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# Delgadina: From Romance to Corrido on the US-Mexico Border

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## ***Delgadina: From Romance to Corrido on the US-Mexico Border***

This study examines in its context one variant of the Spanish *romance* of *Delgadina* transmuted into a Mexican *corrido*. Acknowledging the studies by Beatriz Mariscal and the feminist interpretations of Maria Herrera-Sobek, this study is a departure from past critical work in that it attempts to examine the cognitive effect on both singers and listeners of the modern *corrido* form and the continuity of the tale and the theme of incest. Memory systems generated through popular song are examined as they relate to *Delgadina*'s purpose as a tale, in terms of its social and moral message and impact. Interviews were conducted with one *corridista* (popular song writer), and several respondents familiar with the song on both sides of the border (Mexico's northern region of Chihuahua, and El Paso, Texas), and their discourse analyzed in order to illuminate the continuity and variants of the folk song *Delgadina* and its social and political implications.

To interpret the song as collective imagery and memory, I use the theoretical basis proposed by George Steiner, who articulates that text is embedded by necessity in a specific historical time. Accordingly, this diachronic structure becomes a language act with a temporal determinant. In sum, "no semantic form is timeless" (*After Babel* 24). In accordance with this view, the entire previous history of a culture resonates through the structured words of a language to interpret their meaning.. It is thus that *Delgadina* in the *corrido* form constitutes part of and enriches the collective memory and cultural imagery of a community. "Language as a psychological tool with a function, such as memory, causes a fundamental transformation of the very function that it alters" (Wertsch 95). This is concisely articulated in the following citation which reiterates and further elucidates the diachronic structures found in *corridos*:

Embedded in its cumulative past and in a manifold present, language is physiological, temporal and replete with social modifiers. These modifiers persuade and enlist, consciously or not, instruments attached to word and sentence not necessarily linguistic. The purely semantic leads into semiotic, and into the surrounding phenomenology of making and communicating sense. (Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* 155)

A historical-psychological model sets the basis for Steiner's notion of "transmutation" and a hermeneutic of cultural understanding, where language translation is a constant of organic survival (Steiner, *After Babel* 414-15). Linked to this constancy is the vacillation between internal cognition and external stimuli. The coupling of external semiotic forms with the internal level of consciousness is by nature quasi-social, which in turn generates a cognitive process that is social-transactional (Wertsch 83). The reality of individual lives then is shaped by a complex, multi-layered historical context, which consciously requires a semiotic interpretation that includes aspects of social cultural

history. These aspects can be discerned in talking to the respondents about the meaning of *Delgadina* and what the song meant for their lives.

### The context

*Delgadina* was transported to the American continent. What is now part of the south-west United States was the entry point for the Spanish colonizers, through El Paso, Texas. El Paso del Norte and other Texan cities such as San Antonio have Spanish historical roots that date back to 1596. So *Delgadina* came to the North American continent before the *Mayflower* landed at Plymouth Rock. The colonizers brought with them the language of conquest, Spanish, and the mores of the Catholic religion, and established settlements all through northern Mexico. The early Spanish settlements were situated at the southernmost tip of the state of Chihuahua, with Durango to the south, and to the east Coahuila and the Madre Occidental, which is about a four-hour drive from the city of Chihuahua. Presently, the Madre Occidental mountain range is still home to the Tahuramara indigenous people, who persist in keeping their own language separate from that of the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of the state of Chihuahua, and continue to live by their own cultural values. (Even so, I heard the music of *Delgadina* being played on a radio very high up, near the Copper Canyon, the very first time I visited the mountain range in 2002). The city of Chihuahua is 225 miles from the US-Mexican border. In fact, the Chihuahuan desert, which constitutes approximately 45 per cent of the area of the state of Chihuahua, extends into Texas and the southernmost parts of New Mexico and Arizona. Generally, life along this border has been difficult, not only economically, but socially and, certainly, politically. The people are active and industrious, with an almost aggressive determination to survive, due to the harsh climate and the area's complex socio-political history.

### The respondents/informants

The following are interpretations of the corrido *Delgadina* given by the people I interviewed. (The corrido version of *Delgadina* that I used is the one sung by Lydia Mendoza in June 1933, which makes reference to the state of Durango; see Appendix.) I interviewed five individuals, three women and two men. All respondents were from the same generation, all being in their mid-fifties to mid-sixties. Four of the respondents were from the state of Chihuahua, and one originally from the state of Sonora, just over the Tahuramara mountain range, bordering Chihuahua. I simply asked the question: "Do you know the corrido *Delgadina*, or have you heard it? What does it mean to you?"

One of the male respondents was a *corridista*; he sang and wrote songs. The other four respondents had heard *Delgadina* sung to them when they were children. The story had remained part of their memory until the present day. One male respondent's

interpretation of the story, the music, and its message was elaborate. Not only was his response detailed and based on the Chihuahua version of *Delgadina*, which he could recall and sing in its entirety, but he also gave a historical/political interpretation which seemed to make sense and which connected with the interpretations given by two of the women, who also elaborated extensively about the social meaning of *Delgadina* in their lives. Two of the respondents, both from Chihuahua (one presently living in El Paso, Texas, and the other in Chihuahua city) did not elaborate at all about the story of *Delgadina* or its meaning. One male respondent and the only *corridista*, Omar Verdugo Felix, had little to share about the meaning of the song; instead, he focused on the music and its catchy melody. He was more concerned with the way that the music of *Delgadina* had been recorded for commercial purposes and popular consumption. The other woman, Eva Rodriguez, had heard mention of the corrido but did not remember the music or the words. I report only on the three respondents who had elaborate stories to tell about *Delgadina*.

Respondent 1: Roberto Rodriguez, 66 years of age (retired construction and agricultural worker), living in El Paso, Texas, and born in Villa Lopez, Chihuahua.

Roberto remembered the story that *Delgadina* recounted. Struggling to remember the stanzas, he sang the song in its entirety, and then elaborated on its historical and political meaning. His interpretation is that the "hacendados" (Spanish landowners and political bosses) controlled the lives of the peons and their families. *Delgadina* as a corrido has the father transformed from the king of the Spanish *romance* into a "hacendado". In addition, in Chihuahua, where the history of the Mexican Revolution is a strong signifier for the lived experience for certain generations of people, the story is told of how Pancho Villa (northern leader and hero of the Mexican Revolution) rebelled and sought to organize the peons because his own sister had been raped by a "hacendado". This practice is said to have been quite common among the "hacendados", much like the feudal lords of Europe's Middle Ages.

In fact, before the revolution, the landowners would not only presume to own entire villages, they also claimed ownership over entire families and violated the women at will, especially the young girls. According to Roberto, this is one of the strongest reasons for the singing of *Delgadina*, and is why the story continues to be told in Villa Lopez, which is only 40 kilometers from the city of Parral, where Pancho Villa was assassinated. The Villa Lopez valley is where the first Spanish settlements were established in the state of Chihuahua. In fact, the municipality of Villa Lopez was originally a hacienda, where people worked for the big political boss and were "owned" almost as slaves. According to Roberto, even today the singing of *Delgadina* conjures visions of the power that the abusive landowners had over the people.

Respondent 2: Monserrat Portillo Diaz, 55 years of age (schoolteacher), presently living in Chihuahua city, but born in Temores, Sonora. This small mining town is a municipality that was regionally isolated until 1970, when the railroad was built through the mountain range from Chihuahua to Sonora.

This was a very tight-knit community, and, according to Monserrat, "I never knew of one single man in the village who hit his wife." She explained this in order to illustrate the non-violent nature of her community. She stated that Temores had a very transparent life; everyone knew one another. When asked if she knew the song *Delgadina*, she whispered in a slow and deliberate voice, "You do know that it is about incest, don't you?" She added that she had heard it as a child in the 1950s.

Monserrat recounted her experience as a precocious child of hearing the corrido and its references to a young girl being forced to make love to her father. She recalled that she could not ask her parents about what it meant, because the subject of sex was taboo in most Catholic families. She went to the only person that she could trust to give her an explanation, her paternal grandmother. Her grandmother's interpretation was the only explanation she had had of *Delgadina* – a song she had heard sung all of her life by different groups of singers, both in the state of Sonora when she was growing up and also in the state of Chihuahua where she was presently living. Her grandmother, who was very assertive, explained that the story of *Delgadina* had nothing to do with the actual lives of people in the community. Monserrat's grandmother stated: "all that you hear happened, it is not fiction; what is sung in the song *Delgadina* is all true because it was the Spaniards who committed such acts, they were a bunch of drunkards and they violated the women. It is the history of the Spanish in these lands."

Monserrat remembered some of the words and music, but could not remember the sequence of the story in its entirety. She did, however, have a strong holistic sense of the message of the story of *Delgadina*.

Respondent 3: Mari Nafiez, aged 60 (domestic worker in the US), recent immigrant to El Paso, Texas, born and raised in Villa Lopez, Chihuahua.

Mari remembered hearing *Delgadina* sung to her by her father when she was a child. Her strongest recollection was of the stanza in which *Delgadina* pleads with her father for water. By the time the eleven servants had brought her water she was dead. Mari recalled that *Delgadina* dies of thirst. She stated that the death of *Delgadina* portrayed for her the innocence of childhood, and how *Delgadina*'s morality was most important when her father revealed that he wanted her as his mistress. *Delgadina* preferred to die than to give in to the father. At this point, Mari added that in Chihuahua story of *Delgadina* was extrapolated to refer to the power of the "cacique", or political boss and landowner, over the women who came from the peon working class. The "cacique" had the status of a king, and had the power to imprison the workers.

When asked about the impact that the story had on her own life, listening to the sung version Mari recounted that, for her, it was about imposed power, and that the song's message was strongly linked to her own fundamental values. She stated: "While we were growing up, if our lives were disorganized, ballads like *Delgadina* put balance into the choices we made, and certain traditions of our culture were respected. Although social and economic circumstances change, we did have a collective culture that helped us develop an equilibrium in our daily lives. Our children's lives unfortunately no longer have those cultural tools." Furthermore, she explained that music was an important practice: "We live in concert with the music sung in our communities. The words and moral message stay in our mind and they were continually triggered every time one listened to the song again and again. Traditions have beauty to them; one lives through the tradition."

Without these, the problems become a labyrinth. The song of *Delgadina* helped us put balance in our daily existence."

In addition, Mari told about "Don Melo", a well-respected singer and folklorist from Villa Lopez. She recalled that Don Melo collected traditional songs in the town, and that *Delgadina* was one of his favorites, and he continually sang it on the local radio station. He also asserted that when he died he wanted the song *Delgadina* sung at his funeral. Relatives of Mari had recorded Don Melo singing *Delgadina* before his death. Mari said that it was an eerie experience to hear Don Melo sing the corrido of *Delgadina* even after his death.

### Language, sexuality, and community

This hint at the interrelations between Eros and Tanatos leads us to a coincidental link between this real person, Don Melo, mentioned by Mari Nañez, and a fictional character, the narrator/protagonist of a recent novel, *Memorias de mis tristes putas*, by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Latin America's best-known literary figure, whose writing is inspired by popular culture. Throughout the entire book, *Memorias de mis tristes putas* quite deliberately makes intertextual references to the medieval romance of *Delgadina*. The novel is a humorous allegory of patriarchy, in which the indomitable narrator celebrates his 90th birthday by evoking his love for the sleeping object of his desire, *Delgadina*.

The patriarchal narrator/protagonist, from a "good family", rejects convention and the traditions of society, which would have him marry and bring up a family. Instead, he is a writer, who never married and frequents brothels. For his 90th birthday, the magic of the fourteen-year-old girl whom he christens *Delgadina* changes his life. Skillfully, Garcia Márquez makes allusions to the romance, as the narrator/protagonist (who is unnamed, and possibly to be seen as an extension of the author) sings in the ear of the young girl, "la cama de *Delgadina* de angels esta rodeada" (*Delgadina's* bed is surrounded by angels). With an ambiguity characteristic of magical realism, it is not known for certain whether the narrator/protagonist represents the king/father violator of the young girl, or whether, on the contrary, he is an idealistic lover, as in the medieval tradition of courtly love.

These themes are interlaced by time, linking the historical social life of the novel's context to the life of the narrator/protagonist, not in a linear form but, rather, holistically. The treatment of time similarly includes a dimension elevated to the realm of legend and myth – of *Delgadina* personified, real and not real, culminating in the encounter of both in reality and in dreams. Intertwined is the symbolism of the moon with contextual nature, which is very characteristic of Garcia Marquez's writing. The novel, with its intertextual approach, could be read as a denunciation of social convention, and it reiterates the false constructions of social divisions and stereotypes of marginal people, and emphasizes the ever-changing aspects of real, everyday life. Garcia Márquez recapitulates a criticism of patriarchy through magical realism, and the

imaginary world conjured by *Delgadina*'s mythical character, in a dialectic of love, passion, and death.

The themes developed by García Márquez, in addition to those that appear in the interview protocols, illustrate the multiple ways in which memory functions when a symbolic cultural constant helps to make the associations. Prominent are themes of social mores, concerning incest and behavior according to accepted social convention; the historical abuse of power and capital resources; the history of a colonized people; and rebellion in favor of what the community deems decent in terms of honor and integrity in everyday life. All of these aspects are expressed by a transmuted cultural constant, *Delgadina*, in the understanding of the three representatives who gave their interpretations of the oral cultural traditions evolving in the state of Chihuahua and in their lives.

Steiner asserts:

in most societies and throughout history, the status of women has been akin to that of children. Both groups are maintained in a condition of privileged inferiority. Both suffer obvious modes of exploitation – sexual, legal, economic while benefiting from a mythology of special regard. (i.e., Victorian). Under sociological and psychological pressure, both minorities have developed internal codes of communication and deference. There is a language world of women as there is of children. (Steiner, *After Babel* 39)

*Delgadina*, as cultural image and collective memory – a form of artistic expression in oral tradition and a schematic cultural constant that has been transmuted over time to function in different contexts and locales – has served as a code for cultural values, voicing the innocence of the child within an abusive power structure. Thus, in the northern part of Mexico bordering with the United States, there is an invisible cultural image in the lives of the people, which continues to generate mores to live by, in spite of social and economic conditions, and changes in the collective psychic of Mexican culture, whose people have been continually migrating from one country to the other for hundreds of years.

## Conclusion

According to George Steiner, "sex is a profoundly semantic act and at every conceivable point eros and language mesh" (*After Babel* 40). As we consider the artistic writing of García Márquez, and the interpretation of the three respondents interviewed, language through time is subject to the forces that shape social convention. Rules of proceeding generated in tandem with accumulated precedents, and the complexities and irrationalities of love, passion, and death, are inevitably forces that conjure interpretations of the past. Interpretation of life itself is not one-dimensional; there is a continual need to move beyond the one frame of reference. The creation and use of artistic cultural constants from a historical past provide an impetus for multilevel interpreta-

tion, and the ability to create different stories concerning what went before. Thus the presence of an incest taboo in a cultural constant such as *Delgadina* "appears to be primal to the organization of communal life and is inseparable from linguistic evolution. We can only prohibit that which we can name" (Steiner, *After Babel* 40).

The essential need to communicate the values of a community arises from an organic, individual need to assert the self in order to reach out to the external world and to understand other human beings. In the process of generating values within a social milieu, which are vital for survival, we create social reciprocity. For the Spanish-speaking world along the US-Mexican border, *Delgadina*, as a transmuted cultural constant, establishes a foundation for manifold social, political, and psychological themes to continue to guide everyday life.

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## Appendix

*Delgadina*  
 (version sung by Lydia Mendoza  
 in June 1933)<sup>1</sup>

Delgadina se paseaba  
 en su sala bien cuadrada  
 con su manto de hilo de oro  
 que en su pecho le brillaba.

Levantante, Delgadina  
 ponte tu vestido blanco  
 porque nos vamos a misa  
 al estado de Durango.

Cuando salieron de misa  
 su papa le platicaba;  
 Delgadina, hija mia.  
 yo te quiero para dama.

*Delgadina*  
 English Translation

Delgadina walked around  
 in her spaciouly squared parlor  
 with her golden threaded mantle  
 shining on her bosom.

Arise Delgadina  
 put on your white dress  
 because we are going to mass  
 to the state of Durango.

Coming out of mass  
 her father was saying;  
 Delgadina, my daughter,  
 I want you as my lady.

<sup>1</sup> Lydia Mendoza: "Mal Hombre" and Other Original Hits from the 1930's (Arhoolie CD 7002, 1992).

No lo permita mi Dios  
Ni la reina soberana  
Es una ofensa para Dios  
y tambien para mi mama.

Delgadina, hija mia,  
oye bien lo que te digo  
mira, si no condecienes,  
yo te pongo un buen castigo

Papacito de mi vida  
eso si no puedo hacer  
porque tu eres mi padre  
y mi mama es tu mujer.

Venganse los once criados  
pongan presa a Delgadina,  
remanchen bien los candados,  
que no se oiga su bocina.

Papacito de mi vida,  
tu castigo estoy sufriendo,  
regalame un vaso de agua  
que de se' me estoy muriendo.

Cuando le llevaron l'agua  
Delgadina estaba muerta,  
con sus manitas cruzadas,  
su boquita bien abierta.

Ya con esta me despido  
con la flor de clavelina,  
aqui termina la historia  
la historia de Delgadina.

May the Lord forbid it  
and the Heavenly Queen  
That would be an offense to God  
And also to my Mama.

Delgadina, my daughter,  
listen carefully to me,  
if you don't consent  
I will give you a harsh punishment.

Little Papa of my life,  
that certainly can't be  
since you are my father  
and my Mama is your wife.

Come, the eleven servants,  
put Delgadina in prison,  
fasten well the locks,  
Let not her voice be heard.

Little Papa of my life  
I am suffering your punishment,  
give me a glass of water  
for I am dying of thirst.

When the water arrived  
Delgadina was dead  
with her arms crossed  
and her little mouth wide open.

With this I say farewell,  
with the clavelina flower,  
here the story ends  
the story of Delgadina.