El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border

Reviewed by Jorge Herrera

In recent years, the narcocorrido, a type of Mexican ballad usually performed by conjunto norteño groups, has become a popular subject of sociological inquiry. El Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural-Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border by Mark Cameron Edberg, is one such study of this controversial musical genre. The book provides an extensive overview of drug traffickers as social actors in the context of Mexican border culture, the global music industry, and their socioeconomic and political contingencies. Edberg's work is based on the premise that music not only reflects, but also actively shapes social reality. As for the aim of his study, Edberg explains that it is to investigate the role of narcocorridos, "in combination with social conditions, in shaping the creation of a cultural archetype or persona—the narcotrafficker—and the pattern of action that ties violence, power, money, and drugs to political, social, and regional themes for which the narcotrafficker is known" (p.25).

The first chapter presents definitions of stratification and employs them as basis for a discussion of identity and representation in narcocorrido. In doing so, Edberg defines stratification as a figurative dialogue of social categorization in which status is constructed and contested around individual self-representations.

Chapter two focuses on song lyrics, transcribed in their entirety in Spanish with English translations. The chapter includes a brief background on corridos, the parent genre of narcocorridos, and describes the situations in which the latter are created and deployed. Edberg introduced the corrido through traditional songs about legendary bandits like Gregorio Cortez and Joaquin Murieta, as well as tequila bootleggers during Prohibition. This is followed by a discussion of contemporary ballads about smugglers and corrupt government officials involved in illegal drug trade.

Chapter three contains ethnographic data on Mexican border culture in general, and narcocorrido listeners in particular, which he gathered through interviews. Edberg also offers a detailed account of his personal experiences while working with people in the colonias of Ciudad Juárez and Los Angeles, as well as with corrido bands, including one formed by inmates in the Juárez central jail. An impression emerges of the drug dealer as being the community hero or "Robin Hood of the border," who defies the threats posed by the streets and even the government, and who exploits the United States' demand for drugs in order to benefit Mexico's poor. Thus, Edberg conceptualizes the narcotrafficker as a manifestation of the "social bandit" archetype.

In chapter four, Edberg uses excerpts from an interview with a Long Beach-based family of producers and performers of narcocorridos, in order to explore changing gender roles within this musical tradition. According to this family, narcocorrido songs about women are becoming increasingly popular among both young men and women. Edberg closes by reminding readers of the extent to which "cultural images cross political boundaries via contemporary mass media and shape or are shaped by the market forces propelling the directionality of these images" (p.129).

Although the author draws on personal interviews and participant-observation of corrido listeners and musicians, one feels that he could have given more emphasis to informant testimonials. For instance, comments by the Long Beach-based family of narcocorrido producers and performers are discussed in merely two pages of the text. As a result, the nature of their relationship with legendary narcocorrido singer Rosalino 'Chalino' Sanchez, and their first-hand experience of the world of narcocorridos and knowledge of the narcotrafficker "archetype" is not properly discussed.

Edberg discloses research methodology is not disclosed within the narrative, but rather at the end of the book. Although this organization is not typical of social scientific texts, the methodology itself was quite effective.

It allowed for Edberg to completely indulge in the extent of his field research without disrupting the natural flow of the narrative. Furthermore, Edberg provides examples of questionnaires he employed in the field, specific to narcocorridos, narcocorrido producers, and questions on corridos for use at concerts or community events. These sample questions provide a great reference for those studying a similar musical genre, or similar field of study.

More importantly, they provide strength and a greater sense of understanding to many of the interviewee quotes contained in the narrative.

In considering lyrical translations, it is important to note that these translations address themselves powerfully and informatively. Edberg's book would be a good read even without his draping it in theoretical analysis and scholarly deconstruction.

In acknowledging narcocorrido performers, such as Rosalino 'Chalino' Sanchez, it is important to note that much of his fan base, and a fan base for narcocorridos in general, is located in Los Angeles and surrounding areas in southern California. The bulk of Edberg's research was conducted in the streets of El Paso, Texas and Cuidad Juárez. A truly complete analysis on the narcocorrido cannot be conducted without examining the thoughts and opinions of Los Angeles-based conjunto norteño groups and community members. With this in mind, El Narcotraficante is a somewhat less fascinating narrative than it might otherwise be, but it is well worth the effort for anyone interested in the development of Mexican culture and Mexican musical genres along the U.S. - Mexico border.

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