

## Identity politics in the corrido of Gregorio Cortez

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How do people determine or describe who or what they are? They often do so by means of identification. They look at others and they either align themselves with them: I am like A because A's characteristics feel *familiar* to me, I observe them in myself too, or I *like* A's characteristics, I *want to be like* A. Another way of saying something about oneself is by differentiating: I am not like B. B is strange, B makes me feel uncomfortable. Maybe B doesn't look like me, or (s)he behaves differently. I'm not quite sure if I *understand* B, and the people I'm *used to* don't really *like* B either. Therefore, I wouldn't even want to be like B, I am more like A.

Basically, these are processes of inclusion and exclusion, and one can easily imagine that such underlying operations of identity formation are reinforced when they happen along a clear line, such as the US-Mexican border. Here, the political and social circumstances give an extra impulse to the human tendency to make distinctions between inside and outside on the one hand, and to generalize on the other hand. In Américo Paredes', *With a pistol in his hand*, it is easy to find such distinctions and generalizations along national and cultural lines. He describes how the Anglo-Americans generally view Mexicans in a negative light: as "cruel by nature", "cowardly and treacherous", as horse thieves, degenerate, and "no match for the Texan", meaning that the Texan is "superior" (Paredes 1958, p. 16). In so doing, the Texans define themselves by describing what they are not. A similar mechanism can be found on the Mexican side: Here, it is the Texans, exemplified by the Texas Rangers, who are portrayed to be so much worse than the Mexicans. While Mexicans like Gregorio Cortez are peaceful and brave, the "rinches" - the Hispanicized word for rangers - stand for all Americans "armed and mounted and looking for Mexicans to kill" (p. 24). They are portrayed as being dishonest and cowardly: the "rinches" kill the Mexicans when they are asleep, or they shoot them in the back. They are killing peaceful laborers and tell the authorities later on that they killed a violent "band of Mexicans" (p. 25).

This strategy of self-definition by opposing oneself, or the group that one pertains to, is also visible in the corrido, and is even part of what constitutes the corrido as a genre. Mark Brill (2011) writes that the corrido does not only function "as a source of information, preserving and transmitting oral history from town to town and from one generation to the next" (p. 97). Most corridos are also characterized by "a marked animosity towards the Anglo-American 'gringo'" (Brill 2011, p. 98) and are "subversive to the established order" (Brill 2011, p. 98).

But in his book, Américo Paredes shows in great detail that this kind of identity formation - the one that tries to make absolute distinctions - is only one aspect within a larger picture. By describing the historical and cultural background in which the "Corrido of Gregorio Cortez" has evolved, and by tracing the evolution of the song, Paredes gives us a sense of the fact that not all is so clear cut along the border. At this point, it is helpful to make use of the distinction between a border and a boundary. Noe (2009) explains that "boundaries are political constructs intended to enforce power differentials; borders are cultural phenomena found at the nexus of culture and identity. And it is within that cultural milieu that they can be crossed, often without the consent of those who impose boundaries."

(p. 597). Thus, while boundaries reinforce making distinctions, borders can actually open up a vast space of contact. Noe continues that, “[i]n the Rio Grande Valley [...] one quickly recognizes that the border does not trace a line between the inside and the outside, that it is too porous to be described as a line at all.” (597) It is rather an “amorphous space [...] in which cultures, ethnicities, and rhetorics 'bump' against each other [...] reforming and revising and revisioning themselves and each other” (p. 597). This concept of the border-space directs our attention to a multitude of ways in which identities become differentiated and subject to change.

On the historical level, for instance, Paredes explores the factual bases of various legends and myths that have formed over time. With regards to the Texas legend, for instance, he uncovers that even though Texans liked to blame Mexicans for violence and cruelty, records show that “by far the majority of the acts of cruelty are ascribed by American writers themselves to men of their own race” (Paredes 1958, p. 18). There was, thus, a self-critical insight that not all evil came from the Mexicans. Paredes also points out that there weren't even always hostilities between Texans and Mexicans: “The Rio Grande people, because of their Federalist and autonomist views, were sympathetic to the Texas republic until Texans began to invade their properties south of the Nueces” (p. 19).

What is even more illustrative of how not all distinctions and hostilities were set in stone, is the figure of Gregorio Cortez and the characteristics a diverse range of people attributed to him. To Noe (2009), Cortez is the perfect example of a “fluid identity” (p. 599) that is able to cross boundaries. He is, for example, not only a hero for fellow Mexicans, but he also epitomizes the ideal hero on the Anglo-American side of the wild west. After all, it is on either side of the boundary that the lonesome, brave, and honest hero is met with admiration and respect as he is defending himself against a violent mob. What is turned around, though, if we look at it from the American perspective, is that this time, the hero is not an Anglo-American against a Mexican violent mob, but it is vice-versa: the Mexican is the admirable hero, and the Texas rangers have come to show the worst of violence and ignorance combined. Therefore, as Paredes (1958) mentions, a “curious ambivalence developed in the Anglo-American attitude toward him, even while the chase was on. Many people found it hard not to admire the courage, skill, and endurance of the hunted man. And after the excitement died down, some Texans changed their opinions about the case” (p. 89). The history of 'the man' which Paredes provides, shows us that there are indeed many more gray zones surrounding Cortez than the black-and-white heroic tales about him would make us believe. He won allies among the Americans because he made big efforts to make himself understood in English (Paredes 1958, p. 57) – in this regard it seems odd, by the way, that the movie restricts his agency by portraying him as not being able to speak English at all. On the other hand, he was not admired and loved by *all* Mexicans either (and those who did look up to him, did so for different reasons): the broadside version of the corrido from Mexico city seems to use his story more to make money and create sensationalism rather than really taking his person and his case seriously. And, more importantly, Paredes' historical research shows that also in his private life, Cortez was not so much a flawless saint, but rather a man with very human traits: contrary to the legend, he did get tired, hungry and thirsty on his escape; before the incident with Sheriff Morris happened, he wasn't all peaceful but his son actually does remember him getting into a fist fight (p. 57); and his family did not only carry him in their hearts, as some versions of the corrido have it (e.g. on p. 158), but his wife rather divorced him in sight of the fact that he had liaisons with other women.

All of the facets surrounding Gregorio Cortez and the different versions of the corrido that is sung in his memory, show that the process of identity formation is not a simple one. Sometimes, people like to draw clear lines that help them to distinguish between good and bad, known and foreign. But what Paredes' book illustrates, is that underneath such shortcuts there are always different processes at

work that can go in different directions at the same time. Some people liked to talk about Cortez as if he was one of them, others set him apart for different reasons. In the course of time, details about his story were omitted, while rationales for what happened were created (see for example Paredes 1958, pp. 114-119). It all shows that neither identity, nor the border is truly exclusionary. Instead, they “become[...] a rich space within which cultures intermix rather than a place where one culture disappears until it is simply a shadow of the other.” (Noe 2009, p. 599)

References:

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