

The Ballad of Narcomexico

ABSTRACT: In the first years of the new millennium, Mexico experienced a wave of violence associated with the trafficking of illegal substances, and the deep-seated Mexican ballad tradition called the *corrido* has served as a chronicle of these events, facilitating a popular discourse couched in the sweet sonorities of Mexican song and bespeaking a heroic vision of history as witnessed at the grass-roots level. Here, in what was first delivered as an address to the American Folklore Society, I seek to get beyond the slick veneer of the *narcocorridos*, ballads that celebrate and glamorize the trade, to sample a zone of commemorative practice where narcocorridos share a space in the national consciousness with two additional manifestations of the contemporary genre: corridos of trafficking, which tell drug-world stories in a level-headed manner, and corridos of remediation, which seek to ameliorate the devastation wrought upon the Mexican people by the drug wars of the early twenty-first century.

IT IS A special privilege to be delivering this Phillips Barry lecture¹—not only for the honor of being associated, however briefly, with one of the great ballad scholars of all time, or for the distinction of joining a list of eminent ballad chasers who have previously been entrusted with this honor, but also for the pleasure of locating my work with ballads in the space opened for us by Barry’s groundbreaking writings. Barry was a ballad ethnographer in the days of armchair ballad enthusiasts, and his commitment to seeing how ballads actually originate and evolve in human communities led him to assert that ballads were not “a closed account,” as Francis Barton Gummere (1901, 163) had argued, but rather that they were a flourishing genre in the northeast of the United States and elsewhere. The work I have done over the years with Mexico’s ballad tradition, the *corrido*, is very much in the

spirit of Barry's work; like him, I have sought to test the concepts and theories of ballad scholarship through exposure to the realities of ballad ecologies.

One of the threads to follow in the intellectual project that Barry left to us is the evolution of ballad forms and genres as they are buffeted on the currents of time and bounced around from shore to shore, yet still retain, somehow, an essence that distinguishes them as unique and persisting expressive vessels. Among genres of traditional verbal expression, the Mexican corrido has one of the more remarkable destinies. Arguably born out of the medieval Spanish epic—or at least that epic's offspring, the sixteenth-century *romance*—the corrido came into its own as a New World phenomenon, widely distributed across Spanish America (as Merle Simmons [1963] showed us), but achieving only in Mexico the stature of, in the words of Américo Paredes, “a crystallization . . . which by its very weight impresses itself on the consciousness of the people who cultivate it, owing its pervasiveness to the fact that it shapes the way of life or reflects the character of that people” (1963, 231). It was in response to the intercultural strife of the Texas-Mexican border zone at the onset of the twentieth century, and the bloody struggles of the revolutionary period in Mexico (from 1910 to 1930), that this genre of narrative song achieved a nationwide and even regional prominence as a grass-roots chronicle of history-in-the-making.

Remarkably, the story of this genre's adventures following this watershed period is punctured with a declaration of mortality, uttered in the 1950s by the two leading corrido scholars of the day, Américo Paredes and the Mexican folklorist Vicente Teódulo Mendoza. In a famous passage, Mendoza (who, incidentally, attended one of Stith Thompson's Folklore Institutes in Bloomington, Indiana) argues that the corrido degenerates, at the close of the revolutionary period, into something “culterano, artificioso, frecuentamente falso, sin carácter auténticamente popular” (cultured, artificial, often false, and without a traditional flavor) (1954, xvi). Paredes, from his vantage point across the Rio Bravo, spoke of the corrido's “decay” under the influence of a Tin Pan Alley effect and deplored what he saw as the epitome of demise, when “Pedro Infante . . . groaned a pseudo-corrido into a microphone while a bevy of Mexican bobby-soxers squealed in ecstasy” (1993, 139).

Like Gummere's notion of a “closed account,” these dire pronouncements have been given the lie by a resolute genre that simply

refuses to die (Hernández 1992; Nicolopoulos 1997). The corrido has persisted as a vital resource for the people of Greater Mexico, used by them to address successive phases in their historical destiny. The genre was there for them as they experienced the social violence of agrarian reform in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, as they endured the hardships of migration into the United States in search of gainful employment, as they organized into agricultural unions and fought for better working conditions, and as they pondered the meaning of world-changing events like the attacks of September 11, to name only a few high points. And today, the corrido is close at hand as the Mexican people live through the unbearable trauma of the drug wars, fueled by the lucrative market in the United States for illicit products (said to stand at more than \$30 billion annually [Grillo 2008]), exacerbated by a flow of weapons and arms from the United States into Mexico (*Washington Post* 2011), and costing the lives of over 50,000 people since the time Felipe Calderón took office as president, declared a war to the death with the drug cartels, and unleashed the army on the civilian population of Mexico.²

I take up the ballad of narcomexico in an effort to gain some perspective on this burgeoning manifestation of the corrido genre. My intention is to place today's narcocorridos in historical perspective by assessing their role as active agents in a vital zone of commemorative practice. In a previous study I conducted on the corridos of September 11, I found that the makers and performers of 9/11 corridos formulated a range of positions on the events of that day in 2001 (McDowell 2007). A good many of these ballads adopted the official story, arguing that the attackers were "cowardly terrorists." But differing positions were advanced, claiming that Osama bin Laden should be praised for killing more gringos than Pancho Villa did, for example, or characterizing bin Laden as the CIA's star pupil. I saw in this diversity of positioning the marks of a vibrant commemorative practice, opening a forum where a variety of opinions could be expressed and evaluated.

What I want to do, as I take up narcocorridos, is to explore the possibility of advancing a comparable analysis of corridos being produced today with a topical focus on drug trafficking. This quest entails, initially, coming to grips with the flashiest portion of the overall corpus: a subset of contemporary corrido production with ties, direct or indirect, to the cartels, or with origins in the hyper-commerce of music entrepreneurialism on both sides of the border, but with an epicenter in Los Angeles.

This portion of the modern corrido corpus is the one that has attracted the interest of journalists and other commentators, and it is the object of an ecstatic fandom on both sides of the border. Without for a moment discounting the significance of these narcocorridos, I will draw attention to other voices and other positions in this zone of commemorative practice in arguing that the contemporary corrido, by all signs, is doing an admirable job, as it has throughout its long trajectory, of affording the people of Mexico a forum for exploring the meaning of events that define their current experience. In order to advance this argument, I will first present, in brief, some thoughts about this flashy portion of the corpus—what we might call the “narcocorrido proper” (or more simply, the narcocorrido), in an effort to isolate its defining characteristics. After that, I will bring into the discussion another subset of the modern corpus, one that focuses on trafficking-related events but does so in a tonality more consistent with traditional conventions of form and content of the genre. And finally, I will explore a subset of the modern corpus that deals with trafficking but does so in an attempt to heal and cure the wounded nation. For each category of corrido, I will examine a selection (or two) in order to illustrate the properties most germane to my argument.

When this overview is completed, it will be apparent, I hope, that our understanding of the current narcocorrido craze will be enhanced by locating narcocorridos in a broader historical perspective informed by awareness of the corrido as a genre operating in a lively zone of commemorative practice. Indeed, this argument leads to the conclusion that the corrido genre has not morphed into the narcocorrido, but rather, that narcocorridos constitute one (admittedly very dynamic) branch of a contemporary corrido portfolio that features a multiplicity of voices and positions. I believe that we will see the narcocorrido yield its current prominence and become, eventually, an important historical node in the genre’s continuing march through time.

Cartel Corridos

In a recent talk for an Indiana University Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology colloquium on the aesthetics of fear, I discussed the current narcocorrido craze, highlighting several of its distinctive attributes. I began by posing the question “Is the narcocorrido a genuine corrido?” Upon finding that it is indeed a bona fide exemplar of the

tradition, I then inquired, “What kind of corrido is it?” My analysis suggests that the defining features of this corrido branch or subset can be traced through three critical arenas: patronage systems, modes of dissemination, and aesthetics.

Patronage systems. Corridos have often been involved in reciprocal patterns of exchange—think, for example, of the *corridistas* who accompanied the troops of influential generals during the Mexican Revolution (Reed 1914, 88). In my work with the corridos of Mexico’s Costa Chica, I found that people often solicit corridos from those who are known to be makers of corridos—in one instance, a man sought the promise of a corrido to commemorate him in expectation of his impending death. Narcocorridos too are deeply embedded in webs of exchange, and these webs are worthy of close inspection as they bring composers, musicians, and their patrons into specific lines of communication. The defining feature of narcocorrido patronage systems, in my view, is the participation of the cartels, at some level, in their production and circulation.

Modes of dissemination. In the past, corridos have circulated through live performance, through broadsides, and through audio recordings. Narcocorridos do circulate in live performance and through audio recordings, but in the current moment, another primary modality for circulating narcocorridos has emerged: online communication, and in particular, YouTube. This development has multiple implications—for the form and content of delivery, for the addition of another semiotic channel (the visual), and for altered circumstances in the interplay between producers and consumers.³

Aesthetics. There are innovative features in both the music and the lyrics of narcocorridos that pose great challenges to continuity in the tradition. Musically, we are seeing the impact of rural traditions in the northwestern Mexican states, especially Sinaloa, resulting in a prevalence of the *banda* sound and the introduction of bouncy dance tunes where not long ago the accordion sound of Nuevo León and adjoining states, and waltz or *pasodoble* rhythms, were dominant. With regard to song lyrics, we see the abandonment of conventional features such as opening and closing formulas and a move away from third-person to first-person voicing, features that are present in the hybrid

form identified by Manuel Peña (1999) as the *canción-corrido*, which fuses lyrical and narrative elements.

Let's examine the play of these elements in a case study of the singer Alfredo Ríos, better known as El Komander (also spelled "Comander"), one of the emerging stars in a recent narcocorrido wave termed *alterados*, a word signifying "angered to the point of distraction." El Komander has spoken fairly openly about his interactions with the cartels, as he does in the following interview, which I have transcribed from a 2011 *Time* video report titled "Singing Songs of Drug Violence" (Schwartz 2011).⁴

Cuando alguien me pide escribir un corrido, por lo regular, me llaman a mi radio.

Primero les digo, de qué se lo trata, la historia, antes de hablar de dinero. A veces hablan de un acontecimiento, a veces solo de una persona de gusto, a veces corrido de luto, de alguien que ya falleció.

(When someone asks me to write a corrido, most of the time, they call me on my cell.

First I say to them, what's it about, the story, before we talk about money. Sometimes they talk about a happening, sometimes just about a game person, sometimes a mourning corrido, for someone who has died.)

Después ya cuando se habló de dinero, se habló de que se va a escribir, yo le mando la letra, y él revisa cada palabra que se escribió, eso, y si no le gusta algo, antes que yo grabarla, le digo si algo no le gustó, si todo le gusta, todo se graba.

(Then when we get around to talking about money, we spoke about what I will write,

I send him the lyrics, and he looks at every word that I wrote, like that, and if he doesn't like something, before I make the recording, I ask him if there's something he didn't like, if he likes everything, we record everything.)

Ríos, wisely, has said: "I'm nobody's messenger, nor do I belong to one side" (McGirk 2010). It is alleged in news accounts that narcocorrido composers make as much as \$10,000 or more for a well-placed song. One performer, Reynaldo Martínez, told Elijah Wald in response to a question about whether he is paid for his compositions, "No, but sometimes

someone who likes one of my songs might give me a Land Rover” (Buggs 2009b). Clearly, like a relationship with a recording studio, a connection with a capo (drug boss) can be a lucrative situation.

Alfredo Ríos, El Komander, twenty-five years old in 2011, is a native of Culiacán, Sinaloa, the heart of the current drug underworld and a place where the cultivation and smuggling of illicit substances has deep roots. His career is currently centered out of Los Angeles, where he is sponsored by Twiins Enterprises, the work of the brothers Omar and Adolfo Valenzuela. According to news reports, they are the sons of a clarinetist father who brought them from Sinaloa to California because he didn’t want them getting mixed up with the drug lords in Mexico (McGirk 2010). In spite of these good intentions, the Valenzuela boys took note of the narcocorrido craze in the barrios of the United States, and in 2000 they founded Twiins Enterprises and opened a recording studio in Burbank. They now sit upon a lucrative entertainment empire—they have signed more than twenty bands and singers (including El Komander) whose songs are a hit on YouTube and who play to large and enthusiastic crowds in nightclubs all over the United States and Mexico. To get a sense of the scope of this operation, the twins say that they have more than 1.5 million MySpace friends (McGirk 2010). Twiins has now released a narco-movie based on El Komander’s recent hit “El Ejecutor.” Here’s the promo blurb for this film: “While he may not be a super-hero with magical powers, Valente has a way with arrows, knives, darts, pistols and various other mayhem-inducing hardware, as he secretly pursues (and kills) a variety of bad guys while protecting his reporter girlfriend in Los Angeles, California.”⁵ I present below my own transcription and translation of the lyrics to “El Ejecutor.”⁶

“El Ejecutor”

Me apodan Ejecutor
soy el que cobra las cuentas,
soy el que levanta lacras
el que cabezas revienta,
con un comando de muerte
aseguramos la empresa.

They nickname me Executioner
I’m the one who collects what’s owed,
I’m the one who raises welts
the one who smashes heads,
with a license to kill
we take care of the business.

El abogado del diablo
verdugo de traicioneros,
bajadores y madrinas
que le sirven al gobierno,

The lawyer for the devil
hangman of the traitors,
smugglers, and godmothers
who work for the government,

tomé un curso allá en la sierra
y me gradué con un cuerno.

I took classes in the highlands
and I graduated with a goat's horn.

Nacido allá en Sinaloa
donde me enseñé a matar,
traigo sangre de combate
y la orden de ejecutar
como una fiera salvaje
el terreno hay que cuidar.

Born there in Sinaloa
where I taught myself to kill,
I have combat in my blood,
and the order to execute,
just like a wild beast
who must look after his turf.

Super negra y diamantada
en ella mis iniciales,
blindadas mis camionetas
del gobierno credenciales,
y un san juditas me cuida
y me limpia de los males.

Black and shining pistol
my initials carved into her,
my truck windows are shaded
with papers from the police,
and a little Saint Judas keeps me
and cleanses me from all evil.

Billetes y más billetes
pa' la banda y las mujeres,
que toquen "El Sinaloense"
y "El Hijo Desobediente,"
con buchanas del 18
quiero brindar con la muerte.

More and more piles of cash
for the band and for the ladies,
play me "El Sinaloense"
and "El Hijo Desobediente,"
with Buchanan's 18 whisky
I will have a toast with death.

Unos quieren mis servicios
otros me quieren matar,
me apodan Ejecutor
otros me dicen chakal,
porque doy piso a las ratas
y al que no quiera pagar.

Some of them want my services
others would like to kill me,
they nickname me Executioner,
others call me a jackal,
because I bring down the rats
and those who don't want to pay.

[Sound of screeching wheels as vehicle accelerates]

The visuals for this YouTube video are understated compared to the norm in narcocorridos, which often feature still images of bullet-ridden corpses, burned-out vehicles, and comparable scenes of mayhem. Instead, the video opens with El Komander and his souped-up heavy-metal truck. Dressed in a white cowboy hat and a white linen shirt embroidered with the emblem of a cross flanked by eagle wings, Ríos stands by the side of the truck, singing and gesticulating with his hands. He is shown from three or four different camera angles. At one moment, during the musical interlude after the fourth stanza,

the camera focuses in on a decal on the truck; we see, in ornate letters, the following:

EL COMANDER
ESPERENLO PRONTO!
(Expect him soon!)

As El Komander sings the last words of the final stanza, we see a city street at twilight, and a truck begins burning rubber as it slowly skids its way toward the camera.

Returning now to the words to this ballad, “El Ejecutor” (The Executioner) displays many of the traits that define the narcocorrido proper. Musically, we find banda combined with accordion, a fusion of the newer and older sounds, though in other details the song cleaves closer to the old style with its three-four, waltz-time rhythm. Also typical of the corrido’s music, and evident in this example, is a chord sequence that moves from tonic to dominant and back to tonic, with periodic forays into the subdominant. The lyrics deliver a first-person exposition of a work ethos; this turn to first person is typical in narcocorridos, though it is a departure from the more common third-person voicing in the tradition. It signals a narcocorrido subtype called “corridos de amigos,” where the object is not so much to tell a story as to draw a portrait of a person or figure (see Muessig 2010). As is typical in narcocorridos, the opening and closing formulae have been omitted—the ballad dives directly into its portrayal of the enforcer and drops off, without ceremony, when the portrait is completed.

As in other corridos de amigos, there is a triumphant note to this sketch. No apologies are made for the brutality of the work—we hear, with a distinct note of pride, of the raising of welts and the smashing of heads. But the author of these violent actions is shown to perform for a purpose—he is following orders from on high intended to “asegurar la empresa” (take care of the business). Moreover, the victims of these actions are presented as loathsome in their own right, as “rats” who go back on their deals, and as traitors who secretly work for the government. In the end, an aura of moral neutrality pervades this portrait—El Ejecutor, like a wild animal, must protect his turf, and if some people call him a jackal and wish to see him dead, others seek after his services. He places trust in his tools, including the “cuerno de chivo” or “goat’s horn” (the affectionate name of automatic rifles

with a curved magazine), the “super” (a .38 caliber pistol), and the pickup trucks with shaded windows; plus, he can count on San Juditas, his little Saint Jude, a shadowy patron saint of the Mexican underworld, to cleanse him of all evil.

One detail in this ballad’s lyrics that evokes Mexican song tradition is the reference to other songs. The first of these, “El Sinaloense” (The Man from Sinaloa), composed by Severiano Briseño, is a picaresque hymn to the rural ethos of the state, one rendered in the lively *hua-pango* rhythm. It has been featured in Mexican cinema and is a standard in the mariachi repertoire. Interestingly, it is also a song that in its lyrics refers to other songs. “El Hijo Desobediente,” referenced next in “El Ejecutor,” is a classic corrido featuring a son who fails to respect his father, then receives his father’s curse, and is at last killed by an errant bull. These references to songs within songs foreground the close connection of live music and associated scenes of revelry to the lifestyle aspired to by the men of action portrayed in narcocorridos.

Taken together, the corrido “El Ejecutor” and the movie trailer for *Yo el Ejecutor* offer a glamorized portrait of an enforcer in the drug world. The corrido is one that will not displease the *narcotraficantes*, the drug traffickers; in fact, it is likely to flatter them, even as it engages them with realistic elements from their experience. This flattering portrait is, as well, a lure for the many narcocorrido fans who find merit in the expression of resolve in the face of danger and who welcome any and all who stand up in opposition to the government. These heroic themes have great resonance in the corrido tradition, and in spite of the modifications I have pointed out, this corrido, like most narcocorridos, remains stylistically true to genre.

I have stated my position that corridos like “El Ejecutor” delineate a branch of contemporary corrido production that we might properly term “the narcocorrido.” The defining feature of this branch is its participation in the drug world, a connection that can be rather distant, as in the case, for example, of an upstart local band performing corridos of a certain sort in hopes of drawing the attention of someone in the drug hierarchy in order to acquire a moneyed sponsor. Or the connection can be much more direct, as when a band is invited to perform at a party for higher-ups in the drug world, or consigned to produce a corrido for a capo. Each of these scenarios is commonplace enough to have been thoroughly documented in newspaper accounts

and other investigative reports (see Freemuse 2010; McGirk 2010; Muessig 2010).

Moreover, we know from a variety of testimony that corridos can enter into the communicative networks of the cartels, used to send messages to their rivals or to the authorities. There are documented cases of narcocorridos released on YouTube marking a territory, posting a challenge, or delivering an insult (see Buggs 2009a; Burnett 2009). Lately, YouTube narcocorridos are exhibiting the banner “Aprobado por Cartel” (Approved by the Cartel), thereby making explicit the incorporation of the ballad into the business. If much of the disturbing killing and dismemberment springing from cartel rivalries in recent years must be viewed as symbolic violence, then a significant component of this messaging system is the flood of narcocorridos that circulate via YouTube and announce or celebrate these acts (Burnett 2009; Roig-Franzia 2007). As already noted, I prefer reserving the term *narcocorrido* to refer to that segment of corrido production today that bears this stamp of involvement in the affairs of the cartels.

To a degree, this cartel involvement dovetails with a high degree of commercialization—after all, the lure of assimilation to the cartels is access to the lavish resources to be found in that milieu. But the commercial impulse enters the picture from another quarter as well, as entrepreneurs in the music business, concentrated in Los Angeles but present in other metropolitan districts in the US Southwest and Mexico’s north, capitalize on the street credibility of narcocorridos to promote key bands and individuals like El Komander to the status of superstars with massive fan followings. The interplay of monster bands like Los Tucanes de Tijuana and Los Tigres del Norte with elements in the drug underworld is a murky affair with much allegation and little proven fact.⁷ But suffice it say that the narcocorrido style—in song, dress, and lifestyle—forms an expressive cluster within which the interests of the cartels and the efforts of the promoters coincide in producing a climate favorable to the distinctive YouTube narcocorrido videos.

Finally, narcocorridos are, to a remarkable extent, a YouTube phenomenon. The YouTube corrido is a new animal, as song—already a hybrid of music and lyric—is now coordinated to image, injecting a third dimension into an already complex artistic project. Additionally, YouTube presentations offer space for the uploader to frame uploaded content and for the audience to comment on the material

and, at times, to enter into lively debate. YouTube is an intriguing frontier for folkloristics, placing an enormous quantity of data close to hand even as it assures that this data must remain to some extent inscrutable due to the anonymous quality of its operations.

Corridos of Trafficking

Mixed in with the narcocorridos on YouTube, but less flashy and thus less insistent in nature, are corridos whose topic is events tied to drug trafficking but whose approach to this topic is more closely allied with traditional prototypes. I want to characterize this portion of the corpus as another contemporary branch of the tradition, where the musical and poetic effects follow more closely the familiar patterns for the genre. I came across a sample of this subset of modern corrido production while searching for corridos about the mind-numbing violence that has plagued Acapulco, a place where I spent a considerable amount of time while researching the Costa Chica corridos in previous decades. Newspaper accounts over the last few years have brought to light a disturbing intrusion of violence into the public realm there. What had become of my beloved Acapulco, with severed heads now appearing at clubs and crossroads? Perhaps the local corridos would help me understand this drastic turn of events.

As it turned out, this quest was amply fulfilled when I came across a number of YouTube corridos that shed light on the Acapulco scene. What I find striking about these corridos is how much they differ from the narcocorridos commonly referenced in media accounts. The corridos in this subset, which I am calling “corridos of trafficking,” remind me of the corridos I recorded in Acapulco back in the 1980s and 1990s. The distinguishing features of the narcocorrido proper are largely absent from this corrido category, allowing continuities with former practice to shine forth.

I will now present a corrido, “La Toma de Plaza” (Taking the Plaza), also titled “Corrido de Acapulco,” as an example of the corridos of trafficking subtype.⁸ I present below my transcription of the Spanish lyrics and their translation into English, accompanied by a brief synopsis of visual elements that I have placed, in italics, between the columns of text.

“La Toma de Plaza”

Transcription	Visuals	Translation
	<p><i>Accordion plays opening gambit; a sign saying “Bienvenidos a Acapulco” appears against a blue background. Fade to a still life of two AK-47s with several bullet clips on table.</i></p>	
<p>“Muerto el rey, viva el rey,” así comienza el corrido, en el puerto de Acapulco algo grande ha sucedido, cambiaron mucho las cosas todos saben el motivo.</p>	<p><i>Pan across photo with corpses and man with a rifle; panned aerial view of Acapulco’s sparkling beachfront with high-rise resort hotels.</i></p>	<p>“The king is dead, long live the king,” that’s how the corrido begins, in the port city of Acapulco something big has gone down, things really got changed around everyone knows the reason.</p>
<p>Cambió de jefe la casa pero la línea es la misma, unas veces muy abajo otras veces muy arriba, este mundo es muy pequeño así da vueltas la vida.</p>	<p><i>Pan across photo of two vehicles in a collision, bullet holes in windows; we see corpses sprawled out in front and back seats of car.</i></p>	<p>The boss of the house was replaced but the line is still the same, at times, things are way up at other times, way down, this world is a very small place that’s how life spins about.</p>
<p>Nada es eterno en el mundo no se les vaya a olvidar, es muy bonita la vida si se sabe disfrutar, cuanto tienes, cuanto vales así lo dice el refrán.</p>	<p><i>Pan across photo of vehicle exploding in city traffic.</i></p>	<p>Nothing is eternal in this world you should never forget it, life is a beautiful thing if one knows how to enjoy it, what you have is what you’re worth that’s how the proverb has it.</p>

<p>Llegó la orden de arriba que tomarán esta plaza, que apuntarán los mejores pura gente de confianza, que tomarán el control así dijo en su llamada.</p>	<p><i>Pan across photo of vehicle, corpses laid out in its seats, soldier looking on. Fade to gruesome shot of blood-stained corpse.</i></p>	<p>The order came down from on high that they should take the plaza, they should put the best men on it none but the trusted ones, they should take control of the place that's what he said when he called.</p>
<p>“No se preocupe, mi gente todo el puerto es de nosotros, el vivo siempre disfruta el muerto siempre va al pozo, hay que disfrutar la vida,” así lo dijo gustoso.</p>	<p><i>Pan across shot of crime scene with Home Depot sign in background.</i></p>	<p>“Do not worry, my people the whole port city is ours, the live one always enjoys the dead one goes into the grave, we have to make the most of life,” so he said with pleasure.</p>
<p>Nada es eterno en el mundo no se les vaya a olvidar, es muy bonita la vida si se sabe disfrutar, cuanto tienes, cuanto vales así lo dice el refrán.</p>	<p><i>A blood-stained graphic appears, with the word “Criminal” on top and “sicario” on bottom.⁹</i></p>	<p>Nothing is eternal in this world you should never forget it, life is a beautiful thing if one knows how to enjoy it, what you have is what you're worth that's how the proverb has it.</p>

Viewing the performance, one can note that the Sinaloa banda sound so prevalent in narcocorridos is missing here—this corrido is performed by a typical *conjunto* with accordion accompaniment. In contrast to the highly produced sonorities of narcocorridos proper, this sound gives little indication of studio production. The rhythm is fast waltz in three-four, perhaps the most common in the broader corrido tradition. Furthermore, the words are sung as two-part harmony in thirds—again, a musical feature that has long been standard in the genre.

Likewise, the realization of the story in words is reminiscent of the genre's roots. We have an opening frame in which the song makes a reference to itself: “here's how the ballad begins.” Then the story is told in third-person voicing, the voicing that is most characteristic of the genre. Another prominent verbal technique is used in “La Toma de Plaza”: reported speech places listeners in the presence of the

action, making them virtual witnesses to the narrated event. Here, in the song's next-to-last stanza, we attend to the words of an unnamed leader, who urges his people forward with the striking assertion "Todo el puerto es de nosotros" (The whole port city is ours).

Indeed, the leadership remains in the shadows in this corrido. In addition to the unnamed speaker, we have an order that comes down from on high, with no further specification of its source. When I talked to corridistas on the Costa Chica, I learned that their commitment to telling a true story is tempered by the realization that some details are better left unstated. In this corrido, as in many dealing with drug trafficking, the composer has thought it wise not to name any names. We are told, at the outset, that everyone knows what's going on, so there's no need to state the obvious. In a similar vein, the corridos I collected along Mexico's coast often alluded tangentially to a background that was taken to be common knowledge. As in this corrido, the focus is on constructing vivid tableaux rather than creating journalistic accounts of the action.

Again, referring back to my earlier experience with corridos in this region, it is not surprising to find in this corrido a good deal of philosophical reflection on the meaning of life. The genre is a narrative one, but it provides ample space for what I have called "sermonizing and editorializing" (McDowell 2000). In "La Toma de Plaza" the narrator finds clever ways to formulate the current moment in Acapulco—the "head of house" has changed, but the "línea" (the line, or the lineage) remains the same. In addition to this use of metaphor to frame the volatile situation, the narrator introduces a proverb for further purposes of interpretation, and identifies it as such: "Cuanto tienes, cuanto vales" (What you have is what you're worth). As with most proverb use, this invocation of collective knowledge is intended to capture an interpretation of the situation, offering a relevant piece of wisdom about the world, reminding us that people often assess worth through material circumstances. And, in two parallel moves, the narrator speaks of the imperative to "disfrutar la vida" (get the most out of life). It is brought to mind that life has its ups and downs, and it is incumbent upon us to make the best of the good times.

The title for "La Toma de Plaza" echoes the Mexican history books with their depictions of great moments in the war of independence and in the revolution, when the plazas of major cities fell into the hands of one army or another. The order comes down "to take the

plaza,” but here *plaza* refers not to the central square in the geometric urban plans of the Spanish empire, but rather to a drug-distribution territory and its supply routes—in this case the lucrative site of Acapulco, whose port offers access to trades routes that connect the coasts of Peru, Chile, and Ecuador to the coast of California.

“La Toma de Plaza” was uploaded to YouTube in June of 2010. In January of that year, Acapulco saw its “most gruesome levels of drug-related violence” (Hernandez 2011) due to a power struggle for dominion over its plaza after the death of Arturo Beltrán Leyva, its previous drug lord. Beltrán was killed in Cuernavaca on December 17, 2009, in a shootout with heavily armed Mexican marines, leaving a power vacuum and a scramble for dominance. According to press reports, several groups were involved in this power struggle—one led by Edgar “La Barbie” Valdez, a Mexican-American who came to prominence as leader of an enforcement group called Los Negros, affiliated with the Beltrán Leyva cartel; another led by Arturo’s brother, Hector Beltrán Leyva; and a third, calling itself the Cartel Pacífico Sur, known for painting the letters CPS on the walls of buildings where it has engaged in actions. During this protracted battle for Acapulco’s plaza, hundreds of people have been killed, most of them participants in one or another of these factions. The murders have been accompanied by vicious acts of mutilation and beheading, apparently in an effort to establish supremacy through the use of symbolic violence.¹⁰

It is from this context that “La Toma de Plaza” emerges. We see that this corrido offers a handle on this desperate situation, assimilating it to a broader perspective on the swing of fortunes and recommending a pathway to personal realization—enjoy life when you can—in the grasp of such dire circumstances. This corrido does salute the resolve of those who can ride the tide of good fortune, but there is nothing here of the bluster and glamorizing that infects the narcocorrido proper. However, as noted in the transcription, the YouTube visuals dwell on scenes of mayhem and feature bloody corpses, something that marks this song as kin to the narcocorridos, if only in this specific detail.

Corridos of Remediation

As it happens, the YouTube inventory offers a glimpse into another strategy of commemoration, what I will call “corridos of remediation.” These are ballads whose evident mission is to bear witness to the chaos

occasioned by the drug wars, lay out in measured language the costs to individuals and to the nation, and urge people to rise up and demand an end to the madness. When examining corridos on the Costa Chica, I had noticed in those corridos a recurring theme of therapy in the aftermath of violent actions. This is the dominant theme in these corridos of remediation as well.

Let's turn our attention to two exemplars of this category. One of them is a treatment of the slaughter of fifty-two people in Monterrey's Casino Royale on August 25, 2011. I went looking for corridos about this massacre because it was seen in Mexico as reaching a new extreme of depravity: criminal elements entered the casino with cans of gasoline and set the machines on fire, and this firebombing took the lives of fifty-two people, many of them women. There had been many other atrocities in recent years, but this one aroused a real cry of indignation: not only did it take place in Monterrey, the industrial capital of the nation, which had previously been spared the worst of the violence, but it targeted innocent persons (Booth 2011).

As I expected, this indignation seeped into the corrido world. I offer as an example a stirring corrido that was uploaded on August 26, 2011, the day after the casino attack. It is presented anonymously, for reasons that might seem obvious—but the uploader specifically notes that he or she wishes to remain unknown so as to train all attention on the corrido's message. Here is my transcription of this ballad's Spanish lyrics, as well as my translation into English.¹¹

“El Muerto Cincuenta y Tres”

En Monterrey, Nuevo León
tierra de gente valiente,
una tragedia ocurrió
que no tiene precedente,
apostaban sin pensar
que iba a ganarles la muerte.

A las cuatro de la tarde
del veinte-cinco de agosto,
en el Casino Royale
por orden de un poderoso,
llegó un comando al lugar
para ajustar un negocio.

In Monterrey, Nuevo León
home to courageous people,
a tragic thing has occurred
one that has no precedent,
they were betting with no idea
that death would be the winner.

At four in the afternoon
on the twenty-fifth of August,
in the Casino Royale
on orders from a boss,
a squad came to that place
to take care of a business deal.

Prendieron fuego al lugar
y detonaron granadas,
dispararon al azar,
sin darles tiempo de nada,
murieron cincuenta y dos
dijo un diario en la mañana.

They set fire to the place
and they set off hand grenades,
they fired randomly
allowing no time to react,
fifty-two people died
said a newspaper in the morning.

No fueron cincuenta y dos
como pensaba la gente,
entre las llamas lloró
un angelito en el vientre,
han muerto cincuenta y tres
les cantaremos por siempre.

But it was not fifty-two that died
as people were led to believe,
there in flames was crying
a little angel in a woman's womb,
fifty-three people died
we will sing of them forever.

Llegó de manera urgente
el avión presidencial,
se hicieron declaraciones
y fue noticia mundial,
y ese Cerro de la Silla
también se puso a llorar.

It came in an urgent manner
the president's airplane,
declarations were made
it made the global news,
and that Cerro de la Silla
also broke down in tears.

The YouTube presentation contains verbal elements outside of the song's lyrics—at the song's outset a banner scrolls over the image of Monterrey at sunset, the distinctive humps of La Silla in the background. This commentary reads:

Esta tema se llama "El 53," no busca fama ni gloria por eso se firma anónimo, solo busca alzar la voz de los músicos y compositores de México, no podemos callar, no basta el discurso degastado, es hora de luchar por la paz, es hora de cambiar, es hora de que termine este terror, oremos por la paz y llenemos de amor este mundo.

(This tune is called "The 53," it seeks neither fame nor glory, and for that it is signed anonymous, it only seeks to raise the voice of Mexico's musicians and composers, we cannot remain silent, the old discourse is of no use, it is time to fight for peace, it's time to change, it's time for this terror to come to an end, let us pray for peace and fill the world with love.)

In addition, as is usual in YouTube postings, a commentary is placed just below the video viewing screen. The message reads:

Esta es la voz de varios compositores, que mantienen su anonimato para que prevalezca la finalidad del tema, descansen en paz las víctimas, estamos de luto oremos por la paz en nuestro país.

(This is the voice of various composers, who maintain their anonymity so that the song's purpose might prevail, the victims rest in peace, we are in mourning let us pray for peace in our country.)

There is, as well, a train of contributed commentaries, expressing a variety of ideas but mostly favorable to the song's content.

Musically, this corrido reminds me of the many times I sat with friends who sang as they plucked out on a single guitar the accompaniment to a Costa Chica corrido. We are at the opposite end of the spectrum of musical settings that include the high-production acoustics of the narcocorridos. The song lyrics feature a formulaic opening, "una tragedia ocurrió" (a terrible thing has happened), and the second stanza delivers the time of day and date of the events, a common element in traditional corridos. There is no closing formula, but rather a striking image, of the mountains overlooking Monterrey breaking down in tears.

The texts that accompany the corrido state clearly the remedial purpose of the venture, but the song's lyrics are less explicit on this point. We are given a description of the attack on the casino, with, as it turned out, some inaccurate details—it was originally thought that the attackers used rifles and grenades, but later it became clear that they set fire to the casino, and it was the flames, smoke, and stampede toward the exits that caused the fatalities. The pathetic detail of the additional death, of a fetus in the womb of one of the women who died there, gives this song its sentimental punch. The closest the narrator comes to declaring remedial intent is in the couplet

murieron cincuenta y tres	fifty-three are dead
les cantaremos por siempre	we will sing of them forever.

While this gesture may not seem especially strong, notice that it shifts the focus of attention away from the perpetrators of violence and places it squarely on its victims, a strategy quite different from the approach in the narcocorridos. Together with the weeping La Silla, the mountain that stands for the people of Monterrey, this shift takes this corrido into a sphere of collective therapy.

Conclusion

This excavation of the ballad of narcomexico has been limited in some significant ways. I have confined my data sampling to YouTube products

and news reports, without conducting the kinds of ethnographic inquiry that could fill out the story and conceivably remake some of its components. However, triangulating from the previous ethnographic research I did in the country, I feel that I have been able to gain a handle on corridos in contemporary Mexico. Working with the premise that the corrido is a form of commemorative discourse (McDowell 1992), where a formalization of the message coincides with an evocation of immanent truths, I have identified a lively zone of commemorative practice where different readings of the current moment are formulated and delivered to a receptive public.

My explorations reveal three different trends in this zone of commemorative practice. Attracting most of the attention are narcocorridos proper, those ballads implicated at some level in the scene they describe, or, at the least, profiting from a commercial musical industry that exploits the elevation of traffickers to the status of popular heroes. This flashy branch of modern corrido output is marked formally by musical and poetic deviations from the norms of the genre, though these songs retain enough of the corrido ethos to be immediately recognized as legitimate instances of the tradition. Their first-person narratives often celebrate the life of the trafficker, even as they provide, often enough, a clear-sighted account of the dirty and dangerous side of things.

Examining the corridos on YouTube, one might imagine that the corrido tradition has become a captive of the drug cartels or the production studios, that the corrido is now and will forever be the narcocorrido. My reading of this data is rather different. In this paper I have isolated two additional trends, corridos of trafficking and corridos of remediation. These alternative corrido types are more loyal to the genre's precedents, and they offer perspectives that are not well represented in narcocorridos. Corridos in these two categories tend to suppress the vision of drug traffickers as heroes so prevalent in narcocorridos. Here, the heroic archetype is replaced by a level-headed narrative with neither heroes nor villains; alternatively, the victims of drug-related violence become the heroes.

My overarching theme is that corridos are doing the job that corridos have always done for the Mexican people, that is, offering them a zone of commemorative practice where disruptive historical events can be processed through artistic conventions of words set to music, and where differing accounts of the import of these events can be formulated and circulated. By relegating the narcocorrido to its proper

niche in the wider spectrum, we can say that contemporary Mexican corridos fruitfully fulfill the historic mission of the genre.

I will close with one final example¹²—a corrido performed by Los Tigres del Norte, the biggest of the monster bands in Mexican music today. Titled “La Granja,” the YouTube version of this corrido had reached, as of October 10, 2011, nearly five and a half million viewers.¹² It presents a visual cartoon of a farm besieged by troubles after a vicious dog is set free by a fox. In the visual language of children’s TV cartoons, we witness an allegory or parable featuring the travails of a farmer and his farm interspersed with recurring images of the Los Tigres musicians displayed as foreground against the cartoonish farm background. This visual allegory is suggestive of modern Mexico’s plight: the dog would seem to represent the drug cartels; the fox could be Vicente Fox, president of Mexico from 2000 to 2006; the porky pigs might bear some resemblance to Mexico’s elite class; the little chicks appear to stand for Mexico’s cautious journalists. You might, as well, recognize a fence that appears at the edge of the farm, suggesting the walled-off northern boundary of the nation.

I would group this corrido in the remedial category, an interpretation that gains support from the final scenes when people—and the *tigre* tethered by Los Tigres—gather to confront the vicious dog. It is interesting to note that Los Tigres del Norte have performed and recorded several of the big narcocorrido hits and are responsible, to some extent, for the early popularization of the subgenre. This turn to remediation has arrived, it appears, after a period of serious introspection.

I present below my transcription of this ballad’s Spanish lyrics and my translation of these words into English. Here, as above, I embed some information about the visuals in this YouTube video, placed between the transcription and the translation.

“La Granja” (The Farm)

Transcription

Visuals

Translation

*Before the music begins,
a pickup truck carrying
the musicians arrives
at a farm; shift to a sign
that reads “La Granja.”*

- Si la perra está amarrada aunque ladre todo el día, no la deben de soltar mi abuelito me decía, que podrían arrepentirse los que no la conocían.
- Shots of Los Tigres with the cartoon farm in background; close view of dog house with glaring red eyes, shadow of barking dog.*
- If the dog is well secured even if its barks all day, you should not turn it loose my grandfather would say to me, because they could come to regret it, the ones who didn't know her.
- Por el zorro lo supimos que llegó a romper los platos, y la cuerda de la perra la mordió por un buen rato, y yo creo que se soltó para armar un gran relajo.
- A mustachioed fox leaves hunk of raw meat in dog dish; dog breaks loose, snaps at dish and sends it flying with missing chunk.*
- With the fox we came to see that he came to break the plates, and on that leash of the dog he was chewing for quite some time, and I believe he set it free so it could raise a big ruckus.
- Los puerquitos le ayudaron se alimentan de la granja, diario quieren más maíz y se pierden las ganancias, y el granjero que trabaja ya no les tiene confianza.
- Fat pigs in a room full of corn kernels stuff their faces; farmer, holding tools, shakes his head in disappointment.*
- The little pigs lent a hand they are eating from the farm, each day they want more corn but the earnings just go down, and the farmer who does the work no longer has faith in them.
- Se cayó un gavilán los pollitos comentaron, que si se cayó solito o los vientos lo tumbaron, todos mis animalitos por el ruido se espantaron.
- Hawk flies over and crashes to ground nearby; fat-headed chicks discuss the event; hens run about confused.*
- A hawk came falling down the little chicks talked it over, so did it fall by itself or did the wind bring it down, all of my little creatures were frightened by the noise.

- El conejo está muriendo *A tired rabbit sits in a* The poor rabbit is dying
dentro y fuera de la jaula, *prison cage, dying; all* inside and outside the
y a diario hay mucho *across the farm we see* cage,
muerto *bleached bones; a brief* and each day there is
a lo largo de la granja, *shot of green yields to* much death
porque ya no hay *tumbleweed.* all across the farm
sembradíos since there are no more
como ayer con tanta plantings
alfalfa. like there was with all
that alfalfa.
- En la orilla de la granja *Farmer runs, chased by* At the edge of the farm
un gran cerco les *dog; big metal fence* they built a great big
pusieron, *appears and blocks his* fence,
para que sigan jalando *path; dog bites farmer,* so that they could keep
y no se vaya el granjero, *who slouches to the* working
porque la perra lo *ground, defeated.* and the farmer could not
muerde get away,
aunque él no está de so the dog just keeps
acuerdo. biting him
even though he doesn't
like it.
- Hoy tenemos día con día *Los Tigres appear* Today we see each and
mucha inseguridad, *holding a tiger on a* every day
porque se soltó la perra *rope; joined by the* too much insecurity,
todo lo vino a regar, *farmer, they stand* because the dog got free
entre todos los granjeros *against the dog, who* everything fell apart,
la tenemos que amarrar. *backs away.* with all the farmers
together
we have to tie her up.

“La Granja” by Los Tigres narrates, in parable form, the plight of the country and urges its citizens to rise up in defiance of the elements and forces that oppress them. It offers another point of entrance into the zone of commemorative practice delineated by the corridos of narcomexico. This arena of heroic song, as we have seen, holds interpretive possibilities ranging from celebrations of the hard characters and hard fates in the narcotics trade, to straight-on depictions of episodes in the conduct of that business, to poignant tales that call for acts of political resistance. The corrido of narcomexico, on balance, is a

faithful record of Mexican experience in these trying times, capturing in its tones and rhythms the conflicting passions of the moment.

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Notes

1. *Editors' note:* This address was originally given as the invited Phillips Barry Lecture at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, held in Bloomington, Indiana. It has been modified slightly for print.

2. These numbers are difficult to verify—the Mexican government has not been forthcoming with reliable figures on drug-related deaths, and estimates by Mexican newspapers may be significantly low. As of early 2012, unofficial counts put drug-related deaths at more than 50,000 since Calderón took office (Miroff and Booth 2012); according to some accounts, this toll peaked at over 60,000 by the time he left office. This number does not include the thousands who disappeared during that period, amounting to some 25,000 persons, according to a recently leaked tally by the Mexican attorney general's office (Vivanco 2013).

3. How the visual elements in YouTube videos interact with the lyrics and music of the songs is a promising but complex task awaiting close study. My initial impression is that a number of structures are possible—the visuals can coincide with the other semiotic boundaries and reinforce themes and moods as they develop, or the visuals can cut across these co-existing channels to bridge gaps or propose different linkages of topic and sentiment. I thank Richard Bauman for directing my attention to this matter.

4. In transcribing this interview, I have employed the standard ethno poetic practice of using line breaks to indicate the chunking, or phrasing, of the spoken word.

5. The movie's trailer, credited to "Clark Fountain, ROVI Corp.," was available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKMIdqrGwco>. It had 961,710 hits as of February 4, 2012.

6. The "El Comander - El Ejecutor" YouTube video can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6zskMFioMA>. As of February 4, 2012, the site showed 768,934 hits, with 191 likes and 18 dislikes.

7. See Buggs 2009a for in-depth coverage of stories linking Los Tucanes to the drug world.

8. This corrido was uploaded by "anonimo112" on June 16, 2011. It was available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V0yWFAy14c>, but has since been removed.

9. *Sicario* refers to the (usually) young man (and on occasion woman) hired to do the dirty work of the cartels. Sicarios became famous in Colombia, and more recently in Mexico, for drive-by killings, often using motor scooters or bikes as their transportation. The term has an ancient origin in Jewish history, but is used most frequently today in reference to drug violence in Colombia and Mexico.

10. There has been much speculation about the brutality of drug-related violence in Mexico, with mention of the practices of human sacrifice in pre-conquest times, the continuing fascination with *calaveras* (skeletons) associated with the Day of the Dead, the influence of Guatemala's paramilitaries in the civil war there, the influence of Central American gangs, and even the well-publicized executions carried out by al-Qaeda. See Grillo 2008 for commentary on this phenomenon.

11. "El Muerto Cincuenta y Tres" was uploaded to YouTube under the title "El muerto 53,(EL ANGEL 53) (el original) casino royal Monterrey (corrido del casino en monterrey)" by mrbanda on August 26, 2011. As of February 4, 2012, it had received 127,920 hits and registered 577 likes to 15 dislikes. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuDOBEhhRN0>. "El Muerto 53" translates as "the fifty-third death/dead person" and highlights the extra death beyond the fifty-two initially reported in news accounts.

12. "La Granja" was uploaded by Los Tigres del Norte on November 24, 2009. As of February 4, 2012, "La Granja" had received 6,373,989 hits, with 4,252 likes and 236 dislikes. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ff3C-Kyv8wI>.

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