



# Poetry and Violence: The Ballad Tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica (Music in American Life)

*John H. McDowell*

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Does art that depicts violence generate more violence? Taking up a question that touches on contemporary developments such as gangsta rap and schoolyard shootings, John H. McDowell provides an in-depth study of a body of poetry that takes violence as its subject: the Mexican ballad form known as the corrido.

McDowell concentrates on the corrido tradition in Costa Chica, where the ethnic mix includes a strong African-Mexican, or Afro-mestizo, component. Through interviews with corrido composers and performers, both male and female, and a generous sampling of ballad texts, McDowell reveals a living vernacular tradition that amounts to a chronicle of local and regional rivalries. Focusing on the tragic corrido with its stories of heroic mortal encounter, McDowell examines the intersection of poetry and violence from three perspectives. He explores the contention that poetry celebrates violence, perhaps thereby perpetuating it, by glorifying for receptive audiences the deeds of past heroes. He discerns a regulatory voice within the corrido that places violent behavior within the confines of a moral universe, distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate forms of violence. Finally, he contends that poetry can be a healing force that helps sustain the community in the wake of violent events. A detailed case study with broad social and cultural implications, *Poetry and Violence* is a compelling commentary on violence as human experience and as communicative action. This volume comes with a CD of corrido music taken from live performances in Costa Chica.

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