

Research Note

Chon A. Noriega

Men should sing with their heads thrown back, with their mouths wide open and their eyes shut. Fill your lungs, so they can hear you at the pasture's farther end.

Américo Paredes, *"With His Pistol in His Hand":
A Border Ballad and Its Hero*

Perhaps don Américo was wrong, men should *not* sing with their heads thrown back, with their mouths wide open, and their eyes shut. In the pasture's farther end, another story echoes. ...

Chon A. Noriega, *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*

On a recent trip to Chicago, I encountered a most unusual set of artifacts that challenges my own challenge from the quotation above. I will write about these artifacts momentarily, but first I want to provide some context. In my book about the rise of Chicano cinema, I had sought "the irony of knowing more than your own story" in order to render a more complicated account of how minorities first gained access to film and television. To me, that history was filled with paradox, irony, and ambivalence, whereas Américo Paredes presented the archetypal study of Chicano resistance through a masculine expressive form, the corrido. Paredes was none other than the father of Chicano studies, and what he had to say about the corrido—and resistance more generally—seemed to be all about my own father. I knew that story all too well,

and so I looked elsewhere. Besides, as I confessed in the acknowledgments, I could not sing. ...

While I stand by my original research, and my challenge of Paredes, I have begun to wonder if perhaps I was wrong, too. In other words, if the history I wrote was filled with paradox, irony, and ambivalence, then the same must be true of the historian himself. In fact, as I noted at several points in my book, it was often difficult to draw clear boundaries between historian and history: there were certain events I simply could not narrate as a historian and so on these points I remained silent. And I acknowledged this. These silences were self-conscious attempts to honor and yet contain my participation as an advocate and activist within the historical narrative I was telling. I would have to write about this part of my intellectual life in another context.

But there was another, more profound silence within my book that spoke to a relationship outside the book's subject matter. This relationship had to do with the person who inspired my ongoing intellectual quest: my father. He did so in a way that drove me to approach all things as a life-and-death struggle. But he also wrote poetry. And how he could sing, throwing his head back and filling his lungs, so that he could be heard at the neighborhood's farther end ... much to the horror of my sister. In Miami, where we grew up, corridos and rancheras stood out, calling attention to our difference from the Cuban and Anglo neighbors.

In January 2002 I discovered a new archive in Chicago: my sister Reni's collection of our father's Mexican LPs. As a child, I had fixated on the album covers, the most intriguing of which showed Antonio Aguilar kneeling over his dead horse, pistol raised, and head thrown back, singing a corrido, of course (see fig. 1). My father, who listened to these albums every weekend, informed me somewhat tongue-in-cheek that in Mexico all songs were love songs, and the objects of these songs were either horses or women, but mostly horses. He taught himself to play guitar and sing his favorite love songs, and when he played, I would always request that he sing my favorite song of all, "Cucurrucucú Paloma." Most summers our family returned to his hometown of Alamogordo, New Mexico, where my father would sing a corrido to and about his own father, Gavino Noriega. I now suspect he had modified another corrido, "Gabino Barrera," from the Aguilar album with the dead horse.



Fig. 1. Album cover of Gabino Barrera y 11 Exitos Más by Antonio Aguilar.

While I have carried the image of these albums with me to this day, I had long since let go of them as objects. So it was a surprise to find them in my sister's living room, especially since she never quite identified with our Mexican patrimony. Nevertheless, she had made a point of preserving these albums, even if she never listened to them, could not understand them, and had even forgotten she had taken possession of them. My sister shared my own commitment to the archive, where one collects first and asks questions later. Now, with the objects in my hands again, we began asking questions about our father that ended up providing some answers about ourselves.

The albums can be divided into two periods. The first group was purchased in the early 1960s, apparently in the two years between my birth and that of my sister. The singers are male

and exemplify postrevolutionary masculine ideals in Mexico: Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante, Antonio Aguilar, Javier Solis, and Los Tres Ases. Solis clearly served as the model for my father's singing voice. I imagine my father felt considerable cultural dislocation and isolation in Miami and that these singers provided a connection with his sense of self as a "Mexican." If so, that connection was an ironic one on at least two levels. First, from what I can gather, my father's taste in music during the 1950s ran much more toward country and western and rock 'n roll. Indeed, he loved to sing Hank Williams and Johnny Cash songs and he wore heavy black-rimmed glasses that affected a "Buddy Holly" look. Second, the imprints for these albums came from Miami-based companies; the very place that created a sense of cultural isolation also served as a gateway for the music that eased that isolation.

At the time, my father was a reporter covering the Latin American beat for the Associated Press. But after a few close calls during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he realized that the



Fig. 2. Article from Alamogordo Daily News (New Mexico) c. 1963.

political upheaval in Latin America was too dangerous for a new father. And so he left journalism for a career in public relations (see fig. 2). He also left behind his Hemingway-esque aspirations to become a writer. But he clung to love songs that helped define what it meant to be Mexican after the revolution.

In 1972 my father was promoted and transferred to the regional office in Chicago of a trade association. We entered the middle class in a dramatic fashion, moving into Hemingway's suburban hometown, Oak Park. The second group of albums was purchased in 1978 and 1979, a period during which my parents divorced, my father lost his job, and I left home. The singers are female and are fewer in number: Lola Beltrán and Maria de Lourdes. Sometimes the songs are the same, songs about a person who would rather suffer, accept blame, and even be lied to than be alone. Only now that person was a woman, at least in song. In this period, my father and I attended a performance by Antonio Aguilar at a sports arena in Chicago. Aguilar rode his horse from one end of the arena to the other, singing corridos about crossing the border to a new and uncertain life. It was as if the album cover had come to life in the heroic moments just before the horse would be shot. In such moments, sombrero in hand and head thrown back, a man could survive anything. My father, who endured and struggled against rather explicit racism from his employers before losing his job altogether, slowly built his own business over the next two decades. I was one of his first employees. He also rebuilt his life, as did my mother. Last year, he retired and returned to Alamogordo, building his own house, although his second wife drove the tractor.

The value of the archive is not always what one would expect. I remember everything. And I have pictures, too. But these artifacts have challenged such certainties, bringing a nuanced and more compassionate understanding of my father and his impact on my life. Sitting in my sister's living room, we listened to each of these albums, some nearly forty years old, while I translated the lyrics. Our father's spirit was in the room—in us—whereas before it had been the room, the neighborhood, the universe. His history was now ours, too, rather than being the thing that had created and stood between us in our need for each other.

After we had listened to the albums, and my sister promised to burn them into CDs for me, we put on a formative



Fig. 3. Chon and Reni, around ages 7 and 5. Photo by Saturnino Noriega.

album from our youth—a collection of disco hits—and spent the next hour dancing with Reni's five-year-old daughter, Anna. My nephew Martin, two years older than his sister, peered in from the hallway, embarrassed by our dancing. Decades from now Anna and Martin may re-encounter that album and reclaim a bit of the past in each other. They need each other, and someday they will need to understand why (see figs. 3 and 4).

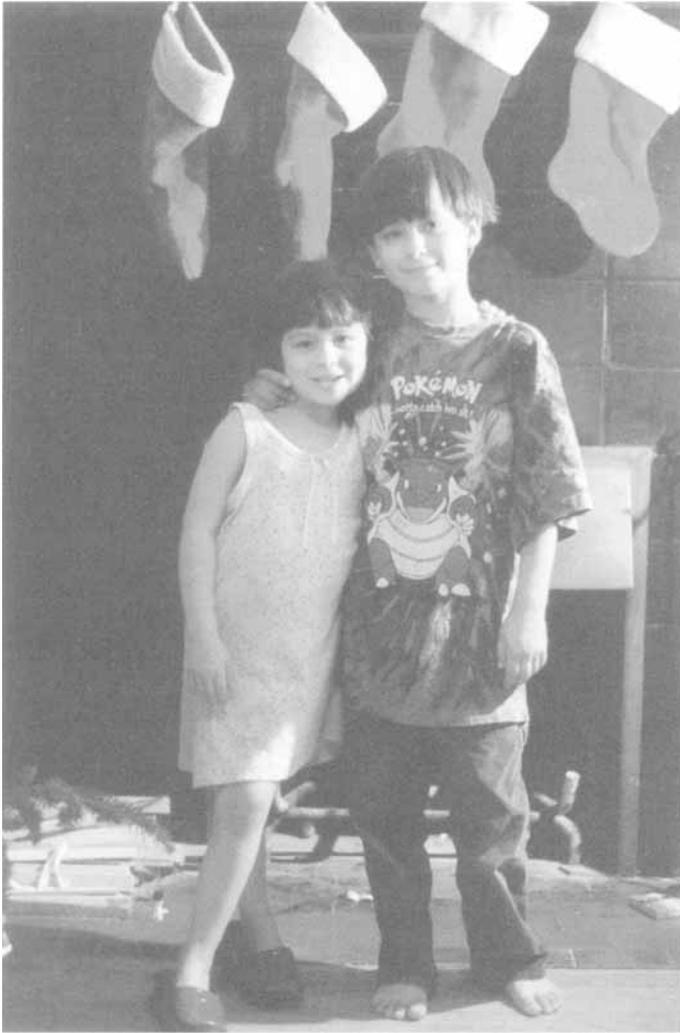


Fig. 4. Anna and Martin, ages 5 and 7. Photo by Reni Celeste.

This editor's commentary is a research note because it signals a profound and still-emerging change in my scholarship. I wanted to write about the personal basis for that change insofar as it relates to my object of study and the historical method. For the past decade, my personal history has functioned as a structuring subtext or as an allegory informing my research. As such, the archive allowed me to confront my past as an object—or as a set of artifacts—that I could

isolate, understand, narrate, and thereby master. That is one reason why I remained silent when I encountered myself as a political actor within my own historical narrative. I seemed to be all over the place: writer, allegory, and actor. This conundrum of our place within our own work and the world is the intellectual's dark side. We cannot bring light to this place—the fantasy of enlightenment being that the mind can free itself from the body and its past—but we can bring understanding and compassion to the darkness. This editor's commentary is a note—a tone, a sounding, a key of an instrument—that serves as one way in which I can sing for my father.

