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PANCHO VILLA AND THE LORD OF THE SKIES:  
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 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> The popularity of *corridos* was gradually eclipsed but surged again in the 1970's with the successful commercial release of *Contrabando y Traición* (Smuggling and Betrayal.)

<i>Salieron de San Isidro</i>	They left for San Isidro, coming
<i>Procedentes de Tijuana,</i>	from Tijuana,
<i>Traían las llantas del carro</i>	They had their car tires full of
<i>Repletas de yerba mala.</i>	"bad grass," (marijuana)
<i>Eran Emilio Varela</i>	They were Emilio Varela and
<i>Y Camelia La Tejana.</i>	Camelia the Texan
	-translation Elijah Wald

The song was a huge hit for the band Los Tigres del Norte, and its popularity is widely credited for ushering in the new era of *corridos*. Termed *narcocorridos*, these ballads recount the treachery, excitement, and violence surrounding the drug trade.

These 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. However, the themes they contain are far from new. Tracing the *corrido* treatment of the themes of smuggling and banditry from the revolutionary era to today, we see that the *narcocorrido* is deeply rooted in Mexican culture, and like the traditional *corrido* is a narrative attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

reconcile complex and often contradictory elements of life. Corridos continue to address themes of banditry and cross-border smuggling precisely because these are long-term strategies forced upon subaltern groups throughout the era of modernization by the power structure. 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 environment of Mexico and the role of the United States also broadens our perspective, illustrating the historical roots of drug trafficking. 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.<sup>2</sup> Finally, an appraisal of the rise of Mexican drug cartels and the simultaneous rise in popularity of narcocorridos illustrates that these songs are only the most recent manifestation of internal and external pressures which predate the Mexican Revolution.

The corrido was not originally an art-form that spoke for—or to— all Mexicans. Early corrido scholar Merle Simmons viewed them as a product by and for the *pueblo*, meaning the common man.<sup>3</sup> In a broad sense corridos are by their very nature considered to be “history from below.” The narrative style is for the most part very matter-of-fact, including names, dates, and details of particular incident or descriptions of an atmospheric set of circumstances. However, the accuracy of the reporting contained within corridos is debatable—as is the question of whether historical accuracy is desirable or appropriate. Some view historical and factual

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<sup>2</sup> See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: New Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Merle Simmons, *The Mexican Corrido as a Source for Interpretive Study of Modern Mexico (1870-1950)* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957), 4.

accuracy as essential.<sup>4</sup> Others, including Simmons, 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.”<sup>5</sup> Taking into account issues of diffusion that Simmons did not, current scholarship continues to view the historic corrido as a “valuable register of historical perceptions and collective and factional wills.”<sup>6</sup>

Much the same could be said of the narcocorrido. For instance a prolific narcocorrido writer, Paulino Vargas, takes his stories from newspaper headlines and even attempts to visit the scene of the incident—though he also admits to a few literary improvements.<sup>7</sup> Though now living a comfortable life, Vargas grew up in very difficult circumstances and clearly identifies with the people he writes about and for—as Simmons observed, a *corridista* [corrido singer or songwriter] must write and sing what the people want to hear or he will be out of a job. Yet Vargas seems to place more importance on the representational impact of his songs than the absolute accuracy of the details.

Interestingly, while the modern narcocorrido continues to be primarily the music of the pueblo, the traditional corrido has been elevated as an important manifestation of Mexican cultural heritage. There are criticisms from what might be termed elite society, who believe that narcocorridos are a direct attack on proper Mexican values. Popular actor Eric del Castillo refers to narcocorridos as “*una bajeza*” (something base or vile) and says that they do not merit the

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4 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).

5 Simmons, *The Mexican Corrido*, ix.

6 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).

7 Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas* (New York: Rayo, 1992) 36-37.

term corrido, and that corridos “are those about [Emiliano] Zapata, [Pancho] Villa, or Felipe Angeles, nothing more.”<sup>8</sup>

This attitude reveals nostalgia for a heroic era—but there is evidence that del Castillo’s counterparts in that era did not share his sentiment. In his research on corridos in the 1940’s, Texas folklorist Brownie McNeil treats the corrido as an expression of a subaltern group in a racially and economically stratified society. He concluded that he could not rely on the opinion of Mexican elites regarding corridos because they dismissed the songs out of hand as the province of the lower classes.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he presented the songs as “ballads of the indio and mestizo, tales of those who have lashed out at opposing forces...and thereby won admiration of others who are oppressed.”<sup>10</sup> As John McDowell points out, it was not until after the Mexican Revolution that a coherent ideology emerged.<sup>11</sup> The single thing uniting various *Constitutionalista* armies was the goal of overthrowing the *Porfiriato* [the reign of Porfirio Diaz]. The elevation of some Revolutionary behavior to heroism simply by association with the conflict thus involves a wistful revision of social conditions of that period.

There is in fact a significant school of thought among corrido scholars which holds that the corrido had its halcyon days in the revolutionary years followed by an unfortunate debasement, commercialization and tepid sentiment.<sup>12</sup> Américo Paredes lamented the moment when “the late Pedro Infante groaned a pseudo-corrido into a microphone while a bevy of Mexican bobby-soxers [a term coined to describe ardent fans of Frank Sinatra in the 1940’s]

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<sup>8</sup> Luis Astorga “Corridos de traficantes y censura” *Región y Sociedad* 17, no.32 (2005): 147 <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/pdf/102/10203205.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Brownie McNeil, “Mexican Border Ballads,” in *Mexican Border Ballads and other Lore*. Ed. Mody C. Boatright, (Austin: Capital Printing Company, 1946), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> John H. McDowell, *Poetry and Violence: The Ballad Tradition of Mexico’s Costa Chica* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 199.

<sup>12</sup> Most significant in this regard are Américo Paredes and Vicente Mendoza.

squealed in ecstasy.”<sup>13</sup> Despite this perceived erosion of quality in commercially recorded offerings, the true or genuine corrido entered what Paredes distinguished as a state of “preservation.”<sup>14</sup> These preserved corridos serve as the gold standard of the genre to this day. The ballad tradition remained as a valid and important part of Mexican national identity despite its lack of currency, analogous perhaps to Yankee Doodle in America.

The implication, then, is that narcocorridos emerged many years later as what ethnomusicologist Helena Simonett termed a “fabricated genre” that is not really the product of a subaltern group but rather of a co-opting of that theme by the “hegemonic power of the culture industry.”<sup>15</sup> This cannot be entirely disproven; there is a clear element of commercialism in the dissemination of most modern music. Nor can it be proven 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. Narcocorridos are by definition counter-culture, filled with illegal acts and anti-heroes—hence the ongoing threats of censorship they draw.

This somewhat dismissive perspective also ignores the diversity of the corrido genre. While it is true 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.

Furthermore, the fact that the State utilized the corridos as a means of building popular support

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<sup>13</sup> James Nicolopoulos, “Another Fifty Years of the Corrido: A Reassessment,” *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 22, no.1 (Spring 1997). <http://sincronia.cucsh.udg.mx/nicolopulos.html> (accessed May 30, 2011)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> 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).

for state programs into the 1950's is indicative of their continuing popularity, despite the judgments of corrido scholars to the contrary.<sup>16</sup>

All this provokes the question—did corridos truly fade away? Paredes and others have distinguished between the “ballad tradition” and a “ballad community.” The distinction rests in the elements of activity and participation. According to Paredes, the ballad community of the border region arose out of the racial and political conflicts along the border. Corridos were composed with a view to reflect both the general environment and specific incidences of injustice and violence.<sup>17</sup> Following the revolution, Paredes concludes that the corrido community moved from generation to preservation, their function having been served. Paredes’ theory that corridos are artifacts of conflict draws a connection between the conflict of the post-independence period, the oppression of the Porfiriato, and corridos about banditry that existed beyond the northern border. According to this theory, the continuing creation of corridos in certain regions and the “rebirth” of corridos as narcocorridos should mirror local experiences of conflict.

More recent scholarship has in fact attempted to ascertain whether an active “living” ballad tradition continued to thrive in Mexico despite scholarly pronouncements suggesting otherwise. McDowell has documented a corrido tradition that appears to have been ongoing throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> In the Costa Chica region of Guerrero, McDowell found a ballad community that did not experience the withering effect that Paredes saw in the border corridos. He attributes this in part to the ongoing racial conflict and economic hardship in that state, and the resultant culture of normalized violence.<sup>19</sup> Corridos are part of the fabric of everyday life,

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<sup>16</sup> Tracy Ramsey, personal communication, April 28, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> McDowell, *Poetry and Violence*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-16.



part of the social network disseminating information about incidents, relationships, and collective memory. In the Big Bend region of Texas and Mexico, filmmaker Alan Govenar and Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records documented a community in which one of the oldest known corridos, *Corrido de Kiansis*, is still a popular request, suggesting the corrido never really went out of style there.<sup>20</sup> Scholar James Nicolopulos 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; those include songs that commemorate events including the slaughter at Tlatelolco, the guerilla movement of Lucio Cabañas, and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas.<sup>21</sup>

Yet even if there were no effective bridge through time, would narcocorridos qualify as genuine corridos? Beyond the shortened length (this owing to the new medium of 78 rpm gramophone record singles, which afforded approximately 3 minutes per side), in terms of structure the answer must be “yes.” There are six recognized characteristics of corrido: the initial call of the *corridista*, or balladeer, to the public, sometimes called the formal opening; the stating of the place, time, and name of the protagonist of the ballad; the arguments of the protagonist; the message; the farewell of the protagonist; and the farewell of the *corridista*. It is not necessary that all elements are present, but the presence of two or more equals corrido.<sup>22</sup> Yet the content—the representation of the duality of life, the representations of men, the acts of heroism and desperation—is essentially the same through the decades.

The bandit archetype and the corrido did not emerge simultaneously. The intersection happened in large part because of the struggles associated with the class-stratification of

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<sup>20</sup> James Nicolopulos, liner notes, *The Devils Swing: Ballads from the Big Bend Country of the Texas-Mexican Border*, Arhoolie Records compact disc 480, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Nicolopulos, *Another Fifty Years*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Mexican society, particularly during the Porfiriato. As a cultural product, the corrido is generally considered exclusively Mexican. This is the perspective of folklorists and historians including Merle Simmons and Vicente Mendoza, and it also reflects the current tendency in modern Mexico to regard corridos as part of that nation's proud cultural heritage.

The Mexican government, perhaps owing to the challenges of achieving political hegemony, has always worked hard to control the national conversation, whether political or cultural. Even prior to the Revolution, Porfirio Diaz sought to mobilize the image of the noble horseman of northern Mexico, the *charro*, to lend legitimacy to his rural police force.<sup>23</sup> Consistent with the idea that counter-culture is a twist on mainstream culture, the most celebrated bandits of the time were the *plateados*, who dressed as charros and capitalized on the image.<sup>24</sup> 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 coincidentally, also figure prominently in tales of Mexican banditry.

Creating a nation-state after the war for independence was an enormous challenge, in part because a large part of the population was native and rural while the 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, here understood as “a process of incorporation that structures and patterns relationships of inequality between men and women as well as among men of different social

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<sup>23</sup> Paul J. Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development* (Wilmington: SR Books 1992), 36.

<sup>24</sup> Olga Nájera-Ramírez. “Engendering Nationalism: Identity, Discourse, and the Mexican Charro.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 67, no.1 (January 1994), 4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3317273> (accessed April 15, 2011). In Spanish, *plata* is silver, and the *plateados* were so called for their adornment.

position and status” helped to hold the fragile nation together, at a clear cost to those on the bottom end of the structure.<sup>25</sup> In the aftermath of the Revolution, the nascent instruments of the state relied on cultural symbolism to bolster support.

Banditry is, in a visible and visceral way, a rejection of that patriarchy. On the one hand, the imagined bandit personifies the common “yearning for escape from drudgery.”<sup>26</sup> On the other, the actual bandit successfully shrugged off the social and economic role of the subaltern class and sought personal advancement on his own terms. From an elite perspective, banditry in the Porfiriato was evidence that the lower classes were morally corrupt and criminally inclined. Ironically, the force which won Mexico’s independence became a force that threatened hegemony, as thousands of displaced soldiers and non-combatants turned to petty crime and banditry at the end of the revolution.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

### *Corrido Heraclio Bernal*

<i>Año de mil ochocientos</i>	In the year of 1888,
<i>Ochenta y ocho alcontado</i>	Exactly in that year, Heraclio Bernal died, his
<i>Heraclio Bernal murió, por el gobierno</i>	death paid for by the government.
<i>pagado</i>	The tragedy of Bernal
<i>La tragedia de Bernal</i>	Began in Guadalupe (de los Reyes, Sinaloa)
<i>En Guadalupe empezó</i>	On account of some bars of silver that they say
<i>Por unas barras de plata, que dicen que se</i>	he stole
<i>robó</i>	Heraclio Bernal was saying: I’m no cattle
<i>Heraclio Bernal decía: Yo no ando de</i>	rustler, I have plenty of silver minted in

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<sup>25</sup> Chris Frazer, *Bandit Nation: A History of Outlaws and Cultural Struggle in Mexico, 1810-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 10-11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 29.

<sup>28</sup> 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).

<p><i>robabueyes, pues tengo plata sellada</i>  <i>En Guadalupe Los Reyes</i>  <i>Decía Crispin García muy enfadado de andar:</i>  <i>Si me dan lost diez mil pesos, you les entrego a</i>  <i>Bernal</i></p> <p><i>Le dieron los diez mil pesos,</i>  <i>Los recontó en su mascada,</i>  <i>Y le dijo al comandante ‘Alistenme una</i>  <i>acordada!’</i></p> <p><i>Qué bonito era Bernal en su caballo jovero,</i>  <i>Él no robaba a los pobres,</i>  <i>Antes les daba dinero.</i></p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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.  -translation James Nicolopulous<sup>29</sup></p>
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The exploits of bandits such as the “Thunderbolt of Sinaloa,” Heraclio Bernal, were among the first popular corridos. The version excerpted above dates back to 1888 and is an excellent example, having not only the requisite elements structurally but the sentiments as well. 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 Porfiriato. 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.<sup>30</sup>

In the wake of the infighting that marked the end of the Revolution to overthrow Diaz, the winners faced essentially the same challenges Diaz had. It was incumbent upon Carranza and the Constitutionalistas to construct an inclusive national identity in order to achieve legitimacy and ensure stability. The solution was in part to mobilize traditional culture as a means of connection to the non-elite social groups and as a method of control. Elevating the pre-

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<sup>29</sup> “El Corrido de Heraclio Bernal,” *The Roots of the Narcocorrido*, Arhoolie Records compact disc 7053.

<sup>30</sup> Frazer, *Bandit Nation*, 159-162.

Colombian past and thus removing the stigma against indigenous people and *mestizos* ensured popular support. Yet the values inherent in an essentially patriarchal system continued to form the foundation of society. Extending Paredes' theory of the genesis of corridos, 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. Yet the eventuality was somewhat different, and corrido production persisted despite attempts at national hegemony.

Nationalism is at once an ideology advanced by the state and a "cultural script," those implicit frames of reference through which people frame their day-to-day existence.<sup>31</sup> Those groups outside the hegemonic vision of national identity do not create alternative visions but instead draw on existing cultural scripts that run counter to those chosen to be elevated to national status.<sup>32</sup> This does not have to be understood as a direct and deliberate challenge to the state ideology, though these alternative cultural values are often seen by the state as oppositional. In narcocorridos there is a distinct national pride communicated by traffickers successfully undermining the legal reach and hegemony of the United States. America is perceived as imposing its will on Mexico, particularly as regards drug interdiction. Yet this simultaneously defies the Mexican state as well, in part because of the inherently illegal nature of the trade itself. Two additional threats to the Mexican government emerge from the dissemination of the narcocorrido: the exposure of governmental corruption and collusion in the drug trade, and the rise of an alternative identity which does not conform to that advanced by the state.

Do narcocorridos glorify the world of the *narcotraficantes* [narcotics traffickers]?

Perhaps an even more compelling question is, if so, why? Clearly what Hobsbawm was in part

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31 José Itzigsohn and Matthias vom Hau, "Unfinished Imagined Communities: States, Social Movements, and Nationalism in Latin America," *Theory and Society* 35, no. 2 (April 2006): 196. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4501750> (accessed May 2, 2011).

32 *Ibid.*, 197.

proposing is that 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. When we look at the concept of the bandit in narcocorridos, we discover that the narcotraficante archetype or persona is a modern version of the bandits and smugglers depicted in earlier corridos. The *narcos* are responding to government's inability to provide meaningful stability or employment in Mexico and the resultant economic conditions. Similarly the element of national pride is inflated through the conflict with American authorities. The protagonists are men who live by their own rules, but like the protagonists in corridos from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they face the risk of prison or eminent death—usually through treachery— as part of that life. They rob from the rich (via illegal activity) and give to the poor. In many cases they are admired, protected, and supported by people within their own community.

Having examined some of the socio-economic elements that inspired corridos in the late 1800's and early 1900's, a similar examination of the circumstances surrounding the rise of the drug cartels in Mexico and narcocorridos is in order. There are significant differences in the environment experienced by Heraclio Bernal, Pancho Villa, and today's narcotraffickers—those elements of the *histoire événementielle*<sup>33</sup>. The stakes are much higher on both sides of the drug deals being done. The culture of drugs and violence has become more entrenched, and its effects more widely acknowledged, if not more widespread. Dissemination of new songs is practically instantaneous, and there is reciprocal interaction between artists, listeners, and the narcotraficantes themselves. There is an interesting tension between what are essentially three nations: the political nation of Mexico, the political nation of the U.S., and the cultural nation of “Greater Mexico.”

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<sup>33</sup> See Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Epoque de Philippe II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) for a treatment of *histoire événementielle*.

Despite these changes, the ultimate themes of life in Mexico for subaltern groups remain remarkably similar. We find, essentially, continuity. Mexican administrations have come and gone, but cross-border smuggling, drug production, and drug trafficking has existed in Mexico since the late 1800's, as evidenced in part by the early corridos on that theme. They have become an integral part of everyday life in many regions despite some ambivalence regarding the trade. 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.

Many of Mexico's working and peasant classes were left behind during the economic progress Mexico experienced in the past 30 years. Early administrations sought to empower indio and mestizo populations through education and land reform, and to build upon the infrastructure advances made during the Porfiriato. But many of the economic advances made in that time have eroded or been abandoned. Following the disappointment of the economic miracle, particularly with the abandonment of the import substitution (ISI) model, the Mexican government has trended toward more neoliberal economic policies and unbridled capitalism.<sup>34</sup> Many rural Mexicans sought work in and around industrialized Mexico City. Maquiladoras along the northern border attracted many migrant workers but proved to be vulnerable to global economic forces, including the terms of NAFTA and the rise of China as a manufacturing center.<sup>35</sup> While on the one hand this approach has allowed for the emergence of a true middle

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<sup>34</sup> Astorga, *Corridos y Censura*, 159.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Cooney, "The Mexican Crisis and the Maquiladora Boom: A Paradox of Development or the Logic of Neoliberalism?" *Latin American Perspectives* 28, no. 1 (May 2001): 55-83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3185149> (accessed May 30, 2011).

class, it has also created a more salient disparity between the haves and have-nots and pushed major sociological changes related to livelihood, including a shift to a highly mobile society and the growth of drug trafficking.

Paredes ascribed the role of expressing the struggles along the political border between the U.S. and Mexico to the corrido.<sup>36</sup> As Paredes and others have recognized, there exists a nation that transcends the political demarcation that he termed “Greater Mexico.”<sup>37</sup> This cultural reciprocity is important. David Gutiérrez makes an excellent case that there is a nation of ethnically Mexican people that inhabits both Mexico and the U.S. but is somewhat distinct from both *political* nations. This is a largely poor, migration centered group; while not everyone is a migrant, every family within the group is touched by migration in one way or another. These people’s need for social and economic security has not been adequately addressed in either country.

On the one hand, the government of Mexico has historically made an effort to promote an official Mexican national identity within the expatriate community.<sup>38</sup> Yet at the same time, “common” Mexicans were discriminated against by their more elite countrymen—for the elites, class and cultural lines were more important than ethnic or national lines. Waves of repatriation in the 1930’s were followed by the implementation of the Bracero program in the 1940’s. Essentially, the working-class ethnic Mexicans who sought life or employment in the U.S. were treated as a commodity on tap rather than a community. The continuous movement resulted in a

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<sup>36</sup> Américo Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), xviii.

<sup>37</sup> David G. Gutiérrez, “Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the ‘Third Space’: The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in Greater Mexico.” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 2. (September 1999), 482. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2567042> As Gutierrez notes, Paredes focused on the borderlands specifically, but wider patterns of migration necessitate a wider scope when discussing ‘Greater Mexico’ in a contemporary context, as with narcocorridos.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 493. In a more recent immigration controversy, G.W. Bushes immigration reform efforts led then Mexican President Vicente Fox to reach out to ‘greater Mexico.’



population with a focus on those cultural and social practices that maintained a sense of community but did not necessarily articulate political nationality.<sup>39</sup> It also established the trans-border network so essential to the drug trade.

Narcocorridos evolved in Mexico, but they also took much of their modern shape in the ethnoscape of Los Angeles, where the growing confidence of the Latino population has led to a return to traditional Mexican musical forms.<sup>40</sup> In her work with narcocorridos Simonett encountered a Mexican-American population at once more confident in its “Mexicanness” and more connected to a mainstream American popular culture that embraces ethnic diversity.<sup>41</sup> It may well be that this nation of ‘Greater Mexico’ is the most cogent audience for narcocorridos. This transnational identity may be the most important distinction between traditional corridos and narcocorridos.

Migration and trafficking go hand in glove. One of the most important themes in both traditional and narcocorridos is eluding American authorities, either for immigration or trafficking purposes. This did not always mean drugs, nor was it a one way trade. *Mariano Resendéz* recounts the life and death of someone who smuggled luxury goods *into* Mexico, and the song *La Canela* recounts a 1934 ambush on cinnamon smugglers:

<i>Amigos voy a cantarles</i>	Friends, I’m going to tell you a story
<i>Pero quiero su atención,</i>	But I want you to pay attention
<i>Estado de Tamaulipas</i>	It happened in the state of Tamaulipas
<i>Y también de Nuevo León</i>	And also in Nuevo León.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 495-497.

<sup>40</sup> Simonett, *Micromusic of Nuevo L.A.*, 318.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 319.

<i>Fueron cuatro los valientes</i>	There were four brave men
<i>Ye todos de buena ley</i>	And every one a man of his word
<i>Traficaban la canela</i>	They were trafficking in cinnamon
<i>De Reynosa a Monterrey</i>	From Reynosa to Monterrey
	--translation James Nicolopoulos <sup>42</sup>

The drug trade, particularly in marijuana and heroin grown in Mexico, was established long before drugs became illegal in the U.S.<sup>43</sup> Prohibition created a new incentive for entrepreneurs—Mexican and American—to supply booze to an appreciative customer base. American brewers and distillers relocated businesses south of the border, towns such as Ciudad Juarez developed swinging night life and raked in tax revenue, and smuggling over the border was just part of business as usual. Once the repeal of the Volstead Act reduced the profit on alcohol, many smugglers converted to other substances and continued their established trade.<sup>44</sup>

The evolution of Mexico into a supply country depended on depressed socio-economic circumstances and governmental corruption. In a detailed anthropological study of the Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán, Victoria Malkin identifies a number of crucial ways in which the drug trade has been important in rural Mexico.<sup>45</sup> Beginning with irrigation projects in the 1950's the Mexican government sought to improve the infrastructure for agriculture in the area, which would seem like obvious progress. But ownership of the *ejidal* land was stratified, with an elite group holding better plots and the rest barely subsisting.<sup>46</sup> Governmental policies based on large-

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<sup>42</sup> *The Roots of the Narcocorrido*. In his discussion in the liner notes of this compact disc, Nicolopoulos shares his surprise that this song is really about cinnamon smugglers, and that the word is not being used as drug code (which it commonly is), citing the research efforts of Armando Hugo Ortiz; this corrido recounts a specific incident in 1934.

<sup>43</sup> 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).

<sup>44</sup> Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Victoria Malkin, "Narcotrafficking, Migration, and Modernity in Rural Mexico" *Latin American Perspectives* 28, No. 4 (2001): 103, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3185140> (accessed April 12, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 105. The *ejido* is essentially a tract of agricultural land communally owned and operated by inhabitants of a village on an individual or cooperative basis. For extensive discussion of the Mexican agricultural

scale export strategies lead to regional boom-and-bust cycles, and corruption was widespread. Reforms were not sustained, leaving the region with substandard schools and prospects for employment, which many residents lament as a lack of modernity. Malkin suggests that, in this environment of economic uncertainty, neoliberal economic policies, and government corruption, narcotics simply represented a stable export.<sup>47</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain whether there was any official Mexican governmental policy regarding drug production and exportation. What is clear is the unofficial policy was to look the other way or in fact to enable and facilitate the drug trade. No doubt there was the individual motivation of private enrichment, but there is also the fact that the entrepreneurial spirit of drug trafficking mirrored the same spirit in official economic policies. Sociologist Luis Astorga sees a parallel emergence of neoliberal economics and drug capitalism from the 1970s onward. He suggests that changes in societal values and the mixing of people with money in various social settings—with little emphasis on how the money was accumulated—served to normalize drug trafficking. Moreover, he observes that, for its part, the government has to set a good example but, due to corruption, does the opposite.<sup>48</sup>

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. When Elijah

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land distribution system, see W. James Foreman, “Changing Land Tenure Patterns in Mexico,” *Land Economics* 26, no. 1, (1950), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3159331> (accessed May 2, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Malkin, *Narcotrafficking and Modernity*, 116, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Astorga, *Corridos y Censura*, 159.

Wald went to the capital of Sinaloa, Culiacan, to research his book *Narcocorridos*, he was warned by many people, including the coastal Sinaloans, to avoid the town and region because it was not safe. What he found instead was a prosperous city full of manicured parks and thriving businesses. The locals he spoke to were by and large unfazed by the fact that it was all paid for with drug money. One fellow told him that there were “only three wealthy families here that have no drug connections in their history”.<sup>49</sup> As in the gun-toting western lifestyle of the U.S., the trafficker-endowed urban society and culture was an acceptable and respectable lifestyle of Sinaloa.

The distrust of government was further compounded by sporadic drug eradication efforts. The United States is of course the ultimate destination for almost all of the drugs produced in and transported through Mexico—yet the United States government has also been an active, if somewhat inconsistent, antagonist in the drug war. During the Echeverría administration Operation Condor sent thousands of soldiers into the mountainous growing regions of Sinaloa, slashing and burning both poppy and marijuana crops and raiding ranches. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration sprayed the defoliant paraquat as well. A local human rights organization estimated that some 2,000 mountain villages were depopulated.<sup>50</sup> The resultant chaos was captured by corridista Pepe Cabrera in *La Mafia Muerte*:<sup>51</sup>

<i>Culiacán, capital Sinaloense, convirtiéndose</i>	Culiacán, Sinaloan capital, is converting itself
<i>En el mismo infierno,</i>	Into a very hell
<i>Fue testigo de tanta masacre,</i>	It was witness to so many massacres
<i>Cuantos hombres valientes han muerto</i>	How many brave men have died
<i>Se acabaron familias enteras,</i>	Entire families were wiped out
<i>Cientos de hombres la vida perdieron,</i>	Hundreds of men lost their lives
<i>Es muy triste de verás la historia,</i>	It is a truly sad story

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<sup>49</sup> Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 58

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

*Otros tantos desaparecieron* Many others have disappeared  
*No se sabe si existen con vida* No one knows if they are alive  
*O tal vez en la quema murieron* Or if they died in the burning

*Tierra Blanca se encuentra muy triste,* Tierra Blanca is very sad,  
*Ya sus calles están desoladas,* Now its streets are deserted  
*No transitan los carros del año* The cars of the year don't drive by,  
*Ni se escucha el rugir de metrallas* Nor does one hear machine-gun fire  
*Las mansiones que fueron de reyes* What were once the mansions of kings  
*Hoy se encuentran muy abandonadas* Today are all abandoned  
 -translation Elijah Wald

Outside of the context it would be possible to perceive this as a corrido with an anti-narco perspective. However in this case the author is lamenting the loss of life, livelihood, and community at the hands of the government. In the final stanza there are also references to the more comfortable lifestyle afforded by drug-trafficking—the latest model car and the giant houses being familiar symbols. Only the wistful reference to machine gun fire suggests that the “norm” was not entirely normal.

One unintended consequence of the purge of Sinaloa was the dispersion of several up-and-coming traffickers into new and unclaimed territory, including members of the Arellano Félix family; Joaquín ‘El Chapo’ Guzmán; and Amado Carrillo Fuentes, who would later become known as “the Lord of the Skies” for his bold use of jet aircraft to transport cocaine from Colombia.<sup>52</sup> In the same timeframe, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) began to lose the grip on absolute power it had held since the Revolution, and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) made gains in several states. This improved democracy had an unsettling effect, as previously established networks of power were interrupted, which increased violence and

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<sup>52</sup> Alma Guillermoprieto, “Letter from Mexico: Days of the Dead,” *The New Yorker*, November 10, 2008, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/11/10/081110fa\\_fact\\_guillermoprieto?currentPage=1](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/11/10/081110fa_fact_guillermoprieto?currentPage=1) (accessed April 17, 2011).

volatility as local police, federal agents, corrupt officials, and traffickers reconfigured the power structure.<sup>53</sup> The battle for control of the *plazas*, those geographic areas adjacent to the border through which cartels move their product, began to escalate from the 1990's onward.

In a sense both corridos and the narcocorridos can be understood as rising to the status of propaganda. After the battle of Celaya, supporters of Pancho Villa and Alvaro Obregón rushed to write and distribute corridos which described the fight and advanced their respective reputations. And the use of corridos as a medium for news/opinion was not lost on Venustiano Carranza and the nascent PRI. In the aftermath of the civil war they adopted corridos as a method of manipulating public opinion. This can be seen as early as 1919, when the *Zapatistas* and the *Constitutionalistas* had an open corrido battle regarding the death of Emiliano Zapata. The *Zapatistas* advanced the idea that Zapata was not dead, that it was a body double. The *Constitutionalistas* responded, often within a day or two, countering the various assertions. The use of the corrido as a medium to bolster the state's reputation continued until the 1950's when the national popularity of the corrido waned in favor of cumbia, salsa and other musical styles. Still, the use of locally popular music by politicians continues.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, *corridistas* [corrido singers or writers] having some connection to one figure or another in the drug world will write songs celebrating their better characteristics or recounting a specific incident. The song most pleasing to listeners will win out.<sup>55</sup> And there are clear connections between some artists and cartels, whether it is purely a regional bias or in the form of actual pay for corridos. Some play at private parties or write corridos for specific narcotrafficantes—the artist El Komander is alleged to make as much as \$60,000 in a weekend doing private performances—though this phenomenon extends to artists from other musical

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<sup>53</sup> George Grayson, *Mexico: Narcoviolence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick: Transaction 2010), 30.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsey Tracy, personal communication, April 28, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 146.

genres as well.<sup>56</sup> The dark side of this is that favoring (or appearing to favor) one cartel over another can be a death sentence. Chalino Sanchez, an artist who was important in popularizing narcocorridos, was killed in 1992 after a performance in his home state of Sinaloa. Explanations abound, but there is no doubt that it was connected to the narco world. Then, it was unusual; now it is commonplace. Between 2006 and 2008, a dozen musicians were killed in similar ‘unexplained’ circumstances.<sup>57</sup> In one incident in Matamoros, a female *corridista* survived a shooting, but her assailants followed her to the hospital and killed her in her hospital bed.<sup>58</sup>

It is unclear how many of the commercially recorded narcocorridos are written in partnership with actual drug traffickers. Although Simonett refers to “personal” corridos for particular narcos, her examples suggest that they are performed in person or recorded in non-commercial settings for the narcos personal enjoyment.<sup>59</sup> It is apparent, however, that the various cartels have seized on the corrido as an avenue for manipulating public opinion just as the state did in following the revolution. The counter-culture theme of corridos, particularly that of smuggling, makes this a natural fit. While many of the songwriters that Elijah Wald met while researching his book were professional writers who averred having any contact with “the life,” narco-traffickers in Juarez broadcast narcocorridos on police frequencies to alert them to start looking for bodies.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Shaul Schwartz, *Narcocorridos: Singing Songs of Drug Violence* (Time Video 2010) [http://www.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,651073925001\\_2027104,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,651073925001_2027104,00.html) (accessed May 2, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> John Burnett. “Narcocorridos: Ballads of the Mexican Cartels.” *National Public Radio*. October 10, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> James C. McKinley. “Songs of Love and Murder, Silenced By Killings,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/18/world/americas/18mexico.html?scp=1&sq=songs%20of%20love%20and%20murder&st=cse> (accessed May 20, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Simonett, *Micromusic of Nuevo L.A.*, 322.

<sup>60</sup> Catherine Schoichet. “Narcocorridos: Mexican Ruling Party Proposes Ban on Songs that Glorify Drug Trafficking,” *El Paso Times*. January 22, 2010, [http://www.elpasotimes.com/juarez/ci\\_14240821](http://www.elpasotimes.com/juarez/ci_14240821) (accessed April 10, 2011).

The fact that narcotraffickers so successfully infiltrate the police band raises the issue of power. News organizations regularly lead with the grisly details of the cartels war for dominance. Chapo Guzman has been named in *Forbes* magazine as one of the world's richest—and most powerful—men.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, those at the pinnacle of their power in the cartels are not helpless, and in many cases they have or have had official support. Understanding their continuing presence in the corrido tradition, then, leads us to consider the role of the bandit in a larger sense, not only as a real figure but as one who is representative or archetypal.

The bandit figure as identified by Hobsbawm in his book *Bandits* is evident in both traditional corridos and narcocorridos. The model of the bandit as originally described by Hobsbawm has been subject to much critique and revision since its inception, and much of the revision of his model is inspired by the question of the true historic role of bandits. While much of Hobsbawm's bandit concept revolves around the "social bandit," others suggest that there are many motivations for bandit behavior beyond overcoming a lack of justice—political or economic motivations, for instances, or kinship ties.<sup>62</sup> Hobsbawm himself acknowledges the distinction is not always easy to make.<sup>63</sup>

Latin Americanist Richard Slatta argues that research into judicial archives by Latin American scholars has effectively disproved the existence of the social bandit model in that region—and indeed, suggests that these historical figures have been refuted world-wide.<sup>64</sup> However, Gilbert Joseph cautions against relying too much on police and judicial records, for the simple reason that "banditry" and associated terms and activities have often been employed for

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<sup>61</sup> "The Worlds Billionaires," *Forbes Magazine*, March 10, 2010. [http://www.forbes.com/lists/2010/10/billionaires-2010\\_Joaquin-Guzman-Loera\\_FS0Y.html](http://www.forbes.com/lists/2010/10/billionaires-2010_Joaquin-Guzman-Loera_FS0Y.html) (accessed May 10, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Richard Slatta, "Bandits and Rural Social History: A Comment on Joseph," *Latin American Research Review* 26, no. 1 (1991): 148, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/i223648> (accessed March 29, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 45.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Slatta, "Eric J. Hobsbawm's Social Bandit: A Critique and Revision," *A Contracorriente*, [http://www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente/spring\\_04/Slatta.pdf](http://www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente/spring_04/Slatta.pdf). (accessed April 24, 2011).



political purposes. Joseph relates the term to the current badinage of the term “terrorism.”<sup>65</sup> Yet as Ranajit Guha indicates, the term is also employed by the outlaws themselves when it serves them to do so.<sup>66</sup> What Slatta and other critics cannot effectively explain is why, if indeed the model is inaccurate, the figure of the bandit is universal and, moreover, why the objective truth (or lack of it) negates the validity of the archetype itself.

Hobsbawm defines the most common incarnation of banditry as the “noble robber” in the mold of Robin Hood as having the following qualities: His 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. He only kills in self-defense or for revenge. He remains in his community as a valued member. He is only vulnerable to harm or death through treason because he has the tacit support of the people--he has an air of invulnerability. He is not the enemy of the king but rather the local authorities.<sup>67</sup>

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. He suggests that it is because the bandit represents justice in a world where justice is denied him.<sup>68</sup> In American folklore, the lore of Jesse James is persistent and almost always favorable. There is not denial of the bad deeds he did, but rather an interpretation of the circumstances surrounding those deeds that defers judgment. As with the legend of Robin Hood, many supposedly historical facts about James do not stack up. There is little evidence to support the mistreatment of his family or

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph, *Latin American Bandits*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 48-9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. See also Vanderwood's *Disorder and Progress*.

himself at the hands of carpetbaggers, yet these incidents of persecution figure into the explanations or apologies for his actions.<sup>69</sup>

But the positive characteristics do stack up—not necessarily with the provable actions of Jesse James, but with the traditional characteristics attributed to similar folk heroes. The phrase “he robs from the rich and gives to the poor” is probably etched in the memory of almost every child in the world, in some form or another. The folk hero is always clever; Sam Bass dressed as a Texas Ranger and asked around town about his own exploits, and Jesse James reversed the shoes of his horse to throw off pursuers.<sup>70</sup> Pancho Villa may or may not have really needed to defend his sister’s honor, but his having done so fits the required mythology. Unlike Robin Hood, who was almost certainly not an actual person, the outlaws featured in heroic tales from American and Mexico did exist; they have simply been imbued with this transcendent spirit of individuation and justice.

Another characteristic prevalent in these North American tales, including corridos and narcocorridos, is machismo. Paredes traces the presence of macho in corridos to the time of revolutionary foment in Mexico. He and other folklorists describe a range of machismo, from authentic courage and heroism to bravado and “supermanliness that conceals an inferiority complex.” It can be argued that the authenticity of each expression of machismo is in the eye of the beholder (or ear of the listener). But Paredes makes another interesting point: feelings of inferiority are often the province of what he terms “upward moving groups.” In the case of the revolutionaries, that took the form of striking out against a dictator; in the case of the narcotraficantes, against poverty and social immobility.

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<sup>69</sup> Kent L. Steckmesser, “Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and Folklore,” *Journal of American Folklore* 79, no. 312 (April-June 1966): 349. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/i223648> (accessed March 29, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

Paredes is himself skeptical as to the inherent Mexican-ness of macho, citing various other such manifestations ranging from 18<sup>th</sup> century English poetry to Daniel Boone.<sup>71</sup> In modern American culture one of the most identifiable personas is the “man with no name” as played by Clint Eastwood; his is a world of action according to his own rules. Nonetheless, the cultural touchstones present in both corridos and narcocorridos are easily identifiable as such. Machismo, then, can be related in part to the continuing popularity of narcocorridos in this way: The songs may combine both the authentic and false machismo discussed by Paredes, but most important is the feelings that they *inspire*. People put on the narcocorridos when it is a bit later in the party and they want to get energized, when they want to feel “really, really Mexican,”<sup>72</sup>

One of the most exhaustively studied bandits of all time is Pancho Villa, yet even his biographers acknowledge that some details of his life will never be confirmed.<sup>73</sup> Friedrich Katz identifies three separate versions of Villa’s history, which he terms the white, the black, and the epic legends. Much of his legend—even, in a sense, the black legend of his detractors—conforms to the bandit. He was forced to become an outlaw after standing up to or shooting a *hacendado*; he gave meat to the needy through his illegal but community sanctioned cattle rustling; he died by treason; his air of invulnerability and the righting of wrongs is expressed in his raid on Columbus, New Mexico. Despite extant support in judicial archives and other sources (diaries etc), Katz concludes that no one version is entirely accurate, nor can any of them be conclusively proved false—a fact that he attributes in no small measure to the nature of the outlaw life.<sup>74</sup> Villa fits the model in another significant way as well: following his death he was

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<sup>71</sup> Américo Paredes, “The United States, Mexico, and ‘Machismo,’” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 8, no. 1 (1971): 18, 37, 26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814061> (accessed May 28, 2011).

<sup>72</sup> Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 144.

<sup>73</sup> Katz, *Pancho Villa*, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

excluded from the “Revolutionary Family” and rebranded as a bandit by the emergent political establishment.<sup>75</sup>

Simmons comments that the pueblos continuing interest in Villa is evidenced by the fact that at the time of his research in the 1930’s, Villista corridos were still played in the marketplace.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Villista corridos continue to be popular to this day, and are routinely included in collections with narcocorridos. However, his role in the Revolution complicates the matter. Pancho Villa’s qualities as a general are by no means immaterial, but the narratives that persist in popular imagination focus just as strongly on his early life of banditry and his raid on Columbus. Hobsbawm adroitly handles this difficult tension between being a member of an oppressed group and being a member of the power establishment. 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.<sup>77</sup> But he had, in Hobsbawm’s terms, formed “a nucleus of armed strength, and therefore a political force.”<sup>78</sup> As 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.<sup>79</sup> 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.”<sup>80</sup> The idea that bandits are pre-revolutionaries is somewhat contested; in Villa’s case, it seems to have been a case of being in the right place as the right time.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 790.

<sup>76</sup> Simmons, *Mexican Corrido*, 276

<sup>77</sup> Katz, *Pancho Villa*, 70-71

<sup>78</sup> Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 96.

<sup>79</sup> Katz, *Pancho Villa*, 71

<sup>80</sup> Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 95.

<sup>81</sup> This idea is advanced by Hobsbawm, and also explored by others; See Joseph, *Latin American Bandits*.

Sociologist Mark Edberg also takes a look at the actors in the creation of the narcotraficante archetype that populates the narcocorrido. Specifically he asks to what degree are narcotraficantes influenced in their outward persona by their depiction in narcocorridos?<sup>82</sup> Ultimately in the modern world we have to view narcotraficantes both as subjects of narcocorridos but also consumers of popular culture. One of trafficker Pablo Acosta's favorite movies was *Scarface*. While there is no evidence that he needed to take tips from Tony Montana in business, it may be inferred that he found it reinforcing in some way.<sup>83</sup> It is difficult to ascertain, then, where the creation of the persona or archetype of the narco happens. It is likely cartels take cues from the activities of other cartels, but these exploits are given coverage in mainstream media as well. How effectively they disseminate their messages and control their public image might well be gauged by listening to narcocorridos. This is a question not easily answered from the current vantage point.

Narcocorridos do not necessarily aggrandize their subjects, but they do give them their due. For example, Pablo Acosta Villarreal, who made his fortune and met his end in Ojinaga, Mexico, is eulogized in several corridos. One, by Paulino Vargas, was a commercial success and makes some interesting suggestions; specifically that Acosta worked for the U.S. government. There is some truth to this, though not as regards the hunting of terrorists as the corrido below suggests; rather, Acosta was actively negotiating with a single FBI operative, helping to bring down rival dealers. Acosta also regularly carried official identification provided by his contacts in the Mexican government that enabled him to move freely and to carry firearms legally.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Mark Cameron Edberg. *Narcotraficante: Narcocorridos and the Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexican Border*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

<sup>83</sup> Poppa, *Druglord*, 208.

<sup>84</sup> Poppa, *Druglord*.

*El Zorro de Ojinaga*

<i>El cuidaba la frontera, por órdenes del Tio</i>	He watched the border under Uncle Sam's
<i>Sam</i>	orders
<i>Y cazaba que terroristas de sesos que saben</i>	He hunted down terrorists, those who knew
<i>matar</i>	how to kill,
<i>El Zorro de Ojinaga, Pablo Acosta Villareal</i>	The Fox of Ojinaga, Pablo Acosta Villareal.
<i>Pero viene otra consigna, dijeron a publicar</i>	But it was said that other orders were given
<i>Dicen que bajaba aviones con polvo pa</i>	They said he brought in planes with cocaine to
<i>comenzar</i>	sell
<i>Como el hombre ya está muerto ya no lo</i>	But now that he is dead, no one can contradict
<i>desmentirán</i>	him <sup>85</sup>

In an excerpt of another locally written corrido, there is 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.<sup>86</sup> Acosta's aid to the needy families in his community is also documented in Terence Poppa's book *Druglord*. As Gutpa suggested, 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.<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> This duality is communicated in the *Corrido de Pablo Acosta*:

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<sup>85</sup> Paulino Vargas, *El Zorro de Ojinaga*, The Devil's Swing compact disc.

<sup>86</sup> *The Devils Swing* (2010), DVD, directed by Alan Govenaar (Huston: Documentary Arts).

<sup>87</sup> Poppa, *Druglord*, 226.

<sup>88</sup> *The Devil's Swing* DVD.

*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 Nicolopoulos<sup>89</sup>

Acosta, it might be said, died just as the battle for the *plazas* gained momentum.

Narcocorridos from this point onward communicate some of the uncertainty created by the new environment. By way of contrast, Amado Carrillo, the Lord of the Skies, gained a reputation for being almost magical—as his nickname suggests. But he was not well liked in the way that Pablo Acosta was, and corridos about him do not laud his generosity. His death during facial reconstruction surgery was far from heroic. Yet as a man of power, he merited a corrido or two:

*La DEA decia que si* The DEA said it was him  
*lo PGR que no* the PGR said no  
*dificil de identificar* it was difficult to identify him  
*la cirugia se aplicó* because he had surgery  
*su madre asi lo reclama* his mother claimed him  
*para llevarlo al panteón* to take him to the family plot

*Tambien el Chapo Guzmán* Also Chapo Guzman  
*El Guero Palma y Zambada* El Guero Palma (Héctor Luis Palma Salazar)

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<sup>89</sup> Los Palomares Del Bravo, "Corrido de Pablo Acosta," *The Devils Swing* compact disc.

*Sinaloa esta muy triste* and Zambada (Ismael Zambada García)  
*de gente que lo estimaba* Sinaloa is very sad  
*querían estar con el jefe* people who revered him  
*hasta en su ultima morada* wanted to be with their chief even in death

*Murió el señor de los cielos* You are dead, lord of the skies  
*pero dejó su talento* but left your talent  
*ya se disputan poderes* and they struggle for power  
*pa entregar los cargamentos* to deliver shipments  
*se oyen rugir las turbinas* they hear roaring turbines  
*y alas que rompen los vientos* and wings in the air<sup>90</sup>  
 -translation by author, with John Rector

Ultimately we learn that, though he is missed by those who were close to him, the death of Carrillo left the organization unsettled. The list of names, including Chapo Guzman, reveals the corridistas predictions about who might be taking over in his absence. The debate between the two government agencies regarding his identity could suggest government collusion, or simply competition, but in dealing with the death itself the corrido gets at one of the central questions—whether he died accidentally or through foul play. Another corrido devoted to Carrillo depicts an incredibly powerful man in a very powerful organization, but again shows the chaos he leaves behind:

*nativo de Culiacán Sinaloa* native of Culiacán Sinaloa  
*y dueño del mundo entero* and owner of the whole world  
*pues los grandes ante el rey* for the great before the king  
*se quitaron el sombrero* took off their hats  
*hoy tranquilos dormirán* Those who feared you  
*los que les tuvieron miedo* Sleep well today

*los de arriba están de fiesta* In heaven there is a party  
*porque Carrillo ha llegado* because Carrillo has arrived  
*porque ese cartel de Juárez* because the Juarez cartel  
*hasta el cielo* to heaven

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<sup>90</sup> El As de la Sierra , “Cayo el Señor de los Cielos,” <http://www.musica.com/letras.asp?letra=1424667> (accessed May 23, 2011).



*lo ha llevado*      has lifted him  
*y en la tierra se pelean*      and on earth they scramble  
*por el hueso que ha dejado.*      for the bone that you have left<sup>91</sup>  
 -translation by author, with John Rector

On the one hand these songs revolve around very real events and people. But on the other hand they are expressions of freedom in a world with little opportunity. Whatever he might have done to get there, Carrillo was seen as a man to whom the elite ceded power. He was important, and lived according to his own rules. Here in, again, we find the archetype or persona of the bandit, reborn as the narcotraficante.

Whether or not they aspire to the exploits of the narcotraficantes, many Mexicans identify with the general feel of the narcocorridos scene. The style renaissance that accompanied the trend is an important cultural touchstone. Particularly in Nuevo L.A., it has been a way for immigrants and natives alike to reclaim their “Mexicanness.” The style is rural, accessible to the working class and the elite narcotraficantes alike: Boots, jeans, fancy shirt, and cowboy hat.<sup>92</sup> In immigrant communities, where the style has long been dominated by Anglo influence, it is energizing.<sup>93</sup>

American political and economic power is dominant, and Mexico is often cast as a poor also-ran at best; economic parasite at worst. A significant exception to this is the success of the narcotraficantes. They continue to elude American law enforcement and appear to be unstoppable. The story of David and Goliath is culturally very compelling, and while it is doubtful most Mexicans truly condone the violence and damage that result from the drug trade,

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<sup>91</sup> Los Huracanes Del Norte, “El Señor de los Cielos,” <http://www.musica.com/letras.asp?letra=1104056> (accessed May 23, 2011).

<sup>92</sup> Simonett, *Micromusic of Nuevo L.A.*, 319.

<sup>93</sup> Lawrence Downes, “In Los Angeles, Songs without Borders,” *New York Times*, August 16, 2009, <http://travel.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/travel/16corridos.html?scp=1&sq=In%20Los%20Angeles,%20Songs%20with%20Borders&st=cse> (accessed May 28, 2011).

there is a certain satisfaction in stoning the giant. On a more personal level, the mystique of the narcotraficantes is the leap out of not only poverty but powerlessness. The narcos are masters of their reality in ways that neither rural Mexicans nor inner city Angelenos can hope to be.

Traficantes are often important members of their home communities, and are locally respected for their contributions to the economy. They drive *el camioneta del año* [the newest truck], have pretty girlfriends, and come and go as they please. Many successful traffickers come from humble beginnings without formal education or solid social standing, so the dream seems all the more accessible to the average listener.<sup>94</sup> They may not aspire to the life, but just as important is the notion that they could if they tried.

Corrido scholars differentiate between corridos which are composite tales or “movie corridos” and the true, epic form that speaks about a particular person or events. The implication in these discussions is that the movie corrido is a less desirable or authentic offering. It is possible, however, that the movie corrido has a place in the current atmosphere. Increasingly, corrido authors and performers face potential retribution from cartels; perhaps a more general treatment is safer. But it is also more universal. Clearly, in geographically and culturally isolated areas such as the Costa Chica or the Big Bend Region, the corrido which presupposes some familiarity with the subject at hand works, because the community will have that information. But drug smuggling, while it is geographically limited in scope by design, has created widespread social effects.

Effectively the cultural discourse became more widely distributed and diffuse—there are varying levels of knowledge about narco-trafficking and the culture that surrounds it. In Edberg’s estimation, the ethnographic view of the connection between culture and place must be broadened within the context of narcocorridos. The cultural inputs that inform the producers and

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<sup>94</sup> Edberg, *Narcotraficante*, 105.

consumers of corridos come from both sides of the border and in much more diverse styles.<sup>95</sup> Some of the young people he worked with listened to gangsta rap; others preferred Marilyn Manson; still, all were well versed in the narcocorridos as well.<sup>96</sup> The author of the song that launched the popularity of narcocorridos, *Contrabando y Traición* (Smuggling and Betrayal), was a retiring farmer who knew vaguely about trafficking but in fact made the entire story up—an interesting departure from the corrido tradition of taking tales from real events, but also an illustration of the fact one need not be anchored in the lifestyle to create an authentic representation.<sup>97</sup> The wider interest and distribution also suggests that, as narcotrafficking affects more lives, more people turn to the corrido as a means of reconciling the difficulties they face.

Additionally, 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.<sup>98</sup> A late 2010 poll found 23 percent of those surveyed predicted that the Calderón administrations prosecution of the war on drugs would fail, and 83 percent perceived security to be worse than in the previous year.<sup>99</sup> The Mexican Army has long been under scrutiny from Human Rights Watch for allegations of rape, disappearances, torture,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>97</sup> Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 19.

<sup>98</sup> “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)

<sup>99</sup> Consulta Mitofsky, “Encuesta Nacional sobre la Percepción de Seguridad Ciudadana en México.” <http://www.consulta.mx/Estudio.aspx?Estudio=percepcion-seguridadmx-2010> (accessed May 2, 2011).

and murder; with the increased military activity human rights complaints have increased six-fold.<sup>100</sup> 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.”<sup>101</sup>

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.”<sup>102</sup> As narcocorridos such as *El Zorro de Ojinaga* illustrate, this is not exactly the message. There are those songs that speak only of success, but they are just as likely to describe the fall.

What *really* granted that immunity is the corrupt involvement of government officials. The censorship debate seems to assume an inspirational, causal relationship between narcocorridos and violence. Sociologist Luis Astorga criticizes censorship in part because there is nothing to guarantee that the government will not use the same arguments to censor other works expressing ideas that are not consistent with the social or political mainstream. He also 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.<sup>103</sup> “*Corridos* tell the truth,” said Juan Tenorio, a 63-year-old retiree shopping for

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<sup>100</sup> Human Rights Watch. “Mexico:Events of 2009,” <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87527> (accessed May 28, 2011).

<sup>101</sup> Philip Caputo, “The Fall of Mexico,” *Atlantic Monthly*, December 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/12/.../7760/> (accessed May 31, 2011).

<sup>102</sup> McDowell, *Poetry and Violence*, 201.

<sup>103</sup> Astorga, *Corridos y Censura*, 146.

corridos at a Los Angeles swap meet. "There are many other bad guys: the government, America's appetite for drugs, corrupt cops."<sup>104</sup>

One of the most salient aspects of narcocorridos, as with the corridos McDowell encountered in the Costa Chica region, is violence. As he 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."<sup>105</sup>

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."<sup>106</sup> 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. Applying the theories of *la longue durée* of time developed in

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<sup>104</sup> Richard Marosi, "Muting the Music of Mayhem," *LA Times*, July 30, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-corrido30-2008jul30,0,4498957.story> (accessed May 2, 2011).

<sup>105</sup> McDowell, *Poetry and Violence*, 22.

<sup>106</sup> 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).

the Annales School, it is apparent that while Mexico has experienced rapid modernization and economic growth since independence, there are fundamental elements of Mexican life and cultural expressions that persist. Ultimately, the interaction of two essentially different historical perspectives creates a demand for a counter-narrative.

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. Narcocorridos may never get official recognition—but then, they don't care. It is better to have that outlaw image. And besides, if they wanted it—they would take it.

## APPENDIX OF CORRIDOS

***Contrabando y Traición*      **Smuggling and Betrayal****

*Salieron de San Isidro*      They left San Isidro, coming  
*Procedentes de Tijuana,*      from Tijuana,  
*Traían las llantas del carro*      They had their car tires full of  
*Repletas de yerba mala.*      "bad grass," (marijuana)  
*Eran Emilio Varela*      They were Emilio Varela and  
*Y Camelia La Tejana.*      Camelia the Texan.

*Pasaron por San Clemente*      Passing through San Clemente,  
*Los paró la emigración,*      they were stopped by Immigration.  
*Les pidió sus documentos,*      He asked for their documents,  
*Les dijo "De donde son?"*      he said, "Where are you from?"  
*Ella era de San Antonio*      She was from San Antonio,  
*Una hembra de corazón.*      a woman with a lot of heart.

*Una hembra si quiere a un hombre*      A woman so loves a man that  
*Por el puede dar la vida,*      she can give her life for him.  
*Pero hay que tener cuidado*      But watch out if that woman  
*Si esa hembra se siente herida,*      feels wounded,  
*La traición y el contrabando*      Betrayal and smuggling do not  
*Son cosas incompatibles.*      mix.

*A Los Angeles llegaron*      They arrived in Los Angeles,  
*A Hollywood se pasaron*      they went to Hollywood.  
*En un callejón oscuro*      In a dark alley they changed  
*Las cuatro llantas cambiaron,*      the tires.  
*Ahí entregaron la yerba*      There they delivered the grass,  
*Y ahí también les pagaron,*      and there also they were paid.

*Emilio dice a Camelia:*      Emilio says to Camelia, "Today  
*"Hoy te das por despedida.*      is your farewell,  
*Con la parte que te toca*      With your share you can make a  
*Tu puedes rehacer tu vida,*      new life.  
*Yo me voy pa' San Francisco*      I am going to San Francisco  
*Con la dueña de mi vida."*      with the mistress of my life."

*Sonaron siete balazos*      Seven shots rang out, Camelia  
*Camelia a Emilio mataba,*      killed Emilio.  
*La policia solo halló*      All the police found was the  
*Una pistola tirada.*      discarded pistol  
*Del dinero y de Camelia*      Of Camelia and the money  
*Nunca mas se supo nada.*      nothing more was ever known.

***Corrido Heraclio Bernal*    **The Ballad of Heraclio Bernal****

*Año de mil ochocientos  
Ochenta y ocho alcontado  
Heraclio Bernal murió, por el gobierno  
pagado*      In the year of 1888,  
Exactly in that year, Heraclio Bernal died, his  
death paid for by the government.

*La tragedia de Bernal  
En Guadalupe empezó  
Por unas barras de plata,  
que dicen que se robó*      The tragedy of Bernal  
Began in Guadalupe (de los Reyes, Sinaloa)  
On account of some bars of silver that they say  
he stole

*Estado de Sinaloa  
Gobierno de Culiacán,  
Ofrecieron diez mil pesos por la vida de  
Bernal*      The state of Sinaloa,  
From the capital in Culiacán,  
Offered ten thousand pesos for the head of  
Bernal

*Heraclio Bernal decía: Yo no ando de  
robabueyes, pues tengo plata sellada  
En Guadalupe Los Reyes  
Decía Crispín García muy enfadado de andar:  
Si me dan los diez mil pesos, yo les entrego a  
Bernal*      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.'

*Le dieron los diez mil pesos,  
Los contó 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.*      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.

*Lloran todas las muchachas  
Desde Altata hasta Mapimí,  
Ya mataron a Bernal  
Ya no lo verán aquí  
Vuela, vuela palomita,  
Vuela, vuela hacia el olivo,  
Que hasta don Porfirio Díaz quiso conocerlo  
vivo*      All the girls are crying now,  
From Altata all the way to mapimí  
Now Bernals been killed,  
Now they'll never see him here again.  
Fly away, little dove  
Fly away, fly on to that olive tree  
Even Don Porfirio Díaz wanted to meet him  
while alive.  
-translation James Nicolopolous



***La Canela*    **Cinnamon****

*Amigos voy a cantarles* Friends, I'm going to tell you a story  
*Pero quiero su atención,* But I want you to pay attention  
*Estado de Tamaulipas* It happened in the state of Tamaulipas  
*Y también de Nuevo León* And also in Nuevo León.

*Fueron cuatro los valientes* There were four brave men  
*Y todos de buena ley* And every one a man of his word  
*Traficaban la canela* They were trafficking in cinnamon  
*De Reynosa a Monterrey* From Reynosa to Monterrey

*Los fiscales los detienen,* The customs men stopped their truck  
*Fortunato no hizo alarde* Fortunato didn't display any emotion  
*Pero le decía a un fiscal:* But he told one of the customs men:  
*Vayan y vuelvan más tarde* Why don't you all go away and come back later?

*Traficantes y aduanales* Traffickers and customs men  
*Sus pistolas dispararon* All began to fire their pistols,  
*Después de la balacera* After the shooting stopped  
*Muertos y heridos quedaron* Only the dead and wounded remained

*El fiscal Emén Rodríguez* Emén Rodríguez, one of the customs men,  
*Era hombre no muy dejado* Was not a weak person  
*Pero al oír los disparos* But upon hearing the first shots  
*Corría como un venado* He ran away like a deer

*Fortunato fue muy hombre,* Fortunato was a very valiant man  
*No se le puede negar,* You can't deny him that,  
*Herido les hizo fuego* Even though wounded he kept firing at them  
*No se pudo levantar.* Even though he couldn't even stand up.

*Fortunato quedó muerto* Fortunato fell dead  
*Y muy grave De la Fuente* And De la Fuente was badly wounded  
*Orillas de Cadereyta* Just on the outskirts of Cadereyta  
*Antes de llegar al puente.* Just before you get to the bridge

*Vuela, vuela pamolita,* Fly, fly away little dove  
*Hasta que puedas llegar,* As far away as you can fly,  
*Avisa a Nuevo Laredo* Let them know in Nuevo Laredo  
*Lo que acaba de pasar.* What has just happened here.

-translation James Nicolopoulos, Roots of the Narcocorrido

***La Mafia Muerte*    **The Dead Mafia****

<p><i>Culiacán, capital Sinaloense, convirtiéndose En el mismo infierno, Fue testigo de tanta masacre, Cuantos hombres valientes han muerto</i></p> <p><i>Se acabaron familias enteras, Cientos de hombres la vida perdieron, Es muy triste de verás la historia, Otros tantos desaparecieron No se sabe si existen con vida O tal vez en la quema murieron</i></p> <p><i>Tierra Blanca se encuentra muy triste, Ya sus calles están desoladas, No transitan los carros del año Ni se escucha el rugir de metrallas Las mansiones que fueron de reyes Hoy se encuentran muy abandonadas</i></p>	<p>Culiacán, Sinaloan capital, is converting itself Into a very hell It was witness to so many massacres How many brave men have died</p> <p>Entire families were wiped out Hundreds of men lost their lives It is a truly sad story Many others have disappeared No one knows if they are alive Or if they died in the burning</p> <p>Tierra Blanca is very sad, Now its streets are deserted The cars of the year don't drive by, Nor does one hear machine-gun fire What were once the mansions of kings Today are all abandoned</p> <p>-translation Elijah Wald, <i>Narcocorrido</i></p>
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*El Zorro de Ojinaga***The Fox of Ojinaga**

<i>El cuidaba la frontera, por órdenes del Tio Sam</i>	He watched the border under Uncle Sam's orders
<i>Y cazaba que terroristas de sesos que saben matar</i>	He hunted down terrorists, those who knew how to kill,
<i>El Zorro de Ojinaga, Pablo Acosta Villareal</i>	The Fox of Ojinaga, Pablo Acosta Villareal.
<i>Pero viene otra consigna, dijeron a publicar Dicen que bajaba aviones con polvo pa comenzar</i>	But it was said that other orders were given They said he brought down planes with cocaine to start
<i>Como el hombre ya está muerto ya no lo desmentirán</i>	But now that he is dead, no one can contradict him
<i>La confianza y prepotencia es la falla del valiente</i>	Confidence and dominance are the weaknesses of the valiant
<i>No te fíes de los alagos, ni siquiera a parientes A los Zorros más astutos, los atrapan con su gente</i>	Don't trust compliments, not even from the family Even the most astute of foxes are trapped by their own people
<i>En el cielo de Arizona, lo quisieron derribar Le mandó a Vecías, dicen con motor mirage Pero el zorro con su Cessna, hizo a Diablo quedar mal</i>	From the skies in Arizona, they tried to bring him down They sent Vecías, it was said, with a Mirage motor, But the Fox with his Cessnas made the Devil look bad
<i>Le mataron a su hermano que era su mano derecha</i>	They killed his brother, who was his right-hand man,
<i>Y después allá en el rancho también cobraron la renta</i>	And later at the ranch they charged the rent (killed more of his men)
<i>Como el hombre ya está muerto ni modo que lo desmientan</i>	But because he's dead now, it's not like they can contradict him.

***Corrido de Pablo Acosta*      **The Ballad of Pablo Acosta****

*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.

*Eran quince federales*      15 federal policemen  
*Que a Santa Elena llegaron,*      Arrived at Santa Elena  
*A orillas del Río Grande,*      On the banks of the Rio Grand  
*Lugar donde aterrizaron,*      The spot where their choppers landed,  
*Venían desde Ciudad Juárez*      They had to come from Ciudad Juarez  
*A llevarse al alegado.*      To arrest the accused.

*El jefe de judiciales,*      The leader of the police,  
*De apellido Calderoni*      By the name of Calderoni,  
*Gritaba-Rindete Pablo*      Yelled ‘Give up Pablo,  
*Con ésa son tres lecciones!*      This is your last chance!’  
*--Primero me sacan muerto*      You’ll have to kill me  
*Que llevarme a las prisiones!*      Before you take me to prison!’

*Empezó la balacera,*      The gun fight started,  
*Según las letras del diario,*      According to the newspapers,  
*Abril 24 era,*      On April 24, Which according to the calendar  
*Viernes marcó el calendario,*      was a Friday  
*En que la vida perdiera*      It was the day that  
*El gran zar del contrabando.*      The greatest Czar of traffickers lost his life.

*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 Nicolopoulos, The Devil’s Swing*

***Cayó el Señor de los Cielos*      **Fall of the Lord of the Skies****

*Cayó el señor de los cielos*      The lord of the skies has fallen  
*los narcos tienen pesar*      The traffickers are sad  
*cayó el cantar del recodo*      Fell/ singer /of the bend? Corner?  
*quien podía imaginar*      who could imagine  
*que criándose entre las aguas*      Growing up in the waters that  
*tan fácil se pudo ahogar*      One could so easily drown

*Era un pez muy perseguido*      He was a very popular fish sought  
*por todo México entero*      through all of Mexico  
*solo cayó en el tras mayo*      and only fell in May after  
*las leyes se sorprendieron*      The laws were surprised  
*fue la noticia de impacto*      it was impactful news  
*que no lo reconocieron*      That they did not recognize him

*Se nos fue Amado Carrillo*      Amado Carrillo is gone from us  
*jefe del cartel de Juárez*      head of the Juarez cartel  
*las leyes quedan confusas*      the laws are confusing  
*por casos muy similares*      in similar cases  
*no lo aprendió la justicia*      He did not learn justice  
*lo confirmo en mis cantares*      I confirm that in my songs

*La DEA decía que sí*      The DEA said it was him  
*lo PGR que no*      the PGR said no  
*difícil de identificar*      it was difficult to identify him  
*la cirugía se aplico*      because he had surgery  
*su madre así lo reclama*      his mother claimed him  
*para llevarlo al panteón*      to take him to the family plot

*Su gente desconcertada*      Your people are disoriented  
*muy tristes sus familiares*      Your family very sad  
*se ven volar avionetas*      they see planes flying  
*por los bosques y los mares*      by forests and seas  
*esperen ordenes nuevas*      they wait for new orders  
*activen sus celulares*      activate their phones

*También el Chapo Guzmán*      Also Chapo Guzman  
*El Güero Palma y Zambada*      El Guero Palma (Héctor Luis Palma Salazar)  
*Sinaloa está muy triste*      and Zambada (Ismael Zambada García)  
*de gente que lo estimaba*      Sinaloa is very sad  
*querían estar con el jefe*      people who revered him  
*hasta en su última morada*      wanted to be with their chief  
even in death

*Murió el señor de los cielos* You are dead, lord of the skies  
*pero dejo su talento* but left your talent  
*ya se disputan poderes* and they struggle for power  
*pa entregar los cargamentos* to deliver shipments  
*se oyen rugir las turbinas* they hear roaring turbines  
*y alas que rompen los vientos* and wings in the air

*me voy pal boamuchelito* I am going to Guamuchilito  
*me llama mi madre tierra* My mother earth calls to me  
*adiós penal de Almoloya* Almoloya prison goodbye  
*de mi no tendrás mas quejas* From me no more complaints  
*te quedaste con las ganas* you remain with the desire  
*de tenerme entre tus rejas* to have me behind your bars  
 -El As de la Sierra,  
 translation author with John Rector

***El Señor de los Cielos*    **The Lord of the Skies****

*de Chihuahua a Sinaloa*    From Chihuahua to Sinaloa  
*se dice que por montañas y cerros*    it is said that mountains and hills  
*también que por la llanura*    also that for the plains  
*se oye que mira hasta el viento*    they look to hear the wind  
*pues no volverán a ver*    but they will not again see  
*a ese señor de los cielos.*    this lord of the heavens.

*el cartel de ciudad Juárez*    the Ciudad Juarez cartel  
*ahora sin su jefe se a quedado*    now without your boss  
*dicen que se fue a las nubes*    they say he was among clouds  
*y en una está sentado*    and is sitting  
*burlándose de la ley*    mocking the law  
*pues los dientes le pelaron.*    they stripped his teeth.

*el era amado carrillo*    he was Amado Carrillo  
*el grande de Sinaloa*    the big man of Sinaloa  
*que con su enorme poder*    who with his enormous ability  
*compro el infierno y la gloria*    bought hell and salvation  
*porque siempre fue el mejor*    for he was always the best  
*asi lo cuenta la historia.*    so the story goes.

*y del Perú hasta Colombia*    and from Peru to Colombia  
*lo saben de México a nueva york*    known from Mexico to New York  
*de Chicago a california*    from Chicago to California  
*de Venezuela a ecuador*    from Venezuela to Ecuador  
*los dientes de este mercado*    clients in this market  
*de la mas fina surtió*    he stocked the finest

*nativo de Culiacán Sinaloa*    native of Culiacan Sinaloa  
*y dueño del mundo entero*    and owner of the world  
*pues los grandes ante el rey*    for the great to the king  
*se quitaron el sombrero*    took off their hats  
*hoy tranquilos dormirán*    Those who feared you  
*los que les tuvieron miedo*    Sleep well today

*los de arriba están de fiesta*    In heaven there is a party  
*porque Carrillo a llegado*    because Carrillo has arrived  
*porque ese cartel de Juárez*    because the Juarez cartel  
*hasta el cielo*    to heaven  
*lo ha llevado*    has lifted him  
*y en la tierra se pelean*    and on earth they scramble  
*por el hueso que ha dejado.*    for the bone that you have left

-Los Huracanes del Norte  
 translation author with John Rector

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