Smuggling, Betrayal, and the Handle of a Gun: Death, Laughter, and the Narcocorrido

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Abstract: A comparison of two narcocorridos, Los Tigres del Norte’s “Contrabando y traición” (1974) and Alfredo Ríos’s “El Katch” (2009), highlights both continuity and change in core features of the genre. Whereas Los Tigres del Norte demonstrate a greater degree of restraint, a change of perspective enables Ríos to enthusiastically celebrate the illicit lifestyle of the narcotrafficker. The lighthearted musical setting of “El Katch” emphasizes personal autonomy by degrading the sense of the power of death, but a preoccupation with mortality remains, following Ríos beyond the song’s boundaries into his off-stage reality.

In his essay on the Mexican holiday Día de los muertos (day of the dead) Octavio Paz extols the revelatory power of death, saying, “death is a mirror which reflects the vain gesticulations of the living….Tell me how you die and I will tell you who you are” (54). He sees the trope of death as a powerful symbol in Mexican art and literature, cutting across socioeconomic boundaries, but with special resonance for the poor. According to Paz, death is the central event of life that reveals who a person truly is: it unveils the mask held in place by animation and discloses the stark, desolate truth of existence. An uncritical reception of this characterization runs the risk of essentializing a diverse nation’s rich and varied culture, yet Paz’s essay provides a useful entrée into an exploration of important themes in certain works of Mexican art.

In the modern world few musical genres consider the issue of mortality as fully or obsessively as the narcocorrido, a song-type of Mexican origin with references, either tacit or explicit, to drugs or drug smuggling. Here the threshold between death and life is often breached. The taking of life and the protection of one’s own may be treated as supreme acts of autonomy,
as cries of individualism, but, in Paz’s construction, even this is a “vain gesticulation” against an inevitable end. Praise of the persona of the narcotrafficker may be understood as a grito (shout) not only against mortality, but against the living death many experience as they struggle under one or more systems created, either consciously or unconsciously, for oppression (Edberg, “Drug Traffickers” 261).¹

In the nearly four decades since the advent of the narcocorrido in the 1970s, the genre has undergone fundamental change in some respects, yet shown remarkable constancy in others in spite of historical vicissitudes. Two narcocorridos, “Contrabando y traición” (smuggling and betrayal) recorded in 1974 by Los Tigres del Norte and “El Katch” released in 2009 and performed by Alfredo Ríos, are representative examples of the genre at two different stages in its development. A comparison of the music and text of these songs reveals that the theme of death maintains a powerful grip on the narcocorrido, even as their narrative perspective, use of laughter, and consideration of narcotics suggest divergent conceptions of personal autonomy.

Previous studies have made useful but rather broad generalizations of the characteristics of the narcocorrido based on a large sample of musical examples (Ragland; Edberg, Narcotraficante; Wald; Ramírez-Pimienta, Simonett). Several scholars have carried out extensive fieldwork, using the reception of the music’s creators and listeners as a starting point for analysis (Ragland; Edberg, Narcotraficante; Wald; Simonett). Others have traced the development of the narcocorrido over the last century, noting change as well as constancy in its various constituent elements (Herrera-Sobek, Ramírez-Pimienta). Analyses of more recent narcocorridos, composed and consumed since the beginning of the Mexican Drug War in 2006, and attempts to place these in the context of the genre’s historical development, however, are
lacking. There is also a dearth of close readings of individual songs and interdisciplinary approaches to interpreting their texts and music.

My study seeks to fill these lacunae by building on the work of other scholars and focusing analysis on two songs from key points in the history of the genre. Concentration on several textual themes facilitates the application of an assortment of ideas from thinkers in a variety of fields, including literary criticism, frame analysis, and anthropology (Paz, Bakhtin, Dostoevsky, Camus, Goffman, Geertz). Analysis of musical differences between the two *narcocorridos* also proves illuminating with regard to the topics explored in the songs. By limiting my discussion to these compositions, I am able to form more concrete conclusions, avoid the danger of making untenable and over-large generalizations, and leave open the possibility for analysis of more repertoire in future studies, potentially providing a more complete picture of the genre and the culture with which it engages.

**Historical outline of the narcocorrido**

The *corrido*, and by extension its subgenre the *narcocorrido*, is consumed and produced largely by individuals of Hispanic descent along the border between the United States and Mexico, though its reach has spread throughout Mexico and to areas with large Latino-immigrant populations in the U.S. (Edberg, *Narcotraficante* 44; see Ragland). The genre is defined as a strophic, narrative ballad with simple chordal accompaniment that usually features four lines per verse (Ragland 206). The *corrido* has been sung in Mexico for five hundred years, and has roots in the Spanish romance (Sánchez 30-31; Edberg, *Narcotraficante* 29). The subjects of *corridos* express a wide range of human emotions, and while many share a number of elements—an opening address by the narrator, the setting of the action, the naming of the protagonist, the body of the story, the protagonist’s farewell, the narrator’s farewell—here the identification of a song
as a *corrido* or *narcocorrido* is largely based on what the people who listen to these songs call them (Sánchez 32). The use of popular sentiment as a determining criterion for categorization accords with the practice of other scholars who seek to understand the contemporary phenomenon (32). Mark Edberg notes a further characteristic of the *narcocorrido*, one especially relevant to the following discussion: its preoccupation with death (*Narcotraficante* 88; “Drug Traffickers” 265-66).

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the subsequent decades of turbulence witnessed a cultural flowering of the *corrido trágico*, or *corridos* about heroes (Edberg, *Narcotraficante* 31). This interest in a “Robin Hood” character-type fostered an ethos of individualism as a means to social mobility (Edberg, *Narcotraficante* 46). The courageous outlaw and smuggling bandit became archetypes memorialized in songs, such as “Gregorio Cortez” (from circa 1901) and “Los Tequileros” (from circa 1937), which Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta believes foreshadow the development of late-twentieth-century *narcocorridos* (Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* 161; Ragland 39-42; Ramírez-Pimienta 23). He speculates that the relatively prosperous economy in the decades following World War II lessened the impetus for the composition of cathartic or politically challenging lyrics that the circumstances of the Revolutionary period had created. The 1950s and 1960s thus witnessed a dearth in the creation of songs about social banditry, and the genre was widely perceived as old-fashioned if not dead (Ramírez-Pimienta 27).

Interest in songs addressing the actions of smugglers was rekindled for a younger generation decades later in 1974 with the release of “Contrabando y traición” (Wald 20). The song elevated the popularity of *musica norteña* (northern music) and spawned the international career of one of the most influential and prolific bands in Latin American music, Los Tigres del
Norte (Wald 20). Musica norteña draws its inspiration from the rural Mexican countryside and Central European dances introduced by Czech and German settlers on both sides of the border (for example, the polca, mazurca, and vals); its instrumentation includes the accordion and bajo sexto, a large, 12-string guitar (Ragland 206, 209). In their 1974 recording of “Contrabando y traición” Los Tigres del Norte feature these instruments along with a drum set and an electric bass, the common modern ensemble (Valenzuela 28). Although the group has recorded in a variety of norteña genres and has won numerous awards in their forty-five year career, this song continues to be one of their most popular hits (“Los Tigres del Norte to be Honored”).

Los Tigres del Norte remain an influential group, but in the 1980s and 90s the genre that they helped advance began to be appropriated by narcocorridistas (composers of narcocorridos) with very different backgrounds, such as Chalino Sánchez. What differentiated Sánchez from earlier performers was the sense that he genuinely appeared to have roots in the drug smuggling underworld; he not only sang about the lifestyle, he lived it (Wald 71). Tales confirming his authenticity abound, including a story of a performance in which he was shot in the side by an audience member, and—rather than relying on security or friends to protect him—he duly pulled out his own gun, which he had carried onstage, and returned fire (Wald 74). His murder at the hands of assassins disguised as police in 1992 cemented his legendary status and confirmed in the minds of many listeners the inseparability of narcocorrido-art from reality (Wald 81).

Ramírez-Pimienta notes the greater reference to drug use and drug paraphernalia in songs composed during the 1980s and 1990s; not only did the singers discuss the violent lifestyle of narcotics smuggling as if intimately knowledgeable of it, they also began to present themselves as consumers (29, 31). María Herrera-Sobek shows that the narcocorridistas of the 1970s, far from accepting the use of drugs as morally acceptable, denied their value, even as they praised
individuals who bravely trafficked them to the foolish Anglo-Americans across the border (54). Increasingly, partaking in consumption became an important element that demonstrated economic power. Drug smugglers and the narcocorridistas who sang about them were not simply lackeys of Anglo-American leisure. They could afford to indulge themselves.

In 1971 Richard Nixon began the so-called war on drugs; between this declaration and the mid-2000s the Mexican government, although officially engaged in an ongoing struggle against smuggling cartels, approached the issue with less vigor than it would in the early months of the presidency of Felipe Calderón in 2006 (Simon 262; Raat and Brescia 233). One effect of the government’s heightened attention to drug trafficking seems to be the news media’s greater interest in laudatory narcocorridos (see also “commissioned corridos” in Simonett, Banda 229-48 and “Los gallos”). These pieces are sometimes commissioned by drug lords for their own glorification and praise the exploits of the narcotrafficker and his gang, but because of the danger of naming specific recipients of laudatory narcocorridos, songwriters will often identify them only with codenames or aliases (McGirk 70; Wald 291; Simonett, “Los gallos”). Los Tigres del Norte, for example, have performed works of this type, including 1997’s “Jefe de jefes,” and have refused to divulge the identity of the individual being praised (Palencio). This is ostensibly due to fear of reprisal from the recipients’ enemies or even the recipients themselves, who may have preferred anonymity (Palencio). Edberg adds another possibility for withholding the name of the subject: the fear that, because of the connection between the genre and death, naming the living in the context of a narcocorrido tempts fate and may lead to tragedy (“Drug Traffickers” 266). Although neither “Contrabando y traición” nor “El Katch” appear to be examples of this subgenre, the laudatory narcocorrido is an important musical backdrop to Ríos’s song.
Three years after Calderón’s escalation of the Drug War, and three and a half decades after the release of “Contrabando y traición,” Ríos recorded “El Katch.” TIME Magazine’s profile of the narcocorrido designates the singer, alias El Komander, as one of the most popular narcocorridistas today (McGirk 63). Other songs by Ríos such as “Mafia Nueva” (new mafia) and “El corrido del invalido” (the corrido of the invalid) also boast high popularity, judging by the millions of hits they have received on sites like YouTube, and most elements (textual focus, musical style, and visual production for videos) remain largely consistent in the singer’s most well-received corridos (Ríos, “El Komander – Mafia Nueva”). Though his use of the narcocorrido genre ties him to Los Tigres del Norte, the instrumentation he adopts also borrows from banda, a Mexican brass ensemble with prevalence in the states of Sinaloa, Guerrero, and Oaxaca (Ragland 205; Simonett, Banda, 99-129). Evoking norteña practices, the song includes an accordion and often features singing in parallel thirds with another voice (Valenzuela 28).

Although outside the scope of this article, it is worth noting that many of the textual and music elements in “El Katch,” including the change in perspective and light-hearted treatment of serious issues, have precedents in the post-Chalino period in the music of, for example, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, Grupo Exterminador, and Los Dorados (Ragland 161; Edberg, Narcotraficante, 56-57). The conditions that made the rise of these features possible, such as poverty and lack of access to means of social advancement, existed then as now, but they are especially apparent when considered against the backdrop of the tragic violence plaguing Mexico in recent years (see Simonett “Los gallos valientes”; Edberg, Narcotraficante; Astorga). Although “El Katch” and “Contrabando y traición” differ in terms of instrumentation, their genre, subject matter, popularity, categorization as regional Mexican music, and preoccupation with the subject of death warrant a comparison.
Perspective

The differing narrative perspectives of the speakers in each of the *narcocorridos* fundamentally contribute to the divergence of their respective messages. Los Tigres del Norte, against the supposed norm of the genre, do not place themselves in the song as storytellers. In the “classic” *corrido* the singer often introduces himself or herself in the song’s opening lines or bids farewell at the end (Edberg 48).³ For instance, the *corrido* “Gregorio Cortez” consists of twenty-eight strophes of poetry, and it is in the final one that the narrator (who, it should be noted, is *not* the title character) enters the song, saying, “Now with this I say farewell in the shade of a cypress / this is the end of the ballad of Don Gregorio Cortez” (Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero* 64-66; Paredes, “*With a Pistol in His Hand*” 151-174). Thus, typically, the singer, in spite of having related most of the event entirely in the third-person, projects himself or herself into the story. Although this signaling of first-person perspective often takes place on the periphery of the song as a framing device, the use of this point of view draws attention to the existence of the speaker, even implying the speaker’s presence at the events in question, making him or her part of the story whether or not he or she is the main subject.

“Contrabando y traición” removes this traditional hint of the first-person narrator (the text and translation are given in Example 1). This *narcocorrido* describes a cross-border drug-smuggling operation carried out by Emilio Varela and his ostensible love-interest, Camelia. After hiding marijuana in the tires of their car, the duo successfully crosses the border, fools immigration officials, and exchanges contraband for cash. Emilio then tells Camelia that he loves someone else and offers to split their earnings. In response to this “betrayal” Camelia fires her pistol seven times, killing Emilio and escaping with the money.
The elimination of the traditional first-person perspective serves to reduce and redact the tale to its essential parts, but it may also have been an attempt by Los Tigres del Norte to avoid an intimation of nearness to the situation and association with the illegality of the protagonists’ actions. Further identification on the part of the band with the smugglers might have limited their sales or marginalized their appeal at a very early point in their career. National and state politicians, local authorities, and radio station executives have worked to ban narcocorridos (albeit with mixed success in terms of curbing their popularity), and fears of such restrictions on media exposure may have led the members of the group to distance themselves from the story’s protagonists (Summers and Bailey; Wald 86).4

In sharp contrast to Los Tigres del Norte’s avoidance of the first-person, Ríos actively inserts himself into his narcocorrido (see Example 2; note especially verses 3-6).5 Because of the vagaries of slang and coded language, it is initially difficult to conclude whether—beyond being a metonym for the word “gun”—“El Katch” refers to Ríos, another unnamed individual, or an imaginary, idealized personality. Regardless of whether “El Katch” is an actual or fictitious person, the strophes following a spoken interlude abruptly change the initial third-person perspective to a first-person one, and Ríos unambiguously inserts his ego within the narrative. Each of the following stanzas focus on Ríos’s command over his people, his fighting ability, and the pleasures he experiences, and it becomes clear that he is, in effect, writing a laudatory narcocorrido to himself.

The practice of some drug lords to pay musicians to compose and perform laudatory corridos is common, yet “El Katch,”—one of Ríos’s most popular songs—does not appear to fall into such a category (McGirk 70). Ríos is not simply acting as a kind of minstrel, praising the deeds of another greater than himself; he is both bard and lord, giver and receiver of
commendation. Perhaps the song’s egocentricity is a reason for its popularity. Ríos does not present himself as a paid lackey for the “truly” powerful, but, like Chalino Sánchez, he is a mighty individual himself, an important actor within an outlawed and dangerous milieu. As such his song emphasizes his independent agency, which is not bestowed by others, but both earned and expressed by himself.

The portrayal of drugs is another characteristic difference in both the earlier and later manifestations of the narcocorrido. Although “Contrabando y traición” fastidiously avoids any sense that it is promoting drugs or drug smuggling, “El Katch” reflects an altered morality by celebrating narcotics as vehicles for self-enrichment (Edberg, Narcotraficante 81). Whereas the earlier song treats narcotics as amoral or immoral existential facts—indeed, the ending of “Contrabando y traición” could be read as a warning not to engage in smuggling or the fate of Emilio could be one’s own⁶—the more recent narcocorrido portrays drug trafficking as overwhelmingly beneficial to the individual who is clever enough to handle the contraband effectively. Drugs gain the title character wealth (“cachas de oro,” “Armani, Dolce y Gabana”), sexual attention (“mujeres”), and popularity (“su gente”). They are positive means to self-actualization rather than amoral necessities or immoral catalysts of doom.

Whereas Los Tigres del Norte foreground the issue of drug trafficking, presenting it as the topic of the song in the first strophe, Ríos moves the issue to the background, never mentioning any illegal drugs by name and only synecdochically alluding to alcohol by referring to a brand of whiskey (“Buchanans”) and containers of beverages (“botellas”). The song euphemistically refers to smuggling as “a business,” but it does not speak of narcotics elsewhere, either explicitly or in code (by contrast marijuana—hierba mala—appears immediately in verse 1 of “Contrabando y traición”). Ironically, by backgrounding illicit narcotics, Ríos dramatically
emphasizes their importance, inextricably weaving them into the fabric of his world. They
entwine and permeate every aspect of his life; they are the source of his wealth, and, as a result,
his charm, power, and self-confidence; they are the most crucial aspect of his identity in spite of
never being named. Perhaps their absence is a symptom of the prohibition of narcocorridos by
many radio stations in Mexico, but regardless of any practical motivation for the composition of
the text, the effect is the complete absorption of the listener into the world of the narcotrafficker.
The very ubiquity of drugs causes their disappearance.

Laughter

In the Kantian sense autonomy is understood as the characteristic of the will that causes it
to be a law unto itself (Guyer 70). Self-rule and death, seemingly unrelated elements, are brought
together in Ríos’s narcocorrido, which creates a space free from the constraints of law, society,
and civility. Although this independence may solely inhabit the imagination of the listener or
performer, this need not merely be an escapist fantasy. Luis Astorga views narcocorridos as a
kind of alternative discourse, in opposition to the worldview articulated by the state and the
powerful interests it supports (245; Edberg, Narcotraficante 104). John O’Connell notes the firm
place this kind of interpretive reading of “deviant” music as a subaltern response to political,
economic, and social hegemony, has held in the ethnomusicological literature (10). Bruce
Johnson and Martin Cloonan trace musical pieces that praise the criminal from the crime ballad
of eighteenth-century England through nineteenth-century songs about American outlaws (66).
They postulate that the popularity of such works may correlate to social conditions against which
lower classes may metaphorically enact violence against the upper-class and the state, the
perpetuators of their economic exploitation (66).
Considered in this light, the *narcocorrido* may thus be seen as providing a means to protest marginalization by supporting an individual (or in the case of El Komander by musically *being* an individual) at odds with the system in power (Johnson and Cloonan 66; Hobsbawm 53-64). By celebrating the outlaw, subaltern peoples may cast into doubt the very idea of their social domination (Scott 315). Thus, for scholars in this critical tradition, the glorification of self within an illicit lifestyle may be seen as a demonstration of autonomy from economic and political impoverishment that is perpetuated by the often tacit acceptance of the supposed “natural state” of things—what Slavoj Žižek calls “symbolic” violence (9-11). Yet here, again, the specter of death erects a check on freedom, for death is the penalty for transgression inflicted by both official and illicit bodies of power.

In his novel, *The Devils*, Fyodor Dostoevsky explicitly links death and freedom. The character, Kirilov, has determined to kill himself in an effort to overcome, or demonstrate his having overcome, the fear of death. For him, freedom from mortal distress alone is true autonomy, even to the point of godlike self-sovereignty (Dostoevsky 126). Unlike Dostoevsky’s character, the narcotrafficking persona of the *narcocorrido* does not commit suicide to prove his independence from existential anxiety; he can demonstrate his autonomy via other means, namely, through laughter. Mikhail Bakhtin observes that “laughter…overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations” (90). Laughter is thus indissolubly linked to autonomy because it enables the overthrow of regulations imposed by social structures, such as laws, but it is also a means of triumphing over even “divine” power, over “death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself” (Bakhtin 91). By treating death and law with frivolous disdain the *narcocorridista* may evince his transcendence over both, using the *narcocorrido* as an avenue for the expression of an autonomous will.
By glorifying himself in the context of a narcocorrido Ríos fully assumes the responsibility of participating in an illicit lifestyle. The identification with such a profession must be met with an awareness of its danger, as death quite literally lurks behind every corner. Ríos’s attitude is not one of stolid defiance, however, but frivolity and laughter. He begins the song “celebrating” (verse 1) and—although themes of arrest (verse 3), violence (verses 1, 4 and 5), and mistrust (verse 4) abound—a sense of festivity dominates (refer to Example 2). Rationally speaking, there is very little reason for Ríos to smile or sing. His life is under constant threat, his heavily armed “friends” could turn on him at any moment, and his occupation (or at least the occupation he is praising) is at odds with his own country’s government and the government of ostensibly the world’s most powerful nation. The guns he celebrates, while conceivably symbols of revolution, merely preserve his life; they do not liberate it. Anxiety should haunt his thoughts, yet his response to these potential checks on his liberty is not to lash out angrily. Instead, “he…jokes about it,” a reflex that, for Paz, is a uniquely Mexican response to the prospect of death (57). It is in this flippancy that Ríos declares himself free from not only the power of others, but from their perspective on reality.

In comparison to the serious tone of Los Tigres del Norte, Ríos’s mocking disregard for mortality is striking. Where carefree aloofness conceivably could have come from the group’s physical distance (they are narrating an event in the third-person) Ríos’s attitude must come from an emotional distancing. He uses laughter, in Bakhtin’s words, to “triumph over the fear inspired by the mystery of the world” (92). Such an attitude is, perhaps, one of the principal attractions for consumers of his music, many of whom find themselves trapped in an oppressive economic situation from which freedom is a distant possibility. Ríos, in the guise of El Komander’s
persona, provides an example of someone who is able to laugh at death—and, by extension, every other source of fear and oppression—degrading its power (Bakhtin 92).

It is worth noting that authors such as Edberg, Helena Simonett, and Elijah Wald have discussed the tendency to compare narcocorridos with gangsta rap (Wald 109; Simonett, “Los gallos valientes” 8; Edberg, Narcotraficante 68, 76, 99). Although this is a valid connection in some respects—the treatment of violence, consideration of harsh “reality,” valorization of murdered performers as martyred heroes, and focus on drug use and trafficking—in others—such as the tendency to laugh about personally tragic or dangerous situations—the genres appear quite different, resonating with Paz’s characterization of the Mexican attitude toward death. Simonett also contrasts the “archaic,” “old-fashioned” sounds of the narcocorrido with the more modern sound of urban hip-hop (“Los gallos valientes”).

In his discussion of “thick description,” Clifford Geertz notes that specific gestures like winks may have different meanings depending on context (6). Drawing on this hermeneutic guideline, in conjunction with a reading of the text, it is possible to make several observations concerning the affect of each narcocorrido’s music. Mixed with an effervescently dance-like triple meter, Rios’s vocal timbre, as captured in the 2009 recording by Twiins, evokes a sense of devil-may-care levity and, at times, outright laughter. The supreme self-confidence of El Komander is reflected in the light, easy, relaxed projection of his singing voice. There is no force exerted upon his vocal cords. The tessitura is comfortable, spending relatively little time in the so-called bottleneck area of the male voice—the span between the D and G above middle C—where audible vocal tension may quickly build (Titze 263, 275). Just one phrase in the first verse (see Example 3, measures 8-9) and three relatively brief phrases in the second through sixth verses (measure 12-13, 16-17, and 20-21) contain notes that fall only in this region; furthermore,
the potentially difficult phrases of the second through sixth verses fall between rests, giving the voice a chance for relief and releasing any acquired tension. Other passages traverse the bottleneck only briefly and quickly descend to more comfortable ranges or end with rests.

If one were unfamiliar with the language, one might assume the performer is celebrating a laconic coastal lifestyle, rather than the struggle of living outside the margins of law-abiding society. Although the text both celebrates decadent pleasure and acknowledges potential causes of existential fear, only the former is reflected in the singer’s timbre. Harsh conditions, the daily reality of many of Ríos’s listeners, are not portrayed vocally.

El Komander’s nonchalance may be contrasted with the exertion of the voice in the 1974 recording of “Contrabando y traición,” re-released in 2006 by Fonovisa. Although the ranges of the pieces are similar, the tessitura plays a large role in affecting the difference in vocal timbre. Each stanza begins with the lowest notes of the entire song, descending to the E below middle C (see Example 4, measure 1). Then, at the beginning of the second phrase, the voice leaps up a major sixth to a full octave above the lowest note (measure 2). Throughout much of the remainder of the piece the voice must navigate the bottleneck region, as the tessitura falls mostly between the D and F above middle C. The difficulty is reflected in the constricted vocal quality of the singer, Jorge Hernandez. He begins each strophe relatively relaxed, but then in the second phrase his larynx suddenly strains and tightens to reach the upper notes. In contrast to “El Katch,” which only spends extended periods of time in the bottleneck in four isolated phrases, “Contrabando y traición” has but one phrase (the first) that does not spend the majority, or near majority, of its time in that small, but affective, region. The singer of “Contrabando y traición” finds repose only at the end of each arch-shaped strophe (measures 13 and 28-29), when the melody expires with a three-note falling gesture.
This descending motive evokes a sense of closure that is repeated at the end of each verse and chorus. At these points, in combination with the text of the song, the vocal line may be heard as a pre-reflection of the content of the story. Edberg notes that the narcocorrido is a song-type “marked” with death, and as the end of the narrative concludes with fatal closure—Camelia kills the philandering Emilio—so each stanza ends with a falling motion toward rest, signifying not only death, but, through constant repetition, its oppressive inevitability (Narcotraficante 265). The musical cliché—the falling three-note cadential gesture is found in many songs in norteña style—reflects the genre’s cliché. With the musical foreshadowing of death in each stanza, Los Tigres del Norte’s choice is not to laugh, but to Aurally depict life’s struggles and their eventual end achieved only in surrender to oblivion.

Although “El Katch” also makes use of this characteristic descending gesture in the final cadence of the first stanza (see Example 3, measure 11), neither the text of the song nor Ríos’s relaxed singing style lend it the affect of tension and release, even as it maintains the historical continuity of the genre. In El Komander’s voice the gesture becomes an expression of laconic confidence rather than emotional resignation. Further evoking a sense of relaxation, melodic leaps larger than a fifth in “El Katch” usually occur downward. This contrasts with the leap upward of a sixth in “Contrabando y traición,” which is accompanied by vocal tightening. Even where rising sevenths do occur as a result of octave displacement in measures 14 and 18, the comfortable tessitura allows Ríos to maintain a relaxed vocal tract.

The contrast in instrumentation, although due in part to differences in musical tradition, likewise highlights the divergent affects of the two songs. Los Tigres del Norte’s instrumental accompaniment is generally simpler, with the guitar’s chords and drums’ hi-hat usually falling precisely on the off-beat and the accordion offering skillful, but tame, solos only after cadential
points. “El Katch,” on the other hand, features a vivacious brass band, whose bright timbre evokes the brash confidence expressed in the lyrics. The collective, polyphonic improvisation and rapid, scalar passage-work at times seems to risk devolving into chaos, but serves to project a festive, unrestricted atmosphere.

**Broken frame**

Initially, El Komander’s song may seem more amenable to laughter simply because its approach to death is less overt than Los Tigres del Norte’s. The third-person perspective of “Contrabando y traición” allows mortality to take a much larger role in the action, since each participant is a potential casualty. The ominous threat of death lurks behind each couplet until it is realized in the final stanza with the murder of the smuggling philanderer and the escape of the spurned lover. In “El Katch” death never manifests itself outright, but, as with drugs, its backgrounded presence permeates and motivates nearly every line of text. The phrase “shots to the wind,” evokes the ever looming possibility of violence, as does “fighting with a squad and a seven.” Threats of arrest appear in the third stanza, and a call for constant alertness due to the imminence of attack haunts the penultimate stanza. The singer claims that he does not like violence (as in verse 5, line 2)—indeed, if the nickname of the title character, “Katch,” refers to the safety mechanism on a firearm, rather than the gun’s handle, such would suggest Ríos only resorts to force when necessary. Yet awareness of existential destruction guides his thoughts and determines his actions.

The fact that “El Katch” is presented in the first-person does not preclude the presence of death; on the contrary, the persona of the *narcocorridista* is now infused with mortal foreboding, just as the persona of the narcotrafficker had been since the songs of the 1970s. The relationship of the fictional Emilio and Camelia was fated to end tragically, but after the death of Chalino
Sánchez, and increasingly since the escalation of the Mexican Drug War, singers are no longer limited to simply reporting “bad news”: they often must face the unfortunate possibility of becoming it. Indeed, the growing list of narcocorridistas dead at the hands of assassins—at least twelve since 2006—evinces the very real danger performers face (McGirk 65). In “Contrabando y traición,” the story told is presented fictitiously. In the twenty-first-century iteration of the genre, however, “reality” has displaced plausibility, and, as a result, life imitates art. In placing himself within the genre of the narcocorrido, Ríos no longer separates truth from fiction; instead, he associates his own identity with death.

In his classic discussion of frame analysis, Erving Goffman argues, “all the world is not a stage”; rather, human interaction is made up of different situations, each with distinct “principles of organization which govern events” (1, 11). There are expectations of action for an individual as a performer that are not present in other contexts, and vice versa. When Ríos removes his performance regalia, however, he is unable to remove himself from the world of the narcocorrido; the boundaries between truth and fiction are blurred and negated, and the stage becomes all the world. In an interview with TIME Magazine, Ríos remarked that the death of a fellow Sinaloan musician greatly troubled him, and he insisted that he was not involved in drug smuggling, his performance mystique notwithstanding (McGirk 70). Ríos’s narcotrafficking persona, necessary for his artistic credibility, has followed him beyond the concert venue and recording studio and is a source of angst in his offstage life.

This fear is justified because although at the end of “El Katch” El Komander remains alive, ostensibly laughing at the failed assassination attempts of his enemies, the narcocorrido is a genre whose denouement almost inevitably involves tragedy (Edberg, Narcotraficante 88). Indeed, recalling the words, “tell me how you die and I will tell you who you are,” for Ríos to
fully dress himself in the narcotrafficking persona, according to the ideas set forth in *Dia de los muertos*, he must die (54). Rather than accepting Paz’s criterion of death as somehow necessary to reveal the true character of an individual, however, perhaps a more fulfilling, though ever-elusive, ending would involve the death of a system indifferent to the needs of society’s poorest and structurally engineered to perpetuate inequality; the emergence of a reality free from the tyranny of fear; and a clear vision for a México governed by accountable leaders who categorically reject violence of all kinds—systemic, structural, political, and economic—and who are able to cooperate with a northern partner more committed to the safety and prosperity of its neighbors than to a forty-year-old foreign policy. Instead, the corrido’s narrative remains unfinished. The song is over, but the story continues offstage.

**Conclusion**

A consideration of the themes of death, drugs, laughter, and autonomy in “Contrabando y traición” and “El Katch” reveals both change and continuity in the philosophical perspective of the narcocorrido over a three and a half decade span. First-versus third-person point of view, moral ambiguity versus certitude, fearlessness versus justifiable fear: each of these contradictions and more are contained within the genre. Understandably, in light of the ongoing Drug War in Mexico that has tragically claimed more than 50,000 lives, the genre has become especially controversial as of late. Critics rightly attack the narcocorrido’s frivolous attitude toward violence as well as its prominent misogyny and materialism (Campbell 2, 12). These negative attributes seem to support Susan Fast and Kip Pegley’s assertion that music can often perpetuate Žižek’s category of “systemic” violence (27). Yet Fast and Pegley also acknowledge music’s ability to challenge violence directly, and there is no proof of a causal link between violence described or suggested in lyrics and actual violent acts. Critics risk missing the socially
significant and morally valid messages of these songs if they dismiss them out of hand (Johnson and Cloonan 40, 65, 82).

Scholars such as Samuel Araújo challenge the idealization of “nonviolent” social forms as somehow representing a state of positive order, as these may be as problematic as the “violent” ones they replace (218). Araújo acknowledges the possibility of reading salutary meanings in certain expressions of violence, and although the narcocorrido may often seem to cheapen life, it also places value on the autonomy of the individual—in particular the type of individual who does not seem to benefit from the economic system maintained by society’s elite (219). Furthermore, it can provide oppressed listeners an avenue to experience a sense of existential freedom from the fear of death. It may also inspire them to act to achieve economic and political independence, in opposition to those who have little concern for the quality of the lives of the poor, as long as there is no disruption of the status quo.

Unfortunately, as Howard Campbell notes, many of the actions taken of late that appear related to the culture associated with the narcocorrido have been violent ones, which “may be even more damaging to the poor than [the] unjust praxis of the state,” benefiting criminal elites over the least fortunate (3). Nevertheless, the genre remains robust with both artistic and political potential. Musicians have sown creative seed in the fertile ground that is the corrido for centuries, a song-type whose rich soil will certainly continue to bear fruit in the centuries to come.
Example 1. Lyrics and Translation of “Contrabando y traición.”
“Contrabando y traición” by Angel Gonzalez
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse 1</th>
<th>(Translation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salieron de San Isidro,</td>
<td>They left San Isidro,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>procedentes de Tijuana.</td>
<td>proceeding from Tijuana.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traían las llantas del carro</td>
<td>They brought car tires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repletas de hierba mala.</td>
<td>full of weed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eran Emilio Varela</td>
<td>They were Emilio Varela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y Camelia La Tejana.</td>
<td>and Camelia the Texan.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pasaron por San Clemente.</td>
<td>They passed through San Clemente.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los paró la emigración.</td>
<td>They were stopped by immigration officials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les pidió sus documentos.</td>
<td>He asked them for their documents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les dijo “De donde son?”</td>
<td>He said, “Where are you from?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella era de San Antonio</td>
<td>She was from San Antonio,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>una hembra de corazón.</td>
<td>a woman with heart.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chorus 1:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Una hembra si quiere a un hombre</td>
<td>A woman if she loves a man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>por él puede dar la vida,</td>
<td>for him she can give her life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pero hay que tener cuidado</td>
<td>But care must be taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>si esa hembra siente herida.</td>
<td>if that woman feels injured.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La traición y el contrabando</td>
<td>Betrayal and smuggling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>son cosas incompartidas.</td>
<td>are incompatible things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Verse 3**

| A Los Ángeles llegaron. | They arrived in Los Angeles. |
| En un callejón oscuro | In a dark alley |
| las cuatro llantas cambiaron. | they changed the four tires. |
| Ahí entregaron la hierba. | There they delivered the grass. |
| Ahí también les pagaron. | There they also were paid. |

**Verse 4**

| Emilio dice a Camelia: | Emilio says to Camelia: |
| Con la parte que te toca | With the share that belongs to you |
| tu puedes rehacer tu vida. | you can rebuild your life. |
| Yo me voy pa’ San Francisco | I am going to San Francisco |
| con la dueña de mi vida.” | with the love of my life.” |

**Chorus 2:**

| Sonaron siete balazos. | Seven shots sounded. |
| Camelia a Emilio mataba. | Camelia killed Emilio. |
| La policia solo halló | The police only found |
| una pistola tirada. | a thrown pistol. |
| Del dinero y de Camelia | Of Camelia and the money |
| nunca más se supo nada. | nothing was ever known. |
Example 2. Lyrics and Translation of verses 1-6 of “El Katch.”

“El Katch” by Jose Alfredo Ríos Meza
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse 1</th>
<th>(Translation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrando con tiros al viento,</td>
<td>Celebrating with shots to the wind,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>después de un negocio la banda jalando,</td>
<td>after doing business the band is having it all,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corridos, canciones, mujeres, botellas,</td>
<td>corridos, songs, women, bottles,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>su gente al pendiente todo asegurando,</td>
<td>his people to ensure all is outstanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>se faja una escuadra y un siete en las cachas de oro diamantado.</td>
<td>fighting with a squad\textsuperscript{11} and a seven\textsuperscript{12}, the catches\textsuperscript{13} of diamond encrusted gold.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Verse 2 | |
|---------||
| Armani, Dolce y Gabana, | Armani, Dolce y Gabana, |
| Land Rover para pasar, | Land Rover to drive, |
| con dólares en la bolsa, | with dollars in the wallet, |
| Buchanans para tomar. | Buchanans to drink. |
| La plebita está que tienta pa’ el party comenzar. | The girls are what tempt the party to start. |

| Verse 3 | |
|---------||
| Muchos le dicen “El Katch,” | Many call him “The Catch,” |
| “El Seven” para su equipo, | his team “The Seven” |
| y la gente qué lo apresia | and people who arrest him |
| también le dicen Panchito. | also call him Panchito. |
| No la anda haciendo de pancho | They don’t go for making him “pancho”\textsuperscript{14} |
Aunque su nombre es Francisco.

[Spoken by Ríos]

Y un saludo a toda mi raza de Mazatlán,
y tiro arriba a mi compa.

[Spoken by disembodied voice]

El Komander.

Verse 4

Se miran las caravanas paseando allí en Mazatlán.
Seguro ya llegó; “El Seven” el hotel van a cerrar.
Plebada los quiero al tiro
porqué nunca hay que confiar

Verse 5

Mi gente no se acelera, pero siempre están alerta.
Así se los he enseñado no me gusta la violencia.
Pero si alguien se pone al brinco
aquí conmigo se sienta.

Verse 6

Las playas me dan sus olas, las mujeres un relax,
pero no soy exclusivo; a todas las quiero igual.

Even if his name is Francisco.\(^{15}\)

[Spoken by Ríos]

And a hello to all my people\(^{16}\) from Mazatlan,
and a greeting to my buddies.

[Spoken by disembodied voice]

El Komander.

The caravans are looked at, passing in Mazatlan.
Confident, he has now come; the seven will close the hotel.
People I want you to be alert because there is no one to trust.
My people don’t start problems, but they are always alert.
Thus I have taught them that I do not like violence.
But if someone jumps [me] he will be taught a lesson.\(^{17}\)
The beaches give me their waves, women relax me,
but I am not exclusive; I love them all equally.
| Y el mar de aquí me divierte. | The sea brings me pleasure. |
| Pero que sea en Mazatlán.    | But of course it would in Mazatlan. |
Example 3. Transcription of “El Katch.”
“El Katch” by Jose Alfredo Ríos Meza
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Verse 1

Celebrando con tiros al viendo, después de un negocio la banda jalan-do, corridos, canciones, mujeres, botellas, su gente al pendiente todo asegurando, se faja una escuadra y un siete en las cachas de oro diamantado.

Verse 2

Armani, Dolce y Gabana, Land Rover para pasar, con dólares en la bolsa, Buchanans para tomar. La plebita está que tenta pa’ el party comenzar.
Example 4. Transcription of “Contrabando y traición.”
“Contrabando y traición” by Angel Gonzalez
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Verse 1
Salieron de San Isidro, procedentes de Tijuana. Traían las llantas del carro repletas de hierba mala. Eran Emilio Valera y Camelia la Tejana.

Chorus 1
Una hembra si quiere a un hombre por él puede dar la vida, pero hay que tener cuidado si esa hembra siente ira. La traición y el contrabando son cosas incomparadas.
Endnotes

* An early version of this essay was presented at a joint meeting of the Southwest Chapter of the American Musicological Society and Southern Plains Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology at the University of Texas on April 17, 2011. I would like to thank Steven Friedson, Clare Carrasco, and Cathy Ragland for reading drafts of this article and providing timely feedback. Many thanks also to Gary Burns and the anonymous reviewers of Popular Music and Society for their informed and thoughtful comments. All translations and transcriptions are my own unless otherwise noted.

1 Literally “cry” or “shout,” grito often refers to the call for freedom by Father Hidalgo, an instigator of the Mexican War of Independence, in 1810 (Kirkwood 83). Edberg synthesizes his findings from interviews conducted along the border between the United States and Mexico and remarks that an interpretation characterizing the narcotrafficking persona as a symbol of resistance is but one of several potential understandings of the figure (“Drug Traffickers” 261). I draw and expand upon this interpretation, recognizing its limitations even as it usefully focuses my study of the narcocorrido on specific features of the genre.

2 Depending on the perspective of the scholar, the corrido’s transmission from a folk genre into popular song disseminated via mass communication has been seen as either the corrido’s renaissance or point of marketization and corruption (Tinajero and Del Rosario 15).

3 See also Ragland’s discussion of the development of the “classic” corrido into the “canción-corrido,” as well as her detailed analysis of “Contrabando y traición” (8-10, 88, 145-59).

4 Wald notes that radio bans of the narcocorrido have been common since the 1980s. In spite of this, narcocorridistas gained an audience by word of mouth and by recording less controversial
songs, which could be played on the radio (87-88). In reaction to restrictive actions against certain types of music, Johnson and Cloonan recognize that the oppressed must choose between “deferential silence… [and] seditious noise” (44).

5 Simonett argues that differences in perspective, first and third, may be correlated to her categories of “commercial” and “commissioned” narcocorrido respectively, yet neither “El Katch” nor “Contrabando y traición” fit neatly into the “commissioned” type (“Los gallos valientes”).

6 This recalls McDowell’s “regulatory” type of corrido, whose purpose is to identify the morality of a given action and encourage or discourage its repetition (15). Of course, the fact that Camelia escaped indicates that, even in the narcocorrido of the 1970s, drug smuggling need not end in tragedy for all involved.

7 Dostoevsky considered Kirilov an absurdist character, but Camus takes him and his nihilist philosophy much more seriously in The Myth of Sisyphus (though he ultimately refutes it). My interpretation follows Camus’s work.

8 Cf. the list of jazz, gangsta rap, and metal musicians killed or involved in violent activity in Johnson and Cloonan (74ff.).

9 All transcriptions and translations are my own and are based on the recordings listed in the works cited.

10 I.e. marijuana.

11 Or “tucking a gun.”

12 “Siete” (seven) probably denotes a particular caliber of bullet and the gun associated with it and in turn may be a reference to an individual’s alias.

13 I.e., the lower part of a gun, or, perhaps, the gun’s safety mechanism.
14 I.e., they don’t dare bully him.

15 Wordplay with “Panchito,” a nickname for Francisco.

16 Or “race.”

17 Literally “sit with me.”
Works cited


<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_eZ_sunopA>.


