

The Problem of Identity in a Changing Culture: Popular Expressions of Culture Conflict Along the Lower Rio Grande Border

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Conflict — cultural, economic, and physical — has been a way of life along the border between Mexico and the United States, and it is in the so-called Nueces–Rio Grande strip where its patterns were first established. Problems of identity also are common to border dwellers, and these problems were first confronted by people of Mexican culture as a result of the Texas Revolution. For these reasons, the Lower Rio Grande area also can claim to be the source of the more typical elements of what we call the culture of the Border.

Life along the border was not always a matter of conflicting cultures; there was often cooperation of a sort, between ordinary people of both cultures, since life had to be lived as an everyday affair. People most often cooperated in circumventing the excessive regulation of ordinary intercourse across the border. In other words, they regularly were engaged in smuggling.

Borders offer special conditions not only for smuggling but for the idealization of the smuggler. This sounds pretty obvious, since, after all, political boundaries are the obvious places where customs and immigration regulations are enforced. But we must consider not only the existence of such political boundaries but the

circumstances of their creation. In this respect, the Lower Rio Grande Border was especially suited for smuggling operations.

To appreciate this fact, one has only to consider that when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo officially settled the conflict over territory between Mexico and the United States, a very well defined geographic feature — the Rio Grande itself — became the international line. But it was a line that cut right through the middle of what had once been the Mexican province of Nuevo Santander. Friends and relatives who had been near neighbors — within shouting distance across a few hundred feet of water — now were legally in different countries. If they wanted to visit each other, the law required that they travel many miles up or down stream, to the nearest official crossing place, instead of swimming or boating directly across as they used to do before. It goes without saying that they paid little attention to the requirements of the law. When they went visiting, they crossed at the most convenient spot on the river; and, as is ancient custom when one goes visiting loved ones, they took gifts with them: farm products from Mexico to Texas, textiles and other manufactured goods from Texas to Mexico. Legally, of course, this was smuggling, differing from contraband for profit in volume only. Such a pattern is familiar to anyone who knows the border, for it still operates, not only along the Lower Rio Grande now but all along the boundary line between Mexico and the United States.

Unofficial crossings also disregarded immigration laws. Children born on one side of the river would be baptized on the other side, and thus appear on church registers as citizens of the other country. This bothered no one since people on both sides of the river thought of themselves as *mexicanos*, but United States officials were concerned about it. People would come across to visit relatives and stay long periods of

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time, and perhaps move inland in search of work. After 1890, the movement in search of work was preponderantly from Mexico deep into Texas and beyond. The ease with which the river could be crossed and the hospitality of relatives and friends on either side also was a boon to men who got in trouble with the law. It was not necessary to flee over trackless wastes, with the law hot on one's trail. All it took was a few moments in the water, and one was out of reach of his pursuers and in the hands of friends. If illegal crossings in search of work were mainly in a northerly direction, crossings to escape the law were for the most part from north to south. By far, not all the Mexicans fleeing American law were criminals in an ordinary sense. Many were victims of cultural conflict, men who had reacted violently to assaults on their human dignity or their economic rights.

Resulting from the partition of the Lower Rio Grande communities was a set of folk attitudes that would in time become general along the United States-Mexican border. There was a generally favorable disposition toward the individual who disregarded customs and immigration laws, especially the laws of the United States. The professional smuggler was not a figure of reproach, whether he was engaged in smuggling American woven goods into Mexico or Mexican tequila into Texas. In folklore there was a tendency to idealize the smuggler, especially the *tequilero*, as a variant of the hero of cultural conflict. The smuggler, the illegal alien looking for work, and the border-conflict hero became identified with each other in the popular mind. They came into conflict with the same American laws and sometimes with the same individual officers of the law, who were all looked upon as *rinches* — a border-Spanish rendering of “ranger.” Men who were Texas Rangers, for example, during the revenge killings of Mexicans after the Pizaña uprising of 1915¹ later were border patrolmen who engaged in gunbattles with *tequileros*. So stereotyped did the figure of the *rinche* become that Lower Rio Grande Border versions of “La persecución de Villa” identify Pershing's soldiers as *rinches*.

A *corrido* [ballad] tradition of intercultural conflict developed along the Rio Grande, in

¹The uprising occurred on the Lower Rio Grande Border and involved a group of Texas-Mexican *rancheros* attempting to create a Spanish-speaking republic in South Texas. Pizaña endeavored to appeal to other United States minority groups. [Original Editor's Note]

which the hero defends his rights and those of other Mexicans against the *rinches*. The first hero of these *corridos* is Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, who is celebrated in an 1859 *corrido* precisely because he helps a fellow Mexican.

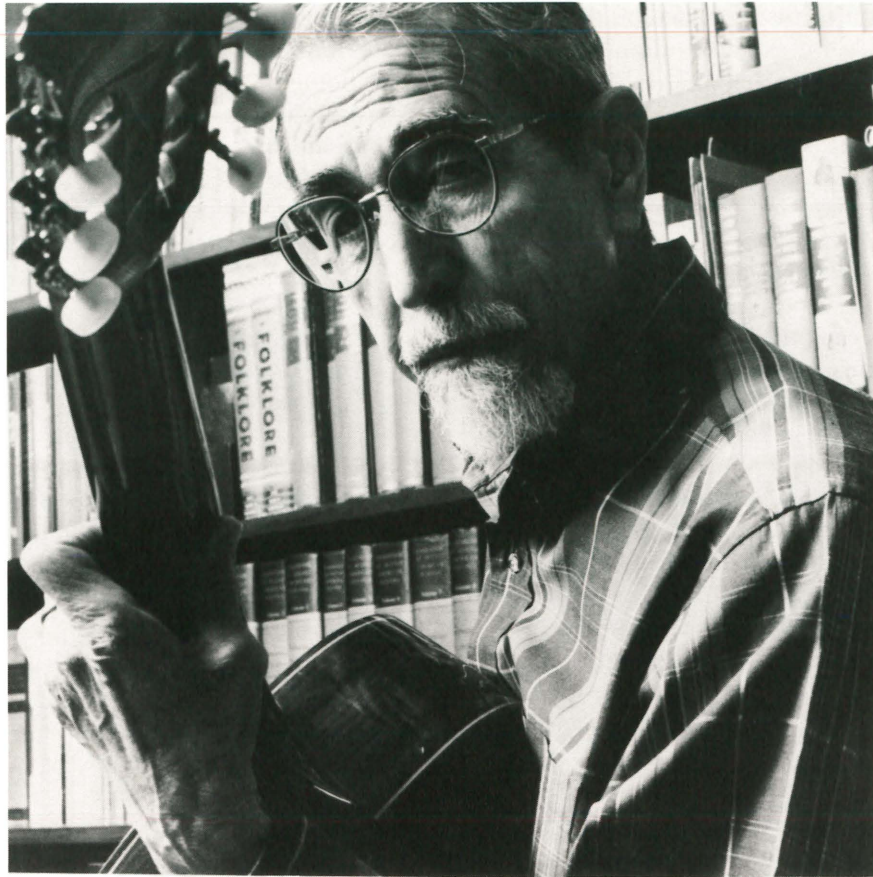
Other major *corrido* heroes are Gregorio Cortez (1901), who kills two Texas sheriffs after one of them shoots his brother; Jacinto Treviño (1911), who kills several Americans to avenge his brother's death; Rito García (1885), who shoots several officers who invade his home without a warrant; and Aniceto Pizaña and his *sediciosos* (1915). Some *corrido* heroes escape across the border into Mexico; others, like Gregorio Cortez and Rito García, are betrayed and captured. They go to prison but they have stood up for what is right. As the “*Corrido de Rito García*” says,

. . . *me voy a la penitencia*
por defender mi derecho.

. . . I am going to the penitentiary
because I defended my rights.

The men who smuggled tequila into the United States during the twenties and early thirties were no apostles of civil rights, nor did the border people think of them as such. But in his activities, the *tequilero* risked his life against the old enemy, the *rinche*. And, as has been noted, smuggling had long been part of the border way of life. Still sung today is “*El corrido de Mariano Reséndez*,” about a prominent smuggler of textiles into Mexico, circa 1900. So highly respected were Reséndez and his activities that he was known as “*El Contrabandista*.” Reséndez, of course, violated Mexican laws; and his battles were with Mexican customs officers. The *tequilero* and his activities, however, took on an intercultural dimension; and they became a kind of coda to the *corridos* of border conflict.

The heavy-handed and often brutal manner that Anglo lawmen have used in their dealings with border Mexicans helped make almost any man outside the law a sympathetic figure, with the *rinche*, or Texas Ranger, as the symbol of police brutality. That these symbols still are alive may be seen in the recent Fred Carrasco affair. The border Mexican's tolerance of smuggling does not seem to extend to traffic in drugs. The few *corridos* that have been current on the subject, such as “*Carga blanca*,” take a negative view of the dope peddler. Yet Carrasco's death in 1976 at the Huntsville (Texas) prison, along with



Américo Paredes is a folklorist, prize-winning author, and singer of border corridos.
 Photo by Jane E. Levine, courtesy Texas Folklife Resources

two women hostages, inspired close to a dozen corridos with echoes of the old style. The sensational character of Carrasco's death cannot be discounted, but note should also be taken of the unproved though widely circulated charges that Carrasco was "executed" by a Texas Ranger, who allegedly shot him through the head at close range where Carrasco lay wounded. This is a scenario familiar to many a piece of folk literature about cultural conflict — corridos and prose narratives — the rinche finishing off the wounded Mexican with a bullet through the head. It is interesting to compare the following stanzas, the first from one of the Carrasco corridos and the other two from a tequilero ballad of the thirties.

*El capitán de los rinches
 fue el primero que cayó
 pero el chaleco de malla
 las balas no traspasó.*

The captain of the Rangers
 was the first one to fall,

but the armored vest he was wearing
 did not let the bullets through.

*En fin de tanto invitarle
 Leandro los acompañó;
 en las lomas de Almiramba
 fue el primero que cayó.*

They kept asking him to go,
 until Leandro went with them;
 in the hills of Almiramba
 he was the first one to fall.

*El capitán de los rinches
 a Silvano se acercó
 y en unos cuantos segundos
 Silvano García murió.*

The captain of the Rangers
 came up close to Silvano,
 and in a few seconds
 Silvano García was dead.

Similar attitudes are expressed on the Sonora-Arizona border, for example, when the hard-case hero of "El corrido de Cananea" is made to say,

*Me agarraron los cherifes
al estilo americano,
como al hombre de delito,
todos con pistola en mano.*

The sheriffs caught me
in the American style,
as they would a wanted man,
all of them pistol in hand.

The partition of Nuevo Santander was also to have political effects, arising from the strong feeling among the Lower Rio Grande people that the land on both sides of the river was equally theirs. This involved feelings on a very local and personal level, rather than the rhetoric of national politics, and is an attitude occasionally exhibited by some old Rio Grande people to this day. Driving north along one of today's highways toward San Antonio, Austin, or Houston, they are likely to say as the highway crosses the Nueces, "We are now entering Texas." Said in jest, of course, but the jest has its point. Unlike Mexicans in California, New Mexico, and the old colony of Texas, the Rio Grande people experienced the dismemberment of Mexico in a very immediate way. So the attitude developed, early and naturally, that a border Mexican was *en su tierra* in Texas even if he had been born in Tamaulipas. Such feelings, of course, were the basis for the revolts of Cortina and Pizaña. They reinforced the borderer's disregard of political and social boundaries. And they lead in a direct line to the Chicano movement and its mythic concept of Aztlán. For the Chicano does not base his claim to the Southwest on royal land grants or on a lineage that goes back to the Spanish *conquistadores*. On the contrary, he is more likely to be the child or grandchild of immigrants. He bases his claim to Aztlán on his Mexican culture and his *mestizo* heritage.

Conversely, the Texas-born Mexican continued to think of Mexico as "our land" also. That this at times led to problems of identity is seen in

the folksongs of the Border. In 1885, for example, Rito García protests illegal police entry into his home by shooting a few officers of Cameron County, Texas. He makes it across the river and feels safe, unaware that Porfirio Díaz has an extradition agreement with the United States. Arrested and returned to Texas, according to the corrido, he expresses amazement:

*Yo nunca hubiera creído
que mi país tirano fuera,
que Mainero me entregara
a la nación extranjera.*

I never would have thought
that my country would be so unjust,
that Mainero would hand me over
to a foreign nation.

And he adds bitterly:

*Mexicanos, no hay que fiar
en nuestra propia nación,
nunca vayan a buscar
a México protección.*

Mexicans, we can put no trust
in our own nation;
never go to Mexico
asking for protection.

But the *mexicanos* to whom he gives this advice are Texas-Mexicans.

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Further Readings

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