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JÁCARAS AND NARCOCORRIDOS IN CONTEXT:
WHAT EARLY MODERN SPAIN CAN TELL US
ABOUT TODAY'S NARCO-CULTURE

TED L. L. BERGMAN

CHARACTERIZING the entirety of “narco-culture,” let alone any culture, is quite difficult, but by analyzing a discrete musical-literary genre, the *narcocorrido* – a ballad-form mostly popularized in Mexico, the Borderlands, and the Southwestern United States – one can more easily characterize the culture’s principal artistic manifestation. In its simplest definition, the *narcocorrido* is a song that recounts the exploits of *narcos*, meaning drug smugglers and their bosses.¹ Since the *narcocorrido*’s existence as a specific genre is dependent on specific historical and social circumstances, the study of the genre also tends to focus on these. It is perhaps for this reason that comparative studies of the *narcocorrido* are relatively rare; and yet a brief comparison between the *narcocorrido* of the last several decades, and a very similar genre, the seventeenth-century Spanish *jácara* (or *romance de germanía*), can be very useful. By making a parallel selective taxonomy of both genres, I hope to provide enough material to create a general backdrop that can be used for further study to examine whether a generic element is the product of a *zeitgeist* or is perhaps inherent in songs about criminals in the Hispanic world.

Long before the word *jácara* became a common term in Spain, the form existed as part of the *romance* tradition. In the late medieval period, alongside musical stories of martial heroes, there were songs about outlaws, the sort that occurs throughout much of Western culture, from Icelandic sagas (Barraclough 368) to Calabrian *canto di malavita* (Deaglio 359). What eventually made *jácaras* distinct from other Spanish ballads in the seventeenth century was their use of criminal jargon, called *germanía*. In 1609, this dis-

¹ *Narcocorridos* are found elsewhere, especially where drug trafficking is prevalent. See Valbuena Esteban’s “Del romance español al narcocorrido colombiano.”

tion was formally announced when Juan Hidalgo published his compilation of anonymous works titled *Romances de germanía*. In the *vocabulario* (glossary) included at the end of the collection, Hidalgo defines “jacarandina” as “rufianesca o junta de rufianes, o ladrones” (Hill 116). The individual who most firmly established the genre’s popularity, and whose works were called “jácara” after his death, was the master satirist Francisco de Quevedo. While he was not included as a named poet in the *Romances de germanía* collection, his sarcastic criminal ballads were likely circulating in manuscript form around the same time (Pedraza Jiménez 84). Within the next twenty-five years, “jácara” would become a generic designation quite separate from any old-fashioned *romance*. This is reflected in Lope’s *Gatomaquia*, published in 1634, as Gilard has pointed out (27):

y en medio de lo grave
del romance suave,
les dijo con despejo,
pareciéndole versos a lo viejo,
que jácara cantasen picaresca. (335)

In similar fashion, the *narcocorrido* is a ballad tradition transformed. Its very name reveals it as an offshoot of the traditional Mexican *corrido*, a ballad-form that shares many striking similarities with the late-medieval Spanish *romance*, just like the *jácara* 300 years before.² Also like the *jácara*, much of the form and content for the *narcocorrido* existed many decades before that designation came into use. In Mexico, the revolutionary heroes of historic *corridos* were replaced by Prohibition-era smugglers, and eventually by traffickers in stuff harder than alcohol. Leading up to the consolidation of the *narcocorrido* as a genre in the 1970’s, some mid-century *corridos* came closer to the *jácara* in their content than in their later manifestations. These two works below, separated by about 300 years, have been placed side-by-side for ease of comparison:

² The wider comparative study of *corrido* and *romance* has its most solid foundation in the often-cited *El romance español y el corrido Mexicano*, published by Vicente T. Mendoza in 1939, and is compared specifically to the *jácara* in a later 1954 book specifically on the *corrido* (IX). Gilard briefly outlines the connections between *jácara* and *corrido*, usefully citing others who have made the connection, but he appears mainly interested in the how *jácara* transformed into ballads about rural *bandoleros* (25-28).

Voy a cantar un corrido,
 ¡escuchen con atención!
 de las mujeres galantes,
 viciosos y malhechores,
 de Juárez hay de a montón.
 A unos los han desterrado,
 otros dejan la carrera,
 otros que por mala suerte
 han encontrado la muerte
 en la mentada Piedrera.
 Fernández, con su dinero
 que de nada le sirvió,
 la muerte se le acercaba.
 (“Corrido del hampa Pt. 1”
 by Flores y Durán [1935])

Atención, señores míos,
 que un jaquezón de la hampa
 os sale a glosar su vida,
 sin olvidar las pasadas.
 Yo nací donde Dios quiso;
 fue mi madre la Solana,
 mujer de ciencia, pues tuvo
 diez cursos de Salamanca.
 En lo de mi padre quiso
 ser naturaleza franca
 conmigo, pues que me dio
 más padres que tengo barbas.
 (“Jácara con glosa de doce
 jácaras” [17th c.] by Miguel Rojo,
 cited in Hill 171)

There is a continuing debate about the Mexican *corrido*'s relationship to the Spanish *romance* tradition, as critics attempt to establish links between the genres while trying to avoid getting bogged down in an argument based on judgments about originality and influence (Beusterien 673-74). Armistead is strong in his belief that medieval epic, the Hispanic ballad and modern *corridos* are strongly tied through their “narrative themes” and “as a medium for reporting on and remembering important events from the immediate past” (101). If we share Armistead's assuredness based on thematic similarities, then it is sufficient to stake a claim for a “genetic relationship” between the *jácara* and the *narcocorrido* (101-02).

What makes the *jácara* distinct from previously penned *romances* is its frequent and sometimes exaggerated use of *germanía*, or criminal jargon:

O tu manflotesca mansa
 que entre Rodanchos, y estoques
 con los de la vida suelta
 calcoteas de venta en monte,
 no manques al garlo mío
 para que de godo informe
 de los dos fornidos jaques
 el suceso por su orden:
 que fletaron sus navíos
 de bueno a bueno sin doble,
 por clamarse cada uno
 el Respeto de la Flores. (Hill 81)

Other *jácaras* are more inclusive by featuring a built-in glossary:

Óiganme, los rufos, digo;
 nuevos vocablos y nombres
 pronuncien de aquí adelante
 los pimpollos y los robles.
 ¡Va de arancel, atención!
 Los vocablos se reformen,
 digan todos como digo,
 laireles y trepadores.
 A las medias calzas, vainas,
 a los zapatos, ramplones;
 ellas porque envainan piernas,
 y ellos porque piedras rompen. (Hill 196)

Code words originally used by criminals to avoid detection became an attraction for audiences, and poets relished mixing code words with their own poetic conceits. In the early stages of its popularity, *germanía* as featured in *jácaras* was sufficiently authentic that Juan Hidalgo explained in his prologue that there was a real danger in not knowing this strange language that appeared in his collection (Hill 54). Authenticity through terminology is also one of the main attractions of the *narcocorrido* genre. The hit *corrido* by Los Tigres del Norte called “Jefe de jefes” begins with a conversation in which one *corrido* aficionado likes the genre because it relates “los hechos reales de nuestro pueblo.” In the case of “Jefe de jefes” itself, the “hechos reales” are barely disguised by the ambiguity of the lyrics:

Mi trabajo y valor me ha costado
 manejar los contactos que tengo.
 Muchos quieren escalar mi altura,
 No más miro que se van cayendo.
 Han querido arañar mi corona
 los que intentan se han ido muriendo.
 Yo navego debajo de agua
 y también sé volar a la altura.
 Muchos creen que me busca el gobierno,
 otros dicen que es pura mentira.

This *corrido*, like the occasional *jácara*, does not absolutely require criminal jargon to set it apart, but also like the *jácara*, the Mexican genre benefits from criminal code words as an easy way to create an air of authenticity, even if the code may have originally been employed as a way to avoid censorship (Montoya Arias 61). For both the *narcocorrido* and *jácara* genres, the chosen code words are often emblems of a gangster lifestyle. Hidalgo’s 1609 *vocabulario* of *germanía* lists “estaca” as “daga,” a tool of many a seventeenth-century gangster, and modern lexicographer Alonso Hernández lists four examples of its

usage, two of which also feature “cerda,” meaning “cuchillo.” Slang expressions are also included in *narcocorridos* to make clear that the protagonist is expecting trouble:

Al tiro y bien alocados,
 con cuerno y empedrados,
 lanzagranada y bazucas,
 con los carros bien blindados.
 (“De H2 las caravanas (M1),” Los Elegantes de Sinaloa)

“Cuerno” is short for “cuerno de chivo,” perhaps the most commonly used *narcocorrido* slang word, which refers to the AK-47 assault rifle and its distinctively curved ammunition clip. Along with weapons, women and alcohol rank highly as emblems, and these are often encoded.³ The *narcocorrido* “Sucursal del Infierno” makes reference to “bucanas,” meaning Buchanan’s brand Scotch whiskey, a drink which is synonymous with the genre, and the band Los Buknas de Culiacán take their name from it, going so far as to use the red wax seal trademark as their own emblem. Women are not often referenced through slang terms in the genre, but the word “buchona” is found in a number of song titles, as well as in the title of an article by Juan C. Ramírez-Pimienta on the subject of strong women in the *narcocorridos*.⁴ By comparison, we find that seventeenth-century *jácaras* deal with pimping, extortion, and robbery instead of drug-running, and the women in the early-modern genre are invariably prostitutes. Alonso Hernández writes that: “Que un rufián cante alabanzas a su puta y al vino me parece la cosa más natural del mundo, ya que tanto la una como el otro se presentan como elementos indispensables de la valentónica en multitud de textos” (62). Hidalgo lists different terms for prostitute or moll (the distinction is not always clear) in his 1609 *vocabulario*. “Marca” (“mujer pública) and “coima” (“mujer del mundo”) are the most popular, appearing dozens of times in the songs from Hill’s modern collection of seventeenth-century criminal ballads. Wine, not whiskey, is the drink of choice for *jaques*, and goes by different slang terms such as “colaima,” “pío,” “tiple,” and “turco.”

Both genres, separated by more than 300 years, specialize in describing criminal exploits with humor and an understated style that use ironic turns of phrase and wordplay, often to barely veil the horror of extreme violence. The

³ For settings in *narcocorridos* involving women and booze, Lobato Osorio also points out the common ingredients of male camaraderie and a love of music (153).

⁴ “Les Dicen Buchonas” by Vanessa García contains the lyrics, “Del baño salen alegres / gritan ‘¡Puro Culiacán!’ / y ‘¡Arriba el M1.’ / ‘El Mayo,’ ‘Chapo Guzmán!’,” and “La buchona” by Julián Álvarez, explains, “Te gustan andar a la moda, / los corridos, las pistolas. / Te gusta andar en blindadas, / presumes ser de la bola.”

modern group Tucanes de Tijuana are known for their big hit “Mis tres animales” in which the narrator humorously refers to his drug trade using code words for cocaine, marijuana, and heroin, respectively, and which presents him as an innocent farmer:

Vivo de tres animales,
que quiero como a mi vida.
Con ellos gano dinero,
y ni les compro comida.
Son animales muy finos,
mi perico, mi gallo y mi chiva.

The same narrator boasts that his “animals” sell better in the United States than hamburgers at McDonald’s. While *Narcocorridos* mostly use violence to heighten the tension of a narrative, an opposing use of understatement can be paradoxically exaggerated to the extent that a humorous effect is achieved, turning bland resignation into entertainment:

Por eso es que hay tantas muertes
en esa frontera roja.
De todos es trampolín
para cruzar hierba y coca.
La mafia tira a matar.
Su territorio es prohibido.
No se metan al corral
porque los cuernan los chivos.
Dicen que la mafia muere,
yo mejor toco madera.
Sé que no es un buen camino
la pobreza no es muy buena.
 (“Frontera Roja,” Los Tucanes de Tijuana)

A full taxonomy of the humor in either early-modern or modern genre is not possible here, but it is important to mention that in both eras the humor is not exclusively satirical, and not always used to make light of a bad situation. To place *jácaras* in the category of *romances burlescos* would be misleading because they are not parodies or mockery *per se*. As with the *narcocorrido*, the main conceit is the colorful and creative narration of violent criminal exploits, and the jokes are not mainly intended to degrade the role of the criminal. Instead, the humor is based on the cleverness of ironic turns of phrase and wordplay that entertain while only barely masking the true horror of the situation. One of the most common puns in the *jácara* uses the image of a “jubón,” a “jacket” stitched together from a hundred lashes on the back of the condemned. More ingenious poets extend the joke by having the narrator ironically describe a greater gift of two “jubones.” In other words, as men-

tioned in Hill's *romances* numbered XL, LIX, XCIX, the criminal receives two hundred lashes instead of the normal hundred. If there is any burlesque element in either the *narcocorrido* or the *jácara*, when it does not involve braggadocio directed towards a rival gangster, it is usually mocking the law-enforcement authorities. When the narrator of "Jefe de Jefes" by Los Tigres del Norte sings "Yo navego debajo de agua / y también sé volar a la altura," as cited above, he is not only prideful, but also gleefully flouting the Law. In another Tigres tune called "Pacas de a kilo," the narrator sings:

Me gusta andar por la sierra.
 Me crié entre los matorrales.
 Ahí aprendí a hacer las cuentas,
 nomás contando costales.
 Me gusta burlar las redes
 que tienden los federales.

Because the censorship regime in seventeenth-century Spain was stricter than the current one in Mexico, anti-authoritarian decrees more often issued from the mouths of condemned men, ensuring that the Crown has the last laugh, at a slight expense:

Mas, para materia de estado,
 que a mi se volvió podre,
 doscientos, y diez de remo
 me cantaron los pregones.
 Dicen que lo manda el Rey;
 no lo creo, aunque me ahorquen,
 que no le he visto en mi vida,
 ni pienso que me conoce. (Hill 138)

Early-modern *jácaras* are set apart from other *romances*, and modern *narcocorridos* are set apart from other *corridos*, because in both cases they are more prone to censorship and even prohibition. *Jácaras* never appear to have been outlawed because of their violent content, but rather because of their potential for causing rowdiness in the public playhouses where they were sung. As Rennert writes, "One can readily imagine the confusion and uproar caused in the theaters by the turbulent mob of *mosqueteros* [groundlings] shouting for *jácaras*. Indeed, it finally became an intolerable nuisance in Seville, and in 1648 the city authorities threatened all such disturbers with fine and imprisonment" (135). Some of the theatricalized *jácaras* in Luis Quiñones de Benavente's 1645 collection *Jocoseria* spend more time riling up the audience with a promise of a criminal ballad than actually producing one. In *Jácara que se cantó en la compañía de Ortegón*, which starts with the stage directions, "Piden los mosqueteros ["groundlings"] *jácara*," two actresses are first hesitant

about singing, but they finally surrender to the shouts of the audience: “*Jácara se la ha de dar; / Que es, sin embargo de embargos / Su mandamiento fatal,*” implying that they will soon be dead if they refuse (686). The tension between facing censorship and suffering the audience’s wrath is undoubtedly part of the genre’s appeal when it was transmitted to a mass audience.

Narcocorridos have been prohibited in the sense that some radio stations have refused to play them, but as with narcotics themselves, prohibition only increases the product’s value. Terms like “prohibido” and “censurado” became a selling point, and likely were part of the genre’s increased popularity (Wald 4). In 1997, Los Tucanes de Tijuana (perhaps only second in popularity for *narcocorridos* to Los Tigres del Norte) released their compilation *Tucanes de plata: 14 tucanazos censurados* and Raúl Ortega’s collection of *Corridos censurados y rancheras llegadoras* in 1998. This trend for releasing compact discs with similar titles continued well into the next decade, with Banda Macho’s 2009 *Corridos prohibidos en vivo*, copying Los Tigres’ title from over twenty years before. The quote from the theatricalized 1645 *jácara* cited earlier in this article “*Jácara se la ha de dar; / Que es, sin embargo de embargos / Su mandamiento fatal,*” echoes across the centuries in a newspaper report that quotes Los Tigres del Norte’s band leader as saying that “*el público es el que manda*” (Trejo). In spite of demand, both *jácaras* and *narcocorridos* face another type of censorship, that of tastes dictated by the middle and upper classes. In Lope de Vega’s *Gatomaquia* from 1624 cited above, we find *jácaras* listed among the “*bárbaras proezas / y hazañas de rufianes*” (335). About *corridistas* in general, and thus *narcocorridistas* as well, Elijah Wald writes, “Despite their successes, many feel underappreciated, both by the *corrido* fans who know their songs but not their names and by the intellectuals and writers who have dismissed their work as *música naca*, music for hicks” (6).

Some intellectuals and writers who have not dismissed the *jácara* or the *narcocorrido* retain another type of bias that is still related to aesthetic judgment. It is the opinion, in both early-modern and modern cases, that the genre has little to offer artistically, but has much to offer as a sort of anthropological informant for studying the seventeenth-century Spanish *hampa* and modern narco-culture, respectively. The finest collection of *jácaras* in a single volume is John M Hill’s 1945 *Poesías germanescas*, but in the prologue he writes, “To the modern reader whose chief concern is with literary values these remnants of such an exotic muse can hardly offer any contribution of value to the enhancement of Spain’s belles lettres” (viii). The notion that a *jácara* could have any aesthetic value also seemed foreign to Juan Hidalgo in 1609, as he explained that his main purpose for publishing them was, in part, to provide aid to law-enforcement officials in fighting crime. Similarly today, *narcocorridos* are studied as documents of anthropological value. Ramírez-Pimienta,

who has written extensively on the subject, encourages readers to see beyond the demonization of the genre, and instead pay attention to its usefulness as “una de las mejores herramientas o barómetros para tomarle el pulso a la sociedad mexicana (en México y en Estados Unidos) de fines del siglo XX e inicios del siguiente” (21). In the introduction to his 2001 book, *Mexican Memoir: A Personal Account of Anthropology and Radical Politics in Oaxaca*, Howard Campbell divides future studies into two groups: those about “the drug trade itself” and those about the “‘narco-style’ espoused in the hundreds of narco-corridos” (6). Valbuena Esteban is aware of this tendency to eschew the artistic in favor of the anthropological, and vindicates at least the “popular artistic” merit of the *narcocorrido* by emphasizing a certain aesthetics of truth-telling that, according to him, has its roots in the medieval Spanish *romance* (994). The intent of this article is to achieve the same end of highlighting shared poetics that are both transcendent and work at ground level.

Because of the two genres’ popularity, there has been a concomitant desire to see them manifest in other forms of entertainment. In general, baroque Spanish entertainment thrived on admixture, and with the dominance of verse over prose in theatrical pieces since the beginning of the seventeenth century, blending poetic and dramatic genres was the norm. One example is the blended sub-genre of the *jácara entremesada*, similar to a *baile entremesado*, in the 1663 anthology *Tardes apacibles*. On other occasions, dramatized *jácaras* were simply called “*jácaras*” and nothing more, as in Luis Quiñones de Benavente’s *Jocoseria* collection. The best example is the same piece cited above in which one of the female actor/singers finally obeys the audience’s “mandamiento fatal” and sings a *jácara*. In a metatheatrical flourish, the song itself attempts to enter the playhouse by beating down the door to the entrance, and thus avoid paying. The song/play makes a specific reference to a gangster named Mallurde,

Preguntáronle: ¿quién paga?
 Y el hombre, sin más, ni más,
 Con la chica desembraza
 Un más líbranos de mal.
 Tate, tate, dicen todos,
 Y él, que no sabe tatar,
 Cuerpos mortales desgrana,
 Como si fueran agraz. (688)

The actors on stage offer both warnings and taunts about Mallurde, soon after which he appears in the flesh (portrayed by the actor Osorio), threatening to smash in the face of the woman who taunted him. *Narcocorridos* have also been dramatized, in both Hispanic and Anglo-dominated entertainment media, especially television. The biggest television hit inspired by the genre

is undoubtedly the 2011 *telenovela* titled *La reina del sur*, based on a full-length novel from 2002. The author Arturo Pérez Reverte “was ‘seduced’ by the narcocorrido and the lifestyle it documents,” but he is also known for fictionalizing the underworld of early-modern Spain (Ragland 198). In one of his novels about this period, he refers to audience members clamoring for a real *jácara* that can be found in the same *Jocoseria* collection as the separate example with the gangster Mallurde cited above (Pérez Reverte 27).

What can we conclude by comparing seventeenth-century *jácaras* to modern Mexican *narcocorridos*, aside from the validity of the old adage: “The more things change, the more they stay the same”? We can conclude that such a staid and somewhat bland adage is actually useful for spurring us to uncover neglected aspects in each genre. Elements that are taken for granted in one can be just as present in the other, barely hidden from plain view. For example, that humor is common in the *jácaras* is a fact taken for granted by Golden Age experts. Those written by Francisco de Quevedo, the genre’s most famous representative, are categorized by some modern editors as belonging to “satírico-burlesca” works, and in the past they received even lighter treatment as “obras festivas” (Martínez Bogo 1). In contrast, when combing entire monographs written about the *narcocorrido*, it is difficult to find much mention of humor and satire, even among comments about the genre’s anti-governmental attitude. The nearest reference is Mark Edberg’s reading of *narcocorrido* bravado, an interpretation that uses Roland Barthes’s observation that professional wrestlers were, in Edberg’s words “cartoonlike on the one hand, yet as larger-than-life, ritualistic theater on the other” (112). But cannot the narrators and protagonists of the *narcocorridos* be laughing as well, with their own form of *burla* or even anti-authoritarian satire? Edberg cites the humor of “Mis tres animales,” as I have done, and directly afterwards mentions the song “Me gusta ponerle al polvo,” calling it “blunter and not quite as clever” (57). There must be a spectrum of humor and satire in *narcocorridos* that deserves further study. Conversely, study of the *jácara* can benefit from its comparison to the *narcocorrido*. The latter is inevitably studied as part of Borderlands culture, something impossible to avoid, since without a border, drug smuggling as a theme for these *corridos* would practically vanish. The Mexico Research Network is, as of 2013, working on a “Borderlands of the Iberian World” project, and there already exists a 2001 book with the very specific title of *Medieval Culture and the Mexican American Borderlands*. Medieval “romances fronterizos” are a sub-genre known to many a Spanish literature teacher. If we consider that Juan Hidalgo’s *Romances de germanía* was published in the same year as the expulsion of the *moriscos*, it should not surprise us that some *jácaras* contain hints of the *frontera*, in an early-modern vein. First there is the expression “jaque,” the

word for gangster itself, most likely of Arabic origin, although its exact relationship to criminality remains contested.⁵ Secondly, there is the tendency of *jácaras* to narrate events in the southern region of Andalusia, with Seville as a main setting for action. Thirdly, there are the toponymic names of the “jaques” that are often repeated, such as “El Mellado de Antequera,” “El Mulato de Andújar,” and especially “El Zurdillo de la Costa,” whose name appears in five separate *jácaras* in Hill’s modern collection. Certain markers of racial identity are also plentiful, as the term “mulato” appears in nine separate *jácaras* in his collection. If being mulatto is its own form of Borderlands identity in seventeenth-century Spain, straddling a persistent medieval “línea de color, esa frontera que fractura a las sociedades mediterráneas esclavistas,” then this is yet another reason to study the *jácara* from an anthropological point of view (Plazolles Guillén 50). In the end what *can* early modern Spain tell us about today’s narco-culture? It can tell us that, as an object of study, whether anthropological or otherwise, narco-culture has as much to teach us about the past as it has to learn from it.

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⁵ The most common explanation for the word “jaque” asserts that it comes from “jaque mate,” or “checkmate,” and refers to the *jaque*’s threatening nature. I find two other explanations equally plausible. It could derive metonymically from “jaco” or a protective jacket, especially when considering that “jaco” is also used in at least one *jácara* to describe the criminal himself. Also, because “jaque” is most often defined in seventeenth-century dictionaries as “rufián,” or “pimp,” we must also consider the term “xeque,” which means an elder political leader. Such a term could have been appropriated to describe pimps, much like the ironically respectful “madam” is used in English today.

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