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EDUCATION AND
AMBIGUOUS
BORDERS IN
MEXICAN CORRIDOS





SARA S. GARCIA · SANTA CLARA · KALIFORNIEN · USA

EDUCATION AND AMBIGUOUS BORDERS IN MEXICAN *CORRIDOS* THRIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

In a previous papers on the *corrido* I have considered the *corrido* as a device for cultural transmutation and have analyzed several *corridos* by focusing on intertextual elements. My attempt in this paper was to reflect on the connection of the lives of the Mexican immigrants living in the United States with the history of the rural schools in Mexico through elements chronicled in *corridos* and modes of popular culture. With this in mind, the initial focus of my effort was directed at examining the role of the rural school teacher in connection with the community. I found however, from the *corridos* I selected to examine, that what had persisted was not the rural teacher as an icon but the rural school ideology and praxis of schooling. In this paper I illustrate how this ideology has been transmitted to the Mexican people, especially the thousands of people that had immigrated north.

The ideology and practice of schooling was generated since the early twenties during Mexico's social education campaign. Moises Saenz who collaborated and was influenced by the philosophy of John Dewey, stated in 1928 when he was the Vice Secretary of Education that

in the ideology of the rural school of Mexico one never knows where the school ends and where the community begins. Similarly, one never knows where the life of the community ends and where the school begins, because returning to its primary function of true social agency, the rural school is a community (Fuentes).

La Casa del Pueblo, as it was called, was named at its inception and continues to be the house of the community where the school is and vice versa. According to Katherine M. Cook, when the community awakened and developed a consciousness of their own needs, the school was established assisted by a teacher selected from among the people of the community. In these types of schools, life was born and a school without formal pedagogy was created, a school with a vigorous social sense, with teachers that developed out of natural growth, and without traditional blockages or impediments. *La Casa del Pueblo* functioned by following the general guidelines of ordinary life in the community that are used in the transmission of cultural norms. In the case of the rural school in Mexico this was conditioned by the interaction and penetration of two diverse cultures (the indigenous and European) that have traditionally been confrontational. (Later in this paper I shall examine how this confrontational struggle is transmuted to the United States and the Mexican immigrants living and working for social justice through education). Historically in Mexico, however, the rural socialist education movement by its configuration contained fundamental definitions and methods, generated by the efficacy of what is already known, and the belief in a school inspired by the people and linked to the same, a school by the community and for the community, a reciprocal school, adjusted by the needs of the popular masses (Cook).

In linking this school ideology to popular folklore in the United States, it is appropriate to consider the work of Americo Paredes and his conception of Texas-Mexican Border society and folklore. Richard Bauman offers an interpretation Paredes's work which articulates a markedly revisionist view of what we understand as folklore. Traditionally the concept of folklore was founded on group homogeneity and operating within the boundaries of the group to maintain its social equilibrium. This view is challenged by Paredes who offers a far more subtle and complex picture of shared traditions between Texas-Mexican Border society and Greater Mexico. In this repertoire the complexities are significant and the most distinctive portions are generated by the stark social oppositions

of the border between Mexico and the United States and “a response to a differential – not shared – identity” (Baumann). According to Paredes the folklore that emerges is the force that generates conflict, struggle and resistance. Moreover, the folklore operates as an instrument of this conflict, not in the service of systems maintenance. Essentially, Paredes’ work in Texas-Mexican Border folklore offers an eloquent counterstatement, documenting and valorizing a culture and tradition of resistance, of standing up for one’s rights in defiance of the forces of domination. Hence, Paredes’ research on the *corrido* provides a foundation for the analysis of symbolic and ideological constructs that are transmuted from Mexico to the United States and serve as cultural tools of resistance and identity to the Chicano community.

The *corrido* tradition, according to Americo Paredes, must be sought in a purely Mexican American folklore in the conflict of cultures. “Its initial genre is the Mexican American or Border *corrido*, which appears as an anticipatory phase of the *Mexican corrido*.” (Paredes). Vicente T. Mendoza tells us that the *corrido mexicano* “begins in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with the singing of the deeds of various rebels against the government of Porfirio Diaz ... [this was] the real beginning of the period in which the courage of the protagonists and their disregard for their lives was underlined and given emphasis” (Mendoza 1954, xv and Mendoza 1964, 14). According to Paredes, at the end of the 1850s the type of *corrido* which sing the feats of the first Mexican American rebels against the North American government, already exist in southern Texas and nearby areas of northern Mexico. “*Mexican American genre develops in a form similar to its Mexican counterpart, but with characteristics peculiarly its own. The hero is always a Mexican whose rights or self-respect are trampled upon by North American authority*” (Paredes).

Through this long trajectory many Mexican American *corridos*, which according to Paredes, “are also older than the *corrido mexicano*, deal with the adventures of a group of Mexicans whose work forces them to travel deep into the United States. Always narrated in the first person plural, these *corridos* recount the perils of the trip, the foreign cities and the strange things seen by the adventurers”. The Mexican American *cor-*

rido tradition continues strongly into the 1900s. As recent as the 1990s the commercial adaptations of *Los Tigres del Norte* of the *corrido* form, blend the *mexicano corrido* with the Mexican American *corrido* in such ballads as *Mis Dos Patrias (Los Tigres Del Norte Jefe De Jefes)*. The *corrido* selected for analysis is "El corrido de 'La Frontera'" and appears in *Folklore Chicano del Valle de San Luis Colorado* by Jose R. Reyna and chronicles, as a departure from other Mexican American *corridos*, the lives of an established community in the United States rather than a migratory experience.

The Analysis of "El corrido de 'La Frontera'"

The *corrido* entitled "El corrido de 'La Frontera'" contains thirteen stanzas and appears from all sources examined, to have been anonymously written. The traditional *corrido* form usually contains a title that evolves from the geographic space – in this *corrido*, however, the title creates complex images of time and the ambiguous word "*La Frontera*" can be interpreted in various ways. An interpretation can be the border between cultures or a geographic border. Another way of interpreting "*La Frontera*" is simply by examining the linguistic elements and borders that stifle communication between one culture and another.

In reading the *corrido* as it is written one is reminded that the *corrido* form stems from oral traditions and thus it is evident that this *corrido* is written the way that the community speaks. The original version of this *corrido* (see below) found in the published source has words that are commonly used by Chicano/Mexican people in the Southwestern United States that are modifications of Spanish. For example in several stanzas the word *mucho* appears as *muncho* and the spelling of certain words like *empecemos* are typical examples of the Spanish used by speakers that speak English as the primary language because the Spanish language has never been taught in formal schooling in the United States. Thus, the native language, which in most cases is Spanish has not been well developed. The spoken Spanish language used is a modification of the standard and in writing, it appears as it is spoken.

For purposes of analysis in the copy provided for the reader, certain lines of the stanzas have been bolded and translated and this full but modified form follows this interpretation of the stanzas. As stated earlier, the original form from the published source appears below. Stanzas one, two and three include the "I" but the subject immediately embraces the collective. The traditional *corrido* usually starts with the first person but in this *corrido* the first person narrator immediately joins in the collective voice. The content exemplifies the struggle for social justice and education and how these themes have been transmitted and transmuted into concrete goals during the sixties in the United States. For example, the Chicano movement and the notion that Mexicans in the United States were viewed as second class citizens and the "forgotten people" which were the population in that had historically not been served by educational systems and social services. The emergent sense of consciousness is articulated in the values of action and reflection toward praxis. The pedagogy of the oppressed in taking action in their lives is similar to the goals of the rural school in Mexico during the 30s. The strongest intertext is the slogan *Ya Basta*. This intersects with educational movements in Latin America and is the same intertext used by Ceasar Chavez in the agrarian reforms of the sixties and seventies in the United States. *Ya Basta* is the cry of the oppressed when they move to action.

Stanzas four, five and six are typical of the *corrido* since a story is told of the events in a concrete local. The community in the valley of San Luis Colorado takes action in the struggle to establish community programs and education. The citizens of this community take part in the reforms and in programs like the one mentioned in stanza six: Head Start. This illustrates the heroic action, that is emotive but is expressed in a form of didactic response.

Stanzas seven, eight and nine reiterate the community awareness and repeat the collective effort of the people. In these stanzas the agency of the community and the intertextual connection with the *corridos* of the *Huelga* (strike) and the movement of Ceasar Chavez is clear. Similar to the *Huelga* themes and purpose the discourse used in these *corrido* stanzas is the discourse of action.

The achievements of the community are recounted in stanzas ten, eleven and twelve. The building of school as a result of communal action is articulated. Faith, hope and agency for a better tomorrow is also acknowledged. The notion of communal struggle is directly linked to the hope and faith in education and the desire of all citizens to see these ideals as continual.

EL CORRIDO DE 'LA FRONTERA'

Folklore Chicano del Valle de San Luis, Colorado

Jose R. Reyna.

San Antonio, Texas. Perca Bark (sin año)

- 1. En el pueblo de Centro, Colorado
toda mi vida he vivido en pobreza
humildes hermanos no fuimos contados
por injustas razones fuimos olvidados.
(for unjust reasons we were forgotten)*
- 2. El mundo se pasó en movimiento
y como no somos nadie cobardes
abrimos los ojos al año sesenta
no fuimos al frente con nuestros compadres.
(we opened our eyes in the year sixty)*
- 3. Con fuerza todos fuimos unidos
con corazón que todos sentimos
toda la raza dijimos, !ya basta!
este pueblito nos lo dominamos.
(all of our people said, enough)*
- 4. Nueve miembros se juntaron
para dirigir un programa social
educación primaria, segunda y covación
para todos igual.*

*(primary, secondary education and
vocation for all equally)*

5. *Ese año el gobierno nos dió
con una migaja el nos conformó
muchos adultos fueron educados
malditos trabajos en el fil dejaron.
(many adults were educated)*

6. *Un nombre gringo llamado Head Start
fue formando para ayudar
para que los niños todos igualmente
juntos con parientes puedan avanzar.
(In order for all the children, as well as
together with the parents can succeed)*

7. *Un mensaje a los miembros llegó
que los gringos lo terminaban
pero nosotros estando alertas
pronto en dos dias se los quitamos.
(but we being alert)*

8. *La dicisión fue legal y sincera
los beneficios los niños lograron
y las maestras también se educaron
oditos los padres derechos ganaron
(all of the parents won their rights)*

9. *Horas largas trabajaba la gente
los conformaban con una peseta
pero todito eso es en el pasado
y ahora la huelga nos ha despertado.
(and now the strike has awakened us)*

10. *Empezamos con muchos problemas
el edificio fue condenado
pero en el año setenta y tres
el edificio nosotros compramos.
(we started with many problems)*

11. *Vinieron gente de todas partes
a prestar mano y corazón
y como hermanos toditos juntos
el edificio así cambió.
(and like brothers together)*

12. *La visión del concilio fue grande
la ayuda del pueblo fue inmensa
yo sé que mucho sufrimos los pobres
pero el edificio es nuestra recompensa.
(the help of the people was immense)*

13. *Con esperanza, fe, y de la mano
le seguiremos la lucha a la vida
porque, nunca, nunca seremos libres
si tu abandonas a tu hermano.
(because, we will never be free
if you abandon your brother)*

The intertext is similar to the goals of *La Casa del Pueblo* mentioned in the introduction of this paper. These ideals embodied in a plan for social equity through education can be seen in an image conjured by a poem entitled "El Elogio de la Escuela Rural" (El Recitador Popular). The following principle stanza from this poem illustrates this symbolic imagery:

*... Y de pronto surgió la lucecita
prendida bajo un árbol
y en el pleno corazón de los montes*

*La infinita sabiduría de la escuela
del pueblo había nacido en el paraje yermo*

translation:

*[... and suddenly there appeared a little light
lit under a tree
and in the mist of the heart of the mountains
the infinite knowledge of the rural school
was born in a barren land]*

Conclusion

These goals of education and social change have been transmitted historically since the twenties to the present time to Mexican American communities with origins in Mexico. The *corrido* form continues to be a cultural constant that serves as a tool for the transmutation of cultural norms and values for millions of Mexicans, Mexican Americans from third and fourth generations and Chicano Mexicano communities in the United States. The values and ideals which result in praxis are exemplified in the *corrido* analyzed for this paper and in another *corrido* that is actually a *metacorrido* which appears in Vicente Mendoza's *El corrido Mexicano* entitled "Viaje". A sample stanza is the following:

*Nuestra música preciosa
tenemos que propagar
y nuestros viriles cantos
por nuestra raza hablarán*

*Our precious music
we must propagate
so that our viril songs
for our people will speak*

It is interesting that this *metacorrido* was written in 1936 at the same time that Katherine M. Cook published *La Casa Del Pueblo un relato acerca*

de las escuelas nuevas de acción de México and George Sanchez, a Chicano scholar, also published in 1935 the important work entitled *Mexico: A Revolution through Education* by Greenwood Press which both chronicle the deeds of the rural teachers. There is a strong and interesting parallel with the goals of education, the struggle for social equity and the use of oral tradition via *corridos* that transmits the essence of Mexican culture in the United States. The analysis of these popular modes of expression that flourish during the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. are directly dealing with the tradition of *La Casa Del Pueblo* and the rural school in Mexico. The themes in all *corridos* of struggle include a subject that embraces the collective voice. Social equity through education that failed in Mexico has been transmitted and transmuted to the Chicano movement. Connecting with global praxis, one can also recognize Pablo Freire's sense of consciousness which are articulated values of the pedagogy of the oppressed, political action and the development of awareness and consciousness. Embodied in the *corrido* form is the work, that according to Levinas, "creates in the struggle difficulty and pain, in this creation the subject recovers the weight of existence that implies its own freedom of existence" (Levinas 109. Translation from Spanish is mine).

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