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The *Corrido*: A Border Rhetoric

Mark Noe

Ever since David Bartholomae insisted, in “Inventing the University,” that the role of composition was to acclimate, perhaps even to assimilate, students into the discourse of the academy, that task has simultaneously attracted and repelled those of us who teach writing in the university. Along with many caught in this web of entirely theoretical desire, I find myself pulled in several directions at once: first toward such arguments as Don Kraemer’s, that our discourse is “critically empowering,” and then toward Kraemer’s more nuanced admission that “we ought to entertain the possibility that there is something oppressive in our invitations” (53). I find myself troubled, along with Deborah Mutnick, by the message sent to students by our “exemplary” discourse: “to become an ‘insider,’” the student “must assume the existence of outsiders and accept a system of exclusion” (42).

Rather than enter into that convoluted debate, however, I suggest that Bartholomae’s defense and Mutnick’s critique of academic discourse are based on an all too “conventional narrative” (see Bartholomae and Petrosky 26) within composition studies itself, a narrative borrowed from French post-structuralism: Jacques Derrida’s call to theorize the “structurality of structure” as an exercise in “decentering” (110). In composition, decentering often takes place through any number of liberatory pedagogies—cultural studies, Freireian, cooperative learning—that, even as they decenter the classroom environment, do so in order to draw those who are outside in, into a discourse that is, as Geoffrey Chase argues, “organized around the production and legitimization of particular forms of knowledge and social practices at the expense of others” (13).

Consequently, I question the continued usefulness of inside/outside as a liberatory metaphor, particularly for Latino/a students, who experience that classroom

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quite differently from the privileged way that I, their Anglo teacher, do. I argue that the assumptions of the inside/outside metaphor accentuate the challenges that these students face when confronted by the demands for assimilation posed by academic writing. Inside/outside becomes a means of identifying what lies on either side of a boundary, while simultaneously bypassing how the boundary functions to categorize and, according to Lázaro Lima, even compartmentalize (128) by selecting who may pass through. Lima goes on to identify the way these boundaries have encroached on Latino/a identity: “[W]hat is understood as the ‘Latino subject’ surfaced along the literal and metaphorical divide between Mexico and the United States, the divide that fractured alliances, elided ethnic and racial identities, and disembodied subjects from the protocols of citizenship” (5). A boundary marks the line between inclusion and exclusion, the cultural disruption required to cross that boundary, and, as the “protocols of citizenship,” the relationship of identity to democracy. In place of the boundary, I follow the example of others by turning to the metaphor of the border with the aim of discussing a particular instance of border rhetoric—the *corrido*. The difference between the boundary and the border is simple yet significant: 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.

Like most metaphors, which are admittedly as conventional as narratives, the border comes to us ready made. What makes this metaphor useful for Latino/a students is that it comes out of the multiethnic experience itself and has developed to meet the rhetorical needs of that experience rather than the desires of academic theorizing. In the Rio Grande Valley, where I teach, 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. Rather than clearly marking the difference between the inside and the outside, the border conceptualizes an amorphous space that is neither inside nor outside, that resists being conceptualized in terms of binaries. The border is a space in which cultures, ethnicities, and rhetorics “bump” against each other, as Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez notes (3), reforming and revising and revisioning themselves and each other—often reimagining in unexpected ways the nature of power itself.

We might imagine the difference between boundaries and borders as the difference between maps and globes. In a map one can always find an edge, a place that is far from power, geographically as well as conceptually. On a map of the United States, the Rio Grande River can immediately be seen as a boundary, a blue line marking the edge of society, culture, and power. On a globe, the Rio Grande Valley can be creatively reimagined as a cultural space along that river, a space between, a space that because of its geographical and conceptual distance from any perceived “inside”—for instance Dallas or Mexico City, almost equidistant—has the potential to reimagine itself in quite unexpected ways.

THE CORRIDO

One such reimagining can be seen in the corrido, a rhetorical form that is metonymic of border rhetorics in general. The corrido is a simple ballad form that—until Américo Paredes used it to launch his own revision of the hegemony of the Western mythos of Webb and Dobie at the University of Texas Press—was of interest primarily to folklorists. Paredes defines the corrido as a “border Mexican ballad of border conflict” (15). As Paredes describes it, the corrido is as conventional a form as the five-paragraph model, a “well-established” (108), if short-lived, popular ballad that addressed a specific rhetorical situation: border “resistance against outside encroachment” (244) from the 1830s to the 1930s. In its formal structure, the corrido is a narrative in which “[b]order conflict dominates as a theme” (149). According to Paredes, the corrido does not describe border conflict so much as it is “a personification of the spirit of border strife” (205). Thus, the corrido emerged as a “dominant form of Lower Border balladry” (149) because it satisfied the rhetorical needs of those living along that border, a means of discursively opposing encroachment from both sides, particularly as embodied in Mexican *federales* and American *rinches*, the derogatory term for Texas Rangers.¹ Eventually, in the corridos, the Texas Rangers came to represent the Anglo order that often served as a justification for violence. In the Hollywood/mythic rhetoric of Western order, the Ranger brings peace and justice to the lawless border. Standing at the center of this myth is the lone hero, the autonomous subject personified in the individualist of the Old West as well as Western progressive thought—Derrida’s *presence* in a white hat.

Rather than opposing the dominant discourse head on, the corrido overturns that discourse through mimicry of its most cherished values: order, and the individualism through which that order is enforced. Through mimicry, corridos highlight the violence lurking beneath the ostensibly neutral theoretical stance of order. Nowhere is this more evident than in the closing lines of “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez,” where the connection between individualism and mob violence is exposed. After being pursued almost 500 miles by hundreds of Rangers, local sheriffs, and vigilantes, Cortez (and here the various versions of the ballad differ) surrenders or is betrayed. Either way, he makes a final, ironic speech:

Then said Gregorio Cortez,
With his pistol in his hand,
“Ah, so many mounted Rangers
Just to take one Mexican!” (Paredes 3)

In taunting the Rangers, Cortez revises their discourse and its ability to order their subjectivity. The Ranger is no longer an individual, but a member of a mob; he no longer represents order, but the violence that inevitably underscores demands for order. In particular, “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez” challenges the Texas Ranger as the personification of this dominant version of reality.

Such challenges, and particularly the use of irony and satire, are common in rhetorics of resistance. Henry Louis Gates locates irony in the African trickster figure in *Signifying Monkey*; Ernest Stromberg describes the use of irony in Native American autobiographies in “The Rhetoric of Irony in Indian Boarding School Narratives of Francis Flesche and Zitkala-Sa.” As a rhetoric of resistance, irony is useful because it makes possible a purely rhetorical challenge to material power. Because ironic rhetoric often goes unrecognized, those in power see little need to impose order through violence. Writing about one such rhetoric, gang graffiti, Ralph Cintron notes that “the mainstream could not interpret gang meanings, and thus a secret, esoteric, subterranean world was made” (167). What makes the corrido distinctive among rhetorics of irony is that it mimics not only the rhetoric of dominance but the subjectivity of that discourse—and thus constructs a fluid multisubjectivity as a rhetorical trope.

We see this self-conscious reconstruction of subjectivity as cultural rather than individual in Cortez’s defiant challenge to the dominant discourse’s ability to fix his identity. As the narrative of the corrido plays out, Cortez’s subjectivity becomes multiple rather than fixed, and it takes on practical and rhetorical, rather than theoretical, attributes that cannot be “ordered.” Paredes notes that in “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez,” the hero morphs through a series of such subjectivities: the peaceful man or disguised hero, the unproven hero, the warrior, the pursued hero, and the Christ figure (119–23). Such fluid identities are ideally equipped to cross boundaries. As a result, the border ceases to be exclusionary and becomes a rich space within which cultures intermix rather than a place where one culture disappears until it is simply a shadow of the other.

The fluidity, the multiplicity, of the corrido hero is critical in resistance to the order imposed by power structures that themselves originate outside the border. Consequently, although Cortez is often seen as a communitarian hero, and thus the direct opposite of the individualistic hero of the Western mythos, Richard Flores argues that the Mexican hero in the corrido does not so much oppose the Ranger’s persona—a move that would require the assumption of the opposite identity, and thus a fixed and symbolic subjectivity—as he mimics it. In this mimicry, a complex and apparently contradictory rhetoric develops at the friction points of identity. According to Flores, in the corrido we find both “The binary opposition of Mexican ‘heros’ and Anglo ‘rinches’ that mimics the dominant discourse of the Old West” (171), as well as “the beginnings of a differentiated, neither Mexican nor American, community” (175)—a setting aside of identity if you will. Flores’s distinction, “neither Mexican nor American,” is important because oppositional binaries operate at the friction points between the inside and the outside. The corrido, as a border rhetoric, questions that metaphor by insisting on a border space in which oppositional binaries no longer order discourse.

Rather than describing a simple communitarian concept in opposition to individual identification, the corrido supplies a fluid concept of identity that is effectively encapsulated in Ed Morales's rendering of the term "Spanglish." Morales identifies Spanglish as a "practice" (7) rather than an identity, an "active state of cultural mixing" (6). Redefining "Spanglish" in terms of cultural rather than linguistic mixing, Morales asks us to visualize a "multisubjectivity" that questions any fixed identity because it functions "in a space where race is indeterminate, and where class is slipperier than ever" (31). Morales emphasizes the performative nature of a Latino/a discourse "which is constantly evolving both north and south of the border, involves increasing, if nonsystemic, proliferations of identities that allow us to choose from an array of guises, accents, class mannerisms, and racial solidarities" (19). As the persona for that fluid subjectivity, the hero in the corrido resists cultural assimilation precisely because assimilation fixes identity. Richard Flores adds that these heroes are "no longer individual personas, but discursive figures who are derived from the social and cultural world of the corrido's authors and audience" (170). In the corrido, a fluid subject continually resists the insistence that identity be fixed in a single discourse at the point where order slips, imperceptively, into violence.

THE RINCHE IN THE CLASSROOM

Academic discourse, for all its critical utility, like all discourses of order, asks those who use it to fix their identity in specific ways. When, in *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, Bartholomae and Petrosky ask students to read challenging texts, such as the first chapter of Margaret Mead's autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*, they do so in order for students to turn a critical eye on their own experience, to become ethnographers of their selves. Students are asked, through the lens of objectivity, to relinquish identification with their culture in order to critique that culture. Bartholomae rejects, and asks students to reject, their discourse because it originates outside academic discourse: "When called upon to speak the language of insight and authority," Bartholomae says, "our students generally speak the language of parents, coaches or other powerful adults." Although Bartholomae objects to the conventionality of this language, it is suspect because it is borrowed from the wrong source and thus, ironically, inauthentic. When students write with these inauthentic voices (two terms that, admittedly, Bartholomae would be uncomfortable with), he has no choice but to reply, "No, that's not it" (*Facts* 34), effectively insisting that students exchange the "language of parents, coaches or other powerful adults" for the language of a new set of powerful adults—their professors, in a process that he refers to as "mimicking" ("Inventing" 590). In "mimicking," students "try on" academic discourse before they have the knowledge that would "make the discourse more than routine, a set of conventional rituals, or gestures" (Bartholomae "Inventing"

590–91). In mimicking, students need not actually enter academic discourse, as long as they develop the necessary skills to perform convincing imitations. Christopher Schroeder identifies such imitations as “essayist literacies” that, he warns, “give rise to essentialized subject positions of Western rational minds” (181). For multiethnic students, as these imitations take precedence over inauthentic discourses, mimicking leads inevitably to assimilation.

Mimicking is ironically similar to the dominant rhetorical figure in border rhetorics, mimicry. The rhetoric of the border mimics the dominant discourse, not simply by mirroring it, but by distorting that discourse, holding it up to a funhouse mirror that exposes the subjectivity lurking behind all supposedly objective discourses, as Ramón Saldívar says, in order to “deflect, deform, and thus transform reality” (7). In mimicry, rather than denying the dominant discourse and its ability to fix identity, border rhetorics shift our conceptualization of boundaries, of the distinctions between what is allowed and what is not allowed, leaving us in a border space where identity is no longer an *a priori* but, in an ironic echo of Bartholomae, a “remarkable performance” (“Inventing” 591). Mimicry in the corrido, and as a possible classroom practice, results in a quite different performance than the one envisioned by Bartholomae, opening up the possibility that as students mimic academic discourse, they do so as a challenge to that discourse. Thus, Bartholomae’s insistence that one student “push against the emerging structure of his own discourse” (Facts 34) is itself revised: the student pushes against the emerging structure of the discourse that seeks to assimilate him through the only means available, the student’s own awareness that this discourse, like all discourses, is only a performance.

Carl Gutiérrez-Jones draws attention to disturbing parallels between such performances in the courtroom and classroom, each of which insists on the necessary connection between order and individual responsibility—one enforced by incarceration, the other by assessment. Gutiérrez-Jones, in addressing critical race theory, notes that Anglo “courtroom interpretation has a performative aspect.” This performance “calls into being certain rhetorical roles which are often assumed uncritically” (41). The only role allowed in the courtroom follows a trope of individualism in which “the notion that crimes are deviations from an otherwise just and egalitarian code of behavior” (4) makes the only sense. The legal system insists that deviations from a behavioral norm (the law) can be understood only on an individual basis, that is, as the actions of a subject fixed within the (decidedly Anglo) discourse of individualism.

Cultural, social, and political situatedness (ethnicity) must remain outside the courtroom (and, all too often, outside the classroom); only objective discourse, with its assurances of neutrality, is allowed. In such a courtroom, behavior is comprehensible only as a function of fixed identity. This assumption, that objectivity guarantees neutrality, is all too often duplicated in the classroom, reproducing the Platonic distinction between reason and emotion: “[M]inority students find their

experiences and their histories displaced as they are forced by teachers and peers either to acquiesce to a properly 'distanced' mode of thinking, or to become sources of subjective, emotional (sometimes coded 'hysterical') testimony about racial problems" (Gutiérrez-Jones 12).

In order to oppose the demands for assimilation, Chicano artists, such as Luis Valdez in *Zoot Suit*, use mimicry to revise the dominant discourse, and "project their own versions of the courtroom, and of legal culture in general, as a critical arena of resistance" (Gutiérrez-Jones 4). *Zoot Suit*, says Jorge Huerta in his introduction to the script, "combines elements of acto, mito, and corrido" as well as "documentary" and "musical" (xvi), moving, often at a dizzying pace, between genres in order to mimic the dominant Anglo discourse that allowed the Lazy Lagoon Murders to escalate into the Zoot Suit Riots. One striking example of Valdez's use of irony takes place in the trial scene, where a character identified only as the PRESS, rather than an attorney, prosecutes the trial and cross-examines witnesses. The PRESS, as did the newspapers at the time, sensationalizes appearance, the guiding trope of bigotry, rather than establishing the facts of the case. Taking over the opening arguments, the PRESS addresses the judge: "Your Honor, there is testimony we expect to develop that the 38th Street Gang are characterized by their style of haircuts, the thick heavy heads of hair, the ducktail comb, the pachuco pants" (Valdez 37).

The other characters in *Zoot Suit*, at least the Chicano characters, assume a multisubjectivity, constantly shifting identities and roles. Huerta notes that El Pachuco, identified by most critics as the Greek chorus, actually functions as the "'nahual,' or the other self" of Henry Reyna, the protagonist of the play, as well as the "Diablo" character found in many corridos (xix). El Pachuco, as the alter ego of Henry Reyna, is an ironic mirror, distorting Henry's subjectivity and the legal discourse that would fix it in a certain way. The play closes with everyone who know Henry Reyna reciting the many subjectivities that he has assumed, both during the play and in the life-history of the real-life Reyna on whom the play is based: "born leader," "social victim," "street corner warrior," "el carnal de aquéllas" (83).

Zoot Suit, as do many other Latino/a ironic revisions, actively counters order and individualism by insisting that deviations are cultural—and normal. In opposing Anglo individualism, Latino/a writers sidestep an individualist/communitarian exclusionary binary that demands a single ethnic allegiance. According to Gutiérrez-Jones, "Communities are thus understood not in terms of purifying consensus (the assimilation model) but rather in terms of conflictual renegotiations (ongoing migrations)" (19). At question for me is how often we as teachers see our students' behaviors, particularly their writing performance, as individual deviations from our pedagogies—which assume the same "just and egalitarian code"—rather than as performances of quite different, and possibly fluid, subjectivities. Offsetting our simplistic readings of student papers can be challenging. Christopher Schroeder recounts Patricia Bizzell's

acknowledgment that “the more she reads of a particular alternative author, such as Keith Gilyard, the more she identifies nuances and subtleties she hadn’t recognized previously”—a nod to the writer’s discourse that most of us find easier to give to established authors than to student writers. Schroeder himself admits, “I wondered how many times I have misread acts of intellectual work of my students” (185).

I share Bizzell’s and Schroeder’s unease. As uncomfortable as it may make me, I have come to the realization that I am the *rinche* in my classroom: my identity as the representative of order is fixed by the very order that I impose, through syllabi, writing prompts, and, ultimately, assessment. With that realization comes the added realization that I cannot “teach” border rhetorics, not in the traditional sense that so many of my colleagues teach the Toulmin Method or the enthymeme. The best that I can do is to fashion an invitation that refigures that classroom as a border rather than a boundary. How ironic it is that I do so by mimicry—this time, of the exemplary rhetoric of my students. Like them, I seek to push against the emerging structure of my own discourse, even as I invite students to enter it. In so doing, I try to make a space in which students are welcome to do the one thing that academic discourse does best: question—question me, my assumptions, my objectivity, my culture. I watch for those moments when students deviate from the conventional, not so I can assess their digressions, but so I can listen to what they have to tell me.

Consequently, rather than radical revisions of pedagogy, I am calling for the recognition that Latino/a students already bring an exemplary discourse into the classroom, one immersed in a quite different rhetorical tradition, one that comes out of a much less conventional “language of parents, coaches or other powerful adults” than we have hitherto assumed. We recognize the irony in their rhetoric only when we accept the possibility that deviations from our order may be creative rather than deviant.

The rhetorical tradition that Latino/a students bring with them has the potential to provide the rhetorical tools needed for resistance precisely because it evolved in the historical friction points along the ethnic, geographic, and discursive borders that those students already inhabit—and because it supplies the two elements needed for significant dialectic with academic discourse: established strategies of discursive resistance and a sophisticated concept of the subject vis-à-vis discourse. Although the history of this rhetoric has yet to be fully explored, it had its inception at the intersection of Spanish conquest and Amerindian resistance.² In this history, resistance and identity, partial assimilation, cultural borrowing, appropriation, and miscegenation have combined to form a culture in which resistance itself has become predicated on a fluid concept of identity, a concept for which our terms, individual or subject, seem inadequate. *Mestizo* or *mestizaje* may be more appropriate, although these terms, like Latino/a identity, are in constant flux.³

It may be that border rhetorics, as exemplified by the corrido, can be used to resist being appropriated by academic discourse through mimicry of the conventions of that discourse as students envision a fluid identity rather than the exchange of one identity for another. Or, it may be that my outline of border rhetoric is overly optimistic. Along the border, hardship, despair, constant struggle, and numerous large and small moments of oppression are everyday occurrences.

By the 1930s, about the time Paredes says the corrido began to decline, the railroads came to the Rio Grande Valley, buying up land once owned by Mexican American farmers and selling that land to speculators who planted orange and grapefruit orchards. Those same railroads shipped the bounty from those orchards back east. Those speculators left their names on many of the streets, businesses, and public buildings in the Valley. Those Mexican American farmers became day laborers. And their grandchildren now sit in our classrooms. This ironic history reminds us that, whenever rhetorics of resistance spring up, the dominant discourse is quite capable of imposing order, effectively squashing the very critical thinking that we insist is at the heart of education and of any democracy that might lay claim to the name.

Unlike the political machine that sought to turn the border into a boundary when the corrido flourished in the nineteenth century, the U.S. education system has become sufficiently sophisticated that it need no longer resort to violence to impose order, instead depending on a number of institutionalized strategies of “prediction, control, and efficiency” (Giroux 216): the adjunct hiring system that continues to tighten control over academic freedom; standardized tests, such as the TAKS, that are based on deadeningly detailed standards such as the TEKS (not surprisingly, both developed in Texas); corporate curriculum, such as C Scope, that removes the possibility of interaction between teacher and student identities in primary and secondary school; and the culture of fear created by the inappropriately named No Child Left Behind Act. These policies impose order by fixing identity, creating a system of training, which Henry A. Giroux labels “schooling,” rather than “education” (238). In training, institutional boundaries channel selected students into a predetermined slot in an economic structure and leave out those who do not “fit”; in education, students develop strengths that they already possess, often in divergent ways that resist control. Paradoxically, it is within a border culture created by such divergent identities that democracy is most likely to flourish.

NOTES

1. See Hernández for an analysis of a corrido focused on resistance against Mexican order rather than U.S. order.
2. See Abbott for the only book-length treatment of this history and its disturbing implications for education in general and composition in particular.
3. See Miller for a historical examination of the slippage around these terms.

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