In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the makers of Mexican ballads known as corridos created a rich body of narrative songs commemorating and commenting on these events. In this essay, I examine these “9/11 corridos” and the dynamics of their cultural production in a zone of what I term “commemorative practice,” taking note of stylistic and functional features that link this specific corpus to the larger corrido tradition, and ascertaining the range of attitudes they express toward the events of 9/11 themselves. I propose that we regard the 9/11 corridos as mediated ballads of mass communication, performed on a global stage and addressing issues of international consequence, a far journey from their point of origin as local ballads responding to matters of primarily local and regional interest.

Remarkably, these ballads of global commentary evince a broad stylistic fidelity to the contours of the genre in its previous and more restricted orbits, indicating the staying power of a sung verse-narrative matrix that has persisted over the centuries and across oceans and national boundaries. Corrido makers, or corridistas, express a variety of attitudes toward 9/11, suggesting that the process of commemoration as practiced in this unofficial and noninstitutional venue is open to competing formulations of shared memory. I see in the emergence of 9/11 corridos, then, the appropriation of a familiar expressive resource,
the *corrido* itself, in an effort to try out interpretations of calamitous events deeply affecting the general public. My objective is to pinpoint the role of commemorative song in this interpretive process, with regard to both timing and function: At what stage do these songs enter the picture? And what is accomplished in this medium by virtue of properties inherent to the song tradition itself?

**THE REALM OF FOLK COMMEMORATION**

Folklorists and ethnomusicologists, by the very nature of what they study, have a useful perspective to offer on the variety of public reactions to the devastating events of September 11, 2001. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, and in the ensuing weeks and months, people in the United States and elsewhere drew on traditional models to craft verbal, material, and musical responses across a range of mostly casual and unofficial communications, a realm I will refer to as “folk commemoration.” Expressive forms at the core of our disciplines — songs, stories, legends, jokes, and artistic displays — clearly played a prominent role in such commemoration during the painful adjustment to a post-9/11 reality, and our subjects of study and expertise consequently gained a new relevance and importance.

We are now at a sufficient distance from 9/11 that we can begin to obtain some perspective on the sequence of these public responses, from early moments when the wound was raw, to the present, when it has partially healed (at least for those of us who experienced its events from a distance). It was amply apparent even in the initial aftermath of 9/11 that a variety of traditional expressive forms, ranging from the ludic through the ceremonial to the reflective, were being employed in many communities to sort through powerful emotions and sift for viable shoots of meaning. Informal discourse was a crucial venue; in conversations and electronic exchanges among friends and family, stories were being shared — of miraculous escape, of unfortunate fatality, of mundane activities interrupted — that began to shape the interpretive frames within which the events would be understood and remembered more broadly.

In this mix of popular artistic responses, the arena of commemorative song has not yet received the attention it merits, particularly in areas beyond the pop music mainstream. Songs that tell a story, such as ballads, of course have a long and intimate connection to newsworthy events in the annals of oral tradition. Typically, I think, their purpose is not so much to narrate the event in the manner of the “reporter on the beat,” but rather to assess and communicate its deeper meanings.
This was certainly the case with many musical responses to 9/11, which tended to minimize descriptions of “what” had happened in favor of emotional appeals, and in doing so played a vital role in shaping and testing public perceptions of how the attacks should later be commemorated and collectively remembered. The Spanish-language corrido recordings released in the United States and Mexico in response to 9/11 were a distinctive part of this repertoire of popular music responses, speaking to and for a particular segment of the (North) American populace, and as such offer a compelling window into the process of individual and collective commemoration through song.

The first corridos dealing with 9/11 began to appear on the airwaves in northern Mexico and the southwestern regions of the United States within weeks of the attacks, reaching their collective peak during the final months of 2001. My inventory is by no means complete, but based on the materials in my possession, including cassette and CD recordings released on both sides of the border, as well as journalists’ reports and Web sites documenting the phenomenon, I estimate that a dozen or more 9/11 corridos were in general circulation by December of 2001, of which perhaps a half-dozen received significant attention from popular music audiences in both Mexico and the United States. This tally does not include more informal or local compositions that failed to register in the public record, and there were no doubt a good many of these.

Commercial 9/11 corridos emerged primarily from the two popular music zones along the U.S./Mexico border, what we might call the western axis running from the Mexican states of Colima and Sinaloa northward into Los Angeles, California, and the Tex-Mex axis running from Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo León, northward into San Antonio, Texas. As a consequence, one could hear 9/11 corridos in the jaunty western style of banda music and in the melodious conjunto style typical of norteño and the Tex-Mex sound. In addition, some of these corridos were performed in an old-timey string-band style, rounding out the variety of musical idioms employed in these recordings. According to press accounts, 9/11 corridos enjoyed airplay in some areas from mid-October 2001 into February of 2002 and beyond. These accounts paint a picture of a veritable 9/11 corrido craze in such cities as Monterrey, Laredo, San Antonio, and Los Angeles during this time, with people seeking out tapes and CDs and requesting these songs on their favorite radio shows.

FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL CORRIDO
The composers and musicians who created this stock of corridos drew on a ballad genre that is practically atmospheric in Mexico, utilizing a
platform for social commentary that has accompanied Mexican history since at least the middle of the nineteenth century (Paredes 1993). The corrido is the traditional ballad of Mexico, a faithful companion to the Mexican people as they have created their history as a nation, and as they have wandered north across the border with their powerful neighbor in search of jobs and adventure. Corridos are performed by trovadores and juglares, popular composers and musicians, in settings both private and public, in conjuntos or ensembles ranging from a singer with guitar to full-scale mariachis and brass bands. Corrido singers launch tuneful melodies on major-key progressions (with the exception of Mexico’s Costa Chica, where some corridos are in minor keys) shifting from tonic to dominant and back to tonic, sometimes with the insertion of a strophe moving to the subdominant as well. Meters can be duple or triple, in full or cut time, and instrumental interludes punctuate the singing of verse stanzas, which is often done in sonorous two- or three-part harmony.

Corridos render the experiences and the ideals of Mexicans as they have weathered revolution, government corruption, migration, the immigrant life, violence stemming from the drug business, and most recently, the scourge of international terrorism. Taken as a whole, this balladry is a remarkable chronicle of Mexican history told from the vantage point of the common man and woman. In villages, towns, and cities of the Mexican homeland, and in near and distant outposts across the northern borders, corridistas and those who perform their songs commemorate notable events in the taut poetry and sweet sonority of this traditional ballad form.

The scope of corrido production and consumption has always been primarily local and regional, but moments in the history of the genre foreshadow the kind of global commentary that manifested itself in the 9/11 songs. During the Mexican revolution (1910–30), hack poets and journalists tuned into the stories reaching the cities to churn out ballads by the dozens (Tinker 1961; Paredes 1993). These journalistic ballads emanated for the most part from Mexico City publishing houses in the form of broadside sheets (hojas sueltas), often with striking woodcut designs, and were mass-produced and sold at marketplaces throughout the nation.

The broadside corrido typically tells its tale through descriptive verse, but often closes with a moral framing the narrative as exemplary, or attaches a sentimental tag that can touch on the maudlin. Some of this production reads as a schematic account of events, much like the conventional news report in the papers, with the moral or sentimental conclusion tacked on at the end. Musical scores are rare, but
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The truly global corrido, as evidenced in the 9/11 corpus, did not fully emerge until the advent of the necessary mass communications infrastructure. While corridistas commented on international events in some of the broadside corridos distributed during the Mexican revolution, and on occasion in subsequent decades, with several songs...
addressing episodes in the Second World War, for instance, a new plateau was reached with the slew of corridos released in the southwest of the United States in the early and mid-1960s commemorating the life and death of John F. Kennedy. The assassination of Kennedy, a great hero among Mexican-Americans, stimulated the production and broadcast of some seventeen different corridos in a variety of styles, ranging from folk to literary; these were recorded in Houston, San Antonio, Austin, and smaller cities of the Rio Grande valley, as well as in Los Angeles, Miami, and Mexico City (Dickey 1978).

Not coincidentally, the Kennedy corridos emerged at a moment when the tools of mass communication had become widely accessible, even in areas of ethnic marginalization. According to Dan Dickey, in the decades following WWII, a homegrown commercial music industry developed in the American Southwest:

In the 1950s and 1960s, because of the greater availability of local recordings of conjuntos, the influence of Mexican records and radio, and because of the increasingly higher economic status of most Mexican Americans, Spanish language radio stations began...
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broadcasting in many communities in South Texas. . . . These stations were outlets for the local recording companies’ products (1978: 19).

Dickey further notes that “many corridistas themselves started their own recording companies in Texas to produce their own corridos as well as to record commercially-profitable conjuntos” (1978: 20). As a consequence, corridistas had wider access to recording studios to cut and produce their 45rpm singles and radio stations catering to a Chicano listening public gave them airtime, responding to the wishes of their growing audience. In short, the corrido of greater Mexico had become a vehicle of mass communication, attaining a wide audience across a large swath of the Spanish-speaking United States.

The public-speaking platform for social and political commentary that was consolidated in the popular Kennedy songs was used repeatedly in following years, in corrido recordings that addressed the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and on other noteworthy events such as the moon walk, the Patty Hearst case, hurricanes and tornados, prominent homicides, and train wrecks (Avitia Hernández 1998). The 9/11 corridos signal yet another level in this extension of the corridista’s voice and audience, now speaking to a broad demographic that crosses the northern zones of Mexico and the American Southwest, and also includes people of Mexican origin or Mexican-American cultural identity throughout the rest of the United States and even into Canada. The corridos of 9/11 can be seen as successors to the Kennedy corridos in that they feature the corridista as social critic whose voice, expounding on events with resonance beyond the ethnic community, is projected to a mass audience through the medium of commercial recording and transmission.

I’ve indicated here that the 9/11 corridos fit within a certain trajectory of the genre as a site of broad political commentary over the last half-century, but a number of questions remain. How true to other conventions of the genre are these mediated ballads of global commentary? How are the events of 9/11 rendered or referenced in their verses, and what attitudes or positions about the attacks are revealed? And more generally, how does the medium of popular music contribute to ongoing processes of memory formation in the aftermath of cataclysmic events? In formulating a preliminary response to these questions, I argue that the 9/11 corridos are a legitimate manifestation of the genre and deeply implicated in a process of testing a master narrative of the events they address.
I will focus here on five 9/11 corridos that offer trenchant responses to the tragedies of that day, beginning with a brief description of each and returning to analyze their texts in a more sustained manner (complete song texts for all five songs are contained in the appendix to this chapter). This sample, while small, provides a reasonable cross-section of 9/11 corrido production, including three examples that endorse, in varying degrees, what we might call the “official” story line as pronounced by leading politicians and the mainstream media in the United States in the aftermath of the attacks, as well as two examples that depart from this position to a greater extent.

The first corrido, “Tragedia en Nueva York,” was composed and performed by El As de la Sierra (The Highland Ace), in September of 2001 on his CD and cassette Soy Ranchero (“I Am a Country Boy”).

El As, based in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, is characterized by music journalist Elijah Wald on his “Corrido Watch” Web page as “a hardcore narcocorrido singer in the style of Chalino Sánchez,” one of the founders of the subgenre. Wald reports that El As was in Los Angeles preparing a CD of ranchera songs when the planes struck the towers and was able to add his take on the 9/11 events to that set of songs and get them into production quickly. Wald speculates that El As may have been trying to soften his image by producing a collection of songs that do not deal with the drug business. In “Tragedia en Nueva York,” he depicts the 9/11 attacks as the beginning of the new century’s first war, noting the many deaths and wondering about the mentality of people who would
carry out such deadly acts. He names the Taliban as likely suspects and, weeks before the invasion of Afghanistan, predicts the destruction of their “country.”

Filogenio Contreras and Lalo de la Paz are the authors of “Once Negro” (“Black Eleventh”), the second corrido in our sample. Performed by Los Estrellas del Bravo on their cassette El Once Negro, the song was released in Monterrey, Nuevo León, about one month after the terrorist attacks. Contreras, who was sixty-nine years old at the time and is based in Monterrey, has written hundreds of songs, including ballads about California’s Proposition 187 and about the murder of Selena, the star singer from Corpus Christi, Texas. He offered this explanation for writing his 9/11 corrido:

I want the people to hear my words, and in the world, wherever the music is heard, I want them to know that Mexico is lamenting a lot, that everyone is lamenting the situation in which a lot of Americans, and so many people of different nations, including Mexicans, were killed.

“Once Negro” makes note of the fact that the Twin Towers had been a center of the global financial industry, and it includes vivid depictions of the confusion and suffering brought about by the attacks, including a striking metaphor of the seemingly solid towers collapsing like “castles of cards.”

José Guadalupe Paredes began writing his corrido, “El Terror del Siglo” (“The Terror of the Century”), the third in our sample, just hours after the 9/11 attacks. According to a later story in the Los Angeles Times, the ballad was recorded by Grupo Imperio Norteño at Discos Acuario in Long Beach, California, and has a companion video including footage of the collapse of the Twin Towers. Paredes, fifty-eight years of age at the time, had been a machine-shop worker at an aerospace factory until illness forced him to retire. His corrido briefly depicts the attack on the towers and warns in closing that the United States is now surrounded by dangers on all sides.

Rigoberto Cárdenas Chávez, the author of our fourth corrido, “Bin Laden, el Error de la CIA” (“Bin Laden, the CIA’s Mistake”), recorded by Los Soberanos del Norte, lives in the Mexican state of Colima and was thirty-nine years old when 9/11 occurred. In a Reuters report filed a month after the attacks, Cárdenas stated, “from when I saw the news on television, I began to write the words of a new song.” In contrast to the first three songs, his finds a measure of poetic justice in the attacks, and observes, philosophically, that the “most perverse of all creatures” is the human being. In this version of events, bin Laden, trained by the
United States to commit acts of violence, eventually turns his tactics against his former teachers.

The final example, “El Corrido de Osama bin Laden” (“The Corrido of Osama bin Laden”), was composed and performed by Andrés Contreras, who is characterized by Elijah Wald on the “Corrido Watch” Web site as “the unofficial bard and corridista of the Zapatista rebellion.” Contreras’s song, self-recorded and distributed on cassette, takes a definitive stance against the United States, adopting the disdain toward Mexico’s northern neighbor more typical of the border ballads documented and analyzed by the great corrido scholar Américo Paredes (1958; 1976). For example, in the song’s preamble, Contreras resurrects the classic insult, *esos gringos patones*, “those big-footed gringos,” a common epithet in the ballads of border struggle of the early decades in the twentieth century. He further spices his song with spoken interludes heaping scorn on the *pinches gringos*, “damned gringos,” and praise on Osama and his associates. The final spoken segment concludes, with admiration, that Mexican heroes such as Francisco Villa and Joaquín Murieta, and even the Nicaraguan rebel Sandino, were less adept than Osama in exterminating gringos. Contreras, who calls himself *el juglar de los caminos*, “the bard of the byways,” devotes most of the corrido to celebrating the scare that Osama has brought to the Americans, who, he claims, are receiving “in their house” the treatment they have meted out to others.

**CONTINUITIES OF STYLE AND FUNCTION**

In my recent study of corridos and violence on Mexico’s Costa Chica (McDowell 2000), I discuss a set of stylistic features and functional roles that characterize the social aesthetic of the genre. Across time and space, corridos have retained an expressive profile marked by meta-narrative framing devices, vivid descriptive passages, and striking episodes of reported speech. These elements are implicated in a complex commemorative exercise involving three takes on the violence they address: celebration, regulation, and healing. Given the broader scope of their political content and the different sort of “community” they address, it is worth exploring whether (and if so, how) these stylistic and functional elements persist in the 9/11 corrido repertoire.

In terms of musical properties, they all fall well within the corrido tradition, marked by ¾-time, major keys, and melodies that ride a simple harmonic progression from the tonic to the dominant and back again, with an occasional stanza inserted that moves to the subdominant. Some are in a rapid ¾ time, as in El As’s corrido, while others
are slower; singing may be by a solo voice or, more often, two voices separated by thirds. Typically, the melody is covered between stanzas, in part or in full, by a lead instrument, usually accordion or guitar in the *conjunto* versions. All of these musical elements are standard in the *corrido* repertoire, and in this sample they persist across the shift from *banda* to *conjunto* to string-band arrangements.

In the poetry, too, we encounter the expected *corrido* elements. The verse comes in octosyllabic lines organized into stanzas of four, six, or eight lines, with rhyme or assonance occurring on the even-numbered lines. The composers remain rooted in the direct vocabulary of the *corrido*, and draw amply on the stock of traditional formulas and formulaic expressions that populate these ballads. As one expects, these authors have a story to tell, but they do not deliver it in a linear fashion. Instead, the narrative unfolds in a series of scenes that index and highlight a tale that is already known, in an effort to bring out significant patterns of action, attitude, and emotion. *Corrido* discourse, in general, is marked by the insertion of original formulations of fresh content into a largely traditional stock of conventional formulaic lines and phrases. Many formulas are scattered throughout the texts of these 9/11 ballads, giving their poetry the distinctive flavor of the *corrido*.

Setting the tone are the familiar opening and closing gambits, moments when the singer addresses the audience directly and acknowledges the performance framework itself. The traditional opening formula, in which the *corridista* announces his intent to sing the *corrido*, is curtailed somewhat in the 9/11 songs, as is common in commercially recorded *corridos* of recent years. However, “Tragedia en Nueva York” by el As de la Sierra makes a nod in this direction by including in the first stanza the imperative verb *miren*, “you (pl.) look,” in the line *miren como empezó*, “look how it got started,” which briefly acknowledges the fact of performance. A similar strategy appears in the famous “Corrido de Gregorio Cortez,” the object of a seminal study by Américo Paredes (1958), which marks this metanarrative moment by the phrase, *miren lo que ha sucedido*, “look what has transpired.”

Two of the *corridos* in our sample include a rendering of the closing formula, the *despedida* or leave-taking. One of them, “El Terror del Siglo,” makes use of the conventional closer, *ya con ésta me despido*, “now with this I say farewell.” El As de la Sierra delivers a more customized closing, with these lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
Me da tristeza cantarles & \quad \text{It grieves me to sing to you} \\
pero lo tenía que hacer & \quad \text{but I just had to do it.}
\end{align*}
\]
Numerous formulaic lines and phrases within the body of the narratives clearly signal a link to the larger tradition. El As de la Sierra, for example, periodically inserts the polite term of address \textit{señores}, gentlemen, echoing a practice that has been standard since the days of the Mexican revolution, and he makes use of a typical formula for citing the day and time of the event:

\begin{center}
\textit{Un martes negro, señores} \hspace{2cm} \text{It was a black Tuesday, gentlemen} \\
\textit{las ocho quince serían} \hspace{2cm} \text{it would have been about 8:15}
\end{center}

It is El As, as well, who draws on the emotive framing device, \textit{no me quisiera acordar}, “I’d rather not remember,” present in so many \textit{corridos} at poignant moments in the narrative.

Throughout the corpus of Mexican and Mexican-American \textit{corridos}, one finds a tendency to insert episodes of reported speech into the narrative, arguably to situate the listener in the midst of the action and thereby accentuate the drama of the moment. On this point, as with the less frequent use of framing formulas, the present selection of 9/11 \textit{corridos} strike a slightly divergent posture. “El Corrido de Osama bin Laden,” alone among our sample of five, makes conventional use of reported speech. Contreras employs this device twice in his \textit{corrido}, once to heroic and once to comic effect. In the first instance, he has Osama offer money to those who will help him and pronounces his hopes of doing bodily harm to his enemies:

\begin{center}
\textit{Decía Osama bin Laden} \hspace{2cm} \text{Osama bin Laden said} \\
\textit{con millones en la mano:} \hspace{2cm} \text{with millions in his hand:} \\
\textit{“Se los doy al que me ayude} \hspace{2cm} \text{“I give this to those who will help me} \\
\textit{a matar americanos,} \hspace{2cm} \text{to kill the Americans,} \\
\textit{con mis bravos mujaedines,”} \hspace{2cm} \text{with my brave mujahadeen,”} \\
\textit{decía con voz en cuello:} \hspace{2cm} \text{he said with his stiff voice:} \\
\textit{“No pierdo las esperanzas} \hspace{2cm} \text{“I have not yet lost hope} \\
\textit{de cortarles el pezcuello.”} \hspace{2cm} \text{of slitting all their throats.”}
\end{center}

We can note right away the play on the standard \textit{corrido} formula, \textit{con su pistola en la mano}, “with his pistol in his hand,” chosen as the subtitle for the classic study by Américo Paredes (1958). Clearly Osama is a different kind of hero, one who wields loose money rather than handguns as his weapon of choice. This playful mood persists as the poet takes liberty with the word \textit{pezcuello}, evidently a mixing of \textit{pescuezo} (“neck”) and \textit{cuello} (also “neck”). Later in the \textit{corrido} the humor broadens in an
alleged conversation between George Bush and his wife, which turns on a near appearance of the word culo, “ass,” which I try to capture in a rough English equivalent:

George Bush, bastante asustado  
le pregunta a su mujer:  
“¿Cómo le hago con Bin Laden que él ya nos pasó a torcer?”  
Su mujer le contestó  
con bastante disimulo:  
“Vete para Afganistán para que le des el cul...”  

... pables son estos gringos  
de todo lo que les pasa...  

George Bush, very alarmed  
inquires of his wife:  
“What can I do with bin Laden who has already come to tweak us?”  
His wife answered him  
in a manner oh so sly:  
“Get you to Afghanistan so you can give him your as...”

The authors of the remaining corridos in our sample find means other than reported speech to involve listeners in their narrative webs, for example by inserting vivid descriptive passages as well as striking images and metaphors. The descriptive power of the genre is present in this passage from “Once Negro,” which evokes the “nightmare” of bodies hurtling toward the ground from the upper stories of the towers:

Parecía una pesadilla  
mujeres y hombres llorando,  
cuerpos envueltos en llamas  
por las ventanas saltando  

It seemed to be a nightmare  
women and men were crying,  
bodies wrapped in flames  
jumping out of the windows.

Earlier in the same corrido we encounter this telling image:

Parecía una pesadilla  
Once negro de septiembre  
del dos mil uno presente,  
como castillos de naipes  
cayeron las gemelas potentes  

It seemed to be a nightmare  
Black eleventh of September  
of the present year 2001,  
just like castles of cards  
the powerful twins came down.

The first two lines of this stanza repeat a venerable corrido formula for conveying the date of a narrated event, while the two last lines offer a compelling metaphor comparing the falling towers to collapsing card castles.
These tactics, with their gritty evocation of experience and unfolding of imaginative vistas, connect us to the stylistics of the traditional corrido even as they mark the mass-mediated corrido as a distinctive branch of the tradition. This stylistic loyalty plays into the voicing of celebratory, regulatory, and therapeutic motifs, present to differing degrees in the 9/11 sample. Corridos have universally celebrated heroic action, resistance to tyranny, and forceful self-defense; this tendency to celebrate the resolve of history’s underdogs pervades the corrido of Andrés Contreras and creeps into the others in the form of grudging praise for the authors of the attacks — even when they refer to these perpetrators as cowards! The regulatory process surfaces in repeated warnings to the effect that the exercise of violence has its consequences, whether desired or not. Here the theme of Osama bin Laden coming back to haunt the Americans seems especially poignant. The therapeutic tendency of corrido discourse abides in performance, in live or mediated venues, where their meditation on violence in sonorous tonalities has a potentially restorative effect.

These stylistic and thematic continuities enhance the commemorative impact of the 9/11 corridos, allowing them to powerfully evoke the past and propose tentative framings of its meaning. The literature on collective memory stresses the importance of the communicative medium; as Edward Casey has it, “[i]t is as if this past were presenting itself to me translucently in such media — as if I were viewing the past in them, albeit darkly: as somehow set within their materiality” (2000: 219). Felicitous commemoration draws most readily on familiar expressive forms whose presence seems necessary and whose purpose appears to be self-evident. There is, moreover, a ritual flavor to commemorative action, which adds solemnity to linkages with the past. The deployment of conventional verbal forms in a rich musical texture fuels the perception that events are being memorialized in natural and appropriate ways.

**FORMULATING 9/11**

The corridistas who have assumed the authority and responsibility to reflect on the events of 9/11 do not speak with a single voice. A range of orientations can be observed in this sample, falling into three main categories: those that enunciate some version of the official story (examples 1–3); one that takes a more neutral stance (example 4); and one that takes the side of those who attacked on 9/11 (example 5). It is important to notice that although a range of positions is articulated, the weight of opinion leans decidedly toward the official story in the commercial
releases. The contribution of Andrés Contreras, on the other hand, with its sympathy for the Taliban, was produced informally and consequently had only a limited release within local outlets. Among the commercially released songs, the ballad by Rigoberto Cárdenas is the only one that deviates in some respects from the official story by imputing some level of responsibility to the Americans. Even here, though, we should note that this *corrido*, performed in an old-fashioned style with acoustic guitars, comes across as the vernacular cousin of the slick productions emerging from the rest of the commercial recording studios.

What are the contours of this official story as replayed in the majority of 9/11 *corridos*? These narratives are framed as laments lodged in a world of black and white, of terrorists and victims — the Twin Towers are portrayed as beautiful (though fragile), the victims are innocents, the attackers cowardly, and the quest for vengeance is a natural and legitimate response by the injured party. The word *cobardes*, “cowards,” resonates in this portion of the corpus as a verbal assault on the authors of the 9/11 attacks, as it did in speeches made by Western leaders in the days and weeks after September 11, 2001. This word and what it signifies, naturally, carry a particular sting in the heroic worldview of the Mexican ballad. Typical of this usage is this stanza near the end of the *corrido* by El As de la Sierra:

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Los que iniciaron la guerra
prepárense pa’ perder,
el país de esos cobardes
puede desaparecer.
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In “El Terror del Siglo,” José Guadalupe Paredes accuses the *terroristas cobardes* “cowardly terrorists,” of “leaving a terrible mark,” and the authors of “Once Negro” mention *el cobarde atentado* “the cowardly attack.” The authors of “Once Negro” even go so far as to pronounce a bond of solidarity between Mexico and the United States; referring to a worldwide voice of outrage, they state that:

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Mexico también se ha unido
sus dolencias ha dado
al gobierno americano.
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Expressions of solidarity with the neighbor to the north are hard to come by in the Mexican *corrido* repertoire, whose authors are far more likely to endorse the kinds of sentiments that exude from the voice of Andrés Contreras (example 5). The sympathies expressed in this
portion of the sample suggest a realignment of sentiment, with more people in the border regions now having a stake in what happens in the United States.

What messages are conveyed in those songs that depart from the official story? As already noted, “Bin Laden, el error de la CIA,” proposes a more neutral reading of 9/11. In this ballad, composer Rigoberto Cárdenas Chávez makes little reference to the terrorist attacks. Instead, his attention is fixed upon bin Laden, characterized as a star pupil of the CIA:

-La graduación con honores
-con traición les ha pagado

The graduation with honors
he has repaid them with betrayal.

Pursuing a theme that received much attention on the street if not from official outlets, Cárdenas presents Osama bin Laden as a product of CIA training, which is now targeted against its source. In keeping with the heroic tone of the traditional corrido, he proposes a heroic vision of the Taliban:

-llevan a Dios por cobija
-y se olvidan de su cuerpo

They carry God as their blanket
and they forget about their bodies.

At this juncture, his corrido takes an interesting turn with parts of two stanzas and another full stanza addressing bin Laden in the second person, as if the corridista were in dialogue with him, a device utilized in a classic corrido of the Mexican revolution, “Siete Leguas,” composed by Graciela Olmos as a paean to Pancho Villa’s favorite horse (and an inquiry into his soul). Again, reflecting a habit of thought that is common in the tradition, Cárdenas refuses to stand in judgment of the controversial figure:

-bin Laden a ti te culpan
-que la guerra has iniciado

bin Laden, it’s you they are blaming
that you have started a war.

-No soy Dios para juzgarte
-pero tendrás tus motivos

I am not God to judge you
but you must have your reasons

Here the corridista signals his distance from conventional judgments and voices a grudging respect for a character whose behavior is outside the law. The corrido tradition favors those who stand against authority, which is customarily depicted as corrupt beyond repair. A genre forged
in revolution, it readily embraces the bold hero, assimilating even bandits, outlaws, and drug dealers, to this heroic vision. In this regard, the corridos by Cárdenas and Contreras, framing Osama bin Laden in heroic terms, adhere most closely to the corrido ethic. The Cárdenas ballad concludes with these lines:

\begin{verbatim}
Por cielo, mar y por tierra
Osama te andan buscando,
bin Laden el terrorista
la CIA te ha preparado,
ese fue el error más grande
del gobierno americano.
\end{verbatim}

By air, sea and by land
Osama they are looking for you,
bin Laden the terrorist
the CIA has trained you,
that was the biggest mistake
of the American government.

Once again the government of the United States is invoked, but in this instance the argument is more in keeping with the corrido heritage of expressing an adversarial relationship between the North American neighbors.

If Cárdenas skirts the official story, Andrés Contreras presents its antithesis. His corrido goes beyond the suggestion of poetic justice and argues explicitly that the gringos got what was coming to them. The mood is one of celebration rather than lamentation. Osama bin Laden is portrayed in the manner of the glamorous Mexican revolutionary, acting in good conscience to inflict pain on oppressive powers while cleverly foiling their attempts to corral him. Contreras holds that the gringos have only themselves to blame; the key moral construct appears in these lines:

\begin{verbatim}
Lo que ellos han hecho al mundo
se lo hicieron en su casa.
\end{verbatim}

What they have done to the world
was done to them in their house.

The pain and suffering of the victims, the loss of innocent life, and the expectation of severe retribution related in the first songs are absent or reversed in this formulation of 9/11. For Andrés Contreras, it is the gringos — and specifically George Bush — rather than the attackers who tremble as they play the part of the cobarde.

UNFINISHED COMMEMORATIVE PRACTICE

I close by inquiring what contribution these popular ballads make to the processing of calamitous world events such as the 9/11 attacks. I see them as part of a larger arena of commemorative practice, ranging from
stories and legends that emerge in the immediate aftermath of such events to the solid memorials and monuments placed on the landscape once a consensus has taken shape regarding their meaning. Within the informal, unofficial, or vernacular subset of this practice, a variegated terrain of traditional and popular expressive forms, the creation of commemorative songs occupies a distinctive niche, transitional both in regard to the permanence of the cultural artifact and the stability of the interpretive lens. The making of songs about disasters and calamities comes neither at the beginning of the process of memory formation nor at its end, but is positioned somewhere in the middle, since composing and singing songs presupposes some degree of prior processing but also signals an ongoing process of memory construction.

It seems probable that commemorative song has a distinctive role to play among the expressive resources employed for testing schemes of remembering in the aftermath of public tragedies like the 9/11 attacks. With exacting musical and poetic requirements, songs are not as quick to appear on the scene as casual stories, new or adapted legends, tendentious jokes, spontaneous shrines, and other conventional expressive forms closer to hand or more readily fabricated. At the same time, commemorative songs, with their sensuous acoustic properties and telling images, have the potential to reach people at a deep emotional level. As instances of fully realized commemorative discourse, such songs draw people into special realms of experience and profoundly shape their consciousness (McDowell 1992). The core features of this discursive mode are a highly patterned expressive medium and a deeply resonant message content. These features, working together, can create for performers and their audiences the illusion of moving beyond the ordinary into a realm of exalted reality.

It is this potential for transcendence, I believe, that bestows on these measured and allusive forms their essential role in processing the flux of actual events into the more or less steady constructions of social memory. Yet ballads launched in the aftermath of dramatic happenings and circulating in social gatherings or through the mass media are most likely to be contributions to a continuing dialogue, not definitive or final statements. They are fleeting rather than permanent memorials, composed in evanescent sound, not enduring stone and steel. Indeed, we can appreciate from this vantage point, now five years beyond 9/11, the ephemeral nature of these corridos, as they have faded from the active performance and listener repertoire. Still, even as I write this, I hear on a Spanish-language radio station out of Indianapolis a 9/11 corrido that I hadn’t heard before, perhaps released on a recent CD,
suggesting a recursive dimension to the treatment of global events in popular music, with successive waves of sung commemoration, each connecting to a different phase of memory processing. Moreover, we must allow that especially strong contributions may obtain a permanent place in the repertoire.

The 9/11 corridos illustrate very well both the special efficacy of sung commemoration and its imperfect character as memorialization of the past. In regard to the former, these corridos weave together descriptive, emotive, and interpretive elements to fashion a complex artistic response to their subject matter. Their musical and poetic profiles reinforce the perception of a significant encounter with truth. They draw their audiences into the narrative frame by inserting passages of reported speech or highly charged descriptive passages. Using such formulas as no me quisiera acordar, “I would rather not recall,” the corridista dramatizes emotional involvement in the story. Memorable comparisons — the collapsed castle of cards in “Once Negro” — capture pivotal nuances of meaning. Judgments are delivered in propositions emanating from the corridista as chronicler of the human condition: the attackers are cowards, their deeds will be avenged, the gringos got a dose of their own medicine, the work of the CIA came back to haunt them. Elements of celebration, meditation, and therapy interact in this corpus to ensure its vitality as a locus of folk commemoration.

The presence of divergent interpretations underscores the location of the 9/11 corridos in a zone of unfinished commemorative practice. In such close proximity to the events they commemorate, they cannot be expected to achieve consensus, though they certainly work to move a population in that direction. It may well be that the corridos of 9/11, tilting as they do towards the official story (at least the more commercial versions), lend additional solidity to that master narrative. But we must not lose sight of the ever-present tendency of this genre to contest official stories. In our 9/11 sample, two corridos stake out independent positions, and even the three conformist corridos contain lines that hint at contrary sentiments, such as thinly veiled admiration for the cleverness or stoutness of the attackers.

On balance, it makes sense to view the 9/11 corridos, and much commemorative song in general, as located at the more formalized end of a spectrum of expressive forms deployed in the early phases of processing and constructing shared memories after cataclysmic world events. As examples of commemorative practice, these musical and poetic compositions enter an ideological setting that is already partly defined by other discourses, both official and unofficial. The moment is
still early, and the situation still fluid, so different schemes of interpretation can be launched. The cache of commercial, mass-mediated songs is most likely to follow the contours of the official story, if our sample of 9/11 corridos is an accurate guide. In this guise these compositions may contribute to the hardening of the official story into a consensual store of memory. But the counterhegemonic potential of these genres is always lurking around the edges, and in the right circumstances, songs will emerge to challenge the official story and propose a different understanding of our collective history.

APPENDIX: 9/11 CORRIDO SONG TEXTS

1. “Tragedia en Nueva York”

Composed and recorded by El As de la Sierra, on Soy Ranchero, Titan Records TNCD 9908 [CD], TNC 9908 [cassette], Sinaloa, Guadalajara, and Pico Rivera, CA, 2001.

La guerra ya comenzó
en los Estados Unidos,
y miren como empezó
con aviones dirigidos
a esas torres tan hermosas
el terrorismo ha surgido.

No me quisiera acordar
de imágenes tan violentos,
ni me quiero imaginar
en cuanta gente está muerta,
de luto está el mundo entero
esto es inicio de guerra.

Que mentes tan criminales
o tal vez sean desquiciados,
de qué países vinieron
estos planes tan malvados,
dicen que son Talibanes
los que están involucrados.

The war has now begun
in the United States,
and look how it got started
with airplanes targeting
those two beautiful towers
terrorism has reappeared.

I would rather not remember
those images so full of violence,
nor do I wish to imagine
how many people are dead,
the entire world is in mourning
this is the beginning of war.

How criminal those minds
or maybe just unbalanced,
from which countries did they come
those plans so full of malice,
they say they are Taliban
the ones who are involved.
La primer guerra del siglo
señores ya comenzó,
el que organizó el ataque
no sabe en que se metió,
el que resulte culpable
ay, pobrecita nación.

Que planes tan estudiados
al secuestrar cinco aviones,
con dieciocho terroristas
hicieron operaciones,
Washington y Nueva York
el blanco de esos traidores.

Un martes negro señores
las ocho quince serían,
cuando en las torres gemelas
un avión estrellaría,
la gente se imaginaba
que un accidente sería.

La gente de Nueva York
sin saber lo que pasaba,
mirando arder esa torre
otro avión se aproximaba,
como a los quince minutos
con la otra torre chocaba.

Me da tristeza cantarles
pero lo tenía que hacer,
los que iniciaron la guerra
prepárense pa’ perder,
el país de esos cobardes
puede desaparecer.

The first war of the century
gentlemen, now has begun,
those who organized the attack
have no idea what awaits them,
whoever turns out to be guilty
ah, I pity his poor nation.

Such plans so carefully made
to hijack five jet airplanes,
with eighteen terrorists
they did their operation,
Washington and New York
the targets of these traitors.

On a black Tuesday, gentlemen
it would have been eight-fifteen,
when against the Twin Towers
an airplane came to crash,
the people they were thinking
it must be an accident.

The people of New York
not knowing what it was,
watching that tower burn
another plane came in close,
about fifteen minutes later
it crashed the other tower.

It grieves me to sing to you
but I just had to do it,
those who started the war
you’d better get ready to lose,
the country of those cowards
could completely disappear.

Lyrics to “Tragedia en Nueva York” reproduced with the permission of Titan Records.
2. “Once Negro”

Composed by Filogenio Contreras and Lalo de la Paz; recorded by Los Estrellas del Bravo on their cassette El Once Negro, Mexico y su Música CLD-051, Centro Casetero, Monterrey, 2001.

Todo el mundo se estremece  
con tristeza y ay, con dolor,  
al escuchar la noticia  
por radio y televisión,  
derribaron las dos torres  
orgullo de Nueva York.

All the world is trembling  
with sadness and ah, with pain,  
upon hearing the announcement  
on radio and television,  
they brought down the two towers  
the pride of New York City.

Cuatro aviones comerciales  
secuestrados en las pistas,  
usados como misiles  
por cobardes terroristas,  
la primera entra de centro  
la segunda hecha cenizas.

Four commercial airlines  
kidnapped on the runways,  
employed just like missiles  
by cowardly terrorists,  
the first one comes straight in  
the second one turned to ashes.

Once negro de septiembre  
del dos mil uno presente,  
como castillos de naipes  
cayeron las gemellas potentes,  
levando miles de vidas  
de personas inocentes.

Black eleventh of September  
of the present year 2001,  
just like a castle of cards  
the powerful twins came down,  
taking thousands of lives  
of completely innocent people.

Destrozaron las dos torres  
bolsa y centro financiero,  
el atentador no sufrió  
otro atentado certero,  
hubo muertos por doquiera  
pero no como el primero.

They destroyed the two towers  
center of financial markets,  
the attacker did not suffer  
another well-aimed attack,  
there were bodies everywhere  
but not like the first one.

Parecía una pesadilla  
mujeres y hombres llorando,  
cuerpos envueltos en llamas

It seemed to be a nightmare  
women and men were crying,  
bodies wrapped in flames
Las predicciones locales
ya estaba prognósticado,
a los Estados Unidos
en minutos lo enlutaron.

Se esperaba cualquier cosa,
pero no lo que ha sucedido,
famosas torres gemelas
en segundos han caído.

Un día once de septiembre
cuando nadie lo esperaba,
habían sonado las nueve
el terrorismo llegaba.

Miles y miles de humanos
de diferentes naciones,
han quedado cancelados
por esas crueles acciones.
Cuatro aviones estrellaron
por diferentes lugares,
terrible huella dejaron
los terroristas cobardes.

Ya con ésta me despido,
pero hay que estar preparado,
en los Estados Unidos,
de peligro están rodeado.

4. “Bin Laden, el Error de la CIA”

Composed by Rigoberto Cárdenas Chávez; recorded by Los Soberanos del Norte on an unknown cassette. This new English translation is by the author, from the Spanish original as posted on the “Corrido Watch” Web site (http://elijahwald.com/corridowatch.html).

Bill Clinton lo dijo en prensa
que dio la orden de matarlo,
su gobierno no cumplió
y el error están pagando,
la graduación con honores
con traición les ha pagado.

Saben que él es poderoso,
que tiene mucho dinero
los talibanes lo siguen,
para enfrentarse al mundo entero,
llenan a Dios por cobija,
y se olvidan de su cuerpo.

Por cielo, mar y por tierra
su huella están buscando,
la CIA de Estados Unidos
a causa del atentado,
bin Laden a ti te culpan
que la guerra has iniciado.

Four planes came crashing
into different places,
they left a terrible mark
the cowardly terrorists.

Now with this I take my leave
but one must be prepared,
in the United States
they are surrounded by danger.

Bill Clinton said it in the press
he gave the order to kill him,
his government did not follow through
and they are paying for that error,
graduating with honors
with betrayal he paid them back.

They know he is a power
that he has plenty of money,
the Taliban follow him
to take on the entire world,
they bring God as their blanket
and forget about their bodies.

By air, sea and by land
they are seeking his track,
the US CIA
on account of those attacks,
bin Laden, they blame it on you
that you have started the war.
No soy Dios para juzgarte
pero tendrás tus motivos,
dinero llama dinero
y a ti te quieren los gringos,
como un tesoro te buscan
si te encuentran serán ricos.

Nostradamus lo predijo
el dragón ha despertado,
inicios del fin del mundo
es lo que estamos mirando,
el animal más perverso
de la tierra el ser humano.

Por cielo, mar y por tierra
Osama te andan buscando,
bin Laden el terrorista
la CIA te ha preparado,
eso fue el error más grande
del gobierno americano.

I am not God to judge you
you must have your motives,
money calls to money
and the gringos are wanting you,
they seek you like a treasure
if they find you they'll be rich.

Nostradamus foresaw it
the dragon has come to life,
the beginning of the end of the world
that's what we are seeing,
the most perverse of creatures
on this earth, the human being.

By air, sea, and by land
Osama they are looking for you,
bin Laden the terrorist
the CIA has trained you,
that was the biggest mistake
of the American government.

5. “Corrido de Osama bin Laden”

By Andrés Contreras, released on self-produced cassette tape titled *Intifada 2001*. This new English translation is by the author, from the Spanish original as posted on the “Corrido Watch” Web site (http://elijahwald.com/corridowatch.html).

Allá por Saudi Arabia
un valiente hombre nació,
lo que nadie había hecho
él hacerlo atrevió,
en varios lugares
a los gringos atacó,
y siempre que lo hizo
muchos soldados mató.

Over in Saudi Arabia
a valiant man was born,
what nobody else had done
he would dare to do it,
in a number of places
he attacked the gringos,
and every time he did it
he killed many soldiers.
Aunque es gran millonario
eso nada le importó,
y toda su fortuna
a la lucha dedicó,
el gobierno americano
con él mucho se asustó,
y para poder matarlo
miles de tropas mandó.

Though he is a big millionaire
that meant nothing to him,
and all of his fortune
he dedicated to the struggle,
the American government
became very fearful of him
and in order to kill him
it sent in thousands of troops.

Osama bin Laden,
no te dejes agarrar
mira que si te atrapan,
seguro te han de matar,
tu cabeza tiene precio
muchos lo quieren cobrar,
por todo lo que has hecho
no te van a perdonar.

Osama bin Laden
don't let yourself get caught,
look, if they can trap you
they will kill you for sure,
your head has a price on it
many would like to cash in,
for all that you have done
they will not forgive you.

Un una saltamontañas
con el frío de la chingada,
travó que si te atrapan,
seguro te han de matar,
tu cabeza tiene precio
muchos lo quieren cobrar,
por todo lo que has hecho
no te van a perdonar.

In a mountain hideaway
with one hell of a chill,
between the devil is here,
between the devil is here
you will not return alive,
in a little black bag
to their country they will return.

Ora, gringo criminal
el diablo se te apareció,
hombre de barba y turbante
asustate que te dió,
hasta el modito de andar
Osama te lo quitó,
y nomás de oírlo hablar
temblorina que se dió.

Now, criminal gringo
the devil has appeared to you,
a man with beard and turban
quite a fright he gave you,
even the way you travel
Osama took from you,
and just hearing him speak
it gave you the shivers.
Osama bin Laden
no te dejes agarrar,
míra que si te atrapan
seguro te han de matar,
tu cabeza tiene precio
muchos lo quieren cobrar,
por todo lo que has hecho
no te van a perdonar.

Heliópteros y aviones
con potente artillería,
bombardean al Talibán
sea de noche o sea de día,
muchos miles de soldados
los han mandado a buscarlo,
solo que los pobrecitos
ruegan a Dios no encontrarlo.

Decía Osama bin Laden
con millones en la mano:
“Se los doy al que me ayude
a matar americanos,
con mis bravos mujahadeens,“
decía con voz en cuello:
“No pierdo las esperanzas
de cortarles el pezcuellol,“

George Bush, bastante asustado
le pregunta a su mujer:
“Cómo le hago con bin Laden
que él ya nos pasó a torcer?“
Su mujer le contestó
con bastante disimulo:
“Vete para Afganistán
para que le des el cul . . .”

Osama bin Laden
do not let them catch you,
look, if they can trap you
they will kill you for sure,
your head has a price on it
for all that you have done
they will not forgive you.

Heliocopters and airplanes
with heavy artillery,
are bombing the Taliban
be it by day or by night,
many thousands of soldiers
they have sent to search for him,
it’s just that those poor fellows
ask of God that they not find him.

Osama bin Laden said
with millions in his hand:
“I give this to those who will help me
to kill the Americans,
with my brave mujahadeen,“
he said with his stiff voice:
“I have not yet lost hope
of slitting all their throats.”

George Bush, very alarmed
inquires of his wife:
“What can I do with bin Laden
who already came to tweak us?“
His wife answered him
in a manner oh so sly:
“Get you to Afghanistan
so you can give him your as . . .”
... pales son estos gringos
de todo lo que les pasa,
lo que ellos han hecho al mundo
se lo hicieron en su casa,
y vuelven los bomberos
allá por Afganistán
andan buscando a bin Laden
pero no lo encontrarán.

... suming the guilt are the gringos
for all that happens to them,
what they have done to the world
was done to them in their house,
and the bombers now return
there in Afghanistan,
they are looking for bin Laden
but they will never find him.

REFERENCES


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NOTES

1. Several folklorists — Bill Ellis (2001) with respect to jokes, Silvia Grider (2001) with respect to spontaneous shrines, for example — stepped forward with thoughtful discussions of this prolific popular reaction to 9/11.
3. I thank my sister Maura Kealey, Ethan Sharp, and Elijah Wald for delivering into my hands some of these tapes and CDs. Also, see Wald (2001) for portraits of El As and Andrés Contreras.