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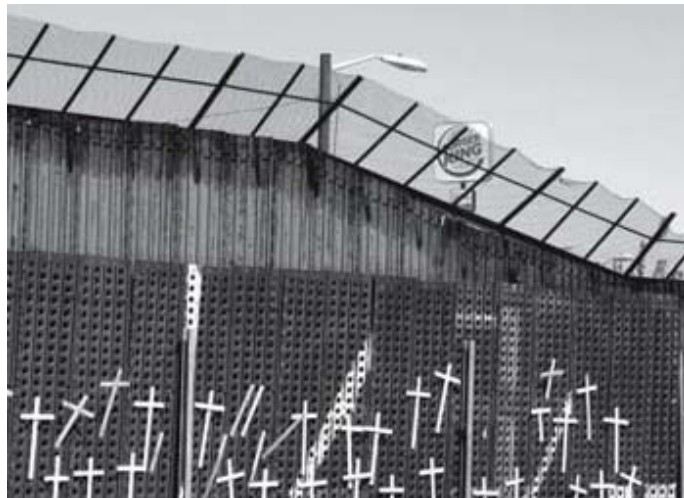
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Marisol LeBrón

For centuries, Mexican narrative folk ballads, known as *corridos*, have chronicled the exploits of outlaws and rebels. Countless corridos have told the tribulations of smugglers trying to get their contraband across the border. And in recent decades, with the boom of the drug trade in Mexico, the songs have increasingly turned to stories about the narcotrafficking. But these "*narcocorridos*" existed long before the rise of today's drug cartels.

It's strange, then, that the U.S. Border Patrol would be promoting a genre so infused with anti-authoritarian sentiment. But that's exactly what the law enforcement agency is doing, even releasing its own album of *corridos*.

In an attempt to deter immigrants from crossing the border, the Border Patrol distributed its "Migracorridos" album to dozens of radio stations in Mexico. The name of the CD plays on the Spanish for "migration" and the pejorative nickname for immigration enforcement agencies: *La Migra*.



Relatives of migrants who died crossing the border hang white wooden crosses on the U.S. border wall, pictured here in Nogales, Mexico. (By Karl W. Hoffman/www.karlwhoffman.com)

The CD is part of the Border Patrol's "*No Más Cruces en la Frontera*" (No More Crosses on the Border) campaign, which has focused on purchasing airtime in Mexico for television and radio spots that provide cautionary tales for those thinking about heading to El Norte. The campaign marks the first time the Border Patrol has bought airtime for advertisements. The CD is the next leg of these efforts.

The "migracorridos" always end in death with a family broken apart. In the song "Veinte," the narrator describes a treacherous

journey north in which several people trying to crossover die of thirst in the desert with "blistered" and "scabby" feet from walking. Abelardo watches his cousin die of dehydration in the desert heat in the song "El Más Grande Enemigo." Aberlardo decides to go back to Mexico to give his cousin a proper burial, vowing to his dead cousin: "If God takes my life, let it be in my beloved land."

In "En La Raya," a young man talks about his friend dying *en la raya* (on the line) and having to make a cross out of sticks to mark the grave. The sight of the wooden cross gives him the courage to return home and never attempt to cross again because he doesn't want to see any more "crosses on the border."

Often criticized for focusing almost exclusively on physical enforcement, the Border

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Patrol began turning to "safety" and "prevention" in recent years. This shift resulted in a multi-pronged approach to enforcement, including continuing construction of the wall and increased patrols along the border, but also things like the "No Más Cruces" campaign instituted as part of the "Border Safety Initiative"

The Border Patrol teamed up [Elevación](#), a Washington, D.C.-based advertising agency to work on the campaign. With high-profile clientele like New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Elevación specializes in Latino/a marketing and outreach. The company has been working on the No Más Cruces campaign for seven years. With the help of Elevación, the Border Patrol has put out commercials, posters, and other kinds of promotional materials, but the "Migracorridos" CD is a first.

Elevación President Jimmy Learned [told the BBC](#) that he conducted research in Mexico "before deciding to target 25 radio stations in six states with the highest count of U.S.-bound émigrés." Learned also said the campaign could soon be expanded to Central America.

The Border Patrol has not disclosed the costs of producing and distributing the CD. But an early part of the campaign in 2005 spent \$1.5 million on television spots alone, according to the [Los Angeles Times](#).

The agency has been careful to keep its imprint off the album afraid Mexican audiences would disregard the songs if they knew who was behind it. Learned [told the AP](#), "A lot of people thought the Mexican government was behind it – the last thing we wanted was to put 'paid by la migra.'"

The Border Patrol has good reason to be concerned about public reaction if word spread that it was behind "Migracorridos." Jose Gasca, manager of La Zeta radio station in Morelia, Michoacán, told

the AP the songs hit a chord with audiences, but that if his listeners knew the message was sent courtesy of the Border Patrol, "They'd feel as if la migra was after them in their own country."

Some critics see the campaign as emblematic of Bush-era federal funding for media propaganda under the "War on Terror" in the mold of military "psychological operations," or PSYOPs. Nezua, a blogger for [The Unapologetic Mexican website](#), notes a better name for the campaign might be "migrapsyops" or "psyop-corrrios." Although some might argue that claims of PSYOPs are exaggerated, the U.S. intelligence community defines "gray propaganda" as situations in which the source of the information (the U.S. government) is deliberately hidden or ambiguous because disclosure would compromise its effectiveness.

The campaign can also be criticized for deploying notions of deficient masculinity to deter would-be-migrants. Throughout the album, the songs claim it takes a real man *not* to cross the border. In "Veinte," the singer croons, "Chickening out is also a manly thing to do." Indeed, in these songs stereotypical notions of machismo are simultaneously admonished and appealed to in trying to get immigrants to think twice about crossing.

The Border Patrol touts the campaign as a complete success. Agency spokeswoman Wendi Lee cites the decrease in migrant deaths from a record high of 492 in 2005 to 390 last year. But most interpretations on the decline in fatalities point to several other factors, including reduced migration because of the economic crisis and the immigration crackdown.

Ultimately, the No Más Cruces campaign, contrary to statements by the Border Patrol, does not address issues of safety along the border. The television spots and the songs do not offer any safety recommendations beyond telling migrants not to cross. And when attempts are made to address the safety of migrants, anti-immigrant activists –



Young migrants caught by U.S. Border Patrol agents in southern Arizona after walking more than 25 miles through the desert. (By Karl W. Hoffman www.karlwhoffman.com)

both within and outside of the U.S. government – roundly criticize these efforts with ridiculous and racist claims.



The cover of the Mexican government's comic book guide for migrants.

The Mexican government, for instance, was harshly condemned by anti-immigrant activists for issuing a "Guide for the Mexican Migrant," a 32-page comic book with information about the risks of crossing and information about foreigners' rights in the United States regardless of immigration status.

In response to the guide, while serving as congressman, the virulently anti-immigrant Tom Tancredo (R-Colorado) issued a statement claiming that publication of the guide "was not an action of a friendly neighbor." In an [interview with the *New Standard*](#) Tancredo's spokesman elaborated on his boss' statement, claiming the guide not only encouraged illegal immigration, but that it also opened the door for terrorist attacks on U.S. soil: "You don't know who is coming here just to look for a job, and who is coming to kill your family.... You've got to remember that the facial structure and skin color of

Arabs and Hispanics is pretty similar."

Unfortunately, since addressing issues of immigrant rights and safety is dismissed as an endorsement of undocumented entry – or worse, seen as some terrorist ploy – the death of migrants and the crosses on the border will continue.

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