

He is killed by treachery and because “it suited them,” not because it was their duty. If the police do their “work”, as suggested by the *corrido*, there is an underlying personal interest or some other reason unrelated to fulfilling their police-related obligations. Thus, the element of betrayal, perhaps the most recurrent theme in *narcocorridos*, implies a supra-subordinate relationship: if the authorities betray a drug trafficker, it is only because they owed him allegiance to begin with.

Betrayal explains death. It is betrayal that undermines the invulnerability of the protagonist, regardless of whether he was the one to betray or he himself was betrayed. If we are to believe online sources, “Facing Death” by Gerardo Ortiz⁴¹ gives a first person narrative of drug trafficker Arturo Beltrán Leyva’s violent death at the hands of the Navy in December 2009. The song portrays his death as a consequence of his duplicity:

It was expected
They’d strike at me.
When there are mistakes
They must be corrected.
And I let the masters down:
I did business
With the other side.
I jumped all over the place.⁴²

Once again, when the authority apprehends or eliminates drug traffickers —even with shootouts as violent, notorious and publicized as Beltrán Leyva’s, the role of authorities is minimized. It is not police or, in this case, military expertise that explains Beltrán Leyva’s fall, but his betrayal to the drug lords. It was not a political betrayal, but a personal one; it was not a political relationship, but an economic one (I did business / with the other side).

Finally, the authorities are portrayed as cowardly and useless. This is very clear when referring to U.S. authorities —the *rinches* (Texas Rangers) — in *smuggler’s corridos* like “Los Tequileros.”⁴³

If the Rangers were men
And they confronted us,
Another song would be sung

⁴¹ GERARDO ORTIZ, *Cara a la muerte*, on MORIR Y EXISTIR (Sony Music Latin, 2011).

⁴² Era esperado/ Que me arrimaran un golpe/ Cuando hay errores/ Hay correcciones/ Y le falle a los señores/ Hice negocios/ Con los contrarios/ Fui un chapulín.

⁴³ TIMOTEO CATU AND JESÚS MAYA, *Los tequileros*, on THE ROOTS OF THE NARCOCORRIDO (Arhoolie Records, 2004).

For the tequileros.

VI. DRUG TRAFFICKING AND COMMUNITIES

The events, deeds and characters of *narcocorridos* are not situated outside the political community the way official discourse would place them. The communities spoken of in *narcocorridos* are often different from the political community. At some point, there is a connection with the political community, especially as a contrast to the threats or abuse posed by U.S. citizens:

A bloody deed, a heroic deed
The audacity of a patriotic community
A very manly man, wounded by a female
Has put his name in our corrido.⁴⁴

As for ties and loyalties, the protagonist is most frequently identified as having a closer relationship with the local community, more than the national one. Localism results in antagonism between localities or regions, and not between local and national communities. This is particularly evident after the emergence of *narcocorridos* outside the northern, Mexico-U.S. border region where the genre originated.⁴⁵

...In recent years the border itself seems to have moved north of the North (Chicago, Detroit, etc.) and south of the South (Michoacán and Oaxaca), where *norteño* groups have emerged, as well as a *norteño* identity that clearly responds to a popular need or taste...⁴⁶

The case of the state of Oaxaca illustrates the phenomenon of regionalism in *narcocorridos*, and their potential to expose the regional rivalry. The "The Oaxaco" *corrido* by Álvaro Monterrubio y su Santa Cecilia is one such example.⁴⁷

In the north, many people
Nickname us oaxaquitos.
Must be because of the state
Or because we are small.
But many have already died

⁴⁴ TIGRES DEL NORTE, *El corrido*, on CORRIDOS PROHIBIDOS (Fonovisa, 1989). Un hecho sangriento, una gesta heroica/ El atrevimiento de un pueblo patriota/ Un hombre muy hombre, por una hembra herido/ Ha puesto su nombre en nuestro corrido.

⁴⁵ The *corrido* has spread all the way to Colombia.

⁴⁶ JUAN C. RAMÍREZ-PIMIENTA, CANTAR A LOS NARCOS. VOCES Y VERSOS DEL NARCOCORRIDO (Planeta, 2011), 22.

⁴⁷ ÁLVARO MONTERRUBIO Y SU SANTA CECILIA, *El Oaxaco*, on EL OAXACO (AVA Records Corp, Titanio Records and Mundo Musical Prod, 2007).

Because they did not watch their mouths.⁴⁸

Thus, a *narcocorrido* unites a regional community, but not a political one. In contrast to what happens in official discourse, drug dealers are portrayed as forming part of the community, and not as antagonizing it. At a national level, there is also an important streak/ element/feature that upholds a sense of belonging and vindication by denouncing the United States. The *war on drugs* is depicted as an illegitimate intrusion of the United States, which hypocritically tolerates trafficking and consumption within its borders, but demands that a war be waged without its borders. Or else, US authorities use Mexicans to obtain information or other type of assistance and then betray them. For example, in extolling a commander who tried to stop a drug shipment, "Underwater" by the Tigres del Norte,⁴⁹ denounces the cover-up of the event and the subsequent distribution of those same drugs:

And in the hospital, the commander
Well under the water
I have brought this issue to light
Out of a journalist's file
Because it was not reported.
And the shipment is now for sale
On the American side.⁵⁰

Narcocorridos openly defend the interests of the political community against the real enemy, the real threat: the United States. The *narcocorrido* points out that:

Different countries are
Certified by gringos
They do not want drugs there
Because they say it is a danger
Tell me who certifies
The United States
To catch the narcos?
Mexico has been straightforward.
The Americans buy coke

⁴⁸ En el norte mucha raza/ nos apoda oxaquitos./ Ha de ser por el estado/ o porque nos ven chiquitos./ Pero muchos ya se han muerto/ Por no cuidarse el pico.

⁴⁹ TIGRES DEL NORTE, *Por debajo del agua*, on 20 CORRIDOS PROHIBIDOS (Fonovisa, 2007).

⁵⁰ Y en el hospital moría/ Asfixiado el comandante. / Muy por debajo del agua/ Este asunto ya he sacado/ Del archivo periodista/ Porque no lo denunciaron. / Ya la carga está a la venta/ En el lado americano.

They pay it at any price.
They do not want drugs to exist
But give themselves privileges.⁵¹

VII. THE DRUG DEALER AS A HUMAN BEING

As for the dehumanization of drug traffickers, a significant portion of *narcocorridos* talks about the everyday and human aspects of drug traffickers: their fears, anxieties and reasons for entering the business.

I was poor for a long time
Many people humiliated me
And I started making money
Things have turned around
Now they call me the boss
I have my own private codename.⁵²

The character's human side is once again presented when speaking of violent acts. In "The Plane of Death,"⁵³ the Tigres del Norte tell of a drug dealer's revenge against his captors. At the beginning of the *corrido*, the lyrics speak of suffering ("tortured / without mercy") and the protagonist's friendship ("they locked his friend in"). "Facing Death,"⁵⁴ referenced above, insistently emphasizes the protagonist's personal ties when he dies ("the affected").

Murderers had me surrounded
In my thoughts, my family
Within minutes my life flashed before me
(...)
Poor and without tears
And many rosaries
Good friends
Dear children

⁵¹ TIGRES DEL NORTE, *El General*, on 20 CORRIDOS PROHIBIDOS (Fonovisa, 2007) A diferentes países los/ Certifican los gringos/ No quieren que exista droga/ Pues dicen que es un peligro/ Díganme quien certifica/ A los Estados Unidos. Para agarrar a los narcos/ México ha sido derecho. / Los gringos compran la coca/ La pagan a cualquier precio. / No quieren que exista droga/ Pero se dan privilegios.

⁵² EL RECODO, *Clave privada*, on PA PUROS COMPAS, Vol.1 (Umbrella Records, 1996). Ya mucho tiempo fui pobre/ Mucha gente me humillaba/ Y empecé a ganar dinero/ Las cosas están volteadas/ Ahora me llaman patrón/ Tengo mi clave privada.

⁵³ TIGRES DEL NORTE, *El avión de la muerte*, on TRIUNFO SÓLIDO (Fonovisa, 1989).

⁵⁴ Gerardo Ortiz, *supra* note 41.

I failed them along the way.⁵⁵

VIII. THE SACRIFICE

Sacrifice is one of the most interesting aspects of *narcocorridos*. It does not fulfill the function of defending sovereignty as implied by official discourse, but when facing an adversary, self-sacrifice is bound to honor, loyalty and vengeance. For example, in “The Plane of Death,”⁵⁶ self-sacrifice makes sense as personal, but not political or communitarian, vindication.

From the ship he remembered
Everything they had done to him
That they had crushed with forceps
The noble parts of his body
And that he would crash the airplane
Even if he died in the process.
In the control tower
Everything was recorded
Shouts of terror could be heard
And three men crying
Atilano laughed and threatened them even more.
The Lieutenant and soldiers
Regretted what they did
They tortured an important man
I think they did not know [that]
On the plane of death
They boarded that day.
The lieutenant was telling him
My wife is waiting for me.
Atilano replied we're going to crash now
I too I have a wife
And she'll be left crying
On arriving at Badiraguato
Helicopters rose
It was going to crash into the barracks.

Violence —whether against oneself, as self-sacrifice, or against others— is perhaps the

⁵⁵ Los asesinos me tenían rodeado/ En mi mente, mi familia/ En minutos repasé mi vida... Pobre y sin llanto/ Y cantidad de rosarios/ Buenos amigos/ Hijos queridos/ Ya les falle en el camino.

⁵⁶ Tigres del Norte, *supra* note 44.

most disturbing element of the counter-discourse. Here, violence is presented as a source of identity, self-expression. As Kahn cautions, this would imply a transition from being the criminal to becoming the enemy. When violence makes sense *per se* and not because of a benefit it may bring, the categories of criminal and enemy begin to crumble. This is the element present in *narcocorridos*: violence as an expression of autonomy and identity.

Because those who shot
Tortured without restraint.
For the weed they stole from me
They will pay dearly.
Why did they let me live?
They should have killed me
Well, they'll be sorry
When I have them in the trunk
I feel hatred and anger toward them
I swear I'll eat them alive.⁵⁷

If violence is a source of autonomy and self-expression (of identity), what other element is needed to be considered an enemy? I think what is missing is a sense of *community*. In other words, it is necessary for the violence to be a collective and autonomous expression of the *community* itself. If the discourse goes beyond the narration of events or simply a record of deeds, and moves toward a deliberate and comprehensive critique, there are good reasons to think this may be the inception of a communal identity that stems from the criminal's banished status.

It is at this point where the criticism of the current *status quo* found in the *narcocorridos* becomes worrisome. Perhaps the most obvious example of the emergence of critical consciousness is one of the most notoriously censored *corridos* in recent times: "The Farm" by the Tigres del Norte.⁵⁸

If the bitch is tied up
Even if she barks all day,
She must not be set free
My grandfather used to say,
They might regret doing it,

⁵⁷ LARRY HERNÁNDEZ, *El baleado*, on 16 NARCO CORRIDOS (Mendieta Discos, 2009) Porque los que balacearon/ Torturaron sin medirse./ La mota que me robaron/ Me van a pagar muy caro./ Porque me dejaron vivo/ Mejor me hubieran matado/ Pues no se la van a acabar/ Cuando los traiga encajuelados./ Les traigo un odio y rabia/ pues los comeré lo juro.

⁵⁸ TIGRES DEL NORTE, *La Granja*, on LA GRANJA (Universal Music, 2009).

Those who did not know her.
It is through the fox that we learned,
That he did break the dishes,
And the bitch's rope
He bit her for a while,
And I think she got away
To make a big mess.
The piglets helped
They feed off the farm,
They want more and more corn every day
And profits are lost,
And the farmer who works
No longer trusts them.
A hawk fell
Chicks wondered
Whether he fell on his own
Or if the winds pushed him down,
All my animals
Were frightened by the noise.
The rabbit is dying
Inside and outside the cage,
And every day there are many dead
All over the farm,
Because there are no crops
Like before with so much alfalfa.
On the edge of the farm
They put up a big fence,
So that they can keep on working
And keep the farmer in,
Because the bitch doesn't bite
Even if he argues against it.
Today we have every day
A lot of insecurity,
Because the bitch got out
And it messed up everything.
Among all the farmers
We need to tie her up.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Si la perra está amarrada/ Aunque ladre todo el día, / No la deben de soltar/ Mi abuelito me decía, / Que podrían arrepentirse/ Los que no la conocían. Por el zorro lo supimos/ Que llegó a romper los platos, / Y la cuerda de la perra/ La

Some of the metaphors in this *corrido* are clear: the farm is Mexico, the big fence is the U.S. border, the hawk is Juan Camilo Mouriño (former Minister of the Interior who died in a mysterious plane crash in 2008), the farmer is the working class, the piglets are the political class, and the fox is (President) Vicente Fox. But other metaphors are more obscure: Who is the bitch? Is it the war (on drugs)?⁶⁰ Is it organized crime? Is it the army? Speculations abound and it can be interpreted in many ways.

The central issue here is the focus of the *corrido*: it is not so much about specific deeds, events or heroes. Rather it is a general diagnosis of what is wrong in the country, a snapshot of what is happening in a political community that might possibly refer to Mexico. It understands the current crisis as a threat to the community, but there is also a call to collective action: all the farmers need to work together to tie the bitch up; as someone particularly brave or violent is not needed.

IX. RECENT TRENDS IN THE P'OLITIZATION OF THE CRIMINAL

When I finished the first version of this work in 2010, my main conclusion was that the *narcocorrido* did not reflect the politicization of the drug trafficker as characterized by Calderón's discourse. However, since then certain signs are pointing in a different direction, especially among younger *corridistas*.

If we shift our focus from the established *corridistas* like *Los Tigres del Norte* and look at little known young composers, the collective dimension openly acquires a confrontational tone between enemies, blatantly military. For example, "Here-I Affirm" by Gerardo Ortiz:⁶¹

Here I present a new proposal
Here we have a couple of answers for you
Here I warn that we are not playing
To work
Here we cross borders straight-on

mordió por un buen rato, / Y yo creo que se soltó/ Para armar un gran relajajo. Los puerquitos le ayudaron/ Se alimentan de la granja, / Diario quieren más maíz/ Y se pierden las ganancias./ Y el granjero que trabaja/ Ya no les tiene confianza. Se cayó un gavilán/ Los pollitos comentaron, / Que si se cayó solito/ O los vientos lo tumbaron, / Todos mis animalitos/ Por el ruido se espantaron. El conejo está muriendo/ Dentro y fuera de la jaula, / Y a diario hay mucho muerto/ A lo largo de la granja, / Porque ya no hay sembradíos/ Como ayer con tanta alfalfa. En la orilla de la granja/ Un gran cerco les pusieron, / Para que sigan jalando/ Y no se vaya el granjero, / Porque la perra lo muerde/ Aunque él no esté de acuerdo. Hoy tenemos día con día/ Mucha inseguridad, / Porque se soltó la perra/ Todo lo vino a regar, / Entre todos los granjeros/ La tenemos que amarrar.

⁶⁰ The words "bitch" (perra) and "war" (guerra) rhyme in Spanish.

⁶¹ GERARDO ORTIZ, *Aquiles Afirmo*, on ENTRE DIOS Y EL DIABLO (Sony Music Latin, 2011c).

Here I announce that I am the owner
Here I will tell you the new turf rules
And the plan of attack
(...)
Here I show my armed team
Here we have men ready
There are no excuses
Or fear of the blood that must spill
Here we have closed the deal
(...)
The power that rules the cartel de la Juana
Respect is given to
Here I show you
Here I warn
Here I present you with a new Tijuana
Where a couple of battles
Are expected
Here I warn you that I am in command
In each word
I know what I'm talking about
Here I affirm that I have
Support.⁶²

Ortiz does in fact present a new proposal that clearly not only speaks of a war environment (“crossing borders,” “plan of attack,” “armed team”, “couple of battles”), but also exalts the collective —and not individual— deeds (“we have a closed deal”). Even more so, collectivity is understood as an organized (“rules in place”, “we have men ready”, “I am in command”) and hierarchical body (“rules in place,” “I am in command”). “Pecheras Antrax” by Alfredo Ríos also reflects these features.⁶³

Breastplates, grenades and AK-47s

⁶² Aquí les presento una nueva propuesta/ Aquí les tenemos un par de respuestas/ Aquí les advierto que no somos juego/ para trabajar/ Aquí les cruzamos fronteras de lleno/ Aquí les afirmo que yo soy el dueño/ Aquí les menciono las reglas de plaza/ Y el plan de atacar... Aquí les demuestro a mi equipo armado/ Aquí les tenemos hombres preparados/ Aquí no hay pretextos/ ni miedo en la sangre para ejecutar/ Aquí les tenemos un pacto cerrado... El poder que reina el cartel de la Juana/ se da a respetar/ Aquí les demuestro/ Aquí les advierto/ Aquí les presento una nueva Tijuana/ En donde se espera/ Un par de batallas/ Aquí les advierto que yo tengo el mando/ En cada palabra/ yo sé lo que hablo/ Aquí les afirmo que tengo/ el respaldo/

⁶³ GERARDO ORTIZ, *Pecheras Antrax*, Y SEGUIMOS LA BORRACHERA (La Disco Music/Twiins Enterprises, 2011).

Bazookas and armored trucks
Taking care of the chief's domain
Mayo Zambada's turf
Folks call me "El Chino"
I command and lead "The Anthrax" team
Vicente left me a job
And I am not going to disappoint him
I have the experience and the rank
My team is already organized
The field is marked out
Antagonists and parasites
Don't want to overstep
Thinking, planning and acting
Looking for the best way
I like to do everything slowly
I like to use intelligence
But some people do not understand
And it's better to use violence
(...)
Sinaloa, what a beautiful state
Because I was brought up in battle
What a beautiful land, Culiacán
That has given me everything
Women, money and friends
Everything I am, everything I have been.⁶⁴

Once again we find the issues of military-style hostility ("breastplates, grenades and AK-47s, bazookas and armored trucks", "the field is marked out"), organization ("command and lead", "I have the experience and the rank", "my team is already organized"), the identification of enemies ("Taking care of the chief's domain", "antagonists and parasites, don't want to overstep").

Moreover, this *corrido* has two elements found in *narcocorridos* composed by already

⁶⁴ Pecheras granadas y cuernos/ Bazucas y trocas blindadas/ Cuidando el terreno del jefe/ la plaza del Mayo Zambada/ el Chino me apodan los plebes/ comando y dirijo al equipo los Ántrax. Vicente ha dejado un encargo/ y yo no pienso defraudarlo/ traigo la experiencia y el rango/ mi equipo ya está organizado/ el terreno está bien marcado/ contrarios y lacras/ no quieren brincar/ Pensando planeando y actuando/ buscando la mejor manera/ me gusta hacer todo calmado/ me gusta usar la inteligencia/ pero hay gente que no comprende/ y es más preferible usar la violencia... Sinaloa qué bonito estado/ porque en la batalla fui creado/ Culiacán qué bonita tierra/ que todo me lo ha regalado/ mujeres, dinero y amigos/ todo lo que soy todo lo que he sido.

established performers: a mention of the region and the local area (the praise of Sinaloa and even more specifically, of Culiacán) and violence as a means of expression (“Some people do not understand and it is better to use violence”). This last point seems particularly important because if they foreshadow the direction the *corridos* are taking, then the use of violence as a means of collective expression is already at play.

However, the exact direction this collective war is taking is still up in the air. In short, who is the enemy? In the last two *corridos*, it can be assumed that “they”, as opposed to “us”, refers to the rival cartel. This is most likely the case in most cases. However, one *corrido*, “I am family; I am from Michoacán” by Gerardo Ortiz,⁶⁵ points to a different, more worrisome direction:

...They did not respect
They got mixed up and aren't getting out alive
They are being paid by the news
And Calderon has seized us
It is a way of harming
The family will be respected
They will pay for those affected
We gave truce and they didn't help us
By word of mouth the announcement was made about
The tragedy of Mr. Nazario
If they want war, we'll get them here
I have agents and people under my command
It is a fight that has not ended
The Good and the Bad is mentioned everywhere
I don't check things out, I just keep working I will find a way to get revenge
We already found out that they put it
And with the story they already had their fun
What they were taking it to the pale-faces
That they couldn't stand up to the blows
We changed our approach
Against government forces
The random killings continue
Endless turf wars, [they] don't end
And when it's over they'll do the math
The family is not respected
The conditions are on the table

⁶⁵ GERARDO ORTIZ, *Soy la familia, soy michoacano*, on MORIR Y EXISTIR (Sony Music Latin, 2011).

They still have time to use their heads.⁶⁶

In short, one may tentatively conclude that the counter-discourse found in the most widespread and popular form of *narcocorridos* does not correspond to the official discourse and even neutralizes the official discourse in many ways. *Narcocorridos* refuse to place the criminal *outside* of the political community; they do not consider the criminal a *threat* to the political community, but humanizes the criminal instead. However, the prolific violence used to express, affirm and identify is present... And there is already an emerging awareness of the need to act in defense of the collectivity. The threat of “*the bitch*” was unleashed by politicians. This tendency is more salient among younger *corridistas*. US-born Gerardo Ortiz, for instance, is 23 and his career grew almost entirely *during* President Calderón's *War against Drugs*, particularly after 2010. This undoubtedly raises concerns, but even more so when it appears to be a response to the previous administration's strategy.

X. CONCLUSION

Felipe Calderón's discourse revolved around the exclusion of drug traffickers from the political community, and called upon “citizens” to rally behind the government. According to Calderón, State violence is deployed in self-defense and what is at stake in this case is the nation itself. In his effort to make the criminal an enemy, the former president turned the criminal into an existential threat to the Nation. In contrast, the discourse embodied in *narcocorridos* places the relationship between criminals and authorities on equal footing/presents the association/liaison between criminals and authorities as common, be it as accomplices or as rivals. Confrontations are generally explained by personal decisions (like betrayal) and as dependent on specific circumstances. In other words, discursively speaking the conflict is individualized and does not extend to the community.

The collective rivalries that appear in the *narcocorrido* discourse do exist, but not as

⁶⁶ Se hicieron cochí no respetaron/ De esta no salen ya se revolcaron/ por la noticia vienen pagados/ y Calderón nos trae apoderados/ es una forma de perjudicar/ a la familia van a respetar/ van a pagarla por los afectados/ les dimos tregua y no nos ayudaron/ de voz en voz se fueron anunciando/ de la tragedia del señor Nazario/ Si quieren guerra aquí los atoramos/ tengo elementos y gente a mi mando

Es una lucha que no he terminado/ el bien y el mal se dice en todos lados/ yo no averiguo, sigo trabajando/ ya encontraré la forma de vengarlos

Ya descubrimos que lo pusieron/ y con la nota ya se divertieron/ que lo llevaban para con los güeros/ que a los putazos no se resistieran/ intercambiamos la modalidad/ contra la fuerza gubernamental/ siguen matanzas indiscriminadas/ guerras de plazas sin final, no acaban/ y cuando acabe sacarán las cuentas/ que a la familia cero se respeta/ las condiciones están sobre la mesa/ están a tiempo de usar la cabeza.

portrayed in official discourse. Rivalries emerge between regions. Authority is the object of either reproach —when it betrays or kills traffickers- or ridicule— when it does neither. Drug lords mock authority by considering it an enemy that poses no sort of real threat.

Perhaps in the imaginary deployed and constructed by the “traditional” (as opposed to “altered” or “progressive”) *narcocorrido*, the enemy does not belong to a political community, but rather to a particular group that benefits from a context of economic exploitation. Although this aspect merits much deeper reflection, it is flagged at this point given its relationship with two recurring themes in *narcocorridos*: economic necessity as a reason for turning to a life of crime and crime as a way to acquire wealth and, with it, social prestige.

Having said that, we should not lose sight of the troubling aspects of the political imaginary embodied in *narcocorridos*, particularly in those written by younger (*narco*) *corridistas* who have come of age during the current wave of violence. Violence is seen as a manifestation of identity (an old and recurring theme in *narcocorridos*) and the violence unleashed by Calderón’s *War on Drugs* is considered a collective problem that requires collective action. This seems to indicate that the popular political imaginary may be politicizing the image of the drug trafficker just as the previous administration did in its discourse. We have not yet reached the same point, but some key elements are present. This notorious and relentless politicization is starting to appear in the more violent *narcocorridos*. It would be prudent for the current government to refrain from identifying the criminal as an enemy; to refrain from politicizing the criminal. Let us hope that criminals do not end up taking the (former) President at his word; or worse still, that society at large comes to interpret the current violence in Mexico as a civil war, in which sides must be chosen.

If we lose sight of the risks represented by the conflation of the criminal and the enemy within the context of the War on Drugs whether in Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America, we run the risk of falling into the trap of either justifying the advent of an authoritarian or making a civil war out of a drug policy that should not be regarded as more than what it actually is: a policy choice.