

Ballads without Borders: Transnational Identities and Voices of Latino/a Migrant Experiences in *El Corrido de Dante* by Eduardo González Viaña

Fredrik Olsson

University of Göteborg

Abstract: This article attends to the representation of contemporary Latin American migrant experiences in the U.S. in *El Corrido de Dante* by Eduardo González Viaña. It focuses on voice and identity in relation to migration, space, place, home, and belonging. Paraphrasing Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" from her homonymous essay, I discuss if the undocumented migrant subject has a voice of his/her own. I claim that the text can help us understand the experiences of undocumented Latin American migrants and the identitarian "in-betweenness" of the new generations born on the other side of the border. Furthermore, I argue that it is a polyphonic novel populated by "new" and "traditional" Latinos/as, whose heterogeneous voices are enunciated from liminal or marginal positions. I find that González Viaña conveys a rich portrayal of the idiosyncratic reality of the Latin Americans in the U.S. with an original intertextual play that situates the text in the literary borderlands between classical Western works and Latin American and Latino/a popular and mass culture. However, the voice of the undocumented migrant is mediated by the complex multi-layered narrative structure, which makes the "truth" behind the story dissipate into hearsays, myths, and legends.

Keywords: Narrative—migration—Latin America—United States—identity—hybridity—liminality—migrant subject—dialogism—intertextuality

Latin American migration to the United States is currently reshaping the cultural landscapes on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. In the last decades, the migrant experience has been represented in various forms of cultural expressions: cinema, *corridos*, and, not least, literature. A salient

theme is the undocumented status of many migrants—Mexicans as well as a growing number of “new” Latinos/as from Central and South America. By posing the question “Can the undocumented migrant speak?”, paraphrasing Spivak’s well cited question “Can the subaltern speak?” from her homonymous essay, I would like to throw light upon the emergence of new “migrant subjects” and “border existences” in Latin American narrative fiction. Who are these subjects, how are they positioned?

This article focuses on the representation of contemporary Latin American migrant experiences in the U.S. in *El Corrido de Dante* (2006, translated into English in 2007 as *Dante’s Ballad*) by the Peruvian writer Eduardo González Viaña, who since 1990 resides in the U.S. where he has worked as a professor at Berkeley and in Oregon. *El Corrido de Dante* raises problematic issues of identity, dislocation, home, and belonging, but it is also, I will argue, a polyphonic novel of Latino/a USA. Who speaks and from which subject positions? Whose stories are told and how are they narrated? I claim that the text can help us understand the experiences of undocumented Latin American migrants and the identitarian “in-betweenness” of the new generations born on the other side of the border.

The location of the migrant

“Voice” is an ambiguous term. On the one hand, when postcolonial critics talk about voice, they may use expressions like “the recuperation of lost voices” or “finding a voice,” whether or not that voice is represented textually. This general and political concept, Susan S. Lanser argues, has become a “trope of identity and power” (3). On the other hand, narrative theorists are usually concerned with a more specific and technical use: the formal structures of texts (Lanser 4). According to Gérard Genette, voice designates the teller of the narrative and corresponds to the question “Who speaks?,” as distinguished from the question “Who sees?,” which refers to “focalization” (186). Also, a character can speak with his/her own voice in reported speech and even become a narrator, which then creates a “metanarrative,” a narrative within the narrative (Bal 275-276); a variant of this is the *mise en abyme* (Rimmon-Kenan 94; Genette 233; Bal 266).

Bakhtin links voice to subjectivity and alterity by stressing the active role of the Other and the dialogic quality of speech. According to Bakhtin, a novel can be defined as “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artisti-

cally organized" (262). Dialogic voices are not only to be found in the same literary work, but also within a single written or spoken utterance, or even within a single word (Bajtín 268). By means of basic compositional units—authorial speech, the speeches of narrators and characters, inserted “speech genres”—“heteroglossia” enters the novel (Bakhtin 263). Bakhtin thus places voice somewhere between Genette and the broader definition which tends to equate voice with “discourse” in the Foucauldian sense (Lanser 5; Foucault).

Having a voice and making use of it necessarily implies a positioning, speaking from a specific location in time and space and from a particular “subject position.” Stuart Hall links representation to cultural identity: “Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of *enunciation* ... We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context,’ *positioned*” (222). The fundamental characteristic of the migrant narrative is that it is de-centered and multiply positioned. According to Antonio Cornejo Polar, the “migrant subject” (*sujeto migrante*) speaks from the different spaces that coexist in his/her memory, from a place of enunciation which is not one nor homogenous (Altuna 5). “Migrant discourse” is characteristically constructed around various asymmetric axes in a non-dialectic way. The migrant experience—“here and now” in relation to “there and then”—tends to create two-faced narratives, where the displacement doubles (or more) the territory of the subject (Cornejo Polar 841).

The protagonist Dante Celestino, an archetypical undocumented Mexican working as a farm laborer in Oregon, perfectly embodies the concept of the migrant subject. Dante’s narrative is positioned around two major spatio-temporal axes: on the one hand, a series of retrospections; fragments from his life that he tells his friend and silent interlocutor, the donkey Virgilio, as well as images of the past that keep reappearing in his dreams: the precarious situation in his hometown in Michoacán, the journey to the North and the hazardous border-crossings, the North American employers’ abuse of the undocumented workforce, the difficulties to bring his beloved Beatriz and the endless quest for obtaining a work visa. On the other hand, his present life: how his only child Emma or Emmita elopes with her criminal Chicano boyfriend Johnny on her *quinceañera*, fifteenth birthday, and how Dante sets out on an odyssey in his old van, accompanied by Virgilio and the occasional voice of his deceased wife, in order to reunite his fragmented

family. The odyssey appears to be an inner journey as well, for in *El Corrido de Dante* every search for the Other is also a search for the proper identity, as José Manuel Camacho Delgado has observed.

Of corridos and classics

Dante's migrant discourse is framed by another narrative, the story of an anonymous reporter who has been asked to write a "human interest story" about the Celestinos, but ends up writing a novel. The story has been covered by other newspapers, but the chief editor wants the reporter to investigate the truth behind it (*Corrido* 25). (González Viaña, *El Corrido de Dante*, 25; henceforth cited as *Corrido*). While the main narrative is told in the past tense by an extradiegetic narrator, to use Genette's nomenclature, the frame narrative is an intradiegetic, first-person rendition in the present as well as the past tense by the reporter commenting on his research. Dante and a few other characters from the main narrative appear in the frame narrative as informants, but only once the reporter enters the main narrative as a character: the reporter coincidentally runs into Dante at a wedding, but "[el reportero] [n]o adivinaba que un año más tarde estaría escribiendo sobre Dante" (*Corrido* 138).¹ The fact that the narrator intentionally exposes himself as the "author" of the novel is a metafictional device that raises questions about authenticity and truth in the representation of undocumented migrants.

As the title of the novel suggests, the *corrido* is a leitmotif. Dante himself is a skillful accordion player able to recall the Mexican classics that his nostalgic compatriots demand, and the text is replete with citations of song lyrics, some authentic, others composed by González Viaña. However, the musical metaphor also governs the composition of the text. Audrey E. García analyzes the structural similarities between *El Corrido de Dante* and the popular musical subgenre, the *corrido del inmigrante*:

The element of truth behind those experiences [of Mexican migration] is *corridos'* own ideal; that is, a narration of a true story/event, skillfully recounted by a *corridista*, or a composer. In *El Corrido de Dante*, González Viana [*sic!*] follows this principle by giving voice to an anonymous journalist who investigates the truth of Dante and his life's quest,

1 'I never guessed that one year later I would be writing about him and his donkey' (González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 142). It can be observed that this passage is written in the first person in the English edition and in the third person in the Spanish one.

an allegory of the collective experiences of Mexican laborers in the United States ... By switching from the journalist's voice to Dante's own rendition, he creates the effect of a testimony, where the journalist is the eyewitness of the 'true' account of Dante's life experiences and events. (García 220-221)

The traditional "news function" of the *corrido* (García 219) has its parallel in the reporter's supposedly veracious representation of Dante's experiences. The "author"-narrator belongs to the highest level of diegesis, and a journalist is, of course, expected to provide reliable information. By analogy with the *corrido*'s frequent time leaps and change of narrators (García 221), the "author"-narrator's discourse is intertwined with Dante's own words, be it his dialogic monologues—or "hidden dialogues" (Bajtín 287-288)—with Virgilio, his dreams, or his conversations with the journalist. The de-centered, fragmented structure in combination with a plurality of dialogic voices makes the text a "polyphonic novel" (Bajtín 67).

Even if the *corrido*'s ideal is the retelling of real events, its literary qualities should not be ignored—it is after all an artistically composed narrative. The famous Texan-Mexican *corridista* El Peregrino, with whom Dante forms the group Los Peregrinos de la Santa Muerte, explains to his friend how to write a *corrido*:

Hacer un corrido es fácil. Al principio, la salutación. Al final, la despedida. Porque en todo esto hay que ser cortés y bien educado con el público que lo va a escuchar. Y luego en el centro, allí hay que contar lo que el personaje de la canción quiere que se cuente sobre él ... Es importante que hayan hecho algo en la vida para merecer el corrido. El resto lo puedo inventar yo. (*Corrido* 218-19)²

As García maintains, the novel is structured on the key elements used in *corridos*: the *corridista*'s call to the audience, the presentation of the protagonist, the story itself, and the *corridista*'s farewell (220). The greeting and the goodbye correspond to the intrusions by the fictive author at the beginning and the end of the novel. By analogy with El Peregrino and his composing of "El Corrido de Juan Miguel" (*Corrido* 222-223), the reporter departs from the information available, then looks for inspiration and invents the rest of the story, exaggerating some details and leaving others out.

2 'Writing a ballad is easy. At the beginning, the salutation. At the end, the closing. Because, in all of this, one must be courteous and polite with the audience that is going to listen to him. And then in the middle, there you have to tell what the character in the song wants to be known about him ... People have to have done something in life to deserve a ballad. I can make up the rest' (González Víaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 231).

The oral character of the *corrido* has its parallel in *El Corrido de Dante*. The journalist affirms that while some facts are well documented in the newspapers, there are other seemingly inexplicable events that intersect these stories and appear to be connected to them. He admits, for example, that he does not know why Dante all the time traveled accompanied by a donkey (*Corrido* 278). In order to find the truth, the reporter makes a series of interviews, but as the subtitles signal, the informants are hardly reliable: “Los que creen que saben no lo saben por completo,” “Más falsos testimonios sobre Virgilio.”³ The first interviewee is an enigmatic Hispanic whose very existence the reporter starts doubting afterwards. The journalist states that he does not clearly remember the words, but he tries to reproduce the “testimony” about Virgilio and how the donkey crossed the border illegally and was taught how to read, a story that according to the informant is based on different and divergent hearsays (*Corrido* 25-29). The technique of juxtaposing several levels of unreliable oral narration is found throughout the text and thus contributes to the deconstruction of the limits between fiction and reality, as well as between truth and myth.

The combination of authentic details, apparently supernatural events and popular cultural beliefs, legends, and myths brings to mind Alejo Carpentier’s concept *lo real maravilloso* (11). As a matter of fact, the migrant characters express their devotion to countless hybrid figures found in Mexican and Chicano folklore, such as *Virgen de Guadalupe*, *Santa Muerte*, and *Jesús Malverde*. Other examples are the Cuban *Santa Bárbara*, who supposedly saved Florida from the Floyd hurricane in 1992, and the nude Venezuelan witch *María Lionza* (see *Corrido* 113, 239, 247, 250). In the novel, most migrants seem to accept miracles as if they be ordinary. The reporter asks Dante if he considers any moment of his recent life miraculous, but the protagonist believes not, because “el prodigio es cotidiano para él” (*Corrido* 279).⁴ Furthermore, the frequent use of dreams tends to blur the limit between the real and the imaginary; even the border between life and death is sometimes crossed. The “miraculous” scenes are generally narrated by characters and/or based on hearsays and normally surrounded by discursive markers that underline the unreliability of the information or the disagreement between the sources. At the same time, the text presents

3 ‘Those Who Think They Know Only Know Half the Story,’ ‘More Falsehoods about Virgilio’ (González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, 15, 44)

4 ‘miracles are a daily thing for him’ (González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, 299).

plenty of realistic details and extratextual references. Critics have identified González Viaña's aesthetics as "magic realism," the controversial concept often attributed to the writers of the Boom. Camacho argues that *El Corrido de Dante* situates the "magic realism" in the context of the U.S.-Mexican border, while Carmen Sales maintains that the genre is simultaneously parodied and paid homage to. The writer himself asserts that he does not follow any particular literary current; he only tries to reproduce the stories that people tell him as accurately as possible (qtd. in Ayala). I believe it to be a problem of representation: how to account for the absurdities of the everyday struggle of the undocumented migrants in the U.S.? How to represent America's *heterogeneidad multitemporal* (García Canclini 72), the idiosyncrasies of a continent where pre-Hispanic cosmologies coexist with (post)modernity? It appears that González Viaña has felt the same necessity as Carpentier to let *lo maravilloso* flow free from a reality strictly followed in all its details (Carpentier 14). The result is a novel where the impossible is made probable and the resurrection from the dead or the metamorphosis of bodies turns out to be easier than obtaining the "green card" (Camacho Delgado).

While the *corrido* leitmotif and the aesthetics of *lo real maravilloso* situate the text in a Latin American tradition, the intertextual play with works such as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and the *Bible* locates it in the borderlands of Western culture, which further accentuates its "literariness." By analogy with the classic work, Dante is guided by Virgilio (here converted into a donkey) through hell and purgatory (as metaphors for the immigrant's hardships) hoping to reach paradise, or at least obtain legality.⁵ In the same way, before Beatriz enters the heavenly terrains (the U.S.), the crossing of a river (Lethe/Eunoe remains—Río Grande/Río Bravo) makes her forget all bad memories (*Corrido* 102), which helps her keep a nostalgic image of her homeland. As in the *Divine Comedy*, the characters Dante meets on his journey narrate their lives. In the contemporary text, however, paradise is always postponed, as Dante's waiting for the work visa turns out to be eternal: "el universo hace milagros, pero el Departamento de Inmigración, no" (*Corrido* 279).⁶ Even if his passionate love to Beatriz makes

5 The fact that Virgilio is a donkey opens for multiple readings. For example, in Dante's home there is a painting of Joseph and Mary fleeing to Egypt with the newborn Jesus on a donkey (*Corrido* 279). The painting is in turn a *mise en abyme* of the intercalated story of Virgilio and the Espino family.

6 'the universe does miracles but the Immigration Department doesn't' (González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 299).

him feel like in heaven, the harsh reality is that he and his family cannot survive on love alone.

González Viaña generally deals with the migration issue using religious (biblical and/or pre-Hispanic) imagery, indicating that international migration is the “natural” course of history and therefore unable to stop as long as the differences between North and South prevail. The exodus of Moses’ people from Egypt to the Promised Land is repeatedly used as a metaphor for the Latin American migration to the North, and there are some truly original rewritings of the Genesis and the Apocalypse. One of Dante’s new acquaintances, an old Mexican horse tamer, argues that Latinos/as are better suited than the Anglos to obey God’s order to “grow and multiply” (*Corrido* 132): “Los latinos, según él, eran una preciosura de raza, pero sus corrales estaban un poco descuidados. ‘Los güeros no saben lo que se pierden. Deberían aceptar a todos los que quieren entrar. No sólo eso. Deben invitarlos para que vengan a mejorar estas razas frías del norte’” (*Corrido* 133).⁷ This unusual metaphor for the “Latinization” of the U.S. is an inversion of White Supremacy discourse and serves as a nod at White America’s fear of the high birth rate of Hispanics. The stereotypical image of Latinos/as as hot and Anglos as cold is repeated in the scene where Emmitta is made in the middle of “un calentamiento global que recae ciertas noches americanas sobre un grupo humano muy caliente y dispuesto a extenderse” (*Corrido* 120).⁸ González Viaña’s message is that a further racial mixing would benefit the nation, perhaps creating a new *mestizo/a* (Anzaldúa 99).

In an interview González Viaña affirms that he aspires to give voice to the Latin American migrants: “Es en nombre de este pueblo sin voz que yo hablo y trato de ser su voz” (qtd. in Sinche López).⁹ Literature *can* be a means to give voice to a group that traditionally has not been able to speak. However, Dante’s voice—the voice of a voiceless, an illiterate undocumented Mexi-

7 ‘Latinos, according to him, were a beautiful breed, but their corrals were a little untidy. “The gringos don’t know what they’re missing. They should accept everybody who wants to come in. Not just that. They should invite them to come and improve these cold northern breeds” (González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, 137).

8 ‘a global warming that on certain American nights falls upon a human group that is very hot and willing to propagate’ (González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, 122).

9 ‘It is in the name of this people without a voice that I speak and try to become its voice’ (my translation). The statement is, of course, somewhat exaggerated, as Latin American migrants already have a voice in well-known Chicano/a writers such as Helena María Viramontes. However, unlike most U.S. born authors, González Viaña writes in Spanish and specifically addresses the issue of contemporary undocumented migration and the “new” Latinos/as.

can farm laborer—is not only mediated through the real author González Viaña—a Peruvian academic living in the U.S.—but also the fictive author—the Hispanic journalist—and his often unreliable sources, who in turn have obtained the information from other unreliable sources, in a seemingly endless chain similar to the *mise en abyme*. The technique of letting the Other speak implies displacement and distantiation, which can make it possible to show or tell what seems impossible to say, or what could otherwise not be told (Piglia 19). In *El Corrido de Dante*, however, “truth” is always displaced through the many levels of unreliable narration until it dissipates into conjectures, hearsays and myths. Dante himself is converted into a legend when his life is (re)told in a performative way in a *corrido* that El Peregrino composes as a tribute to his friend: “*Este es el corrido que canta la pena / del cantor errante Dante Celestino. / Por el sur y por el norte, perdió su camino / peregrino errante, erraba en tierra ajena*” (*Corrido* 255).¹⁰

Testimonies from a *quinceañera*

The opening scene of *El Corrido de Dante* depicts the microcosm of a predominantly Mexican community in the village of Mount Angel, Oregon. The choice of this untypical space signals that the “Latinization” of the U.S. is a national concern not limited to the traditional Mexican migration to the Southwest. The narrative starts *in medias res* with a detailed account of the event that is going to be the highlight of the twenty-five years that Dante has spent in the U.S.: Emma’s *quinceañera*, a party he solemnly promised his wife on her deathbed a year earlier.

The representation of the *quinceañera* situates the migrant community in a hybrid space of “petrified” Mexican traditions and mass culture in the form of *telenovelas*. Dante is firmly determined to comply with Beatriz’s last wish and with the help of friends and neighbors and most of his savings, he converts the community hall of the humble housing complex into “un fastuoso escenario de fiesta como aquéllos donde se desarrollan las vidas y los quereres de la gente que habita en las telenovelas” (*Corrido* 14).¹¹ The party is an ephemeral moment of living the American Dream and displays

10 “This is the corrido that sings the sorrow / of wandering minstrel Dante Celestino. / In the south and in the north, he lost his way / wandering pilgrim in a foreign land” (González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, 272). All italics are original unless stated otherwise.

11 ‘a lavish party stage like those on which the lives and loves of soap-opera characters unfold’ (González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, 3).

idiosyncratic and hyperbolic features such as a silvery limousine with fourteen doors for the birthday queen to arrive in (*Corrido* 15). Dante concludes that in his past life in Michoacán he could never have dreamed of such a *quinceañera* (*Corrido* 17)—nostalgia and triumph coexist in the living memories that sooth or torment the displaced (Cornejo Polar 840). The unifying theme for “la gente amante de los recuerdos” (*Corrido* 20)¹² is the geographical dislocation similar to exile and the nostalgia that is evoked through music—boleros, *corridos*, and other Mexican classics for the older generation to remember, the latest Latino hits for the youngsters who do not share the identification with the homeland (*Corrido* 20-21). Within the community, there is a strong sense of solidarity, even across nationalities, which manifests itself in the numerous *padrinos* and *madrinas*—the *quinceañera* is a truly communal event.

The (re)creation of the course of events during the *quinceañera* reveals the dialogic narrative structure with its multiple levels of unreliable oral narration. What begins like an extradiegetic eye-witness account with Dante as the main focalizer is completed with testimonies from several informants. One of the witnesses, don Egberto Longaray from Guanajuato, recalls the sudden appearance of the criminal Chicano gang and how they leave with Emmita (*Corrido* 21). Like several other scenes, the passage is filled with uncertainties and ambiguities through the use of discursive markers such as *quizás*, *tal vez* (‘perhaps,’ ‘maybe’) and different accounts of the same event:

Según algunos, [a Dante] los pandilleros le hicieron beber una sustancia extraña. *Según otros* fue desmayado de un cachazo de pistola en la cabeza, y la pandilla se apoderó de la fiesta ... Pero Dante no recuerda las cosas así:

—No pasó nada. ¿Para qué periódico dice que trabaja? No, hombre, esa noche no pasó nada.

—Estoy tomando notas para escribir una historia. A lo mejor ese detalle no aparecerá.

—No pasó nada ...

En todo caso, Dante despertó a la mañana siguiente. *Tal vez*, desmayado en el local o en su cama *si es cierto que no pasó nada*. *Quizás* decidió creer que todo lo había soñado. *Según lo que dice que recuerda* ... (*Corrido* 22)¹³

12 ‘people fond of memories’ (my translation).

13 ‘Some say the gang members made Dante drink a strange substance. Others say he was knocked out by being hit on the head with the butt of a pistol and the gang took over the party ... But Dante does not remember it like that: “Nothing happened. What newspaper did you say you work for? No, sir, nothing happened that night.” “I’m taking notes to write a story. Perhaps that detail will not be included.” “Nothing happened.” ... In any case, he awoke the next morning. Maybe regaining consciousness at the hall or in his

The metalepsis is signaled by the change from the past to the present tense. Dante seems reluctant to inform about the *quinceañera*, and the “truth” behind the event can therefore only be approached as a conjecture based on competing and contradictory voices that form a dialogue in Bakhtinian sense. Even the narrator’s discourse is “double voiced,” internally dialogized, as it includes other characters’ speech as well as the narrator’s evaluation (Bakhtin 224-226).

Emmita’s elopement with her Chicano boyfriend during the unfortunate *quinceañera* exposes a profound generational conflict between migrants and their children born in the U.S. Dante speaks from the position of the migrant subject who has not assimilated but continues living in a present time invaded by the nostalgic memories of the colors, tastes, and smells of his village in Michoacán. As his mother told him before he went North looking for a job and a future, his homeland will always be Mexico: “Eso sí, cuando ya te toque morir, déjale dicho [a Beatriz] que te traiga de vuelta para acá. Los muertos y las plantas tienen su tierra, hijo” (*Corrido* 61).¹⁴ Hoping to maybe be able to return some day, Dante has maintained his “petrified” Mexican identity and his emotional attachment to Spanish; in fact, he neither speaks nor understands English. A caring father, he warns his daughter for the Others, the “Americanized” Latinos (*Corrido* 18): “Hispanos, como nosotros, eso está bien ... pero no esos otros jóvenes hispanos que no hablan en español y se juntan en pandillas para hacer negocios con drogas” (*Corrido* 18).¹⁵ According to Dante, there are two kinds of Hispanics: those who have assimilated (and lost the traditional values) and those who maintain their roots. However, Dante fails to recognize the inevitability of hybridization and therefore also its possibilities.

Emmita openly repudiates her parents’ culture and speaks from a radically different subject position. In the reproduced farewell letter (an inserted speech genre), Emma tells her life story in her own words, that is, with the female voice of a second generation Mexican American:

bed if it's true that nothing happened. Maybe he decided to believe that he had dreamed it all. According to what he says he remembers ... (González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 12). Emphasis added.

14 ‘But make sure that when your time comes to die, tell her [Beatriz] to bring you back here. The dead, like the plants, both have their land, son’ (González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 57).

15 ‘Hispanics, like us, that’s fine ... but not those other *Hispanic* guys that don’t speak Spanish and join gangs and make drug deals’ (González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 7).

Me voy, Dad, no me siento bien en este environment que tú tienes para mí. Remember, Dad, ya no estás en México y yo no soy una chiquilla. Mom y tú siempre me llevaron a las fiestas de hispanos, a la iglesia, a las clases en español, y luego me hiciste esa fiesta ridícula. Dad, yo soy una chica americana. Johnny y yo hemos estado saliendo *for a long time* ... Como querías que te lo dijera, Dad, si tú no quieres a los chicos que hablan inglés ... Dad, ya no estás en tu tiempo ni en tu patria ... *Wake up*, Dad, yo soy una chica americana. Yo no nací en Michoacán ... Dad, tú eres casi un analfabeto, y no puedes ofrecermelo el futuro que tú mismo no tienes ... Y no te preocupes mucho, quizás algún día regrese, pero será cuando haya cumplido mi sueño de ser una gran cantante como Selena ... I'm gonna be famous, Dad. (*Corrido* 23-24)¹⁶

Emma's letter is a product of the process of hybridization, in which assimilation is not complete but opens up a "Third Space," an "in-between" space of translation and negotiation in the conflict between the inherited culture and the surrounding dominant society (Bhabha, 1994, 54-56; Bhabha, 1996, 58). Her linguistic identity is particularly interesting, as she identifies more with the English language than with the Spanish; she is perfectly fluent in English and speaks "Spanglish" with her father. Several examples of "code-switching" can be observed, some of which are marked in italics in the original text: phrases such as "*for a long time*" and "I'm gonna be famous, Dad," and single words like "Dad," "Mom," and "remember."¹⁷

Emma positions herself in the ambivalent borderland between a bilingual Chicana and "an American girl." Her idealized object of identification is the murdered Texan-Mexican singer Selena, icon and legend of Latino music in Spanish and English. Also, her extremely influential boyfriend is a Chicano, a monolingual English speaker, but nevertheless of Mexican descent. As expressed in her letter, Emmita does not identify with the migrants and their "petrified" traditions. On the contrary, she repudiates the traditional Mexican celebration of her fifteenth birthday, which was of such a great importance to her mother. The distant homeland that Dante feels dislocated

16 'I'm leaving, Dad, I don't feel right in this environment that you have for me. Remember, Dad, you aren't in Mexico anymore and I'm not a little girl. You and Mom always took me to the Hispanic parties, to church, to Spanish classes, and now you organized this ridiculous party for me. Dad, I'm an American girl. Johnny and I have been going out for a long time ... How do you think I could have told you that, Dad, since you don't like boys who speak English ... Dad, these aren't your times and you aren't in your country anymore ... Wake up, Dad, I'm an American girl. I wasn't born in Michoacán ... Dad, you're practically illiterate, and you can't offer me the future that you yourself don't have ... And don't worry too much, maybe someday I'll be back, but that will be after I've achieved my dream of being a great singer, like Selena ... I'm gonna be famous, Dad' (González Víaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 13-14). It should be observed that the code-switching is lost in translation.

17 For a discussion of "Spanglish" and "code-switching," see Fairclough.

from does not exist in his daughter's imagination. Instead, Emma maintains that she sees herself as an American girl with an American dream: to become a famous singer like Selena. However, Emma's "self-identity" (Giddens 53) does not correspond to the cultural identity that the environment assigns her. In school, she receives special treatment as "Hispanic," even though she proved to be the best pupil in her English-speaking class. Besides, her fair skin and green eyes make the school inspector believe he has made a mistake, because the girl in front of him does not correspond to his stereotypical image of Hispanics, who according to him are "persons of color" (*Corrido* 163-164).¹⁸ In sum, Emmita symbolizes the second-generation Mexican immigrant, located in an identitarian borderland, the in-between space of conflict and negotiation between the cultural heritage of her parents and the struggle to fit into the dominant society of the country where she was born.

Pilgrims of the borderlands

During Dante's odyssey, his old van literally and metaphorically becomes his new *mobile* home. Dante's life once again turns into a modern "pilgrimage" (Bauman), but now his project is not to find a place where he can form a family, but to recuperate his daughter and—metaphorically—the sense of himself.¹⁹ Dante and Virgilio leave their home twice—as did Don Quixote (Camacho Delgado)—and along the road they meet other first- and second-generation migrants—mainly Mexicans but several other Latin American nationalities are also represented—whose dialogic voices are enunciated from liminal positions.

A particularly challenging "border identity" (Grossberg 91) is embodied in the character of the old Chicano who is hitchhiking to Las Vegas with his grandson. The stranger demands a ride and begins to explain to Dante, in reported speech, that his parents were undocumented Mexican immigrants and that he was literally born between two worlds in El Paso, even if he has lived most of his life in Los Angeles (*Corrido* 192). In the following dialogue between Dante and the hitchhiker, the latter expresses his rootlessness:

18 It can be discussed if González Viaña instead perpetuates another stereotype, namely to equate beauty with fair skin. Both Emma and Beatriz are described as blond and beautiful.

19 An intertext is Odysseus' journey and adventures and his tireless search for his loved ones in Homer's *Odyssey*, as has been observed by Camacho Delgado.

Yo mismo no sé de dónde soy. A veces soy de aquí. A veces soy de allá ... [M]is padres eran mexicanos, pero mi señora madre me parió en tierra americana y hablo inglés como primera lengua, pero las más de las veces sueño en español. Cuando era joven todo el tiempo hablaba, pensaba y comía en gringo. Ahora vivo más de recuerdos y de sueños, y todo me viene en español ... La verdad es que no sé ya lo que soy. A veces me sacó los recuerdos y los remuevo para ponerlos en orden, pero creo que no se puede. (*Corrido* 195)²⁰

The hitchhiker's self-identity oscillates between "American" and "Mexican," but he does not enjoy his freedom, because he feels trapped in an ambivalent in-between position where he has not only lost any sense of home, but also lost himself. Before he used to renounce his linguistic and cultural background, but this condemned him to live in a constant state of nostalgia. If Dante's only attachment is his absent daughter, the hitchhiker's future is his grandson, whose studies he will finance by robbing a casino in Las Vegas; a Robin Hood-like crime against the very heart of capitalist America. In the words of Bauman, the old Chicano has become a post-modern "vagabond," a stranger wherever he goes with "little choice but to reconcile himself to the state of homelessness" (28, 30).

Another form of "border existence" (Grossberg 91) is embodied in the character El Peregrino. The narrator gives a brief summary of the troubadour's life on the border, which El Peregrino himself continues:

Si había cruzado la raya tantas veces era porque sufría de incontenible nostalgia y no podía permanecer mucho tiempo en Estados Unidos sin ir por unos días a ver a los suyos

...

—Si usted me pregunta por qué me gusta la frontera, le puedo dar muchas razones, pero las principales son dos: la primera es que puedo ir en cualquier momento al otro lado. De El Paso, cruzo el puente y ya me tiene en Ciudad Juárez. La segunda es que son ciudades para gente muy bragada. (*Corrido* 238)²¹

20 'I myself don't know where I'm from. Sometimes I'm from here. Sometimes from there ... My parents were Mexican, but my mother had me on American soil and I speak English as my first language, but I usually dream in Spanish. When I was young I always spoke, thought, and ate in Gringo. Now I live more on memories and dreams, and everything comes to me in Spanish ... The truth is that I don't know what I am anymore. Sometimes I take out my memories and stir them around to put them in order, but I don't think that's possible' (González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 205-206).

21 'If he had crossed the border so many times it was because he suffered from uncontrollable homesickness and could not remain in the United States for long without leaving for a few days to see his loved ones ... "If you ask me why I like the border, I can give you a lot of reasons, but the main ones are these two: the first is that I can go to the other side whenever I want to. From El Paso, I cross the bridge and I'm already in Ciudad Juárez. The second is that they are cities for very malicious people"' (González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, 252-253).

El Peregrino positions himself literally and metaphorically in the borderlands. His restless nature as an innate “pilgrim” makes it impossible for him to keep a prolonged attachment to one single place, because as soon as he feels nostalgia, he crosses the border. El Peregrino’s biographical narrative is a repeated border-crossing, “an image of between-ness which does not construct a place or condition of its own other than the mobility, uncertainty, and multiplicity of the fact of the constant border-crossing itself” (Grossberg 91-92). It is perhaps not surprising that the *corridista*’s favourite theme is “los hombres y mujeres que caminan debajo del río o de la tierra y cruzan la línea para invadir una tierra que también consideran suya” (*Corrido* 243).²² The recognition of the fact that many Latinos/as are descendants of Mexicans who lived there even before the U.S. was constituted as a nation is explicitly expressed in the epigraph, sung by Los Peregrinos de la Santa Muerte: “Nosotros no cruzamos la raya, la raya / nos cruzó a nosotros” (*Corrido* 11).²³

Social networks are crucial for the day-to-day life of the migrant. In *El Corrido de Dante*, solidarity is strong among first-generation migrants, but there is interaction with Anglos as well. Dante makes friends with a fellow camper along the road, a Second World War veteran called Sean (note the Irish origin of the name) who speaks Spanish because he was married to a Spaniard. Together they sing and play the accordion, Sean an Irish lullaby (“*Over in Killarney many years ago / my mother sang a song to me,*”) (*Corrido* 73) and Dante the Mexican song “*María Bonita,*” thus sharing their nostalgia and the fact that both Latinos and Anglos have a history of immigration (*Corrido* 69-74). In fact, the *corrido* genre, popular in the Texan-Mexican borderlands, is actually a transnational hybrid, as the accordion is originally a German instrument and the polka rhythms were adapted from German immigrants, who in turn had borrowed them from the Czechs and the Bohemians (Anzaldúa 82-83). The scene where Dante, Sean and Jane, Sean’s friend, play and sing together shows that music does not know any borders and for a moment Dante feels like in heaven (*Corrido* 73). Despite their differences, Dante and his new acquaintances find a voice and a common language in music. Maybe it is here where González Viaña believes the future is to be found: a pan-American solidarity of cultural interaction between and despite national, ethnic, racial, and linguistic borders.

22 ‘the men and women who walk beneath the river or the land and cross the border to invade a land that they also consider theirs’ (González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, 258).

23 ‘We didn’t cross the line. / The line crossed us’ (González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, 12).

This essay has been dedicated to the study of voice and identity in *El Corrido de Dante* in relation to migration, space, place, and the idea of home. Literature is one of the mediums through which the undocumented migrant *can* speak, but does s/he? By analogy with the *corrido*, the reporter narrates Dante's life and adventures, with intercalated fragments told in Dante's own voice. Like the *corridista*, the journalist departs from a nucleus of (unreliable) information and then invents the rest: The article becomes a novel whose fictionality is constantly accentuated, "truth" is displaced and dissipated through the many levels of unreliable narration and Dante's life is turned into hearsays, myths and legends. The migrant subject speaks not in a voice that necessarily *is* his/hers, but is *imagined* to be his/hers. Analogous with the reporter and the *corridista*, González Viaña does not narrate his own experiences—he is after all a Peruvian professor writing about an undocumented Mexican farm laborer—but he speaks for the Other, from the Other's subject position, as if he were the Other, (re)creating a cultural universe that permits the reader to "live" with the migrants and know their inner thoughts and feelings. No, the undocumented migrant does not speak on his/her own, but nevertheless *El Corrido de Dante* conveys a truly original portrayal of the idiosyncratic reality of the Latin Americans in the U.S., with all their fears, joys, hopes, and illusions. One of the merits is the intertextual play that situates the text in the literary borderlands between Western canonical works and Latin American and Latino popular and mass culture. *El Corrido de Dante* is a polyphonic novel populated by a vast gallery of "new" and "traditional" Latinos/as whose dialogic voices are enunciated from the borderlands, the in-between spaces and the silence of the margins. Many characters suffer from nostalgia caused by dislocation, chronic rootlessness and a sense of life being an eternal "pilgrimage" or "vagabondage," but there is also the soothing power of music and a strong sense of solidarity among the migrants. *El Corrido de Dante* may be a ballad of broken dreams, but González Viaña seems to imagine the future of America as a continent without borders, a vast in-between space of hybridization and pan-American solidarity where everyone can find a home, somewhere.

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