

RACISM AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE LEGENDS OF GREGORIO CORTEZ

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After the signing of The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the true nature of American racism was made very clear. Although the treaty promised equal rights for all who decided to stay in the United States after the border shift, racist attitudes prevailed and these promises were ultimately ignored.<sup>1</sup> The story of Gregorio Cortez directly exemplifies this, where the dangers Cortez encounters are direct products of discriminatory attitudes toward the Border Mexican. The legend and corrido of Cortez, however, make almost no explicit mention of racism. Thus, the widespread popularity of the legend, especially in its corrido form, reflected a common acknowledgment of racism among Border Mexicans and an individual desire to overcome it by combating specific racist incidents.

A primary reason for the popularity of the legend of Gregorio Cortez was its relatability. People were easily able to put themselves in the position of Gregorio Cortez as he valiantly escaped from his pursuers. As Américo Paredes mentions in his study, *With His Pistol in His Hand*, “the laborer made of Cortez a laborer, the farmer a farmer, the vaquero a vaquero” and so on.<sup>2</sup> This identification with Gregorio Cortez points to the idea that many Border Mexican people could easily see the similarities between Cortez's situation and their own. On a basic level, the pastoral lifestyle of Cortez was similar to that of most people who lived on the border, where the economy was mostly driven by such activity.<sup>3</sup> On a deeper level, the racism that Cortez was a victim of was the same racism that victimized all Mexican peoples who lived in the border region, where they were often taken advantage of economically and commonly referred to as lazy and inferior.<sup>4</sup> Although some may argue that since the idea of racism was never explicitly mentioned in the story nor corrido of Gregorio Cortez, the people that spread the story were ignorant to its existence, this is not the case. Indeed, in one version of the legend of Gregorio Cortez, Cortez's brother Román takes advantage of an Anglo-Texan farmer's racist

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1 Ernesto Chavez, *The U.S War With Mexico: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 27.

2 Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1958), 113.

3 Ibid., 10.

4 Luis Alvares, Lecture on 5 April 2016, University of California, San Diego.

presumptions in order to trick the Anglo-Texan into a bad trade.<sup>5</sup> The Anglo-Texan, of course, believed that Román, being a Mexican, would be foolish enough to trade his superior sorrel for an inferior sorrel. This allowed Román to easily trick him and its inclusion in the story, therefore, shows that Border Mexicans were very much aware of the racist attitudes that they were a victim of. The commonality of this victimization only made the story more relatable and the lack of explicit mention of racism points to an unstated acknowledgment of its existence by those who circulated the story.

The general idea of racism, however, is an abstract and complex one. Even today, theories about how one should combat racism are consistently debated. It makes sense, therefore, that the legend of Gregorio Cortez makes minimal effort to address it explicitly. The entire idea of racism is too large and complex to combat as an individual, however, since it affected the lives of almost every Border Mexican of the early twentieth century, there was still a deep desire to fight its products on an individual level. Cortez was a primary example of this individual fight. It may be argued that Cortez was not fighting against racism, but only for his own survival. However, the conflicts that Cortez found himself in were direct results of Anglo-Texan racist presumptions. For instance, Sheriff Morris first shot Román due to a misinterpretation and a racist assumption that Román and Gregorio, border Mexicans, were not willing to come to an agreement in a civil way.<sup>6</sup> Further, while on trial, Cortez was forced to argue his case several times over due to an Anglo-Texan notion that he could simply not be in the right. Thus, as Cortez shot Sheriff Morris, tricked his pursuers, and argued his case in court, he was directly combating racism in a way that any individual person could. This makes the story of Gregorio Cortez not only relatable, where each listener could imagine himself fighting “his own disagreeable contacts with the Anglo-American”,<sup>7</sup> but also inspirational. Through his actions, Cortez showed the fallibility of the “superior” Anglo-Texan, giving hope to Border Mexicans who had a desire to fight

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5 Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1958), 38.

6 *Ibid.*, 61.

7 Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1958), 113.

against them.

The difference in details between the corrido and factual events described by Américo Paredes further show evidence of the individual desire to fight racism. Although the facts provided by Paredes provide no evidence that Cortez was ever antagonistic toward his Anglo-Texan pursuers, the corrido contains details of Cortez saying “Don't run, you cowardly rangers/From just one Mexican.”<sup>8</sup> The insertion of this line into the corrido further emphasizes the fact that the individuals circulating it felt the desire to express themselves against the Anglo-Texans and racist atrocities they had been a victim of. As another example, the corrido expresses the Americans who question the strength of their group, saying “If we fight him man to man,/Very few of us will return.”<sup>9</sup> This exaggeration of American fear again expresses the desire of the Border Mexican to be strong against the Anglo-Texan, causing them to not only respect the Border Mexican as an opponent, but also as a person.

Thus, the circulation and popularity of *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez* was due to the way peoples living near the Border could relate to Gregorio Cortez and the conflicts that he was forced to overcome. Although the actions of Gregorio Cortez himself may not have posed a direct threat to Anglo power, his story inspired its circulators to fight against this power. Combined with the growing tensions of the early twentieth century, the legend of Gregorio Cortez may have played an important role in the formation of the Magonistas in 1903 or the Plan de San Diego in 1915, where people were driven, sometimes to extremes, to fight directly against the racist attitudes of the Anglo-Texans.

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8 Ibid., 156.

9 Ibid., 156.

## Bibliography

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