In the Mexican corrido tradition, the oldest evidence of this musical style according to Mendoza, dates back to 1684 with the "coplas del tapado" when the lyrics were published. The coplas del tapado was the story of Antonio Benavides, who stole the identity of an important person in New Spain. Mr. Benavides was decapitated during the Inquisition; his head was taken to Puebla and showed in the arch of a local church while one of his hands was nailed in the gallows.

In Mexico, the modern corrido has been sung mainly by mariachi and norteño groups that have appeared in the central and northern region of the country. In other regions of the countryside such as the Costa Chica of Guerrero, corridos have been a form of expression also. However, their performance is framed in other musical expressions that do not fit the traditional mariachi or norteño group. In this part of the country, it is possible for just one person to perform corridos just using the harp, which by the way is the main musical instrument in this region. The rich baggage of musical expression in Mexico is something that might help us understand the cultural expression and political and social agenda in the corrido production. Some of the songs that almost every Mexican listened has at least one time in his life, includes corridos about towns, horses, national heroes and lately the controversial drug dealers. It is in the topic of drug dealers where Wald (2000) and Quiñones (2001) have done extensive research.

The corridos songs respond to different kind of situations, Celestino Fernández (1989) listed some of the most popular corridos themes. These range from stories and people of the Mexican Revolution, to animals, criminals, love experiences, towns and regions, smuggling, socio-political events, violent deaths and of course the subject of this paper, the Mexican immigration experience. In some places the corrido tradition is very strong that its importance has called the academics' attention to do research about this tradition and its sociological implications (McDowell 2000), or to document them (Ortiz Guerrero 1992). The corrido tradition has also called the attention of academics to analyze the portrayal of gender within this narrative frame (Herrera-Sobek 1990).

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**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MUSIC AND THE VALIDATION OF THE CORRIDO EXPRESSION**

Music is a universal way of expression, however its social significance is not. The universality of music resides in the fact that all the cultures that have existed and continue to exist in the world have developed this kind of expression. In ancient cultures, music was attached to religious practices, which is also something that continues today. The social significance of music is regional, it depends on the rhythms and words that are being performed, the audience, and the geographical place where this music is being performed. For example, the Mexican National Symphony Orchestra (OSN) is one of the most, if not the most influential musical organization in Mexico. However, one performance of the OSN in a roosters fight palenque in Aguascalientes might not be the most adequate place, nor have the most adequate audience. The social significance of the OSN in this case, is irrelevant to the avid audience that wants to see the roosters fighting while listening to music more appropriate to this event. The opposite example could also be true. One of the most important groups in norteño music is Los Tigres del Norte and so far they have sold millions of copies around the world. The Tigres del Norte's presentations always gather thousands
of people, something that the OSN rarely does. However, many would consider performances by Los Tigres as inappropriate at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, which is the most prestigious place for performing arts in Mexico.

THE CORRIDO AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL EXPRESSION

The corrido composers most of the time are people who have experienced the story which is being narrated. In this sense, the epistemological expression in which the corrido is framed, transforms the narrative into a valid source of personal, community and even national expression. According to Webster’s dictionary, “epistemology is the study of the theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge esp. with reference to its limits and validity.” The use of epistemology is not a new concept in the academic grounds of Latinos; Latina women have used it in their academic areas. Dolores Delgado Bernal (1988) uses this theory and states that her research “places Chicanas as central subjects and provides a forum in which Chicanas speak and analyze their stories of school resistance and grassroots leadership.” Another Latina that also uses epistemological theory when she discusses her immigrant experience and justifies it as a valid form of research is Olivia Espin (1997). Espin uses her limited and valid knowledge about her own experience as a Cuban immigrant in at least three continents to write about and validate her immigrant narratives.

In the same way that Delgado Bernal and Espin use epistemological theory to do their research, I will use the narrative stories on migration in the corridos as the ways in which Mexican origin people describe their border-crossing experience. The description of the different experiences of border-crossing, (the physical obstacle and the cultural border) are valid ways of how these people have seen and continue seeing the world. These corridos, that Ernesto Galarza (1972) has labeled, as “the songs of exodus” and which include “An Emigrant’s Farewell”, “El Coyotito”, “Deported” and “La Cucaracha” are the first corrido songs about the Mexican migration, which again began in the last decade of the 19th century.

Most of the corridos about the Mexican migration portray the history of what some people consider the Mexican underclass. That is true for the most part. It is a fact that the parts that migrate to the United States include individuals from the poorest parts of Mexico. One example of this statement are the corridos El Bracero Fracasado and Pobre Juan among others. In a study about how gender is portrayed in salsa music in the Puerto Rican culture, Frances Aparicio states that “salsa is the music of the immigrant and the urban working class...its lyrics continue the traditional role of the Puerto Rican plena, the Cuban son, the Colombian Vallenato and the Mexican Corrido-the role of narrating historical events, local situations, and stories from the point of view of the marginalized.” The concept-that corridos are narratives from the point of view of the marginalized as Aparicio states, is true. That will be clearly exemplified in this discussion about musical narratives of migration.

CORRIDO TRADITION AND ITS LINK TO THE U.S. EXPERIENCE

I stated before that the corrido tradition has been especially strong in Central and Northern Mexico. For the purpose of this paper, I will only discuss the development of the corrido tradition in the framework of the border, which geographically includes Northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. It is in this region where the border that divides the two countries is
The case of the corrido Los Mandados. Their permanent victim-state and a person capable of changing their state by using self-empowerment such as in the case of the corrido Los Mandados.

CORTIDOS ABOUT MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

The songs that I will use to explore the meaning of the border-crossing experience for Mexican origin people and how these acts help to construct artistic representations include, Los mandados, El corrido de los mojados, Los alambrados, Pobre Juan and Jaula de oro. Most of these songs are framed in the traditional corrido style except one, Pobre Juan. However, I have decided to include this song because in terms of its literature or message it perfectly can fit under the category of corridos. As in most corridos, the main goal of these types of songs is to tell a story about something that happened or is happening. I am also including this song because it is part of the border narrative that deals with migration topics.

LOS MANDADOS

The corrido Los Mandados is a good example of self-empowerment of the undocumented immigrants. This song narrates the story of thousands of immigrants that have tried to cross the U.S.-Mexico border without documents and have been arrested by the Patrol several times. The following quote exaggerates this corrido story when it says that “the border patrol caught me three hundred times, we would say but it never dominated me, the beatings they gave me, I gave to their fellow country men”. Crossing the border three hundred times seems impossible for a single man but the purpose of this exaggeration is to include in the narrative the experience of thousands of other people that also intend to cross the border many times in their lives.

In his work about the history of the Texas-Mex Conjunto Music, Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. (2002) cites Peña's work stating, “In many ways, corridos were the product of a subordinate society whose only means of fighting the dominant Anglo powers was symbolic”. San Miguel Jr. also states that after losing popularity during the 1930’s, the corrido, “shifted its focus from the cultural hero to the helpless victim... that the newer corridos aroused sympathy for the victim and spurred Texas-Mexican communities to take collective action for the benefit of all... that the real hero in these communities was the organized and politically active community as a whole, not the individual.” To a certain degree that is true, however the corrido song as a cultural and popular expression continued to be in many cases, the only weapon for the victims to transform their permanent victim-state and change it into a victim-as agent towards a person capable of changing their state by using self-empowerment such as in the case of the corrido Los Mandados.
powerful because a subordinate is challenging and overcoming the rules of the hegemony. I consider that this analogy serves very well the purpose of showing the empowerment in the lives of the Mexican immigrants that successfully cross the border.

Fernández also discusses the meaning of the word los mandados. The word comes from mandadero, that according to Fernández “in the stratification system of the Mexican society a mandadero [one who does errands] is clearly below the person for whom the mandado [errand] is done’. Under this perspective, “the corridista states that the border patrol does errands for the undocumented border crossers, implying that it is the immigrants who have higher status, power and authority”, which are characteristics of an empowered person.

EL CORRIDO DE LOS MOJADOS AND LOS ALAMBRADOS

As in many corridos that self-empower the immigrants, there are many other corridos that glorify and “heroize” them. To discuss this characteristic in the construction of the immigrant identity I am going to refer to two corrido; El corrido de los mojados and Los alambrados. These two corridos portray the border crossers as people that suffer in their intents to reach their own American dream when crossing the border. In the corrido Los mojados for example, the narrator tell us that because they are wetbacks the law is always searching for them. Being a mojado or wetback is equal to be an illegal and that is the cause why the police, border patrol, etc are always behind them. The corrido also states that not speaking the English language, as in the case of Los mandados, is also a major problem for their undocumented resident status in the U.S.

The self-empowerment for the narrator of this corrido is also in the collective action that while the Border Patrol deports people back to Mexico, more people reach their goal of successfully entering to the United States. The statement in this corrido is supported by the facts that for the Border Patrol it is impossible to completely deter the undocumented Mexican migration but also according to Fernández, to deconstruct the monthly statistics of the

Border Patrol/INS agencies. Another characteristic of self-empowerment is expressed in the part of the song where the narrator claims that they are indispensable for the U.S. economy. Having a job most of the time contributes to the self-empowerment of most people. Most of us feel with power when we have a job and case for the narrator of this corrido, their work is necessary for the U.S. economy, especially farm production. (fruits and vegetables).

Another corrido that glorifies the efforts of undocumented border crossers is Los alambrados. Los alambrados is a term that defines two characteristics, the wired fence that divided the Tijuana-San Diego border before the iron fence was build in the 1990’s and the people that “slipped past the fence”. Under these two definitions, Los alambrados narrates the story of a group of people-the concept of collective action-that struggled to cross the Tijuana-San Diego border. In this collective undocumented border crossing, the protagonists of the story fooled the Border Patrol efforts to deter them. According to the corrido, the border crossers walked in the hills during the night and were hiding in the bushes when the helicopters were searching for them. The reward for these heroes was a life in Chicago, their final destination where they found a job and are having fun with the dollars earned.

Discussing this corrido, José Macias (1991) points out that the story of Los alambrados is the not an isolated incident because it is a story of “the kind of experiences which a large segment of the Mexican population has or can expect to have”. In my personal experience, I remember that this song was a hit during the middle 1980’s, before my first migration to the United States. At those times, my thoughts about migrating to the United States were linked to this song. In other words, when I thought about a possible migration to the United States, it was when I was listening this song. Under these circumstances, I have to agree with Macias when he states in his analysis that “the most visible effect of immigration (narratives) is its familiarization of individuals with the immigration culture, as it helps an epistemological process, reinforces a set of beliefs, and reflects ‘popular attitudes towards events’.” I also consider that I am not the only person influenced to a certain degree by these types of narratives because almost all these songs are very popular among the majority of the Mexican immigrant population in the United States.
POBRE JUAN

The narrative discourse of self-empowerment and successful undocumented crossings have changed after the heavy militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. Today, successful alambrados or mojados are being displaced by stories like the case of Juan. The song Pobre Juan, projects the current reality of many immigrants along the U.S. Mexico Border. This song narrates the story of Juan who died in his intent to reach his American dream, which was to work in the U.S., save some money and return to Mexico to get married. This song serves to connect the stories of thousands of people that have died in their effort to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. There are several points to note in this song which include the absence of last names, geographical locations, and several suggestions about the death of Juan.

This song uses two names that are among the most popular in Mexico, Juan and Maria. I am sure that most Mexican origin families have members with these names and I believe that that was one of the reasons to use these names, to easily connect the protagonists with any Mexican family. The lack of last names also has the same purpose, to link tentative migrants and their families with what is happening in the story. Names serves as a personal identification for most of us but the last names the ones that consolidate our identity. The inclusion or exclusion of names are or last names serves to connect people with Juan, and the absence of a last name leaves the space for their own inclusion. Another point that serves by leaving open the identification of the Mexican people with the story, is that the song does not happen in any specific geographical space. Juan travels throughout Mexico, but we do not know what part of Mexico he is migrating from, or by which border he is trying to cross. This open or limited information about Juan also allows the listener to connect the risks of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border by any port of entry.

Pobre Juan is a song that appears in the latest (2002) musical production of the Mexican rock group Maná. Most songs of this group reflect political discourses and Pobre Juan is a good example of this agenda. After the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, the number of deaths on the border has been rising to critical levels. According to American Friends Service Committee, which is an organization that defends the rights of immigrants, from 1995 to February 2001, 610 people died crossing the California-Mexico border, this number does not include many more people that have died in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Each year, an average of 355 people died crossing the border, which is equivalent to one person per day (AFSC 1999, 2001). The inclusion of these events in the musical agenda of Maná reflects the national tragedy of the migrants that die trying to reach their dream. The song leaves open the possibility that Juan was shot by a Border Patrol agent, a Coyote (or people smuggler), have died under the heat of the desert or in the waters of the two rivers that divide the two countries. In this sense, the narrative form of these post-militarization songs are not a way to empower people about their border crossing experience, rather to portray a reality that does not reflect anymore the good times when crossing as a mojado or alambrado was easier. Another example of this new narratives the song La 187, composed by Juan Gabriel which narrates the rejection environment after Proposition 187 in California and its effects all over the U.S.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF CROSSING THE CULTURAL BORDER AND LA JAULA DE ORO

Jaula de oro or "cage made of gold" is a famous corrido of the norteño group Los Tigres del Norte. This corrido song narrates the story of many men that live undocumented in the United States. For these men and families in general, the border does not end along the sixty-mile region that delimits Mexico and United States. This cultural border extends to whatever place in the United States or Canada, where Mexicans live and most of the time, it is more difficult to cross than the iron fence, the river or the desert. Most of the corridos that try to portray empowerment are not able to do it in this area and Jaula de oro is among the best examples of this situation.

Jaula de oro is the specific story of a man that despite of ten years of continuous residency in the United States is not able to legalize his status. When he migrated to the United States, he brought with him his small children and his wife. Ten years later, his children were adolescents that have forgotten all about Mexico, the Spanish language, thinking about themselves as Americans and denying their Mexicaness. The family situation presented in this corrido, is a barrier that summed to his home-to work, work-to home life does not provide a sense of freedom and a sense of inclusion to mainstream U.S. society. This man lives life thinking of an eventual return to Mexico; however, the family obligations do not allow him to do that.

Many of these Mexican immigrants exemplified in Jaula de oro have created another [little] "Mexico" on the U.S. side of the border as it is expressed in the corrido El otro Mexico, also analyzed by Macías (1991). Barrios such as East L.A. in Los Angeles, La Misión in San Francisco, and La Villita and Pilsen in Chicago are clear examples of how these communities do not entirely cross the cultural border. Ricardo Romo (1983) analyzed this issue in his book East Los Angeles : History of a Barrio where he suggests that the self-segregation of the barrio was the creation of a safe and culturally appropriate place for and by the community. The goal of the togetherness orientation of the Mexican origin people in the United States is to cope with the "otherization" they encounter in this country as an ethnic minority group. In this sense, the existence of social spaces for Mexicans buffer their need to entirely cross the cultural border.

CONCLUSION

Corridos have played an important role in the history of the people of Mexican origin in the United States. The first corridos telling the experience of living in U.S.-Mexico borderlands; they appeared as soon as the border was delimited and the conflicts between the two people began. Texas is one of the main places where the corrido tradition was used to express the difficulties that Mexicans encountered in their daily interaction with the Anglo population. The outcomes of the Mexican Revolution pushed over one million people to the United States, the corrido tradition begins in the area of immigration. I believe that the experiences narrated in the corridos are valid forms of history. Corridos are epistemological expressions, something that according to Los Tigres del Norte, "whether the protagonist is good or bad, it speaks the truth" (Burr 2000).
Since the militarization of the border in 1993, over two thousand people have died in the deserts of Arizona, California and Texas and in the waters of the Colorado and Grande (Bravo) Rivers. It is important to state also that most of the Mexican migration to the U.S. display two main characteristics. The first characteristic is the act of crossing an obstacle, in this case the political line that tries to separate the two countries. The second characteristic is the act of crossing a cultural border and its adaptation to U.S. mainstream culture.
These migration experiences that reflect the point of view of the protagonists, in this case the undocumented border crossers, have been filled with self-empowerment strategies that construct images of what is, what it means, what can be expected, etc. for future immigrants. These images eventually will influence to a certain degree the decision to migrate or to not do it, as it is the message in post-militarization narratives such as Pobre Juan and La 187 where the messages include possible death, and discrimination by the Anglo society.

The people of Mexican origin in the United States are tied in different levels to migration. It is true that most Mexican origin people in the United States were born in this country; however, is also true that the majority of this people have family members that have migrated from Mexico at one point in their lives. In this sense, the migration issue is part of the Mexican American agenda and the migration experiences in the corrido narratives are a rich source of information for the history of this group in the United States. These migration corridors are the valid expression of a voiceless group of people that want to express their story, expecting to be heard, and that someone would make something about that such as the case of Pobre Juan. If they do not reach that, at least their story should be included in the volumes of the official history of both countries.

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REFERENCE:


Fernández, Celestino. The Mexican Immigration Experience and the Corrido Mexican. The University of Arizona.


NOTES
1. Webster New Collegiate Dictionary 1981

2. Migra, term used for the Border Patrol/INS people.

3. Translation used by Jose Macias in his essay.


5. This is a good example of what Octavio Paz saw and wrote about during his short residency in Los Angeles CA at the times of the Zoot Suit revolts. Paz has been criticized by many Chicanos about this writings (El laberinto de la soledad 1950) , however, these are issues that continue happening as it is clearly stated in this song.

Photo by Claudia Morales Haro