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AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF QUALITATIVE AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:
The academic community everywhere should pay attention to the appearance, in the discursive space delineated by communication studies, of the remarkable innovative intervention of the "ethnic" (rhetorical) critics comprised in the edited book of Al González, Marsha Houston, and Victoria Chen, *Our voices*. The anthology changes the face of qualitative and critical inquiry in communication studies, by negotiating, with the academic public everywhere, the possibility of a viable alternative, which offers legitimation and shelter to those who, for one reason or another have found themselves in the shadow, at the margins, in the insignificant corners of academic culture. The interest of the editors of *Our voices* in each one of us, those who choose to respond to their interpellation with our own texts, far from resonating with the older interest of the imperialist subject in the colonized object, seems, on the contrary, to invite us to the table of negotiations, to propose that we commence our existence, as ethnic scholars do, within our texts, whose meanings should (inter)mediate communication between our cultures from democratically equivalent positions, for the sake of cultural innovation, but also for the sake of a configuration of a universal profile of the discipline, whose symbolic borders are, no doubt, large enough to shelter every human effort to understand the complex phenomenon of communication.

Keywords: qualitative and critical inquiry, ethnic scholars

Around the end of 2013, I was discussing with Professor González from Bowling Green State University, Ohio, former chair of my doctoral committee, some issues related to the best articulation of the current ways to legitimize humanistic, interpretive, or, in methodological terms, qualitative and critical orientations within the larger context of inquiry in the field of communication studies. At that date, I very much needed, as in all crucial moments of my "bumpy" journey through this epistemological labyrinth of the field in question, his advice in that respect, as I was scheduled to make a public presentation, with a "preamble" role to the imminent publication of the *Politics within*

Parentheses, (Gabor, 2014) in the context of the monthly conferences hosted by the Institute for Social and Political Research. Professor Ioan Biriș created this institute under the aegis of the Faculty of Political Science, Philosophy, and Communication Studies in 2005, but it has "produced" only since 2013, when Professor Florin Lobont become its director. Dr. González was extremely receptive to my request and sent me an email with a summary of the "hard arguments" that any representative of qualitative approaches to communication phenomena carries around, fresh in their minds, like so many "aces in the sleeve," just in case, who knows, someone in some corner of the world still wonders: "Why use qualitative and critical methods in the study of communication?"

As an aside, those arguments reached my ears countless times, to saturation, during the four years I spent in the United States at the beginning of the third millennium. Every time I met some "communication studies scholar" – and there were many – the way in which they "identified" themselves, professionally speaking, referred precisely to the theoretical-methodological option that framed both their research and their teaching approaches. In one of the first courses that I took, in the fall of 1999, Professor Lynda Dixon hosted, one or two at a time in each of our weekly classes, the representatives of the entire academic community working for the School of Communication Studies that we all attended, whether we were "international" students or Americans. These meetings, which took place in the context of the Introduction to Communication Studies class, offered us, the newcomers, the School's Master's or doctoral students, a first sense of the dynamics of the field of study of which we had engaged ourselves. Invariably, the professors from Bowling Green State University identified themselves through their methodological orientation, just as in social interactions, some gays and lesbians first – and, often, last – refer to their sexual identity as a *prima facie* attribute of their "total" identity.

That fact intrigued me, at that time, to such extent that, very early, I tried to "escape scot-free," as much as possible, from that trivium. But I did not take a stand right away. I did, well-behaved, my homework, especially throughout my first year, when I was accumulating credits for my Master of Arts degree, a necessary step in the procurement of the doctorate. In other words, I frequented specialized courses on both types of approach which, like any self-respecting university, Bowling Green State University impartially offered to the future experts in the field of communication studies: Qualitative Research Methods, but also Quantitative Research Methods (for which, in the curriculum, a mandatory class in Statistics was a prerequisite). Later, the (macro-)orientations became more diverse, such that I could and did opt for subsequent classes within the frame of one or the other perspective. For instance, the class in Rhetorical Criticism – a separate course in the curricular offer that I chose without hesitation in the spring of 2000, once I got that "first sense" of the dispute with historical tradition, defining for the field in the study of which I had engaged myself – constituted, to me personally, the moment when, for the first time since I had begun studying in the States, I had the feeling that I was "on the right track" in my search for my own epistemological and methodological identity.

Coming back to the legitimizing arguments for qualitative and critical orientations, especially as regards research in the area of interculturality – an academic area where Dr. González holds a totally privileged status, as he has contributed through inestimable efforts to the delineation of a profile of the discipline of an exemplary representativity as regards the appropriation of the discursive space by a multitude of "voices," extant in a perfect, democratic harmony – Dr. González, thus, let me know at the moment of our conversation at the end of 2013 that, ten years after I had left the United States, the humanistic and social-scientific approaches to the study of communication had declared an armistice! They reached this armistice on the basis of the common-sense observation that a dynamic and vigorous field is more valuable than one that is fragmentary, divided by sterile polemics, all tributary to one type of theoretical and methodological dogmatism or another.

Al González was reflecting, extremely trenchantly, on the margins of that issue, stating clearly and upfront that anyone who reckoned that human symbolic interaction could be studied on the basis of a single research paradigm had stopped reflecting on the authentic meaning of inquiry. To believe, González understood, that qualitative and critical approaches rely to a larger extent on the subjective judgment of the researcher than on quantitative perspectives is as false as regarding the latter as free from the "burden" of rhetorical, persuasive argumentation. In fact, Al González confessed, things were way more complex. The most thorny problem, the most burning issue of the era we live in, the problem of (inter)cultural difference, requires an arsenal of methodologies as complete as possible, through the help of which we may gain, gradually and not without difficulties, access to its understanding. Only by bringing together the contributions that emerge from the various types of theoretical and methodological approaches may we hope, González believed, to understand the complex world that we live in. Alternative voices raise in support of this statement, Dr. González added, while drawing my attention to the fact that, at that date, academic publications such as that of Judith Martin and Tom Nakayama's (1999) might be brought up that offered "dialectical models" of inquiry, by corroborating the results of qualitative, critical, and quantitative approaches, to balanced extents. Instead of continuing the old "struggle for legitimation," these models could draw together, in constructive ways, the objectives that the various methodological approaches to the complex phenomenon of communication seek to achieve.

Most certainly, a hero of the ascension of qualitative and critical orientations in intercultural communication inquiry, Dr. González did not hesitate to remind me of only a few of the qualities of the orientation that he has given body and soul to throughout his career: he referred to the ethical-moral mandate that completes the portrait of those who aspire to an analysis of an interpretive type of human communication. Of course, González appreciated, social-scientific researchers identify themselves as well in relation to certain ethical structures, but these present a limitation to the scope of research that the scientist can imagine and construct. The primary values, within such contexts, are predictability, control, and detachment, and not at all ethical-moral values, which must, necessarily, be part of secondary importance. Therefore, Dr. González argued, qualitative and critical methods are premised on social participation and involvement, as they promote and make themselves the ambassadors of a certain "relational praxis," according to which the researcher talks *with a certain community/culture*, while giving up the old practice, with scientific claims, of the discourse *about that community or culture*.

Ultimately, Al González prompted me to be alert to and discourage any type of "weird reactions" of my audience at the Institute's conference by saying, simply, that in the United States of America, the two antagonist types of approach to the complex phenomenon of communication could coexist and do, in fact, coexist, something that, for him, constituted the supreme argument – understandably, as all theoretical and methodological histories of the field attest to this. Fortunately, my public at that time was neither hostile, nor urgently pressed to seek a precipitous resolution of the issue. On the contrary. The questions that ended the presentation helped me to explain why a privileged place should be conferred on qualitative research methods, next to the quantitative, in the research economy of communication studies, and why that position should be reflected, as soon as possible, in the Romanian curriculum, the script *par excellence* with the help of which we legitimize and document, here as elsewhere, our didactic experiences: in other words, the documents with the role of a theoretical and methodological map – of the caliber of any theoretical and methodological history – of the field we serve throughout our academic efforts. Until Dr. González's ultimate argument acquires, in our Romanian academic culture, the *prima facie* understanding that the one who forwarded it credits it with, let us commence, together, this theoretical and methodological alternative journey through what constitutes the spinney of the documents that attest to my own *academic experience* on communication studies territory, contextualized, in its initial moment, by the American culture. My working premise is that the "beginning" is everywhere, that every text that has personally interpellated me, ever, is "just as good a beginning" for this trip as any other. Therefore, let us start right here.

In the introduction to the fourth edition of *Our voices: Essays in culture, ethnicity, and communication*, Dr. González explains why this publication, unique in the American academic culture, sustains the breach of qualitative and critical research in the field of communication studies, to the detriment, of course, of other options. To Al González, whose theoretical and methodological legacy I have benefited from and which I ventured, very early in my career, to transform into a "vision" of my own, communication means "an ongoing process of reconstructing the meanings of the symbols through social interaction." (Gonzalez, Houston, & Chen, 2004, p. 6). Thus, as González appreciates, by citing Carbaugh, "[I]f one wants to understand the action persons do, from their point of view, one should *listen to the terms* they use to discuss it.” (Carbaugh, 1988; my italics). By gaining access to the symbols that people use in their social interactions, we get both the privileged key, and the access route towards the meanings that human beings share with their fellows, in the context of certain communities, to the configuration to which those symbols themselves contribute.

In an attempt to offer “an alternative for those interested in learning something about culture, ethnicity, and communication,” (González et al., p. 2) by way of *listening* to the various perspectives that “ethnic scholars” – a term that designates the non-dominant (from a social-cultural point of view) communities within the United States – manage to articulate, in the context that *Our voices* offers, on the basis, exclusively, of their own cultural experiences and in the unique terms in which they describe and interpret those experiences themselves, the three editors commence from the premise that the very complex process of communication may be accessed, from an epistemological standpoint, on the basis of those individual descriptions and interpretations of culture, while the individual becomes the point of access towards an understanding of the cultural community, in its whole, which those individuals represent and whose epistemological contour they articulate, thus, through their own “voices.”

The purposes that *Our voices* serves are meant to legitimize these presuppositions of inquiry. By registering the “communication styles and practices of cultural groups, from these writers’ points of view” (González et al., p. 2), *Our voices* intends to explore the complex relation between communication and culture, through a welcome balancing of the weight of “voices” within the academic space, such that the dominant voice, articulated in “privileged form[s] of scientific inquiry” (González et al., p. 3) and which conveys, rather the unfamiliarity of the scholars who articulate it “with the specific practices that lend significance to the general cultural categories or dimensions that are created,” (González et al., p. 3) stops supplying the unique perspective which can legitimize academic inquiry in general. Thus, the editors attest that another objective that *Our voices* pursues is to invite *human experience* onto the stage of inquiry, while legitimizing it as such, as a foundation and an access point in understanding and studying (cultural) communication. Consequently, a third objective is being implicitly attained: as long as (academic) research recuperates human experience as its foundation, the *ongoing interest* in the complex phenomenon of communication becomes a necessary effect in this new “logic of inquiry,” while the concept itself of “scientific/academic inquiry” gains access to new locations within the discursive space, as it changes its meaning so as to integrate, rather than silence, exclude, or make such expressions illegitimate. Ultimately, the book sets out to illustrate, as concretely as possible, the vast variety of perspectives from which, at the beginning of the third millennium whose gates we are chosen to open with our own steps, the phenomenon – of an overwhelming complexity – of human communication can and must be regarded.

Al González is among those scholars in communication studies who have a true "gift" concerning the synchronizing of their own agendas – in this case, coordinating theory and practice. Moreover, oftentimes, as in a veritable *mise-en-abyme* of meanings, his writings leave the impression that the two levels coincide, while (self-)referring to one another, a phenomenon whose explanation resides in that "relational praxis" that he talked about, as I noted at the beginning of this essay, and which means nothing but a practical-theoretical outcome of those exposed in a theoretical-practical manner in the introduction to *Our voices.* To illustrate the above, I chose to refer to a publication of Dr. González from the very book he and his two colleagues, Marsha Houston and Victoria Chen, edited. My purpose, in the following analysis, is to propose a first meaning for the concept of *cultural mediation*, a meaning which Dr. González himself indulges in his study. Then, according to an older habit, I balance the respective meaning with my own definition of cultural mediation, which is specific, in particular, to academic culture everywhere, while attempting, in this way to delineate the profile of a cultural practice whose confessor I portray myself to be, by self-textualizing my own discursive experience on communication studies' territory. This is a field whose flexible and relaxed borders, as Griffin (1997) characterized them at the end of his incursion through its theoretical and methodological history, *may be thought over, on the basis of their symbolic character*, according to the exigencies and interests of those who wish to find shelter and legitimation within their context. I am the first to believe that such project is of major desirability. Moreover, without holding "expert knowledge" in this respect, I intuit that my pages speak on behalf of a community that, even if it does not yet exist, will acquire a profile and an identity because of my effort of *(re)construction of the symbolic borders of communication studies* beyond (or on this side of?) the academic cultural space of the United States. Here is, therefore, the reason that I am selecting, out of the numerous texts that might document my academic experience, those which interpellated me not necessarily from the perspective of the knowledge they offer as regards the American profile of communication studies, but, more importantly, in their quality as "cultural guides" with a major heuristic value in my own searches for identity through the labyrinths of all kinds of texts (academic, in particular).

To me, one such "cultural guide" has been and still is the *tejana* singer Selena Quintanilla-Pérez, who lived between 1971 and 1995 and whose existential journey and cultural memory have been appropriated, from an academic perspective as well, by contributions such as that of Dr. González, to which I will refer in the following. The article "Remembering Selena" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004), published in the fourth edition of *Our voices*, the edition I work with, is written in collaboration with Jennifer L. Willis-Rivera from Southern Illinois State University. The study begins with a 'Prelude/Postlude,' which we should understand by looking at the etymological history of the terms, as an anticipating engagement with a ludic episode, but which, paradoxically, may be also conceived as a final moment of a game with/of cultural meanings. Let us see what kind of play or game the two researchers talk about and via what symbolic means they choose to describe and interpret it. In other words, in the terms that the editor of *Our voices* himself used, in the introduction, let us step into the "academic game" the two scholars propose, in order to gain access to the cultural meanings that only this choice can lead us to. Throughout this journey, let us *carefully listen* to the unique terms, the words that the authors use to document their own cultural experiences. Thus, we will get a sense of the community, *as a whole*, on behalf of which the authors speak and whose symbolic borders they articulate, while defining them in the very process of this articulation and, of course, while inviting the readers to identification.

The Prelude/Postlude invites us on the stage of the Convention Center Arena in San Antonio, Texas, where, on the night of March 2, 1991, the winners and the nominees of the eleventh edition of the Annual Tejano Music Awards, which took place the previous evening, perform to raise funds for a noble cause. Al González and Jennifer Willis-Rivera are there, as they let us know through the personal story whereby they invite us along to the musical event. The story does not say much, in its first episode: we find out that artists such as Mazz, Shelly Lares, and Adalberto appear on stage, "an act for every generation" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 56), yet, even though the music is excellent, it does not manage to make the two determined to get closer to the stage. The cultural barrier they experience, like a wall, gets between the two and the cultural act of participation which such a musical event invites: "Our Midwestern accents alienate us from many *tejanos* from the valley" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004). Yet, confess the two, someone manages to get them up onto the stage, someone manages to bring together everyone at that concert. This is Selena Quintanilla, whom the authors describe in vivid terms through a story that transcends the limits delineated with italic characters by the critics themselves at the beginning of their study:

> As she performs her set, she gives little waves to people close to the stage. She seems to delight in her newly choreographed motions; her voice seems to rejoice in her newly learned Spanish […] During the instrumental portions of the songs, Selena engages in small talk with those who come up to the microphone. Through all of this, Selena is laughing and smiling. She makes the interactions part of the music rather than a distraction from it. (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004)

The story, thus, seems to continue, even when according to most it should have ended its mission: if, indeed, a personal story may constitute, since Aristotle, the best way to announce the topic, as well as to capture an audience's attention and benevolence, in most of our discursive undertakings, when it comes to academic research we find ourselves compelled to *not* continue, as much as possible, in the same manner, in the same tone. As Al González clearly states in the same introduction to *Our voices*: "The pressure is great to put aside our cultural selves in order to gain scholarly credibility" (González et al., p. 4). Still, the critic adds a few pages later, "if human experiences are indeed characterized by storytelling and the creation of meanings" (González et al., p. 4), then it is the right moment, which *Our voices* celebrates, to redefine intercultural communication inquiry itself so that ethnic scholars are able to "create their own agenda and contribute to a truly polyphonic cultural melody" (González et al., p. 4). Here is the theoretical credo practically conveyed within the two scholars' academic writing. The impulse towards storytelling, proper to human beings, gains access, from the marginal location where the efforts towards "scientificality" of the old contributors to the development of communication studies pushed it, to a central, privileged position in academic writing. González and Willis-Rivera have a personal story to tell us, which does not restrict, from their perspective, our – the public's – possibilities of epistemologically relating to the communication phenomenon that they bring to our attention that way. On the contrary. The "wager" of the critics is that *it is precisely in this way* that we may gain access to the *particular*, culturally determined meanings, in the terms in which they invite us to do it, *terms by which the authors feel well represented* and which allow us to know them as *persons engaged in the academic act of inquiry*, focused on their objects of interest.

If the lively image of Selena at the concert in San Antonio remains "the best memory" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 56) of the *tejana* artist in the minds of the two critics, very soon this image will have to survive, as such, in collision with the numerous alternative images that mass media, invariably, appropriate and broadcast (and Selena's case was no different) in the case of a tragedy. On March 31, 1995, TV stations in the United States broadcast, live, images from in front of a Days Inn in Corpus Christi, Texas – images that caught Yolanda Saldívar, the artist's accountant, in her own car, speaking over the phone with police negotiators, a conversation followed by the arrest of Saldívar for the murder of Selena Quintanilla-Pérez. In the same evening, record the critics, CNN and the Spanish network Univision broadcast a variety of commemorative shows in honor of Selena because – ironically, in González's and Willis-Rivera's view – Selena "achieved far greater fame in death than in life" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 56), despite her artistic career and her career as a designer with her own boutique. The months that followed her death brought Selena to the forefront of American pop culture, through publications with a commemorative character, such as *People* and *Newstyle* reviews.

In the following pages, González and Willis-Rivera speak, at the same time, in stories that overlap and intersect, both of the social-cultural context that hosts and *transforms* as an outcome of the tragic event of the death of the artist, and of their "own journey to the place where Selena lived and died" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57), a journey which, as we expect, changes, to the same revealing extent, the identities of the travelers themselves. The trip from San Antonio to Corpus Christi, a drive on the freeway, touched initially by rain and ending with the sun on the sky, brings them unexpectedly to a Days Inn – perhaps the one in which the tragic event took place. The two discover, one at a time, the insignia of the memory of Selena, kept alive in her hometown thanks to the sustained efforts of her fans, whose inscriptions on the walls of the town or on commemorative posters, worn with the passage of time, featuring photos of the artist, describe in moving words the love that they all feel for the *tejana* singer who won their hearts. During their drive through the streets of the town, the two critics discover the street and then the houses of the Quintanilla family, "a bit out of place in the neighborhood" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58), but insufficiently impressive from the standpoint of the affluence they could have conveyed: "This was no Hollywood," remark the two. Eventually, González and Willis-Rivera arrive at Selena's gravestone, a black marble stone in the form of a human face on which, in white, the artist's name is carved. Above the stone, there are two angels, one with a red crucifix wrapped around its neck and the other holding a white carnation. The most impressive thing is the young *mesquite* that is planted behind the singer's grave: "On every surface of this tree, on every branch, were carved and written messages to Selena […] It was on this living part of her memorial where the grief of her fans poured out" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 59). On their return in town, González and Willis-Rivera find the artist's boutique as well, a small, modest store with Selena's name inscribed on the neon sign above: "The walls inside were covered with pictures of Selena, gold records, newspaper and magazine stories, and Coke advertisements featuring Selena. A magazine article hung on one wall: 'Haven't heard of Selena? If not, you will'" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 60).

Beyond the narrative parameters of the journey itself of the critics Al González and Jennifer Willis-Rivera to the "center" of their academic interest, which, according to their own methodological exigencies, must become *a part of their concrete life experience* in order to become legitimate as such, the two relate, in the space which is textually delineated by the recurrent episodes of the narrative *per se*, the story of the legacy that Selena Quintanilla left both to American pop culture and to the American social-cultural (macro-)context that hosted her efforts at artistic expression. Ironically, only the "events after Selena's death, the mourning, the remembrances […] revealed the extent of her border sensibility" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57) remark the critics. The purpose of the two is to argue, by comparing the way in which the artist's contribution has been retrieved from the dominant perspective of Anglo-American mass media to the manner in which the *mestizos* appropriate Selena's music as part of their life experience, the thesis according to which "cultural borders are symbolically recognized and negotiated" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57). Moreover, González and Willis-Rivera notice, the symbolic negotiation that Selena initiated continues, putting its mark on American popular culture.

What does *mestizo*/*mestiza* mean, anyway? What does *tejano*/*tejana* mean, for that matter? What cultural borders do the two critics talk about? What is the relevance of the thesis that they set out to illustrate, and to whom is it significant and revealing? Who benefits from the results of such analysis? Who in their right would make it, and who should go through it, by reading it? I ask myself, naturally, all these questions and many others, when I run into terms of the kind I listed, which, chosen, in full awareness, by the authors, whose effort at (academic) expression I am just going through – because they communicate to me, right? what every "ethnic scholar" who contributes to the compilation of the *Our voices* volume "feels is most significant to share about his or her culture" (González et al., 2004, p. 7) – are the unique terms that confer meaning, first in the eyes of the two critics, to their own effort to describe and interpret the experience which, only in those terms, they wish to share with an (academic) community. Who may be a part of that community?

González and Willis-Rivera bring to our attention, very early in the context of the theoretical story that the text relates, the descriptions of the Chicana poet and essayist Gloria Anzaldúa of the "border experience" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 56) of those who live at the frontier between the United States and Mexico, expressing "the consciousness […] of living between cultures" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 56). Herself a *mestiza*, "with a mix of Spanish and Native American blood" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 56), Anzaldúa is familiar with an understanding of cultures "in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned" (Anzaldúa, 1987).

According to González and Willis-Rivera, Selena "offers a case study of the pluralistic mode that Anzaldúa attributes to the contemporary Chicana" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57). To illustrate the statement above, the two critics introduce two essential terms into their discourse: *mediation* and *innovation*. The borderline between the United States and Mexico means more than a territorial marker that, in its conventionalism, even though it benefits from international recognition, does not manage to give an account of the concrete life experience of those who, on the "fringe" delineated by this marker, "struggle against poverty, environmental neglect, and political exploitation as well as for justice, self-worth, and social respect" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57). Those who live along the borderline, on that "fringe," have been compelled to "find ways to accommodate multiple (and often conflicting) histories, cultural identities, and social practices" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57). Thus, to the extent "Anglo and Mexican values and references intermingle" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57), the margin, the border, or the fringe becomes the privileged place for cultural mediation and innovation: "Mediation occurs when the preferences of two or more cultures are reconciled; innovation results when the preferences of those cultures are transcended" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57). Thus, González and Willis-Rivera suggest a binary of operational terms that we may use to work our way through this brake of intermingled stories. Because, thanks to the defining effort of the two critics, the statement according to which the *tejana* artist Selena Quintanilla-Pérez inherits a musical tradition that conveys "a border creation that reveals a *particular historical moment*" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57) becomes intelligible. If, overlapping with the legal borders, "a symbolic place exists where diverse meanings come together through imposition, by invitation, or by accident" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57), only those who have the life experience of those cultural meanings, the people on the fringe, the people who live along the borderline (the border people), interpellated by the symbolic space whereby their carry their existence, "often question those meanings and *remold them into new interpretations* that fit into their border world" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57).

The two critics claim that *tejano* music is an example of such border innovation. The sound of *ranchera* is "a rich mixture of cultural influences: Spanish (guitar and violins), Mexican (trumpet and emotional vocal delivery), country and western, and pop" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57), a "dramatic, at times hyperbolic, never merely pretty" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57) sound. Thus, the unique sound of Selena, "a symbolic integrating of Aztec empires, Spanish/Arabic conquest, Mexican devotion, and Anglo colonization" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57) *integrates and, at the same time, transcends* the general effort of *tejana* music to "avoid capitulation to any one influence" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57). Moreover, the *grito*, a cry conveyed in *tejano* songs of love or sorrow, "is as much an expression of defiance as one of solidarity with the singer's pain" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 57), which those who listened to Selena, even through mass media – as myself, who did not have the opportunity to encounter her while she was still alive, despite the closeness in age between us – remember first of all things. I still keep in mind and have not given up meditating on the moment when, on a stage that was literally assaulted by fans, whose excitement in participating in Selena's concert became violent and dangerous to everyone (there were around 100,000 people in the audience), Selena leveled everyone's emotions with such a *grito*, which she improvised as a prelude to her well-known song "Como la flor," but also with her finger on her lips, in the gesture that generally appeases children. Here we have a child, a wonderful young woman who teaches us, from beyond the grave where she ended up way too early, "something about communication" (as Al González puts it in his introduction) with her own life, with her own innovative expressiveness.

After noting Jose E. Limon's premise – "while their [*tejanos*'] hold and sense of anything that could be called *Mexican* is tenuous and flat, they do not conversely think of themselves as *Americans* in any ideological sense" (Limon, 1994) – the two critics point out the subtle manner in which, far from meaning a "problem" (to solve), this "ever available opportunity for improvisation and creation" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58) of the young *mestizos* allows them – and Selena was an exemplary case of this, as well – a continuous reinvention of the cultural self, with major impact upon the symbolic borders along which these innovative manifestations take place. Nothing illustrates this "border identity […] full of unexpected linguistic creation" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58) more eloquently than the pronunciation of the name of the *tejana* artist in three different ways, as González and Willis-Rivera appreciate. The events around the death of the artist discursively “reclaimed her” under the name which, in its various pronunciations by one cultural group or another, creates itself a space of negotiation and innovation in relation to linguistic borders. The community in the north of Mexico and Univision pronounced her name in “correct Spanish” (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58), but, as the artist was rather considered *tejana* than Mexican, another (unique) form of pronunciation of Selena’s name also came to be used that represented this. At the same time, the Anglo media named Selena by pronouncing her name in yet another, third way, thus proving “their unfamiliarity with *tejano* music, language, and culture” (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58).

If, while she was still alive, the cultural community that was familiarized with Selena’s expressiveness was limited to the Mexican-American groups in the south of Texas, the carriers of *tejano* culture, the “sensationalism” (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58) of the artist’s death radically changed things, such that Selena gained, *post mortem*, access to a new public. In the face of the tragic event, the Anglo media confronted an image for which it owned no adequate discursive means of appropriation, as it had neither sufficient background nor history in that respect. Therefore, it made several gaffes, from the standpoint of the *tejano* community, which reclaims Selena as its “label.” Thus, by calling Selena a “Mexican Madonna,” an inadequate, simplistic reading, even though “visually accurate” (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58) as Selena chose to wear flashy costumes and bustiers on stage, the Anglo media associated her, on the basis of that reductionist reading of (the artistic act of) Selena, with the images “reserved for Madonna” (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58): of promiscuity, opportunism, and lack of respect. This portrait, though, as the authors point out, stands in visible contrast to the one through which those in her own culture appropriate her, who associate her with radically different values: to the latter, Selena remains *la Reina de la Musica Tejana* – and it should be mentioned that *mi Reina* is the appellation, *par excellence*, by which *mestizos* refer affectionately to their own mothers, girlfriends, or daughters. Consequently, the two critics remark that the descriptions, at a linguistic level, of (the music of) Selena that proliferated around the time right after her death, coming from different cultural communities, attest to the “broadening of the spaces for negotiation along the symbolic border” (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 58), a consequence of the artist’s death, an event that interpellated an entire nation.

Thus, communities which, up to that point, had remained invisible “suddenly shed their cloaks of obscurity as they gathered to write, parade, grieve, sing, and perform […] throughout the country”(González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, pp. 58-59) in honor of Selena, while inhabiting, thus, the newly created discursive space with expressive forms that would make room, along the extant cultural borderlines, for those who *chose to respond with their own descriptions and interpretations to the tragic event*. Therefore, the cultural memory that Selena left behind, manifest in the expressive actions that took place not only in her hometown, but all over the United States, facilitated the transgression and reconfiguration of the cultural borders between Anglos and *mestizos*, while bringing the two communities closer to each other, by means of the unmediated access of all to the discursive space that Selena created along the cultural borders which hosted her artistic act. González and Willis-Rivera note the fact that this cultural legacy of Selena *has no end*, once a larger and larger Anglo public encounters, for the first time, the Spanish language and once the *tejano* music transforms, gradually, in the eyes of the dominant culture, from an obscure manifestation, whose place of expression (Mexican restaurants) remains a limiting option, into something different: "a person, a place, an event" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 59). The voice of an isolated culture speaks to a national audience, the two critics attest, and the *tejano* music becomes the cultural bond, *par excellence*, which facilitates that effect.

Peña, whom González and Willis-Rivera cite in their study, refers explicitly to "the pedagogical aspects of music-centered events in the *tejano* community" (Peña, 1985), while considering them "a special sort of rhetorical play form […] that both defined symbolically what a *tejano* was and prescribed how he or she should behave culturally" (Peña, 1985). Thus, Selena herself constituted and still represents an educational model for many *tejanos*, such that, in this way as well, her message becomes stronger and stronger, while accessing portions of public that "were once inaccessible" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 59). Consequently, the two critics decide, through Selena's music, "*mestizos* have been able *to share their culture with the entire nation*, allowing for a (re)formation of symbolic borders and the (re)introduction of mainstream American culture to many aspects of *tejano* culture" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 59).

The possibility of creating a *mestiza* culture, the freedom to manufacture a positive space of intersection at the limit of cultures, which Gloria Anzaldúa dreamed of, is awakened in a symbolic order thanks to Selena's effort in artistic expression, and is further capitalized on by artists such as Ricky Martin, Cristina Aguilera, and Jennifer Lopez. González and Willis-Rivera remind us that Lopez gave Selena an image, in "an especially symbolic" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 60) manner, thanks to her role in the film that the director Gregory Nava dedicated to the artist, in 1997, only two years after Selena's death. The two critics acknowledge, as did all who watched the film, the fact that "Lopez looked strikingly like the slain Selena" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 60) a resemblance which Lopez herself confesses, by remarking, along with the fans, and in a non-sexual manner, the "curvy" character of both bodies, which makes them alike in the first place and which stands as a sign through which to read *correctly* the most important attribute of Selena: her physical resemblance to common people. "She blazed and shimmered in the spotlight, but it was the fact that Selena was happily, proudly *del people* – "of the people' – that forged a powerful, personal bond between her and her audience" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 60) attests the *People Weekly Tribute* publication in an issue of 1995, confirming the image of the "girl next door," or the "girl from the *barrio*" for that matter, which, (inter)mediated or not, constitutes the privileged reading of (the body of) Selena, along the symbolic borders of the social-cultural space that her memory created, but also beyond (on this side of?) that "fringe."

González and Willis-Rivera end their story by noting that "the borderlands made visible to Anglos through Selena are still vibrantly in motion, still fluctuating, defined through music, language, and the body" (González & Willis-Rivera, 2004, p. 60). Therefore, the rhetorical play form, in Peña's terms, which the *tejana* artist literally put on stage follows the prescriptions of those curved lines (as Lopez put it), the limits of the motion, carefully choreographed, of Selena's dance on this "fringe," while articulating, at the level of rhetorical "delivery," what the artist's message, in terms of discourse and sound, symbolically creates at the intersection of cultures, while giving a profile and identity to the *mestizo* community through *tejano* music, in an integrative, innovative, and interpellating manner.

It is not by accident that the two critics chose, out of the multitude of available options, Selena's story and not another, in order to shed light on the concrete manner through which the creation of cultural meanings may convey that perfect coincidence between life and text, an overlapping which, as the authors consider, must be communicated to those who try to "learn something about communication" at the beginning of the third millennium; it should be shared with and to those who, to the same revealing extent, look for it with their own bodies and texts. The message *per se* of González and Willis-Rivera, in this fascinating academic piece, is a revolutionary, heroic message. "Remembering Selena" constitutes the academic representation *par excellence* of the *telos* of the new "politics of inquiry," which the authors, as we remember, describe in full responsibility in a formula which makes explicit their particular position as regards the new identity of the communication studies field as frankly as possible: that "relational praxis" which Al González talked about, at the end of 2013, cannot be conceived without its *materialization within and throughout academic writing*.

If Selena succeeds in mediation and innovation at the level of her own forms of (artistic) expressiveness, while enriching American popular culture through her effort in articulating a different voice within the discursive space, the same is true as regards the two critics whose piece we have just read. The effort in articulating the most significant aspects of their own culture focuses, as we can see, on an "object" of interest whose appropriation, from an academic perspective, almost "requires" that the two authors approach it in a privileged way. To Selena, to her cultural inheritance which, in terms of a (re)definition of the symbolic borders at the intersection of cultures which, along with the people she interpellated and who responded to her, she managed to forward to the future generations, one does not get close, as González's and Willis-Rivera's lines seem to confess, except by showing the same delicacy, love, responsibility, care, and fidelity with which Selena herself always got close to the people around her. To understand Selena and be able to speak *on her behalf*, as well as on behalf of the *mestizo* community which she (well) represented and not, way too inadequately, *about* the artist, implies the effort of following Selena even from the perspective of that "pedagogical model" that Peña talked about. Here we see researchers of Al González's caliber assuming responsibility, with the same *joy and pride*, for this life lesson that the *tejana* artist offered, by creating within the academic discursive space a privileged place for the (re)definition of the symbolic borders which, this time, are proper to the field of communication studies and by suggesting, theoretically and practically, an alternative.

The effort in cultural mediation and innovation of the two critics becomes transparent all through *Our voices*, which, in letter and in spirit, manages to bring to the American academic public's attention "different voices," voices that articulate, in this volume, a real symphony of alternative cultural meanings, produced along the symbolic borders of the communication studies field, through the effort towards expressiveness of those who have their concrete, everyday experience. Only in these unique terms do the descriptions and interpretations of those who contribute to the compilation of the anthology give an account of the epistemological experiences of the authors and reveal aspects of communication *to which no other access way is available*. It must, therefore, be invented, and the writing of the two critics is such an innovation, as it mixes, in a harmonious manner and in a game with/of textual meanings, the story of Selena with their own story, the story of American popular culture, transformed, thanks to the effort of enlargement of the symbolic borders through *tejano* music, the expressive form *par excellence* of *mestizo* culture, with the story of American academic culture, itself transformed from its foundations by the new symbolic order which Al González and Willis-Rivera conceive and convey, in the company of all the other ethnic scholars who contribute to the realization of the volume, at the border between everything that used to mean, from the standpoint of the dominant culture, "academic research in communication studies," until *Our voices* appeared, and everything else.

The academic community everywhere should pay attention to the appearance, in the discursive space delineated by communication studies, of this remarkable innovative intervention of the "ethnic" (rhetorical) critics, whose particular perspectives upon communication and culture, legitimized by their own life experiences and articulated in the unique terms in which these scholars wish to describe and interpret them, appeals thus to a public which defines itself, gets its contour, and enlarges with *every reading* of *Our voices*. The anthology changes the face of qualitative and critical inquiry in communication studies, by negotiating, with the academic public everywhere, the possibility of a viable alternative, which offers legitimation and shelter to those who, for one reason or another – and history or histories represent, right?, the best reasons – have found themselves in the shadow, at the margins, in the insignificant corners (from the perspective of those who appropriated, on the basis of the power that they owned in their quality of dominant community, the possible meanings of "inquiry") of academic culture.

It is time for each of us to respond to the interpellation contained in the volume which Al González, Marsha Houston, and Victoria Chen edited. In other words, it is time for us to ask ourselves, fully sincere, if this reading, this story, this journey has changed us fundamentally or not. If it has changed our identity as researchers in the field of communication studies to such extent as to make us choose to contribute (rather than not), from our particular cultural corner, *visible or not yet* from the perspective of the dominant academic culture worldwide (which is American, especially on communication studies' territory), to the effort of transcendence of the symbolic borders, culturally determined, of the field, an effort that the three editors initiate and which they leave, on the basis of the texts with which they document their experiences, as a legacy to the next generations. The interest of the editors of *Our voices* in each one of us, those who choose to respond to their interpellation with our own texts, far from resonating with the older interest of the imperialist subject in the colonized object, seems, on the contrary, to invite us to the table of negotiations, to propose that we commence our existence, as ethnic scholars do, within our texts, whose meanings should (inter)mediate communication between our cultures from democratically equivalent positions, for the sake of cultural innovation, but also for the sake of a configuration of a universal profile of the discipline, whose symbolic borders are, no doubt, large enough to shelter every human effort to understand the complex phenomenon of communication.

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