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Straddling the Crystal Frontier: Reworkings of the U.S.-Mexican Border in the Lyrics of Calexico

Abstract:

The U.S.-Mexican border has been a contested space throughout the political and cultural history of the American South-West. Traditionally negotiated in regional genres such as the Western, which embraces a distinctly Anglo-American perspective, the borderlands have come to be increasingly recognized by cultural theorists as a space of cultural hybridity. The region's creative potential is deeply rooted in the conflictive history and present-day state of border politics. This article focuses on the Tucson-based band Calexico in order to demonstrate how borderlands politics influence musicians in the region. Since their early days, the band's song lyrics have had a politically conscious and highly critical perspective on various issues related to the border. Three of Calexico's songs, released between 2001 and 2006, serve as a "road map" for this article, leading from the violent border towns in northern Mexico across the border towards the south of the United States. As my analysis shows, the lyrics of Calexico cannot be fully appreciated without a thorough understanding of how deeply their work is intertwined with the various socio-political, environmental and cultural issues surrounding the U.S.-Mexican borderlands.

Keywords: Borderlands, Calexico, US-Mexican border, cultural hybridity

1. Introduction

The border as a contested space has long been a common trope throughout American cultural history. In addition to its administrative function, the border has come to be understood as a specific, human-made condition shaping the region surrounding it and the people living in this region (Martínez 53). Traditionally negotiated in Anglophone regional genres such as the Western, the border has gained renewed attention especially with the growing recognition of Mexican-American and Chican@ minorities towards the end of the 20th century, leading to a stronger focus in literary studies on cross-cultural or even transcultural reworkings of the border in the cultural production of the South-West. On the other hand, actual political tensions at the border have anything but disappeared. Tendencies of a positive awareness and inclusion of Mexican cultural practices as a part of U.S. culture have their negative counterpart in increasingly racialized discourses on illegal immigration and cross-border trafficking from Mexico into the United States. It is this tension which characterizes what Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa calls the “border culture”, which “[is] physically present wherever two of more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa vii).

A perfect example of how border culture can evolve over time can be found in the broad range of musical traditions present in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. What is today perceived as “Tex-Mex”, *ranchera* or *tejano* music has been heavily influenced by German and Czech immigrants who brought their accordions and polkas with them (San Miguel 10). Mexican influences, in turn, have found their way up north through *mariachi* sounds, Spanish rock music and the like. Last but not least, the entire genre of known as *narcocorrido* would never have existed without the existence of a border which unintentionally called into existence a particular type of music praising smugglers as heroic figures (Wald 12ff.). That being said, it should be obvious that Mexican and Mexican American musicians are not the only ones mixing influences and creating new, hybrid forms and traditions.

The Tucson-based band Calexico, named after a small border town in rural California, is a group of musicians that experiment with hybridity on a number of levels. A loosely knit collective of musicians rather than a permanent band, Calexico incorporate a great variety of musical styles, such as mainstream indie rock, Portuguese fado, Cajun jazz and Southern folk ballads. They utilize blasting *mariachi* trumpets, *cumbia* waltzes and other Latin American musical forms (Roddy, Schacht). More importantly, however, a great number of Calexico’s lyrics, which often contain passages sung in Spanish, take a social and environmental activist standpoint critical of U.S. foreign and social policies. The thematic range of their lyrics – most of which are written by lead singer Joey Burns – spans the disastrous impact of hurricane Katrina on the Mexican Gulf

Coast, the assassination of social activist and *nueva canción* singer Victor Jara by CIA agents in Chile, human trafficking, or “the seemingly inevitable demise of the Tarahumara, a native Indian tribe of the Sierra Madre’s Occidental range in Mexico who are losing their unique culture – and often their lives – to exploitative drug traffickers” (Schacht).

This paper explores the presence of political, environmental and cultural issues surrounding the U.S.-Mexican border in the lyrics of Calexico. More specifically, the analysis focuses on three songs: “Crystal Frontier” (from the album *Aerocalxico*, 2001), “Across the Wire” (*Feast of Wire*, 2003), and “Roka” (*Garden Ruin*, 2006). They take us on a journey from the Mexican side of the border via the actual frontier, the deserted space between the two countries, to the south of Arizona. Most importantly, all three songs deal with different border-related issues. “Crystal Frontier” describes everyday life, i.e. violence, drug and human trafficking, and exploitation in the *maquiladoras* (factories) in northern Sonora. “Across the Wire” touches upon illegal migration but, above all, focuses on environmental issues, a topic that has become more and more salient in the border region over the past few decades. Finally, “Roka” has a more culturally oriented approach towards hybridity (*mestizaje*) – with lyrics in both English and Spanish – and towards border folklore.

2. Illegal Immigration, Maquiladoras and Narcotráfico at the “Crystal Frontier”

Mexican immigration to the United States dates back to the late 19th century, when railroad construction peaked in the border region. When labor became a scarce resource north of the border around the mid-20th century, the Bracero Program provided Mexicans with short-term work contracts in the United States. It was the end of this program in 1964 which “marked the beginning of large-scale [illegal] immigration from Mexico” (Hanson 9). Since 1990, 34% of all immigrants to the United States have been of Mexican origin, 56% of which arrived without official documents (Hanson 1). These figures are in stark contrast with the assumption that the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), put into effect in 1994, would reduce economic push-pull effects contributing to south-north migration by creating economic wealth in Mexico itself. In fact, NAFTA was most profitable for U.S. companies that shifted their production centers to the infamous *maquiladoras*: large factories located just south of the border, where underpaid workers assemble commodity goods produced for the U.S. market.

As a consequence of economic deprivation and related problems such as organized crime, drug and human trafficking, and intense violence, migration is often seen as the last straw by many Mexicans living in the border region. Ironically, one of the major U.S. border-protection measures – Operation Gatekeeper in California – was enacted the same year that saw the beginning of NAFTA. Yet even the National Bureau of Economic Research is no longer denying the reverse

effects of increased border protection: “Over the last two decades, the United States has greatly increased the resources devoted to controlling illegal immigration... The net effect of changes in enforcement policy... has been increasing levels of immigration” (Hanson 42).

The ever-present border between the United States and Mexico thus became problematic in a new and more destructive way in the mid-1990s, which is also reflected in a number of literary works of that period. While not all of them are directly linked to current events of the time (for instance, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing* [1994], the second instalment of his well-known *Border Trilogy*, is set before and during the Second World War), the border seems to have been a prominent point of reference for many authors. One just has to look at titles such as T. C. Boyle’s *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) or Carlos Fuentes’s *The Crystal Frontier* (*La frontera de cristal*, 1995) in order to find evidence of this tendency (cf. Sadowski-Smith 188). As distinct and varied as they may be, all of these novels have in common that they describe the difficulties of life in and around the borderlands, particularly for Mexicans who migrate to the United States. It is thus hardly surprising that Calexico’s songwriting mastermind, Joey Burns, took up the famous title by Fuentes and borrowed it for his eponymous song.

The first auditory sensation of Calexico’s “Crystal Frontier” may be deceiving. The upbeat, lively brass hook line, supported by an energetic drum pattern, seems to provide the perfect background for what the listener would expect to develop into a generic story involving typically macho Latino heroes, any number of shady *gringos*, beautiful Latina women and an abundance of tequila. The lyrics, however, tell a rather different story. As a look at the chorus suggests, this song is more concerned with the violent nature of two cultures clashing in the infamous border towns of northern Mexico – for instance, Ciudad Juárez in the state of Chihuahua or Mexicali in Baja California – and with the way both sides are “keeping a close eye” on each other in an atmosphere of violence and mistrust. The three characters presented in the verses can be read as emblematic representations of different parts of border society.

The first verse introduces Marco, a young Mexican trying to cross the border. The proverbial “Seven Cities of Gold” – an old Spanish myth about the riches awaiting the brave north of the border – are here described as “lost”, suggesting that Marco’s desire for a better life has made him just as blind for reality as the craze for gold blurred the vision of the *conquistadores* in the New World. Stumbling forward, Marco does not pay attention to the head of a raven and the tail of a rattlesnake lining his path – macabre remains of two Mexican national symbols. For Marco, the Crystal Frontier thus seems to be nothing more than a see-through glass pane behind which he is hoping to become part of the American Dream. Little does it matter to him that NAFTA and other forms of U.S. neoliberal exploitation are, at least partly, responsible for shattering Mexico’s national economy and social structure in the first place.

Next, we learn about Amalia, a *maquiladora* worker assembling TV sets for the North American market. Amalia's child is among the many *desaparecidos*, the people who disappear without a trace in northern Mexico on an almost daily basis. This sketchy description of a young mother is all the more disturbing because it captures, in only a few lines, a number of problems with which women in the border region are confronted. Violence, most often in connection with organized crime and drug trafficking cartels, obviously affects the weakest members of society; adding the factor of exploitation on the labor market, many women are desperate enough to try and cross the border in order to find (equally underpaid) work in the United States (Slack and Whiteford). If they do remain in Mexico, many struggle to maintain their dignity while dealing with the loss of family members, the experience of violence and material deprivation. With regard to Amalia, the Crystal Frontier resembles an unbreakable shield locking her in a place from which she cannot escape. Its sheer presence dominates and shapes every moment of her life; for her, there is no way of forgetting about or even transcending this frontier.

One of the few "winners" of border society is Ramón, who is introduced in the third verse. A *coyote* – a human trafficker – by profession, he makes a living out of other people's desire to cross the frontier illegally. He is portrayed as a shady, elusive character who easily "slips through a hole in the fence" and who "can get you anything you want" as long as you are able and willing to pay. Although the lyrics remain vague here, it is not unlikely that the term Crystal Frontier for Ramón also implies his involvement in *narcotráfico*, i.e. drug trafficking, which has been growing despite the U.S. government's costly attempts to wage war on drugs such as crystal methamphetamine. A cynic by nature, Ramón's only interest is money, which will keep flowing as long as U.S. border protection policies are in place.

3. Environmentalism and the Borderlands: "Across the Wire"

The opening verse of "Across the Wire" introduces two brothers on their illegal journey across the border. Alberto is nervous and urges his brother to wake up and continue the dangerous endeavor. At this point, however, the focus shifts from the issue of migration to the actual, physical context in which the protagonists' story is embedded, capturing a snapshot-like impression of the border landscape. Before turning to the song lyrics themselves, it is worthwhile taking a brief look at how this environment has developed over time.

The field of environmental history has established the notion that humans do not only constantly and profoundly change their surroundings, but that they do so while operating within a complex network of socio-economic constraints (cf. Truett). In the U.S.-Mexican border region, the "transnational legacy of environmental and social change" dates back at least to the end of the 19th century, when Anglo-Americans began to push for resource development in southern

Arizona (Truett 161). During the heyday of early electrification, the discovery of copper around the small town of Bisbee led to the creation of railroad infrastructure on both sides of today's Arizona-Sonora border. Truett goes on to explain

the central irony of industrial development in the region[:] Although it created and sustained new linkages between the United States and Mexico, between city and country, and between nature and society, those who entered this transformed landscape found themselves in a world deeply inscribed by boundaries. (Truett 168)

Transnational environmental history draws attention to this contradiction precisely on the grounds of the assumption that “nature itself [ignores] political boundaries” (Truett 161). To give just one example, if industrial plants on the Sonoran side of the border pollute the Rio Grande, this will naturally affect both banks of the river – a truth simple enough to be generally overlooked in national environmental policy-making both in Mexico and the United States.

Like “Crystal Frontier”, “Across the Wire” was written by Joey Burns in a phase of intense and critical interest in illegal migration and environmental issues. In fact, the song title itself is borrowed directly from environmental critic Luis Alberto Urrea’s 1993 eponymous book (Schacht, Urrea, *Across the Wire*), and further intertextual references can be found in the lyrics. The third verse is particularly interesting because it creates a scenic atmosphere of the borderlands by weaving together ancient Aztec mythology, as featured in the first chapter of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, with references to Urrea’s general concerns regarding the environmental future of the Sonoran desert. The eagle “spotted... in the middle of a lake, / resting on a cactus and feasting on snakes” has its complement in the first chapter of *Borderlands*: “The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/ feminine” (Anzaldúa 5). The serpent being eaten by the eagle symbolizes the victory of a male, patriarchal order over the pre-Columbian concept of matriarchy. In “Across the Wire”, Burns’s lyrics add another layer to this viewpoint by continuing, “but the waters recede as the dump closes in”, thus criticizing the ongoing growth of settlements and industrial facilities into the Sonoran desert. Neither snake nor eagle will – metaphorically speaking – survive this level of human interference with their natural habitat.

The dump itself, which “reveal[s] a whole lake of sleeping children”, once more refers to a book by Urrea (*By the Lake of Sleeping Children*). There, the author portrays a social microcosm of Mexican poor living in, around, and off dumps outside urban spaces in the border region. In “Across the Wire”, social-environmentalist concerns are most overtly voiced in the fourth verse, which criticizes the pollution of the Rio Grande river. The second half of this verse points out that, no matter how rigidly the border is being protected by U.S. law, environmental problems do not

stop at legal borders and cannot be made to go away by mere economic wealth on one side. Therefore, when stating that “the future looks bleak, with no sign of change”, the speaker addresses not only the two brothers’ immediate situation – on the content level of the narrative –, but also the oblivious attitude of policy-makers and corporations towards nature. Economic interdependence, resulting in the asymmetrical exploitation of people and environmental resources, is thus shown to be an issue on both sides. Patrolling the border at best contains one symptom of the general, literally unhealthy relationship between the United States and Mexico.

Only in the sixth stanza does the lyrical focus shift back to the fate of Alberto and his *hermano*, who are trying to avoid an encounter with the U.S. border patrol while having to lay all their hopes on the *coyote* leading them across the border. The song ends on a rather pessimistic note, suggesting that the two men will most likely exchange their poverty in Mexico for a new kind of dependency and deprivation in the United States, because “those in control, holding so much” are unwilling to share their wealth with illegal immigrants. Exploitation is anything but over for the two brothers, even if they do manage to enter the country without being apprehended.

4. Mestizaje and Migrant Melancholia: “Roka”

In “The Anthropology of Borderlands”, Robert Alvarez traces the resonance of the border problematic in the field of cultural anthropology, stating that this trope “has lately come to represent a juncture between the literal and conceptual” (Alvarez 449). The “literal” points to the so-called “policy problem approach” (Heyman 43), that is, the administrative function of the border and its practical implications for the study of transnational flows of economic and human capital. The “conceptual” notion of the border is most relevant in the context because it takes up the work of early borderlands theorists such as Americo Paredes and Gloria Anzaldúa, both of whom “broke down the boundaries of the geopolitical border and illustrated the multidimensional character of life on the borderlands, nurtured in a history of conflict through the Spanish, Mexican, American, and, throughout, native stages” (Alvarez 461).

Along similar lines, cultural theorist Renato Rosaldo formulates his broader notion of “hybridity”, which “can be understood as the ongoing condition of all human cultures, which contain no zones of purity because they undergo continuous processes of transculturation (two-way borrowing and lending between cultures)” (Rosaldo xv). In the face of an “incongruity of cultural and political spaces” (Kearney 58), the border as a dividing line between two fundamentally different cultures is a myth; cultures in the borderlands have always been intimately intertwined to a degree that it may be more useful to speak of something like a “border culture”: a heterogeneous phenomenon which should not be understood as a monolithic entity, but rather as an ongoing process shaped by the particular conditions under which it exists.

On the other hand, the concept of “border culture” should not be understood as a justification for disregarding the differences and diversity of the cultures co-existing in the borderlands. The co-existence of different cultures in one and the same space – or even within one and the same individual – does not merely dissolve into a happy synthesis, but in fact adds “a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts” (Anzaldúa 79f.). Cultural hybridity, or *mestizaje*, always contains an affirmative element of resistance against attempts by outside forces to establish fixed categories of self-identification. This resistance is not, however, an exclusively negative reaction to external pressure, but it can result in “continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (Anzaldúa 80).

Grounded in the idea of cultural hybridity, “border culture” can thus be understood as a cultural phenomenon intricately shaped not only by the geographical space it inhabits, nor by the ethno-political and economic struggles alone which result from different groups claiming this space for themselves, but also by a great potential for cultural production. Embracing conflict as a creative force, as a culture in its own right, is one of the merits of recent cultural-anthropological perspectives on the borderlands. The lyrics of Calexico’s song “Roka” can be read as an example of *mestizaje* in that they speak to the tension between what is gained and what is lost in the process of transculturation.

Of the three songs examined here, “Roka” is the least narrative in character. The pensive mood expressed by the music is equally present in the lyrics, which begin with an English verse and switch to Spanish in the chorus. The first verse of “Roka” opens with a seemingly picturesque landscape description: “Sleeping in the valley ... / Waking cross the river ... / Full moon lures the waves...”. The second half of each line, however, re-contextualizes the harmless scenery: the (Rio Grande) valley, a symbol of fertility and growth, is also a “valley of misfortune”; the river itself is depicted as a “river of delusion”; and the waves are in fact “waves of desperation”. The morbid atmosphere created in those first three lines provides an appropriate setting for the actual topic of the song, i.e. the hardships of migrant life north of the border. The “empty hearts and mouths wither[ing] away” point to the difficulty of crossing the border alive and to the deprivation which most often awaits those who do reach the United States.

The feelings to which the lyrics allude, embedded in a subdued soundscape, strongly resonate with what Alicia Schmidt Camacho calls “migrant melancholia”. She claims that “narratives of loss and wounding have always coexisted in tension with the legitimating discourses of international cooperation, development, and economic opportunity that depict the sojourn in the United States as a matter of elective choice” (Schmidt Camacho 832). Her claim is that migrant melancholia does not only concern those migrants who are unable to get proper documents in the United States, but in fact all those who suffer from a lack of belonging, who have left behind their homes and cannot build a similar connection to the new place they find themselves in (Schmidt

Camacho 838f.). The “fantasy of reunion” the author refers to (Schmidt Camacho 840) has its lyrical complement in “Roka”: the addressee is asked to cup a “parched and broken heart” in their hands, which could be understood as an act of re-connecting with something – someone – long gone and left behind.

Unlike the two other songs, “Roka” does not introduce any concrete characters; instead, the lyric persona speaks to an undefined addressee in the pre-chorus, echoed by the Spanish chorus. The (presumably Mexican) addressee is implored to be persistent in their search for a new home north of the border, despite all the obstacles they may have to overcome, despite feelings of homesickness and hopelessness. However, the appeal to keep up hope is accompanied by the lingering presence of death – the “parched and broken heart” may therefore also be read as a reminiscence of deceased loved ones, of the destroyed desert landscape, or even of the symbolic homeland, Aztlán.

Repeated references to the “*danza de la muerte*” (“dance of death”) evoke another aspect of death originating in Mexican culture, i.e. the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebrations traditionally held on November 1st and 2nd every year. Originally a Catholic holiday introduced by the Spaniards, *Día de los Muertos* combines Christian elements with native Mexican folklore. On this occasion, families gather to mourn their loved ones who have passed away. This holiday, itself an example of cultural hybridity, is described by ethnographer Stanley Brandes as “a key symbol of national identity” (Brandes 11). With the growing influx of Mexican migrants to the United States, and most notably in the course of a rising awareness of Chican@ culture in the past few decades, it “has been reinvented many times, by church and state, as well as in the press and through mass communications systems” (Brandes 11) and is now celebrated by Hispanic communities in most parts of the United States as well. According to Regina Marchi, one of the results is that “expressions of Latinidad (Latinness) not only affect individuals of Latin American heritage, but also are reshaping mainstream U.S. culture” (Marchi 4).



Fig. 1: Calexico performing at the *Día de los Muertos* Festivities in Tucson, Arizona (image taken from the 2012 documentary film *Flor de Muertos*, dir. Danny Vinik)

North of the border, *Día de los Muertos* has taken on an additional meaning: “Each year, immigrant rights activists across the U.S. observe Day of the Dead with processions and altars critical of U.S. border patrol policies” (Marchi 75). The state of Arizona hosts some of the largest processions and demonstrations criticizing policies such as Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Hold the Line. As a local band, Calexico have made a habit of performing at those events, as is illustrated in native Tucsonan Danny Vinik’s 2012 documentary film *Flor de Muertos* (see Fig. 1 and 2). The reference in “Roka” to the dance of death, one traditional feature of *Día de los Muertos* processions involving dancers dressed up as skeletons, can therefore be read as a sign of Calexico’s strong involvement in this politicized component of *Día de los Muertos*, because it draws attention to the countless migrants who lose their lives at the border year after year.



Fig. 2: Calexico and other artists performing at the *Día de los Muertos* festivities in Tucson, Arizona (image taken from the 2012 documentary film *Flor de Muertos*, dir. Danny Vinik)

5. Conclusion

Drawing on theoretical and empirical approaches from environmental history, social sciences as well as cultural anthropology, I have examined the lyrics of three songs by the Arizona-based band Calexico with regard to the ways in which current and salient border issues are translated into those lyrics, i.e. how the border is present as an integral part of Calexico's songwriting. I hope to have shown that the issues discussed in the lyrics span both sides of the border, dealing with problems such as violence and the exploitation of workers in the *maquiladoras* south of the border; the catastrophic exploitation and violation of the environment in the border region; the omnipresent and ongoing topic of illegal migration from Mexico to the United States; as well as the aspects of migrant melancholia and the ways in which the traditional *Día de los Muertos* has been reframed in the context of killings at the border. Although Calexico are not directly connected with the contemporary cultural movements originating from minority groups in the border region, their socio-political agenda certainly places them within the broad context of border culture.

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