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Heroes or Villains:

Placing Narcocorridos in the Mexican Corrido Tradition

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The *corrido* is a traditional narrative ballad of Mexico. Though it had roots in older, probably Spanish song-forms, the corrido did not come into its own until the late 19th century.[1] The stories told in corridos included tales of battle, romantic liaisons, and heroic adventures. In the era of cross-border skirmishes with Texas Rangers and armed internal conflict, Mexican bandits and smugglers became legends. Beginning in the 1970's, a new breed of bandit, the narcotrafficker, emerged, and his exploits were also celebrated in song. Termed *narcocorridos*, these ballads recount the treachery, excitement, and violence surrounding the drug trade.

As was true in the bandit corridos of the early 20th century, the subjects of these songs are figures whose notoriety rests as much on their violence and ability to elude the law as on their more laudable qualities. The songs are nearly as controversial as the drug trade itself. Widely perceived as glorifying and even contributing to drug-related violence, the narcocorrido is popular throughout Mexico and the United States, despite condemnation and efforts to ban them from radio airplay. Corrido scholars generally consider 'true' corridos to have faded away in the 1930's, and so consider narcocorridos to be an aberration rather than a continuation of the corrido tradition. However, the persistent popularity of these drug ballads merits further consideration of the relationship between traditional and narco- corridos.

Tracing the themes of smuggling and banditry from the 1880s on, we see that the narcocorrido, like the traditional corrido, is a narrative attempt to reconcile complex and often contradictory elements of life. Corridos continue to address themes of banditry and cross-border smuggling precisely because these are important long-term strategies available to subaltern groups through cycles of modernization by the power structure. The archetypal figures these songs depict experience in epic fashion the gains and losses experienced by the communities

effected by drug trafficking. Despite their rejection by many in government and academia, narcocorridos represent a genuine continuation of a living ballad tradition.

In order to better understand the relationship between traditional corridos and narcocorridos, it is useful to first consider scholarship on the subject. Examining the socio-economic history of Mexico demonstrates how banditry and smuggling emerged as a response to class stratification and lack of economic opportunity. An appraisal of the conflict between the twin powers of Mexican drug cartels and government suggests that the simultaneous rise in popularity of narcocorridos is a cultural response to intense social and political pressures. Finally, the concept of the social bandit as conceived by the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm sheds further light on how and why heroes—or anti-heroes—are treated not only as real men, but archetypal manifestations of agency and self-determination that is out of reach for all but a few.[2]

In a broad sense corridos are by their very nature considered to be "history from below." Some view historical and factual accuracy as essential.[3] Others believe that corridos represented a traditional form that does not transmit history "as it happened" but rather "events as the masses believed them to be."[4] Current scholarship continues to view the historic corrido as a "valuable register of historical perceptions and collective and factional wills."[5] While the modern narcocorrido continues to be primarily the music of the common man, the traditional corrido has been elevated as an important manifestation of Mexican cultural heritage. Many scholars hold that the corrido had its halcyon days in the revolutionary years followed by empty commercialization and tepid sentiment in the mid-20th century.[6] Despite this perceived erosion of quality in commercially recorded offerings, the true or genuine corrido entered what scholar Américo Paredes distinguished as a state of "preservation."[7] The ballad tradition remained as an

important but static, historic manifestation of Mexican national identity, analogous perhaps to Yankee Doodle in America.

The implication is that narcocorridos emerged many years later as what ethnomusicologist Helena Simonett termed a "fabricated genre," one that is not really the product of a subaltern group but rather a co-optation by the "hegemonic power of the culture industry."[8] Certainly there is a clear element of commercialism in the dissemination of most modern music. However, it is difficult to suggest that the power of the culture industry automatically negates— from the perspective of either the musician or the listener—the authenticity of the corridos being produced. Any evaluation that ascribes the topicality and perspective advanced in narcocorridos to a mere quest for record sales also attempts to negate their political nature.

This somewhat dismissive perspective ignores not only the diversity of the corrido genre, but the continuous composition and diffusion of corridos, despite the terminal pronouncements. While heroic corridos were popular throughout Mexico, war-time exploits were never the sole focus of the genre. Commercial corridos continued to be recorded and listened to well into the 1950's, and there is evidence that the "genuine" corrido survived as well. In fact several smuggling corridos, one recorded as late as 1960 (*Corrido de Juan Meneses*), survive. Scholar James Nicolopulous evaluated a number of commercial recordings from the 1950-60's and concluded that, in content if not in perfect detail, genuine corridos continued to be recorded, such as songs that commemorate the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. [9] Furthermore, the fact that the State utilized the corridos as a means of building popular support for state programs into the 1950's is indicative of their continuing popularity, despite the judgments of corrido scholars to the contrary.[10]

Indeed, in some regions corridos are not artifacts but contemporary reactions to ongoing conflict. In the Costa Chica region of Guerrero, John McDowell found a vibrant ballad community that did not experience the withering effect that Paredes perceived elsewhere. He attributes this in part to the ongoing racial conflict and economic hardship in that state, and the resultant culture of normalized violence.[11] In the Big Bend region of Texas and Mexico one of the oldest known corridos, *Corrido de Kiansis*, is still a popular request, suggesting the corrido never really went out of style there.[12] The area situated along the Rio Grande is a natural locale for smuggling, eventually becoming home to one of the first notorious narcotraficantes, Pablo Acosta Villareal. In such places, corridos are part of the fabric of everyday life, part of the social network disseminating information about incidents, relationships, and collective memory. When narcotrafficking became part of life, it became the subject of corridos.

The intersection of bandits and corridos happened in large part because of the struggles associated with the class-stratification of Mexican society in the years following independence from Spain, particularly during the Porfiriato [the reign of Porfirio Diaz]. The rigid social strata established during the Spanish occupation and calcified during the Porfiriato had and still have a defining effect on Mexican culture. The stratification is based on economic and racial indicators—both of which, not coincidently, also figure prominently in tales of Mexican banditry. Creating a nation-state after the war for independence from Spain was an enormous challenge, in part because a large part of the population was native and rural while the Hispanic elite sought a nation that was modern and forward looking. Liberal ideals about equality conflicted with economic pressures and negative impressions of the average Mexican's ability to rise to the occasion. Patriarchy helped to hold the fragile nation together, at a clear cost to those on the bottom end of the structure.[13]

Banditry is, in a visible and visceral way, a rejection of that patriarchy. On the one hand, the imagined bandit personifies a "yearning for escape from drudgery."[14] On the other, the actual bandit successfully shrugged off the proscribed social and economic role of the subaltern class and sought personal advancement on his own terms. From an elite perspective, banditry was evidence that the lower classes were morally corrupt and criminally inclined. Peace and security, a common rallying cry for political candidates everywhere, was central to Mexican politics as well, and any activity that appeared to contradict this aim in the eyes of the state could be labeled banditry.[15]

Corrido Heraclio Bernal

Año de mil ochocientos
Ochenta y ocho alcontado
Heraclio Bernal murió, por el gobierno pagado
La tragedia de Bernal
En Guadalube empezó
Por unas barras de plata, que dicen que se robó

Heraclio Bernal decía: Yo no ando de robabueyes, pues tengo plata sellada
En Guadalupe Los Reyes
Decía Crispin García muy enfadado de andar:
Si me dan lost diez mil pesos, you les entrego a Bernal

Le dieron los diez mil pesos,
Los recontó en su mascada,
Y le dijo al comandante 'Alístenme una acordada!'
Qué bonito era Bernal en su caballo jovero,
Él no robaba a los pobres,
Antes les daba dinero.
.

In the year of 1888,
Exactly in that year, Heraclio Bernal died, his death paid for by the government.
The tragedy of Bernal
Began in Guadalupe (de los Reyes, Sinaloa)
On account of some bars of silver that they say he stole

Heraclio Bernal was saying: I'm no cattle rustler, I have plenty of silver minted in Guadalupe Los Reyes
Crispin García was saying, very tired of riding with the outlaw: give me the ten thousand pesos, and I'll hand you over Bernal.

They gave him the ten thousand pesos,
He counted them up in his bandana,
And he told the commandante: get a posse ready for me!
How fine looking was Bernal on his paint horse.
He didn't rob the poor, on the contrary, he gave them money.

The exploits of bandits such as the "Thunderbolt of Sinaloa," Heraclio Bernal, were among the first popular corridos. This version dates back to 1888 and is incredibly similar to modern narcocorridos in both structural and sentiment. It portrays Bernal as a noble man who died through treachery and for his rejection of governmental authority. A flamboyant character, Bernal turned an outlaw following his conviction for stealing silver. Like Pancho Villa in later years, he gained legitimacy as a guerilla fighter and visible opponent to the totalitarian rule of Porfirio Diaz. Diaz attempted to capitalize on the publicity following the capture and killing of Bernal, but in the end the anti-state sentiment of the rural poor far outweighed their willingness to trust Diaz.[16]

In the wake of the infighting that marked the end of the Revolution it was incumbent upon the Constitutionalistas to construct an inclusive national identity in order to achieve legitimacy and ensure stability. In order to forge a connection to non-elite social groups, the Mexican Revolutionary State worked to capture popular support though mobilization of traditional culture and state participation in the composition and diffusion of the corrido.[17] Thus the discourse of the pueblo was co-opted, yet the values inherent in a patriarchal system continued to form the foundation of society. The period following the revolution contained the promise of breaking down barriers and opening economic prospects for those who had suffered under the old order. Instead, many rural Mexicans experienced few sustained improvements, and some continued to rely on the established tradition of smuggling to make ends meet.

The drug trade, particularly in marijuana and heroin grown in Mexico, was established long before drugs became illegal in the U.S. [18] Prohibition created a new incentive for entrepreneurs—Mexican and American—to supply booze to an appreciative customer base. Corridos like 'Los Tequileros' and 'The Ballad of Juan Garcia' described the legal and mortal

dangers faced by smugglers. Once the repeal of the Volstead Act reduced the profit on alcohol, many smugglers converted to other substances and continued their established trade.[19] Furthermore, the drug trade itself afforded people access to monetary gain and a degree of freedom not otherwise available to them. And because that freedom was predicated on an illegal act, it is an approach well represented in the long-standing tradition of banditry within Mexican culture. Thus the activity of drug dealing is negative from an elite societal perspective and neutral or even positive from the pueblo perspective.

The inability (or unwillingness) of the Mexican government to adequately address the economic needs of the rural poor, the emergence of laissez-faire capitalism after decades of strong state control of the economy, and the evident hypocrisy of the governmental treatment of narcotrafficking encouraged the traffickers and inadvertently increased their legitimacy. This is especially true in regions where drug traffickers have poured money into schools and infrastructure—those things that should have been undertaken by the government.

The scope and intensity of drug-related violence has escalated dramatically since the election of Felipe Calderón and his decision to utilize a military style approach to combating the cartels. The war on drugs in Mexico is no longer figurative; it is literal. Conventional wisdom recognizes extensive government corruption and protection for larger traffickers dating back to at least the 1970's. Civilian trust in the army and federal police is tepid at best; there is a common belief that the military, either with or without the complicity of the government, is working not to destroy all the cartels but to destroy competition for the Sinaloa cartel of Joaquin " Chapo" Guzman.[20] As journalist Philip Caputo muses, "What began as a war on drug trafficking has evolved into a low-intensity civil war with more than two sides and no white hats, only shades of black."[21]

The rising violence leads some to scrutinize the relationship between the bloodshed and narcocorridos. Manuel Molina Bellina, director of a drug treatment center in Tijuana, said "In narcocorridos, the trafficker prevails, and crime pays. The narco manages to stay alive, elude capture, get his drugs across the border, and vanquish authorities. The moral is that being a narco gives you immunity."[22] A cursory examination of narcocorridos reveals that this is not exactly the message. What *really* granted that immunity is the corrupt involvement of government officials. Pablo Acosta, for example, regularly carried official identification provided by his contacts in the Mexican government that enabled him to move freely and to carry firearms legally.[23] The censorship debate seems to assume an inspirational, causal relationship between narcocorridos and violence. Sociologist Luis Astorga suggests the growth of the drug trade and the violence associated with it has escalated in proportion to the measures taken to address the phenomenon, not with the existence of songs that do the same. [24]

The bandit figure as identified by Hobsbawm in his book *Bandits* is evident in both traditional corridos and narcocorridos. The "noble robber's" career as an outlaw is initiated as the result of an injustice. He "rights wrongs," largely by robbing from the rich and helping or endowing the poor, remains in his community as a valued member, and is only vulnerable to harm or death through treason because he has the tacit support of the people--he has an air of invulnerability.[25] There is something very compelling about men who make their own rules. Though their actions are not always laudable, their self-generated freedom supersedes moral reservations. The dual tracks of the real and imagined, archetypal bandit is a crucial aspect of understanding the narcocorrido. As Hobsbawm said, Robin Hood is invented even in places where he did not really exist, saying this is so because people *need* him.[26]

De tanto cantar corridos	My voice is tired
Mi voz está muy cansada,	From singing so many ballads,
Pero lo que ha sucedido,	But what has recently happened
Es cosa muy mencionada;	Is much talked about,
Ha muerto uno de los grandes	One of the great and most famous
Más famosa de Ojinaga.	Men of Ojinaga has died.
Pablo Acosta fue su nombre,	Pablo Acosta was his name,
De nación americana,	And he was born a U.S. citizen,
Y puesto a jugar con lumbre,	He started playing with fire,
Sabiendo que se quemaba,	Knowing full well that one could get burned
En las orillas del Bravo,	On the banks of the Rio Bravo,
Del estado de Chihuahua.	In the state of Chihuahua.
Si alguno bien lo recuerda,	If anyone remembers him well,
Y quiere mandarle flores	And wants to send flowers to
Al hombre que hizo leyendas	The man who made legends,
Y que ayudaba a los pobres	And who helped the poor,
Mi cruz se encuentra clavada	My cross is standing
En el rancho El Tecolote	In the ground at Rancho El Tecolote.
	-translation James Nicolopulous[30]

Corrido de Pablo Acosta provides a very traditional account of his death and reminds listeners that Acosta helped the poor. One of the beneficiaries of Acosta's largess was in fact the wife of one of the musicians, who received a life-saving blood transfusion.[27] Acosta's aid to the needy families in his community is also documented in Terence Poppa's book *Druglord*. This was not entirely selfless action; for instance, Acosta mobilized the image of the noble bandit by leading newspaper reporters to meet a blind girl he was assisting.[28] Yet locals speak very fondly of Acosta and do not see his home for the elderly or his other good works as having selfish motivation.[29]

'El Chapo' Guzman is not Robin Hood, nor is he a powerless man; in fact, he may be the richest and most powerful man in Mexico.[31] Narcocorridos can thus conflict with that essential aspect of the bandit archetype. Hobsbawm adroitly handles the tension between being a member

of an oppressed group and being a member of the power establishment. For instance, Pancho Villa on the eve of the revolution was not a political actor; he was essentially an outlaw, well insulated from legal trouble by his community.[32] But he had, in Hobsbawm's terms, formed "a nucleus of armed strength, and therefore a political force."[33] As Friedrich Katz speculates, the fact Villa was able to live a life at once legitimate and illegal during the totalitarian Porfiriato suggests that he had strong support within the power establishment.[34] This tension, Hobsbawm says, is part of the ambiguity of the successful bandit: "The more successful he is as a bandit, the more he is both a representative and champion of the poor *and* part of the system of the rich."[35]

One of the most salient aspects of narcocorridos is violence. As McDowell suggests, violence is change. It is like a door; on one side is the past, on the other the future. In the life of a narcotraficante, violence is common, often sudden but rarely unexpected. Many are victims, but many others are just as likely to be perpetrators of violence. Largely these are not men and women in isolation—they are members of their community, fathers, mothers, children, brothers and sisters. In this way violence not only fragments communities, it brings people together in a common experience. This also explains the more widespread appeal of narcocorridos, which are commercially successful and are obviously no longer being listened to solely by those people directly involved in the communities in question. "Corrido narratives are anchored in our awareness of violence as an essential—perhaps the quintessential—human experience, and in our shared ability, or shall we say compulsion, to inhabit reports of violent episodes that come to our attention."[36]

The study of corridos bridges the folklore and history disciplines. Barbara Henkes described folklore as "articulated forms of culture in the shape of specific traditions of knowledge."[37] Taking these articulated forms as a point of departure, the broader context within

which the corrido was and is created lends insight into the way history is experienced. The ongoing popularity of corridos in areas such as the Costa Chica and Ojinaga suggests that violence and hardship continue. Ultimately, the interaction of two essentially different historical perspectives creates a demand for a counter-narrative. In another sense, narcocorridos can be seen as a 'retaking' of the corrido from the power structure, taking what had been pressed into a top-down form of communication back into a more horizontal pattern more useful to the subaltern.

Narcocorridos give voice to a phenomenon that runs against the goals of the state and against cultural norms. They provide a report that does not appear in mainstream media, and a method for comprehending a power struggle that affects nearly everyone. The future of Mexico is hard to gauge at this time; but it is probable that as the violence escalates in reality, it will be reflected in corridos. Narcotrafficking cannot truly be understood as a social and cultural force from this vantage point. This very fact makes the production of narcocorridos significant; they will comprise a portion of the material future historians, anthropologists, and sociologists will utilize as they seek to unravel the causes and effects of the current era of narcotrafficking.

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[1] The origins of the corrido, to what degree they are rooted in Spanish songs, and whether they are exclusively Mexican or in fact can be found in other Latin American countries has been a lively debate, and is far from a settled issue. See Américo Paredes, "The Ancestry of Mexico's Corridos: A Matter of Definitions," *The Journal of American Folklore* 76, no. 301 (1963): 231-235. http://www.jstor.org/stable/538524; Merle E. Simmons, "The Ancestry of Mexico's Corridos," *The Journal of American Folklore* 76, no. 299 (1963): 1-15. http://www.jstor.org/stable/538074 (accessed March 25, 2011); and Guillermo E. Hernández, "On the Paredes-

Simmons Exchange and the Origins of the Corrido," *Western Folklore* 64 no.1/2 (Winter-Spring 2005), 65-82. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25474721 (accessed March 25, 2011).

[2] See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: New Press. 2000).

[3] See José Pablo Villalobos and Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, "Corridos and 'la Pura Verdad': Myths and Realities of the Mexican Ballad," in *South Central Review* 21, No. 3. (2004) http://www.jstor.org/stable/40039894 (accessed March 28, 2011).

[4] Merle Simmons, *The Mexican Corrido as a Source for Interpretive Study of Modern Mexico (1870-1950)* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957),, ix.

[5] Ramsey Tracy, "Singing an End to the Mexican Revolution: Corrido, Truth Claims and the National Formative Process" (presented at the Latin American Studies Association Conference, Toronto, 2010).

[6] Most significant in this regard are Américo Paredes and Vicente Mendoza.

[7] James Nicolopulous, "Another Fifty Years of the Corrido: A Reassessment," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 22, no.1 (Spring 1997), 5. http://sincronia.cucsh.udg.mx/nicolopulos.html (accessed May 30, 2011).

[8] Helena Simonett, "Narcocorridos: An Emerging Micromusic of Nuevo L.A.," *Ethnomusicology* 45 no.2, (Spring-Summer 2001): 332, http://www.jstor.org/stable/852677 (accessed May 15, 2011).

[9] Nicolopulos, *Another Fifty Years*, 4.

[10] Ramsey Tracy, personal communication, April 28, 2011.

[11] John H. McDowell, *Poetry and Violence: The Ballad Tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000)., 14-16.

[12] James Nicolopulos, liner notes, *The Devils Swing: Ballads from the Big Bend Country of the Texas-Mexican Border*, Arhoolie Records compact disc 480, 2000.

[13] Chris Frazer, *Bandit Nation: A History of Outlaws and Cultural Struggle in Mexico, 1810-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 10-11.

[14] Ibid., 5.

[15] Gilbert M. Joseph. "On the Trail of Latin American Bandits: A Reexamination of Peasant Resistance," *Latin American Research Review* 25, no. 3 (1990), 23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2503816 (accessed March 29, 2011).

[16] Frazer, *Bandit Nation*, 159-162.

[17] Ramsey Tracy, "Singing an End" ,1.

[18] See Gabriela Recio, "Drugs and Alcohol: US Prohibition and the Origins of the Drug Trade in Mexico, 1910-1930." *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 34, No.1 (February, 2002), http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875386 (accessed April 10, 2011).

[19] Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 13.

[20] "Outsmarted by Sinaloa: Why the Biggest Drug Gang has been the Least Hit." *The Economist*, January 7, 2010., http://www.economist.com/node/15213785 (accessed May 28, 2011)

[21] Philip Caputo, "The Fall of Mexico," *Atlantic Monthly,* December 2009, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/12/.../7760/ (accessed May 31, 2011).

[22] McDowell, *Poetry and Violence*, 201.

[23] Terrence Poppa. *Drug Lord: The Life and Death of a Mexican Kingpin*. New York: Pharos. 1990.

[24] Astorga, *Corridos y Censura*, 146.

[25] Hobsbawm ,*Bandits*, 48-9.

[26] Ibid.,61. See also Vanderwood's *Disorder and Progress*.

[27] *The Devils Swing* (2010), DVD, directed by Alan Govenar (Huston: Documentary Arts).

[28] Poppa, *Druglord*, 226.

[29] *The Devil's Swing* DVD.

[30] Los Palomares Del Bravo, "Corrido de Pablo Acosta," *The Devils Swing* compact disc.

[31] "The Worlds Billionaires," *Forbes Magazine*, March 10, 2010. http://www.forbes.com/lists/2010/10/billionaires-2010_Joaquin-Guzman-Loera_FS0Y.html (accessed May 10, 2011).

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[32] Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)70-71.
[33] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 96.
[34] Katz, *Pancho Villa*, 71
[35] Hobsbawm, *Bandits,* 95.
[36] McDowell, *Poetry and Violence*, 22.
[37] Barbara Henkes and Richard Johnson, "Silence Across Disciplines: Folklore Studies, Cultural Studies, and History," *Journal of Folklore Research* 39, no. 2/3: 126, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814688 (accessed May 28, 2011).

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