Hombres Bravos, Mujeres Bravas: Gender and Violence in the Mexican Corrido

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I. Introduction: Violence and Music in Mexican Popular Culture

The Mexican *corrido* is a narrative song with lyrics that recount episodes of violent conflict and confrontation. The origins of the corrido can be traced to the decimas and romances that were brought from Spain to Mexico by the conquistadores in 1519 (McDowell 2000; Paredes 1976). In the early twentieth century, the corrido became a vehicle to narrate the events of the Mexican Revolution, and the ethnic conflicts

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between Mexican-Texans and Anglo-Texans (Paredes 1976). In the late 20th century the corrido recounted the hardships of the immigrants who crossed and re-crossed the border to work in the United States (Herrera-Sobek 1993). Finally, the narcocorrido (drug-smuggling corrido) has arisen to recount the grisly battles of the illicit drug trade carried out by the mafias and cartels of Mexico and the U.S. (Wald 2002). The highly publicized, mafia-style murders in 2007 of big-name corrido singers has polarized opinions about the corrido (Stevenson 2007). Some view it as a music style that condones and perpetuates drug-related violence (Rodríguez 2010), while others celebrate the outlaw style and attitude of the corrido protagonist and/or the singer of the tale (Ramírez-Pimienta 2008). As a musical genre, the Mexican corrido has been compared with "gangsta rap" in the United States, which is also condemned by many as a music that glorifies violence (Edberg 2004; Simonett 2006; Valenzuela Arce 2003).

Another prominent trend in the world of Mexican popular music is the corrido which recounts a story of a *mujer brava* (tough woman). Although having historical roots in the corridos about female combatants in the Mexican revolution (Herrera-Sobek 1990), the recent spate of ballads seems inspired by the 1973 international hit song "Contrabando y Traición" (Ragland 2009; Ramírez-Pimienta 2008). In 2007, Graciela Beltrán released her album <Mujeres Bravas> with 12 corridos detailing acts of violence committed by women against men. A similar collection was released by all-male group known as Oro Norteño. Outside of these CD collections, many famous songs in Mexican music have been about women using violence against men to extract revenge and to seek vigilante justice. A careful listening of these songs indicates that in Mexican society, it is considered admirable and heroic for a woman to fight against an abusive man, by wielding a knife, gun or other weapon.

Hence, one of the central questions for researchers studying the corrido

is to what extent does the violence portrayed in the lyrics reflect the social realities of the Mexican people? (McDowell 2000). The narcocorrido and the corrido of the mujer brava tell stories that are centered on acts of violence. However, they are different because each tells a story centered on a different type of character. What do the *narco* (drug smuggler) and the mujer brava have in common? The answer is that both characters are examples of a person who is *bravo* (or *brava*), which may mean "angry", "quick to anger" or "tough". What does it mean to be bravo or brava in Mexico? Numerous CD and LP titles [such as *20 Corridos Bravísimos* and *Música Brava*] attest to the importance of the character trait of toughness. Being bravo or brava means to be unassailable, alert and prepared to counterattack against any attacker. Why is this important in Mexico? What is it that one must defend in order to live in Mexico?

In Mexico, to be "bravo" is normally considered to be a male trait. Hence, the transfer of a male trait to a female persona carries special meanings, which need to be explored. I begin this exploration by using corrido lyrics to illustrate some of the ways in which gender norms of Mexican society serve to render violence meaningful. I begin by considering the representations of gender in corridos that deal with themes of conflict between men and women. Next, I consider some representations of Mexican identity in the lyrics of selected narcocorridos. Finally, I examine lyrics from songs that combine gendered representations with drug-related narrations. Drawing from these examples, I conclude that the gender norms referenced in narcocorridos appeal to Mexicans' idealizations of honor and their geographic identifications with the rural lifestyle. I also argue that gendered norms provide a set of meanings that normalize the drug trade and at times may help it appear to be politically acceptable to some segments of the Mexican public.

II. Honor and Toughness in the Northern Frontier

The social value placed on "toughness" grew out of the frontier culture of northern Mexico. This is illustrated in the ethno-historical research carried out by Ana María Alonso (1988; 1995) in the frontier state of Chihuahua. As a sparsely populated region inhabited by hostile Apache Indians, the Spanish and Mexican governments sought to introduce settlers to pacify the Indians and create orderly settlements. The settlers became "peasant-warriors" who waged the battle of civilization against barbarism by fighting the Apaches and cultivating the land (Alonso 1995, 95). Each man adhered to a strict code of honor, proving his virility in warfare and with a posture of readiness to defend himself with violence. The settlers often referred to themselves as *vaqueros* (cowboys) or as *rancheros* (ranchers). However, Alonso refers to them with the more general term *serrano* (those who dwell in the mountainous sierra).

The serrano society described by Alonso was organized as a patriarchy in which men exercised authority over women. A man's honor depended on protecting the honor and chastity of his womenfolk. Alonso explains, "the female body was construed by the serranos as a point of great vulnerability for the honor of both men and women, one which had to be constantly guarded or reputations would be destroyed and society would be plunged into a state of disorder" (Alonso 1988, 18). A woman was expected to be chaste, demure and obedient to the male authority figure, be it her father or her husband. Any insult to her honor would require immediate and violent retaliation.

An "exaggerated" emphasis on honor is most pronounced in northern Mexico, where the colonial provinces of New Spain developed in the frontier at a distant remove from the social and legal institutions of Mexico City and central provinces (Gutiérrez 1991, 214). Hence, in his study of the province of New Mexico, Gutiérrez argues that the

ideals of "familial government" were strictly enforced in order to uphold the principles of social hierarchy. In this hierarchy, women were thought of as weaker than men, and in need of male protection. The social hierarchy also depended upon notions of racial purity, with Spaniards considered to be honorable and Indians viewed as savages who lacked honor. Most lacking in honor were the genízaros, or enslaved Indians. According to Gutiérrez (1991, 206), "Spaniards reveled in their honor only because they lived among genízaros". Hence, preventing racial mixing and protecting Spanish "bloodlines" was an overriding concern behind the strictures that kept women secluded and sheltered from contact with men outside of their own families in New Mexico (Gutiérrez 1991, 199) and in Chihuahua (Alonso 1995, 96).

Gutiérrez (1991, 208-209) suggests the utility of drawing a sociological distinction between honor-status and honor-virtue. Honor-status refers to a social standing that enables a person to claim deference or respect from others, but honor-virtue refers to the actions which are taken by individuals or by corporate groups to keep or to improve their positions in the status hierarchy. To maintain honor-virtue, a person's actions must be subject to constant scrutiny by others and evaluated according to the established norms of the community. In the frontier of New Spain, the male norm of behaving with "manliness" meant exerting authority over one's family and defending one's honor by taking part in vendettas and family feuds. At the same time, "men enhanced their honor by conquest of another man's woman" (Gutiérrerz 1991, 213). Hence, the patriarchal society of New Mexico was characterized by *machismo*, a cultural tendency to "exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships" (Stevens 1994, 4).

It must be emphasized that the colonial frontier societies of Chihuahua and New Mexico are not identical to the modern culture which is referred

to as *norteña.* The term *norteña* is generally applied to the frontier states such as Sonora, Sinaloa, Baja California Norte/Sur, Coahuila, Durango, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas. The modern culture of this area is an amalgam of cowboy attire, horsemanship, firearms and *musica norteña* (Valenzuela Arce 2003). As explained by Catherine Ragland (2009), *música norteña* developed in the 20th century with the rise of the mass media and the concentrated infusion of Mexican migrants into the United States. The ebb and flow of Mexican migrants to and from the United States has played a preponderant role in shaping *música norteña* and in making it into a symbol of Mexican identity. In addition, the modern trade in illegal drugs has made *narcocultura* (narcotics culture) a visible subculture within the *cultura norteña*.

As a major element of *norteña* culture, *norteña* music is currently part of a modern, self-conscious attempt to create a culture that looks, sounds and feels "traditional" for Mexicans in the face of their prolonged migrations to and from the United States. As such, *norteña* music incorporates the traditional notions of gender honor, which require distinct forms of social evaluation of the behaviors of women and of men. In this sense, the modern *norteña* culture, along with the historical societies of Chihuahua and New Mexico, can be seen as variations in the gender ideologies of "machismo" and "marianismo" (Stevens 1994).

At the same time, modern social life creates possibilities for women to legitimately engage in behaviors that once were exclusive purview of men (Valenzuela Arce 2003, 49-62). The combined portrayal of "old" and "new" gender roles for women in the genre of *norteña* music has resulted in the appearance of the *mujer brava* as a popular figure in *corrido* narratives.

III. Gender Roles as Cultural Models

How is it possible to discover the gender roles which are influential in Mexican society by examining the stories that are narrated in song by popular corrido singers? Furthermore, can the stories narrated in corridos indicate how violence contributes to the definition of gender roles?

First, it is necessary to caution that socially defined notions of honor are complex and do not exert equal influence on all members of a society. For example, Gutiérrez described colonial New Mexican society as organized around a strict honor code based on norms of male aggression and patriarchal control of women. However, he cautioned that these ideals of honor were less influential for peasant families whose agricultural or occupational duties required women to have more freedom and make autonomous decisions (Gutiérrez 1991, 215). Furthermore, socially assigned gender roles may be influenced by conflicting norms or models of behavior. The existence of numerous (and even conflicting) cultural models must be assumed, since "rarely if ever does the public realm of culture present a single, clearly-defined, well-integrated reality" (Strauss 1992, 11).

Nevertheless, symbolic representations of gender roles do exist and they have an impact on behavior. According to Peggy Reeves Sanday (1982), the symbolic values assigned to women in cultural representations have a major influence on their allotment of social power in areas such as marriage, economics, politics or religion. Holland, et al. (2001) argue that symbolic representations impact social life in the form of cultural models or schemas, which are simplifications of reality as idealized representations. Schemas are conceptual structures which enable people to identify objects and events; a cultural model may contain one or many schemas (D'Andrade 1992, 28).

Although cultural models of gender are merely representations and do not necessarily correspond to the way that people actually think and behave, they do have objective existence in the realm of public culture. This public existence means that cultural models are available for persons to select when they must choose how to interpret or respond to a particular situation. The variance of human behavior in different situations is partly explained by the concept of "public culture" as a kaleidoscopic field of shifting and varied cultural models.

Cultural models do not "do" anything by themselves, but they become influential inasmuch as they seem plausible to a social actor who is choosing a course of action or trying to understand events that have befallen him. Hence, the plausibility of a cultural model is crucial in story-telling, because "schemas give meaning to the actions of the characters" (Mathews 1992, 129). In the analysis of the Mexican folk tale *La Llorona*, Holly Mathews (1992) found that Oaxacan men and women followed different cultural models and produced different variations of the folk tale. According to Mathews, the Oaxacan villagers used the tale as a kind of measuring device to evaluate and comment on real people and real situations.

In a similar manner, the corrido in contemporary *música norteña* is a representation which may instrumentally represent gender roles as much more coherent and normative than they really are. In the public culture of Mexican and U.S. audiences who listen to *música norteña*, gender norms are replete with ambiguities, contradictions and inversions. However, the corridos narrate stories within a widely shared framework of regimented ideals for "masculine" and "feminine" honorable conduct. The idealizations of honor in terms of "machismo" and "marianismo" are oversimplifications of reality, but these simplified models serve to remind listeners of the importance of honor and to contrast honorable behavior with socially disapproved forms of conduct.

Consider the ways that corridos often idealize and praise the male protagonist whose behavior fits the pattern of machismo. One such example is "Manuel Juárez", a song written and performed by Joan Sebastián. The story is about masculine honor and a man's duty to protect his wife.

En un ranchito en la sierra
Feliz vivía Manuel Juárez.
Arrendando sus caballos
Cuidando sus propiedades
Trabajando bien su tierra
Poco salía a las ciudades.

In a little dwelling in the mountains
Manuel Juárez lived happily.
Raising his horses
Taking care of his properties
Laboring on his land
He seldom went into the towns.

Juárez was a *ranchero*, a livestock owner with a small landholding in the Sierra Madre mountains. Newly wedded, he lived contentedly in the sierra, but he and his wife decided to attend a fair celebrated in the days prior to Holy Week. Juárez and his wife rode their horses through the town, where a troublemaker shouted lascivious remarks at Juárez' wife. Juárez approached the rowdy who drew his pistol, but Juárez returned fire and killed the man. At this point, the authorities intervened.

Testigos hubo del caso
Y aunque a Manuel apresaron
Luego de averigüaciones

En libertad lo dejaron
Mientras que calladamente
Al hocicón sepultaron.

There were witnesses to the case
And although Manuel was taken prisoner
After investigations were made
They set him free.
Meanwhile, quietly
They buried the troublemaker.

The singer concludes by warning the audience, “Now I say goodbye, everyone, and let me remind you of something. Although the ranchero is humble, you must respect his wife!”.

The story of Manuel Juárez provides a useful illustration of the code of honor of the sierra. The song portrays a kind of justice based on a man’s willingness to fight −and kill− other men who transgress his wife’s honor. This is vigilante justice carried out without assistance from the police. In the song, Manuel’s act is portrayed as beyond reproach, and it is respected by the government authorities who set Manuel free once the cause of the fight was determined. The socially accepted gender roles require certain behaviors of men, and the state authorities portrayed in the song are respectful of this norm.

According to Stevens (1994, 4), the gender role for women in Latin American is shaped by the ideological pattern of *marianismo*, the idea that “women are semidivine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men”. The ideal woman is constrained to be humble, patient and capable of any self-sacrifice. While women tend to adopt a submissive posture relative to men, this in fact indicative of spiritual fortitude. The story narrated in a popular Mexican song “Corrido de Santa Amalia” exalts the ideal of female passivity.

En Santa Amalia
Vivía una joven
Linda y hermosa como un jasmín.
Ella solita se mantenía
Cosiendo ropas para vivir.

In Santa Amalia
There lived a young woman
As beautiful and lovely as the jasmine.
All alone she supported herself
Sewing clothes for a living.

Her misfortune began when a man called "el mal hermano" (the bad brother) expressed his romantic intentions toward her. Presumably, he was either her brother or some other blood relative. Shocked by his advance, the seamstress blurted "I would rather die a thousand times before I'll let you stain my honor!". The brother's response was violent.

El mal hermano saco un revolver
Y al instante le disparo
Dandole un tiro en los sentidos
Que todo el craneo le destrozo.

The bad brother took out his revolver
And in an instant he shot her.
Giving her a bullet in the brain
That blew apart her skull.

After the murder a police investigation exposed the wrongdoer who was arrested:

Por ahí preguntan quién había sido
Luego pregunta la autoridad
Vinieron gentes de todas partes
A ver el crimen de ese lugar.

There people were asking who had done it,
Later the authorities made inquiries.
People came from far and wide
To see the criminal of that town.

Although this corrido likely derives from an older version sung in Spain (Torre García 1990), it exemplifies the gender norms of humility and female honor in the Mexican sierra. Unlike a man, the seamstress could not use violence directly to defend her honor. Her only option as a woman was to sacrifice her life in the hope that retribution might be made by a male figure. In this case, it was her only male relative who dishonored her, so her honor could not be avenged by a relative. Instead, the state authorities intervened to avenge the murder in her behalf, and her honor was conserved in the memory of the citizens who came to see the criminal on trial.

Given these prevailing gender roles, it is surprising that recent corridos have portrayed women characters using violence to defend their honor. In fact, some leading scholars have overlooked this recent trend of songs featuring “tough women”.

IV. La Mujer Brava

The belief that Mexico is a patriarchal society in which men exercise domination over women has caused some scholars to argue that corridos always reflect the ideals of machismo. Américo Paredes, a foremost

scholar, wrote of the corrido as a historical song genre which chronicled the deeds of the border hero. Such a hero was a courageous man (not a woman) who stood against injustice "with a pistol in his hand" (Paredes 1976). Even the feminist scholar María Herrera-Sobek (1990, 72) wrote that typically, a woman's role in the corrido is that of the "treacherous woman […] who catapults the hero to his death". Herrera-Sobek (1990, 72) argued that the negative portrayal of female characters in the corrido is didactic, "to instill conformity in young maidens" who must obey the patriarchal norms.

There are two famous corridos which portray the male privilege of using violence to punish a disobedient woman, "Rosita Alvírez" and "El Corrido de Michaela". Like Eve in the story of Genesis, the protagonist Michaela "is depicted as the instigator and perpetrator of tragic deeds […] [she] is able to subvert [the] patriarchal order" (Herrera-Sobek 1990, 63). Gabriela Nava (2003) argues that these songs indicate a sexual double standard, by which men are permitted to be aggressive and active, and women are expected to be passive and obsequious. For Nava, these songs clearly show social justifications employed for rationalizing the use of deadly violence against women.

Nevertheless, a recent trend in corridos shows quite the opposite tendency. For example, consider the song "Mujeres Bravas" composed by Javier Torres. The song narrates how a young girl was raped and sought revenge with the help of her sister. The people of the town never connected the death of the rapist to the two girls:

Llego la fecha esperada,
hay un difunto en el pueblo
Y dice quien lo encontro
que el cuerpo estaba incompleto
Lo que le faltaba de hombre,
se lo tragaban los perros

Rosa y Juanita en el templo,
quince anos esta cumpliendo

The awaited day has come,
A corpse is found in the town
And those who found it say
That the body was incomplete.
It was missing the male organ
Which the dogs had eaten.
Rosa and Juanita are in church,
Celebrating a fifteenth birthday.

There are many songs which celebrate and laud the acts of revenge carried out by women, including some famous songs such as “La Venganza de Tina” (Joan Sebastián), “La Venganza de María” (Julián Garza), and “La Carta de Raquel” (Basilio Villareal). However, perhaps the most famous is “Laurita Garza”, written and performed by Eduardo “Lalo” Mora. In this corrido, Laurita confronts her former fiancée Emilio and pleads for him not to marry another woman.

Tu no puedes hacerme esto
Que pensara mi familia
No puedes abandonarme
despues que te di mi vida
No digas que no me quieres
como antes si me querias.

“You can’t do this to me,
What will my family think of me?
You can’t abandon me
Now that I’ve given you my life.
Don’t say that you don’t love me
When before you did love me.

Laruita's plea makes clear that what is at stake is not simply her heart. Rather, her social reputation and good standing in her family are about to be destroyed. This makes Emilio's reply seems especially cruel.

Solo vine a despedirme
Emilio le contesto
Tengo mi novia pedida
por ti mi amor se acabo
Que te sirva de experiencia
lo que esta vez te paso.

I'm just here to say my goodbyes
Emilio replied to her.
I have my bride, my betrothed
For you my love is finished.
Just learn from the experience,
Of what happened to you this time.

Whereas Laurita's honor as a woman will be irreparably damaged, Emilio exults in his freedom to reject her and select a new bride. In this dialogue, the song emphasizes the injustice of unequal gender hierarchy in Mexico, which gives men greater freedom and privileges. The sexual double standard of Mexican society is portrayed in the song as unjust and intolerable. Laurita's desperation and her appeal to save her reputation and honor are plain. Seemingly she is a hapless woman and a victim of the man's superior sexual freedom. Hence, listeners must feel great satisfaction when Laurita kills Emilio.

No sabia que estaba armada
y su muerte muy cerquita
De la bolsa de su abrigo
saco una escuadra cortita

Con ella le dio seis tiros
luego se mato Laurita

He didn't know that she was armed
And his death approaching fast.
From the pocket of her coat
She pulled out a miniature pistol.
With that she gave him six bullets.
After that, Laurita killed herself.

"Laurita Garza" criticizes the gender inequality of Mexico but does not provide any imagined solution for the society as a whole. The song only proposes an isolated act of revenge committed by a girl to save her individual honor. Laurita's only option after taking revenge is to commit suicide, a tragic ending. Nevertheless, the listeners must exult in the vengeance exacted by the mujer brava on the man who ruined her honor.

How can we explain the proliferation of "tough woman" corridos which portray the decisive revenge taken against a threatening man? The narrations provided in these songs still retain some aspects of marianismo, the idea that women are spiritually different from and superior to men. Herrera-Sobek (1990) and Stevens (1994) indicate that in many cultures, women are believed to possess an awesome power because they can create new human beings inside of their bodies. However, the converse of this genitive power is that women have especially powerful abilities to destroy life as well as to create it. Hence, in her analysis of the archetypes of the avenging woman, Herrera-Sobek (1990, 55) argues that many societies have stories "of women who kill, maim and eat other beings".

Hence, with this brief sampling of corridos about "tough women", we can conclude that these narratives are written based on the idea

that Mexico is a society in which women are subject to male domination. However, the lack of gender inequality is criticized and portrayed as intolerable by giving a positive portrayal of women who use violence to protect their own honor. These corridos are not revolutionary because they do not contest the basic premises of patriarchy - the women characters portrayed in the corridos are defending their honor as it is defined within the confines of the patriarchy. Nevertheless, positive portrayal of female avengers conveys the idea a women must be treated with respect - otherwise she can become a man's most powerful and dangerous foe.

V. The Narcocorrido

The narcocorrido is a song that narrates the events of the drug-trafficking world, usually focused on the trade of narcotics between Mexico and the U.S.A. The narcocorrido usually commemorates the deeds of the drug traffickers, particularly their confrontations with the government and with rival narcos. The narcocorrido is often an expression of respect and admiration for the drug smugglers, who are portrayed as honorable men who defend their honor while carrying on a business that is illegal but not unethical (Edberg 1994; Simonett 2006; Wald 2002). Based on the idea that drug-running cartels are simply supplying a market created by drug addicts in the U.S., many Mexicans feel that the drug growers and smugglers are more honorable than the Mexican government, which is seen as corrupt. The anti-government feelings and support for the drug cartels is labeled as a *narco-insurgency* by North American crime and terrorism experts (Brands 2009). What is meant by the term is that the drug runners are not merely criminals, but enjoy support and sympathy of the local population in isolated parts of the Sierra Madres. Indeed, the drug growers and traffickers are seen in rural areas

as “local boys” and defenders of the local people, in opposition to interlopers from Mexico City, who come to the *serrano* communities to impose foreign laws.

In the minds of many Mexicans, the sierra represents a wild land with its own rules which cannot be dominated by the Mexican government. In the mountains, “the land doesn’t belong to anyone who can’t hold it”, and it is where the drug lords have made inroads in winning the support of local people (Strong 1990, 62). The sierra has taken on special meaning as Mexican norteña music became a commercial success in the United States. The rough-hewn image of a ranchero from the sierra was popularized in the 1980s by Los Angeles-based singer Chalino Sánchez (Quinones 2001; Ramírez-Pimienta 2008; Wald 2002). Chalino popularized and commercialized the concept of the sierra as a symbolic space which represents an anti-establishment, outlaw lifestyle based upon the principles of honor (Ramírez-Pimienta 2008). For young Mexicans who live in the U.S.A., the ranchero style represents a cultural expression of their values outside of the mainstream (Edberg 2004), in opposition to the mainstream, bourgeois values of Mexico City or the United States.

Hence, the narcocorrido is only one part of a much larger assortment of cultural practices related to illicit drug commerce which some scholars refer to as *narcocultura* or “drug trade culture” (Ramírez-Pimienta 2008; Valenzuela Arce 2003). Mexican narcocultura includes flamboyant styles of dress, dance moves, adornment and display of pickup trucks, adornment and display of firearms and acts of religious devotion, in addition to the music itself. These social practices activate a repertoire of symbols that are saturated with multiple meanings (Astorga 1997; Edberg 1994; Jónsdóttir 2006; Ragland 2009; Simonett 2006). Edberg argues the symbolic practices of narcocultura generate a world populated with personages both admirable and despicable who are readily recognizable to all or most Mexicans. Hence, following Edberg we can say that the

culture of the drug trade is not an anomaly or outlier in relation to Mexican culture; rather, it expresses the most difficult issues in the heart of Mexican society, such as class conflict, gender conflict and generational conflict.

If the narcocorrido is an expression of a subculture with alternative values that differ from the mainstream, what are the values of that subculture? Of course, one of the most obvious values is the high value placed on money, power and success. A famous example can be heard in the corrido "Pollitas de Cuenta" by Roberto López Herrera, a story of women drug smugglers.

En la ciudad de Morelia
A causa de la amapola
Murieron seis judiciales
Voy a contarles la historia
Los mataron dos mujeres
Para proteger la droga.

In the city of Morelia
Because of the [opium] poppy
Six [judicial] police agents died
I'm going to tell you the story.
They were killed by two women
To protect the drugs.

After narrating the shoot-out, the song provides an explanation of the women's involvement in the trade.

Eran vecinas de un pueblo
Llamado Villa Madero
Y no quisieron ser pobres
Pues les gustaba el dinero

Se metieron a la mafia
Por no conocer el miedo.

They had been neighbors in a town
Which is called Villa Madero.
And they did not want to be poor.
Well, they liked money.
They got into organized crime
Because they are fearless.

Hence, although the song expresses admiration for the women for their fearlessness and their skills in the business, they are said to be motivated by money rather than honor. They are depicted as hard-nosed business women. However, it is not certain that the values of these women are an alternative to mainstream capitalist society. As Philippe Bourgois (2002) has pointed out, the desire to get ahead and to succeed are mainstream social values which are expressed in underground areas of the economy (organized crime) to the same extent as in the aboveground economy (*Wall Street*).

Another attempt to claim that narcocorridos express values in opposition to the mainstream is the "social bandit" hypothesis. Drawing on the work of Eric Hobsbawm, Simonett (2006), Edberg (2004), Ragland (2009) and others have argued that drug smugglers seem like heroes from the perspective of Mexicans who live in poverty, because the smuggler can defy oppressive forms of authority. First, drug smugglers can cross the U.S./Mexican border with impunity, whereas illegal immigrants often lose their lives and fortunes trying to cross this formidable border. Second, because the illegal immigrant to the U.S. lives a clandestine life, he or she can identify with outlaws who live constantly on the run. Finally, the drug smugglers command the respect and fear of the authorities, so many young people who are growing up in poverty see the life

of crime as the only sure path to success, money and respect. In this latter case, a person who listens to narcocorridos can vicariously feel what it is like to be respected by others and feared by the government (Edberg 2004).

In contrast, I believe that only a small minority of Mexicans really feel they can gain respect by selling drugs and murdering people. Instead, I suggest that the "outlaw" drug smuggler represents an alternative set of values, based on the code of honor which organizes rural life in the sierra. For example, the patron saint of the drug smugglers is Jesus Malverde, an outlaw in Sinaloa who robbed the rich and gave generously to the poor. In her detailed study of the devotions to Malverde, Jónsdóttir (2006) shows that Malverde provides a model of ethical behavior in a world in which the Mexican government is viewed as hostile, corrupt and oppressive. In this world, the government is portrayed as corrupt and is seen as an invader in the sierra, where people are obligated by a code of honor to treat each other ethically. In this world, there is nothing unethical about growing, harvesting and transporting drug crops to the United States as a way to make a living.

It is in this context of an alternative ethical system that it is possible to show how models of female honor can be used to express criticism of the Mexican government and its armed incursions into the drug trafficker's territory. These insurgent corridos use ideas about male and female forms of honor to portray the narco-insurgency as a struggle for honor, rather than being a bloodthirsty business. While most scholars have cited the male outlaw Jesus Malverde as the legendary model for the narco-insurgent, some corridos focus on female forms of honor and the metaphor of marriage. Marriage as a test of honor is transformed into a political idiom to portray the relationship between the government of Mexico and the people of the Sierra. One excellent example is the song "La Amapola del Coyote" (The Coyote's Opium Poppies), written

and performed by Fiden Astor.

Allá en las faldas de cerro
se escucha un coyote auhullar
es que anunciaba la muerte
de un valiente capitán
que en busca de amapola
subió a la sierra de Ixtlán.

Salió con treinta soldados
nunca se puso a pensar
que es peligrosa la sierra
si no la sabes tratar
hay mucha fiera salvaje
en defensa personal.

Among the ridges and hillsides
A coyote's howl can be heard.
It's the announcement of the death
Of a valiant captain
Who went looking for the opium poppies
Up in the sierra of Ixtlan.

He set off with thirty soldiers
But he never stopped to think
That the sierra is dangerous
If you don't know how to handle it
There are many savage beasts
Poised to defend themselves.

The corrido portrays the lands of the mountainous sierra as a dangerous wilderness, where nature itself opposes the incursions of garrisons dispatched from Mexico City. The metaphor of a matrimonial conflict

is indicated by the phrase, "The sierra is dangerous if you don't know how to handle it". It suggests that the government that does not treat its people well must suffer dire consequences, just as a man who mistreats his wife may suffer retribution. This metaphor of marriage is not entirely clear in the English translation, because English uses a gender-neutral pronoun, "it". However, Spanish uses a female pronoun for a female noun such as "sierra". As a result, the Spanish phrase, "Es peligrosa la sierra si no la sabes tratar" can also mean, "The sierra is dangerous if you don't know how to handle her".

Hence, in Spanish the warning about the sierra sounds very similar to the warning, "Your wife is dangerous if you don't know how to handle her". The fact that the song begins with this line indicates that we are dealing with a social relationship similar to that of a marriage of husband and wife. The indication is of a relationship between opposite but complementary forces, such as male and female, which become antagonistic if they do not achieve harmonious complementarity.

The two opposed social forces introduced are the sierra and the army/government. In the corrido's introduction, the people of the sierra are portrayed as ferocious animals, waiting to devour the intrusive army. Although the song is about the sierra of southern Mexico and not the northern sierra studied by Alonso (1995), her work is relevant to the song. The female gender is associated with the natural world, which is procreative but also savage, untamed and destructive. In contrast, the male gender is associated with the army and government, instituted forms of patriarchal authority.

The clash of the two social forces is narrated, as the captain and his troops moved through the sierra, repeatedly ambushed by the guerilla forces of the narco-insurgents.

Llevaban tres días sin verlos

entre bosques y barrancas
cuando volteo a ver su gente
doce nomás le quedaban
ocho añoraban sus casas
y cuatro que agonizaban.

Three days passed without spotting enemies
Among the forests and the canyons
Suddenly he turned around to look
And only twelve soldiers remained
Eight of them pined for home
And four lay on the verge of death.

Finally, only the captain himself remained alive. He fled through the sierra hoping to escape to Guadalajara, and he flagged down a passing motorist.

Pidió un rai a una muchacha
él ya se sentía salvado
en eso se oyen disparos
y el capitán cae tirade
porque la linda morena
era el coyote malvado.

He hitched a ride with a girl
Now he felt he was safe.
Then shots rang out
And the captain fell limp.
Because that pretty girl
Turned out to be the cruel coyote.

The oppositions of male/female, sierra/government are introduced at the beginning of the song, without giving away the “punch line” of

the Coyote's female identity revealed at the song's conclusion. Using the oppositions of male/female, husband/wife to portray the antagonism between the inhabitants of the rural zones and the central government, the corrido is drawing upon the commonplace idea that the woman possesses a furious and implacable power. Like a woman, the sierra and its inhabitants are normally demure but if they are mishandled, the fury of female power may be expressed with deadly results. In other words, what is represented in the corrido "La Amapola del Coyote" is not merely a "ballsy" woman who can equal a man's toughness. Rather, the corrido refers to a form of female power that is not anomalous but commonplace, in the serranos' experience of married life as well as their experience of the natural world. By invoking female power, the song also invokes issues of honor. The people of the sierra are not portrayed as attacking government soldiers simply to protect the narcotics business. Rather, the narco-insurgency is portrayed as a matter of honor, the desire of the sierra inhabitants to be respected by the government and to maintain their proud independence. In other words, the song uses the idiom of female honor to portray the narco-insurgency. Hence, the male outlaw such as Jesus Malverde is not always the model which is used by corrido singers to portray the narco-insurgency as an honorable struggle.

Another corrido which uses the notion of female honor to justify the insurgency of serranos against the Mexican government is "El Cordero" (the Lamb), composed by Santiago Macareno Rodríguez and performed by Ramón Ayala. This song begins with a scene of gunfire and combat. The criminal who provoked the battle is known as "the Lamb", which seems an incongruous nickname for a deadly foe of the government.

Un tiroteo muy cerrado
Se registró en aquel día
Murió el teniente Hugo Dines

Por muertes que ya debía
Y el delincuente se escapa
Con rumbo a la serranía.

A very intense volley of gunfire
Was heard that day.
Lieutenant Hugo Dines died
For deaths which he owed
And the perpetrator escaped
Heading for the sierra mountains.

It is important to note that honor is immediately given as the motive for the crime, because the lieutenant killed is said to have "owed" for the deaths of others. As McDowell (2000) notes, the concept of "owing" blood results from a murder, because the victim's kin cannot restore their honor until they exact retributive vengeance. The identification of "the Lamb" with the people of the *serranía* is also made clear by the direction of the escape. Subsequently, an army commander leads a contingent of troops on a house-to-house search.

La tropa llegó furiosa
A la cabaña del cerro
Salió una mujer bonita
Con gran aspeto ranchero
Muy buenas tardes señores
Soy la madre del cordero.

The battalion arrived furiously
At the cabin on the hill.
A pretty woman came out
She looked like a farm woman.
"Good evening to you, gentlemen,

I am the mother of the Lamb."

The pronouncement seems incongruous. The farm wife is merely admitting to be the mother of the fugitive the men are seeking, but by announcing "I am the mother of the Lamb", the song invokes the Christian imagery of the Virgin Mary. In Christianity, "the Lamb" usually refers to Christ offering himself as a sacrifice for the sins of men. It appears as if the woman is claiming to be a supernatural being.

The farm wife is taken into custody, and questioned at the military command. Calmly, she denies any involvement in the crimes and she is eventually released. After that, the Lamb soon renews his attacks, this time at a local hacienda.

Pero surgio el mismo caso
En el Rancho del Olivo
Se vio de nuevo el cordero
Feroz, terrible y active
Matando a gentes y a perros
No dejaba ni uno vivo.

But the same thing happened
At the Olive Tree Ranch.
"The Lamb" was seen again
Ferocious, cruel and active
Killing people and even dogs
Not even one was left alive.

Why is "the Lamb" so fierce and implacable? Who are the enemies at the Olive Tree Ranch? Although we cannot answer these questions, we do learn the identity of the outlaw at the end of the song.

La gente cuenta la historia

Una venganza pregona
La mano de la justicia
Nunca, jamás lo perdona
El cordero y la señora
Eran la misma persona.

The people tell the story,
The vengeance is announced.
The hand of justice
Will never give a pardon.
The Lamb and the lady
Were the same person.

Hence, two things about "the Lamb" are clarified in the last verse. First, the vengeance was undertaken on behalf of the people; it is not psychopathic violence, but an assertion of social justice. Furthermore, the peoples' right to carry out vigilante justice is asserted by the reference to "the hand of justice", which clearly strikes out against the government agents in this narrative.

Second, by revealing that the farm woman is herself the outlaw, we understand the meaning of the phrase, "I am the mother of the Lamb". In Mexico, Mary the mother of God is considered to be the ideal of womanhood and the model of feminine honor (Alonso 1995, 84). Just like Mary, each woman represents the origin of life for the human race. However, Mexicans not only adulate the mother figure, but also know the persona of the destructive mother who kills her own offspring (Herrera-Sobek 1990, 16). The corrido "El Cordero" shows that the female source of life must be respected or her destructive power may also be unleashed. Hence, this "Mary" is not at all like La Guadalupana, the merciful intercessor of Mexican religion. Rather, she embodies the Sierra Madres mountains themselves, as she is an implacable and

irresistible force for destruction and creation.

The conception of the "mujer brava" used in narcocorridos illustrates the use of gender roles to criticize the political situation in Mexico. For several decades, the government of Mexico has been sending soldiers to enforce anti-drug laws in the drug-producing zones of the sierra. The situation is portrayed by the corrido singer as a war against the people of the sierra. The composer uses the concept of the dangerous woman in order to suggest that violence against the state is justified in the same manner that a woman has the right to destroy a husband who damages her honor. This is part of a larger effort to construct an image of rural culture as an authentic and integral community in opposition to a government that is corrupt and invasive. This construction is based on the oppositions of rural/urban, simple/sophisticated, natural/artificial, honest/crooked, hard-working/parasitic, self-sufficient/taking from others, humble/arrogant. The male/female opposition is a basic foundation upon which these other oppositions are predicated.

In other words, the narcocorrido does not merely appeal to the listener's desire for power and money. Rather, it may appeal to the listener based on deep-seated gender norms of honor and self-respect.

VI. Conclusion

Three different uses of gender roles in the Mexican corrido have been illustrated here, to reveal variations in the social meanings attached to violence. First, the idealized and traditional portrayals of male and female forms of honor were illustrated with examples showing the ideal of the "tough" man and the "passive" woman. Second, the transformation of the virtuous woman from a passive victim into an aggressive defender of her own honor is illustrated with the appearance of the "mujer brava".

I argued that the mujer brava is a well-known corrido character who evinces sympathy, awe and fear. Finally, several examples of narcocorridos were provided, which illustrate the importance of the mujer brava as a symbol of the sierra-dwelling mountain people.

The final use of the mujer brava as a character in the narcocorrido brings the gendered models of honor onto the political stage. The majority of people who listen to corridos do not live in the sierra, but in major metropolitan areas across Mexico and the U.S.A. However, for these listeners, the conflict between the Mexican government and the drug growers of the sierra is a conflict between the "authentic" values of the wild lands and the corrupt and hypocritical values of the establishment. The gendered and place-specific values of sierra inhabitants are intentionally placed in the center of the narrative, as representations of what the composer views as "virtuous" and respectable people.

Abstract

This article examines the construction of meaning in episodes of violence which have come to dominate Mexican popular music, focusing on the story-telling song called the *corrido*. Although scholars have considered the multiple meanings of violence in the narrative songs, they have not given adequate attention to the character of the *mujer brava*, or "tough woman". I begin by considering gender roles and codes of honor which historically developed in northern Mexico, in the region of the U.S./Mexico border. Next, the expression of *machismo* and *marianismo* as cultural patterns in popular corridos is illustrated and explained. Finally, the mujer brava is contrasted with the traditional conception of the submissive woman, as this character is aggressive and defends her honor against threats from men. The argument is developed that the mujer brava is not simply a woman who acts like a man, but who defends her honor with distinctly female forms of destructive power. Finally, I apply these insights to the appearance of the "mujer brava" in several narcocorridos. In these selected narcocorridos, the destructive power of a woman is used as a representation of the *serrano* or *ranchero* culture, in which gendered norms of honor and respect are considered to be more important than laws and political institutions. I argue that an understanding of gender norms helps to reveal the meanings of Mexico's narco-insurgency, especially shedding light on why drug smuggling and drug-related culture are not deemed unethical by the audiences who enjoy narcocorridos.

Key Words: Mexico, Corrido, Popular Music, Violence, Gender / 멕시코, 코리도, 대중음악, 폭력, 젠더

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