

What are corridos and why are they important?

The corrido, part of Mexico's oral tradition, is a descriptive narrative, a running account that is written in verse, like poetry, and put to music. In other words, corridos are stories sung in poetic form and to simple music, much like ballads. This genre originated in Mexico and has become a source of popular expression throughout the nation, and today it is known and performed wherever Mexicans and Mexican Americans reside, including throughout the United States and particularly the U.S.-Mexico border region.¹ Although the corrido can be traced to an archaic Spanish form known as the *romance* that was brought to the Americas by the Spanish settlers, this Spanish form was transformed in central Mexico into a unique musical genre that spread quickly and became very popular with "el pueblo" (the people; the working class).² The corrido art form was already well-known from at least the mid-1800s onward, but it became even more popularized and deeply engrained in Mexican culture during the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920).

Much like the editorial page of the local newspaper,³ the corrido takes a topic of importance and accurately and precisely documents the essential points, interprets them and provides commentary; it may also provide advice or recommendations. However, the corrido always takes the point of view of the working class, "el pueblo," and thus it is from this perspective that the particular issue is documented, analyzed and interpreted. In a world in which working class people have little economic or political power/influence, cultural expressions, such as corridos, play an important role in giving voice to this segment of the population.

¹ Mendoza, Vicente T. 1954. *El Corrido Mexicano*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

² Griffith, James S. and Celestino Fernández. 1988. "Mexican Horse Races and Cultural Values: The Case of Los Corridos del Merino." *Western Folklore* 47:129-151.

³ Fernández, Celestino and James E. Officer. 1989. The Lighter Side of Immigration: Humor and Satire in the Mexican Corrido. *Journal of the Southwest*. 31(4): 471-496.

What are some of the popular themes in corrido?

This musico-poetic form has been used to document and provide commentary on any and all events, occurrences, and personalities of local, national or international importance and that remain in the common memory.⁴ Indeed, corridos have been composed about every imaginable topic. As one Mexican scholar noted:

...corridos emerge through popular tradition from those events that people intuitively select as representative of a particular time period. Thus, anything that appeals to the masses, that influences their daily lives and supply them with lasting stimulation, become subject matter for the corrido.

Although any topic may be fit for a corrido, some themes have been covered extensively by this folk tradition, such as:

- Wars and armed conflicts: Most notably the Mexican Revolution, but also WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq. Some of the best-known and classic corridos are about the Mexican Revolution, such as *Corrido Villista*, *La Persecución de Villa*, and *Carabina 30-30*.
- Immigration: These corridos discuss many aspects of the Mexican immigration experience, including leaving the family in Mexico, the details of the trip, crossing the border, encounters with the Border Patrol, migrant deaths in various forms (e.g., in the desert, automobile accidents, inside locked train boxcars, and in over-crowded trailers of semi-trucks).
- Folk heroes: Many folk heroes have been memorialized through corridos, including Gregorio Cortez (border folk hero depicted in an entire book by Américo Paredes, 1958, and in a feature-length commercial film) and Fernando Valenzuela (a pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers during the 1980s who was recruited from Sonora and in his first year won both the Cy Young Award and Rookie of the Year Award).

⁴ Pérez Martínez, Héctor P. 1935. *Trayectoria del Corrido*. No publisher given.

- Personalities: Shortly after Michael Jackson died on June 25, 2009, several corridos appeared documenting his life.
- Tragedies: Train accidents, the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, and earthquakes are but a few of the tragedies that have been documented through corridos.
- Horses and horse races: Although horses are a major theme, there are also corridos that involve other animals, such cock fights and bull fights. Some of the most notable horse corridos include: *El Caballo Blanco*, *Caballo Prieto Azabache*, and *El Moro de Cumpas*.
- Miraculous events: Two individuals depicted in corridos as being associated with miracles come immediately to mind: Jesús Malverde and St. Toribio Romo. Malverde has a public shrine (he is not recognized by the Catholic Church) in Culiacán, Sinaloa (Mexico) and is credited with being a “Robin Hood type” while alive (robbing the rich to give to the poor) and now as a helper of drug traffickers; he apparently helps them move drugs going north and deliver them to the U.S. St. Romo is said to appear to distressed migrants making their way across the U.S.-Mexico border and cure them, as well as giving them food, water, money and even directions. Today, St. Romo’s image can be seen everywhere, including on religious cards carried by immigrants. His shrine in Santa Ana, Jalisco (Mexico) is visited by 5,000 people every weekend.
- Drug smuggling: These corridos are commonly known as “narcocorridos” because they depict the comings and goings of drug traffickers.
- Assassinations: John F. Kennedy (President of the United States; assassinated on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, TX) and Donald Colosio (candidate for President of Mexico; assassinated on March 23, 1994 in Tijuana, Mexico).
- Towns and regions: These corridos usually document, with much pride, a town’s or state’s special characteristics and features, e.g., *Corrido de Mazatlán* and *Corrido de Chihuahua*.

What are the characteristics of the traditional corrido?

Although one can find exceptions to every pattern and every rule, and such is the case with corridos, the fact remains that one can identify clear patterns in the form and structure of corridos. Some of the more salient characteristics of the traditional corrido are as follows:

- Perspective: As noted above, corridos take the perspective of the common folk. Thus, they are composed in the vernacular language of the people, generally by eye witnesses or well-informed observers situated in (or intimately knowledgeable of) the culture of the working class, the primary audience of corridos.
- Meter and rhyme: Meter refers to the number of syllables in each line, and traditional corridos can be composed in 7–10, but mostly in either 6- or 8-count per line. Also, verses can be either 4 or 6 lines. If the verse is four lines, the rhyme scheme is ABCB; in other words, the end of the last word of the second and fourth lines would rhyme. If six lines, the rhyme pattern is ABCBDB; the last words of lines two, four, and six would rhyme.
- Length: Old-style corridos are long (20–30 verses), providing much rich detail as they narrate an event. In fact, when corridos were first recorded, many of them did not fit on one side of a 45-rpm record and it was common to record “Part 1” on one side and “Part 2” on the other. Now, corridos tend to be much shorter (8–10 verses), easily falling within the standard time for songs aired on commercial radio.
- Opening, middle and closing: In order to call the audience to attention so that listeners will hear the story being related in the corrido, many corridos begin by noting in the first or second verse that, indeed, this is a corrido. Some familiar lines include: *Éste es el corrido* (This is the ballad) or *Señores pongan cuidado* (Ladies and gentlemen, lend me your ears); for example, *Éste es el corrido del caballo blanco* (This is the ballad of the white horse). The middle part of the corrido, the longest section, relates the details of the story. Finally, the listener is frequently alerted to the fact that the corrido (the story) has come to an end by a final or penultimate verse; for example, *Así termina el corrido* (That’s how the

corrido ends) or *Aquí termina el corrido* (The ballad ends here). If the corrido has described death, either the penultimate or final verse begins with “*Vuela, vuela palomita*” (Fly, fly, little dove).

- Performance space: Traditionally, corridos were performed wherever people gathered, such as *plazas*, *mercados* (marketplaces), and *ferias* (fairs). Even today, it is common to hear corridos wherever people gather, including in the *plazas* of large cities such as Guadalajara.
- Singers: *Trobadores* (wandering singers) would carry the news of the day in their corridos as they travelled from town to town. They played mostly for tips, although some of them also sold broadsheets, often with artistic borders and designs, with the words of the corridos printed on them.
- Singing style and accompaniment: Because the emphasis is on the words, on the story being told, traditional corridos were performed without embellishment by one individual accompanied by a guitar. Today, however, corridos are performed in almost all musical genres, from *mariachi* to *norteño*. Still, the emphasis should remain on communicating the words clearly so that the listener can understand and follow the story being conveyed by the singer.

Why should the corrido tradition be continued?

Although the mass media document and interpret important events, such documentations and interpretations are seldom from the perspective of the common, working class people. The corrido, as a traditional cultural art form, ensures that the perspective of “el pueblo” (the people) is included and that events and occurrences important to “el pueblo” are preserved in the common memory and through this authentic oral tradition. In other words, the corrido gives a voice to people whose voices are seldom included in official means of documentation.

Thus, through the annual High School Corrido Contest, the University of Arizona Poetry Center is helping to preserve both an important musical-poetic tradition and the voices of the people.

The Corrido as Cultural Artifact

Maribel Álvarez, Ph.D.

Head down to El Minuto Café in Tucson’s historic Barrio Viejo on a Friday night and you are likely to run into Octavio Tovar making the rounds from table to table with a guitar strapped across his chest. Don Octavio is an itinerant musician—practitioner of a time-honored craft in the borderlands. For more than ten years he has been playing and singing at local restaurants on demand. To go along with their margaritas, patrons often request any number of *boleros* (romantic tunes); if the mood happens to be nostalgic, they ask for their favorite heart-warming *rancheras* (country songs). But when the occasion calls for stronger statements of bravado, social justice, humility before life lessons, or courage in the face of adversity, then only a corrido, “*la música del pueblo*” (the people’s music), would do.

Throughout the U.S.-Mexico border region, corridos are far more than “just” songs; they are social events rich in symbolism that lend themselves to a wide range of adaptations and appropriations by people with a variety of interests. The melodic structure of corridos makes them easy to sing, even if you don’t have a specially gifted voice. Deeply embedded in oral tradition, corridos are the kinds of songs that people memorize with relative ease, because they tell a story and follow a pattern that evolves from introduction, to climax, to conclusion. These characteristics make corridos one of the most democratic artistic expressions anywhere. It is not surprising, therefore, that throughout the United States and greater Mexico today so many young people, amateur singers, homespun philosophers, and would-be poets are expressing a desire to become corridistas.

Originally, corridos were folk expressions shared among intimate, tightly-knit working-class groups in the frontier. Starting in the late 1940s and early 1950s, corridos began acquiring mass popularity in the United States as a key musical element within the phenomenon known as Tex-Mex or conjunto music. An earlier commercial revival of the corrido had occurred in Mexico City and Los Angeles circa 1920s, with popular versions of corridos such as the “*corrido del lavaplatos*” (ballad of the dishwasher) capturing the sensibilities of an expanded urban mass in Mexico City and “*del otro lado*” (across the border, on the U.S. side). Starting in the 1980s, under the prism of

multiculturalism that dominated arts-making in the United States through the not-for-profit system, corridos began to emerge as educational products helpful in the promotion of diversity and cross-ethnic understanding. Community organizations, humanities councils, libraries, and folklife festivals began to regularly program corrido-singing contests, teach corrido-writing workshops, and fund the documentation of corrido history and scholarship.

In the last decade of the 20th century, corridos came into the public spotlight as the controversial versions of the songs known as narcocorridos (drug smugglers' ballads) exploded through the airwaves of major cities in the U.S. and many rural parts of Mexico. The emergence of narcocorridos had the effect of polarizing Mexican American and Mexican migrant communities into those who favored the radio play of these songs as indicators of "real life" events that matter to common folk and those who saw references to drug smuggling and the lavish, violent lifestyles of druglords as damaging to community pride, integrity, and self-respect.¹

While occasionally narcocorridos admonish listeners about the ill-advised ways of the drug world, this is not their general thrust.² The success of the narcocorrido subculture has been unprecedented. Journalist Sam Quiñones describes in vivid detail how young Chicanos in Los Angeles who grew up on rap music, speak limited Spanish, and used to be embarrassed by their parents' folk music have increasingly adopted and emulate the rural clothing, talk, walk, and style of the men from Sinaloa and other Northern Mexican states to partake of the narcocorrido craze.³ But perhaps the most interesting fact about narcocorridos is that although they incorporate strong elements of "Mexicanness," they are a transnational cultural phenomenon that originated primarily in the United States.

Until the late 1990s, narcocorridos were almost absent from radio airwaves in Tucson. A respected Mexican American community leader said in

¹ In March 2005, Associated Press writer Mark Stevenson filed a story that circulated widely in print and online news sources describing livid protests by Mexican activists against the Mexican government decision to stock school libraries with a book that included the lyrics of narcocorridos.

² The definitive text on this phenomenon is Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns and Guerrillas*, Rayo/Harper Collins, 2001.

³ See Sam Quiñones, *True Tales from Another Mexico: The Lynch Mob, the Popsicle Kings, Chalino, and the Bronx*, University of New Mexico Press, 2001.

an interview: "we are very much against playing that kind of music... it is not conducive to anything socially beneficial."⁴ On the other hand, the decision by local radio station Radio Pantera to include the songs about traffickers in their regular repertoire set off a storm of controversy. The station's program manager, also a Mexican American with roots in the local community, said to the shock of community leaders: "Social concerns about corridos are not my problem; my problem is programming the station and getting the best numbers I can." That same year, a local music store located in the heart of one of Tucson's Mexican barrios reported that narcocorrido groups and CDs were their top sellers.

These stories suggest that corridos have significance beyond a simple matter of musical taste; they function as cultural "objects" attached to multiple, and often conflicting, community dynamics. Never truly embraced by Mexican scholars as part of the inventory of national patrimony, corridos have survived and been passed on from generation to generation by means of popular taste, word of mouth, and the determination of marginalized workers, migrants, and dreamers to claim them as "heritage" in the face of social invisibility. For example, one of the best known corridos among Anglo audiences is, to the chagrin of many *mexicanos*, the song *La Cucaracha*, which paints a supposedly stereotypical picture of an intoxicated, underground anti-hero. Based on their propensity to favor ordinary and sometimes low-grade themes, characters, and sentiments, Mexican scholar Salvador Novo wrote in 1924 that corridos were chock full of "clichés" that glorified and sentimentalized past deeds by utopian heroes instead of encouraging people to grapple in the present with problems of exploitation and injustice.⁵

Enough scholarship has been produced on corridos to date that we can affirm with certainty that Novo was shortsighted and plainly mistaken in his analysis. While part of corridos' appeal can certainly be attributed to the uses people make of them for fun and distraction, the great folklore scholar Américo Paredes noted in his 1958 classic study of *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*⁶ that corridos resonate with ordinary people because they give voice to those whose point of view on the world is constantly muffled by "official"

⁴ "Radio embraces corridos that make heroes of drug runners," by Tim Steller, *The Arizona Daily Star*, August 23, 1998.

⁵ Salvador Novo, "Los Corridos Mexicanos," in Mario Colin, *El Corrido Popular en el Estado de Mexico*, Biblioteca Enciclopedia del Estado de Mexico, 1972

versions of history. There is, of course, an inherent tension to any form of public expression that navigates a course between folkloric and commercial uses. But Paredes' extensive work on the social uses of corridos changed forever the way we think of "folk" practices; that is, not as items on a shelf, frozen in time and untouchable, but as living forms of expressions that manifest our deepest fears, ambitions, and struggles in specific times and places.

The opinion that narcocorridos betray the authenticity of "real" corridos is shared by many critics. Yet, taking into consideration how cultures change and adapt, a summary judgment of this kind may be simplistic. Corridos are a "popular" musical form insofar as they are employed and deployed by the ordinary members (the popular sectors) of a cultural community as part of their lived and felt everyday culture. Both the folk expressive performance and the commercial adaptations operate through networks of common folk's meaning-making; these symbolic networks overlap and crisscross each other in the everyday lives of *mexicanos* in the Southwest, even as they pull towards different directions and conceptions of what and who speaks for the community. Both form part of vital and ongoing processes of cultural negotiation and cultural agency among different sectors of the Mexican and Mexican American communities, at different historical and class junctures. Perhaps a more fruitful way of understanding the multi-faceted meaning of these cultural artifacts is to explore the extent to which corridos of *any kind* (serious, whimsical, or sensational) stand, as Paredes convincingly argued, as expressions of "self-empowerment achieved through a collective imagining."⁷ Instead of clamoring for a return to quaint and genuine forms, narcocorridos can open the door for critical analysis and debate on tensions affecting contemporary life.

⁶ Ámerico Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, University of Texas Press, 1958.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Corridos and Pedagogy

The University of Arizona Poetry Center's Corrido Contest is the most comprehensive and sustained example in the United States and Mexico of a not-for-profit cultural producer harnessing the diffused emotional force and cultural flexibility of corridos into a product of pedagogical value.⁸ The premise behind utilizing corridos as tools for multicultural education (as is often the case with arts education programs in general) is that by strengthening their cultural identity, participants can experience personal empowerment and this can in turn lead to social change for the communities represented. Aspirations for cross-cultural understanding, a heightened sense of history and place, and the recovery of "community-based values" that are perceived to be threatened in some way have all become standard in most arts outreach programs established by cultural institutions.

But when cultural programmers enter the fray of living cultures in motion, unexpected things can happen to the pre-scripted utopias. The fact is that to expect otherwise—that the center of cultural wholesomeness will hold devoid of conflict—is not warranted by what we know about how culture works. As it should be plainly evident by now, the process of *making* community is often messy and constituted by multiple leaps and retreats as well as occasional illuminations and obfuscation.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the predominant image of Arizona, border culture, and community that emerges through the thirty winning corridos in the Poetry Center's Corrido Contest over a span of ten years is one of sustained inter-ethnic conflict, anguished search for stability and family understanding, unexpected turns of luck for the worse, and homages to hard-working but often unappreciated people. Corridos, after all, are part of what Professor Richard Bauman called a "larger expressive system."⁹ This means that anyone who wants to understand something about their emotive force and resonance, better know something about the "culture of conflict"

⁸ The contest includes a resource guide for teachers available online through a partnership with ArtsEdge, the National Arts and Education Network at the Kennedy Center. The online guide includes "tips on writing corrido lyrics," "tips on composing a simple corrido," and a 2-lesson unit on form and theme in the traditional corrido.

⁹ Richard Bauman, "Introduction," in *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, Ámerico Paredes, edited by Richard Bauman. CMAS Books: University of Texas at Austin, 1992.

in which they are bred. Over the last decade, Arizona and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands have emerged as notable breeding grounds of tensions and challenges to many of our society's most enduring values.

The tempo of the majority of the winning entries in the Corrido Contest is one of irony and introspection before life's unpredictable turns. This stanza from the 2001 Third Place winner refers specifically to the tragic death of a 13-year old girl in Sonora, Mexico, but its poetry captures a mood that remains fairly consistent across other entries:

Jugadas muy traicioneras ésas que tiene la vida	See how life betrays us in so many tragic ways
Pues nadie se imaginaba que su vida acabaría	Who could have imagined such an ending to her days
Vuela, vuela, palomita, vuela por todo Sonora	Fly far away, little dove—shout the name of Reyna Ruiz
Y grita a los cuatro vientos: “¡Reyna Ruiz descansa ahora!”	To the four winds of Sonora: may she always rest in peace.

The word “jugadas” in the original Spanish version is aptly translated as referring to a kind of “betrayal” that life perpetrates against human beings unwillingly. But the word “jugada” in the original Spanish context can also be interpreted as pointing to an even more provocative point of view; “jugada” derives from “juego” (game or play) and can also be translated as the equivalent of “the hand that we’ve been dealt.” Contrary to the stereotype of fatalism that is often attached to Mexican folk beliefs, the reference to life as a game can also be read as invoking a social order that *has been made* to be unjust and unequal, in other words, that has been “played” to the advantage of a few and to the disadvantage of many. Thus, a game attributed to human actions and actors instead of fate.

Equally salient throughout the winning entries is a desire to “soar” above difficult circumstances. Sometimes, as in this stanza from the 2003 Second Place winner, the goal seems wistful, perpetually out of reach:

Quando una paloma vi Pensé: “Ay ¡qué afortunada! Ojalá también pudiera Yo volar a dondequiera, Ojalá también pudiera Yo volar a dondequiera”.	I saw a dove come flying And thought, “How lucky you are! I wish that I, like you, Could fly away so far, I wish that I, like you, Could fly away so far.”
--	---

In other cases, we are offered an exhortation, a call to reflect upon our common humanity as a way out of injustice (2009 Third Place winner):

No soy tan diferente, somos todos iguales, Ricos, pobres, chatos, altos, ilegales, Cuando me corto yo también sangro, Hay que aprender a vernos como hermano a hermano.	I’m really not that different, all of us are equal, Rich and poor, short and tall, legal and illegal, If I get cut, then I bleed, just like any other, We need to learn to get along like sisters and brothers.
--	--

These brief examples offer but a glimpse of the critical themes percolating in the minds of young people throughout Arizona from 2000 to 2010. Clearly, the judges who decided the competitions also played a role in the thematic uniformity of the winning corridos. It is quite possible that they favored corridos that tended to replicate the traditional ethos of melancholy and defiance. But even if that was the case, the student participants surely gave the judges plenty of consistent material to support their preferences. After reviewing the body of work produced to date, I was able to identify six distinct topical categories into which the winning corridos can be distributed. They are:

- **Death** (of a child; in a car accident; as a result of greed; because of a love triangle; the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; and of migrants attempting to cross the desert).
- **Discrimination** (on account of race; because of a physical impairment).
- **War and Politics** (a corrupt politician; young men going to war; exploits of a revolutionary hero).

- **Family and Friends** (friends are the source of support; family is everything; distance and separation from family; missing friends and hometown).
- **Homage to the Underdog** (war hero; father; grandfather; working women; local boxer).
- **Favorite Things** (places to visit; best horse; favorite authors; a teenager's life; fantasy and science fiction).

In addition to the predominant emphasis on *life as struggle*, there were other aspects of the Corrido Contest that point to dissident aspects of the art form when applied as a teaching tool. Of the thirty winning corridos, close to two-thirds were written by young women. All but five of the top thirty were written in Spanish, but the Poetry Center translated many of the winning entries to English and Spanish regardless of original language. These outcomes are significant because each in its own way bucks the trend of expectations. First, corrido-writing has been dominated by men. While the participation of women as subjects of corridos and as performers have seen an increase more recently,¹⁰ generally their participation has been minimal.

Historically, this may have had something to do with the places where corridos were first sung: on horseback by traveling troubadours, in cantinas by itinerant *guitarreros* (guitar players), or in the thicket of battles during the Mexican Revolution. The high level of participation by young women in the Poetry Center's contest could be a sign of positive changes taking place in the gender dynamics of the art form.

Secondly, U.S.-based nonprofit arts education practices (especially within "mainstream" institutions) have been slow to embrace Spanish-language instruction and, most singularly, bilingualism as a favored operating approach. The expansiveness and inclusivity of the Poetry Center's competition in these areas offer evidence of a solid commitment to establish respect for corridos as an important literary form.

The idea of the contest was developed by Poetry Center Literary Director Frances Sjoberg. Sjoberg had taught elementary classes at a bilingual school in Guadalajara, Mexico and is an advocate for bilingual education. According to Sjoberg, one of the Poetry Center's interests in the corrido

¹⁰ Maria Herrera Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis*, Indiana University Press, 1990.

stems from this musical genre's potential connection to a long tradition of "underground literacies," including many poetic forms that have been ignored by "mainstream art" institutions. This conceptual orientation offers an interesting—and alternative—platform to the garden-variety discourse of "deficit" prevalent in many art education models targeted to Latino youth. Frequently designed from the lens of "art enrichment" for disadvantaged youth, many of these art programs tend to reproduce the ideologies of difference and disempowerment that they allegedly exist to defeat. It is a vicious circle from which many good-intentioned art programs are not able to escape. The evidence in this case points to a different objective: a sincere desire on the part of an academic institution to frame corridos and the mechanics of their writing and performance by high-school students in a border community as a comprehensive and punctuated cultural intervention.

Nonetheless, one can argue that the Poetry Center walks a fine line with respect to how far it can avoid the phenomenon of "folklorization" that so easily emerges when a "folk practice" is taken out of its context. Corridos have existed for a very long time within cultural contexts and folk communities that understood explicitly and implicitly the subtexts of the form, especially in their more nuanced manifestations as irony, parody, humor, or various modes of "vernacular wisdom" that communities use to negotiate their most sensitive issues. Many of the more subtle elements of these uses of corridos have been misinterpreted or ignored by strangers to the cultural group from which they emerge. Folklore studies centered on a performance approach have sought to carefully reorient folk forms like corridos from "folklore-as-material" to "folklore-as-communication" and to strengthen the understanding and deployment of the corrido and other musical forms as multi-layered instances of social events that attempt to tackle many of a folk group's internal contradictions.

Cultural organizations like the Poetry Center play a key role in shaping or directing our understanding of what *are* and *ought to be* the categories that we use to constitute ourselves into a "community." We cannot dismiss the critical symbolic role that cultural programming agencies hold in the general organizing and structuring of identities and sometimes even of social movements. But the winning entries in this contest offer us some hope for the future of arts education in a country facing unprecedented demographic changes. Either because they decided to emulate the traditional corrido ethos of social denunciation, or perhaps on account of their own emotional investments in

A Decade of Young Corridistas 2000–2010

the burning topics of their day, contest winners refused to turn the corrido—as a pedagogical tool—into a sanitized and tamed object of admiration far removed from the musical expression's deep history of defiance and social restlessness.¹¹

"What is the proper time to break out into a corrido?" I asked Don Octavio Tovar while we ate lunch at El Minuto Café one busy afternoon a few years ago. His answer was economical and poignant: "*pues cuando haga falta*" ("when it becomes necessary"). His answer implied that the best way to competently "get" the meaning of a corrido is to be part of the moment of a "corrido experience." This "experiential substratum," as scholars have called this property of the musical form, is already encoded within the poetic structure of a corrido because stories in a corrido "dramatize the most dramatic of human involvements."¹² It is thus, in and through this participatory act, that the meanings of the song and of the performance are produced. In a similar vein, anthropologist Victor Turner suggested that performances, insofar as they function as memorable events that break the flow of the "normal," can in turn produce unexpected wedges for social critique. Turner called this effect an "evaluation... of the way society handles history."¹³

As a cultural intermediary, the Poetry Center *willed* the social space that encouraged youth from Southern Arizona to mobilize corridos as a tool in their own struggles for meaning. In promoting this willful act of cultural democracy, the Center successfully tapped into the richness of a community that, sadly, is increasingly perceived by the nation as a source of "trouble." While on the one hand the social imagination in which narcocorridos exist is fed through a register of *material excess* (big SUVs, big guns, abundant jewelry, plentiful parties, big houses, etc.), on the other hand, the attempts that cultural workers and art educators make to advocate a communitarian realm of shared meaning function as a kind of *symbolic excess* directed at the reconstitution of a sense of hope and possibility. For this, we must all be grateful.

¹¹ I benefited from a conversation with Dr. Seemin Qayum in drawing out these points.

¹² John Homes McDowell, "The Corrido of Greater Mexico as Discourse, Music, and Event." In *Other Neighborly Names: Social Processes and Cultural Image in Texas Folklore*, eds. Richard Baumann and Roger D. Abrahams, University of Texas Press, 1981.

¹³ Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, AJ Publishing Company, 1988.