

Amor en Aztlán: Music, Movement, Performance, and Power
in the Conjunto Dancehalls of the Texas—Mexico Borderlands

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the Texas Mexican musical genre known as conjunto and its concomitant social world. In this work I situate conjunto within a broader context of Mexican American cultural production, Texas Mexican popular music, and the shared histories of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. As a social history, the dissertation traces the development of the genre and its practitioners across the twentieth century to the present. I examine interactions of power; expressions of identity; and constructions of race, class, and gender through movement (dance), performance (instrumentation and playing), and place (the dancehall or nite club) within and around San Antonio and South Texas. I argue that conjunto is an embodiment of Xicanx thought and knowledge, an everyday act of resistance and reaffirmation.

Dedicación

This is for my grandmother

Dora María García Pérez

1929 - 2017

y

para mis hijos

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throughout the years. Lerma's would not remain standing were it not for the organizing campaign spearheaded by Susana Segura. You are an archive of knowledge about all things conjunto, a tireless warrior for our people, and a tremendous friend. I thank all of you for being keepers of the tradition for the next generation, and the ones to come.

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The words that follow come from a place of love, respect, and humility for our people, our music, and our history. Any errors or inaccuracies are of course entirely my own.

Alejandro Wolbert Pérez

San Pancho, Califas
August 2019

Introduction

Amanecer con Acordeón: Music and Memory¹

For twenty-five centuries Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.

Jacques Attali²

One thing I'm real proud of is my style of music. *De aquí*, from here, from this area, from this piece of land here. To me, *el gusto, el gusto de producir esta música, viene del corazón*. It's not what you play, but who you play for. And I figure that I play for my people—for the people that were born and raised with this certain type of feeling in them that I was lucky enough to have been a part of.

Tony de la Rosa, *Songs of the Homeland*

When I think about conjunto I think about sounds and songs, memories and magic. Most of all, I think about my grandmother.

I was not from a musical family. I did not grow up around musicians or attend dances with relatives, and my listening preferences in adolescence ran more towards punk rock than polkas. Yet one of my earliest memories is of waking up at my grandma's house: the rest of my family still asleep atop sleeping bags spread out on the living room floor; the smells of eggs frying, bacon sizzling and coffee brewing in the kitchen; and these strange and wonderful sounds coming from the next room where my uncle was playing his accordion. I say strange because this was in all likelihood the first time I had heard him play his three row Hohner, the first time I knew what sounds emanated from that shiny black box with the three rows of white buttons; and wonderful, because of the memory and the magic and the moment. If I concentrate, I can still in my mind hear a tune, smell the bacon and coffee, and see my grandma's kitchen bathed in the warm glow of morning light. This being memory what I imagine listening to changes often. Some days I imagine a simple melody, other days my uncle greets the dawn with "Las Golondrinas." For all I know he was just playing around on his box and I am hearing something now familiar playing in the background of my recuerdo. Ni modo, I was hooked.³

¹ A portion of this chapter was previously published in "Amanecer con Acordeón: Music and Memory." *Tonantzin*. San Antonio: Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio. May 2012, p. 28.

² "Listening," (1985: 3).

³ Recuerdo: memory. Ni modo: doesn't matter. All translations are mine unless indicated. In *Feminism on the Border*, Sonia Saldívar-Hull explains why she does not italicize words or phrases in Spanish unless they are already italicized in quotations, calling this a "consciously political act," or "what Gloria Anzaldúa calls 'linguistic terrorism'" (173). Likewise, AnaLouise Keating articulates a similar point when she writes of her decision—consistent with Anzaldúa's preferences—not to italicize Spanish, Náhuatl, or other non-English words. "As Gloria [Anzaldúa] often explained, such italics have a denormalizing, stigmatizing function and make the italicized words seem like deviations from the (English/"white") norm" ("Introduction," 10-11). Following their examples, in this dissertation I deliberately do not italicize non-English words unless they are already italicized, such as in a direct quotation.

My grandmother belonged to a generation of Mexican Americans born in Texas during the 1920s to parents who fled the ravishes of the Mexican Revolution. Raised by her mother, a war refugee, my abuela grew up during La Chilla, the Great Depression, through the discrimination and segregation of the south (and South Texas), not far from the U.S.-Mexican border. There is nothing I cherished more than to hear my grandma tell stories of her childhood, of growing up in El Valle, of picking nopales in the monte—and of the musicians and performers who she remembered from decades ago.⁴ In the 1960's my mother's familia moved north, to Michigan, and it is there where my parents met and I grew up. As an adolescent questioning and uncovering my familial history I found a connection with my maternal grandmother through her love of conjunto music. When I moved to Texas this connection deepened, for on my visits home I would return with CDs and tape recordings of now-classic records or photographs of conjunto legends, each one prompting another story. He was born in your grandpa's hometown; I remember hearing him when I was growing up; He used to be so young! (But grandma, I gently chided, you're older too.) Long after the fact I learned that she loved to dance, and why I never thought to ask her about this any earlier escapes me, even as it fills my heart with sadness and regret.

Conjunto is more than just music for listening and dancing. Conjunto is community. Conjunto is culture. Conjunto is a creative expression of a people. Conjunto is our music, Xicanx music, with its roots going deep into South Texas and Northern México, but it is also history, emotion, movement and memory. Conjunto is part of un hilo de resistencia which attaches me to a past that I would otherwise know only through book and story.⁵ Conjunto is my grandmother on a sunlit Sunday morning making breakfast while listening to the radio as my family and I wake up. I carry these stories with me now, as a sort of ancestral memory I struggle to preserve, to honor, to sustain, and to share.

• • •

Conjunto is a musical genre rooted in the working-class experiences of Texas Mexicans who adapted, appropriated, and transformed ways of playing and dancing Eastern European polkas into a unique cultural product of the North Mexico/South Texas borderlands. At its core the standard conjunto ensemble is comprised of the three-row button accordion and twelve-stringed bajo sexto, and plays rancheras, polkas, vales and other rhythms along with the Afro-Latino cumbia in a lively, fast-paced, up-tempo manner, oftentimes accompanied by sung verse. Major studies on the genre to date have focused upon the history and development of the conjunto ensemble and/or the content and significance of its lyrics (Peña, 1985; Peña, 1999a; Peña, 1999b; San Miguel, Jr., 2002). In contrast, my dissertation is an in-depth study of conjunto music as expressed through performance, dance, feelings, and emotions. Like the devilish apparition that appeared to vex and trouble the conjunto dancers on a summer evening long ago, José Limón's famous inquiry, "Why do my people dance?" that he asks repeatedly throughout his monograph echoed throughout my mind as I conceived, conducted and composed this project (*Dancing with the Devil* 1994, p. 154). In fact, I have been asking myself the same question since

⁴ El Valle: The lower Rio Grande Valley, in South Texas. Nopales: cactus paddles. Monte: mountain, but here used as a generic reference to the countryside.

⁵ Hilo de resistencia: thread of resistance. In writing "hilo de resistencia" I am making reference to an early campaign slogan of Fuerza Unida, an organization formed by displaced garment workers. Please see *Hilo de la justicia: Thread of justice: Campaign bulletin of Fuerza Unida*, Vol. 1., No. 1, Spring 1998.

first hearing of this urban legend. This dissertation is my effort at finding significance and meaning in the complex, gendered expressions of desire and emotional affect in the lyrics, songs, and performative (bodily) expressions associated with the Texas Mexican conjunto.

As a form of cultural studies, I view conjunto music and its attendant social scene as more than an outlet for recreational entertainment since its participants belong to a larger social world in which their lives—and their bodies—are gendered, racialized and marked as laborers. While the salón de baile or conjunto night club may be a temporary sanctuary or refugee from society’s confines, I argue that conjunto’s listeners, dancers, and performers negotiate power and privilege through forms of verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, such as sung lyrics or bodily movements, grounded in their material reality. Dance halls, beer joints, and ballrooms where conjunto is listened to, performed, played and enjoyed inform a relationship between public space, personal memory and collective history, creating what Dolores Hayden terms “the power of place”— “the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens’ public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory” (1995:9). Dancing gives us insight into ways in which gendered negotiations of power, expressions of desire, and constructions of identity are performed—in front of the stage, on the floor, one song at a time, “day after day and night after night” (Delgado and Muñoz, 9).⁶



Figure 1: Couples dance at the 2012 Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio. Photograph by the author.

⁶ Salón de baile: dance hall, ballroom.

Conjunto dancing, in particular, is a learned practice, a form of bodily knowledge communicated, I hypothesize, primarily through familial and social networks. While there are steps or moves associated with particular rhythms conjunto dancing is a living social practice and as a result subject to innovation, improvisation and invention. Similar to the transmission of familial histories conjunto dancing relies upon person-to-person contact; the how-to is not learned in classes or written down and found in books but rather shared collectively through movement. The most salient example of this is the style of dance Chicanas and Chicanos in the south Texas cities of San Antonio and elsewhere developed in the years following WWII: the *taquachito*, or ‘little possum,’ so named because of the way dancers resembled the outdoor marsupial in their wobbly movements.

Dance styles were not the only aspect of the genre that changed mid-century. Scholars generally agree the conjunto ensemble underwent a radical transition in the post-WWII years. I want to emphasize that what we now consider “traditional” by today’s standards is in fact a historically ambiguous, if not inaccurate, misnomer. Does one mean the traditional way of playing with just an accordion and bajo sexto? If so, does the accordionist use the bass buttons or just the treble? Play a two- or one- row box, as opposed to the three-row button accordions now standard in today’s conjunto ensembles? Do they stand up or sit down to play? And is there singing? Electric amplification? I ask that you keep these considerations in mind to underscore just how radical an innovation the addition of singing, the electric bass, and a drum set were to the conjunto ensemble of the 1940s. As with the *taquachito*, Mexican Americans in the post-WWII period took something that was commonplace, accepted, and popular, and changed it, making it their—*our*—own. Instantly recognizable, as it still retained its form, the conjunto ensemble was immediately, radically, and fundamentally altered once again through the subsequent innovations. But this is just part of the story.

Another consideration, one which I feel is oft overlooked, is that a number of these mid-century developments in conjunto mirrored innovations and experimentations in other forms of U.S. based popular music. The simplified equation of conjunto being the result of Mexican and German musical cross-pollination does not allow for this broader complexity. So, too, it makes sense that the *polka ranchera*, already popular among Mexican and Mexican American listening communities, came to solidify its position as the dominant rhythm during this time—for the *polka*’s popularity was not limited to Mexican Americans but rather shared or expressed across ethnic European listening communities across the united states during the 1940s and early 1950s. Rather than view the conjunto ensemble’s playing of *polkas* as a bid for mainstream acceptance or commercial recognition however I interpret this as a parallel development which allowed for a greater depth and expression of cultural mores.

Interestingly, although Chicanos were “early adopters” in some forms of technology—especially in the 40s and 50s—they remained “traditionalists” in the ideological composition of the conjunto ensemble. Once the button accordion became the dominant lead instrument (and signifier) for conjunto it held that position as it continues to do so today. (Prior to adapting the accordion, however, early conjuntos experimented with a variety of instruments—including the fiddle—as the lead. See Chapter Two for more on this.) When the piano accordion became popularized in the 1920s, in part due to its ease of use and availability, some conjuntos and later orquestas made the switch (as evidenced by early photographs of ensembles). However, the majority did not, choosing instead to remain wedded to the diatonic (button) accordions. Even as ethnic European-American *polka* groups embraced the piano accordion conjunto, Tejano and *norteño* artists by and far held on to their button accordions. Perhaps as significant is the fact that

conjunto ensembles embraced, in short order, the sorts of technological innovations in the 1940s and '50s, such as electronic amplification and instrumentation that were sweeping across popular music across genres. At the same time, rather than supplement or outright replace the lead accordionist with a guitarist, conjunto ensembles remained rooted in “tradition.” Regarding the accordion the most significant innovation came from El Conjunto Bernal’s employment of the chromatic five-row accordion, and, to a lesser extent, their use of multiple accordions, as I discuss in Chapter Two.

Vocals entered the conjunto genre’s repertoire beginning in the late 1940s as performers, notably Valerio Longoria, began to sing canciones atop the polka ranchera rhythm, a sung accompaniment to popular dance music. Longoria receives credit for a number of innovations and contributions to the genre as he was one of—if not the—first to play standing up, to use electronic amplification, to develop his own style of tuning, and he introduced the bolero and cumbia to conjunto, in addition to incorporating stylistic flourishes and arrangements now so commonplace as to be considered “traditional.” Longoria coupled singing along with his adaptation of musical styles popularized throughout Latin America—the Columbian cumbia, the Mexican bolero, itself an adaptation from Cuba, that becomes conjunto’s canción romántica—in a way that had not previously occurred in conjunto.⁷

Within a decade conjunto artists would incorporate polyvocal arrangements—and, in some instances, mirrored this musically as even the options for instrumentation began to change. Conjunto Bernal’s use of multiple chromatic (five row) accordions, in place of the more commonplace diatonic (three row) accordion, allowed them to play across a wider range—an experiment in instrumentation that they similarly reflected through their vocal arrangements. Significantly, their recording of “Mi Unico Camino” in 1955 marks the first time that two and three part harmonies first appeared in conjunto recordings (San Miguel, 55).⁸ El Conjunto Bernal became widely admired and praised for their technical virtuosity, and Manuel Peña considered them to represent “the apex of conjunto music’s evolution” (*Texas Mexican Conjunto*, 92).⁹

I take issue with this statement. Not of the well-deserved praise, but the sentiment behind it. If mid-1950s era Conjunto Bernal represented the highest point of musical accomplishment within the conjunto genre then somehow everything that follows is diminished. While this might be applicable in speaking of an individual’s career or a group’s achievements, positioning a form of cultural production this way leads to the establishment of a metric which valorizes the more technically complex forms of playing and performing. This hierarchy undergirds Peña’s argument. Further, it views conjunto as an artifact, frozen in time, rather than seeking to understand or contextualize the music not only through its historical development but also where

⁷ Canción romántica: romantic song, literally, used to refer to romantic ballads or love songs. Longoria’s adoption of Afro-Latinx musics—the cumbia, the bolero— as well as their subsequent, enduring popularity are reminders of Mexican Americans’ understated and largely unacknowledged proximity to Blackness. For more on this please see Cervantes, Marcos. “Squeezebox Poetics: Locating Afromestizaje in Esteban Jordan’s Texas Conjunto,” (2013).

An avid shortwave (“ham”) radio enthusiast, Longoria first encountered the Columbian cumbia via his hobby. Recorded to cassette, he would then learn them the following day. See Strachwitz, Chris. “Valerio Longoria.” *Caballo Viejo* (p. 3). See also Champion, David, Ramón de León, and Cynthia L. Vidaurri, “Taquachito Nights: Conjunto Music from South Texas,” *Taquachito Nights* (p. 15-16).

⁸ “Mi Unico Camino” and other classic recordings from El Conjunto Bernal may be found on the compilation *Mi Unico Camino: 24 Original Hits* (Arhoolie, 1992).

⁹ During the course of my fieldwork I managed to track down Paulino Bernal. Bernal famously left secular conjunto performing and became a “born again” Christian. Now an evangelical preacher, Bernal made weekly trips from the LRGV to San Antonio to minister to the faithful. Ever the showman, I witnessed him selling healing salves along with spiritual salvation during the course of his multi-hour evening roadshow revival.

it is today—be it Peña’s ‘present’ of the early 1980s, the two-year time span from 2010 to 2012 when I conducted my fieldwork, or my own temporal ‘present’ of 2019, as I submit this work for approval? Or even a future moment beyond the writing of this dissertation that will become present and, eventually, past. What of those changes? How is conjunto heard and enjoyed? What is generational? What meanings are made in the music? In order to address these and other questions I turn to ethnographic research.

• • •

Toward the end of summer, 2005, I moved from San Antonio to the San Francisco Bay Area and began working towards a Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley. At the time I was a community organizer, an educator, and a journalist for the *San Antonio Current*, where I covered Chican@ and Latin@ arts and culture.¹⁰ I wrote about it all, from Tex Mex legends playing at hole-in-the-wall ice houses in my westside barrio neighborhood, to touring norteño superstars commanding an arena; alt-Latin rock and hip-hop en español; and the cumbia. Everywhere, cumbia—from Mexico, from Colombia, from South Texas; mixed and remixed, rapped over, chopped and screwed; everywhere. However, my love, my passion, was for conjunto.

I was in the right place for it. San Antonio is steeped in conjunto history and culture. It was one of the many things that attracted me to the city. Shortly after moving there as a young adult I began to explore this treasure trove of cultural riches. At the time I lived less than a mile away from the infamous El Camaroncito, where the devil was rumored to have once danced, and I spent my last weekend in town at Lerma’s before departing for graduate study in California. I saw Valerio Longoria play, in one of his final public performances, and was surprised Esteban Jordan didn’t draw a larger crowd to *Saluté* on my first visit to that storied nightclub, so steeped in reputation and rumor. Esteban Jordan and Valerio Longoria have passed on, and both El Camaroncito and Lerma’s have since shuttered. I name these men and identified these venues because they are all now gone—for the moment. Longoria, the Texas conjunto pioneer¹¹, died in 2000; Jordan, El Parche, the oft-proclaimed Jimi Hendrix of the accordion, passed away a decade later. While El Camaroncito more or less faded out of existence and *Saluté* closed in style, with a party acting as both celebration and despedida, community activists responded to the forced closing of Lerma’s in 2010 by organizing a campaign to “Save Lerma’s” and restore the historic night club as an integral part of our cultural patrimony.

¹⁰ A note on nomenclature: Throughout this dissertation I will use the terms Texas Mexican, Mexican American, Chicana/o, Chican@, Xicana/o, Xican@, Xicanx, Mexican, Mexicana/o, Mexican@, Latina/o, Latinx, and Hispanic at various times in reference to a racialized population of Mexican and Latin American origin in the United States. While there is considerable overlap among the populations identified as—or who identify with—each term, they are not interchangeable. For my part whenever and wherever possible I will be as specific as possible in my use of terminology, especially when I am aware of how one self-identifies. (Thus, I use/identify as Xicano, Chicano, Mexican American, and Latino, in that order of preference.) When I do not know or have no means of verifying one’s preferred identifier I will use terms that are generationally and regionally consistent (Texas Mexican, Mexican American, Chicana/o). When writing specifically about Mexican migrants in the U.S. I will use Mexicana/o, as opposed to Mexican—however, this is a distinction I do not extend towards cultural production (i.e. Mexican regional music). In resistance to a gendered binary I use the suffix –x and –@ (as opposed to the –a/o, which I feel is unwieldy in both written and spoken use). My preference for the latter is, I believe, more generational than anything.

¹¹ Putting aside the implications of the term pioneer and its identification with settler colonialism, I reference Longoria’s *Texas Conjunto Pioneer* (Arhoolie, 1993), in part because it most likely was the first disk of his I had listened to.

I cannot say I took any of this for granted. From the late '90s, when I first arrived in San Antonio, through my departure, I was at best a casual participant in the conjunto scene. I took accordion lessons for a few years at the Conjunto Heritage Taller, although my demonstrated lack of ability might suggest otherwise. Each May I looked forward to attending the annual Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio ("Conjunto Fest"), staying until the close of each night's performance. I listened to KEDA, Radio Jalapeño; bought, burned, or copied a treasure trove of music; wore out the soles on my favorite pair of botas, twice—and still didn't go dancing nearly enough.

I returned to San Antonio in 2010, this time as a bona fide academic, in order to conduct ethnographic and archival research on the conjunto scene. For the better part of two years' time I immersed myself in all things conjunto. I identified a number of sites and venues for participant-observation, loosely grouped around festivals and other community-based events, such as the Conjunto Fest; nightclubs and dancehalls, including VFW halls, pulgas, and daytime dances at the Royal Palace Ballroom; and cultural centers or other sites that are not primarily performance venues, such as the lessons offered through the Conjunto Heritage Taller or a special event for Día de los Muertos organized by the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center.¹² Ultimately, I organized the majority of my time in the field around two principle sites: a small neighborhood bar that featured live conjunto performances on a weekly basis, and the daily tardeadas at the Royal Palace Ballroom.¹³ While these two sites form the core of my ethnographic research I also included festivals, performances, and other conjunto related experiences throughout Texas (specifically San Antonio, Austin, and San Benito) within the scope of my study.

I approached my fieldwork cautiously, cognizant of the privileges I held. I now was an academic-in-progress—a researcher—who was visiting for an undetermined length of time yet would eventually leave. This placed me as an outsider to San Antonio and the conjunto scene in particular, in ways I did and did not recognize at the time. So, too, my status as a researcher enabled me to spend daytime afternoons and late evenings in the company of musicians and dancers in ways that friends and acquaintances were unable. I relished being freed from the demands or constraints of a steady job or other responsibilities beyond my own person for perhaps the last time in my life, while recognizing the tremendous privilege that opportunity reflects. Finally, although certainly as if not most important, as a cisgendered man I had a mobility and access to sites and spaces on my own, with some degree of safety, that I might not have otherwise had. All this comes to mind as I think of myself as a positioned subject, in the sense of Renato Rosaldo's (1989) conceptualization of the term.

And yet, for something that at the time seemingly defined my research and captured the better part of two years of my life I now realize in hindsight how precious little of it has made its way into my dissertation. Know that those hours I spent in dimly-lit dance halls sipping my bottles of Topo Chico soda water and, sometimes, an ice-cold Lone Star beer; the fieldnotes I took, disguised as text messages surreptitiously sent to myself; the late evenings and early mornings where I wrote, or struggled to, fueled by bean and cheese tacos or pots and pots of coffee: all this shaped me; all this shaped who I was and what I have written; the experience as episteme, as ofrenda.¹⁴

¹² Pulgas: flea markets.

¹³ Tardeadas: afternoon dances.

¹⁴ In the process I compiled over one hundred pages of fieldnotes from this research, the majority of which by my own admission goes underutilized and unacknowledged in this dissertation, as well as untold hours of recorded interviews still awaiting transcription. Herein lies my dilemma. I undertook an extended project of participation-

I expected to spend weekend nights at Lerma's, for its historical significance as well as my familiarity with it. Close friends hosted a regular gathering there Sunday night, which would have provided me an entry point. But not long after I settled in again Lerma's closed, unexpectedly. Shut down by the city for code violations. This closure led to my thinking about the importance of performative space and became the basis for my chapter on the geographies of conjunto in San Antonio.

Additionally, I intended to interview dancers, patrons, and performers about their relationship with conjunto music. In my initial conceptualization of this project I anticipated recording and documenting an oral history of a subject's involvement and interaction with the scene as I inquired what attracts one to conjunto music and what sort of thoughts and feelings guide one's involvement in dancing and performing. This proved to me one of the more difficult aspects of my research. While I had initially expected to conduct around two dozen interviews, I ended up with half a dozen recorded conversations of varying length and quality. I attribute this difficulty in conducting formal interviews to a number of reasons, including a reluctance to be recorded by an unfamiliar person (or, in some instances, a familiar person operating in an unfamiliar capacity), as well as scheduling, coordination and just plain avoidance or refusal. I write this with understanding and without judgement. At the same time, I mourn the loss of an archive of oral histories of those involved with conjunto in one form or another who have since passed away.

The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at UC Berkeley approved my research and I received consent forms from all interview subjects. I conducted my interviews under a variety of conditions and circumstances. While I preferred to meet informants at their home or place of choosing, I also seized upon any opportunity as it presented itself. Thus, I spoke with informants perched on bar stools between or during sets. Our recorded conversations varied in length, from around 15 minutes to an hour and a half. I was unable to conduct follow-up interviews during the course of my research. As an aspect of my larger research project these interviews are absent from this dissertation. This portion of my research remains the most unfinished, as I have yet to transcribe and annotate the majority of the interviews I managed to conduct, and as such represents that area with the most underutilized potential. Interviewees could opt out of the interview at any time, or choose to be identified by a pseudonym. None did. I use the names of entertainers, musicians, performers, cultural workers or event organizers who had a prominent role (i.e. festival director, organization co-chair), and those published or quoted elsewhere wherever possible. However, for this dissertation I have opted to employ aliases for interview subjects who were not public figures, as well as any informant I spoke with during the course of my fieldwork outside of the formalized interview process. I indicate these aliases through the use of quotation marks when introducing these informants for the first time.

Concurrent with my fieldwork and collection of oral histories, I began to construct an archive of ephemera: documents, memorabilia, posters and fliers, announcements and articles, albums and videos, to document the moment. A snapshot of conjunto in 2010, if you will,

observation (characterized by my surreptitiously taking notes under the auspices of text messaging) with the anticipation that this project—what is now my dissertation—would be a reflection of my ethnographic fieldwork, supported by oral histories and grounded in archival research. However, as I moved from conceptualization to composition towards completion the further I strayed from this initial envisioning. Yet I would not be here without those experiences, the two years I spent listening to musicians and watching dancers and talking to anyone, everyone, about conjunto.

however incomplete and in progress. Through my fieldnotes, interviews and oral histories, and primary source documentation I triangulated my research.

I approached this research in an open-ended fashion. While I had a series of research questions and inquiries around dance and performativity, I also viewed this project as an opportunity to explore conjunto in its totality—not only ‘of the (present) moment’ but also its history and future. In doing so I position conjunto as the most significant musical form of Mexican American/Texas Mexican cultural expression from the mid-twentieth century—a bold statement, to be sure, but one I make in recognition of the genre’s importance and reach. At the same time, I place conjunto in conversation with a broader Texas Mexican musical scene, one that includes Tejano, orquesta, and other popular musics encountered and enjoyed across the region and by those with a connection to a place called Tejas (Vargas, 2002: 118).

Maricela Espinoza-Garcia, interim director of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center during the 2004 Tejano Conjunto Festival, put it best where she said, “we come out of conjunto.”¹⁵ The Texas Mexican conjunto defined a generation. As a form of public art, conjunto reflected the defining characteristics of mid-century Texas Mexicans: working class and male-dominant, with largely agrarian origins while steadily undergoing a process of urbanization. Conjunto musicians were and remain largely self-taught, as Mexican Americans as a whole were denied access to formal education. Even the Chicano musicians who gained fame in other genres—like country western legend Freddy Fender, or artists like Sunny & The Sunliners (originally Sunglows), recognized the importance of conjunto.¹⁶

Hyperbole aside, I nonetheless argue that in spite of its mid-century prominence and popularity especially among Texas-based and Texas-origin Mexican Americans conjunto has been and remains an overlooked and marginalized topic of academic inquiry, even within the field of Chicana and Chicano Studies. I saw this project as a corrective to this discrepancy. In hindsight I recognize that without a tightly focused set of parameters I rapidly became overwhelmed by the enormity of my project. Was I to strictly focus upon the dance, or solely collect oral histories of conjunto, or revisit a historical period, I might have completed all that follows in a timelier manner. Or perhaps not. While my project spiraled out of control those tangential inquiries led into different directions. My interests changed, as did the questions I asked of conjunto, all for the better. This dissertation is the culmination of those efforts.

¹⁵ Pérez, Alejandro. “Chicano Roots: Tejano Conjunto Festival celebrates and preserves a cultural tradition,” *San Antonio Current*. May 6, 2004.

¹⁶ Baldemar Huerta cut his teeth playing traditional Mexican music and rock and roll (as the Be-Bop Kid and Eddie con Los Shades, among other monikers) before adopting the stage name Freddy Fender. Sunny & The Sunglows (later, Sunny & The Sunliners) played a mix of Tejano/orquesta and rhythm & blues. They gained national prominence with their recording of Little Willie John’s “Talk to Me,” further underscoring the need for an analysis of Xicanx cultural production that recognizes the centrality of *Afromestizaje*, and a further interrogation concerning Mexican Americans’ relationship with Blackness. I write more about Freddy Fender in Chapter Six. For examples of Freddy Fender’s early years, please listen to Fender, Freddie. *Canciones de mi Barrio: Barrio Hits from the 50s and 60s* (Arhoolie, 1993). Music from Sunny Ozuna and his band may be found on various compilations, such as Sunny and the Sunliners, *15 Hits* Eagle Music Productions, 1996).

Chapter One

Performativity in the Social World of the Texas Mexican Conjunto: Disonancias, Discursos, y Preguntas¹⁷

Must the singing voice play by the same rules as the speaking voice? Must it bear the indelible mark of a binary gender system? Could the singing voice perhaps offer an escape from that system?

Judith Ann Peraino¹⁸

Theory lets one quantify the unquantifiable: emotions, feelings, things temporal and ephemeral. As an academic I have been trained to employ the theoretical as a means of precision in naming, describing, and explaining experiences and events—circling evermore towards a grand ‘unified theory’ of the social world. But the world as we know is not composed of binary equations, reducible to a master algorithm that spits out an answer for any situation. Rather, our world is messy, imprecise, mixed, blended, muddled. It is hybrid, ambiguous, both/and versus either/or. It resists classification, defies naming, challenges conventions. Those of us who have lived experiences being racialized, queer, or marginalized have long known and recognized this understanding of multiplicity— what W. E B. DuBois called double consciousness (*Souls of Black Folk*, 1903: 3) —as a way of being and knowing: an epistemology borne of bodily experience.

In *Chicano Poetics* Alfred Arteaga calls Chicanos products of hybridity and, as he reminds us, “a consequence of essential hybridity is subjective ambiguity” (11).¹⁹ For Arteaga, “Chicano subjectivity posits as central metaphor that it is mestizo and that its constitutive mode is hybridization” (25).²⁰ Or, to it put another way, the material condition (mestizaje) comes from the action of its creation (hybridity). Here I find useful the distinction Diana Taylor makes:

Whereas mestizaje tells a *history* of domination, rape, and reaffirmation, hybridity connotes a *process* of social categorization. Instead of the historical head-on of mestizaje (with all its violent and transformative fallout) lived on and through the body of the conquered, hybridity more commonly bespeaks a scientific, conscious project (2003: p. 101; emphasis hers).

¹⁷ Dissonances, Discourses, and Questions

¹⁸ “Listening to Gender,” (2007: 64).

¹⁹ As Arteaga reminds us,

As the border figures the Chicano in cultural difference, so Indianness figures the Chicano in racial difference. For while Chicano subjectivity comes about because of Anglo-American conquest of Northern Mexico, the Chicano body comes about because of *mestizaje*. ... like the border, Indianness is at once a site of origin and of cultural interaction. At each reproduction of the Chicano body, the racial characteristics of European and indigenous American compete for presence (10).

Elsewhere, Arteaga elaborates, calling mestizaje

an opportunity to consider Indianness, Europeanness and mestizo-ness as perspective bound, politically weighted mental constructs. Aztlán and the borderlands are therefore not the impossibilities they are for the nation states of the United States and Mexico but the open possibilities for negotiating difference (17).

²⁰ Likewise, while acknowledging the similarities between mestizaje and hybridization “as both represent the space-between,” Alicia Arrizón emphasizes the need to distinguish between the two because of the “distinct” nature of the “colonial experience” in Latin America (4). Please see Arrizón, Alicia, *Queering Mestizaje* (2006).

Mestizaje as a project has to be attuned to the manifestations of power and, concomitantly, the violence of the colonial regime.²¹ Furthermore, through José Vasconcelos' initial conceptualization, as an ideology mestizaje functioned to consolidate state power under the nation-building egresses of post-revolution Mexico by legitimizing an emergent ruling class through a remaking of racialized masculinity.²² Not only did mestizaje suggest that the outcome—children—of a mixture or blending of the European (Spanish) with the indigenous was forward-thinking and modern—again, via Vasconcelos' "Raza Cómica"—but it did so on terms that relegated indigenous people to a premodern, primitive past; erased an African presence, in spite of the great numbers of enslaved African peoples forcibly brought to colonial Mexico; and so denigrated indigenous womanhood that the sobriquet often attached to Malinche, Malintzin Tenapal, the enslaved interpreter considered to have birthed a mestizo people and betrayed their nation, is synonymous with colloquial epithets for sexual violence. This casual misogyny played out across time and space, as it continues to do so, from that most intimate and immediate of sites—the body—to and through histories and geographies of desire and being, of subjugation and liberation.

As the result of Indians and whites (Spanish) meeting on unequal terms, formed through force, through violence, through colonization, the Chicano body "that is the product of diverse roots is more than the sum of those roots" (11). I begin with Arteaga's reflections in order to ground this dissertation about the social world of the Texas Mexican conjunto within a conversation around identity and its meaning. For what better expression of a hybrid identity than a form of musical expression that combined multiple influences as it created something distinct, yet familiar. Arteaga describes the (Chicano, mestizo, hybrid) body as the "physical manifestation of the Chicano," an embodiment which rejects essentialist notions of racial purity (11). So, too, I argue conjunto as a cultural expression defined and shaped by the experiences of Texas-Mexicans in the twentieth century rejects purity and embraces the hybrid, ambiguous, marginal and multiple ways of being. In doing so it creates anew, out of forms and structures familiar and recognizable.

Conjunto is the ritual turned into repetition. It is, and has been for a century, a quotidian expression of a people. Musically "simple," with straightforward lyrics, and enjoyed by a working-class audience that seeks to dance, not dazzle, conjunto's complexity lies in its combination of constitutive elements: the relationships between music and dance which constitute performance; between history and memory expressed through movement; between

²¹ Arteaga's rejoinder that the body is the "physical manifestation of the Chicano" (11) locates the sexual and racial violence of coloniality upon our very being. In a similar vein, Rafael Pérez-Torres argues that mestizaje marks "a rupture in racial ideology" signified by "the embodiedness of power, the incarnation of colonial histories, the ways bodies are disciplined, formed, and deformed by ideology" (xiv). Please see Pérez-Torres, Rafael. *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

²² During the period of rebuilding following the Mexican Revolution, Saldaña-Portillo posits, Mexico's elites employed indigenismo in their attempts at restoring national unity. This revolutionary nationalism took form through and upon Mexico's indigenous people. "Mexican revolutionary indigenismo also inscribed particular Indian subjectivity within a teleology of becoming more perfect citizens," a "developmentalist logic" found in the "paradoxical relationship between indigenismo and *mestizaje*" (p. 294; emphasis hers). Thus, Saldaña-Portillo argues, as it "incorporates Indian difference as a source of historical and cultural pride" and "subsumes it into a sum greater than its Indian and Spanish parts" mestizaje comes to represent "perfect citizenship" in the Mexican nation (294), or, as she puts it, "Indians may be Mexico's ideal ancestors, but mestizos are Mexico's ideal citizens" (294-5). For more, please see Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina. "Reading a Silence: The 'Indian' in the Era of Zapatismo." 2002.

instrumentation and vocalization which create music; and dancer to dancer which creates community. While it would be erroneous of me to place conjunto at the core of Xicanx/Mexican American expressive cultures (musical and dance) for the entirety of the twentieth century it is not incorrect of me to underscore its centrality when speaking of cultural expression along the borderlands and across the diaspora. While its popularity has waned considerably from its heights (in the '60s, as conjunto, and in the '90s as Tejano) its influence, and its impact, endure. Reports of its demise have been greatly exaggerated—and yet those reports persist, in conversation and essay, article and anecdote, as they have for several decades.²³

Conjunto is and may forever be associated with a Texas Mexican working class. However, conjunto's marginalized status in the academic world has, I suggest, more to do with the class-based biases and aspirations as well as regional differences of those U.S.-born and/or raised Mexican Americans (myself included) who do write about cultural studies. As a form of cultural expression rooted in the Mexican American working-class conjunto lacks sex appeal; it is neither cutting-edge nor trendy, new or groundbreaking. In contrast, even the terms used to describe it—“traditional,” “authentic,” “basic,” “folk”—reference an earlier time, an agrarian

²³ Alongside Peña's musings about conjunto reaching its apex with El Conjunto Bernal I encountered a number of variations upon this theme. Certainly, I find myself in agreement with Peña's characterization of the seventies, eighties and nineties as “a period of consolidation and decline” (*Texas Mexican Conjunto*, 105). (If he was to update his text, I wonder, would he include the subsequent two decades as part of this period?) In some instances, I speculate the concern around conjunto's decline is meant as a clarion-call, as if to say that we are in danger of losing this aspect of our cultural patrimony if we don't act to actively value it. Certainly, this seems to be an underlying assertion of Juan Tejeda's, especially in my reading of his public statements around the earliest iterations of the Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio. Others echo this sentiment for similar reasons, but with perhaps less clear intent. Often, statements around the declining interest in conjunto contradict one another. For example, in 1990 Joe Nick Patoski wrote

Ten years ago, conjunto was a tradition in decline. Second generation Mexican Texans derisively called it wetback music. But a growing worldwide interest in 'roots' music coincides with *tejanos'* rediscovery of their native sound. Today a larger international audience that neither speaks Spanish nor understands Mexican culture in Texas has come to appreciate conjunto's virtues (37).

Over two decades later, in a long-form essay around preservationist Lupe Saenz's efforts—and the xenophobic angle it takes—Saul Elbein characterizes the genre as moribund. He writes

Saenz, like many Tejanos, is angry because he sees conjunto, the traditional music of Tejanos, vanishing from the airwaves and record stores, replaced by *norteño*. Since conjunto's boom days, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the style has faded. Except for a couple of stations in Corpus Christi and San Antonio, you can't hear any conjunto on commercial radio anymore. Most of the conjunto record labels—Falcon, Del Valle, Bernal—have gone out of business. Only a couple survive.

Writing in the *San Antonio Current*, Debbie Nathan subtly positions herself as a gatekeeper of cultural authenticity through the guise of an essay covering just how much conjunto is to be found in San Antonio.

...Then, when the show winds up after six days, everyone will leave, and most of the 'minorities'—the Anglos, blacks, and Latino intelligentsia—will spend the next year without their conjunto music, except for what they get off their Los Lobos and Super Seven CDs. These poor souls will sit at home with their canned sounds, or spin them at parties if they're lucky. They won't know that practically every day of the week, and at almost every hour of the day or night, they can find living, breathing, and often stellar conjunto bands in venues with ridiculously low cover charges, or no cover at all. Nor will they know they can turn on the radio and thereby instantly 'enroll' in San Quilmas' greatest institution of musical learning: 1540 on the AM dial—KEDA (8).

Please see Patoski, Joe Nick. “Squeeze Play: Three masters show why conjunto, the accordion music of the Tex-Mex border, is hotter than Lajitas in August.” *Texas Monthly* August 1990 Vol 18 #8 p. 36-38; Elbein, Saul. “Get Your Norteño Out of My Conjunto.” *The Texas Observer*. March 20, 2011.

<http://www.texasobserver.org/datetime/get-your-norteño-out-of-my-conjunto> Last accessed June 26, 2018; Nathan, Debbie. “Conjunto every day (and night): How musicians, fans, and DJs keep a magical music alive in San Antonio,” *San Antonio Current*, May 11-17, 2000 (8-13).

past, a moment in history perceived to be long past and irrelevant to contemporary life, or even to the project of modernity itself. In short, conjunto is not seen as forward-thinking, dynamic, or modern, but rather stuck—nay, trapped, frozen—in an all-too-recent past.

I wish to reframe this conversation.

Conjunto has never had the mass-marketed “crossover” appeal of other forms of Latin American/Latinx popular musics. Unlike the periodic appropriation of Black cultural expression, legions of trend-savvy Anglo youth never took up conjunto performative aesthetics; the (button) accordion never worked its way back to the center of the stage in pop music; and polkas remain as passé as they were when Laurence Welk jokes first became popular. And then there is the question of country-of-origin, as norteño and Mexican-origin regional music (banda, norteño, grupera, et al.) supplemented and then replaced conjunto as the popular music genre within greater Mexico. Rather than viewing this occurrence through an anti-Mexican/anti-immigration lens as Elbein (2011) documents, I find that a demographic shift coupled with commercial viability and marketing dollars does more to explain the paucity of conjunto on the airwaves and at the dancehalls than any analysis based upon denigrating Mexicans. Besides, in what is a common trope in writing about music, as music fans of any genre outside the mainstream knows, the “good stuff” isn’t played on the radio or marketed commercially.

Furthermore, the history of conjunto confounds an (im)migrant/Mexican-origin narrative trope, in ways both straightforward and far more complex. While the genre’s sense of place and historical antecedents are encountered in the Texas Mexican frontera region any detailed analysis suggests a complex web that confounds teleological thinking. The words of Paul Gilroy are particularly relevant here. Writing of a different cultural context his musing are nonetheless relevant for my study. He asks

What special analytical problems arise if a style, genre, or particular performance of music is identified as being expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it? What contradictions appear in the transmission and adaptation of this cultural expression by other diaspora populations, and how will they be resolved? How does the hemispheric [179] displacement and global dissemination of black music get reflected in localised traditions of critical writing, and, once the music is perceived as a world phenomenon, what value is placed upon its origins, particularly if they come into opposition against further mutations produced during its contingent loops and fractal trajectories? Where music is thought to be emblematic and constitutive of racial difference rather than just associated with it, how is music used to specify general issues pertaining to the problem of racial authenticity and the consequent self-identity of the ethnic group? (*Black Atlantic*, 179-180).

Far too often the story of conjunto—indeed, that of Chicana and Chicano cultural production in general—repeats a similar series of stories bound by binary logics and framed by that of south-to-north migration. Yet the question of where conjunto came from itself interests me far less than questions around the many influences conjunto had—and continues to have—as well as the various ways in which the genre negotiated its disparate influences. I place this conversation within the broader context of the twentieth century and attribute meaning and significance to dance, instrumentation, vocality, and geography.

In considering the combination of factors, events, innovations, and experiences that comprise the Texas Mexican conjunto I am not arguing for an isolationist position, as if conjunto

existed in a cultural vacuum. I recognize the multiple, shared connections, influences and commonalities conjunto holds across borderlands—even as, for example, these are shared by *norteños* in Northern Mexico and extend to Eastern European communities in the Midwestern United States. I find it equally important to examine conjunto, its development and expression, as something created by, influenced, and enjoyed by Chicanas and Chicanos. This line of thought—with its associated implications of authenticity and originality—takes me out of a framework of unidirectional transmission (‘north from Mexico’) into one of adaptation, creation, and contribution.²⁴ Instead, I frame conjunto as a creative cultural form which negotiates multiple sites of identity formation and contestation, and I emphasize the value inherent in an everyday form of expression which has gone largely underappreciated by critical analysis in and out of the academy.

The Pleasure of the Dance

The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas--for my body does not have the same ideas I do.

Barthes (1975: 17)

Time and time again throughout this dissertation I return to the significance and meaning of the dance in conjunto. More than just a frivolous activity I argue that dancing is a loci of multiple signifiers connecting divergent histories and diverse bodies. Conjunto dancing is a social activity; it is communal, collective, collaborative, and, in the case of conjunto, culturally-defined. Has conjunto become commodified, as Peña contemplated some three decades ago? Does it remain as commonplace in the everyday lives of the Texas Mexican working class, thereby forming an integral part of one’s identity? Does the conjunto dancehall challenge and replicate hegemonic masculinity through word, song, and movement as female and male bodies contend with, negotiate, and reify definitions of masculinity and femininity on the dance floor and on stage? As studies of dance cultures demonstrate, dancing as an activity is connected to the playing and performing of music. This, to me, suggests that the importance of the relationship between the performer (musician) and participant merits further study, analysis and theorizing of music within a broader social world. The song does not exist without the singer, the performance without the participant, the dancehall without the community.

“Music moves through time; it is a temporal medium,” Tia DeNora explains, in emphasizing its role as a “powerful *aide-mémoire*.” She continues, writing

Like an article of clothing or an aroma, music is part of the material and aesthetic environment in which it was once playing, in which the past, now an artifact of memory and its constitution, was once a present. Unlike material objects, however, music that is associated with past experience was, within that experience, heard over time. And when it is music that is associated with a particular moment and a particular space, music reheard and recalled provides a device for unfolding, for replaying, the temporal structure of that

²⁴ Octavio Paz’s disparaging words about pachucos and pochos in *El laberinto de la Soledad* (1961) is an example of the critique that Mexican Americans are incomplete, inferior, and inauthentic Mexicans. For example, please see Paz’ first chapter, “The *Pachuco* and Other Extremes,” in his book.

moment, its dynamism as emerging experience. This is why, for so many people, the past ‘comes alive’ to its soundtrack (“Music and Self-Identity,” 144).

In a similar manner Josh Kun reminds us

music is always from somewhere else and is always en route to somewhere else. It is always post- whatever context or circumstance defines it. It has always the potential to defy you, move beyond you, be something you never thought it could be. It is made of difference and speaks to difference. Music can be of a nation, but it is never exclusively national; it always overflows, spills out, sneaks through, reaches an ear on the other side of the border line, on the other side of the sea (20).

Music, he continues, “does not respect places precisely because it is capable of inhabiting them while moving across them—of arriving while leaving. Through music, space is constructed and de-constructed, shaped and shattered, filled up and hollowed out” (22). Kun asks that we think of music “in terms of the differences it contains [and] makes audible.” To this end he proposes the concept of the audiotopia—what he describes as “small, momentary, lived utopias built, imagined, and sustained through sound, noise, and music”—as we think of music “in terms of space and in terms of its spaces—the spaces that the music itself contains, the spaces that music fills up, the spaces that music helps us to imagine as listeners occupying our own real and imaginary spaces” (21). An audiotopia “offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world” ... “the audiotopia is a musical space of difference, where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other.” Kun considers them “contact zones,” both

sonic and social spaces where disparate identity-formations, cultures, *and* geographies historically kept and mapped separately are allowed to interact with each other as well as enter into relationships whose consequences for cultural identification are never predetermined (23).

Kun’s audiotopia extends Foucault’s notion of the heterotopia beyond the visual realm. Like the Foucaultian heterotopia it is based upon, Kun’s formulation of the audiotopia represents an imaginary possibility, a somewhere or something else made real through sound and song, in contrast to the representation of a utopia as an idealized impossibility, an imaginary something that could never be. Foucault developed the idea of the heterotopia as an alternative to the paradox of the utopia. Whereas the utopia represents an idealized, if unreal, space—an unactualized and impossible imaginary—Foucault suggests in contrast the concept of the heterotopia. Heterotopic space is encountered in a material, real space: a “counter-site,” a “kind of effectively enacted utopia” where the “real sites” of a culture “are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1967). For Foucault the analogy turns upon the visual: the mirror represents a utopia, “since it is a placeless place” ... an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface. Yet the mirror also represents a heterotopia, since it exists in reality. As Foucault writes, the mirror

makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since

in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (1967).

Kun terms the audiotopia “a musical space of difference, where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other.” He considers them “contact zones,” both

sonic and social spaces where disparate identity-formations, cultures, *and* geographies historically kept and mapped separately are allowed to interact with each other as well as enter into relationships whose consequences for cultural identification are never predetermined (23).

Kun’s audiotopia enables another world to become possible through sound. However, it is worth noting that it does not exist in a vacuum. If this strikes one as obvious it bears repeating if only because of the extremes taken to study music as music; that is, as song or sound, and not from, of, and—as it becomes, as in the case of conjunto—belonging to a larger social world. What gives conjunto meaning is its context and its connection to a broader social world, for without this understanding we are left with simplistic, superficial interpretations of conjunto music—as music, as if it could in fact exist independently of its creation and consumption. These links between cultural production with the sociohistorical and sociopolitical context are apparent in the more obvious and overt examples, such as protest songs from the sixties; Latin America’s *nueva canción*; New York’s politically-tinged *salsa dura*; or the birth of hip-hop. Along the Texas-Mexican borderlands the *corrido* exemplifies this relationship—be it the heroic *corridos* celebrating armed resistance in the early parts of the twentieth century, or the migration *corridos* popularized over the past four or so decades by groups such as *Los Tigres del Norte*.²⁵ In both instances while the form (heroic *corridos*, migration *corridos*) has deep-reaching historical antecedents as well as a long-lasting influence, any interpretation or analysis of them must be grounded within their sociohistorical and sociopolitical context. But what of a (seemingly) apolitical music, one whose primary impetus appears to be dancing, enjoyment, pleasure? A genre which sings of the frivolous and fun, one that had been devoid of lyrics for the first few decades of its presence? In light of these characteristics held by but not exclusively unique to the Texas-Mexican conjunto, it is crucial to understand the context out of which it emerged, and in which it was and remains experienced. As Kelley (1993) reminds us, the history of working-class resistance does not take the same shape or form of middle-class social movements. Why should we expect forms of cultural expression, such as music and dance, to do likewise?

Frederic Jameson, writing in the introduction to Jacques Attali’s *Noise*, reminds us that music has “the strongest affinities with that most abstract of all social realities, economics, with which it shares a peculiar ultimate object which is *number*” (vii). However, as if to underscore the importance of situating cultural production (in this case music) within a sociohistorical context, Jameson cautions, whether the production of music materializes in a utopian or dystopian manner is itself contained “as possibilities whose realization only political praxis can

²⁵ For more on the *corrido* and its contemporaries, please see Chapter Three. To perhaps further belabor the point of this sentence, to the latter I wish to point out that Mexicans in the United States have composed songs about migrating to and within the U.S. as long as there has been Mexican migration within the U.S., and to the former I wish to underscore that, too, there have been songs of Mexican resistance to Anglo oppression as long as there has been Mexican resistance to Anglo oppression, which is to say since colonization.

decide” (xiii). Wither the (gendered, racialized) body? Beyond a description of the mechanics and movements comprising each twist and turn—and, if this is the metric then I will leave it to the reader to evaluate whether or not I do justice to the dance or fail miserably—I believe it necessary to examine the erotics of the dance: desire, from the most intimate level of the self to that of a people, a community, a collective; the interplay and negotiation of gendered forms of expression; and the importance of reclaiming sites of pleasure within the alienation of late capitalism and a postindustrial neoliberal economy as encountered at the tail end of the twentieth century. In contrast to the demands of capitalist production—wherein the body is a tool to be used for the purpose of wage-labor, to maximize the accumulation of wealth for those in positions of power—dancers, through the physical action of dancing, reclaim the body as a site for the creation and reproduction of pleasure. As a site of bodily pleasure, I position dancing as an “unmistakably collective” and communal activity which goes against the Fordian regulation of the body and bodily functions (Kelley 1993: 84).²⁶

Far too often the physical movements associated with dancing are framed in a binaristic dichotomy as being ‘of the body’ and not ‘of the mind’, as bodily knowledges and embodied practices—especially those that may be quotidian in nature, such as conjunto dancing—do not occupy the same status as other intellectual activities such as reading or writing. I wish to reframe this perception, for movement through physicality embodies thought; it is a creative, dynamic, and improvisational “theory of the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981: 23). Rhythms structure dance moves; rather than constrain or contain movement (as in an assembly line) however, dance in conjunto signifies a freeing of the body from the prescribed locations of the shop’s floor, machine’s controls, or office’s cubicle. Dancers restructure time: their steps synched in tune with the music represent an ordering of rhythm that is undercut, or dare I say even subverted, if one misses a beat. In couple dancing this form of everyday choreography requires movement in tandem, an unspoken production of bodily communication played out as a negotiated disciplinary device regulating movement.²⁷ Yet, at the same time, in ways perceptible and not, this symbiotic interplay falters, failing often, in ways which suggest to me a symbolic slippage that is in many ways essential to its effective operation. For what is a new dance move but an innovation or improvisation?

That which we consider “development” did not occur instantaneously. As the South Texas borderlands grappled midcentury with the trappings of modernity the brown bodies upon whose labor so much of capitalist expansion relied upon sought and found release in the weekend’s play. Conjunto dancing is a site of contradiction: what else explains the logics behind relaxing through the strenuous physical activity of dancing, or how dancers spend their personal, private time in the most public of settings? It is not just the musicians who are on stage; dancers perform—in the most conventional of definitions—visible by all surrounding the pista de baile as they step and spin to the latest or longstanding polkas.²⁸ Never mind that in the dance cultures of South Texas (and beyond, when thinking of the migratory paths taken by Texas Mexicans) the widespread practice of dancing in a counterclockwise circle means one is as likely to wind up in

²⁶ This is not to say that the economy of conjunto dance somehow exists beyond the capitalist system, or that the social space of conjunto dance is free from competition and exists outside of social hierarchies bound to wage-labor. Nor is it to say even that I wish to privilege a Marxist analysis in suggesting as much.

²⁷ I use negotiation here to highlight the shared decision-making calculus between conjunto dancers. Terms like ‘leader’ and ‘follower’, when applied to couples’ dancing, obscure the myriad ways in which conjunto dancers nonverbally negotiate their movements continually. With and within each step and every turn dancers determine solutions for any number of possible equations involving rotational momentum and angular velocity over time.

²⁸ Pista de baile: dance floor.

the same place one started. Western teleost dictates that time moves in a straight line, always forward, yet conjunto disrupts this regulatory mechanism song by song, dance by dance, step by step, to the rhythm of the polka or the bouncy beat of another cumbia. As Robin Kelley reminds us, once working bodies are no longer working they are freed, at least temporarily, from the commodification that comes with wage labor (1993).

The pursuit of pleasure, of leisure, defies dominant ideologies prioritizing productivity. Yet it is only through wage-labor and an expansive opportunity structure that the Mexican American working and middle classes were able to participate in an expressive dance culture. Furthermore, it was only through their patronage that the structures—dance halls— and performers—musicians—were likewise able to exist. It is this material aspect of music production, and the creation and maintenance of conjunto spaces, that comes to concern the latter portion of my investigation. The urban geography of San Antonio enabled the rise of a number of night clubs, bars, ballrooms, dancehalls, and ad-hoc conjunto performance venues during the mid-twentieth century. These locales dotted the landscape—concentrated in places like Guadalupe Street near downtown San Antonio, or along Old Highway 90 past where it split from West Commerce—giving rise to a performative economy by mid-century that flourished, enabling (some) musicians to work as musicians. I cannot understate the importance of this enterprise in conjunction with cultural production, be it for the spaces and sites for expressive dances or experimentations in musicality. Beyond (although connected to) the economics of space I wish to consider the poetics of place—the “formative and utopian potential that dancing in a club engenders,” as dance scholar Ramón Rivera-Servera, writing of a different yet relevant content, reminds us. In this essay Rivera-Servera points specifically to club dancing as a site where queer latinidad is practiced and performed, calling it an “improvisational social practice” with both “immediate materiality” from practices such as preparing for, traveling with, and socializing with others as well as an “utopian futurity” predicated upon “the emergence of community, the world of possibilities and strategies, [and] the promise of pleasure” (134-5). Yet, he reminds us, the utopian aspects of community and pleasure “must always be negotiated, sometimes even fought for, in its live material context” (135). On the dance floor social hierarchies complicate these exchanges. Rivera-Servera suggests “it is in the improvisational bodily articulations of the dancers, their theories in practice, and in the transactions that unravel from these actions, where utopia, in its connotations both as liberation from oppression and the constitution of community, resides” (135). Ultimately, he writes, “In proposing utopia as a theory in practice of queer latinidad I propose these choreographies as practices of resistance” (137).

I borrow liberally from Rivera-Servera’s work as he complicates an assumed interpretation of the gay club as a ‘safe space’. Paraphrasing Walter Hughes, Rivera-Servera reframes the club “as a disciplinary social space in itself”; that is the club imposes its own set of disciplinary technologies, from social mores to choreographic behavior—dance moves, in other words, structured by the music being played (145). The beat goes on, and on, and as it does it “animates and structures social exchanges on the dance floor since it influences how bodies will move and thus under what conditions they will relate to each other” (145). Under Rivera-Servera’s model, the dance floor is “always involved in an economy of hierarchies,” such as the construction of normative homosexuality—i.e. white and male— in mainstream gay clubs in the U.S. (145). For Latin@ queer dancers this model is upended, as they are “marked” upon entering the ‘safe space’ of the club. He argues that dance, “as an act of self-presentation and community building,” is “one of the mechanisms through which Latina/o queers negotiate their place and

membership within and outside the club. ... The emergence of utopia for queer Latina/o dancers is both an individual act of survival and a communitarian experience of and yearning for freedom” (145). As Rivera-Servera found, this involves not simply dancing but multiple, intersecting experiences, sometimes in contrast or conflict with one another (145). As Rivera-Servera complicates the notion of a ‘safe space’ for the expression of queer latinidad he centers the primacy of the brown, queer Latin@ body. In contrast to Kun’s audiotopic spaces Rivera-Servera concentrates on the materiality of the body itself as a site of creation. Here, it is the act of dancing itself that

constitutes the utopian ‘doing’ of the club by materializing bodily [146] exchanges that articulate, showcase, even flaunt queer sexuality publicly. ... The practice of dancing in clubs engages bodies in social dance and in the realm of improvisation. These physical exchanges are characterized by dancers constructing their identities as subjects and community members in space, in an environment established for intimate social interaction[s] ... made possible by the theatricality of the club environment (146-7).

If there appears to be a shifting fluidity to this conception, I believe that is intentional. Improvisation is key to Rivera-Servera’s conception of the dance as a multi-layered, complex process operating upon multiple levels:

how dancers react to the sensory stimuli of the club, the body in relation to its surroundings in the moment, constitutes a training of sorts; both in techniques of self-affirmation as dancers attempt to perform themselves in public, and in communitarian practice as they share the moment of cultural performance with others. Although structures of power constitute these social spaces and exchanges, the live transactions that take place within them (re)define and at times challenge them through performance. Focusing on the kinesthetic rhetorics of the dancing body, and particularly local interventions by individual dancers, offers a radically different picture of the club experience. A discourse focused on improvisation allows for the articulation of strategy within the (dis)orderly logic of the dance club. Here perhaps, within the context that showcases spontaneous social relations and the skills developed to thrive within them, lies the utopian potential of club dancing. This is where the presentness of performance—its ability to do something, and the versatility of improvisation, the possibility of transformation and change—becomes the driving force of dance culture (147).

Here we encounter the power of the everyday in shaping identity—or rather, identities—as a process, as something set in motion through motion: a process of becoming through the action of being. I argue for an analytical calculus capable of tracking changes. The fluidity of queer latinidades encountered through what Rivera-Servera terms “dramaturgical processes” tells us that identities and meanings attached to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity are also always in flux. Whereas Chicano and Mexican American masculinity takes on a specific meaning within the social space of the dancehall—the male-as-leader in a heterosexual space—this dynamic does not remain static nor fixed. As Rivera-Servera writes,

Through dancing, performers navigate the specific social realm of the club. Sexuality, race, gender, and class are negotiated among patrons who travel to these sites in search of

both individual pleasure and community. These acts of affirmation and community performed in the club may in turn reshape the attitudes and approaches dancers take to their daily lives (148).

In the nightclubs and dancehalls, festivals and family gatherings, we find a making and, as importantly, a *remaking* of racialized masculinities. The performative dynamics of conjunto ascribe a range of roles, contingent upon the context and confined by gender identities. In San Antonio I identify the work of cultural institutions that center queer Xicana/Mexicana/women of color as having been crucial in the creation of alternative spaces where one encounters conjunto. Specifically, I think of the events and programs hosted by the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, especially featuring conjunto legend Eva Ybarra. I'll return to this later in the dissertation.

Festivals, gatherings, and community events are sites where gender is made and remade as well as destabilized and challenged. Here children and youth are socialized into gendered identities, as young girls and boys participate and practice steps with their elders. This modeling carefully follows gendered roles to an extent. Whereas heteronormative social norms dictate fathers and male elders do not dance with their sons past a certain age, the unspoken guidelines governing dancing among daughters, mothers, and female elders are far less restrictive.

I selected the primary and periphery locations where I observed and participated in the conjunto scene based upon my personal familiarity with the conjunto scene in San Antonio and the surrounding areas in combination with invitations, recommendations, and suggestions from those I spoke with as well as announcements and listings from periodicals, the radio, or word of mouth. I sought a range of venues, including regional and nationally-recognized festivals; neighborhood bars; conjunto talleres, or workshops; and historic or significant locations. I encountered conjunto everywhere—in San Antonio conjunto *is* everywhere—and yet there remained sites that remain outside the range of my project.

I was not invited into, nor did I go on my own to, the gay and lesbian bars clustered around San Antonio College and San Pedro, or to the Chicana lesbian-identified bar on the deep southside. I recognize and acknowledge these gaps in my fieldwork and subsequently my observations and theorizing. At the same time, I must honor and respect the limitations of my positionality as well as the privileges I have and am granted. In so much as I theorize around the construction of gender within conjunto it is in a context that is mindful of my role as an ethnographer. Thus, while I did not include any explicitly identified gay or lesbian conjunto bars within my research—at the time of my fieldwork, I was not aware of such a place—this is not to say that conjunto wasn't found in gay and lesbian bars in San Antonio.

I place this conversation in contrast to my ethnographic fieldwork at one of my primary research sites, a small conjunto bar on the southside of San Antonio. While this was not an explicitly identified queer conjunto site it does not fit neatly within the confines of hegemonic heteronormativity. Instead I situate it as tacitly ambiguous, to contest any reading of the bar as heteronormative.²⁹ This visible-but-not-stated identification complicates any interpretation of

²⁹ During my fieldwork I would often solicit input for sites—venues—to investigate. During one conversation with a member of a band I had come to know I mentioned in passing I had been to this particular site. The musician responded critically, saying “a lotta *lesbians* go there” (emphasis his). This was the only time I had noted such an overtly homophobic remark about the venue during the course of my fieldwork. This venue was one of my primary sites for participant-observation, so it follows that those who I encountered at or associated with the site more likely than not did not share this particular informant's perspective.

racialized gender within that space. Furthermore, it contests any easy categorization of conjunto as being inherently homophobic. This is not to downplay the intense homophobia and sexism encountered within the scene, or amongst Mexican/Chican@ communities, as much as society as a whole; rather, in place of reductive binaries we find far more complex realities based in the many lived experiences of brown bodies dancing, singing, laughing, and loving.

Performative erotics are at once both liberating and normalizing, as the freedom of movement abuts expectations of behavior and comportment rooted in gender and class mores. Yet, I argue, even within the heteronormative space of mass-audience conjunto dance, be it at a ballroom, nightclub, or community festival, the style of dance itself allows for an expansion of gendered identities and expressions. In a heteronormative space the sight of two women dancing together to a cumbia may go unnoted. However, should the band or DJ switch to a polka ranchera and one dancer pull the other in close to twist and turn al estilo taquachito, reactions—whether spoken or unspoken—may vary, from the disinterested to the disgusted in some cases, as well as from the ambivalent to the appreciative. The dance floor thus becomes a site where performative identities that might otherwise be seen as potentially queer are given more flexibility, more fluidity. Yet, much like a smooth pasadita where the dancers rock, sway, and move in tandem two steps forward before taking one step back, any such notion of the dance itself as a liberatory space pushes against the constraints of heteronormativity. Limón reminds us that the women who dance “are continuously forced to contest the sexual commodification of their bodies” as the men seek out their movidas—a caló term that here encompasses such things as hook-ups, one-night stands, and extramarital affairs (159). To be clear, this does take place.³⁰ Yet, during the course of my fieldwork I did not find the pursuit of movidas, or even the performance of heteronormative (Chicano) masculinity to be as prominent as Limón’s monograph suggests.³¹

Yet within these spaces the transgression of class boundaries—or, rather, a perception of such an act—elicit a separate form of social critique. Thus, within the working-class environment of the Texas Mexican conjunto, expectations and aspiration of behavior, appearance, and mobility remain at play. The caveat to this, of course, is the ability to change and alter one’s appearance. Style politics play a role here as much as anything; and whether one affects a ranchero or pachuco sensibility—or just goes out dancing in shorts, a t-shirt, and gym shoes—is and is not indicative of social mobility or economic status.

Tradition, Change, and Commercialization

³⁰ “Juan,” a regular at the Royal Palace Ballroom, clearly enjoyed dancing. When we first spoke, I mentioned I had seen him out dancing before. “Ah, I’m one of the best,” he told me. “I love polkas. I’ve been dancing all my life.” I asked him what the side by side dance is called. Juan is disdainful, almost. “Ah, I don’t dance like that. I do a lot of turns. Everybody dances differently.” Our conversation supported Limón’s assertion—that men and women go to dance in order to do just that: dance (159). But underscoring Juan’s interest and enjoyment in dancing is his pursuit of women. Characteristic of his self-deprecating humor, Juan told me, “Women have been my downfall. I was a real smart kid . . . I’m a lover not a fighter.”

³¹ This is not to imply that Limón was in the wrong. My fieldwork experience occurred at a different moment in San Antonio’s cultural history, under different conditions, and motivated by different—although not necessarily exclusive—interests. At the time of Limón’s fieldwork conjunto and Tejano enjoyed far greater popularity than in 2010, as evidenced by the vibrant scene and the proliferation of dancehalls and performance venues. Certainly, however, it is worth noting that the patrons who attended the daily dances at the Royal Palace Ballroom are in all likelihood of the same generation that Limón encountered in pursuit of the devil dancing in South Texas.

Over the course of the twentieth century the importance of agricultural and, later, manufacturing sectors declined in Texas as with the United States as employment-opportunities shifted toward a low-wage service-sector economy (Montejano, 1987; Rosales, 2000). Concomitant with this shift was a change in the structure of society; for example, the rise of a predominantly male and Anglo managerial class. As the industrial revolution spurred a migration from rural to urban, areas manufacturing opened up new, albeit limited, opportunities for people of color as well as white women. The most dramatic example of this occurred during the period of mobilization for World War II as Anglo male laborers participated en masse in the wartime effort. This vacancy enabled Black and Mexican American men and women, as well as white women, to enter into manufacturing and low-level managerial positions that were previously dominated by Anglo men. The discovery of oil in East Texas at the beginning of the 1900s facilitated a shift in the Lone Star State from an agriculturally based economy to a more industrialized one. As industry and manufacturing grew, employers took advantage of low wages and right-to-work laws, concentrating Mexican and Mexican American workers in the garment and food industries: the economic growth of Texas came on the backs of Raza.

Race, class, and gender stratified employment opportunities for Mexican Americans; and while the post-war economy expanded the opportunity structure it did not succeed in dismantling a segregated labor force. When Chicanas/os transitioned from agricultural labor and moved into urban areas their opportunities were concentrated in low wage, labor intensive areas: domestic work; pecan shelling; garment manufacturing. Here the rise and subsequent decline of San Antonio's apparel industry makes for a telling case study. By the 1920s the garment industry had a solid foothold in the South Texas economy. While the garment industry continued to grow following WWII, the labor movement faltered. Part of this was due to the passage of Texas' notorious right-to-work law of 1947, and the Landrum-Griffin Act in 1959, both of which weakened unions (Ledesma, 1992: p. 51). Following WWII, the center of the garment manufacturing industry in Texas shifted from San Antonio to the El Paso-Juarez border region. This change in San Antonio's economy from the mid-50s on, or "from labor intensive to capital intensive meant that the era of the small, individually-owned garment firm was long gone" (Ledesma, p. 157). During this period Mexican Americans worked in the remaining San Antonio garment firms such as Tex-Son and Juvenile Manufacturing, otherwise known as Santone Industries. During the mid-1950s, Juvenile/Santone Industries employed 500 workers, thereby making it the largest garment factory in San Antonio (Ledesma, 1992). In 1960 they opened a plant on South Zarzamora Street, which Levi Strauss & Company soon contracted and, later, purchased outright. This plant—the most profitable of all Levi's US production facilities—would remain in operation until 1989, when it shuttered its doors and displaced scores of workers.

To recap: during the long twentieth century the economic base of South Texas shifted across three phrases. First, in the early-to-mid part of the century, from an agrarian and rural-based economy to one that was urban and industrial. Then, during the latter part of the century, a turn towards deindustrialization and neoliberalization, marked by the passage of NAFTA. Concomitant with the rise and fall of industrialization came the benefits and trappings of a modernity which led to a change—or more accurately, a challenge—to existing hierarchies of race and gender in the social order (Montejano, 1987). By the tail end of the twentieth century, however, economic opportunities shifted and Texas heralded the arrival of late capitalism and the neo-liberal state with the decline of its manufacturing base. Without question this had implications beyond the workplace; entertainment and leisure activities underwent a similar transition.

As the nature of the employment opportunities for Mexican Americans shifted, from manufacturing to service, the leisure activities also shifted. As noted, conjunto's popularity—measured by any number of metrics, including record sales, performance venues, festival attendance, and musician wages—has been in decline since the heydays of the 1960s. Not coincidentally, the decline runs parallel to the decline of the manufacturing economy. Rather than sounding the death knells for conjunto, however, and belaboring the decline in popularity as evidence of conjunto's demise I wish to reframe the discussion by emphasizing that conjunto is one among many genres enjoyed by a broader Mexican-origin listening community.

Locating conjunto as a “traditional” form of culturally-rooted music has the unintentional side effect of freezing conjunto, casting it as something static and immutable, resistant to change while not reflective of the changes that continually take place.³² Ethnomusicologist Marion Jacobson cautions against this tendency, encountered in various accordion-themed festivals, towards making a cultural artefact into a “living museum” or “live cultural exhibit” (*Squeeze This!*: 191). Tradition also speaks of authenticity. The oft-repeated phrases and slogans of “puro conjunto,” “real conjunto,” and “música tradicional” that I came across repeatedly illustrate this conflation of the authentic and the traditional. To be pure, real and traditional all signify the same thing, and carry undertones of a Chicano masculinist-nationalist project, illustrated as much by what it is as by what it is not. The performance of tradition is itself a project of authenticity within the conjunto: performers consciously and subconsciously enact or subvert genre norms through their playing, performance persona, style of dress and branding, and even choice of instrumentation. Or, as Raymond Williams explains

it only takes two generations to make anything *traditional*: naturally enough, since that is the sense of *tradition* as an active process. But the word moves again and again toward *age-old* and toward ceremony, duty and respect. Considering only how much has been handed down to us, and how various it actually is, this, in its own way, is both a betrayal and a surrender (*Keywords*, 1976: 269; emphasis his).

As Deborah Vargas reminds us, Chicano musical scholarship, such as that written by Paredes, Peña, Limón and San Miguel, “foreground Tejano masculinity as the subject of cultural resistance to Anglo Texan hegemony.” Here we find the requirements of ‘tradition’ and a hegemonic cultural nationalist-masculine narrative linked together as the sources of and key contributions to the canon can be traced to individual, male performers, reflecting “a heteronormative temporality within the cultural-nationalist imaginary of *Tejas* and its gendered and sexual subjectivities” (*Dissonant Divas*, 111). The accordion, as the visible signifier of conjunto and of a musically-rooted Texas Mexican cultural identity, serves as the medium through which performers and participants identify as masculine or feminine. As Halley and Alvarado argue in “Why Are There So Few Women Conjunto Artists?” patrilineal and heterosocial codes govern the playing of the accordion, as well as the transmission of these abilities. They point to the way in which accordion instruction is transmitted from elder males to

³² As a consequence, conjunto music, and the living, breathing performers and participants who constantly breathe life into the genre, become artifacts to be documented and filed away. As a maligned and oft-ignored genre this form of cultural production is not even deemed worthy of in-depth, continual study. So positioned, conjunto becomes a curiosity, almost, a cultural quirk of a depoliticized past.



Figure 2: Conjunto virtuoso Eva Ybarra on stage at the 2012 Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio. Photograph by the author.

younger men and boys; women and girls are excluded from this process, largely limited to supporting vocalist roles, if present.³³ Thus, within this context, multi-instrumentalist and accordion virtuoso Eva Ybarra is not evaluated upon accordion-playing abilities alone. Rather, and regardless of her abilities, her playing goes against the spoken and assumed restrictions and expectations of Mexican American women under a cultural-nationalist reading (*Puro Conjunto* 7). Similarly, when Vargas peels back the liberatory discourse of recent sound studies she finds a contradictory impulse in the *Tejas* musical imaginary in which the creation and emergence of new subjectivities leaves behind, excludes or ignores female accordionists. She writes, “in the case of Tex-Mex accordion-driven musical sound, there must be attention to how sound is constituted by body, instrument, and historiography.” Through an analysis of sound and dissonance which incorporates its “audible, physical and discursive productions”—the totality of

³³ Offhand, the notable exceptions to this unspoken rule—such as accordionists Susan Torres or Mickey Mendoza, drummer and vocalist Clemencia Zapata, and, of course, Eva Ybarra—stand out precisely because of their scarcity within the genre’s pantheon of performers.

its social world—do we find the interconnection “between looking odd and sounding odd”; it is within these “discordant reverberations” Chicana accordionists such as Eva Ybarra are seen as ‘peculiar’ (112).

Peculiar or not, however, Chicanas move through the social world of the Texas Mexican conjunto, as performers, participants, and agents. My point here is not to suggest an ‘additive’ model—to paraphrase Emma Pérez, ‘Chicanas are also accordionists,’ as if gender parity alone would be sufficient to unravel the effects of patriarchy which undergirds culturally nationalist canonical scholarship, not to mention conversational understanding, of conjunto (*Decolonial Imaginary* 1999: 22). Overlaid against the backdrop of the twentieth century these brown bodies, sexed and gendered, move through the social world of conjunto, finding pleasure and enjoyment in the face of racialization, restrictive legislation, and the violence of the Texas Rangers. Across shared histories and disparate experiences, they listen and dance to the music of the Texas Mexican working class.

For Chicanas and Chicanos, Texas history is one of violence.³⁴ A historically-felt violence of legislation and legal movidas, inflicted upon bodies and minds.³⁵ It is racial, sexual, spiritual, linguistic violence, found in the heel of a Texas Ranger’s boot or segregated facilities, subpar education or subsistence labor. Borderlands identity is framed and founded within this violence, within what Gloria Anzaldúa famously termed “una herida abierta,” an open wound, “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds”; the brown bodies of Texas Mexicans are disciplined, regulated by this violence or the threat thereof (*Borderlands*, 3). Conjunto dance, as a technology of the body, offers one a strategic counterpoint. Through miniscule and major movements dance carries with it the potential to remake and reimagine ways of being, rather than reifying that which is. As a communal act of stylized, individual expression, with each step the twists and turns of the taquachito and the counterclockwise shuffle of the cumbia suggests possibilities, modalities, desires yet to be articulated through word.

Anzaldúa’s writing in *Borderlands/La Frontera* represents perhaps the best, and certainly the most influential, expression of what she calls “mestiza consciousness,” a borderlands identity and way of being intimately tied to both the lands—as a material basis and geographic location—and identities—cultural, racial, sexual, gendered, in the plural. But this is not just the border as a political line of demarcation separating—or not separating—two nation-states. Anzaldúa peoples her border zone, her contact region, and then takes it a step further: the people—brown, Indian, Xicanx—come to embody the borderlands, its history of violence and violation, its domination of women and erasure of the queer. Anzaldúa links geography with violence and domination throughout her text. “My grandmother lost all her cattle/they stole her land,” she writes in a poetic break from the prose form with which she used to recount other historical and autobiographical details in the first person, in what Sonia Saldivar-Hull appropriately labels testimonio (*Feminism on the Border*, 46).

Anzaldúa addresses the spiritual and the sexual in *Borderlands*, launching a powerful critique of the sexism and enforced heteronormativity within. “Not me sold out my people but they me,” she states, twice, in plain and forceful language (43, 44); her words are a defiant

³⁴ For more on this, please see please see Monica Muñoz Martinez’ excellent study, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). While the first half of her book forcefully documents the history of anti-Mexican violence in the years following the Mexican Revolution, the second half addresses the ways in which the state and affiliated institutions have presented (or, more accurately, misrepresented) this narrative. Along similar lines, please see also Flores, Richard R. *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

³⁵ Here I use “movidas” to refer to dirty tricks, underhanded deals, and outright manipulation and deception.

rejoinder to those who used lesbian-baiting and homophobia in the service of a culturally-nationalist definition of belonging, community, home. In *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians*, Catrióna Rueda Esquibel cautions against the splitting of Anzaldúa's theories of borderlands, mestizaje and identity from her lesbianism (2006: 2). To Anzaldúa, "land does not represent merely *la tierra patria*, the father's land and the father's name, but the actual means by which to earn a living" (*Machete*, 138; emphasis hers). When Anzaldúa writes about the fear of going home—a play on the word homophobia—she connects and then takes her identity beyond place, beyond geography:

...yes, though 'home' permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home. Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, *conozco el malestar de mi cultura*. I abhor some of my culture's ways ... I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me. ... And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture (*Borderlands*, 43-4; emphasis hers).

Anzaldúa does not reject home—or a conception of the (Xicano) nation vis-à-vis home; rather, she writes, "as a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover" (102). Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano argues that Anzaldúa's feelings of not being at home, or of being/ "belonging" nowhere, leads her to create her own "home" via writing. Mestiza consciousness does not come automatically; rather, it "must be *produced*, or 'built' ('lumber,' 'bricks and mortar,' 'architecture'). It is spatialized ... racialized ('*mestiza*'), and presented as a new mythology, a new culture, a non-dualistic perception and practice": a new consciousness (Yarbro-Bejarano 2006: 85-86).

Along the same lines Maria Lugones argues that resistant and liberatory possibilities are rooted in mestizaje and multiplicity. Anzaldúa's mestizaje, in particular, is "an example of and a metaphor for both impurity and resistance" that resists control by being unclassifiable, unmanageable, impure, ambiguous (*Peregrinajes*, 122-123). Rather than reading Anzaldúa in a vacuum, Yarbro-Bejarano suggests situating the reader and the text "within traditions of theorizing multiply embodied subjectivities by women of color and living in the borderlands by Chicanas and Chicanos" (2006: 82); reading it as part of a "collective Chicano negotiation around the meanings of historical and cultural hybridity would further illuminate the process of 'theorizing in the flesh,' of producing theory through one's own lived realities" (82-83). Along these lines, in Catrióna Rueda Esquibel's discussion of Anzaldúa's short story, "La historia de una marimacho," Esquibel writes that Anzaldúa imagines an alternative to the male-dominated corrido narrative. The title of course references Américo Paredes's groundbreaking work *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958)—but rather than having the (male) warrior-hero die at the end—as in the corrido form—Anzaldúa reimagines familia. It is the father now who "must learn to live by new rules" (*Machete*, 181).

World Traveling Across the Dance Floor

The dance as an activity is a site of pleasure and pleasurable expression enacted through play, albeit one bounded by societal and material constraints. I think here of María Lugones'

conceptualization of playfulness as “an openness to uncertainty, which includes a vocation not bound by the meanings and norms that constitute one’s ground ... It is that openness to uncertainty that enables one to find in others one’s own possibilities and theirs.” (*Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* 26). For Lugones, play offers a “loving attitude” (94) to world travel—that is, to move across and through different sites and spaces, with varying degrees of compatibility. Lugones critiques this white, western, male impulse that holds to a fixed sense of self and forces, expects, or demands other worlds to change to his image, through what she calls a “deadly” construction of playfulness. This impulse is reflected in imperialistic, antagonistic attitudes—the self as colonizer, in a contest or battle—that serve no purpose other than to conquer or kill other worlds (95). In contrast, Lugones examines playfulness in the context of compatibility with the world one is in. Rather than positing a fixed or static sense of self that expects the world(s) one encounters to change to their (his) being, Lugones recognizes that “I am both and that I am different persons in different ‘worlds’ and can remember myself in both as I am in the other. I am a plurality of selves” (93). Towards this end Lugones introduces the concept of “loving playfulness,” calling it an “attitude” that “carries us through the activity ... turning the activity into play” (95). This playful attitude that gives meaning to the activity comes with a sense of uncertainty, “but in this case the uncertainty is an *openness to surprise*” (95; emphasis hers). She continues,

We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are *open to self-construction*. We may not have rules, and when we do have them, *there are no rules that are to us sacred*. ... While playful, we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular ‘world’. We *are there creatively*. We are not passive (96; emphasis hers).

For Lugones, loving playfulness recognizes multiple selves, enables world travel, and moves us further towards coalition building (98).

Within the realm of pleasurable pursuit, dancing is an action that may be, for the participants, free from the constraints and demands of wage-work. Yet the social spaces of the dance—be they at a bar or dancehall, with a DJ or live conjunto—depend upon the recognized and unrecognized work, from the barback to the band, upon whose labor the pursuit of pleasure depends. Within these spaces the logics of heteronormativity code heterosexual couples dancing as normative behavior. However, this is not absolute nor universal; social spaces and musical scenes allow for, and indeed may encourage, a diffusion of normative behavior. Some social conventions may break down while others are upheld, reified or reinforced. In place of conventional notions that music and dancing are inherently liberatory and transgressive—a universal freeing of mind and body, or thought and movement—in opposition to reactionary and oppressive forces, two parts in a dialectical opposition framed by Western liberalism.

As a site of pleasure, conjunto dance offers a complex and oftentimes contradictory range of options and expressions. The liberation of body through movement contrasts with prescribed and regulated motions; the freeing or blurring of social barriers or gender roles confronts the limits of capitalist heteronormativity. What and whose bodies find freedom, and under what circumstances? Stuart Hall, George Lipsitz, José Saldívar and others all remind us that through the cultural people are able to express, rehearse, develop, and defy identities in ways that may or may not be possible in the public sphere. These ways of being may be found—and formed—through play, performance, or pleasure, as they can never—and cannot—be separated from the materiality of the body itself. A serious, in-depth, and expansive examination of music as a form

of cultural expression, historically situated and located within a broader social world, that seeks to develop an understanding of power and social change must move beyond the surface-level readings found far too commonly in music criticism. At the risk of being reductive, if we only identify political engagement as that which explicitly states its intention to do so then the revolution is just one hit single away from actualizing and the only thing necessary to squash a social movement is to ban its singers from the airwaves. I write this with some degree of self-parody, for how many times have I listened to the movimiento rolas like “Mexico-Americano” or “Chicano,” sung by Rumel Fuentes, or Jesus “Chuy” Negrete’s epic corridos, not to mention Doug Sahm’s original recording... and felt a kindling of pride— *Brown pride*, at that, Chicano pride; Chicano power.³⁶ So, too, as the unspoken or de facto ‘Chicano national anthem’ does Little Joe y La Familia’s “Las Nubes” summon forth similar feelings.³⁷

To Vargas, “Las Nubes” represents “a vision of freedom and escape—the dream of a better day” (*Dissonant Divas*, 182). Although I was a generation too late and a geographic region too far from its release I can’t help but nod in agreement while reading Deborah Vargas’ analysis. Like her, I wonder what of the earlier interpretations of “Las Nubes,” be it Wally Almendarez’ or Carmen y Laura’s versions. Does this genealogy matter? Without the broader Chicano Movement in all its multiple shapes and forms taking place how would a song so characterized and associated of the moment be received?

Clearly, context matters. However, there is meaning beyond the moment, a notion that speaks not to a timelessness of music but rather ways in which music—song—moves *through* time. Martin Stokes argues that “music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them” (5). Elsewhere, Stokes suggest we examine “what musics *do* rather than what they are held to *represent*.” As musics bring people together, for listening and/or dancing, they are “invariably” communal activities (p. 12; emphasis his). Paraphrasing Foucault, Stokes reminds us that pleasure is

a significant arena of political experience and a focus of control, through the definition of what pleasures ‘are’ and whether or not they are permitted, and, conversely, through resistance to that control. ... The association of pleasure, license and a festival atmosphere with music and dance makes them experiences which are distinctly ‘out of the ordinary’ (13).

³⁶ “Rola,” song, in caló. That Doug Sahm, of the Sir Douglass Quintet as well as the Texas Tornados, wrote “Chicano” complicates any one-dimensional cultural nationalist notions of authenticity. For “Chicano,” see Rumel Fuentes y Los Pingüinos del Norte, *Chulas Fronteras & Del Mero Corazón* (Arhoolie, 1995). For “Mexico-Americano,” see Rumel Fuentes, *Corridos of the Chicano Movement* (Arhoolie, 2009). Chicago-based musicologist Jesus “Chuy” Negrete performed corridos spanning the Mexican revolution through the Chicano Movement. I wore through two copies (on cassette) of his *500 Years of Chicano History* (Mexican Cultural Institute, 1993) while an undergraduate. Doug Sahm’s recording of “Chicano,” when he played with The Sir Douglas Band, has been rereleased and may be found on *The Best of Doug Sahm’s Atlantic Sessions* (Rhino Records, 1992). Following the deaths of both Freddy Fender and Doug Sahm, the remaining members of the Texas Tornados reunited, and, accompanied by Doug’s son Shawn, recorded an interpretation of “Chicano.” It can be found on their album *¡Esta Bueno!* (Bismieux Records, 2010).

³⁷ Little Joe y la Familia’s interpretation of “Las Nubes” may be found on the CD compilation from *Chulas Fronteras & Del Mero Corazón* (Arhoolie, 1995). Wally Almendarez’ earlier version may be found on *Tejano Roots: Raices Tejanas* (Arhoolie, 1991). As I finalized revisions to this dissertation, I learned that the Strachwitz Frontera Collection has digitized Carmen y Laura’s extremely rare recording of “Las Nubes” from the 1950s. Please see <http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/recordings/las-nubes-27> for more.

In summarizing Cowen's (1990) findings, Stokes reminds us that dance is a "vital means of gender socialization, and an enactment of masculinity and femininity at ritual occasions ... it is also an area in which gender categories can be contested." However, dance "is not 'normal' behaviour: the rules which apply [22] outside dance do not necessarily apply inside" (22-23). While I agree with Stokes' assessment it is worth noting as well whether or not they apply, and to what extent they may do so, these "rules"—be it gender hierarchy, class divisions, or racial animosity—inform the decisions and actions of agents in a social setting, whether or not they act in opposition or collusion with them.

Eyerman and Jamison recognize music as integral to what they term the "mobilization of tradition" (2). Social movements make and remake forms of cultural traditions, including musical ones, while the political mobilization may lessen "the music remains as a memory and as a potential way to inspire new waves of mobilization" (2). Thus, social movements "utilize the media of artistic expression for communicating with the larger society and, by so doing, often serve to (re)politicize popular culture and entertainment" (10). This analysis calls to mind DeNora's conceptualization of music as a "powerful *aide-mémoire*," situated within a collective—not individual—context, as Eyerman and Jamison argue for its ability to recall past struggles and movements. They write

Whether progressive or reactionary, what is at work in almost all social movements, we would claim, is an active reworking of cultural resources, both an inventive, creative work of artistic experimentation and a critical, [10] reflective work of evaluation. And it is the cultural effects that often live on; it is through songs, art, and literature—and as ritualized practices and evaluative criteria—that social movements retain their presence in the collective memory in the absence of the particular political platforms and struggles that first brought them into being (11).

Here the authors identify a tension between the political and the cultural, one which privilege written forms of discourse and communication. Yet, they ask us to think beyond the textual, through what they term the "cognitive approach." The cognitive approach

focuses attention on the construction of ideas within social movements, and on the role of movement intellectuals in articulating the collective identity of social movements. [It] views social movements primarily as knowledge producers, as social forces opening spaces for the production of new forms of knowledge (21).

As products of "specific socio-political conditions" as well as a broader cultural and historical context, they argue social movements nonetheless

temporarily transcend the specific situations from which they emerge; they create new contexts, new public spaces for addressing the particular problems of their time. ... what is central is their transience, their momentariness, their looseness. Social movements are processes in formation; they do not spring already formed to take their place on the stage of history. Rather, they can be conceived of as contingent and emergent spaces which are carved out of existent contexts; they are creative, or experimental, arenas for the practicing of new forms of social and cognitive action. ... Social movements are the

carriers of one or another historical project, or vision; they articulate new “knowledge interests,” integrating new cosmological, or worldview assumptions, with organization innovations, and sometimes with new approaches to science. ... This process of identity formation is called cognitive praxis and those actors who are most directly involved in its articulation movement intellectuals. Cognitive praxis, like the cognitive approach as a whole, calls attention to the creative role of consciousness and cognition in all human action, individual and collective (21).

In contrast to a functional analysis of protest music, as found in the work of Serge Denisoff, Eyerman and Jamison argue that music and song can “maintain a movement even when it no longer has a visible presence in the form of organizations, leaders, and demonstrations, and can be a vital force in preparing the emergence of a new movement” if it is interpreted through a framework that recognizes tradition and ritual “as processes of identity and identification, as encoded and embodied forms of collective meaning and memory” (43-44). Perhaps anticipating critique, the authors avoid a reductive conceptualization of tradition and ritual. Instead, they elaborate, music enables an open-ended framework, in place of the fixed or static associations with that which is traditional. The symbolic representation of music as a “carrier of images and symbols” changes over time, provokes an emotional response, and provides a basis for framing or interpreting reality. Eyerman and Jamison posit this in contrast to the work of ideology. As a framework or means of understanding, interpreting, and explaining the social world ideology functions in linking the structural and the cultural. Eyerman and Jamison clarify, “while both encourage action through symbolic representation, ideology is more direct in what it does. Music suggests interpretation, ideology commands it. Ideology tells one what to think, how to interpret, and what to do; music is much more ambiguous and open-ended and like any art form contains a utopian element” (46). Here I find their definition collapses upon itself. Rather than placing music as outside and in contrast to ideology I suggest instead examining the ways in which music functions in service to ideology. While Eyerman and Jamison allude to the heterotopic—or more specifically the audiotopic aspects inherent in music in the abstract, their understanding of music in opposition to ideology denies the way in which interpretations suggested through music are based upon and bound to ideology. In this light ‘taste’ or ‘preference’ in music is not bias-free and value-neutral but laden with and reflective of any number of ideological foundations, as argued by Bourdieu or Barthes.³⁸ For example, consider how conjunto is framed when it is placed against other popular genres of Mexican and Mexican American musics. That is to say, one’s preference or disdain for conjunto music may be reflective of one’s class (or class aspirations), as much as it is of one’s social location, citizenship status or affiliation, and/or sense of nationalism. I have found this this tangled web of attitudes and attributes articulated most clearly in conversations where conjunto and Tejano are placed in comparison to Mexican-origin or –marketed norteño.³⁹ Throughout my fieldwork experience I noted subtle and not-so-subtle

³⁸ Bourdieu describes this ever-changing relationship that reflects and is reflected in a broader sociohistorical context in terms of “space” and “fields”: i.e. a “*space of literary or artistic position-taking*,” inseparable from a similarly-named “*space of literary or artistic positions*.” Likewise, he terms the literary or artistic field “a *field of forces*” as well as “a *field of struggles*” (p. 30; emphasis his).

³⁹ Although norteño and conjunto as a whole share many similarities—itsself a statement that deserves further analysis beyond this brief note—in general the norteño listening audience is Mexican-origin or Mexican-identified, in contrast to conjunto’s U.S.-based (and generationally-defined) Chicano or Mexican American listening audience.

distinctions informants made between Mexican Americans and Mexicanos, Mexican nationals, or, as in the words of one informant, “Mexican Mexicans.”⁴⁰

A staple of the Tejano Conjunto Festival is the poster competition. For almost every year of the festival’s existence there has been an open competition to select the poster design that will advertise that year’s festival. The winning entry, along with the runners up and entries in different age categories, are all displayed at the Fest. On the second day of the 2012 festival while I spend some time admiring the range of entries a man came up behind me to share his (unsolicited) opinions. “I like this one, I like this one, but I wish they went with this one,” he said, pointing at the winning entry and two runners up.



Figure 3: 2011 and 2012 Tejano Conjunto Festival 3-Day Passes, featuring the winning poster design. From the author’s collection.

The winning poster for 2012, designed by Jeanne Richter, featured a light skinned woman with jet black hair braided down her back and turning to face out. A bajo sexto printed with the red, white, and blue of the Texas flag—replete with the lone star of the state’s eponymous moniker—and a red two-row button accordion frame the foreground of the image. Behind her is a Mexican flag, and silhouetted in the distance the San Antonio skyline, glowing yellow-orange under a crescent moon in a blue-purple sky. Upon a red ribbon reads the words “Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio.” This man continued with his critique of the design that appeared on all the promotional posters. “What I’d change with this one is I’d take off

⁴⁰ In my work I found while this distinction overly referenced one’s citizenship status and nationality it was not bound to either. That is, Mexican American or the more politically charged Chicana/o/Xicana/o/Xicanx could refer to individuals who were U.S. citizens or had come to identify with the experience of being in the U.S. In contrast, as the examples I listed imply, far more than actual citizenship status those who were “Mexican Mexicans” demonstrated markers, cultural and other—such as speaking Spanish fluently, style of dress, or musical preferences—that marked them as outsiders.

this”—he pointed to the red ribbon— “and change the flag. Make it blue and put in a Tejano Music Award. I’d leave the woman in because I like women. None of that Mexico shit. I don’t know about the red, white, and green, homes. Chale con that. Somewhere along the line we’re in there but—naaahhhhhh.”

His critique stuck with me, as much for his articulation of a Tejano identity based within heteronormative masculinity— “because I like women”—and a rejection of the red, white, and green of “that Mexico shit.” This is not the “we didn’t cross the border the border crossed us” transnationalism of an oppositional Chicanismo but rather a position invested in white supremacy and xenophobia. Imagine my surprise when I encountered him later on selling that red, white, and green “Mexico shit,” one of several vendors whose merchandise tables displayed items spanning the gamut from conjunto themed tchotchkes (drink koozies, novelty hats) to t-shirts and hats printed with the colors and design of la bandera Mexicana, the Mexican flag.

At the same time as I find meaning in one’s preferences, I also recognize that musical tastes could just as easily be shaped generationally, and reflect the likes and dislikes of a particular moment in time. Tia DeNora reminds us of as much when she critiques Adorno’s statement that musical organization is a simulacrum for social organization and formative of social consciousness. Where Adorno understood music as a force in social life—thereby performing the work of ideology—DeNora argues he “offered no conceptual scaffolding” towards understanding how it works (*Music in Everyday Life* 2000: 2). In contrast, DeNora examines what she calls a “production of culture” approach, wherein “the realm of the aesthetic” is treated “as an object of explanation but not as an active and dynamic material in social life” (5). Likewise, she writes, “the journey into context was also a journey away from a concern with the social *presence* of aesthetic materials” (5). Here DeNora reminds us of Simon Frith’s admonishment: “The question we should be asking is not what does popular music reveal about ‘the people’ but how does it construct them” (1987: 137). While DeNora agrees with scholarship from Frith and Willis that position music as a means of producing “agency and identity,” and finds Frith’s *Profane Culture* to be instrumental in conceptualizing music’s importance to social formation (5-7).⁴¹

DeNora asks that we think of music as more than a “meaningful” or “communicative” form of expression. She reminds us that it does more beyond

convey[ing] signification through non-verbal means. At the [16] level of daily life, music has power. ... Music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, how they feel—in terms of energy and emotion—about themselves, about others, and about situations. In this respect, music may imply and, in some cases, elicit associated modes of conduct. To be in control, then, of the soundtrack of social action is to provide a framework for the organization of social agency, a framework for how people perceive (consciously or subconsciously) potential avenues of conduct. This perception is often converted into conduct *per se* (17).

⁴¹ DeNora interprets Willis’ framework in *Profane Culture* as one in which “music is a cultural vehicle, one that can be ridden like a bike or boarded like a train. This description is metaphorical ... but it worth noting that one of the most common metaphors for musical experience in post-nineteenth-century Western culture is the metaphor of ‘transport’ ... Viewed in this way, music can be conceived of as a kind of aesthetic technology, an instrument of social ordering” (7).

To find an example of this we need go no further than observe the relationship between a DJ and a group of dancers on any given night. The ebb and flow, the movement of the crowd, the breaks for rest and socialization, or to allow for the dance floor to turn over, are in part symbiotic relationships between dancers and disk jockey. Never mind the economic impulses at work during play: the ability for a ‘name’ DJ to attract a crowd; the breaks between sets that allow for the purchase of snacks and (alcoholic) beverages. This is the work of music, as much as ideology and identity formation, and it too merits study.

DeNora reminds us of the demands Western thought places upon an analysis of the social world, as it frames music as possessing social and emotional content while suggesting music’s social force and implications are “intractable to empirical analysis” (21); John Rahn calls this discrepancy “a gap” between “structure and feeling” (1972: 255, quoted in DeNora, 21). In contrast, DeNora suggests emphasizing music’s semiotic force to develop an understanding of what she terms “human-music interaction,” although doing so removes the need of ethnographic research (21). Elsewhere, she argues for the importance of ethnographic research, as “only ethnographic research has the power to elaborate our conceptualization of what such processes entail— [38] there is much work to be done before the mechanisms through which cultural materials ‘work’ are properly to be understood” (38-9). She argues that

implicit in much work devoted to the question of musical affect is an epistemological premise ... [which consists] of the idea (albeit unacknowledged) that the semiotic force of musical works can be decoded or read, and that, through this decoding, semiotic analysis may specify how given musical examples will ‘work’ in social life, how, for example, they will imply, constrain, or enable certain modes of conduct, evaluative judgments, social scenes and certain emotional conditions (21).

Here DeNora evokes Barthes’ cautions concerning the limits of semiotics, or how meaning is constructed or signified, in this case through music. As the critic delves deeper into the semiotics, or meaning, of music itself she becomes further and further removed from an understanding of music’s relationship to social life. “When it exceeds these bounds, semiotics risks a kind of covert objectivism, a presumption that music’s meanings are immanent, inherent in musical forms as opposed to being brought to life in and through the interplay of forms and interpretations” (22). For example, DeNora paraphrases ethnomusicologist Henry Kingsbury (1991:201) who suggests that “the act of description thus *co-produces* itself and the meaning of the object” (DeNora, paraphrasing Kingsbury, 23). Furthermore, DeNora agrees with Latour’s (1991) suggestion to examine how music produces meaning within socially located scenes. “Meaning, or semiotic force, is not an inherent property of cultural materials, whether those materials are linguistic, technological or aesthetic,” DeNora writes. “At the same time, materials are by no means empty semiotic spaces” (38). Rather than focusing on “ ‘the music itself’ ” DeNora suggests “a reflexive conception of music’s force as something that is constituted in relation to its reception by no means ignores music’s properties; rather, it considers how particular aspects of the music come to be significant in relation to particular recipients at particular moments, and under particular circumstances” (23). While it is possible to speak about the musical work in and of itself DeNora cautions against separating this discussion from one which is concerned with the music’s interactions and investments with the outside world. “Simply put,” she writes, “a sociology of musical affect cannot presume to know what music causes, or what semiotic force it will convey, at the level of reception, action, experience” (31).

As she reminds us, “musical affect is contingent upon the circumstances of music’s appropriation; it is, as I wish to argue, the product of ‘human-music interaction’, by which I mean that the musical affect is constituted reflexively, in and through the practice of articulating or connecting music with other things” (33). Through these articulations we are able to find meaning in the music, with the music; this reflexive construction involves not just the song or music but the larger social world at work and play.

The Social World of Conjunto

Popular culture ... is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message but to ourselves for the first time.

Stuart Hall (“What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” 113)

I embarked upon this study of the social world of conjunto with questions around power and desire and the hermeneutics of love on my mind. And why not? The cultural is where these sorts of things first get sorted out, to paraphrase Stuart Hall’s adage. Or, as Martin Stokes states, musics “are structured but not entirely determined by the dominant ideologies” (Stokes 13). I take care to point out the following: the social world of conjunto is not a microcosm, nor is it a reflection, of a snappily-termed Mexican-American ‘experience’. However, I believe—strongly—that a comprehensive, longitudinal and in-depth analysis of the social world of conjunto provides a window into examining experiences, in the multiple, thereby complicating our understandings and expectations of Chicana and Chicano lived culture.

In “Scenes and Sensibilities,” Will Straw argues that scenes are “enmeshed within broader economic relations and regulatory regimes” (245).⁴² Scenes are dependent as much upon the musical acts, entertainers, and audience patronization as they are upon the codes, statutes and legislation governing their participation. Taxation, as much as any law, can have a shaping effect to encourage or limit the creative expression. Yet the term itself remains vexing, fluid, and ambiguous, employed vaguely as a generalization disengaged from the particularities of class or subculture (248-9). The concept itself appears to invite this contradictory notion, at once ordering semantically, “one resource in the elaboration of a grammar of cultural ordering” (250) while seemingly grouping disparate, random, and “seemingly purposeless sociability” in a process of taxonomic naming and definition. (250). In other words, I wonder, does the ordering imposed by the naming of a scene imply a regulation of leisure? Would one speak of a workplace scene, task or goal oriented, with the imposition of ordering and structure and power clearly delimited? What reversing the terms makes apparent, as Straw notes, is that the loose theorization of “scene” tends to lack an analysis of agency (252). Nonetheless, Straw embraces the concept of the scene, arguing

scenes extend the spatialization of city cultures through the grafting of tastes or affinities to physical locations. Within scenes, tastes or affinities become organized as itineraries across series of spaces. In this respect, scenes absorb (and sometimes neutralize) the energies of vanguardish activities. Scenes regularize these activities within the rituals of drinking or dining, or subject them to the frequency of accidental encounters. ... In this

⁴² While Straw writes of an entirely different context—disco’s expansion through 1970s Montréal—I find his analysis to be apt, and applicable to my own work around conjunto.

process, the spectacular loses visibility, dispersed within multiple sites of encounter or consumption (254-5).

Despite their “effervescence,” Shaw continues, scenes “create the grooves to which practices and affinities become fixed.” Through the encounters of individuals within a scene (and, he points out, their repetition) “knowledges are reinvigorated and the peripheries of our social networks renewed.” Through these encounters “the city becomes a repository of memory” (254).

Throughout this dissertation I use the phrase “social world of conjunto” as a means of identifying the influence and shaping forces of conjunto beyond the music, as expressed by speaking of conjunto or the conjunto genre, and in greater depth and with a historical component. Sara Cohen, in discussing the ‘Liverpool sound,’ reminds us to question the notion of authenticity as we examine the construction of a musical scene. While writing about a different context the questions she raises regarding the construction of a scene and related notions of authenticity apply to conjunto. Cohen rightfully observes that the diverse culture, influences and geographic background of musicians is reflected in the music they create, the construction of particular places, and the ways in which people conceptualize them, in an ever-changing relationship between music and locality (117). As political and economic developments shift, so too does cultural production and consumption within a given area (118). She writes, “The linking of particular artists with particular places identifies them with roots and presents them as real people embodying artistic integrity and honest, rather than glitzy stars representing an unreal world of glamour, commerce, and marketing strategies” (118). This statement applies to the description of conjunto as a working-class music of the people. Within these sorts of descriptors are notions of authenticity: the ‘real’ conjunto sound, versus that which is commercial, a commodity. Beyond a dichromatic authenticity reduced to class or commercial appeal I find the construction of a scene and its membership to be structured as well along lines and divisions bound with expressions of a culturally nationalist masculinity. The extent to which one adheres or defies a variety of expectations and assumptions in turn shapes the construction of the scene. While the connotations of ‘scene’ overlap with what I seek to express through the social world of conjunto, I elect to use the term ‘social world’ as a marker of greater inclusivity and fluidity as a social world can and does encompass the interactions of multiple scenes.

In discussing the relationship between cultural citizenship and music scenes, and the ways in which the artifacts or products of cultural production are transmitted Straw (2005) considers cultural products “inertial,” explaining that they “inevitably repeat elements from earlier products or works. ... the inertia within cultural artefacts [sic] ensures degrees of continuity from one artefact to another” (*Accounting for Culture*, 184). To this extent we can interpret successive waves of expression, exploration and innovation within the conjunto genre as a means of “working through” questions of identity and culture. Here I borrow Straw’s terminology (2005: 188) to suggest, albeit within a different context, that the creation of a popular music and its concomitant forms of dance had as much to do with artistic expression and creative innovation as it did with a community in the continual process of identifying and defining itself. Or, as Straw puts it, acts such as opening a club or playing records

tested tradition and prejudice and transformed the cultural cartography... [and] they should be seen as acts of civic engagement, expressions of a cultural citizenship which negotiated new relationships between music, place and people (191).

Additionally, the act of negotiating relationships based upon music, song, and performance—through dance and socialization at a conjunto nightclub—suggests another way of interpreting the social world. Writing about sound and movement is a way of writing against the ocular-bias of Western thought. Although I do rely upon the visual to inform my observations and analysis, I move beyond it as I theorize about space, sound, and movement. While I employ the textual and utilize the visual neither functions as the source and determinant of my analysis. Rather they are tools. The soundscape, the scene, the meaning of bodies in motion and the ephemeral nature of an aural medium in the everyday remain primary.

In “Performing the (sound)world” Susan Smith advocates a turn from an analysis of musical texts—to which I would add the textual analysis of the lyrical content—to the physical aspect of musical production. She argues that through performative embodiments music functions as an episteme, a way of knowing and being. “What would happen if we thought about space in terms of its acoustical properties rather than in terms of its transparency or its topology?” Smith continues, paraphrasing Attali,

What would happen to the way we think, to the things we know, to the relationships we enter, to our experience of time and space, if we fully took on board the idea that the world is for hearing rather than beholding, for listening to, rather than for looking at? [615] ... music is a cultural form, but its content is as much the product of material struggles as the embodiment of aesthetic ideals. All ‘silences’ are permeated by sounds; all sounds are potentially music; all music is potentially noise. ... the act of appropriating and controlling noise (the act of making sounds into music, through composition, performance and/or listening practices) is, in short, an expression of power (615-6).

Smith argues that not only are questions of power central to our understanding of sound, but that our understanding of power may in fact be incomplete without questioning the importance of sound. I will go further and stake out a position: I argue that thinking beyond the visual is itself a potentially decolonial act, and one which merits further exploration, for so doing challenges the occularcentric foundations endemic to Western thought.⁴³ Rather than applying the techniques and tools of literary or textual analysis to understanding the work done by music and

⁴³ I use the term ‘ocularcentricism’ to draw attention to the ways in which Western civilization privileges that which is visual above all other senses, and subsequently normalizes this hierarchical privileging through, for example, emphasizing or valuing that which is written as opposed to that which is verbal or auditory. We find this in the production of knowledge wherein printed or textual sources in the archive carry with them more worth, more value, over oral histories or the storytelling and narratives communicated verbally and labeled ‘folklore,’ ‘myth,’ ‘legends.’ (Here, too, we find a contrast between the individual and the collective, respectively, as the source of what is considered legitimate knowledge.) So, too, my critique here of occularcentricism incorporates the critique of the male gaze, as the phallogocentrism of the West is implicated in its visioning of the world.

I dare say that DuBois anticipated this critique linking the privileging of the visual with the hegemonic domination of Western thought through his discussion around double-consciousness, should we read him literally, where he writes of that “peculiar sensation ... of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that *looks on* in amused contempt and pity” (*Souls*, 3; emphasis added). Certainly, this act of looking becomes his central metaphor as he writes of “the veil” a page prior, his life and those of Black folk shaped—obscured—by its existence, and seen “as a problem” (*Souls*, 2).

For more on this please see Dubois, W. E. B. *Souls of Black Folk*; 1903; Mulvey, Laura, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 1999; Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, 1993; Crary, Jonathan, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 1990; Levin, David Michael, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, 1993.

performance Smith foregrounds the experiential, inviting us to conceptualize the experience of music as “a performance of power ... that is creative” and brings “spaces, peoples, and places ‘into form’” (618). As B. Smith (1999) writes, “music is not what is printed on the page, but what is heard in performance” (in Smith 2000: 618). This will result, inevitably, in new ways of knowing, an epistemology borne from the body itself.

Chapter Two

Música de la Frontera: Historical Considerations and Theoretical Implications from a Century of Texas Mexican Popular Music

In this chapter I situate the development of Texas-Mexican popular musics within a broader historical, social, and cultural context. While my primary focus and interest here is upon the conjunto genre, I recognize that listeners, performers, and the greater Mexican American listening community all belong to a far larger, dynamic and complex social world than that which is neatly contained by markers of identity, nationality, race, gender, sexuality, class, or generation, to name a few. As culturally-based types of expression Texas-Mexican popular music take many forms, such as the corrido; conjunto ensemble; big-band orquesta; or Tejano outfit, and exist in conversation with other musical genres, including Mexican norteño, country-western, hip-hop and rock. Long before the dawning of automatic shuffle or streaming singles the listener flitted between styles, finding their preferences in the popular, promoted, and personal. To write about, or to presuppose, that the conjunto genre developed in isolation would be a misleading and a disservice. Far more accurate would be to recognize the interplay, exchange, sharing of ideas and spread of influences whether through music, performance, lyrical tropes or cultural critiques. In this I am not alone. Other people have written far more—and far more eloquently—on the subject of the historical development of the Texas Mexican conjunto and its proto-predecessor, the borderlands corrido. Certainly, one needs look no further than Manuel Peña's three monographs (1985, 1999a, and 1999b) for a detailed, descriptive, and definitive analysis of conjunto and orquesta music. These tomes—especially *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, the first in the unnamed trilogy—are all “*actos* of ‘imaginative re-discovery’,” if I may borrow the use of the concept from cultural critic and film theorist Rosa Linda Fregoso (*Bronze Screen*, 1993:1). In my application of Fregoso's concept I understand Peña's texts to do the work of “re-invent[ing]” and “re-construct[ing]” “an intellectual lineage and a historical genealogy for Chicana and Chicano cultural identity” (*Bronze Screen* 2).

Much like his contemporaries, Peña's work centers men in the creation and production of an authentic cultural artefact—conjunto music—as a form of resistance to white supremacy and capitalist exploitation. Thus, I situate his monographs within a framework of Chicano culturally nationalist scholarship. Same too for the work of Américo Paredes, who has written extensively upon the corrido—most notably in *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958)—and whose work influenced generations of scholars of Chican@ folklore, music and cultural studies (including Peña and José Limón). In addition to introducing a counter-genealogy to the male-dominated narrative of conjunto, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez' beautiful testimonio/historia and analysis on the life of Lydia Mendoza (*Lydia Mendoza's Life In Music*, 2001) has aided in my understanding of early-to-mid- century performative styles in and around San Antonio, while María Herrera-Sobek's *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (1990) provides an important textual analysis of the lyrical content and archetypes found in corridos.⁴⁴ As many corridos have found their way into conjunto recordings and compositions I find Herrera-Sobek's tome to be particularly relevant.

⁴⁴ That Mendoza played the bajo sexto, not the accordion, further challenges the ‘origin story’ framework of masculine conjunto historiography.

What led to the development of the Texas Mexican conjunto? Or, rather, what were some of the more significant developments in Texas Mexican conjunto? In rephrasing this question, I am less interested in an ‘origin story’—the birth of conjunto—than I am interested in how and why conjunto came to be *the* dominant musical form of cultural expression for Texas Mexicans midcentury, and what came after the peak of its popularity. At the same time, I am interested in exploring the poetics of the form through performance (dance, bodily movement), musicality (instrumentation, vocality), and space (conjunto dancehalls), as well as the ways in which all three are interrelated and interconnected. As I consider these foundational texts and situate my research within the intellectual traditions, they have collaborated upon in forming I proceed with caution. What I offer here is sociohistorical contextualization; a cultural history of the genre.

In this chapter I am primarily concerned with conceptual considerations stemming from and spanning three major, overlapping periods: the tail end of the corrido’s dominance, spanning roughly from the late 1800s to the early 1900s; the growth and consolidation of the conjunto ensemble from its earliest appearances to its post-war apex; and finally the past half century’s shift away from conjunto. While my curiosity resides within the Texas Mexican conjunto genre I must note that the Mexican American listening community does not exist in a vacuum. Far from it in fact, as Mexican Americans engaged in and with a disparate range of listening communities, Black and Anglo, that encompassed rock and roll, jazz, country western and western swing, as well as boleros, cumbias, and mariachi from Mexico and Latin America—just to name a few choice examples. And this is to say nothing of Chicano soul’s “Westside sound,” that highly localized mixture of Chicano orquesta, big band brass and woodwinds, with African American doo-wop and R&B, performed and enjoyed by Black, Brown and white kids through the 1960s and beyond.⁴⁵

Centering conjunto requires a rethinking of Mexican American cultural production, not as a hybridized pastiche borne of parts borrowed from other musics but rather as a creative process engaged with trends, innovations, and practices at highly localized and far reaching levels. Rather than what happened—here, the accordion was introduced; here, vocals were added; here, amplification—I ask why these developments took place. Moreover, what is their significance? And what can we learn from all this?

Through what follows I will situate the development of the Texas Mexican Conjunto form, briefly, by paying attention to significant performers and innovations in the genre as well as the socio-political context of the borderlands region, or what Américo Paredes called “Greater Mexico,” during the past century. In part this chapter is a review of the literature on Texas Mexican popular musics, with an emphasis on conjunto and the conjunto form; in part it serves as an introduction to borderlands history. I am of course indebted to previous studies that have examined conjunto and norteño musical genres as sites of cultural production, discussed constructions of patriarchy and sexism in the lyrical content and placed conjunto music—or, more specifically, the corrido form, at the center of Chicano letters and social thought.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For more about San Antonio’s Westside Sound, please see Ruben Molina, *Chicano Soul: Recordings and History of an American Culture* (2017).

⁴⁶ For a comprehensive and detailed (if now dated) introduction and overview of the genre and its significance please see Peña, Manuel, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History of a Working Class Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985). Both of Peña’s subsequent monographs, *The Mexican American Orquesta: Music, Culture, and the Dialectic of Conflict* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999) and *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1999) delve into greater detail. Américo Paredes paved the way for the formation of Chicano@ Studies half a century ago with the publication of “*With His Pistol in His Hand*” *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958). A prolific scholar, Paredes

I locate my study in San Antonio, Texas, what many consider tongue-in-cheek to be the conjunto capitol of the universe. (Another contender for that title might be San Benito, Texas, birthplace of luminaries such as Narciso Martínez and Freddy Fender and present-day home to the Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center.) In terms of migration, for the better part of the last century San Antonio was a way-station, a stopping point as much as a destination where urban and rural met as Mexicano immigrants and Valle residents passed through en route to pick northern crops, while scores of Mexican Americans in the city found themselves part of an emerging politically-active middle-class constituency.

Conjunto's roots run deep in the Alamo city. On any given night one may find the familiar sounds of the squeezebox coming out of the jukebox or played live by duos, trios, and conjunto outfits in its cantinas and icehouses. As one of the largest metropolitan areas in Texas, and the largest in South Texas, San Antonio houses a community of working-class fans and musicians. At various times over the past five decades entertainers like Flaco and Santiago Jiménez, Jr., Mingo Saldívar, and the late Lydia Mendoza and Valerio Longoria all made San Antonio their own, not to mention the scores of artists who have passed through the I-35 corridor while on tour. Cultural institutions such as Radio Jalapeño, KEDA 1540 ("Jalapeño University"), the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, and the Conjunto Heritage Taller all remain active and visible in the scene. A small number of smaller recording studios and record labels continue their operations, and major labels Univision and EMI established satellite branches. Starting in the 1980's the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center began their annual Tejano Conjunto Festival which one may argue preserved conjunto's status as a 'folk' expression worthy of recognition.

Today the Festival attracts locals as well as attendees from across the globe, although attendance pales in comparison to the record-setting numbers from the "Tejano Boom" in the early-to-mid-1990s.⁴⁷ Among the core fans there remains a strain of thought—heard in

produced continuously throughout his academic career. Another volume of his worth referencing is *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976 [1995]). In the span of a 21 page chapter at the heart of *Pistol* ("The corrido on the border," pp. 129-150), Paredes traces the development of the Texas-Mexican corrido from the Spanish-origin romances, coplas, and décimas which first arrived in the Americas during Spanish settlement in the 18th century, through what he terms "the corrido century," a period of "profound," "violent changes" spanning from Texas independence in 1836 to the late 1930s (132). For a variety of approaches to the problematics of gender and sexuality in Conjunto music and Tex-Mex cultural expressions I suggest reading José Limón's *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Politics in Mexican American South Texas* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1994); María Herrera-Sobek's *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) and Deborah R. Vargas article about slain pop-star Selena Quintanilla ("Bidi Bidi Bom Bom: Selena and Tejano Music in the Making of Tejas," in *Latina/o Popular Culture*, Habell-Pallán and Romero, eds. New York: New York University Press, 2002, pp. 117-126). Finally, in *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), José David Saldívar posits that the literary output of Chican@ organic intellectuals was in response to the white supremacy and racialized violence of the borderlands (see especially pp. 49-56). Saldívar further builds upon the relationship between socio-political forces and cultural production in *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁴⁷ More similar than different, I nonetheless distinguish Tejano music from conjunto on the basis of their instrumentation, arrangements, and performative style or aesthetics. (With exceptions I think of the Tejano ensemble as one that builds upon the accordion, bajo sexto, bass, and drum set found, again with exceptions, in conjunto, typically with the addition of brass—the saxophone—and electronic keyboard, as well as the elimination of the button accordion. Tejano's roots in the Texas Mexican orquesta belie a "formal" musical education—gained through, for example, high school band, and found through the ability to read music as well as compose more 'complex' or technically proficient arrangements, a point noted by Manuel Peña—that contrasts with conjunto's more 'organic' form of informal instruction and training. As before, exceptions abound in all such cases.

conversation or classes, or from the artists themselves—about the importance of ‘preserving the tradition’, without necessarily questioning the implications of this statement.

Before, during, and long after my fieldwork I drifted through multiple scenes as a playful world-traveler, in the spirit of Maria Lugones’ conceptualization of the terms.⁴⁸ It is with this sense of loving playfulness that I now proceed. As a positioned subject I acknowledge my own musical tastes and preferences inform and interact with the histories contained within.⁴⁹ Although my interest resides primarily with conjunto, Tex-Mex and Tejano (that is, Texas-born Mexican, Mexican American, or Chican@-identified listening communities) by no means do I wish to suggest that working-class Mexican American communities listen, perform, or otherwise partake exclusively or even extensively to conjunto music. For example, Mexican Americans comprise a visible and vibrant portion of San Antonio’s rock and metal scene, and what might otherwise be a white-dominated fan base in other scenes is transformed into one that’s proudly bilingual, bicultural, and brown. San Antonio’s techno and dance, hip-hop, country-western, and punk scenes all reflect similar demographics. While the city’s profile as a hub for cutting-edge live music in no way compares to that of Austin, just a short drive north, the interest, enthusiasm and innovation for creative work runs through the city. In fact, some of the more dynamic music coming out of San Anto contemporarily results from the overlap of these genres, such as the raucous punk-polka sound of Piñata Protest or cross-cultural hip-hop sound of scholar activist Marcos Cervantes, who performs as Mexican Stepgrandfather (“Mex Step”) with the Third Root project. Rather, while maintaining my primary focus upon the Texas Mexican conjunto and its listening communities I will by design incorporate and acknowledge the broader sonic landscape that is present. In particular, I pay special attention to the relationship between the Texas

I recognize the distinctions made between the two genres are to an extent porous, an academic’s interest in nomenclature that is rendered irrelevant by a listening community that cherishes crossover stars (Flaco Jiménez, the late Selena Quintanilla) and multi-day decade-spanning celebrations alike (The Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio, whose programming blurs any distinctions not negated by the event’s title). And yet, San Antonio’s KEDA Radio Jalapeño was very clearly a conjunto station, despite playing Tejano (as well as country & western or rock ‘n’ roll on occasion), while Tejano station KXTN rode a wave of popularity to become the #1 ranked FM broadcaster during the height of the genre’s boom years.

Known as “La Onda Chicana,” “La Onda Tejana,” and perhaps most commonly as “Tex Mex” during the 1960s and 1970s, Tejano music continued to grow in popularity during the 1980s. Major label money in promotion and production from the likes of Discos CBS (now Sony Discos) and Capitol/EMI Latin, along with breakout superstars (Selena, Emilio) saw the genre “boom” in the early 1990s, with the most aggressive expansion taking place from 1989 to 1991 (Calderón, 4). Demographics likely contributed to the genre’s growth as well, as the listening base grew beyond South Texas’ Texas Mexican population. Additionally, industry backing opened up markets for Tejano in Mexico and throughout Latin America, a move that can also be linked to the increasing appearance of cumbias across the genre.

Alas, the “Tejano Boom” was relatively short lived. At the end of March, 1995, Selena Quintanilla, the oft-proclaimed “Queen of Tejano Music,” was shot and killed by the president of her fan club. Her death resulted in a momentary uptick in sales, but it was not enough for the genre. After consistent growth sales hit a down cycle at the tail end of 1995. Major labels dropped artists’ contracts and withdrew promotional support, while radio stations experienced consolidation and restructuring (Calderón, 31). At the same time, and for many of the same reasons (demographics, industry support) Mexican regional and Latin artists came to dominate the airways and commercial venues in much the same way Tejano had only half a decade prior.

For more please see Peña, Manuel. *Música Tejana*; San Miguel, Guadalupe. *Tejano Proud.*; and Calderón, Roberto R. “All Over the Map: *La Onda Tejana* and the Making of Selena” (2000). See also Chapter Five, where I discuss further some of the economies behind Texas Mexican popular musics.

⁴⁸ I discuss these concepts in the previous chapter.

⁴⁹ I use the term “positioned subject” to call attention to the ways in which my social location—my positionality— influence and inform my ethnographic research. For more, please see Rosaldo, Renato. *Culture & Truth*. (19).

Mexican conjunto and Mexican regional music scenes, as both share a considerable degree of historical, cultural and contemporary similarities—not to mention sound, rhythms, instrumentation and dance styles. Due to factors such as demographics (immigration) and marketing in communities with a Mexican-origin listening population Mexican regional music has come to dominate Spanish-language radio—an indicator of listening preferences as much as commercial influence—in a way that conjunto and Tejano never did.



Figure 4: Bene Medina and Salvador "El Pavo" García practice with a student at the Conjunto Heritage Taller. Photograph from the author's collection, circa 2004-2005.

Paradoxically, while Mexican Americans with middle-class aspirations sought to distance themselves from their more ‘country,’ rural-origin, working-class and/or immigrant brethren through a variety of social, symbolic, and aesthetic gestures—cultural practices, in other words, that included one’s choice of musical entertainment—their distinctions along lines of class, race, and citizenship were nonetheless blurred, made complicated by segregated communities and limited social mobility; the nature of their shared commonalities along lines of culture and kin; and the ever-present hostility towards any person of Mexican descent.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez explores this phenomenon in *Walls and Mirrors*, his excellent study on the complicated relationship between Mexican immigration and Mexican American communities in the United States through the twentieth century. Chapter 4, “The Contradictions of Ethnic Politics, 1940-1950,” is useful in providing further context for the experiences and tensions between Mexican Americans, Chicanos (here, as pachucos), and Mexican immigrants during and after wartime. “Although thousands of Mexican Americans did begin to think of themselves more as Americans than as Mexicans during the 1940s,” he writes, “thousands more remained deeply ambivalent about their cultural and national entities even at the height of the war” (118). At the same time that I take Gutiérrez’ use of “American” as a centering of whiteness I also wish to suggest a counter-reading, one that explores Chicanos

Discussions of class, citizenship and racialization all come into play as I work to identify and tease out these many entanglements. With some exception—such as the large-scale festivals—the Mexican@-oriented scenes attract more youth; this is important if we are to presuppose that generational changes also come into play and affect expressions of pleasure and desire. Furthermore, as scholars in Chican@ Studies this blurring of musical borders begs the question as to our own intellectual borderlands. Are there, should there be, (musical) boundaries to Chican@ Studies? What are our own limitations? Are we so invested in the national project of the United States as to replicate its narrative throughout our own critical and cultural productions? I argue that the vision and practice of Xicanx Studies must be broad and inclusive enough to encompass those living on both sides of the imposed borderline; we must recognize that borders (be they geopolitical or of gender) are in themselves forms of colonial violence.

I utilize the periodization framework outlined by Manuel Peña in *Música Tejana* (1999b) as a starting point or a framing device. However, beyond this brief yet necessary overview contextualizing the genre what I am suggesting is that we begin to think of the playing, performance, and participation by dancing to conjunto music—indeed, of musicality in general—as more than material artifacts. For even as one may inscribe a linear temporality on to the development of a given genre the replicable, repetitive nature of a song’s performance or playing of a recording temporarily disrupts this unidirectional projection as one may return to or replay said recordings, and in these instances it is not the recording itself that has changed but the circumstances, the social world surrounding it, and the affective qualities which it may evoke, for music, song, our enjoyment and our understanding of them do not exist in a vacuum devoid of outside influence. Furthermore, the repetition of riffs and phrases within songs itself references a past that is also present, a present that has passed. Concurrently, I will pay attention to moments, occurrences, and happenings and their relationship with popular song and dance. Bear in mind that I attempt to impose a linear trajectory upon these events from the past with some caution, as I do not wish to fall into a teleological trap by which the idea of progress follows the passage of time, or locks tradition as an immutable given. This is a notion worth exploring in the case of music and song. Keep in mind that recorded music, be it a 45 or LP, CD, or electronic file, is a relatively recent phenomenon. While it is true that with replication and commercialization comes some degree of standardization the very act of playing what may seem a timeless recording nonetheless remains bound to the historical conditions that allow or facilitate its performance, production, interpretation and enjoyment. To wit: just as the earliest corridistas passed along corridos verbally, often adding their own spin to the story, prior to the advent of mechanized recording conjunto artists learned “by ear,” from playing, practicing, and observing other performers, which meant that the songs reflected the musicians’ individuality. These stylizations, while replicated and standardized (such as through the addition of sung vocals, the slowing of the song’s pace, or the inclusion of electric instrumentation) to some extent, nonetheless call into question the permanence of a given song, its replicability and permanence, for even a virtually-identical “copy”—say, something played in the style or “tradition” of Santiago Jiménez, Sr.—is marked with difference. This difference is compounded when played over time, as one considers the very real, material changes in socio-historical conditions that a population undergoes.

relationship with Blackness. This reading, grounded in what Natalia Molina frames as a “relational” approach to ethnic studies, suggests that the political and performative acts of approximating whiteness, such as the emphasis on patriotism and respectability politics undertaken by an organization like LULAC, were also to some extent a distancing from Blackness, with the recognition that citizenship without whiteness was meaningless (2013: 522).

Cathy Ragland recounts Santiago Jiménez, Sr. describing the traditional conjunto as being comprised of the two-row Hohner, the bajo sexto, and the tololoche, or upright bass, with no mention of drums or other form of percussion. In contrast, Tony de la Rosa remarked to Ragland that “the bajo and I can sit there and play all day and all night long. But for me, if the drums aren’t there I cannot get into the rhythm” (pp. 89-90). Here, I question if the elder Jiménez would include singing, as his was of a generation that eschewed vocal accompaniment, and I wonder if for him the performers who embraced the three-row Hohner were in fact breaking with tradition, even as they played in the ‘traditional style,’ in a fluid homage to his performance.

Moreover, what of recordings? Certainly a “newer” development, conjunto recordings have been commercially available since the Great Depression. While the format itself has changed today the simple fact is that one may encounter recordings and song variants (if converted into digital formats) with greater ease than at any time previous. (Allow me to put aside the pressing concern of archivists and preservationists regarding accessibility, availability and acquisition of historically-relevant sound recordings, for addressing the issue of what is preserved and the power dynamics behind these decisions is beyond the scope of this chapter.) What this means is that, for example, one may easily and instantly play “Mal Hombre,” by Lydia Mendoza, as it was recorded and first released.⁵¹ Will it sound exactly the same as it did on 45? Chances are the recording has passed through some form of remastering or conversion. More importantly, however, are the meanings and significance attached to the song. Even the exact same song will take on a different meaning under different contexts.

That is to say one may interpret and analyze a given recording as being of the moment it was released, as a cultural production of its times. However, while the recording of a song (as an artefact) may remain a constant, the context, conditions, circumstances and the very the way in which it is interpreted, understood, received and shared is ever-changing. This is especially relevant to Mexican and Mexican American listening cultures, whereby songs remain in circulation, spanning decades. There are numerous examples of this: the multi-generational transmission of the ‘oldies,’ encompassing Chicano soul, R&B, doo-wop, cruising classics, lowrider tunes, or firme rolas; the enduring longevity of borderlands corridos; and of course, any number of conjunto classics.⁵²

Interestingly, in the early or formative stages of conjunto it was the fiddle (violin) and not the accordion that played lead. Recordings from the blind violinist Melquiades “El Ciego” Rodriguez that date from the mid-1930s serve as a reminder to this now-overlooked and largely forgotten chapter in conjunto music (Strachwitz, 1978). Frank Corrales, a member of Conjunto Alamo, noted the lasting influence of the violin in trio music in San Antonio through the 1940s and until the accordion took lead in the 1950s. He dates the rise in popularity of the accordion sound to the 1950s, suggesting a transformation that occurred over two decades—a generation later—after the first accordion-led conjunto recordings:

⁵¹ For a compilation of songs by Lydia Mendoza, including “Mal Hombre,” please see *“Mal Hombre” and Other Hits from the 1930s* (Arhoolie, 1992).

⁵² Firme rolas: dope/cool/’firm’ tunes.

Attend any conjunto dance, or join a group of students at a taller, and you will hear Santiago Jimenez, Sr.’s compositions “La Barranca” or “La Piedrera” at some point. These songs, and others like them, speak to the ways in which the conjunto listening communities maintain a cultural memory through experience—be it dancing, listening, or performing. Américo Paredes’ *With His Pistol in His Hand* is perhaps the best-known study of the corrido, and takes as its title a line from perhaps the best-known corrido, that of Gregorio Cortez. That I reference, in 2019, a monograph first published fifty years ago, concerning a border ballad about a confrontation that occurred at the start of the twentieth century, is a testament to the longevity of Paredes’ work and the corrido upon which he writes.

Conjunto didn't use drums, country western people didn't use drums, so the sound people wanted was violin, guitar, the way it was. And some people, they shied away from the accordion, they considered the accordion something else. They wanted the violin, that's what they wanted. Violin, guitar, that was the sound. But then the accordion started to get popular, they started to add lyrics to the song... The violin was very popular, the sound was very popular. The accordion was ... very low. Even the big bands, the orchestra, even the union, didn't consider the conjunto musician. No, they're not professional, you know, very low (Corrales, 1991).

Through his repeated mention of conjunto and the accordion's association as "very low" Corrales alludes to differing perceptions of class, vis-à-vis popular music. These distinctions reflected not only instrumentation, as the accordion signified, but the interpretation or value attached to the naming of the instruments. As Tony de la Rosa noted, "When I was playing country, that's fiddle. And then you go pick up a Stradivarius, that's violin."

During the course of his lengthy interview with Cathy Ragland, De la Rosa acknowledged the influence "hoe-down fiddlers" had upon his own style, especially the continuous runs that remain a distinctive characteristic of his playing.

It comes from the fiddle. ... Way back, it comes from the fiddle. I hate to pat myself on the back and say I created some of them myself, but I would try to, you know, get away from what I had done originally and try not to copy somebody else, because I don't believe in copies, I wouldn't take my hat off to a man who copies another one, but if you're different I would take my hat off to you and I would congratulate you. I don't know, really and truly, because this goes so way back that some of it I remember, Cathy, and some of it I don't. It's hard to say 'oh, I remember everything,' because I don't. But I owe it to the fiddling. Bluegrass music, mountain music, I would go play for a dance, even if it would be 10, 16 miles away from here, and I would turn the radio on, in Spanish, and in country. And I would look for country music. I would pass up Spanish music and listen to country in order for me to find something to do different. ... I believe I owe it all to the fiddle. And Cajun music. It's so close. We're cousins in that. I still have one thing left to do, and that's by god I'm going to do it either this year or next year, I'm going to go to Louisiana and I'm going to sit down and listen to these people play their accordions (De la Rosa, 1991).

This description indicates the degree to which innovations and experimentations took hold in conjunto and Mexican American popular musics. In some cases—such as the accordion's dominance—the transition was gradual, spanning several decades, whereas in other instances—such as the use of a drum set and electronic amplification—the switch came almost immediately. In both these examples, the latter impacted the former, as Ragland explained Corrales indicated in his interview that the electric bass and drums "made it difficult for the guitar" as a lead instrument "to fit in between the heavy rhythmic backbeat and the more expressive accordion style emerging in San Antonio" (Ragland, "Report, 1991." 1991: 3).

Given the overlap and connections between the accordion and the violin, two instruments sharing the role of lead in the still-nascent conjunto ensemble during the early part of the twentieth century, it is clear to me that further research is needed into the genre's relationship

with a still nascent country western and western swing at the same time. A comparative analysis, rooted in a regional understanding of musics and histories, would greatly benefit this line of inquiry. At the very least it would highlight parallel or shared experiences in the development of musical genres originating in the United States, be it country western, jazz, or conjunto, and perhaps offer new insights into their commonalities.

Given this history, how did the accordion obtain its positioning as perhaps the central instrument in the conjunto genre? Helena Simonette's essay "From Old World to New Shores" gives a detailed yet concise overview of the accordion's manufacturing and development during the 19th century. Initially constructed by hand, mass production in the 1850s and steam powered automation twenty years later lowered the instruments' cost while making it widely available (23). While there is documentation of various accordions in the Americas prior to mass-production, not until the 1890s does it appear in significant numbers, particularly in the German, Bohemian and Polish communities of Chicago and Milwaukee (28-30). These same communities of migrants are credited with introducing the accordion to the Texas-Mexican borderlands, where the Mexican-origin population rapidly adopts the instrument, incorporating it into their performance repertoire.

The brand Hohner is synonymous with accordions, especially in the conjunto community. Founded in 1857, Hohner did not begin producing button accordions until 1903. They intended to enter the export business by setting up a branch in New York, and marketed to Canada and prerevolutionary Mexico (Simonette, 31). By 1908 Hohner had a subsidiary in Mexico, although it closed three years later due to the Mexican Revolution. In spite of the closure, the company's representative saw potential in the Mexican market. Writing to the New York office in 1913, he expressed hope that the US would annex Mexico, (following this logic) thereby increasing their customer base (Simonette, 32), a prospect I find equal parts hilarious and horrifying.⁵³ I can only assume that post-Revolution northward migration elided further demands for annexation.

Unhampered by revolution and unassisted by annexation, Hohner's dominance of the marketplace continued. Through mergers and expansion their production increased until wartime restrictions caused them to temporarily curtail their exports. Following WWI, production resumed, and by the eve of the Great Depression half of all accordions produced in Germany were exported to the Americas, with nearly a quarter separately going to the U.S. and Latin America during this period (Simonette, 32). Accordions became, for a time, ubiquitous across the Americas; prior to the widespread popularity of the (electric) guitar it was the accordion that captivated the imagination. For ethnic whites—Polish-, German-, Hungarian- in the process of becoming American—there was an evident connection between the music of the homeland to the music of their adoptive home. Until rock and roll went mainstream and the guitar took center stage the accordion was a constant, almost everyday presence, in songs and dances and communal gathering, at VFW halls and ballrooms and living rooms during family gatherings, and, with the advent of broadcast media, over the airways and on the television.⁵⁴

⁵³ Of all the justifications for imperialism...

⁵⁴ While the accordion's enduring popularity through midcentury strikes many as a curious factoid—in part a reflection as to the extent to which the instrument itself is viewed as a novelty across mainstream (non-Mexican origin) listening communities in the U.S.—its presence and prominence is well documented across the literature and among accordion-related listening communities. As Jacobson writes

In the public mind, at least during the period when the instrument was at the peak of its popularity in the 1940s and 1950s, the accordion [was] seen as an accepted part of American popular culture. Accordions were not too 'other'—they were not the instruments of street musicians or underclass immigrants who

War once again curtailed accordion production and exportation. Interestingly, the Nazi regime in Germany banned concertina and Bandonion clubs outright and limited harmonic and accordion playing as musical organizations sympathized with the communist workers' movement (33). In spite of this, as Ragland points out, other ethnic communities abandoned the button accordion even as Tejanos embraced it,

making it central to the [Tejano conjunto] music's sound in spite of the contemporary stylistic and instrumental changes in the ensemble. For the Tejano, the three-row button accordion embodies the community's economic struggle while also distinguishing it as the core of an 'authentic' Tejano conjunto sound. Rather than change to a more versatile, larger accordion, conjunto accordionists prefer to tinker with the instrument by re-voicing the reeds, adding more buttons and keys to the board as needed, and maintaining a sound that is in their mind uniquely "Tejano" (95).

Ragland correctly notes here how the button accordion functions as much as a signifier, in this case for a working-class community's "economic struggle," as it does as *the* central instrument in that community's music. This association speaks to a classed and raced distinction between ethnic white (Italian- and Polish- American) communities who largely gravitated towards the (more expensive) piano accordion and their Mexican- and Afro-Caribbean/ Latinx-origin counterparts' use of the button accordion, as it is found in conjunto, norteño, merengue and cumbia genres throughout the Americas. As Ragland continues,

For the Tejano migrant worker who originally was able to obtain this instrument in the early 1920s because it was cheaper and smaller than the larger chromatic, piano-style accordions used by other immigrant musicians, the diatonic model represents an act of defiance as well as of dedication to a tradition that evolved in spite of poverty and oppression (95).

In spite of efforts to reform the accordion's image and ensure its entry into classic music, ultimately its "strong ties with folk music and oral traditions ... hindered a smooth transition into the [33] concert world" (34), as Helena Simonette concludes. "The accordion of the nineteenth century was a symbol of progress and modernity as well as of mass culture and industrialization," she continues. "This dichotomy is one of the reasons for the elite's ambivalence towards and uneasiness with the accordion" (34).

needed to be watch with suspicion. ... Accordion sales reaching 250,000 in 1953 (at its peak) created a stir in the music industry (139).

Please see Jacobson, Marion. "Valtaro Musette: Cross-Cultural Musical Performance and Repertoire among Northern Italians in New York. *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives*, edited by Joseph Sciorra, Fordham University, 2011, pp. 133–152. For an example of an article heralding the resurgent interest in the instrument, please see Golden, Hallie. "Accordions: So Hot Right Now." *The Atlantic*. (January 9, 2014). Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/01/accordions-so-hot-right-now/282782/> on July 10, 2018.

What's old is new again. The trope of 'rediscovering' the accordion has its own enduring legacy, one that appears to be renewed periodically. For an example of this from an earlier resurgence, please see Jacobson, David. "It's Back with A Bellow." *Washington Post*. (February 8, 1988.) Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1988/02/18/its-back-with-a-bellow/18faa95f-516b-402c-b1e6-d245ca502586/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.db22b3bb0660 on July 10, 2018.

Simonette reminds us that in the wake of wartime fervor the United States denigrated German music, along with a number of other things associated with Germanic origins. What, if any, effect might this have had on conjunto's popularity in the 1940s, as Texas Mexican conjunto performers often recorded (under stage names) for ethnic European audiences? Was there a wartime lull in polka playing?⁵⁵ Certainly, the best was yet to come as conjunto's popularity skyrocketed following the war.

Conjunto Innovations following WWII

Manuel Peña identifies four eras or stages to the Texas Mexican conjunto during the twentieth century, neatly divided by WWII (1999b: 86-7). The first era, the diffuse stage, began around 1870, lasted through the 1920s, and is marked by a lack of formalization or regional stylization. While musicians played the accordion during this time span it would not achieve the prominence one often associates with the genre until the formative stage, from the late 1920s through the end of WWII. During this stage the accordion-bajo sexto combination (as exemplified by the playing duo of Narciso Martínez and Santiago Almeida) becomes standardized, in part due to the availability of commercial recordings. In marked contrast to the German/Eastern European style of playing, Texas Mexican accordion players largely abandoned the use of the bass buttons on the accordion, in part because of rhythm accompaniment by means of the bajo sexto. Narciso Martínez spearheaded this innovation, playing the treble buttons of his two-row diatonic accordion in an artistic move that, in Cathy Ragland's words, freed Santiago Almeida on bajo

to develop a distinctive style of playing by using a cross-picking technique with an alternating pattern and by playing the notes of the bass chord individually. This approach to playing the instrument produced a syncopated effect and increased the temp of these rhythms (and the dancing) which set the Texas-Mexican sound apart from that of the local German and Czech population, who initially brought the accordion and early repertoire to the region (Ragland, "Tradition," p. 90).

Musicians continued to experiment and innovate with the conjunto ensemble following the end of WWII. Mexican Americans experienced an increased range of class mobility coupled with an accelerated urbanization; these changes were reflected in and, in many instances, grappled with through the realm of cultural production.

In what Peña terms its classic era or golden age, conjunto music achieved prominence in Texas amid a period of rapid innovations that came to be incorporated into the genre. Among the innovations were the contributions of Valerio Longoria, who introduced vocals to a previously

⁵⁵ Similarly, how much cross-cultural overlap occurred from Mexican and Mexican American listeners enjoying Polish and German polka recordings? Any theorizing I can entertain at this juncture is primarily speculation based upon anecdotal evidence from observations of those born before or during wartime. That being said, and in my limited capacity I have yet to encounter any record collections to suggest that Mexican Americans sought out or obtained recordings from Eastern European/European American polka artists. A search through the Joe Nicola Collection housed in UT Austin's Benson Library likewise did not turn up any results that would indicate otherwise. Although I cannot at this juncture rule out the possibility that recording labels released and marketed Eastern European/American recordings to a Texas Mexican listening audience I have yet to encounter evidence to the contrary.

instrumental way of performing, incorporated the Cuban-Mexican bolero, and is credited with incorporating drums into the conjunto repertoire, thereby changing the very nature of playing. Another foundational innovation in the modern conjunto sound came from Tony de la Rosa, who slowed down the tempo and whose staccato style of playing polkas “became the hallmark of the tejano style” (100). Of all the artistic innovators in the post-WWII era, Peña identifies El Conjunto Bernal as the most stylistically innovative. “More than any other group, El Conjunto Bernal took all the elements coalescing around the accordion ensemble in the late 1950s and raised them to a level of technical virtuosity ... that remained unsurpassed at the end of the twentieth century” (101). El Conjunto Bernal represents the pinnacle of the Texas Mexican conjunto’s development, as Peña argues persuasively, yet within a decade’s time the genre would enter an era of “consolidation and decline,” caused, in part by a number of factors: the rise to prominence of norteño acts such as Ramón Ayala y Los Bravos del Norte and Los Tigres del Norte; culturally-imposed mores that limited experimentation and constrained innovation; and the influence of major labels in further shaping the Tejano/conjunto sound. To this list we should also note the rightward turn of the late 1970s and 1980s, which we find most saliently in the Mexican American listening community as the underlying class-based tensions between the conjunto and orquesta became subsumed and subsequently glossed over as the community shifted from the cultural nationalism of the Chicano movement to a homogenizing identification as a pan-Latino Hispanic. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the popularity of the electronic synthesizer as a replacement for the accordion in the Tejano ensemble, and the ways in which this change in instrumentation reflects and speaks to larger trends of corporate downsizing and privatization. Thus, through an analysis of the conjunto genre we can see the effects of modernity play out upon a Mexican American listening community during late capitalism on many levels, including musical production and dissemination, identity formation, and performative aesthetics.

What I am articulating here is not necessarily a new argument. For decades the work of Manuel Peña has served as the benchmark of scholarship on conjunto and other Texas-Mexican musical genres. Starting with the essays and a dissertation that led to the publication of *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto*, and continuing with his two subsequent books, Peña has crafted a body of work that encompasses history, cultural criticism, and ethnography as he seeks to understand the development—or, in his words, “evolution”—of conjunto, Tejano and orquesta music. As a historical materialist, Peña’s analysis presents, with increasing sophistication and nuance, the complexities and contradictions facing Texas Mexicans as they grappled with the changes wrought by modernity, capitalism, and Anglo American racial hegemony throughout the twentieth century. At the same time, his work fails to explore gendered constructs in conjunto, beyond questioning the limited representation of women in the genre.

To fully understand a given music’s meaning one must situate it culturally, historically, and socially; in other words, music only has meaning in specific social settings (Slobin and Tilton, 1996; in Peña, 1999b: 4). Central to Peña’s argument is a dialectical relationship between working-class Chicanos and middle-class Tejanos, a neatly bifurcated relationship that he finds characterized by the *ranchero-jaitón* divide. Peña asserts that conjunto is borne out of the conflict between Anglos and Mexicans. Within the Mexican American listening community intraethnic class tensions following WWII forced a division between *ranchero* and *jaitón*, expressed musically through, respectively, the accordion-driven conjunto ensemble and the big-band emulating orquesta. With this binary established, Peña devotes the majority of his work towards complicating things. As he almost delights in showing us, through interviews and the thick

description of a participant-observer, the orquesta-listening, acculturated, upwardly mobile (or aspiring to be so) Mexican Americans still cut loose and danced to the polka ranchera at bailes and balls, despite their voiced disdain for the music of the lower classes. This tension, which Peña traces, eventually finds resolution in the synthesis of orquesta's instrumentation—through the incorporation and use of the brass horns—with conjunto's musicality—the polka ranchera—as it led to the creation of the Tejano sound.

In *Música Tejana* Peña argues that when Tejano music became a “superorganic commodity” it also becomes an inert and unchanging artifact for sale. Per his formulation, no longer was the music an organic—authentic, perhaps—performance of culture. Rather it had become a mass-produced commodity as its worth-value changes to reflect this transformation. Following these logics, mass produced conjunto 45s had a dual effect upon the genre: they consolidated and regulated the many stylistic, instrumental and technical innovations at the same time as they enabled conjunto's mobility, thereby expanding the genre's reach across time and space. No longer bound to the live performance of an accordionist or fiddler, or limited by the range of a radio signal, I argue the conjunto recording ‘freed’ the music, untethering it from its source or origin. First, in lieu of a live performance, the conjunto recording enabled its enjoyment anytime, and anywhere, provided one had the means to play it. This altered the timeframe in which conjunto came to be heard, as well as changed the spaces where conjunto existed. Secondly, to the latter point, as an artefact the conjunto recording extended conjunto's reach beyond that of the performer's immediacy or broadcast's signal. Conjunto recordings could travel with the people who listened to the genre and made their way across the nation that is presently the United States, in search of and subject to the demands of labor markets. Peña rightfully cautions that this freeing occurs within the confines of a commercial project and the rigors of capitalism itself. “To become organic cultural activity,” he writes, “music first must be transformed by use-value” (7). Thus, we see a schism form, between the first order, “live,” versions and the second order, recordings; or, perhaps more aptly, the transformation of musical cultures from the local, regional, and communal to the mass-marketed, commercial, and national (or international). In this hierarchical syllogism the former is superior by dint of proximity and intimacy, whereas the latter, a mass-produced commodity, lacks authenticity. In contrast, I argue, this unidirectional formulation not only overly simplifies complicated relationships of musical creation, commercialization and dissemination, but also ignores the agency of the listener. Rather, I ask, does the concern or interest over a perceived authenticity or loss thereof reflect instead a cultural-nationalist politics of identification? And, if so, how do we think beyond or outside this binaristic structure?

For example, per Peña, we may identify the shift from organic to superorganic commodity in Texas Mexican musics by noting the changes in the conjunto/Tejano ensemble, as it went from a two-piece accordion-bajo sexto combination in its earliest incarnations, to its addition of electrified instruments in the mid-1950s, to the employment of the Mexican-regional grupera aesthetic with the incorporation of electronic synthesizers in place of the accordion and its embrace of the pan-Latin cumbia rhythmic structure during the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁶ The schism Peña identifies reflects a shift in late capitalist logics, as seen in the movement from a communal towards an individual construct; deindustrialization, alienation, and indeed, commodification of artifacts and cultural productions once thought of as ‘folk’ writ large, as

⁵⁶Grupera: category of Mexican regional music with a ‘smooth’, synth-heavy sound, typically eschewing the accordion in place of the keyboard, romantic lyrics, and a propensity towards ballads and cumbias.

products (or causalities) of modernity.⁵⁷ However, these transformations within the genre itself present only part of the picture. What of the listeners, and the ways that their social world changed—or remained the same? Does post-wartime prosperity or twentieth-century deindustrialization impact or alter one's relationship to a cultural production? What of migration? Not to mention how listeners may and do listen differently—across class, across gender, across geographic region. These questions inform my analysis, and suggest future directions for further research upon this subject.

Interestingly, curiously, Peña's analysis in *Música Tejana* does not reflect the depth or nuance he brings to the discussion in *Orquesta Tejana*, the companion volume released the same year. Whereas the division between organic and superorganic commodity strikes me as a little too neat and tidy, a little too binary, I find his employment of a dialectical model to be much more suited towards addressing the fluidity, the range of movement, the shifting differential between ideological positions expressed culturally through the musics of conjunto and the Texas-Mexican orquesta. Still operating within a Marxist framework, Peña surmounts the reductive, rigid nature of his earlier model. Yet, Peña leaves unanswered lingering questions of authenticity. Under his formulation, if a cultural production is 'authentic' then it is somehow able to surpass the organic-superorganic divide and transcend the effects of commodification. Quite literally, the cultural production (conjunto, in this case)—and, by extension, the producer and consumer—remains 'real, in contrast to that which is a vendido, a sell-out.

There is an overlap between Peña's diffuse stage, covering the period between around 1870 to the 1920s, and the tail end of what Paredes (1958) called "the corrido century," spanning from Texas independence through the Great Depression, or roughly from 1836 through the late 1930s (1958: 132). In his genealogy of the corrido Américo Paredes identifies its earliest influences in the northern Mexican frontier as the romance, décima and copla or verso, all lyrical forms originating from Spain and introduced to the Americas through the colonial project. Anglo encroachment, Texas Independence in 1836, annexation in 1845, and the seceding of Northern Mexico to the United States following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 led to the rapid displacement and disenfranchisement of the region's Mexican population, and Texas Mexicans entered into a period of open hostility and conflict.

As Paredes (1958) and Herrera-Sobek (1990, 1993), among others, so effectively document, not all corridos fit into the resistance trope. For example, the Corrido de Kansas (Kansas), dating from the 1860s, and the Corrido de Pennsylvania are both early examples of corridos about migration and labor conditions. Yet it is the resistance corrido that comes to dominate as Texas Mexicans struggled to define their identity, and their place, in this always changing society. Denied access to the rights and privileges of Anglo Texans, they nonetheless saw themselves in many regards as different from and rejected by *fuereños*, literally "outsiders," or the northern Mexican newcomers, and their kin south of the borderline (Montejano 1987: 110). As a culturally-rooted form of expression the corrido emerged during this period of open conflict along the borderlands. Paredes cites the uprising led by Juan Nepomuceno Cortina in 1859 as the first "documented" example of borderlands resistance commemorated in song, followed by corridos dedicated to men known and unknown, such as Catarino Garza, Jacinto

⁵⁷ I use the term late capitalism to refer generally to the post-WWII period. In using this term, I do not mean to imply that capitalism is or will be coming to its end. Rather, I would argue we have witnessed a transformation or transition in capitalism necessitated by systematic and structural forms of power so as to remain in power. That shift is what is reflected in the term "late capitalism." For more, please see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1990).

Treviño, and others whose names have been lost to the passage of time. However, it is El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez that proves to be most enduring, influential, and illusory. While it is neither my interest nor my intent to greatly explore the significance of the Corrido de Gregorio Cortez as there are in-depth and probing discussions available elsewhere (Paredes, 1958 [1990]; R. Saldívar, 1990) a few words are in order. As Paredes notes,

The *corrido* of border conflict assumes its most characteristic form when its subject deals with the conflict between Border Mexican and Anglo-Texan, with the Mexican—outnumbered and pistol in hand—defending his “right” against the *rinches* (147).

Furthermore, he elaborates,

it is never the same in all its details, nor does it always correspond to fact, but it carries the real man along with it and transforms him into the hero. The hero is always the peaceful man, finally goaded into violence by the *rinches* and rising in his wrath to kill great numbers of his enemy. His defeat is assured; at the best he can escape across the border, and often he is killed or captured. But whatever his fate, he has stood up for his right (149).

Or, as he puts it,

One can see the balladry of the Lower Border working toward a single type: toward one form, the *corrido*; toward one theme, border conflict; toward one concept of the hero, the man fighting for his right with his pistol in his hand (149).

Paredes states that the corrido comes to be about one man fighting for his rights—with the individual protagonist symbolically representing the whole. Corridos make a sharp distinction between the hero and outlaws: unlike the Robin Hood-type ballads, “the hero as an outlaw who robs the rich to give to the poor does not gain acceptance,” although these songs circulate, and the border outlaw does not repent, as if to provide a moral for the audience (150). In the corrido the hero

is not the highwayman or the smuggler, but the peaceful man who defends his right. The Border ballads that have been most widely accepted are those containing the three factors mentioned: *corrido* form, border-conflict theme, and a hero that defends his right (150).

As Paredes argues, the Corrido de Gregorio Cortez represents the clearest synthesis of all the corrido’s elements. His monograph presents eleven documented variants that emerged following the turn of the century, although there were certainly many more versions in circulation attuned to local, regional, and temporal nuances.

In *Chicano Narrative*, Ramón Saldívar argues for the importance of Paredes’ study in shaping Chicano prose fiction, stating that “it stands as the primary formulation of the expressive reproductions of the sociocultural order imposed on and resisted by the Mexican American community in the twentieth century” (27). Saldívar argues that the corrido lends itself to ideological analysis in part because of its emergence as the “dominant socially symbolic act of the Mexican American community,” one which is

not typically a form of personal narrative, a reproduction of idiosyncratic experiences, the corrido instead tends to take a transpersonal, third-person point of view representing the political and existential values of the community as a whole. Since its narrated events are historical in nature, the corrido focuses on those events of immediate significance to the corrido community that are capable of producing a heightened, reflexive awareness of the mutual values and orientations of the collective (32).

At its core, the corrido narrative follows a common, peaceful man thrust into situation where he must respond by violence in defense of home, family and community. Saldívar continues, writing how

[i]n the process of this attempt to win social justice, his concern for his own personal life and his own solitary fate must be put aside for the good of the collective life of his social group. Composed for a predominantly rural folk and focused on a specific geographical locale, the unity of the corrido is culturally, temporally, and spatially specific; the corrido makes no effort to be 'literary' or 'universal'. Its point of view is cultural rather than national (Paredes 1958a, p. 183-84, as quoted in R. Saldívar, p. 35).

Even as the protagonist is named and celebrated the narrator and the author are both anonymous. Saldívar argues that in the heroic corrido

there is no place for the idiosyncratic, for an individual perspective that stands totally outside of communal concerns. No individual life, even that of the hero, may be regarded as uniquely different from the fate of the community as a whole. Gregorio Cortez stands, consequently, not as an individual but as an epic construction of the society that constitutes him. His fate cannot be disconnected from communal fate (36).

This is true; we remember the song but not the singer, the narrative but not the narrator, the story but not the storyteller. Thus, Saldívar concludes, "in the symbolic sphere, the corrido became the preeminent form of action and resistance against the ever-increasing political and cultural hegemony of Anglo-American society" (*Chicano Narrative*, 39).

The heroic narrative dominates Paredes' framing of the corrido century and Peña's discussion of Texas Mexican popular music's primacy. Paredes argues, "The concept of the hero as a man fighting for his right also becomes dominant" (150). Furthermore, he concludes, "The balladry of the Rio Grande Border was not like the Castilian, a border balladry of military victory, but like the Scottish, one of resistance against outside encroachment" (Paredes, 244). In both Paredes' and Saldívar's analyses the heroic corrido narrative models social behavior, insomuch the expectation if not the reality. We cheer for the lone Mexican confronting Anglo encroachment and gringo domination, or so it follows, for he represents us: a community (of men) empowered by the efforts of one lone Mexican (man). This resistance narrative thus models a means towards insurgency along the borderlands—as well as constructs an image of Texas Mexican masculinity, for what does the hero do but defend his family and his land who are his people and his nation—that fails. The hero meets a tragic end, and the people he represents are ultimately defeated. The triumphs of Gregorio Cortez, or that of Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, or Joaquin Murrieta, or Tiburcio Vásquez, all heroes of ballads singing of

their acts of resistance and bravery, are ultimately short lived as Texas Mexicans continued to grapple with the loss of property and the denial of basic protections under the law.

Given this reality what, then, becomes of the heroic corrido? While Paredes notes that it fades away, Peña suggests that after the 1920s it morphs into the victim corrido, wherein songs narrated stories of the humble protagonists being conned, swindled, tricked, or taken advantage, just as Texas Mexicans find themselves confronting a changing set of circumstances along the borderlands. This “symbolic transformation” of the heroic corrido continued, Peña notes, especially following WWII, as “the larger-than-life hero began to disappear from the Texas-Mexican corrido; in corridos of intercultural conflict, he was replaced by a more or less helpless victim (or victims)” (*Música Tejana* 76). Peña attributes the “absence of status reversal” (i.e. the heroic narrative arc) to the “transformation of Texas-Mexican society itself” (*Música Tejana* 76-77). In contrast to the hero corrido, which he considers “the product of a subordinate society whose only means of empowerment was symbolic” Peña argues that the victim corrido “emerged to articulate the aspirations of a people with an increasing sense of empowerment” (77). Through its portrayal of helpless victims, the victim corrido generated sympathy and “spurred Texas-Mexican communities to take *collective* action for the benefit of all. The real hero turned out to be the collectivity” (p. 77; emphasis his). Concomitant with the changing nature of Anglo American hegemony, forms of symbolic and cultural resistance or negotiation changed and adapted in response. As the corrido is linked “to the heroic past of cultural resistance.” with its decline other expressive forms take precedence. As Saldívar explains,

Residing as a repressed element of the political unconscious, thereafter the corrido exerts symbolic force in the spheres of alternative narrative arts. ... We might thus argue that contemporary Chicano narratives and other forms of novelistic discourse are to problematic mid-twentieth-century society what the epic heroic corrido was to the integrated world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: self-consciously crafted acts of social resistance (41-42).⁵⁸

At a time of open conflict and intense violence against the Mexican American population the people reacted, culturally speaking, through the proliferation of border ballads celebrating a hero’s rise against an injustice. However, while the corrido itself is a form of resistance to Anglo hegemony, it is a tempered resistance limited in scope and scale, means and methods. It is, as Peña argues, symbolic, engaged in a Gramscian war of position over ideological domination during an era that is much more reflective of outright war, or what Gramsci would term a war of maneuver.⁵⁹

Positioning the corrido at the heart of the formation of Chicano letters leads to some glaring omissions and silences of the historical record. But it also presents us with some fundamental questions around expressions of selfhood and community, identity, and social mores. Intrinsicly male, the corrido asserts its performative masculinity from the points-of-view articulated in its songs to those who composed and sung its lyrics, those who repeated its refrains, and those who—like Paredes—listened to its stories in all-male multi-generational

⁵⁸ Or what Lukács calls “the reification or fragmentation of modern life” (R. Saldívar, referring to Lukács 1971, 56). Saldívar’s use of the phrase “political unconscious” is of course a reference to Fredric Jameson’s 1981 book *The Political Unconscious*, and Jameson’s insistence upon locating literary texts within their broader sociohistorical context.

⁵⁹ Limón makes this point in greater detail. Please see *Dancing with the Devil*, 1994: 41-44 for more.

spaces. Herrera-Sobek suggests as much in description of the internal structure of the hero corrido, or what she calls the valiant-hero corrido,

represented by a circle that begins and ends with the death of the hero. The narrative unfolds and evolves between the two axial points of death; as we trace the path of this circle, it is obvious that the dramatic thread of the narrative reaches its pivotal axis at the point of betrayal. ... The axis on which the action rotates towards its inevitable finale and through which the tragic destiny of the hero is accomplished is the treachery and betrayal of the protagonist by a woman. In this manner, the women who appear in the lyrics, although playing a secondary role in the sociohistorical drama, serve the function of anti-heroes, or anti-heroines to be more precise (68).

Could the corrido escape the limitations of its form, by design? What shape would this take? Who would be the subject? The gendered constructs underlying the narrative arc of the heroic corrido carries over, even if the gender of its protagonist changes. Who would become the hero-subject of this anti-heroic corrido in this decoupling of hero narratives and hegemonic masculinity?⁶⁰ I think of Tish Hinojosa singing “Con Su Pluma en Su Mano,” her moving tribute to Paredes off of her 1995 album *Frontejas* framing him as the embodiment of a heroic Chicano scholar, as an example of how the form replicates itself.

Along—and in contrast to—these lines of inquiry, I wish to examine the work of Lydia Mendoza. Rather than placing her as part of a binary dualism that contrasts with—and therefore places her outside of—the dominant corrido-to-conjunto genealogy, I center Mendoza’s creative work and generation-spanning career within twentieth century Texas Mexican popular music. Doing so disrupts the patrilineal constructions of conjunto historiography, as a way of continually (re)imagining future narrative frames. This is not so much an act of historical recovery as it is of continual recognition, a deliberate act of identification that challenges the hegemonic masculinity of cultural production in the public sphere.

Mendoza began her career shortly after the heroic corrido’s apex, at the dawn of the recording age.⁶¹ While she was not a corridista, her participation in a nascent genre did not occur separate from the ‘tradition’ already in place. Furthermore, as one of a small number of performer-vocalists, Mendoza’s influence, as her visibility, was limited—but, by the same token, through touring, performances, recordings, and a career spanning multiple decades it is important that we do not understate her role or importance to Texas Mexican popular musics and especially the canción ranchera.

Popularly known as La Alondra de la Frontera, or, in an English translation devoid of poetry, the Lark of the Border, Lydia Mendoza was born in 1916. Her career spanned over half a century. Mendoza credited her mother and grandmother with teaching her to play and sing

⁶⁰ Time and time again we find peoplehood conflated with nationhood conflated with manhood—the father-fronted ‘familia of la Raza’, the hypermasculinist strains of Chicano nationalism, the way the Spanish language itself is gendered to construct a masculine subject in referring to groups, be they all-male or mixed gender, thereby erasing or subsuming lo femenino under the -o at the end of a word. For the Mexican American males—be they fathers, sons, or patriarchs—who found themselves continually besieged by Anglo encroachment through lynching, land grabs and other sorts of legal violence, did their songwriters and cultural workers in turn project their sense of victimization upon the women closest to them, vis-à-vis the victim corrido?

⁶¹ As Broyles-González put it, “radio and phonograph technologies facilitated [Mendoza’s] widespread resonance, which at some levels is the very resonance of the people whose collective songs were channeled through her body and voice” (*Chicana Traditions*: 187).

starting when she was seven.⁶² Together with her family members, as a teenager she began to perform professionally just prior to the Great Depression as part of El Cuarteto Carta Blanca, in a manner similar to their country-western contemporaries the Carter Family, (Broyles-González, 37). Mendoza suffered a stroke in 1988 that effectively forced her into retirement. However, she continued to perform and make sporadic public appearances up until her death in 2007. She was in many ways the epitome of an organic intellectual. Despite receiving little formal education her talents as a gifted composer and songwriter, not to mention her playing ability, should sufficiently warrant her inclusion among the greatest musicians of her era.

I think of Mendoza's life within the context of her times. While her upbringing, including her lack of formal education and her informal training in music, may seem remarkable from the vantage point of the present day I argue instead that a century ago Mendoza's experiences were in many ways the norm for Mexican Americans in pre-Depression Era South Texas. Mexican Americans in Texas were consistently pushed out of schools at an early age. Indeed, had Mendoza graduated high school, let alone attended, she would be an anomaly. Furthermore, as a female musician Mendoza matrilineal training in performing and playing is consistent with the gendered norms regulating Mexican American women's forms of creative expressions. Even as Mendoza began to perform professionally (i.e. for a wage, albeit one shared across a family) it was within the confines of gendered norms, and regulated as such. Where Mendoza veers from these norms—dictated, in so many ways, by patriarchal concerns—is in her career as a solo artist, and in the duration of her career.

The best and most comprehensive text to date on Mendoza remains Yolanda Broyles-González' *Lydia Mendoza's Life in Music: La Historia de Lydia Mendoza*. Part oral-history, part biographical sketch, part scholarly analysis, and part loving ode to one of the most influential Mexican American musicians, Broyles-González locates Mendoza within the world of Texas Mexican popular music and positions the singer as central to its development and popularity. Mendoza's influence shaped a genre. Her works and words continue to resonate. Based upon my reading of Broyles-González I argue that Mendoza created an alternative poetic imaginary, a third space Chicana feminism embodied by the singer and her verses.

Paredes, in *With His Pistol in His Hand*, and R. Saldívar in *Chicano Narrative*, analyze the primacy of the corrido in shaping Texas Mexican listening preferences at the dawn of the twentieth century. By placing the corrido as part of a musical lineage that leads to the dominance mid-century of conjunto, Chicano scholars compose a masculine teleost that silences other songs, other sounds: a linear progression of, by, and for (Mexican) men. In contrast, Mendoza's embrace of the canción, and especially the canción ranchera, reflects a shift in the preferences of the Mexican American listening community that occurred within the transition from corrido to conjunto. Rather than view her creative intervention as peripheral, a manner of composition and playing to be eventually incorporated into and subsumed by the post-war conjunto ensemble, in centering Mendoza Broyles-González recovers a Chicana performative epistemology in its own right.⁶³

⁶² NEA National Heritage Fellowships, <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/lydia-mendoza>. Retrieved on August 8, 2018.

⁶³ This merits further discussion beyond the scope and space of chapter. Sufficient to note that conjunto historiography framing stylistic innovations—i.e. Valerio Longoria's introduction of the canción ranchera into his repertoire—by and large fails to offer a larger context by which to understand the significance of these innovations or their respective (gendered) histories.



Figure 5: A rare public appearance by Lydia Mendoza, at the opening of the Tejas Music Museum in San Antonio, May 5, 2005. Photograph courtesy of the author.

While the corrido itself had begun to undergo another series of changes during the same period in which Mendoza became a popular performer, the themes of rugged masculinity and romantic nationalism carried on, and both the tensions and the contradictions between rural and urban life became increasingly visible. For Mexicans, and the Mexican Americans who lived in Texas during the Great Depression, *el rancho* was the place of “sociocultural origin” (Broyles-González, 188), a sort of homeland in the collective imaginary. As Broyles-González writes, “Mendoza’s crucial network of popular *ranchera* songs constructs social meaning, including a common ground across differences, of working-class identity formation and thus social empowerment” including her agency in this process (188). Mendoza was part of the process of countrification, “transforming the city into a rural imaginary. Her voice helped establish and consolidate the imagined communities of U.S. Mexicans and Mexican immigrants during one of the greatest migratory periods. Lydia Mendoza’s presence and voice became a space of reintegration, reflection, and collectivity during periods of extreme dislocation and relocation” (190). Through her tours and dispersal of recordings and media “her voice and repertoire

physically gathered displaced workers into listening collectives and auditory communities. Her voice established a focal point and presence among the massive migratory movements (forced and/or voluntary) of the thirties, and it continues to do so in the present” (190).

How do we define ranchera? What makes ranchera music “so-beloved and so-maligned,” Broyles-González asks, especially when its “star idols are dismissed (or not even perceived) by academic culture critics?” (183-4). To dismiss ranchera music, she argues, is to dismiss “the humanity of the people who carry the weight of the tradition” (184). As Broyles-González points out, the use of ranchero imagery in the popular imaginary was contradictory. At a time when México struggled following its 1910 Revolution to define itself as a nation-state and achieve some semblance of national unity amid deep divisions, intense regionalism, and the ravages of war and hyperexploitation the ranchera flourished, for it works “to cement local allegiance; the imagined community is not the nation but the rancho, the communally held farmlands” (191). This is the great contradiction in ranchera music, for it produces “counternarratives of popular rural identity at a historical juncture ... when rural life and culture are being decimated by extensive government/corporate-sponsored land seizures” (191). Within this context “the *canción ranchera* creates a popular poetics of space that tenaciously remembers and even idealizes rural lifeways under attack as the nation-states sell out to foreign investors” (191). In other words, the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of the *canción ranchera* pays attention to particulars of locality, region and physical markers, not to the nation. However, as Broyles-González points out, the “rural-urban binary is not only oppositional but also complementary,” as they both share “spheres of mutual influence” (193). Historically, patterns of migration have gone from rural areas to increasingly urban ones; within this context, as Broyles-González observes, “the more migration there is to cities the more rural the cities become” (193).

Rather than ignoring the *canción ranchera* on the basis of its subject matter—that is, rather than disregarding songs of love or betrayal as escapist, apolitical, or insignificant—Broyles-González suggests we examine “the ways in which the *canción ranchera* functions as a living working-class social practice that variously enacts and rehearses social relations, locations, and meanings” (194). In this light the *canción ranchera* may be seen as a “living social practice ... The *ranchera* emotes without much narrativizing; you fill in the blanks with your own desires” (195). Thus, in contrast to the “detached narrative tone” of the corrido one may feel “pleasure or pain” at multiple levels—be it emotional, mental, or physical—while listening to a ranchera (196). The *canción ranchera* invites investment through its emotional intimacy laid bare. As with the bolero, conjunto performers adopted and incorporated the ranchera into their repertoire and in so doing opened up diffuse avenues for their audiences to participate in a dialogical process through dance, through spectatorship, and through emotions, whether shared or perceived as such. It is evident there are multiple layers of meaning embedded in the *canción ranchera*, and these meanings shift and change within the urbanized setting of mid-century Houston and San Antonio. On the surface love songs seem to exist in their own, isolated sphere, removed from any contemporary or historical social commentary. But it seems to be precisely this apolitical and ahistorical aspect of the romantic ranchera that begs for further analysis and serious consideration. Ultimately, “many love songs”—including Mendoza’s rancheras — “are much more than songs about love” (197).

Broyles-González argues that Mendoza’s rancheras “deterritorialized ‘Mexicanness’,” reconstituting it into what she calls a “non-national diasporic auditory community.” As she argues, within the intimate context of “celebration and mourning,” the ranchera opens a communal space that marks life events such as “reunions, separations, kinship, and the

experience and re-experience of manifold encounters, relationships, and solidarities (including bonds of enmity)” (198). This is possible, in part, because the social separation between performer and audience participant is not a neatly cleaved division. Rather, as characteristic of Texas Mexican popular musics, the relationship between performer and audience is multidirectional, not unidirectional. Audiences will call out song requests, sing along and even take to the stage to dance, sing, and otherwise engage in the performative aspects of musical production most often associated with that of the performer herself.

More often than not performers share similar backgrounds as their listening community. This in turn leads to a familiarity borne of shared experiences, as, again, exemplified by Mendoza’s biographical experiences. Mendoza embodied knowledges, practices and understandings from a working-class Mexican American feminist positionality. She reflected this in her performative practices and venues; in the way she moved through space; her dress and appearance; the rancheras and boleros that comprised her sets; and even her singing.⁶⁴ Broyles-González characterizes the tonal qualities of Mendoza’s voice “as representing rural and working-class qualities of voice and song.” Broyles-González describes them as being straightforward, almost speech-like, with minimum vibration and phrased using inflections of daily speech, or declamadoras (202). Rather than adopt or employ the phrasing of a classically-trained vocalist, or that of her Anglo or Black contemporaries recording and performing at the same time, Mendoza’s singing, as with her on-stage persona, reflected her community and background through her approach to vocality. In employing this every day, quotidian quality Mendoza staked out a position that was distinctly individual yet intimately tied to a larger social network of working-class Mexican and Mexican Americans. Furthermore, as a Chicana in a male-dominated sphere of cultural (musical) production, she articulated sentiments and situations that critiqued or challenged patriarchal narratives, in lyrics and in life, around the prescribed roles of women.

Photo stills of Mendoza and her sisters shown in a montage during *Chulas Fronteras* (1976) suggest that as a performer in the early stages of her career she was deftly attuned to the fashions and styles of the day; certainly, the close-cropped hair with a neatly-pressed curl to the side was keeping in line with the latest fashions of the time. Historian Vicki Ruiz situates the impact of flapper styles, such as bobbed hair, and the tensions around the choice of dress and makeup use, within the context of a generational divide as young Chicanas negotiated the confluence of cultural and social mores, gendered expectations, class mobility and “elements of Americanization with Mexican expectations and values” (1998: 53). As an example of the fervor around Chicanas’ style politics, Ruiz cites a verse from “Las Pelonas,” a popular corrido, where the singer says “the girls of San Antonio/ are lazy at the *metate*.” Prior to mechanization, and long before large-scale commercial production made such things largely irrelevant, part of the process of making tortillas involved hand-grinding the maiz on a metate, a heavy, rectangular-shaped block of volcanic stone used for such a purpose. To be lazy at it implied that these “girls” were negligent in the heteronormative duties they were expected to perform under the patriarchy. *Las Pelonas* concludes with the line “The flappers stroll out now/for a good time,” a line that retains its poetry more in its original Spanish, found in the book’s endnotes, rather than the

⁶⁴ For a visual representation of these aspects of Mendoza’s performance please see Les Blank’s excellent documentaries *Chulas Fronteras* (1976) and *Del Mero Corazón* (1979). This footage of her performances underscores the warmth, charisma, and presence of her on-stage persona, and the sheer power of her singing voice during the latter stages of her musical career.

translation Ruiz provides (55).⁶⁵ Regardless, and somewhat ironically, as they found themselves on the receiving end of similar criticism, the Mendoza sisters too were critical of the independence and (relative) mobility of their pachuca peers, as suggested by Las Hermanas Mendoza's song *Los Pachucos (Pachuco Boogie)*. Yet, the Mendozas shared some degree of exercising an independence that came from working, earning money, and expressing themselves as musicians. While the bulk of their scorn is directed at the pachucos "que no saben trabajar" (who don't know how to work) in this song, they direct one line at both pachucos and pachucas who enjoy going out and dressing in the latest styles, implying that they spent their money on frivolous and superficial things. Yet, in many regards, the Mendozas shared much in common with their pachuca contemporaries. Like the sisters, the pachucas who earned an income through employment outside the home sought to enjoy the social mobility and greater freedom from gendered norms this provided them.

Broyles-González speculates that Mendoza's career in the public spotlight was one of if not the longest of any musician in the U.S. Her enduring presence presents a welcome contrast to the prominent Mexican American performers whose careers were cut short by tragedy.⁶⁶ Through Mendoza, and other female-fronted duos, trios, and solo artists who originated during the Depression-era or following the war (WWII), we find a cultural counterpoint to the masculine, singular, rural and authentic subject of the hero corrido—an example that lies outside the (corrido) genre but within the cultural context that produced it.

Among the first "this side of the border" to gain national recognition during the 1930s were sisters Margarita and María Padilla, of Las Hermanas Padilla, from Los Angeles (Salem, Nicholopoulos and Strachwitz, 1991: 3). They joined a handful of other duos—including several pairs of sisters—who had recorded during the first few decades of the twentieth century. These numbers increased following WWII as small, independent labels in South Texas such as Discos Ideal began recording duets. In addition to Mendoza, who performed along with her sisters Juanita and María (Las Hermanas Mendoza), artists such as Carmen y Laura (Hernandez), Las Hermanas Segovia (Aurelia y Lucita), Las Hermanas Cantú (Nori, Ninfa, and Nellie), and Rosita (Fernandez) y Laura (Cantú) all recorded and played through South Texas and beyond. Of this cohort only Chelo Silva, who toured across the U.S. and Latinoamérica and was possibly the

⁶⁵ The entire verse from "Las Pelonas" is as follows:

Los paños colorados
Los tengo aborrecidos
Ya hora las pelonas
Los usan de vestidos.
Las muchachas de S. Antonio
Son flojas pa'l metate
Quieren andar pelonas
Con sombreros de petate.
Se acabaron las pizcas,
Se acabó el algodón
Ya andan las pelonas
De puro vacilón

Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930; rpt. Arno Press, 1969). P. 89, in Ruiz, Vicki. *From Out of the Shadows* p. 178.

⁶⁶ For example, see Richie Valens, Selena Quintanilla, and/or Jenni Rivera.

most widely known Mexican-origin female musician during the 1950s, rivaled Mendoza in fame and longevity. Together, the two were known as “Las Grandes de Tejas.”⁶⁷

Mendoza’s creative work bridges the gap between the waning years of the (heroic) corrido’s popularity and the emergence of the Texas Mexican conjunto. Her presence, performance, voice and lyrics present us with an opportunity to examine alternative spaces beyond the combination of masculinity and cultural nationalism; an agentic, audiotopic alternative to both lo ranchero and romantic nationalism. But we also encounter a highly-problematic syllogism that not only excludes Chicanas from representation but goes so far as to deny them a place in the act of resistance. For, after all, corridos were stories about men, sung by other men; if women were present it was in a familial setting, if at all, and their contributions were seen as minimal at best. This is not to say that Chicanas did not intervene interstitially or fail to take an active role in organized (and unorganized) resistance against the prevalent Anglo-American hegemony taking place along the borderlands of South Texas at the turn of the century.⁶⁸ Rather, recognizing this fact forces us to question where and in what forms resistance and agency manifest culturally. In short, once again paraphrasing Stuart Hall, we witness the hard work of hegemony—fought, in this case, through the contested terrain of the cultural front.

⁶⁷ The Arhoolie compilation *Tejano Roots: The Women (1946 – 1970)* features recordings from duos and solo artists following the end of WWII and is a useful guide to female-fronted and female-led Mexican American recording artists of that time. For more please see *Tejano Roots: The Women (1946 – 1970)*. Arhoolie Records, 1991.

⁶⁸ Even within this context the terms of resistance remain gendered as heteronormatively masculine. How might we recognize other forms of resistance?

Chapter Three

“Al estilo taquachito”: Theorizing Movement in Conjunto Dance⁶⁹

Tejas is a site of “third space” cultural production that emerges in conversation with the discourses of Anglo-Texas colonialism and Mexicano nationalism. ... Tejano music is a site for the construction of *Tejas*. ... the music itself comes to represent a discursive mechanism for Tejano subjectivities.

Deborah R. Vargas⁷⁰

Te voy a comprar chinelas
Y un vestido muy bonito
Pa' que bailes la polka
Al estilo taquachito
Traditional, “Margarita, Margarita”

It is in the middle of the afternoon and I am listening to Santiago Jiménez, Jr. perform at the Royal Palace Ballroom, deep in southside San Antonio. He’s been blazing through any number of polkitas for the past hour and he’s not even halfway through his set. Through Jiménez, Jr.’s hands resonate a musical history spanning generations. As he plays this particular afternoon the music he creates forms a sonic landscape which invites—beckons—listeners to participate in an act of physical expression and bodily movement called dance. These quotidian bailes and tocadás, even in the service of celebration or special occasions, are so common as to be taken for granted and are subsequently overlooked, ignored, and dismissed.

Jiménez, Jr. has over six decades of experience playing conjunto. A staunch traditionalist, he plays in a style directly influenced by his father, conjunto pioneer Santiago Jiménez, Sr. The younger Jiménez eschews a drum set, a move unusual by today’s standards but the norm through the 1950s, instead relying upon both the bass of his accordion as well as the tololoche for keeping rhythm in his musical homage to his father’s style of playing. Indeed, aside from his use of a three-row Hohner, electronic amplification, and the occasional fermata, or extended note, played in the style of his brother Flaco, “to create tension and excitement in his performances,” (Ragland 100) Santiago Jiménez, Jr. would not be out of place in his father’s ensemble.

On this particular day I have invited a few friends to join me, and together we take turns dancing to Jiménez’s rancheritas and cumbias for the next few hours. These tardeadas, or afternoon dances, have been a staple of Mexican American cultural life for generations. Typically, initially, they were limited to the end of the workweek—usually the weekend or, specifically, Sundays—as a way for field and manual laborers to enjoy their day off. However, through the course of my fieldwork I have found that in San Antonio one may encounter live conjunto performances seven days a week—a fact that makes it unique, and, as of 2012, somewhat of an anomaly for by all accounts the heyday of conjunto has long since passed. The Royal Palace ballroom hosts acts at least six days a week, every week—most notably conjunto

⁶⁹ An earlier version of this chapter was previously published as “‘Al Estilo Taquachito’: Theorizing Movement in Conjunto Dance.” *The Journal of American Culture*. March 2015. Vol. 38, #1. 51-62.

⁷⁰ “Bidi Bidi Bom Bom: Selena and Tejano Music in the Making of Tejas,” (2002: 118).

scion Henry Zimmerle on Mondays and occasional Sundays, with other acts such as Bene Medina, Santiago Jiménez, Jr., and the duo of Eddie ‘Lalo’ Torres and Anita Paez on regular rotation. Capacity here maxes out at 700, but the weekday crowd reaches a third of that. An impressive number, but it feels sparse given the venue’s space. Attendance typically ebbs and flows consistently between one to two hundred patrons, with an estimated average of around one hundred and fifty people dancing on any given afternoon, year-round. This number easily doubles on the weekends, with Sunday’s dances after church and brunch attracting more of a multigenerational crowd, with the lone deterrent I have noted being winter weather. Not even the Cowboys distracts this football-loving crowd from conjunto—and the tardeadas ended early enough on Superbowl Sunday for everyone to sport their team jerseys and leave in time to catch kickoff elsewhere.

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Figure 6: Schedule of events at the Royal Palace Ballroom for June, 2012.

On the outside you wouldn’t know it but this squat, nondescript building, in continuous operation since 1975, deserves recognition as a conjunto mainstay. Even after their recent renovations it is easy to miss if you are not already with someone who knows where to turn into the lot. Parking is in the rear, the driveway is hidden by a row of bushes along a fence, and the front entrance of the building all but abuts the street. The sign, written red on white in a nondescript font that is devoid of any flair, adornment, or embellishment, gives no indication of the activities inside, no listing of performers or programming. From the parking lot the building still retains its innocuous character. Especially in the middle of the day when, aside from the rows of cars parked, you might be hard pressed to suspect any activity inside the plain white walls. Approaching the entrance there is a sign, perhaps a remnant of when the ballroom first opened, beckoning visitors to enter. It is hand-painted, with a stylized logo spelling out R-O-Y-A-L P-A-L-A-C-E alongside an ‘Aztec calendar’ motif, and sits just above the second set of doors leading into the building. By this point that is of secondary importance, for if it is a

weekday and it is after 2 p.m., well, by now you hear the music. And that, after all, is what we are here for.

Cover charge to the Royal Palace during the daytime is only a dollar, almost as an afterthought, and admission comes with a ticket to one of the raffles held during intermission. (Although management doubled the price of entry—to two dollars—in early 2013 it remains a steal by any metric.)⁷¹ For one more dollar attendees can purchase three tickets for a second round of door prizes; sometimes there will even be a third set of prizes, depending on the sponsors, or a “fifty-fifty” raffle, where the winner splits the prize money with the contest’s organizer. Periodically, during the musicians’ break, guest speakers will announce various charities and benefits and address the crowd about topics relevant to retirees, such as senior health and diabetes. The audience thins out following the weekday raffles and by the time the band starts up once again late arrivals can enter, free of charge.

The interior of the Royal Palace Ballroom is as spacious and Spartan as its exterior. Row after row of folding chairs and tables, like the kind one might find at any office supply store, are arranged around a small, low-rising stage and give definition to the dance floor. A series of Christmas lights, the kind which dangle like icicles, adorns the ceiling overhead. There are beer signs and lights along the walls, some of which may be considered vintage collectables by today’s standards and were in all probability part of the original decor. To varying degrees this sort of display is common to the conjunto dance halls, bars and ice houses—basic, open-air beer gardens dotting the landscape—I have visited in and around San Antonio and south Texas. The specific adornment varies from place to place: clocks pointing to Miller Time, neon signs glowing Budweiser or Plexiglas Lonestar lamps. But the alcoholic-beverage distributors do not have a monopoly on decorations. Los Cocos Lounge (an icehouse, albeit not necessarily a “conjunto bar”) on Pleasanton has photographs of San Antonio landmarks, buildings and, most importantly, the people who lived, worked, and built the city—so that even when the bar is empty there are familiar faces and places all around you. Behind the register at Bosman’s resides a Virgin de Guadalupe clock, all flashy metallic reds and greens and blues, and hand lettered signs outlining house policy (the de rigueur “No Smoking”—and an unexpected “No Spitting”). Perhaps most famously, to the right of the stage at the still-shuttered Lerma’s, someone painted a near facsimile of the now-iconic Jesús Helguera calendar image of an ‘Aztec’ warrior and his ‘princess’. These are not “ultra-lounges,” or sleek, flashy nightclubs, catering to the urban chic, moneyed or not. Rather, the aesthetic of the conjunto nightclub is Chican@ working-class and utilitarian, basic decorations in simply furnished buildings. It is the epitome of rasquache, the “underdog” “attitude” and “worldview” of the “have-nots” that reflects the “bicultural sensibility” of Chican@s, as Tomás Ybarra-Frausto so lovingly describes (1991).

To paraphrase a descriptive phrase I heard repeatedly in conversation, conjunto fans such as those at the Royal Palace Ballroom ‘grew up along with their music’. Here, the patrons in attendance for the daytime dances are overwhelmingly older: retirees, grandparents, and the sabios, or elders, of the community. Appearances aside, one indication of participants’ age comes from the frequent parties for somebody celebrating their seventy-fifth, eightieth, or ninetieth birthday. (For such an older crowd there is a surprising number of twenty-first birthday parties held almost on a weekly basis. These are announced with a knowing grin, as though it was the first time someone made this joke.) Additionally, the “Single Seniors Club” meets on

⁷¹ As of August, 2019, the Royal Palace Ballroom now charges \$3 cover on weekdays and \$5 on Sundays for conjunto dances. They are now closed Mondays and, at least for the month of August, Tuesday shows are on hiatus. From what I can tell these changes have been in place since 2018, if not longer.

Thursdays, and they host themed dances periodically, such as a Senior Prom or Sweethearts dance for Valentine's day. While the age of the conjunto listening community as a whole tends to skew older (based upon my observation the majority of fans in general are between their mid-40s to late-60s-and-up) there is a smaller but significant young (teens and 20s) population taking an active role in performing and enjoying the music due, in part, to the rising availability of conjunto music programs in schools, community colleges and cultural centers in the Lower Rio Grande Valle and San Antonio.⁷²

In a space such as the Royal Palace during an afternoon baile I am younger than most by two or three decades at the time of my fieldwork. The individuals gathered here belong to a generation born between the Great Depression and the Vietnam War, with the majority a part of the post-WWII baby boom—which, for Mexican Americans, means they were most likely born or raised in Texas, in an urban, not rural, setting (be it the small towns of the Lower Rio Grande Valle or a larger cities such as San Antonio, Houston, or Corpus Christi), transitioned out of migratory agricultural labor (even if this was the primary occupation of their parents), and received at least some level of high school education (again, in contrast to their parents' generation). Chances are, if male, they also have military service (or are related to someone who served) and if they were raised in San Antonio, they, or their families, had access to employment that permitted entry into the lower-middle class, such as through the manufacturing sector at Kelly Air Force Base.

As part of a community of dancers it is likely that the elders who gather on a regular basis at the Royal Palace were the ones who filled up San Antonio's nightclubs like El Camaroncito or Lerma's during their respective tenure as *the spots* to be. Indeed, interviews and conversations I held with regulars during my fieldwork indicate that dancing to conjunto music was not something that individuals came to later in life. Rather, those who dance as an elder or in adulthood were already dancing by their formative years. Several informants pointed to a parent or close relative introducing them to conjunto music and instructing them to how to dance. A focus on the long-term or recent decline in conjunto's popularity—by now a trope in academic and popular articles on the genre—frames conjunto as a fad or trend in need of greater promotion, protection, or popularity (if not all three) while overlooking the deep, life-long connection/s one has with the music.⁷³ This sense of longevity comes into play when we consider that the personal and social histories of conjunto's performers and their listening

⁷² Since their inception cultural centers such as the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center or the Conjunto Heritage Taller, both in San Antonio, and the Narciso Martínez Cultural Center in San Benito, Texas have offered formal conjunto instruction from the likes of Valerio Longoria, Santiago Jiménez, Jr., Eva Ybarra, and Oscar Hernández. (The Taller was where I attempted, quite unsuccessfully, to learn how to play my beautiful vintage 3-row Hohner under the instruction of Jiménez, Jr. and Benny Medina.) Through the leadership of Juan Tejeda, Palo Alto College in San Antonio developed a Conjunto Music Program in 2001. This was the first program of its kind at the college or university level. (Tejeda was the founder and coordinator of the Tejano Conjunto Festival for almost the entirety of its existence.) Since then UT Austin begun (as of Fall, 2006) to offer a Tex-Mex Conjunto ensemble. While mariachi programs across Texas and the southwest have been a staple for some time conjunto instruction is a relative newcomer to K-12 instruction. Conjunto scholar Dan Margolies singles out three programs, all in South Texas, for praise. Please see Margolies, Dan. "Conjunto Sustainability and The Schools," (2015). For more about the importance of cultural sustainability programs please see Margolies, Daniel S. "*Voz de Pueblo Chicano: Sustainability, Teaching, and Intangible Cultural Transfer in Conjunto Music*," (2011).

⁷³ Most notably, Manuel Peña describes the seventies, eighties, and nineties as a period of "consolidation and decline" (1999: 105). More recently, Saul Elbein writes of Lupe Saenz who angrily bemoans the loss of conjunto radio stations in the Lower Rio Grande Valle ("Get Your Norteño out of My Conjunto," *The Texas Observer*, May 20, 2011. <http://www.texasobserver.org/dateline/get-your-norteño-out-of-my-conjunto>. Last accessed, July 12, 2017.

community of a certain age are intertwined, as conjunto's performers live and work in the same communities as their listening public. If the genre as a whole has ceased to exhibit the radical stylistic innovations and changes it underwent during the post-WWII period (as per the argument best articulated by Manuel Peña, as discussed in the previous chapter), its consistency amidst change has an enduring appeal. Furthermore, it's also worth considering that those born in the late '40s and early '50s and now celebrating their sixth and seventh decades by dancing at the Royal Palace Ballroom to the sounds of Santiago Jiménez, Jr. were in their teens and twenties during the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. While I hypothesize that there were indeed overlapping influences—most notably in the “Brown Pride” sound, songs and style best demonstrated by Little Joe y La Familia's movimiento-era recordings that combined big, brassy horns and Tejano rhythms with calls for Chicano power—this is an area that merits further study. Rather than investigating overt forms of politicized expression, such as lyrics advocating cultural reaffirmation or benefit shows for the UFW or Raza Unida, I turn my attention to quotidian, everyday cultural expressions encountered through the music—sound—and movement, or more specifically, dance within the conjunto genre.

It is within these spaces like the Royal Palace Ballroom that the conjunto listening community congregates to socialize and, more importantly, dance to conjunto music ‘al estilo taquachito,’ or in the taquachito style. Taking its name from the wobble of a taquache, or possum, the taquachito and its many references (“puro taquachito,” “a taquachear,” “estilo taquachito,” and occasionally spelled with a c in place of the q, as in “tacuachito”) remains the best known and most widely accepted moniker for any number of stylistic moves danced to a polka rhythm by the Chicana and Chicano working class conjunto listening community. As one may still encounter live conjunto performances every day of the week in San Antonio in these places the act of dancing to conjunto music is as woven into the fabric of everyday life as rice and beans with tortillas are at mealtime. But what are these rituals? What composes them? In what ways are they unique? Writing nearly three decades ago, Yolanda Broyles-González offered this description of the variety of dance styles encountered in San Antonio:

Contemporary [as of 1985] Tejano polka-dancing involves no foot-stomping, jumping, or arm-flailing. Instead, it is subtle and smooth. The smoother, the better. ... Over the years several distinct San Antonio Westside dance forms have evolved. One of them is named ‘estilo camarón,’ the style of El Camaroncito Night Club. Perhaps the Devil was eager to learn the step. Even at a distance, the style of El Camaroncito is unmistakably striking. The woman is arched back at the waist, so that her feet almost appear to be dragging behind her; the man is curved forward. Hands are held high, the forearms near the woman's ear. Movement originates in the hips and the body seems to spiral gently. Turns and half-turns are completed in split-seconds. Not even the Devil can master it in one night (“Even the Devil Dances at El Camaroncito,” *SA Light*, May 27, 1985b, p. E5).⁷⁴

While seemingly out of place, the repeated references to the Devil peppered throughout her article are a nod to the moment in which Broyles-González wrote. As an enduring part of the

⁷⁴ In my research I found examples of dance styles named for their resemblance to movements or actions, including the well-known motions of a particular marsupial, as well as those referring to a particular place, venue, or region. While the taquachito gets its name from the way dancers move, possum-like, across the floor, I am unclear if the estilo camarón is a descriptive title referring to the place—El Camaroncito, the dancehall—or the appearance of the dancers. Or, possibly, both.

regional folklore much was made of Devil sightings at conjunto dances, a subject José Limón explores in *Dancing with the Devil* (1994). Although I did not document any references to “Estilo Camarón” during the course of my research (as El Camaroncito had long since shuttered its doors) and thus do not have a first-person eyewitness account of the accuracy of Broyles-González’ description for that specific style the general details remain consistent with the contemporary and classical forms of the more generalized taquachito style. (The Devil’s appearance, however, remains a viable reference as I found informants followed a similar pattern to what Limón outlined: first-hand testimony became reframed as knowing someone who was there became hearing about the Devil from someone who heard about it from someone else, and so on.)

Although nomenclature is important in order to define stylistic accuracy, overall participants had few if any specific names for their dances or oft-repeated moves, a point I will expand upon elsewhere. However, I posit that for those moves which have names, these styles of dance and the terms associated with their nomenclature are in many ways variants of the taquachito, updated, refined, personalized, and identified street by street, barrio by barrio, or bar by bar. For example, through my research I came across mention of “Highway 90” style, or “puro Highway 90,” so termed because the geographic location in the title refers to the present-day stretch of Old Highway 90, traversing the outer limits of San Antonio’s Chican@ West Side, and the high concentration of bars, ice houses and dance halls in operation along that stretch of road during conjunto’s heyday. Yet puro Highway 90 is as much a naming and claiming of a particular geographic space as it a period in time in which that space existed as a marker for the actions, events, and occurrences which lend its moniker currency and resonate, even today, within a particular community. Given that, I suggest that puro Highway 90 style functions as a signifier for what was a hyperlocal variation of the taquachito, a reference to a dance which gained regional prominence during a specific time and in a particular place which have both long since passed. This idea isn’t as fetched as it may seem. Research into polka in the Midwest reveals variations in playing styles across the Great Lakes area (Jacobson 2012). Performers, scholars and participants have all observed regional differences in conjunto across the state of Texas. Ragland (2012) delineates three major groupings based upon style of playing located, generally, in what one refers to as South Texas: San Antonio, Corpus Christi and the Coastal Bend, and the Rio Grande Valley and Northeastern Mexico border. While her detailed analysis does not delve into an analysis of the dance practices in those areas it stands to reason that the differences in sound and style would lend themselves to variations in movements. Along the same lines, Esteban Jordán based his observations of the variations of conjunto dance across Texas around tempo (Tejeda, *Puro Conjunto*, 2001). He noted the minute, miniscule differences in polkas he played differently depending on his audience: a little slower in Corpus, a little faster in the Valley. Unfortunately, Jordán does not elaborate upon the differences further, although he does name and describe three popular dances, grouped by region: the tacuachito, or little possum, in Houston, the serruchito, or tiny saw, in San Antonio, and the tiezo, or stiff one, in West Texas (348). Whether Jordán was referring to localized variations of what were essentially the same set of dance moves, or a specific, unique move in and of itself is unclear, especially so regarding the taquachito as it is a common denominator across conjunto listening communities.

The act of dancing has a meaning and a significance which endures beyond the song and extends beyond the dancehall. As Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz write in “Rebellions of Everynight Life,” dance

sets politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity where identification takes the form of histories written on the body through gesture. . . . Latin/o bodies serve as the site of a long history of racial, cultural, and economic conflict. Dance promises the potential reinscription of those bodies with alternate interpretations of that history. Magnificent against the monotonous repetition of everyday oppressions, dance incites rebellions of everynight life (1997: 9-10).

Movement in dance for the brown, racialized, gendered and sexualized body is a site of embodied resistance and agentic change. Or, as Delgado and Muñoz remind us, “dance vivifies the cultural memory of a common context of a struggle that bolsters a cultural identity itself forged through struggle and dance” (16). While Delgado and Muñoz write of a broadly categorized “Latin dance” here I draw from them in order to explore the meanings and ramifications of Tejano conjunto dance and, specifically, the construction and significance of the *taquachito*.

In conjunto the style of dance is synonymous with the particular style of music. One dances cumbia to a cumbia beat; a waltz to a waltz; huapango to a huapango, and so on. The style of music determines the dance, and both share the same name. While one may speak generally of dancing—through the use of the word conjunto (ex. ‘I want to go conjunto’) as an umbrella term for the variety of musical styles played at a dance, or a bilingual slang term (‘a chanclear,’ from the word for sandals)—the *taquachito* is unique in that it refers broadly to the act of dancing as well as specifically a the style of dance; it is another synonym for the polka (or polka ranchera, or, affectionately, the polkita) as well as, depending on the specificity and context used, a style of polka dance. To dance the *taquachito* is to dance in a manner distinct (or distinct enough) from other polka dancers; yet to dance ‘al estilo *taquachito*’ may also mean nothing more than to participate with a partner in the counterclockwise rotation that occurs on the dance floor as a performer plays any number of songs in the 2/4 time signature, thereby further confounding one’s desire for precision and specificity in naming and defining. This fluidity and blurring of lines, terms, and movements carries over throughout the genre; it is hybridity in motion; an embodiment of *transfronteriza* bodies coupled in pleasurable practice, unconstrained by imposed borders or stylistic definitions, of which there are many.

In present-day San Antonio one rarely hears the *chotis* and *redova*, once-popular rhythms included in the conjunto ensemble’s repertoire.⁷⁵ In contrast, the *taquachito* is a social phenomenon rooted in that specific time and moment that has nonetheless survived and flourished into the present. Even the now-ubiquitous cumbia which surged in popularity during the 1990s across Mexican regional and Mexican American formats is a relatively recent addition to the conjunto genre when compared to the polkas and waltzes, styles that have deep reaching Eastern European origins and came to be a part of Mexican-origin dance practices by way of the pre-revolutionary Porfiriato. The manner in which one dances to the Texas Mexican polka ranchera contrasts with the way one might dance to variations of the Eastern European polka or Cajun zydeco, although the music may be otherwise similar sounding, if not identical. (A further exploration of this phenomena merits exploration, as this essay raises questions around the development of conjunto isolated from a broader polka-listening community.) Indeed, the parallels and similarities between the playing—if not the performance—of popular accordion-

⁷⁵ I suspect this may be a regional distinction, or a reflection of regional preferences, as I noted numerous instances where dancers requested—and performers played—these oft-ignored styles during the course of the three days I spent in late October, 2011, at the 20th Annual Narciso Martínez Conjunto Festival in San Benito, Texas.



Figure 7: A couple appears to pause as dancers spin around them at the at the 20th Annual Narciso Martínez Conjunto Festival in San Benito, Texas, in October, 2011. Photo courtesy of the author.

based ‘ethnic’ music meant that labels could and did repackage, relabel, and rename albums in order to sell to diverse markets. One salient example is that of Narciso Martínez, the first true ‘star’ of conjunto, whose Depression-era recordings for the Bluebird label were attributed to “Louisiana Pete” and “Polski Kwartet,” and marketed to the Cajun and Polish-American listening communities, respectively—with no mention of Martínez’ authorship (Strachwitz, 1977). This sort of cross-cultural exchange still continues today, albeit under the artists’ control, as evidenced by the Two Kings of Accordion tour and eponymous recording featuring conjunto artist Santiago Jiménez, Jr. and Chris Rybak, the ‘Accordion Cowboy’, a second-generation self-taught accordionist playing music inspired by his Czech heritage.⁷⁶

The taquachito is the embodiment of a Chicano style. Through its combination of elements from *lo ranchero* and post-WWII era pachuco styles the taquachito becomes a visual, performative, and bodily declaration of identity that spoke to Mexican Americans’ anxieties around social mobility, ethnicity, and gender roles amidst a rapidly changing world. These Mexican Americans in the late-1940s and 1950s began moving in greater numbers from rural to urban areas and experienced a modicum of social mobility as both men and women gained employment in factory, service, and low-level white-collar work. While urbanization and the experience of entering the modern urban city is often portrayed as a source of conflict resulting

⁷⁶ For an audible comparison of the marked similarities between the two groups listen to Rybak, Chris & Santiago Jimenez, Jr, *Two Kings of Accordion* (Dog House Studios, 2011).

in alienation and homogenization (Williams 1973, p. 297) the performative and participatory aspects of the conjunto scene mitigate this tension.

The importance of *lo ranchero* to the conceptualization of conjunto bears discussion. Rather than think in terms of dichotomies (*lo ranchero* vs. *lo moderno*) however, I propose that *lo ranchero* be conceptualized as a constitutive element, albeit one historically bound and geographically located. Broyles-González, in an article about the ranchera music of Lydia Mendoza, considers the mythology of *el rancho*, or what she terms a place of “sociocultural origin” (“Ranchera Music(s)”: 188). While the term *ranchero* refers, literally, to the ranch, or rancher, I employ ‘*lo ranchero*’ in a manner consistent with other critics in order to encapsulate that sense of being ‘from the ranch,’ or from the countryside, as a metonymic shorthand for a range of indicators from dress and appearance to forms of employment and gendered divisions of labor. In the Chicano imaginary *lo ranchero* symbolizes a romanticized homeland, one which evokes “living on the land, self-sufficiency, roots”: a sense of place, and a social hierarchy anchored by clearly defined social roles (197). Under the term *lo ranchero*, Peña describes a series of idealized qualities embodied by the figures of *el charro* and *el campesino*: “manliness, self-sufficiency, candor, simplicity, sincerity, and patriotism, or *mexicanismo*” (*Texas Mexican Conjunto*: p. 11; emphasis his). Visually, *lo ranchero* evokes a style of dress represented by boots, well-fitted blue jeans, and button-down shirts for men, topped by a *tejana*, or wide-brimmed cowboy hat, which together constitute a *ranchero* masculinity defined by sober and neat attire. Yet, revealingly, Peña offers no gendered counterpart to this. His hegemonic, dominant, masculine-national depiction of the project of *lo ranchero* subsume, silence, and erase a female equivalent (an *a la ranchera* aesthetic, perhaps?). The logics of dichotomous thinking leave little room for shared agency, complexity, or multiple identities. Instead, in this line of thought, where one side is strong and dominant the other must be weak and passive.

Through appearances and actions, across barrios and borders, Mexican American women, Chicanas, and Mexicanas contested—and continue to contest—these gendered expectations. Catherine Ramirez, writing in a different context (about *pachucas*, not *lo ranchero*), remarks “as they shaped their own dissident femininity or rejected feminine norms altogether, *pachucas* came to represent a female masculinity” (124). Ramirez paraphrases Judith Halberstam’s argument in *Female Masculinity*, noting that Halberstam argues “masculinity does not belong to men exclusively. . . . masculinity can and does exist without men, and [Halberstam] makes the case that when masculinity is removed from men it is denaturalized” and can possibly challenge hegemonic gender constructs (124). The silences in Peña’s account suggest as much, as do the performative legacies of women like Lydia Mendoza and Chelo Silva, “Las Dos Grandes,” as discussed in the previous chapter; the late ranchera singer Anita Jeanette “Janet” Cortez, known as “La Perla Tapatia,” who enjoyed a late-career revival singing with San Antonio’s Las Tesoros; and accordion legend Eva Ybarra, whose performative aesthetics, vocal timbre, and even instrument—the accordion—all complicate and confound gendered expectations.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Other examples abound, beyond a conjunto/Tejano/ranchera/Mexican regional music context. For an in-depth discussion around the ways *pachucas* contested the masculine-nationalist iconography and significance of the *pachuco*, please see Catherine Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* (2009); Escobedo, Elizabeth R. *From Coveralls to Zoot Suits: The Lives of Mexican American Women on the World War II Home Front* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). See also Ruiz, Vicki. *From Out of The Shadows* (1998).

For a first-person narrative account of a Xicana contesting gendered and racialized expectations within the punk rock scene during the 1990s, please see Gonzales, Michelle Cruz. *The Spitboy Rule: Tales of a Xicana in a Female Punk Band*. Oakland: PM Press, 2016.

Mid-twentieth-century portrayals of rancho society relied upon these tropes which were then reified in the academy as the first generations of Chicano scholars returned to them in their work. This is most evident in Américo Paredes' writing upon the corrido. *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958), Paredes' most influential work, covers a period predating the emergence and dominance of the conjunto in Texas Mexican popular musics. However, the social world of the borderlands which he so poetically describes sets the foundation for what was to come. Certainly, it resonates mid-century as Mexican Americans transitioned en masse to an urban environment. As the corrido was the stylistic precursor to conjunto and as the preeminent form of popular musical entertainment along the frontera I find Paredes' observation detailing the social world of this time to be relevant to my discussion here. It bears mentioning that the analysis presented by Paredes is one of men writing about men singing about the activities and actions of other men; as such, the world of the corrido and the corrido-hero, in the historical imaginary, is part of a masculinist-nationalist project which centers the Chicano as the defender of the familia and nation.

By equating the desirable qualities of being just, brave, honorable, and strong to expectations of Mexican manhood this course of logic conflates cultural authenticity with patriarchy. The corrido-hero defends his family as he defends the nation—within specific parameters, under a code of behavior and being that prescribed strict roles for men, women, and children. This strict adherence to a rancho sensibility began to unravel during the 1940s, forced to change as Mexican American women increased their social mobility along with their economic influence as they entered the workforce and participated in leisure activities in greater number. The corrido as the popular and dominant form of musical entertainment gave way to the canción romántica, a favorite among Mexican American women in urban centers.

During the early part of the twentieth century, female performers in the Mexican American entertainment industry were limited to the stage in roles as singers and dancers. By the 1920s and 1930s a few became recording artists as solistas (soloists) or part of a dueto (duo). With limited exception—the illustrious Lydia Mendoza and her family-based group Cuarteto Carta Blanca in particular—prior to WWII female duets either recorded locally in Los Angeles or were visitors from Mexico (San Miguel, 29). While female vocalists had been recorded backed by a number of different ensembles or instruments it wasn't until after WWII that the Tejana vocalists recorded while accompanied by an accordionist (San Miguel, 29). As the first to do so, the duet of Carmen y Laura gained popularity and financial success with their single “Se Me Fue Mi Amor.” Others followed in their wake, duetos and groups such as Las Hermanas Segovia, Hermanas Cantu, Delia y Laura and Rosita y Laura.⁷⁸ Chicanas did not come to perform in a vacuum: their participation and involvement in conjunto, whether singing, playing an instrument, or both, by its nature challenged prevailing gender mores and societal pressures which were in turn policed and regulated at every juncture. If a performer was young (and unmarried) then the guidance of her parents, in particular her father, determined and limited her opportunities. Adult women, if single, fell under the paternal guidance of the male manager or band leader; married performers found their ability to tour restricted by the constraints of her husband and family. Male performers faced these same concerns and complications, as a married father whose ensemble played the circuit from South Texas to Midwestern migrant camps also had to leave family and children behind for the duration of the tour. But the literature does not speak to this as a limitation in the same way that it does with regards to the female artists.

⁷⁸ The recorded anthology *Tejano Roots: The Women* (Arhoolie, 1991) features more examples of early Mexican American women recording artists.

The female duets toured extensively throughout the Southwest and Midwest. They did not tour by themselves nor were they part of ‘caravanas’ (caravans) like so many recording artists from Mexico. They were always accompanied by their husbands on the road and toured with established conjuntos or orquestas (San Miguel 30).

Unsurprisingly, as San Miguel points out, “because of the relative absence of women in the recording industry, almost the entire range of Mexican and Tejano music came from a man’s point of view” (29). What is interesting to me, however, is the following sentence in San Miguel’s *Tejano Proud*: “In some cases, when women sang in public, the lyrics were not changed to reflect their experiences. This led to absurd situations...” (29) Although his analysis is limited, the ambiguity rendered by the inconsistent gender roles in a performance is simply, merely an ‘absurd situation.’ Rather than attempt an analysis that recognizes nonnormative expressions of gender, or even one that situates gender as a social construct, San Miguel finds humor in a perceived conflict between a performer’s gender and that of the lyrics in the songs they sing.

According to Peña, however, to the Chicano working-class audience the canción romántica was “an effete artistic form, the property of snobbish, pretentious people” (*Música Tejana*, 61). Thus, the canción romántica became perceived as the music of the jaitones, referring to the upwardly mobile, assimilationist minded Mexican American middle-class.⁷⁹ This was a generational, gendered, and geographic divide as much as anything, one which turned on class and gender as much as it did on location and social mobility.

I question whether the entanglement of the canción romántica with the listening preferences of middle-class aspiring Mexican Americans was as neat and clear-cut as Peña describes. Here, perhaps inadvertently, Peña conjoins a Chicana-centered-and-targeted form of expression (the canción romántica) with the greater social mobility entailed by urbanization, and the middle-class—assimilationist—values of the jaitón. Peña views this as emblematic of the struggle between the capitalist modernity of cities and rural folklife, observing how the canción romántica, such as the popular work of Chelo Silva, flourished in the sphere of urban modernity (*Música Tejana*, 61). Echoing Williams, Peña frames the advent of the canción romántica in terms of a dichotomic ‘country versus city’ or ‘tradition versus modernity’ divide by describing the “clash” of style preferences as a representation of the “disjuncture between capitalism and its organization of production” (*Música Tejana*, 61). Peña elaborates further, writing “With respect to the ranchera and the romántica, and the ideological poles they represented they were illustrative ... of a much larger relationship between the country and the city and its ideological articulation” (62). Ultimately, he concludes,

the tensions inherent in the romántica/ranchera dichotomy are traceable to the contradictions experienced by the Texas-Mexicans in their transition from earlier forms of economy to capitalism, from Mexican to American cultural citizenship, from rural to

⁷⁹ Jaitón, a play on “high tone,” is a term that refers to those who are or perceive themselves to be high class, fancy, or acculturated. In many ways it signifies the opposite of lo ranchero: los jaitones are urban, sophisticated assimilationists who preferred orquesta over the conjunto—or, at the least, gave the impression they did. As Beto Villa, the “father” of orquesta Tejana, found, “jaitones still enjoyed *ranchero music*, as long as it was properly packaged”—that is, played by an orquesta. Please see Peña, Manuel. “Orquesta Tejana: The Formative Years.” Liner notes. *Orquesta Tejana: The Formative Years*. (Arhoolie Records, 1992. Retrieved from <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/benson/border/arhoolie2/orquesta.html> on July 19, 2018; emphasis in original).

urban modes of living, and, most importantly, from working-class to middle-class status. ... the romántica and the ranchera mirrored these contradictions [in WWII society]: the former strove for a modern, sophisticated and (usually) urban aesthetic sensibility; while the ranchera continued to represent an idealized rural existence, the province of a folk-ethnic and increasingly working-class sensibility. Paradoxically, many tejanos, particularly the upwardly mobile, found themselves embracing both (*Música Tejana*, 66).

This dichotomy which Peña describes marginalizes and erases working-class Chicana participants in the post-WWII conjunto listening community. Rather than teasing out the contradictory, competing impulses—which Peña recognizes as being shared by rancheros and tejano jaitones—he collapses them inward. Instead of viewing these Chicanas who embraced the challenges and opportunities presented in an ever-changing society as pathfinders, innovators and early adopters the songs castigated them and their newfound freedoms, a policing via cultural production repeated as their actions and accounts were seen as assimilationist and in opposition to their cultural traditions. Lo ranchero as an ideological undertaking, it would appear, was incapable of reconciling both the newfound, albeit limited, social mobility of Mexican American women *and* the changing demands and opportunities prompted by the modern city of the post-war years. (While pachuquismo offered another alternative its appeal was likewise limited, and immediately shunned by a broad swath of Mexican Americans for its nonnormative ways of being.⁸⁰) In the realm of cultural expression conjunto reflected this conflict as the polka ranchera struggled with its depiction of women, both lyrically and thematically. As María Herrera-Sobek found, corridos from the early 1900s prescribed in great detail the sorts of behaviors Chicanas should and more likely should not possess. Rather than viewing Mexican American women as improvisationally adept and able to successfully negotiate what were in many cases dramatic, sweeping changes to their ways of life—such as moving from a rural to urban area, becoming proficient in a new language, or obtaining full-time employment outside of the home—the verses to these songs scorned Mexican American women, and considered them acculturated for not fulfilling their gendered expectations (*Northward Bound*: 280-281). The flip side to these songs which bemoaned women for ‘betraying’ their culture—and their men—of course were the songs about licentious women—that is, songs by men celebrating their unquestioned and uncritical access to these ‘loose’ women. Mexican American women in these songs were portrayed as docile and submissive, yet acculturated and outgoing—an inherent contradiction which doesn’t escape Herrera-Sobek’s analysis. While the songs themselves are dated, the tropes which they describe remained relevant to the Mexican American generation that came of age mid-twentieth century (and, it could be argued, even today).

Herrera-Sobek documents the appearance of several archetypes, or tropes, encountered in corridos, such as The Good Mother or the Terrible Mother.⁸¹ She writes that “patriarchal ideology and social class converge in the formation, flowering, and dissemination” of what she calls the Lover, Eve, or the mala mujer (54).⁸² This archetype has as an antecedent the cultural signifier and historical figure of La Malinche (previously discussed in Chapter One), whose image Herrera-Sobek rightfully notes is as a betrayer of her nation and her people. Elaborating, she writes how

⁸⁰ Again, see Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* (2009), for more.

⁸¹ By no means are these tropes limited to corridos, as I will shortly discuss.

⁸² Mala mujer: evil woman.

Mexico's historical origins, therefore, specifically involve a woman as betrayer, as traitor to her race, as whore to the conquerors, and as the sullied and tainted mother of the mestizo race that was to surface after the holocaust of the Conquest. The image of the evil, tainted woman inherited from Western conceptualizations was thus given form and substance in the historical specificity of Mexico. Eve and La Malinche become inexorably intertwined, reinforcing each other in the Mexican national consciousness. It is not surprising, then, to find the archetypal image of Eve in the corrido in various manifestations as "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (i.e. coquette and seductress), the disobedient mate or the traitor (54).

Herrera-Sobek finds numerous manifestations of these tropes in popular verse, from corridos dating as far back as the 1880s and as recently as the 1930s. (Keep in mind that the corrido's popularity waned during this latter period, as previously discussed in Chapter Two.) For example, in her discussion of a subset of the Lover, the archetypal figure of la traidora, or what she terms the "Treacherous Woman" (71), Herrera-Sobek writes about El Regio Traficante, "a drug-smuggling song" (71).⁸³ In this corrido Rodolfo, the protagonist, is betrayed by his lover, who has turned him over to the rinces, the Texas Rangers.

Al lugar donde el llegaba
Ella lo fue a recibir
Y los rinces lo rodearon
Ya no era posible huir.
Rodolfo pensó en rendirse
Cuando rodeado se vio
Pero prefirió morirse
Y fue quien el fuego abrió
Llevándose por delante
A la que lo denunció.

At the place he used to go
She went to meet him
And the Rangers surrounded him
It was impossible to flee
Rodolfo thought of surrendering
When he was surrounded
But he preferred to die
So it was he who opened fire
Taking with him
She who betrayed him.⁸⁴

These tropes remain a staple of conjunto and norteño today. Among the many well-known examples include the Carlos y José song "El Chubasco," in which the (male) protagonist,

⁸³ El regio traficante: The magnificent smuggler.

⁸⁴ "El regio traficante," in Herrera-Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido*, p. 72. Translation accompanies the original verses.

lamenting the loss of his beloved Lupita, and perhaps believing her to have betrayed him, wishes he could cause a rainstorm that would stop her from leaving.⁸⁵

Como a las once se embarca Lupita
Se va a embarcar en un buque de vapor
Y yo quisiera formarle un chubasco
Y detenerle su navegación.

At eleven o'clock Lupita left
She went to board a steamboat
And I would like to create a rainstorm
To prevent her from sailing.⁸⁶

A more light-hearted and frivolous example of betrayal may be found in Flaco Jiménez and Fred Ojeda's recorded performance of "El Mojado Sin Licencia."⁸⁷ Sung in the first person, the protagonist of this song recounts the difficulties he faces on his way from Laredo to San Antonio intending to marry his girlfriend.⁸⁸ In the classic tradition of the pelado, or underdog, everywhere he goes he is stymied by his lack of a driver's license. He is detained and jailed overnight for driving without one—in a car that lacks headlights, nonetheless.

Al fin de todo salí del bote
con muchas ganas de ver a mi Chenchita
la hallé paseando con un gabacho
el mero jefe que arregla las licencias

I finally got out of the clink
And was looking forward to seeing my Chenchita.
But I found her with a gringo
The head boss who gives out licenses!⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Numerous artists have recorded an interpretation of this song, including norteño contemporaries Los Cadetes de Linares and mariachi legend Antonio Aguilar. Monterrey, Mexico-based hip hop group Control Machete sampled Carlos y José's version of "El Chubasco" in the song "La Lupita" off of their 1997 debut *Mucho Barato*. Whereas the jealousy and rage at a perceived betrayal was covered in subtext and metaphor, with allusions to forces of nature, in the norteño recording, Control Machete dialed up the aggression and intensity of the song's beat and coupled it with violently misogynistic, homophobic lyrics.

The band would later—much later—publicly denounce their single, in conjunction with the 20th anniversary of the album's release. For more, please see Amezcua, Melissa. "Control Machete Tampoco Ponía Lupita: Toy Selectah," *#music*, February 23, 2017. (Accessed from <https://www.redbull.com/mx-es/control-machete-tampoco-pon%C3%ADa-la-lupita-toy-selectah> on July 19, 2018.)

⁸⁶ Carlos y José, "El Chubasco." (1980). Translation is mine. A sample from this recording may be found via La Colección Strachwitz Frontera de Grabaciones Mexicanas y México-Americanas at <http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/es/recordings/el-chubasco-18> (last accessed July 19, 2018).

⁸⁷ El mojado sin licencia: The undocumented person ('wetback') without a license. Originally composed by Don Santiago Jiménez, Sr., the version I reference here may be found on the CD and DVD of the 1976 Les Blank documentary film *Chulas Fronteras*.

⁸⁸ In the song the protagonist refers to her as "mi chenchita," which could be her name ("Chenchita") or, just as likely, a term of endearment he uses for her.

⁸⁹ Flaco Jiménez y Fred Ojeda, "El Mojado Sin Licencia," from *Chulas Fronteras* (1975). English translation from original.

The song ends with the protagonist returning to Laredo. Bemoaning his betrayal, he laments “Estos gabachos son abusados/perdí mi carro y me quitaron a Chenchá.”⁹⁰

Another well-known example of betrayal may be found in the now-classic song “Contrabando y Traición.”⁹¹ Written by Ángel González in 1972, norteño artists Los Tigres del Norte featured the song on their eponymously-named album shortly thereafter. This recording catapulted to stardom this group of siblings and cousins who had themselves just arrived in San José as teenagers a few years prior. As a testament to its enduring popularity there are almost 50 variants listed in the Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings alone. Housed at UCLA and funded, in part, by Los Tigres del Norte, this collection includes interpretations by well-known and obscure norteño, banda, Tejano, and conjunto artists along and beyond both sides of the Rio Grande.⁹²

“Contrabando y Traición” tells the tale of drug traffickers Emilio Varela and Camelia, la Texana. They cross into the states, their car tires filled with “yerba mala,” marijuana, and make their way to Los Angeles to complete their deal. There,

Emilio dice a Camelia
Hoy te das por despedida
Con la parte que te toca
Tú puedes rehacer tu vida
Yo me voy pa’ San Francisco
Con la dueña de mi vida.

Sonaron siete balazos
Camelia a Emilio mataba
La policía sólo halló
Una pistola tirada
Del dinero y de Camelia
Nunca más se supo nada

Emilio says to Camelia
“Today I say goodbye
With the part (money) you made
You can remake your life
I am going to San Francisco
With the owner (love) of my life.

Seven bullets rung out
Camelia killed Emilio
The police only found

⁹⁰ Those Gringos sure are sneaky. I lost my car and they took away my Chenchá.

⁹¹ Contrabando y traición: contraband and treason.

⁹² For me, Los Tigres del Norte’s original single, off of their 1975 album of the same name, remains the definitive version. Other noteworthy covers not found in the Strachwitz Collection include rock en español outfit La Lupita’s hard-driving punkish recording, found on their 1992 debut album *Pa’ Servir a Ud.*, and Café Tacuba’s avant-garde track “Futurismo y Tradición,” off of the 2001 tribute album *El Mas Grande Homenaje a Los Tigres del Norte*.

A discarded pistol
Of the money and Camelia
They were never seen again.

“Contrabando y Traición” effectively revitalized the corrido genre and is widely recognized as birthing the modern narcocorrido. These ballads chronicling (and often glorifying) drug dealers and their ilk, in a similar vein to outlaw country or gangsta rap, remain immensely popular, with their influence a grim reflection of the power and impact drug cartels have on Mexico. In comparison with the narcocorridos that define the genre today Los Tigres del Norte’s version of “Contrabando y Traición” seems—despite the sound of gunshots mimicked in the song, the death of the protagonist, and a drug deal gone wrong—like a relic from a bygone era.⁹³

“Contrabando y Traición” breathes life into longstanding tropes. While it is Emilio who betrays Camelia—had she known he was in love with someone else would she still have joined him?—in the end it is Camelia who makes off with the money, and her life. Thus, this ‘modern’ take nonetheless harkens back to Herrera-Sobek’s formulation of the Treacherous Woman as “harbingers of death” (72). Elsewhere, she concludes that what she terms a “love-death” corrido “serves to legitimate male domination” (75). Herrera-Sobek calls songs that fit within the broader trope “socializing agents” that “instruct, coerce, and frighten rebellious and unruly young women into ‘proper’ behavior”—in other words, a disciplinary technology in verse, set to a polka ranchera beat (72).

As a connective thread running through these examples the critiques of Mexican and Mexican American women’s actions echo the codes of conduct for ranchero society from decades previous, and a testament to their enduring longevity. *Tejano music 1830-1930: An Informal History*, Adrian Treviño’s monograph, is a fascinating, if informal, description of ranchero society, its music and social mores. While he writes extensively upon the instrumentation and its playing associated with early Tejano (the people, not the genre) music the details are intertwined with a description of the society in which they were played. It is clear from the subtext of his writing that this emergent frontera contact zone had clear, distinct limitations in place and mechanisms which perpetuated gender roles. Although Treviño plays loose and vague with the dates—rarely does he break down the century-wide swath he presents into anything more specific—I found the descriptions allowed a useful, if generalized, point of reference into borderlands area ranchero social mores prior to the Great Depression. Early Tejano society had an intricate array of specific prohibitions governing singing, instrumentation, and even the rate at which one could play in a particular setting. For example, the mandolin was considered a lady’s instrument, in contrast to the violin and accordion. In most cases musical families divided their duties across gender as well, where the father taught how to play an instrument and the mother taught singing. In the rare case where the mother taught her how to play, she did not perform in public (13). While Treviño does acknowledge that women did play the accordion it was typically a “ladies’ accordion,” or one which was lighter and more compact, as opposed to the standard model. Furthermore, women would rarely travel further than a day’s

⁹³ For a general—if somewhat sensational—overview and introduction to the narcocorrido genre, please see Wald, Elijah. *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002. More recent coverage suggests little has changed. See, for example, Burnett, John. “Narcocorridos: Ballads of the Mexican Cartels.” *NPR Music*. October 10, 2009. Last retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2009/10/10/113664067/narcocorridos-ballads-of-the-mexican-cartels> on July 20, 2018.

journey—approximately 20 miles from home to perform—for fear that she might elope. Instead, she would perform at the home of her family or a close relative (15).

Treviño describes without delving into a critique or analysis as to why these restrictions were placed upon women’s mobility, performance or choice of instruments. As a form of leisure and pleasure that involves close physical contact between its participants, couples-dancing under a heteronormative and patriarchal society subjected women to close scrutiny under the “encargo” system, and regulated their social roles (*Tejano Music*, 25). Generally speaking, immediate family members were free to dance with one another without problems. However, if an unfamiliar man approached a single woman to dance (typically a daughter or other unmarried female guest) the expectation was that she would first tell him to ask for permission from her mother, who would then decide or consult with her husband and other mothers. Being “asked for” in this sense was analogous to claiming a dance partner with the consequence that she could not dance with anyone outside of her immediate family (25-26). What Treviño describes carried with it an unspoken determination of class and status, as this factored into the decision-making calculus with regards to who could dance with whom—and who could not. “Sometimes dances considered to be “Indian” or “Mexican” such as the huapango, or too risqué like the taquachito, or too wild like the fox-trot popular at the early [31] part of the 1900s, were not to be played” (31-32). Eventually these considerations would drop out, as the huapango, taquachito and even the fox-trot all achieved enduring popularity—albeit bound by ideologies of race, class and citizenship. In place of a specific dance-rhythm being considered ‘too Mexican’ now it is an entire genre—norteño—which is seen as too Mexican, and threatening to not only conjunto but U.S. Texas Mexican cultural expression (Elbein 2011).

The taquachito represented a break with the social mores governing this form of ‘tradition.’ In Texas, Chicano vernacular style cautiously embraced pachuco aesthetics filtered through an emergent youth-driven conjunto culture which resulted in the taquachito. As an embodied form of expression, the taquachito incorporated visual, stylistic, and performative markers of Chicana and Chicano daily life. That is, through appearance and dress, bodily movements and dance steps, the taquachito blurred the neatly defined and contained gendered norms carried over from rancharo society. Conjunto dance suggested and allowed for an unactualized alternative within the confines and constraints of Chicana/o cultural practices and norms which was forward-looking even as it remains couched in the language of ‘tradition.’ If lo rancharo represented the rural, agrarian, working-class background and its concomitant code of masculine behavior—whether symbolic or real—of the WWII-era Chicana@s, then the post-WWII pachuco represented an urban, modern, disruptive reality.⁹⁴

Rather than assimilating or embracing lo pachuco as a whole, Chicano vernacular style incorporated the pachuco aesthetic within the emergent second-wave of conjunto performance and participation. The style of dress and dance movements associated with the taquachito brought a pachuco-influenced sensibility to a vernacular, predominantly rancharo form of cultural expression. What does this mean, exactly? Simply put, as Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg state, “the [pachucos’] clothes made meanings with their bodies” (100). For urbanized Mexican Americans—or, perhaps, more accurately, a Mexican American population in the process of urbanization—in terms of appearance this meant ‘dressing up’ to ‘go out’: wearing the short-brimmed “tandito” hat by men (and more than a few women on occasion), buttoned-up dress

⁹⁴ Catherine Ramírez further explores the significance of la pachuca during WWII as well as her subsequent erasure in 1960s-era Chicano nationalist discourse. Please see Ramírez, Catherine. *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

shirt, pressed slacks and highly polished Stacey Adams shoes in place of the wide-brimmed Tejano cowboy hat, t-shirt or Western shirt, jeans and boots.⁹⁵ While the former style was adopted and continues to be worn by many but not all, as evidenced by a glance around at the crowd assembled during a midweek tardeada at the Royal Palace Ballroom, it is the physicality of the dancers themselves which have proved to be much more widespread as dancers lean, rather than stand (and dance) upright. Angled, and paired, they incorporate any number of twists and turns as they rotate en mass counterclockwise around the dance floor. I hypothesize that the twists and turns are in part a crossover from jazz, western swing and big band dancing popular in the 1940s—certainly, this is what comes to mind when performers break into an accordion-driven rendition of Glen Miller’s “In the Mood” between sets. Furthermore—in contrast to, say, swing dancing’s acrobatic physicality where, for example, a leader might raise a follower in the air, or the rigid bounce step encountered in German polka—the taquachito emphasizes a gliding movement, a smooth forward facing horizontal movement in place of the up-down lift associated with Eastern European-style polka dance. (Although norteño dancing—conjunto’s close cousin to the south—hasn’t embraced the ‘pachuco’ style of dress, nor have the dancers by-and-large incorporated taquachito-style dance movements in their repertoire, the acrobatic maneuvers encountered in banda dancing evoke swing’s athleticism, making this an area for rich intra-cultural investigation and further research.)

The differences between rural and urban experiences play a role in shaping how Chicanas and Chicanos viewed themselves through their musical attachments. While the perception of orquesta Tejana was more urbane and classy, in line with an image that middle- and upper-class Mexican Americans sought to cultivate in the post-WWII period, I am reminded of a delightful interview which Peña summarizes by writing that “no matter how ‘elegant’ a dance, people always wanted to dance their polkas”—or, in the words of one of his informants, “You can take la raza out of the country but you can’t take the rancho out of them” (*The Mexican American Orquesta*, 157). Ultimately the class-based tensions between the largely-overlapping conjunto and orquesta listening communities found resolution through the emergence of Tejano music and what Peña terms “compound bimusicality,” a musical code-switching between styles (242-243). Compound bimusicality offered Mexican Americans a solution to the intra-group tensions and divisions around social location and class. For example, Little Joe’s 1972 recording of Wally Almendarez’ song “Las Nubes,” which came about during the apex of the Chicano Movimiento and became the de facto anthem for the United Farmworkers, blended the arrangements and instrumentation of orquesta with the accordion and rhythms of conjunto and alternated between “Mexican-ranchero and American-jaitón styles *within* the same musical piece” ... resulting in “an intensive stylistic transformation” (*Música Tejana*, p.163; emphasis his). Here I find Deb Vargas’ critical reading of Peña’s analysis as part and parcel of a Chicano cultural nationalist framework to be especially apt (*Dissonant Divas*, 2012). She argues that Little Joe’s Las Nubes articulates a “brown soul” which “registers brownness as marked by cultural-nationalist constructions of gender, masculinity, and class” (183). Thus, the resolution which Peña encounters through Little Joe’s bimusicality is conjoined with the Chicano movement’s nationalist project. (Through her research Vargas uncovered a variation of “Las Nubes” recorded

⁹⁵ In an earlier version of this essay I refer to the short-brimmed lowrider-style hat as a “techito” (or, tiny roof) based upon my notes. In his glossary of barrio slang, Mike Tapia indicates “tapita” as another term for a “barrio pachuco hat” or “brim-hat.” The dressy Stacey Adams shoes were also known as “Stacies,” or “Los Estacies,” terms of affection and endearment that have endured through the early years of the twenty-first century. Please see Tapia, *Barrio Gangs*, p.165.

in the 1950s by the duet of Carmen y Laura, thereby predating Little Joe's by over a generation. She wonders, and I do as well, what different meanings might Almdarez' lyrics have conveyed mid-century through a Chicana-fronted musical duo [viii]). In contrast, I suggest that Peña's bimusical resolution—encountered in Tejano's aural bridging through a bricolage of conjunto's working-class rancheridad with orquesta's jaitón (urbane, sophisticated) impulses—arrived earlier, chronically speaking, through the performative act of the taquachito dance. Of the many regional styles of dance (and local variations) encountered in the conjunto genre the taquachito remains among the best known and most popular, even after more than sixty years since its emergence. The taquachito rose to prominence at a time of transition as performers were, for the first time en masse, able to earn a living playing music for pay, thanks in part to the dramatic rise in the number of dance halls (including Lerma's in San Antonio) which opened following the return of the young men who served in World War II.⁹⁶

The taquachito was enormously influential and contributed immensely to conjunto's popularity. Dance promoters, public dance halls, and paid admission dances played an important role in Chicana@ cultural life as cantinas and dance halls flourished (San Miguel, 2002: 56). San Miguel describes it as “a slower and more expressive way of dancing polkas and rancheras.” Prior to the taquachito participants danced to conjunto music “with a quick loop in the manner of Polish or German polka dancing. Afterwards, a swaying motion replaced the hop and skip” (*Tejano Proud*, 58). As dancers no longer adhered to an Eastern European style of movement so too did performers break, subtly, from the previously established norms of the genre in ways that were, for their time radical, although from the vantage point of the present day these changes—such as using electric instruments, amplification, or playing while standing up—almost appear trivial or insignificant in nature. One of the most influential of this second generation of conjunto performers, Valerio Longoria, introduced vocal singing into the conjunto genre in 1948.⁹⁷ Longoria also introduced the modern-day drum set, which replaced the handmade tambora de rancho. However, it wasn't until a young accordionist named Tony de la Rosa from the tiny town of Sarita just outside of Kingsville on Highway 77, incorporated drums into his ensemble that the role of percussion in conjunto realized its full potential. As Manuel Peña explains, the drum “settled down” the tempo and “freed the bajo sexto and the accordion from the constant necessity of attending simultaneously to melody, harmony, and tempo. With the drums taking over the primary function of rhythm and ‘keeping time,’ both the accordion and bajo were left to explore new modes of articulation” (Peña, 1985: 87). For de la Rosa, this meant playing in a staccato-style, best exemplified by his 1956 recording of “Atotonilco” (although he would record variants up to the time of his passing). While fast paced, the tempo of the songs from this period onwards was significantly slower than that which had been played and popularized by Narciso Martínez, el Huracán del valle, and his generation of pioneers.

De la Rosa slowed the polka's tempo down to 110-115 beats per minute (bpm), a significant change from his predecessors' rapid-paced 130-135 bpm. This shift came in response to the taquachito, still danced today with a lean, a turn, and a wobble; its loose, fluid, and above all smooth movements were centered in the hips and conveyed between partners through the touching of hands. Ultimately this style spread across Texas and along the migrant trails. In contrast to a more formal, almost rigid style of dancing exemplified by the prim and proper heel-toe polka steps which followed Eastern European by way of Mexican high society the taquachito

⁹⁶ I discuss the proliferation of conjunto dance halls in greater detail in the following chapter.

⁹⁷ Curiously, with the introduction of singing and advent of multi-part harmonies in accordion-led ensembles, the number of female-led duos and trios declined significantly.

freed the body, physically and metaphorically, from the constraints of its European origins and Mexican influences. As such, I consider the taquachito to be a culturally-rooted bodily expression wholly Chicano: unique yet familiar; borne out of the borderlands; not an imitation but an innovation. The movement of dancers and the rhythm of the drums performed a dialogic exchange, each one in turn informing the other. Dancers adjusted their bodies and movements to the musicians' slower pace, and musicians in turn performed what their public wanted to hear. Thus, the most popular songs became—and remain, as enjoyed three-quarters of a century later through conjunto dancehalls dotting South Texas—the polkitas and rancheritas still played and danced “al estilo taquachito.”

Chapter Four

Looking for Lerma's: The Geography of Place in San Antonio's Conjunto Nightclubs

How do the discursive spaces and the physical places of the U.S.-Mexico border inflect the material reality of cultural production?

José David Saldívar⁹⁸

You slow to a crawl along Zarzamora, glancing to see if there's room for you to park in the tiny lot. A man motions you to pull in, flashlight in hand, and you take the last spot in the lot. You slip him a few dollars, break a twenty for the door and use what's left to get started at the bar. In this story of a memory, a memory that is a story, you are alone, rolling solo, so you settle barside and take in the view. It is as you remember it from the last time you were here. It is as it has always been, unchanged. The solid square red wood tables, each side with a corresponding ill fitting, uncomfortable chair. But you did not come here to sit. You came here to dance, to cumbias and to polkas, al estilo taquachito, played by living legends and cultural treasures and those whose hands make music, make magic.

The room breaths a red glow from the candles, from the paint, from the lingering heat that overpowers the overworked air conditioning. Obscured behind the stage there is a mural of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl, the volcanoes of legend and myth, embodied as a plumed warrior and a frail princess like in Jesús Helguera's famous painting. Worn and faded, yet instantly recognizable from being featured on seemingly every single Aztec-themed taqueria calendar you have ever owned, with no band blocking it from view the picture of the tragic pair now commands the room's attention.

The center of the dance floor buckles where a retaining beam had been removed a very long, long time ago in order to make more space for couples to spin and strut. Dancers, the experienced ones at least, knew to step over or avoid or otherwise compensate for this bump, and those new to the floor learn soon enough. The band returns from break, Santiago or Benny or Henry or any number of conjuntos, for at one time they all played here, all passed through these same doors and across the same stage, such as it was, such as it is; an accordion, a bajo sexto, maybe a drum set or a tololoche, that deep sounding upright bass; a vocalist who may or may not have done double duty on an instrument. Familiar faces float in and out and all around; Mary, dressed as always to the nines, and Gilbert, the couple who owned the place and ran the bar; friends and acquaintances from the community; musicians, whether tonight was their night or not; and dancers, dancers, dancers. Always dancers.

Each and every night was different but in your mind it all looks the same as time becomes compressed into memory. Even now, after being forcibly shuttered, permanently closed, it's hard to make a distinction between moments. Here you are dancing to a pulsating polkita amidst a packed dance floor; here you are gazing at the cavernous space, never as empty as it is now. Here the image basks in a warming red glow, from candlelights and neon; and here are beams of light, the sun's rays leaking in through an open door. Here there is life, vibrant, in motion; and here, silence amid the still air.

⁹⁸ *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, p. ix.

Man, this place was *legendary*. You knew it, conjunto fans knew it, San Anto knew it, but if you didn't run in those circles, if you didn't grow up listening to conjunto—and, let's face it, *you* didn't—if you had no idea, no appreciation of the music and the musicians and the history and culture and importance of it all, then what was this place but just another old, slightly dilapidated structure on the westside of town? A safety hazard, a fire trap, a dangerous structure to be condemned, razed, and replaced with a parking lot. Now, Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl sit center stage, performing to an empty house. Now, the chain link fence and the empty parking lot. Now, silence, save for the rumbling of passing vehicles outside, as we wait for Lerma's to breathe with life once again.⁹⁹

Mapping Conjunto, Making Aztlán

Throughout this dissertation I have written about the social spaces of conjunto; nightclubs, dance halls, performance venues, floors and rooftops and fields cleared for an evening's dance: what takes place, what occurs, the practices and performances, negotiations and movidas in each and every sense of those words. As much as I have argued that any history of conjunto is incomplete without an analysis of the participants—the dancers themselves, not just musicians—to truly understand the depth, significance and importance of the Texas Mexican conjunto for the better part of the twentieth century, it is necessary as well to gain an understanding of the spatial location of these venues. As the epigraph from José David Saldívar at the start of this chapter reminds us, the sites themselves were and remain more than just a place for entertainment—although this in and of itself is worth recognition, worth remembering. As the number of established performance sites proliferated in the wake of WWII so did the economy of entertainment. Conjunto was on its way to becoming an industry as much as a culturally-rooted practice, and the conjunto dance hall was a key component to insuring, for a time, the livelihood of working musicians and a space where dancers, fans and the Mexican American working class would spend their leisure time and disposable income. Scattered throughout the southwest, in pockets of the Midwest around agricultural centers and urban areas, and dotting the landscape of south Texas and especially the West and Southsides of San Antonio the conjunto nightclub was a contact zone, a space of cultural transmission and exchange, a location where musical practices came into being, dancers articulated bodily movements and a community made, broke, and renewed relationships.

My research, my advocacy, and this chapter are all informed by the core belief that these histories matter, these places matter.¹⁰⁰ While my own history of participation in the conjunto

⁹⁹ It won't be long. July 15, 2019: A scant month before my deadline to file this dissertation the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center broke ground upon their two million dollar, year-long renovation project. They expect to reopen by the summer of 2020. I hope to be in attendance when they do.

According to Susana Segura, Lerma's Project Coordinator, this is the first Latinx restoration project local (San Antonio) government agencies have invested in since the restoration of the Guadalupe Theater during the 1980s. Please see Ayala, Elaine. "A shrine to conjunto music on San Antonio's West Side will rise again." *San Antonio Express News*, July 13, 2019. (Retrieved from https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/elaine_ayala/article/A-shrine-to-conjunto-music-on-San-Antonio-s-14092538.php#photo-17848664. Last accessed July 22, 2019.) See also Huddleston, Scott. "Work begins on restoration of historic San Antonio conjunto club." *San Antonio Express News*, July 15, 2019. (Retrieved from <https://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/Ground-broken-to-save-historic-San-Antonio-14096843.php#photo-17858322>. Last accessed July 22, 2019.)

¹⁰⁰ "This place matters," or #thisPlaceMatters, is the name of a campaign sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In San Antonio the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center promoted the campaign as a way to raise awareness of historic structures in the city's predominantly-Mexican/Xicanx West- and Southsides and their

scene at Lerma's pales in comparison to that of any number of regulars who I spoke with and who shared their recuerdos with me over the course of conversation and my research, I include it here as a means of introduction and a way of emphasizing the significance of these structures. I begin this chapter with a discussion of Lerma's. The rise, decline, and still-to-be-written rebirth of this historic site are the lens with which I use to examine the growth, development, and displacement of conjunto and Tejano entertainment venues, as well as to underscore the importance of preserving these sites and locations. I do not wish to over represent my relationship with Lerma's. I was never a regular or a fixture on the scene, at least until the point I embarked upon an intensive period of ethnographic fieldwork in the service of my research. As tempting as it is to refashion my narrative around my fieldwork to dramatize Lerma's closure the truth of the matter is I took it for granted that Lerma's would be around. What's the rush? What's the hurry? They were around for generations—so why not plan to go next week, or the week after? Of course, I should have known better. I, of all people, writing about conjunto of all things, knew not to wait, not to delay, for the generation that grew up with conjunto, that moved from the fields to the cities and first danced the taquachito, is disappearing. Rapidly. And with them go their songs and stories, their many histories which are our histories as well. How could I take Lerma's for granted?

Here I take up Saldívar's question. How do the "discursive spaces and the physical places" of the borderlands "inflect the material reality of cultural production?" (ix). Whereas Foucault reminds us that power and knowledge are joined together in discourse Saldívar posits that "border discourse not only produces power and reinforces it but also undermines it, makes it fragile, and allows one to map and perhaps thwart the cultures of U.S. empire" (xiv). He argues for a Chicana/o cultural studies that has the capacity to examine how "lived memory and popular culture are linked," while recognizing that the same technologies and disciplinary practices embedded within late capitalism's neoliberal push that "lend themselves to new forms of exploitation and oppression" may also have "utopian uses as new forms of resistance and struggles" (35). As I have shown in this dissertation, this 'lived memory' is found in the musics and embodied in the cultural practices—dances, vocal stylizations—of a Mexican/Chican@ population. In this chapter I turn to the physical spaces where these musics and cultural practices took shape—the nightclubs and dancehalls, the community spaces and ad hoc cultural centers—houses, yards, weeklong festivals—in which conjunto came to life. As identifiable physical spaces, whether permanent or temporary, these sites for play and pleasure serve as what I term embodiments of Aztlán. Aztlán, for the mythic Chicana/o homeland of movimiento nationalism and political poetics; Aztlán, for "a place that is no-place"; Aztlán, for that which is both imaginary and real; found and unfindable; imagined, made, created, dreamed, lived, experienced, and, even, perhaps, "hallucinated" (Pérez, "Ero-Ideologies and Methodologies of the Oppressed," 2005). In contrast to Foucault's "placeless place" of the utopia,

Aztlán's 'existence' as a nation goes against 'reason'; unauthorized, its discourse has the status of fiction. Both Chicana/o nation and discourse are denied within the ordering reason of dominant culture. But, for Chicana/os, 'nation' is made to signify differently, and symbolic language is made to course through alternative venues than the ones imagined, colonized, legitimized by the order that denies oppressed peoples access to its

importance to the community. Please see Olivarri, Jason. "Community teaches history, culture of West Side., May 27, 2010. (Retrieved from <https://www.mysanantonio.com/community/southside/news/article/Community-teaches-history-culture-of-West-Side-787812.php>, last accessed April 3, 2017).

centers of articulation. The Chicana/o nation and its cultural practices are *rasquache*, fly-by-night productions. They are cheap, economical, and thus they are doable” (Pérez, *El desorden* 19).

Concomitant with this pragmatic focus upon the spaces and geography of conjunto performance I engage in a discussion of the musical economy in order to investigate what I call the price of performance, or the wages of play. I embark upon this to examine how the conjunto economy allowed for performative innovations, not only—as we have already seen—in the leisure spending of an increasingly stable Mexican American laboring class but also in supporting the musicians themselves. After all, as Attali suggests, musical activity anticipates, rather than simply expresses, change in political economy in society (1985: 134). By examining the material grounding through the political economy’s influence and impact upon a performative market economy we find the clearest expression of the relationship between structure and culture within the social world of conjunto music. Performance venues and performer wages are but two metrics to measure the viability and vibrancy of conjunto.

History and Place

Any discussion of the social spaces of the conjunto dance halls in San Antonio must begin with a conversation around the geography of the city: the divisions and overlaps, the communities and divides, the way that class and race intersects, literally, and how the margins of the city delimitate communities, in ways visible and not. Elders speak of deep-seated racial divisions, places where at one time one was not to go if Black or Mexican; a de facto segregation which lingered long after the courts struck down laws decreeing such.

For over seventy years the structure which housed Lerma’s has sat on the corner of West Laurel and North Zarzamora, a stone’s throw away from Culebra Avenue. This area continues to be a working class and overwhelmingly Mexican and Mexican American community. The iconic bell towers of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Little Flower punctuate the skyline facing north, while the Lincoln Heights Courts—with its small-but-significant African American population a demographic outlier in this neighborhood, by design—sits a block away.¹⁰¹ During the past two decades the surrounding blocks have transformed in some places—after the turn of the millennium a bank and drugstore opened on facing sides of the southern corner of the Zarzamora-Culebra intersection, only to be replaced by a gas station and dollar store at the time of this writing—while remaining largely unchanged as a whole, with structures such as the one

¹⁰¹ The San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA), with funding from Roosevelt’s New Deal-era United States Housing Authority, constructed five public housing projects—all segregated—in San Antonio. Lincoln Heights Courts (commonly referred to as Lincoln Courts, or simply the Lincolns) opened in 1940 as one of two housing projects designated for Black families.

For more on the Basilica, please see Danini, Carmina. “San Antonio’s Basilica is a testament to the faith of its parishioners and supporters.” *SAEN*, June 10, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.expressnews.com/sa300/article/San-Antonio-s-Basilica-is-a-testament-to-the-11212410.php#photo-13069949>; last accessed June 26, 2019. For more about the Lincoln Heights Courts and the history of public housing in San Antonio please see Moore, Larry. “Lincoln Heights Courts—San Antonio,” *The Living New Deal*. Retrieved from <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/lincoln-heights-courts-san-antonio-tx/> on June 26, 2019. See also Zelman, Donald L. “Alazan-Apache Courts: A New Deal Response to Mexican American Housing Conditions in San Antonio,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, v. 87 n. 1, July 1983: pp. 123- 150. Retrieved from Texas State Historical Association, University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph117150/>; last accessed June 26, 2019).

that housed Lerma's more the norm rather than the exception, for the time being at least. This development is characteristic of San Antonio's Mexican American working-class Westside: it stops and starts, with construction projects undertaken in the interest of modernization and progress at once contrasting with the existing architecture of the place.¹⁰² Working class houses sit side-by-side, showing a certain do-it-yourself pride and care in their construction and maintenance, not to mention decoration: lawns with elaborate flower gardens and brightly colored paint schemes, wrought iron gates and bars covering windows wide open, taquerias and taco houses, and the area's ubiquitous tire shops a bright yellow. On one level are the years of neglect by city planners in roads and drainage ditches in need of repair. Less obvious, at least to the recent arrival, the newcomers, those without a deep reaching historical memory, are the substantial changes to the area: the post-War construction boom that expanded the I-10 and 281 highways throughout the city, including the area near Zarzamora and Culebra. In San Antonio, as throughout the United States, highway and freeway construction projects took place not on deserted or empty expanses of land—a statement in and of itself I'm cautious in making, for under settler colonialism it begs the question as to whose land and for what use—but upon and through neighborhoods, residencies, communities. Construction projects in urban areas displaced scores of people—multiple-generations of families—belonging to working class Black and Brown neighborhoods. The construction of the nation's transportation system, together with a boom in suburbanization, the shift in the manufacturing base in this country, and de jure and de facto restrictions on housing and social mobility all had the irrevocable effect of changing the composition of cities not only in San Antonio, but in barrios from Detroit to San Diego, and beyond.

I try to picture the Westside before I-10; I try to picture the rows of shotgun houses near downtown; the vendors and markets around Market Square and the sounds of the chili queens calling out their wares; the neighborhoods as they were and the neighborhoods as they are, still. What aids in this are the memories of those who lived through these transitions and transformations, as well as the structures and edifices that remain: a row of houses or buildings that remain as they were. And increasingly, these are becoming fewer and fewer in number.

Dolores Hayden, writing in *The Power of Place*, defines “the power of place” as “the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory,” arguing that it remains “untapped” for working people, as well as ethnic and women's histories (9). She cautions that losing shared public spaces—such as through displacement or neglect—can result in a loss of civic identity that can come from a shared history, even one borne from conflict “so as not to diminish their importance” (11). Hayden argues for the importance of public spaces—including social structures— as they

¹⁰² In writing this from a distance, I recognize that I am perhaps overly and uncharacteristically optimistic that the character of San Antonio's Westside will remain intact in the face of much-heralded development projects. The historical record suggests otherwise. For a more grounded and recent assessment, please see Olvio, Ben, Sanford Nowlin, and Gaige Davila. “As Downtown Development Spreads, Displacement and Gentrification are Set to Roll Over San Antonio's West Side.” *SA Current*, May 21, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.sacurrent.com/the-daily/archives/2019/05/21/as-downtown-development-spreads-displacement-and-gentrification-are-set-to-roll-over-san-antonios-west-side>, on June 26, 2019. See also Ayala, Elaine. “West Side Braces for Latest Wave of Gentrification.” *SA Express News*, May 9, 2019. Retrieved from https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/elaine_ayala/article/West-Side-braces-for-San-Antonio-s-newest-round-13830479.php on June 26, 2019.

can help to nurture this more profound, subtle, and inclusive sense of what it means to be an American. Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we have come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities. Urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories, because natural features such as hills or harbors, as well as streets, buildings, and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes (1995: 9).

Whereas she frames her discussion in terms of “being American” I suggest that this sense of identity can and does take on more specific markers as related to race, class, gender and sexuality even within particular geographic regions. As Hayden reminds us, “the authors of books on architecture, photography, cultural geography, poetry, and travel rely on ‘sense of place’ as an aesthetic concept but often settle for ‘the personality of a location’ as a way of defining it” (15). Historically speaking, Hayden writes, prior to the twentieth century the term place conveyed more political history as it also referred to one’s ability to own land—here Hayden elides the question of settler-colonialism—or participate in a social world. Phrases such as ‘knowing one’s place’ or ‘a women’s place’ as remnants from this era “still imply both spatial and political meanings” (15-16). Paraphrasing the work of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, Hayden writes how an individual’s sense of place consists of both a “biological response to the surrounding physical environment and a cultural creation” (16). She points to John Agnew’s and James Duncan’s argument that social scientists tend to avoid place as a concept, thereby sidestepping discussion of “the sensory, aesthetic, and environmental components of the urbanized world in favor of more quantifiable research with fewer epistemological problems” (18). In contrast, Hayden suggests,

speaking critically of bad places is more effective than dismissing them as places. The process that transforms places demands analysis. As a field of wildflowers becomes a shopping mall at the edge of a freeway, that paved-over meadow, restructured as freeway lanes, parking lots, and mall, must still be considered a place, if only to register the importance of loss and explain it has been damaged by careless development. ... “If place does provide an overload of possible meanings for the researcher, it is place’s very same assault on all ways of knowing (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste) that makes it powerful as a source of memory, as a weave where one strand ties in another. Place needs to be at the heart of urban landscape history, not on the margins, because the aesthetic qualities of the built environment, positive or negative, need to be understood as inseparable from those of the natural environment (18).

In arguing for the primacy of place Hayden understands that an analysis of its impact and importance will be messy, for conceptually and analytically it implies and implicates many, often contradictory meanings across multiple, at times competing groups of people and their histories. Building upon Lefebvre’s concept of the production of space, Hayden argues that the production of space is essential to the inner workings of the political economy (20). As Hayden posits “Space is shaped for both economic production—barns, or mine shafts, or piers, or a factory—as well as for social reproduction—housing for the workers, managers, and owners, a store, a

school, a church” (20). These all have a “social as well as a technological” history as “people fight for and against them. People also construct and maintain them” (20).¹⁰³

For Hayden, the link between a place and memory is crucial to understanding its importance. She writes about a “moral imagination” (245) in communities such as the South Bronx or South Central Los Angeles that have undergone tremendous change. “In places like these, especially for women and members of diverse ethnic groups, memory is inevitably going to involve issues of isolation and exploitation, as well as connectedness” (245). With this in mind I now turn to the history of conjunto dance halls in San Antonio.

A Brief History of Conjunto Dance Halls in San Antonio

In this brief, sweeping overview of the rise and slow decline of San Antonio’s conjunto nightclubs, dance halls, and performance venues I seek to ground my larger discussion around the poetics and politics of conjunto performance with an analysis of the material conditions that enabled its existence and continual survival. As Henri Lefebvre, writing in *The Production of Space*, reminds us, “authentic knowledge of space must address the question of its production” (Lefebvre, quoted by Hayden in “Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space,” p. 111). Elsewhere, Lefebvre writes

Leisure spaces provide a mixture for analysis. This border zone between labor (predominant) and nonlabor (virtual, indicated from afar by the arrows of automation), like all transitional zones, is characterized by its own conflicts, which exasperate the latent contradictions and the affected zones. Leisure spaces exhibit a formless but carefully determined mixture of detournement, of latent appropriation; through technical expertise a return to the immediate is revealed: nature, spontaneity. Use is strongly contrasted with exchange, even though their conflict is dissimulated beneath myths, abstract utopias and ideologies ... A form of bodily culture is adumbrated, although awkwardly, and appropriated. This is where the body is revealed, where it reveals itself, bares itself, recognizes its importance. Use value comes to life in the face of exchange value (*Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, 100).¹⁰⁴

For musicians and performers, leisure and labor overlap in conjunto dancehalls and performance venues. Early twentieth century conjunto dances and performances took place in rural, agrarian settings or at informal sites, such as one’s home. This reflected a Mexican American population that was largely rural or, if urbanized, without the means or disposable income to sustain a viable conjunto performance economy. While the first conjunto recordings were made on the cusp of

¹⁰³ Or, as Lefebvre writes, “Space is permeated with social relations: it is not only supported by social relations but it is also producing and produced by social relations” (Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 286, quoted in Hayden 41).

¹⁰⁴ Lucasz Stanek, in his introduction to Henri Lefebvre’s *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, characterizes Lefebvre’s understanding of leisure spaces as

exemplifying the technological capacities to make nature available for collective enjoyment and the destruction of nature by this very technology. In his account, they are sites where the future is not yet decided and its various possibilities are taking shape ... Spaces of leisure are neither enclaves within the dominant mode of space production nor reflections of the interests of the dominant class; rather, they exacerbate the contradictions of the social totality, revealing the antagonistic forces operating within it (xxxi).

the Great Depression it wasn't until Narciso Martínez's recordings towards the late 1930s that mass recordings took off.¹⁰⁵

Following WWII, the changing nature of San Antonio's Mexican American population, growth, and subsequent social mobility, led to the proliferation of conjunto dance halls and an increase in the sales and promotion of conjunto recordings. Lerma's opened at the start of this period, and survived through a series of changes and transitions. By the late 1960s conjunto secured its position as *the* dominant Texas Mexican musical genre, whereas starting in the 1970s Tejano occupied this position. This was less a shift than a synthesis, "compound bimusicality," as Peña reminds us, "a musical homologue to compound bilingualism" as evidenced by Little Joe y La Familia's Chicanismo-laden 'Brown soul' sound (*Música Tejana* 163). Through all of this Lerma's remained a constant fixture in San Antonio's conjunto nightlife.

In the 1980s we begin to see a shift in the narratives around conjunto as cultural workers embark upon a far-reaching (and, I argue, largely successful) campaign to recognize the importance and significance of the genre. The Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio began at this time, spearheaded by the efforts of Juan Tejeda and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. Other regional, statewide, and national cultural institutions and commercial enterprises followed, some of which still survive today. At the same time major labels demonstrated an interest in Tejano artists, leading to the Tejano boom of the mid-1990s—and its subsequent collapse shortly thereafter.¹⁰⁶ As the post-war generation of pioneers and innovators passes away and the once thriving dancehalls and performance venues continues to go silent conjunto entered the twenty-first century amid renewed concerns as to its viability and continued survival.

I recognize here the tensions between narratives, and I write with caution lest I frame the story of conjunto as a 'rise' and inevitable 'fall'. At the same time, I do not wish to misstate the strength of the genre in the present for concomitant with the loss of the early generation of performers and dancers as well as the closure and demolition of performative venues comes a loss of history, of memory, of the cultural practices of a people and all that this represents. *This place matters*, as the placards printed and distributed by the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center so plainly and directly state. *These people matter*, they might as well say; *these histories matter*.

The generation of Texas Mexicans in San Antonio who found employment at Kelly or Lackland Air Force Bases following the war gained a degree of economic stability that facilitated a modicum of upward mobility, relatively speaking, as Mexican Americans remained bound in a second-class status due to a combination of state-sanctioned and unspoken discriminatory practices.¹⁰⁷ For those who transitioned from agricultural work and rural areas into urban areas,

¹⁰⁵ As Manuel Peña documents, during the 1920s recording companies such as Vocalion, OKeh, Decca, and Bluebird began to record Mexican American artists in San Antonio and Dallas-Forth Worth (*Texas Mexican Conjunto*, 39). The first accordion-led conjunto recordings, of Bruno Villarreal, in 1928, come from these sessions, as do tracks played by El Cuarteto Carta Blanca, Lydia Mendoza's family band. Within a decade's time Martínez, along with San Antonio conjunto patriarch Don Santiago Jiménez, and blues legend Robert Johnson will all have recorded—sometimes back to back in the same hotel room at the Gunther Hotel.

¹⁰⁶ I address this in greater detail in Chapter Two.

¹⁰⁷ For more on this please see Telles, Edward E. and Vilma Ortiz, *Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race* (NYC: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008). Telles and Vilma present the analysis of a multigenerational survey of Mexican and Mexican Americans. They document that economic progress and educational advancement have been systematically and structurally denied to Mexican-origin people living in the United States, in contrast to assimilationist rhetoric to the contrary. For further sociopolitical context on San Antonio please see Rosales, Rodolfo. *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio* (Austin: UT Press, 2000).

year-round employment, rather than seasonal, was a form of stability and an entry into social mobility—even if the year-round employment was in manual labor at wages substantially less as a whole than that paid to their Anglo counterparts.

These factors allowed for an entertainment economy to prosper around the playing, promotion, and participation in conjunto. While not centered in San Antonio per se, as the largest urban center of South Texas, San Antonio is an ideal site to further examine how this process unfolded. As an aside, however, it is worth noting that the conjunto recording industry remained largely decentralized throughout the majority of its developmental history. For example, Mexican American-owned recording studios sprung up throughout South Texas, not only in San Antonio but in Corpus Christi and the lower Rio Grande valley. The earliest recordings of what is now considered conjunto date to Bruno “El Azote del Valle” Villarreal in 1928, although these never achieved the popularity nor sales of Narciso Martínez and Santiago Alameda’s Bluebird sessions eight years later, nor did Villarreal manage to parlay his performing into a sustainable career of sorts (Peña, 1985: 52).¹⁰⁸ Few did, as these early conjunto performers were paid by the song or recording. Even at their most prolific their income did not reflect the total record sales. Some, such as Martínez, found their recordings relabeled and reissued for other ethnic markets—as Polish American polka fans listened to his recordings under the name of “Polish Joe,” or the “Polski Kwartet,” while Bluebird’s Cajun B-2000 series marketed him as “Louisiana Pete” (Russell, 513).¹⁰⁹ The point of this is that market demands alone do not determine the success or viability of a genre’s creative output. The delayed proliferation of conjunto recordings is not, I argue, a phenomenon unique to a Mexican American working-class population but consistent with similar patterns and trends we find taking place during the advent of mechanical recording. However, all this begs the question of sustainability. What might it take for a conjunto performer to in fact perform, as his “work”—and make no mistake, conjunto musicians were and remain overwhelmingly male—for a living? If Narciso Martínez represented the first generation to record and perform then, as Les Blank’s wonderful documentary *Chulas Fronteras* reminds us, he still needed employment elsewhere. In Martínez’ case, he worked as a groundkeeper at the Brownsville Zoo, a job that may have provided economic stability for him and his family throughout the latter part of his performative career and life.

As I think of Martínez as the example of that first generation of conjunto performers, and I begin to consider those who came in his wake who were able to leave the fields and factory floors in order to pursue their music full time, as their primary occupation, I wonder, again, about the economics of conjunto performance. What informs the decision-making calculus? Do the demands of a life on the musical circuit come with enough ‘rewards’—the joy of performing, the at times flexible schedules, a sense of freedom and mobility—to make up for what might be long stretches of un- or underemployment? And what of the ‘costs’ that aren’t quantifiable, such as the time one spends away from family and loved ones, or the very real expenses associated with excessive drink and perhaps even drug abuse?

The spaces carved out and created for conjunto were gendered male. We know from the testimonials of female performers the extent to which gendered expectations played a role in

¹⁰⁸ Please see Chapter Two for more on the early stages of conjunto’s development.

¹⁰⁹ This was not an entirely uncommon occurrence, as listings in Tony Russell’s *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942* indicate scores of artists who recorded or were marketed under pseudonyms across different markets. For more on early Cajun music and Narciso Martínez’ recordings, please see Early Cajun Music. (2014, September 4). “Ma Fiancée,’—Louisiana Pete” Retrieved 8/2/2017 from <http://earlycajunmusic.blogspot.com/2014/09/ma-fiancee-louisiana-pete.html>.

limiting and restricting Chicanas' performative movidas. Here I think of Broyles-Gonzales' definitive work on Lydia Mendoza, as well as Vargas' excellent *Dissonant Divas*, in particular the insight she offers into the life of 1950s Mexican American bolero singer Chelo Silva. One thing these biographical inquiries show is the extent to which Chicana performers contested patriarchal expectations, and the 'costs' that came with this. Conversely, male privilege enabled male performers to travel, to tour, to perform for a living; it allowed men to stay up late, to stay out late, and to be shielded from suspicion or judgement in such a way that was not extended to any female counterparts in related musical genres. The clearest indicator of this is marriage. While I argue that the mid-century dissolution of the female-fronted duos and trios stems from multiple reasons, the patriarchal edict that prevented or greatly limited married women from touring and performing was, on some levels, the most apparent of causes for the dissolution of some of the more prominent groups. Chicana performers, by their presence on stage, challenged these patriarchal conventions, as did Chicana dancers and participants in the scene. Furthermore, in the absence of sustained access to unregulated (i.e. male) public spaces, Chicanas created their own audiotopic sites of enjoyment and engagement with conjunto. In public, such as through alternative community-based events, and in private, such as at home listening to conjunto tunes on the radio, Chicanas engaged with conjunto removed from the demands of normative heterosocial Mexican/Chicano masculinity imposed vis-à-vis the dancehall or salón de baile.

But what are the factors that allow the conjunto dancehall to exist in the first place? The conjunto dancehall owes its existence to a confluence of factors, including the loosening of restrictions regarding property ownership and management, coupled with a proliferation of conjunto ensembles and the social mobility of working-to-middle class Mexican Americans. The disposable income of this emerging cohort made performative venues profitable, or at least sustainable, and enabled musicians to earn some monetary compensation for their labors. Access to transportation further transformed the geography of conjunto in San Antonio as venues became open to patrons from beyond their immediate neighborhood locales. This in turn created new opportunities for performative innovations on multiple levels, as musicians and participants engaged in dialogical exchanges through music and movement across the geography of the city.

Early in *Quixote's Soldiers* David Montejano examines neighborhood divisions present in San Antonio barrios during the mid-to-late 1960s. In so doing he further breaks down how deeply segregated the city was in its post-war incarnation, as well as setting the stage for an understanding of the radical transformations—and its limits—yet to come. Montejano reminds us that progress was a myth for the majority of those in the nation's then poorest major city. Furthermore, far from being a homogeneous group, Montejano details the myriad elements and distinguishing features that comprised a neighborhood's identity—as embodied through the youth gangs and based on geography, parish and schools, streets and housing projects, to name a few examples.¹¹⁰

I reflected upon this as I considered how this sense of place might have factored into the proliferation of nightclubs and entertainment venues. Each neighborhood, each barrio, had one or several local bars, ice houses, or gathering spots. Certainly, even today, if you drive the length of Zarzamora from where it starts at Fredericksburg, across Culebra into and through the West Side, marking the change from North to South, you will encounter a series of watering holes—La Coqueta comes to mind, spied just past where West Martin meets Zarzamora, with its stylized Betty Boop a cartoonish contrast to what is clearly an adult hang-out—more 'dive' than

¹¹⁰ For a more in-depth, historical account of barrio-based subaltern social organizations please see Tapia, Mike. *The Barrio Gangs of San Antonio, 1915-2015* (Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press, 2017).

‘destination.’ Take a left on Guadalupe and head towards downtown, past El Gato Negro, where Juan Viesca doused his tololoche with lighter fluid and set it ablaze—while playing—in the 1950s, then swing over to pay respects to where once stood La Gloria at the corner of Brazos and Laredo; or cruise along Old Highway 90 shortly after it splits from West Commerce, and gaze at the not long shuttered El Camaroncito but across the street, to the dilapidated grocery store that now occupies the original location where the Devil danced so many years ago.¹¹¹



Figure 8: The bar at Saluté, afterhours. Esteban Jordan performed here up until his death in 2010. Saluté closed in 2012, but other venues would soon take its place in offering conjunto on San Antonio's St. Mary's strip. Photograph courtesy of the author's collection.

Until it was shut down, Lerma's was the most prominent of a dwindling series of conjunto night spots, dance halls and holes in the wall still active in San Antonio. Lerma's functioned as both a neighborhood local and a conjunto destination as it played host to touring acts and performers from San Antonio, as well as local bands, musical journeymen (and a few women) whose passion for performing propelled them to play. More to the point, individuals and groups moved between and through these categories much like dancers trading partners in-between songs: smoothly, gracefully, fluidly, on beat, and without missing a single step.

The ability to tour—that is, mobility—is an unappreciated and underlooked innovation that the conjunto genre underwent in the post-war years. As performers and ensembles began to travel, whether across town or across the country on the 'taco circuit', they continued a

¹¹¹ See Broyles-Gonzalez, "Even the Devil Dances at El Camaroncito," *SA Light*, May 27, 1985b, p. E5; Limón, *Dancing with the Devil*.

conversation of exchange and dialogue, trading tips and techniques, or just chisme.¹¹² Through formal and informal means of communication conjunto performers built upon their knowledge base; nightclubs, bars and dancehalls like Lerma's played a vital role as sites for creative cultural innovation and experimentation.

Innovation and experimentation occurred off-stage as well, as fans—dancers—began to enjoy the freedom and creative exchange that occurred through greater social and geographic mobility. For the Mexican American working class, mobility meant walking more than driving—and negotiating or traversing the dividing lines between neighborhoods. This in turn led to the development of hyper-local variations on conjunto dance styles—the site-specific 'Highway 90' style stands out—as well as created a rich culture of performative creativity where dancers met, collaborated, or even clashed against one another.

At the same time, I wonder how many cross-cultural conversations took place within conjunto sites in a highly segregated San Antonio. While Blacks and Mexican Americans share cultural and social ties with one another—not to mention that for Mexicans in the United States the process of racialization has been dictated against a Black-white binary—tracing, naming and valuing these connections as an act of historical recovery remains a work-in-progress. As Marco Cervantes reminds us, Blacks and Chicanas/os “occupy complex *afromestiza/o* spaces in their identity politics and performances” as he demonstrates taking place through hip hop and Tejano musical production as well as literary works in poetry and prose (2010: 184). He points to both Esteban Jordan and Selena Quintanilla as entertainers who embodied a performative *afromestizaje* through their musicality and stylistic choices.

Among the San Antonio Housing Authority's first five housing projects, the Lincoln Heights Courts began housing primarily African American residents in 1940 (Zelman, 2010). How and in what ways did Blacks and Mexicans living in the neighborhoods near Zarzamora and Culebra collaborate and interact? Given the proximity to the structure that housed El Sombrero Nite Club, the original name for the music and performance venue that became Lerma's, and the demographics of the area, I can't help but speculate about things that are far and beyond the scope of this monograph. Nor can I make any presumptions, let alone conclusions, about any obvious and apparent histories of shared influence.

As the preceding paragraphs posit, Lerma's remains a significant site for conjunto performativity, even in its absence. Unlike other locations that have come and (mostly) gone, Lerma's inspired a community-driven organizing effort—the Save Lerma's campaign—which has led to its recognition as a historically-significant structure. While the threatened and then actual demolition in 2002 of La Gloria—another historically significant yet long-vacant dancehall slash filling station—inspired similar passions and a push for historical preservation, that campaign did not succeed in its efforts. In contrast, the building which housed Lerma's remains standing and under the ownership (stewardship) of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, thereby ensuring its continual presence in a current conversation around cultural production and conjunto music.

In many ways, La Gloria serves as a cautionary tale that effectively jumpstarted a larger conversation around the importance of historical preservation. Activists and cultural workers

¹¹² Chisme: gossip. Deborah Vargas argues that “*chisme* represents a site of knowledge production that reflects gendered rules and regulations” that contain or regulate a subject's “representation and life narrative to the space of dissonance” (77). Instead, she argues for a retheorization of the work of chisme as part of a “feminist project for historicizing nonnormative Chicana/o genders and sexual desires,” or what she calls an “*archisme*,” an *archivo de chisme*, or archive of gossip (77).

called attention to how the disparities between those sites and structures deemed worthy of recognition and preservation, and those that were expendable—in the name of progress, beautification, renewal—cut across lines of class and race in ways.

Built in 1928, La Gloria stood at the corner of Brazos and Laredo for 73 years. As Xelena Gonzalez writes,

In its 1930's heyday, La Gloria's rooftop dances attracted hundreds to step to the sounds of swing, jazz, blues, and Latin beats. It later became one of the first venues to feature early Tejano and conjunto music. The building's atrium contained a food market, bakery, and silent movie theater, and the outdoor multi-pump gasoline station is believed to be San Antonio's first ("La Gloria," 2002).

Whereas Lerma's remained in use up to its closure, La Gloria sat empty and unused for almost four decades. Murmurings around the owner's decision to tear it down stirred community opposition—although critics were quick to inquire, pointedly, where was the interest in preserving the building earlier, when the structure stood virtually abandoned for several decades prior to Limón's purchase; while it was once a grocery store and hosted open-air dances on its rooftop, by the turn of the century those days had long since passed to the point where just a handful of community elders had any recollections of attending them.

Despite a last minute 'Hail Mary' attempt to halt the demolition through protests and court orders, and even to purchase the building from Limón, community activists were unsuccessful in saving the structure. So La Gloria came tumbling down the first day of April, 2002, and as it fell it passed into the realm of memory, stories, a site that once was but could no longer become again. In some regards, the organizing and mobilizing around La Gloria was preparation for an unanticipated struggle in the future to save Lerma's. The destruction of La Gloria dealt a crushing blow yet it brought together a diverse coalition of groups who might not have otherwise connected on a single-issue campaign: predominately Chicana and Chicano Westside activists, artists and cultural workers, and the Historic Design and Review Commission, or HDRC. The campaign to Save La Gloria brought to light the fact that the historical preservation efforts had, to that point, all but completely ignored any structures on San Antonio's west, south and east sides—the predominantly Mexican/Chican@ and African American parts of the city—in a glaring act of institutional racism the likes of which the city's elite had prided itself on long since abandoning. For wasn't San Antonio a model city for Hispanic progress? Never mind the economic inequality, the social stratification, the overt discrimination which persisted long after the city elected its first Hispanic mayor, its second, and even its third. This was a Raza city, one which seemingly had dismantled the 'old ways' but remained mired in their legacy. The lessons from La Gloria brought all that home. And then complicated matters by exposing the limits of ethnic solidarity, for who was the owner of La Gloria but Tony Limón, a Mexican American businessman who built an extensive commercial fleet repair garage on the lot, at the expense of the building's demolition, in a Mexican American district represented in city council by another Mexican American.¹¹³

¹¹³ For an in-depth, contemporary overview of the fight to save La Gloria please see Gonzalez, Xelena. "La Gloria: 1928-2002." *San Antonio Current*, April 4, 2002. Historian Yolanda Chávez Leyva blogs about the destruction of La Gloria in her February 2, 2017 post "Remembering La Gloria" (<https://www.fiercefronteriza.com/fierce-fronteriza-blog/remembering-la-gloria>, last accessed on July 23, 2018). Leyva's post links to San Antonio artist Mary Agnes Rodríguez' painting, "Remembering La Gloria," as well as poet and playwright Virginia "Vicki" Grise's moving

La Gloria's place in the context of activism in San Antonio deserves further discussion. Although the community—and here I use the nebulous and vague identifier of “community” as a stand in for the varied organizations and individuals who united to preserve La Gloria—did not succeed in preventing La Gloria's demolition I do not interpret this as a failure or defeat. If we take success literally then the community's efforts did not meet their stated goal as the building was in fact destroyed. But through the mobilization of a wide range of the community and the articulation of a multifaceted set of issues –historical preservation, cultural awareness, and the not-so-subtle racism that determined which structures were deemed worthy of protecting—the same coalition of community members and cultural workers laid the groundwork to come together again, this time in defense of Lerma's.

History of a Dancehall

According to the registration form prepared by Gregory Smith and Susana Segura petitioning for Lerma's to be added to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), the building that houses Lerma's was constructed circa 1948.¹¹⁴ In 1946 the Maryland-based American Service Company sold the parcel of land hosting the building for \$8,000.00 (approximately \$100,000 in 2017 after adjusting for inflation) to a T.H. Wu, who then “conveyed one-sixth interests in the property to Lim S. Hong, Charlie She Jew, Huey Soon, Louis On and Louie Lin” (NRHP, 8).¹¹⁵ The historic registry grows silent around these six individuals. Were they Chinese investors, or Chinese Americans, or Chinese Mexicans, perhaps? Given the history of Chinese exclusion and the circuitous routes Chinese migrants took in entering the U.S. through Mexico there are several possibilities.¹¹⁶ Many questions, no answers.

tribute, “La Gloria” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d001wjuicuU>, last accessed July 23, 2018). Across three different mediums (painting, film/video, and text) these pieces convey the affective impact the demolition of La Gloria had upon these artists and authors; speak to the ways in which the structure has been memorialized; and suggest its role in catalyzing future preservation efforts in San Antonio and beyond.

¹¹⁴ The San Antonio Conservation Society and the National Parks Service both indicate this date. Other sources, including the *San Antonio Express News* and the Bexar County Appraisal District indicate the structure being built or under construction by 1942. SaveLermas.org, a site developed to keep supporters informed of the campaign around Lerma's preservation, uses 1942 as an approximate date for the building's construction but speculates that this may have been the first time the property appeared in a listing through The American Service Company, owners of the property at 1612 N. Zarzamora. Yet even here there remains some confusion as to the actual date of sale and construction upon the property. For these reasons I will privilege the account provided on the application for the National Register, as it is prepared by supporters, stakeholders and cultural workers involved in the Save Lerma's campaign and presumably the most accurate and up-to-date source of information. Furthermore, it appears to be the most comprehensive and consistent source of details concerning the structure, except where noted as above.

¹¹⁵ All calculations around inflation are based upon the United State Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm at the time of writing.

¹¹⁶ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 effectively barred any immigration from China to the U.S. until its repeal in 1943. In its wake some Chinese migrants found passage to the states via Mexico. Notably, a contingent of 527 Mexican Chinese settled in San Antonio in 1917. Known as the Pershing Chinese, after General John J. Pershing, these Chinese settlers had assisted in the General's campaigns against Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution. With them, San Antonio overtook El Paso as the largest Chinese community in Texas, a distinction it would hold until the 1950s.

As of 1930, there were only 703 Chinese in Texas. Bexar County, including San Antonio, housed 321 of them, or 46%. Once Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act the Chinese population in Texas blossomed. As of mid-century, the Chinese in Texas found employment in laundries, restaurants, and groceries that served Blacks and Mexican Americans. Perhaps the consortium that purchased the structure that eventually housed Lerma's belonged to these ranks.

The earliest tenants of the property included Huey's Variety Store—presumably belonging to Huey Soon—alongside the San Antonio Baking Company and Lakeview Cleaners. Interestingly, a cleaning company remained a part of the property up to (and, from all indications, responsible for) its closure. Records indicate that by 1951 El Sombrero Nite Club occupied the portion of the structure that would eventually become Lerma's.¹¹⁷

The details on SaveLermas.org allow a little more insight. The Wu family was “an apparently wealthy family” who appear in photos archived at the Institute of Texan cultures. The owners became indebted to the Great Southern Life Insurance Company and sold the property to Nathan and Elizabeth Karin in order to clear their debt. Curiously, there is no record indicating transfer to Marjorie Freedman and Doris Sideman, the next owners of the property, but there are recordings indicating transfer to Morris Wise. The estate of Morris Wise in turn sold the property to Mary and Gilbert Garcia in 1988, and it remained in their name at the time of its closure. Along with a dance hall, dry cleaners and variety store at various times in its history, the five sections of the building have also housed a tire shop, grocery store, meat market, restaurant and thrift store (saveLermas.org).

I speculate that the discrepancy in the NRHP document comes from confusion with Lerma's Place, a bar Pablo Lerma previously owned on Zarzamora before taking over El Sombrero's lease and changing its name. In the process Lerma effectively rebranded El Sombrero, taking it from a more Mexicano- and norteño emphasis—albeit one that included some conjunto—to one that was more in line with the burgeoning Mexican American community's listening preferences. In the process, as part of its transformation into Lerma's, El Sombrero not only changed its name but also its clientele. Or, rather, the name changed, as did the music, in reflection of the clientele's changing tastes. This transition, elaborated upon in the saveLermas.org website and mentioned in the NRHP proposal, came at a time when conjunto venues had yet to open on a wide-spread scale in San Antonio and elsewhere. Lerma's was an original, among the first conjunto spaces in San Antonio and South Texas.

Even through the 1950s “Lerma's was one of only a small number of documented commercial music venues in San Antonio that booked regional conjunto artists” (NRHP). This, as we will see later, changes in subsequent decades. The report finds little to no primary source materials concerning Lerma's, especially during its earliest years. No advertisements or posters were found by researchers from Lerma's first decade, and a search of San Antonio's Spanish language *La Prensa* through 1959 turned up no mention of Lerma's, although the report points out that other venues did advertise during this period. As the report explains

For more historical context on the Chinese in Texas, please see *Handbook of Texas Online*, Edward J. M. Rhoads, "CHINESE," accessed July 23, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pjc01>. See also Huddleston, Scott. “Chinese Came to San Antonio in Waves.” *San Antonio Express News*, August 28, 2017. Accessed from <https://www.expressnews.com/sa300/article/Chinese-came-to-San-Antonio-in-waves-12115708.php> on July 23, 2018; Rhoads, Edward. “The Chinese in Texas.” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. V. 81 No. 1, July 1977, pp. 1-36; Glasrud, Bruce A. “Asians in Texas: An Overview, 1870-1990.” *East Texas Historical Journal*. V. 39 N. 2., 2001, pp. 10-22. For more on Chinese migration to Mexico, and their experiences that followed, during the period from the Chinese Exclusion Act to the start of WWII, please see Romero, Robert Chao. *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011); Chang, Jason Oliver. *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880-1940* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

¹¹⁷ According to the NRHP document, Pablo Lerma took over El Sombrero's lease in 1948. However, this is in conflict with information stated previously in the document and could possibly be a typo.

A distinction may be drawn between clubs such as Lerma's, which catered to a regular working-class clientele, and had neither the means nor the need to advertise, and larger night clubs in the city which hosted by acts that appealed to Tejanos with higher incomes, and could afford to advertise in a large circulation newspaper such as *La Prensa* (NRHP, 11).

When he retired, Pablo Lerma passed the venue to his son Armando. The Garcias, longtime family friends, took over Lerma's from Armando Lerma in 1981, while retaining the name as a way of honoring Pablo Lerma. When the entire structure became available for sale they purchased it using their retirement savings and established it as a venue for conjunto artists and aficionados. SaveLermas.org conclusively states that Lerma's "is the longest running live conjunto music venue in central and south Texas."

I argue that the Save Lerma's campaign is intentional in their use of the present tense 'to be' verb (rather than the perhaps more grammatically sound past tense, following the forced closure of the historic dancehall). By framing Lerma's as being, in the present, the campaign actively resists closure or completion. Furthermore, the campaign employs multiple forms of memory in the creation and documentation of history as personal narratives, familial and communal relationships, bodily (embodied) practices and a cultural patrimony are all named or alluded to. In this light the Save Lerma's coalition reframes the forced closure by city officials as one of many transitions that have occurred during the structure's history, alongside the transfer of leases, the sale of the property, the opening and closing of many businesses and the naming and renaming of the original night club. To say Lerma's is, is to imply that Lerma's will be. Had the campaign elected to use 'was' instead of 'is' to frame Lerma's status this would have implied a narrative ending, a closure of possibility in the face of regulatory sanctions. By not allowing this through language and action Save Lerma's resists forgetting.

This is one of the lessons learned from the demolition of La Gloria. I am not arguing that had the organizing around La Gloria's preservation reframed the narrative there would have been a different outcome. Rather, the closed and abandoned status of La Gloria itself precluded and therefore prevented its positioning as a living structure in a way that Lerma's stood in contrast, by remaining in active use for the entirety of its history.¹¹⁸ As part of their lifecycle businesses open and close, and even multigenerational community institutions are not immune to any number of complications. Perhaps the owners' children or grandchildren opt for a different career, or the property owners raise rent higher than is sustainable. Maybe the community base has been displaced, or interests otherwise changed.

With respect to San Antonio's nightlife/music/conjunto scene a number of stalwarts emerged—places where one could count on encountering live musicians on a regular basis.¹¹⁹ The location of notable conjunto dancehalls in and around San Antonio perform an act of cultural geography. While Westside and Southside venues demonstrate, predictably, that the

¹¹⁸ If La Gloria was still in operation up to its purchase and subsequent demolition I think the narratives that emerged through a preservation campaign would have foregrounded historical continuity and living memory, much like Save Lerma's, rather than their emphasis on preservation and recovery—even if the outcome was the same. This is, of course, all hypothetical speculation and does nothing to alter what has happened only to say that the telling of these stories—a people's collective memory of them, whether in triumph or defeat—also matters.

¹¹⁹ The "Latino boom" of the 1990s also resulted in the construction and opening of a number of Tejano and Tex-Mex dancehalls and clubs throughout the greater San Antonio area, several of which closed and remain deserted or repurposed for other use, such as bingo halls.

culturally-rooted nature of conjunto is connected to a Chicana and Chicano working class who live in those areas, the existence of sites outside of those geographic regions desettles the notion that it is spatially specific and limited or confined to a particular demographics' places of residence.

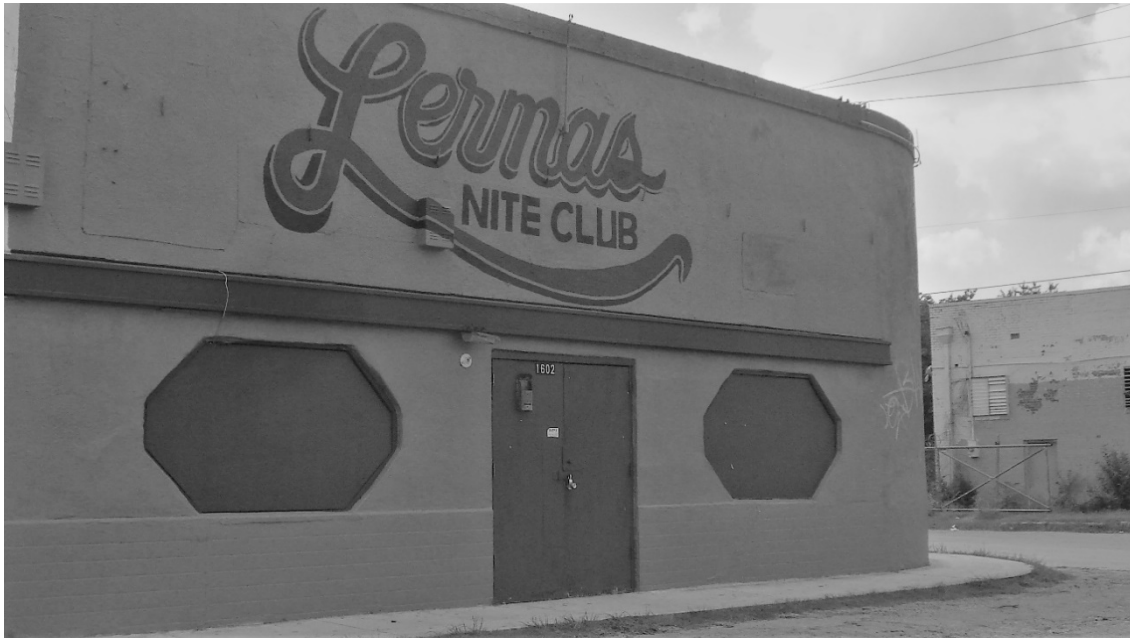


Figure 9: Lerma's, during the daytime. Photograph courtesy of the author, 2011.

As of this writing the structure that housed Lerma's remains standing—and will for the foreseeable future, thanks to an organizing effort spearheaded by an intensely devoted multigenerational fan base, together with a coalition of cultural organizations and historical preservationists. Under the guardianship of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, Lerma's is currently undergoing a two million dollar campaign to renovate the structure and, eventually, reopen as a cultural center and historic site for generations to come. This may take years, if not longer. Until then, Lerma's sits, and waits.

And yet—Lerma's is more than an empty building surrounded by a chain-link fence, its pale blue paint faded by the intense Texas sun. In the weeks following its closure I accompanied representatives from the Save Lerma's campaign on a walk-through of the structure. The power had been shut off and, though we arrived early in the day, it was already stifling inside from the summer heat. The place looked like so many other abandoned structures, untouched since the night it was shut down, empty bottles still on tabletops waiting to be bussed, chairs pushed under tables, a floor in need of sweeping. It was silent, aside from our conversation, and our hushed tones, much like one would use in a church or place of worship, spoke of a reverence for the place. Sunbeams illuminated bands of dust floating in the air and in the dim light I could make out the mural on the wall, two lovers frozen forever in time.

Chapter Five

“There’s no money playing here”: The Economies of Performance in Texas Mexican Popular Music

[I]t is in the improvisational bodily articulations of the dancers, their theories in practice, and in the transactions that unravel from these actions, where utopia, in its connotations both as liberation from oppression and the constitution of community, resides.

Ramón Rivera-Servera¹²⁰

Identity and social spaces

The social spaces and nightclubs which proliferated in the wake of the second World War were an outcome, a growth of a healthy economy and the attainment of a level of disposable income which allowed the Mexican American working class to ‘go out’ instead of ‘staying in.’ These public places represent a transition from the house party—the conjunto dances held at an individual’s home on a weekend night, as described by Santiago Jiménez, Jr.—into an establishment. This sort of structural permanency was enabled by a newfound modicum of financial mobility, not to mention outright (literal) mobility in the case of venues which attracted patrons beyond their immediate vicinity.

One theme I keep returning to throughout this dissertation is that conjunto’s rise in popularity following the end of the second world war came at a juncture of economic and social mobility in conjunction with the rapid urbanization of the Mexican American population following WWII. These circumstances, along with technological advancements in recording and amplification, led to the growth—and, to be clear, the formalization—of the musical genre as a marketable commodity (as per Peña, 1985). As Susan Smith explains, “...to the extent that musicians perform ... to make a living, concert spaces are the enactment of a complex set of economic relationships; they are produced through the economic relations of musical performance” (2000: 625.) While Smith specifically references the concert hall the statement is applicable as well to the salon de baile or conjunto night club; certainly, the machinations behind the economic impulse which lends itself to the maintenance of the concert hall—wherein ‘high’ culture is enshrined—is not dissimilar to that which maintains the corner cantina or conjunto dancehall, even if the economic valuation and social status accorded to these endeavors are in opposition.

As the longest continually-running conjunto nightclub in Texas—and therefore, the longest-running conjunto nightclub worldwide—Lerma’s shared the same markers of longevity and permanence as any number of other concert halls formed following WWII in cities throughout the United States. And, while I presume that Lerma’s never hosted fundraising galas for the city’s Anglo elites, the symbiotic relationship between musicians/performers, patrons/dancers, and owners/management allows me to draw some parallels between the cantina and concert hall. Where my analysis by necessity diverges from Smith’s is in framing the conjunto performance venue, be it ballroom or cantina, as a performance incubator. When Smith writes that

¹²⁰ *Performing Queer Latinidad*, 135.

[t]he musical making of modern society is therefore at least partly about the repeated marking out of spaces in which performance takes place and these are, by and large, the spaces which musicians—who need time and money to acquire the skills that music demands—are paid to occupy (Smith, 2000: 626)

she describes musical production as a social function that takes place in a musical performance space, and therefore belonging to a specific, classed social location. Unlike the relationship between an orchestra and the concert hall—in which the concert hall serves as practice/rehearsal space as well as the site for performances—the conjunto ensemble does not have the same formalized relationship with their performance venues. Nor do we expect them to, for why should they?¹²¹ Yet even for an act with a regular, reoccurring gig at a particular site—like the ‘house band,’ playing on a weekly rotation—there is a divide between the practice/rehearsal space and that of the performative. Conjunto performers are not funded nor subsidized by the conjunto dance hall. Lerma’s did not pay for the training and practice of an in-house ensemble. However, for professional conjunto musicians—that is, the relatively miniscule number of artists who did in fact earn a living from their performing—the wages paid to them per gig were, collectively, enough to live off of, and presumably compensated them not only for their performing time but also for their experience and training as ameliorated over a lifetime. The “professional conjunto musician” is, also, a myth, an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms that counts as an exception just a few, and fewer than that.¹²² In this regard, the ‘professional’ musician is a creation, function, and limitation of its status as the experience of a classically-trained member of an orchestra is much more the exception than the rule with regards to musical production in modern society.

An application of Smith’s argument to conjunto would necessitate us expanding the range of sites for performance as well as practice. In conjunto and other Texas Mexican music genres, the work of cultural production takes place *everywhere*. Community talleres and workshops, recording studio rentals, converted garages adjoining humble homes; porches, patios, bars, and backyards are all potential and oftentimes realized sites for creation. Yet this is only one part of the performative equation. For the journey person musician, solo or collaborative rehearsal alone will not translate into cash in hand or another form of compensation.

The genre as a whole has been impacted by the closure of longstanding conjunto night clubs and dance halls that has taken place during the past two decades. As the number of live

¹²¹ This sentiment—the expectation or assumption that conjunto ensembles do not need nor are deserving of a dedicated practice space is, I feel, a reflection of the raced and classed nature of the genre itself.

¹²² I think of Narciso Martínez, who drove trucks and worked as a field hand before retiring as a caretaker at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville. (*Chulas Fronteras* has this beautiful cut that transitions between Martínez, the performer, accordion in hand, and Martínez, the zookeeper, feeding the elephants and carrying a chimp.) Santiago Almeida accompanied Martínez on bajo sexto, and developed an innovative cross-picking technique that distinguished their ensemble from other accordion-led conjuntos of the time that played in the style of German and Czech bands (Ragland, “Tradition” 90). In the 1940s Almeida and his family joined the migrant stream. They eventually settled in the Yakima Valley, where Almeida continued to play locally. (Geranios, Nicholas. “Star of ‘Conjunto’ Music Wary of Limelight After Long Years of Obscurity: The Arts: Santiago Almeida, 81, Won a \$10,000 NEA Grant as a Heritage Fellow This Year. After His Popularity Faded in the ‘40s, He Became a Migrant Worker in Washington State.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1993. Accessed via http://articles.latimes.com/1993-10-24/local/me-49201_1_santiago-almeida on July 23, 2018.)

At the time Martínez and Almeida recorded in the 1930s they were paid per song, with no promise or expectation of royalties. In conjunto their experience is more the rule than the exception.

music venues decreases, so do the number of bands and musicians who can earn a living from playing conjunto. Venues which continue to offer live music pay little. Per hour, a performer could earn more giving private lessons, or take gigs in another genre (mariachi ensembles, studio recordings) if possible—options which many conjunto musicians already pursue, in addition to outside (non-musical) employment.

The money just isn't there to support a viable conjunto performative economy. During the summer of 2012 one informant who played on a semiregular basis at the Royal Palace Ballroom remarked to me “there's no money playing here during the day... I make more giving lessons.” Born in 1939, he said he's been playing for sixty years. An enthusiastic fan—a regular at the daytime dances—slipped him a hundred for another hour of music. Once it's split across a four- or five-piece band it's not going that far.

Another artist I spoke with told me he won't even take gigs at the Royal Palace because they don't pay enough. According to him conjuntos only make \$200 for the afternoon, and he wants something in the area of \$300-\$350. Even more when he plays out of town, but they'll pay it. When he does play at Royal Palace for a Sunday afternoon *tardeada* in the middle of August's *canícula*, the hottest part of the summer, the place is packed. In my notes I remark that I have never seen it so full. Reportedly, he's pulling \$600 for playing this particular day.



Figure 10: The cash register at Lerma's. Photograph by the author, 2010.

The promoter I spoke with tells me bands get \$160 for two and a half hours of playing, but I am not sure if he means all daytime acts or ones like his that don't carry name recognition or draw a crowd. Or if that includes his cut. Another source says conjuntos are only getting \$300-\$250 to play these days—not just afternoons, anytime. She points to the economy. They use to get \$1000 for a quinceañera. Even one of the more popular nightclubs is only paying \$300 and they don't charge a cover, she says.

I found few occasions where the cover charge exceeded \$10, including benefit fundraising dances and festivals or other special occasions. The majority of places I frequented were free or asked for a nominal (\$2-\$3) door charge. The Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio was one exception to this, as the price varied in the high ‘teens during its annual run in May. I noted some vocal participants expressed their displeasure at the “high” cost of a ticket—a complaint that I remember hearing years prior when the festival first broke above the single digits in price—but given the caliber of the line-up, the number of bands playing, and the duration of the festival the ticket should easily cost several times more if it was to reflect the actual costs of the event.¹²³

While the Tejano Conjunto Festival is the largest such musical festival dedicated to the genre it is not the only one. At the time of my fieldwork, local San Antonio radio station KEDA, affectionately dubbed “Radio Jalapeño,” hosted single-day events several times a year at no charge to the public. San Antonio seemed unique in that a private enterprise—the local radio station—promoted such an event. Typically, around the state from Austin to the Rio Grande Valle, cultural organizations sponsored festivals, such as the Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center Conjunto Festival in San Benito, Texas. In addition to the door charge and any outside funding or sponsorship these agencies receive—including private financing, in-kind donation, grants for nonprofits—the “real money” comes from concessions, in particular beer sales.¹²⁴ In this regard the largest of festivals shares something in common with the lowliest of dive bars.

The entertainment value of a live performance becomes even greater when one factors in the time spent on the road while touring, the cost of instruments and upkeep, and the years of expertise gained from a lifetime of practicing and rehearsal. One may hire a group of musicians for a few hours—but what went into the preparation for that time? And yet, the price for a live conjunto performance during the 2010s was, in real terms, much less than that of decades prior. Certainly, as any analysis of earnings points out, minimum wages have not kept up with inflation and the cost of living. For example, a cover charge of \$2 to \$3 in 1970 comes out to about \$13 to \$20 in 2018, based on inflation. For a place such as Old Hwy. 90’s legendary El Camaroncito to ask this amount—on weekday nights, even—was no insignificant thing.¹²⁵

Still, when I read some of the articles and comments from the heyday of Tejano conjunto I can’t help but meet it with a bit of healthy skepticism. In part, this is my own historically-situated bias. During the entire time I have researched and participated in the conjunto social scene—during my entire adult life, in fact—the dominant narrative trope has been that of conjunto’s decline. Marketing and the market combined, in a way which propelled Tejano from its regional basis to national prominence for the first and perhaps only time.¹²⁶ My skepticism is warranted by the contradictions I found in archival research as well as through interviews and conversations during the course of my fieldwork. For example, following an 8,000-person concert featuring Little Joe and Sunny Osuna an article by Ben King, Jr. in the San Antonio Express News from August 27, 1978 lauds the growing market power of “la onda chicana,” Tejano music.

¹²³ Costs, not worth, for conjunto musicians are as underpaid and undervalued as they come. Hence the heavy corporate sponsorship.

¹²⁴ I elaborate upon this point later in this chapter.

¹²⁵ El Camaroncito is still known today as the place where the devil was rumored to appear. See elsewhere in this dissertation.

¹²⁶ The “Tejano boom” was not bound spatially, in spite of the implications its name might suggest. Rather, as per Vargas, the Tejas that functioned here was a site of (in this case audiotopic) cultural production, through Tejano music (2002: 118).

For instance, one local musical Chicana radio station, with an average of 67,000 listeners, makes \$35,000 monthly in advertising revenue. In one year, most of the major música Chicana record labels look forward to bringing in \$250,000. The money involved obviously isn't overwhelming, but at the same time it's nothing to be overlooked ("Music Scene makes room for música Chicana," SAEN August 27, 1978: 3-Z).

King's article continues in this celebratory vein. He quotes the general manager of Freddie Records, one of the region's more significant labels, estimating monthly revenue of approximately \$65,000 monthly (6-Z). At the moment of the genre's success it seemed that things would continue along the same trajectory. Indeed, the article triumphantly states "as música Chicana ever dying out completely—the chances seem small" (6-Z).¹²⁷

Four years later the Conjunto Fest would kick-off with its inaugural three-day event in 1982. The festival ballooned to a week's worth of musical acts within a decade; as it passed through its second decade and into a third it has returned to a more conservative long weekend format. While the growth and contraction of a given festival's number of days is not necessarily indicative of the popularity or commercial viability of a given genre, here I find a relevant parallel. The Conjunto Fest experienced a spike (expanding to seven days) at the same time as the Tejano boom of the 90s, as discussed earlier; as this ended so, too, did the Festival scale back. The sense of urgency, however, remains, underscored by the unfortunate loss of the genre's legends, pioneers, benefactors and influences.

Contradictions abound. The late Oscar Tellez, longtime bajo sexto player alongside Flaco Jimenez, observed San Antonio's conjuntos were experiencing a "periodic" boom, after a drop-in popularity during the '60s and '70s ("Conjunto is Music you'll love to Squeeze," by Ben King, Jr. SA Express News, January 16, 1981: 8-w). The same article notes the cover charge for conjunto was \$2 or lower, although the most popular of groups commanded upwards of \$10 at the door.

In a 1985 article, Tejeda estimated that most conjuntos made \$20 to \$30 a gig, while a legend like Valerio Longoria was in the \$200 to \$300 a night bracket.¹²⁸ Billboard, in 1993, identified Tejano as the "hottest prospect in Latin music," with projected earnings increasing fivefold since 1980, from \$3 to \$15 million annually.¹²⁹ Clearly, some of these numbers and projects are supported by industry publications. Again, however, I came across repeated contradictions and conflicting reports. Perhaps the best explanation for the discrepancies—as well as a detailed explanation of the earning potential of the average conjunto ensemble—comes

¹²⁷ I do not wish to give the impression that Tejano and conjunto are completely interchangeable. In spite of their many shared performative elements, instrumentation, and listening communities, there are nonetheless important distinctions that mark each genre historically, and continue to set them apart today. (In general, these distinctions have been formed along the lines of class, and formed a contrast between the working-class conjunto listening community and the more middle-class—or aspiring to be middle-class—Tejano and orquesta listening communities. For example, see Peña, 1985 and 1999b or San Miguel, 2002.)

However, at the same time, the similarities between the Tejano and conjunto genres far outweigh any prevailing differences that may place the two in opposition. For the purpose of my study, here I am primarily drawing upon an analysis of concert revenue or performer income in Tejano as I have found a lack of substantial work on the economies of conjunto from the same time period.

¹²⁸ Ramiro Burr, "It's the music of South Texas: This year's Conjunto Festival Honors Don Santiago Jimenez, One of The Founders of Conjunto Music." SAEN 1-G, Sunday May 12, 1985.

¹²⁹ Ramiro Burr, "Music with a Texas spin: Arista's branch in Austin to focus on Tejano artists" *San Antonio Express News* 10.7.93 1D, 3D.

from a 1978 article by Gus Clemens, “Música Chicana: Making San Antonio Famous.” In the article Clemens refers to a *Billboard* report circa 1973 in which entertainers reported being a part of a \$20 million dollars a year industry. This was, apparently, based upon misrepresentations and exaggerations, an example of hyperbole seeing print and becoming part of the official record—with humorous consequences. As one promotor recounted to a reporter

Sunny [Osuna?], Little Joe, all the Tex-Mex musicians, told the *Billboard* writers any lie they wanted to hear. ...Most of them quoted the reporters figures two or three times more than what they actually made. Everyone was thinking ‘national distribution’ and ‘major label’ if the figures looked real good. So they made the figures look real good. ... So good, in fact, that shortly after the article appeared in *Billboard*, the Internal Revenue Service was auditing all the big names in musica chicana [sic], trying to find out why it had never been told about all those big bucks in the industry (Clemens, 1978: pg. unknown).

Clemens obtained off-the-record figures which topped out at \$250-\$300,000 annually for the biggest orquesta outfits; conjunto ensembles earned one-tenth that amount. Of the thirty to forty orquestas which performed on a regular basis he estimated only the top six made more than \$200K annually. As a whole he estimated orquesta Tejana earned between \$5 to \$7 million a year, including ticket sales and recordings—a far cry from the reported \$20 million. Combined, Clemens speculated that the approximately 200 conjuntos active in the U.S. and northern Mexico had combined earnings of almost \$7 million annually at the time. While the total amount is as much or more than that brought in from orquesta outfits, it is dispersed over a far greater number of bands. Even if one was to factor in the difference in size between the typical outfits—orquesta tejana, akin to a big band, could easily host 8-12 musicians on stage at one time, whereas the ‘traditional’ conjunto ensemble commonly featured four to five performers, but could be as few as three on stage—it is clear that orquesta earned more and paid better than conjunto. (Clemens, “Música Chicana: page unknown). This contrast reflects the class-based divisions between the two closely-related genres. Yet, despite the difference, Clemens reports that for both genres the biggest source of income is live performances such as the “Super Dances,” where an estimated 6,000 individuals paid as much as \$10 apiece —“the top ticket price in musica chicana [sic]” in 1978 —to dance to headliners Little Joe and Sunny Ozuna at the San Antonio Convention Center. (With inflation in 2018 this is the equivalent of \$40 at the door.) “The rest of the year, musica chicana [sic] groups work ‘The Circuit’ or ‘La Onda,’ a 20-year old (at the time of the article) series of Mexican American dance halls and night clubs stretching across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California and Washington, then jumping to Minnesota, the Midwest (especially the Chicago area) and into Pennsylvania.” The richest part of the Circuit is Texas, and San Antonio is the best on the circuit. Música Chicana performers go to the Midwest and west coast during lent and football season, slack times in Texas, and they play “at the same places, for the same promoters, at the same time of the year,” for a decade or longer (33). “Although The Circuit provides a stable income,” he writes, “it is by no means an easy life. Almost all travel is by bus, and sleep is a precious experience irregularly enjoyed” (33). As Sunny Ozuna explained,

It usually takes us until two or three in the morning to finish breaking down, get something to eat and relax. ...Then you’ve always got the same problem—do you go

ahead and get some sleep where you are, or do you drive to the next gig. On tour, we make five or six gigs a week. Man, you can really get tired living like that. Most people think we have a glamorous life. We don't. We have a car and a band bus that we live in on the road. The straights ride in the car with me. The smokers and drinkers ride in the bus. We spend half our lives driving to gigs (in Clemens, 33).

Much like conjunto, female participation in Tejano remained limited largely to vocalists. It is within this context that I read the interview with Delia Gonzales, of the group Culturas, as conducted by José Angel Gutiérrez in 1995.¹³⁰ Among the 173 prominent Tejanas and Tejanos interviewed as part of the Tejano Voices project are a number of performers and others in the entertainment industry. The majority of those interviews are accessible only at UT Arlington, where the transcriptions and video recordings are held. As I have not had access to the entirety of the collection I cannot speak with authority as to how the interview with Delia Gonzales compares to the others. What I found when reading through her interview however is that it is revealing, a detailed snapshot of a moment—the Tejano boom—as well as the life history of one of the artists who participated in it. Over the course of their six hour long conversation Gonzales and Gutiérrez discuss topics such as her role as a performer, her career, her youth, and her family history—including their participation in the Crystal City walkouts and involvement with La Raza Unida Party (LRUP), a Chicana/o political party which rose to prominence during the 1970s. This is familiar ground for Gutiérrez, as he was one of the most prominent individuals associated with LRUP and the campaign in Cristal. (He also enquires about Gonzales' dress and appearance, questions I have not found him asking or addressing in any of the interviews with men that I have read.) What I find most interesting and relevant for my purposes here is when their conversation turns towards finances. Gutiérrez poses several questions about what Gonzales makes as a performer, and she talks openly and honestly about her earnings. When she started out in 1982 her band charged \$250 for an evening's performance running about four hours; at the time of the interview in 1995 her band charged around \$6,000 for two sets of an hour and fifteen minutes apiece. By her own estimates Culturas earned around \$800,000 annually from performances but Gonzales and her partner only saw about \$65,000 annually, as

¹³⁰ In this exploration of the economics of musical performance I expand my scope to include the conjunto/orquesta/Tejano trifecta as part of a broadly related scene. Elsewhere there have been discussions around the commercial viability of the cumbia with regards to a pan-Latin@ audience across the Americas. Among Texas Mexican musical performers, the radio-friendly cumbias of the late Selena Quintanilla still resonate beyond the confines of what may be considered a niche or regional market. While I wish to elude a larger discussion around what, exactly, it means to be a crossover I suggest the term, as it has been used, implies Anglo or mainstream acceptance. Certainly, around the time the Tejano boom of the '90s faded away a separate, tangentially related Latin boom took off, one which created household names out of artists like Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin, Christina Aguilera and Shakira. What these artists had in common, as well as those who followed their wake, was a polished top-40 produced sound which drew from pop, R&B, hip-hop and, only later, reggaeton, salsa, & other not-Mexican (which is to say banda, norteño) 'Latin' influences. Had Selena lived I imagine she would have followed her 1995 album *Dreaming of You* along these lines, with subsequent releases parleying a mix of English-language, accessible, pop tunes and ballads as well as Spanish-language cumbia dance numbers. Speculation upon alternative historical outcomes, while enjoyable, is meaningless. That being said; however, I wish to return to the point regarding what makes for a crossover album. In Selena's case it meant appealing to an English-speaking audience. Yet, at the same time, Selena had already become a crossover success—by crossing over into a larger Spanish-language market in Mexico and throughout Latin America. That she accomplished this is in and of itself significant. While undeniably the most successful—as her headlining of the Houston Astrodome indicates—it is also important to remember that prior to her death Selena was one of a number of prominent female Tejano singers poised for stardom, including Shelly Lares, Delia Gonzales, of Culturas, and Elida Reyna, of Elida y Avante.

they ran an eight-member band with an additional six persons employed in various supportive roles in their organization. As of 20018 their earnings would be the equivalent of \$1.33 million and \$108,000, respectively, for the band and for the couple. Although these amounts are certainly not small change by any stretch of the imagination, I find it important to consider several things. This was the reported income during the most commercially viable period of Tejano music in the past three decades. This amount may very well represent the apex, as the industry as a whole went into decline and wages and earnings followed suit. Culturas was one of the more prominent and successful Tejano ensembles of the time. While other outfits might have achieved greater commercial (financial) success it stands to reason that the vast majority of active Tejano and conjunto groups toiled for far, far less—as they continue to do so today.

There is another aspect to the Gonzales interview and this is her discussion around sponsorship. Alcoholic beverage companies, in particular domestic megacorporations (Coors as well as the parent companies of Budweiser and Miller) influence and shape the musical production in a way which is indirectly felt but no less evident. As Gonzales explains,

The only, the only thing they require is that, at all times, I mean, any alcoholic beverage or competition, a competitive beer it would be, we, the only one we could drink is Miller Beer [sic]. Anything, you know we can't wear anything that is, anything other than Miller Beer. If we are going to be advertising a beer. They do have so many shows during the year that they don't require us to do, but if we are available, that they would like for us to do, to be a part of (Tejano Voices, 1985).

Branding and label associations are not without costs. While Gonzales does not elaborate upon the amount received from corporate sponsorship, nor the specifics of their contract, the value in advertising and promotion the corporation receives from the bands' use is more than enough to make up for whatever monies they put into their sponsorship. Certainly Culturas, as a breakout Tejano group, is not indicative of what the majority of Tejano artists experienced, even during the boom period. What the interview allows, however, is an insight into one aspect of the performative economy in operation at a particular point in time. For an artist to generate an income allowing her to work full-time as a musician, even for a limited time, indicates the existence of a sustainable performative economy. That is, each dollar an artist receives as payment for her musicianship must pass through several layers at multiple sites, whether it is money from admission or record sales or even corporate sponsorship. The production and promotion of albums supports not just the band on the label or the label itself, drawing perhaps the most profit from its sale, but also vendors, be they a corporation or an independent record shop like Del Bravo. Likewise, depending upon the formal contract or verbal agreement a percentage of cover charges may go directly to the artist and her band but also support, whether directly or indirectly, the employees' wages and operational expenses of the venue itself. Without tours, without an extensive back catalog or consistent album releases, the careers of musicians remain by and large limited.

While pursuing her music Gonzales obtained a cosmology license and worked in an unidentified context for SER, a federally funded social service agency.¹³¹ Either line of work paid less, on average, than what she was earning at the time of the interview. As she reported working 14-hour days for all but two weeks a year on her music the time commitments and physical toll seems less intense as well. What this indicates to me is, in part, considerable

¹³¹ Gonzales eventually quit performing due to kidney failure, and began a second career in nursing.



Figure 11: Promotional postcard advertising the 2005 Tejano Conjunto Festival, by Vincent Valdez. Note the sponsor sharing top billing with the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center.

foresight and agency on Gonzales' part. She prepared for career options as alternatives to performing. More importantly, however, it reveals that even the most successful and prominent of Tejano musicians struggled to make a sustainable, viable long-term career out of performing. And, to extrapolate further, if this was indeed a struggle for her then what of the scores of other Tejano and conjunto musicians, male and female, who didn't achieve nearly the same level of fame?

In my research I spoke to performers who indicated their unwillingness to perform locally—that is, in San Antonio—because the scene paid so low. I encountered acclaimed artists—among the best in the genre—who played the Conjunto Festival one weekend then returned to their weekend gigs strolling from table to table at any number of Mexican restaurants throughout the city, or up and down the Riverwalk and historic Market Square in downtown, where they played by request for \$5, \$10 a song. Even steady employment, such as a regular, weekly gig, is not an indicator of sustainability. Discounting promoter's fees and alcohol consumption—some musicians drink a little, some drink a lot, and a number abstain completely—that may come out of their pay, or be comped by the bar as a way of supplementing the take-home pay, conjunto ensembles at every level make very little money. Period. While the genre grew out of similar conditions—the earliest conjunto performances took place outdoors, on dirt fields, or in Westside casitas, all the furniture piled to the sides so as to maximize room for dancing, with musicians playing all night long after working in the fields or factories, or crushing rocks at la piedra—it flourished in the wake of post-war economic prosperity as musicians

could live off of their music, supported by a steady income stream generated through performances at any number of venues dotting San Antonio and elsewhere. Without these venues or spaces to perform for a living, the sustainability of the genre remains questionable.

Chapter Six

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, just listen”: The Semantics of Sound in the Making of Texas Mexican Popular Music

On my drive to work today I listened to Rubén Vela’s “Popurri en concierto,” off of his 1996 album *El Coco Rayado*, as it played from my phone through a cord connected to the stereo. I mention this process only because, thinking I might become upwardly mobile, I expected the next vehicle I would own would allow me to stream music wirelessly. Not too long ago I would not have considered either option—playing music from a phone the size of a half slice of bread, with or without a connection—to be possible. Once upon a time, during the early 1990s, I purchased the CD with Vela’s song, and in order to enjoy it I could either play it on the stereo in my apartment, or listen to it from a tape cassette in my car—after recording it to the cassette. Later, I replaced the tape deck with a CD player so I could hear it direct from the source—by which I mean directly from the compact disc recording. Barring this I might hear Vela on KEDA, Radio Jalapeño, or see him play a festival in San Antonio or San Benito, up to the year of his passing. These latter options required some degree of physical proximity—to a radio station, to a concert performance—as well as a loss of selection. I could make a request for a particular song, but there was no certainty that I would hear the song played.

I thought of this on my commute as I considered the recording as artefact, as material, as memory. The record as an invention revolutionized broadcasting and spurred an industry. As recordings—“records”—became more and more accessible a whole economy arose and depended upon the creative production of musicians and artists. Yet until recently, the term recording meant a tangible, physical form of media—be it a pressed vinyl record, a tape cassette, or a compact disk—that nonetheless carried or contained that which was ephemeral, temporal, intangible: sound and song, moving through time and moment. Separated by virtue of recording and reproduction from the point of production—the musicians—this perceived disembodiment conversely frees the song to inhabit space audiotopically, to be embodied through the relationship with the listener. The music transmits meanings, multiple, and it is in this multiplicity we find a site of creation.

Here I consider the live recording I listened to, the one that inspired the introduction to this essay. Did Rubén Vela record his “Popurri en concierto” live, in concert? Did he produce it with effects—cheers, the voiceover from the conjunto ensemble’s version of a hype man—to produce that illusion? Moreover, what makes the distinction between a live and studio album or recording, if both are produced “live,” if both are products of production as much as the artistry of musicians?¹³²

¹³² While an examination of the disk’s liner notes would typically provide an answer to these inquiries—however inconclusive they are in this instance—it is the larger questions behind them that drive my curiosity here. In this instance, the CD sleeve only notes Vela’s album as recorded at the Hacienda Recording Studios, in Corpus Christi, Texas. It is entirely possible that the titles of the various songs making up this Popurri, as called out by the announcer between transitions, as well as the cheers and whistles that punctuate the melody in the background were all done in-studio, flourishes easily accomplished under a producer’s deft hand. And if this is in fact the case then that places Ruben Vela y su conjunto in good company. Notably, the first half of James Brown’s 1970 album *Sex Machine* featured material recorded “live”—in studio, with effects and applause added to the recording. In both instances the artists recognize the inherent fallacy in the naming of a live recording, as the act itself of recording renders the performance into an artefact, replayable and reproducible.

Musical performance changes as it is observed; to participate and to observe and to analyze requires a disconnect, a doubling, a pause from the pleasure of the dance. How can one parse a song in process, a performance as it occurs? As a researcher, no matter how participatory my positionality, I can only offer snapshots, slices and moments couched in the best poetic and academic language I am capable of expressing. Splice together these frames and perhaps I may be able to reconstitute an event, moving through time like pages in a flipbook or a differential



Figure 12: Rubén Vela, El Chaparrito de Oro, adjusts his tie prior to performing at the Tejano Conjunto Festival. Photograph by the author, circa 1999.

calculus equation. So what is left? Photographs, videos, audio recordings that are infinitely replayable and uniquely ephemeral. The song as sound occupies space, fills a sonic landscape, and, in its audiotopic potential, creates. As an artefact it exists yet remains intangible: I can hold the recording as media—record album, tape cassette, compact disk, downloaded single on a portable device—in my hand, stream it from my phone or laptop, and yet it only exists as a recording while played and amplified. As sound the recording becomes intangible; through repetition I can replay, revisit, and repeatedly return to it. Yet through repetition it changes. Repetition of song, repetition of performance, repetition of movement, repetition of dance: the repetition is not replication, nor is it necessarily a remaking anew. Repetition is not duplication; in place of the copy I think of mimesis, or perhaps rearticulation; each iteration an opportunity to revise, revisit, reclaim or restore. To say the earliest Texas Mexican conjunto used the instruments and played the rhythms of those Eastern European settler-colonists suggests a copy, a duplication, a something-less-than-original in the service of culture. In naming the Texas Mexican musicians who took up the accordion and bajo sexto, the tololoche and tambor de rancho, the fiddle or violin, and their audience of listeners, many of whom certainly drank, danced and enjoyed the songs they played I stress the importance of positionality. This is not an appeal to the universal, or that faceless, raceless, sexless ideal western subject who, in his individualistic refusal of categories nonetheless inhabits and inhabits a series of identities reflective of power and privilege. Rather, I name the social location and the spatial geography of

those conjunto dancers, listeners and performers in order to argue for a performative epistemology. As previously discussed, the terrible, complicated history of oppression and resistance, of colonization and settlement, of slavery and struggle comes to bear upon the conditions and circumstances that led to conjunto's development and diffusion. These traumas do not go away upon entering the dancehall, nor do they disappear at the drop of the needle or the pressing of the play button.¹³³

I think of the repetition as ritual. As ritual it is repeated, repeatable, so often to be ingrained in the everyday. The quotidian aspect of conjunto means that it can and does act as a normalizing function, structuring familial-social relationships and gendered roles. Yet it is within the same quotidian function of repetition that change can occur. Even if the song and sound remain the same the circumstances, the context, the conditions change. The moment at the point of observation is inevitably altered. Why invest so much currency in the notion of an original? The copy, the cover, the bootleg, the duplicate all do cultural work. Valuing or diminishing their importance based upon the medium, based upon the conditions and circumstances structures and replicates a series of hierarchies. I call this the authenticity of sound. Who or what is privileged in this equation? Does a recording make one's experience any more or less authentic, any more or less valid? Does a cover of a song circulating for the better part of a century diminish the enjoyment, the pleasures of listening and dancing to it for the first time—or the first time tonight? Conjunto as a genre makes do with the copy, the cover, the rerecording or revision. I write this not to disparage any of it, but rather to make the point that denigrating any of this is cause for a devaluing of the genre as a whole. So doing leads to a logic of erasure, of silencing. If one is in pursuit of solely the real or authentic, and the criteria to measure such excludes aspects of the genre itself, then what is left is but an incomplete fraction of the larger picture.

I ruminate upon these recordings as I think about Rubén Vela. Affectionately dubbed “El Chaparrito de Oro” due to his diminutive stature, this now-deceased conjunto performer enjoyed a late-career boost of fame from a recording of the traditional tune “El Coco Rayado,” spruced up with a heady cumbia beat and a series of increasingly-absurd sound effects and samples. Starting with a bombastic “Wait a minute, wait a minute, just listen,” the announcer then counts “Four... three... two... one...” before exclaiming “I-I-I-let's ROCK this joint! Hit it!” to kick the song off. These overexaggerated effects contrast with Vela's smooth, melodic playing on his Gabbanelli accordion, and for a long, hot summer in the mid-90s you couldn't go anywhere in Greater Aztlán and beyond without hearing it play. At least that's how it felt to me in Michigan at the time, where I encountered it everywhere—at our college parties, at the community dances, and on the airwaves. (At the time I had my own radio show and did my part to contribute to its ubiquity, playing it in steady rotation.) Vela followed this up with another infectious cumbia rendition of “Las Toronjas,” and “La Papaya,” each time playing up the increasingly obvious overtly sexualized imagery. I think about this two decades after the fact for a number of reasons. Why the sexualization, masked as playfulness? Here, through repetition, is the normalization of hegemonic masculinity vis-à-vis the objectification of women, put in verse and set to a catchy cumbia beat.

¹³³ For a harrowing, moving documentation of legal and extralegal violence perpetuated against Mexican Americans in Texas, please see Monica Muñoz Martinez' excellent study, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). David Montejano's *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas* remains perhaps the definitive work on the history of Mexican Americans in the Lone Star State.

Within what mechanisms and through what technologies does conjunto perform gender? Heteronormative masculinity manifests itself across multiple sites: that of voice, that of instrumentation, that of lyrics, that of performance, that of movement, that of geography, space, and structure. Style and aesthetics, too, are sites for the construction and reification of heteronormative masculinity of racialized bodies. Curtis Márez argues that Chicanos embody a Chicano aesthetic, or what he terms a “brown style,” that encompasses “a critical discourse that simultaneously counters Anglo repressions, opposes white supremacist assumptions of highbrow taste, and affirms the qualities of Chicano difference” (1996: 109). A working-class Chicano style is formed through these encounters—“violent confrontations” (109)—that functions as a form of resistance to white supremacy (109). If *rasquachismo*, as elucidated by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, is the means for the making, an ever-variable pastiche-piecemeal act of survival and creation, then brown style is the application. In particular, while Márez engages in a close analysis of the work of the late Freddy Fender I find enough in his argument to apply to the conjunto genre. Certainly, as I argue against the neat and tidy divisions of genre, Fender’s inclusion in this discussion of an expansive Texas Mexican musical landscape becomes apparent.

Freddy Fender was born Baldemar Garza Huerta on June 4, 1937, in San Benito, a small South Texas town near Harlingen, in an area recognized by fans and scholars alike as being the birthplace of Texas Mexican conjunto music. Fender’s father sang casually at a time when professional recording opportunities for Mexicans and Mexican Americans were few and far-between. Instead, like most working class Mexican Americans of their generation the Huertas traveled north as seasonal migrants, picking cherries, tomatoes and cotton, among other crops, in places like Arkansas, Ohio, Michigan and Indiana.¹³⁴ As racialized subjects Fender’s experience—and that of other Chicanas and Chicanos—unsettles the “common knowledge” or trope of the (European) immigrant-assimilation narrative. Certainly, while his farmworker origins clearly align with the conceptualization of country music by fans, performers, and scholars as a working-class, rural-based music, placing Fender alongside white country musicians with this narrative misses the racialized aspect of poverty and work that dominated his childhood and adolescence and can be traced throughout his early career.¹³⁵ Then as now, migrant work was racialized, and, as historian Neil Foley documents in his 1997 study of Texas’ cotton culture, Mexican American migrant workers became unwilling and unwelcome recipients of this process in complex and historically-situated ways.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Biographical details are from Ramiro Burr (*The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music*. New York: Billboard Books, 1999, p. 91), and are shared in several articles about Fender, including wire reports on his death and profile pieces written during different points in his career. Please see, for example, “Obituaries: Freddy Fender,” *Variety*, October 23—October 29, 2006, p. 49; Valerie J. Nelson, “Freddy Fender, 69; Grammy Winner Grew Tex-Mex Appeal,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 2006, Section B, p. 12; Lynn Brezosky, “Singer Freddy Fender Dies At Age 69 After Battle With Lung Cancer,” Associated Press Wire Report, October 15, 2006; Spencer Leigh, “Obituaries: Freddy Fender: Tex-Mex Singer Best Known For ‘Wasted Days and Wasted Nights’ and ‘Before The Next Teardrop Falls,’” *The Independent* (London), October 16, 2006, p. 34.

¹³⁵ For more on these associations, please see Bill C. Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2002, in particular Chapter 2, “I’m A Small-Time Laboring Man’.”

¹³⁶ Foley, Neil. *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). In particular, see Chapters 7 and 8, “The Darker Phases of Whiteness: The New Deal, Tenant Farmers, and the Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, 1933-1940,” and “The Demise of Agrarian Whiteness: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in Texas and the Racialization of Farm Workers,” for a greater discussion of this process. See also Montejano, David. *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

During the decade following World War II—Fender’s formative years—the South became increasingly urbanized as greater employment opportunities opened in industrialized sectors, and rural white and Black southerners continued to migrate in ever-increasing numbers to Southern, Midwestern, and Western cities. As Bill C. Malone argues, this demographic shift among the white working-class rural southerners in particular meant a greater commercialization of country music, via phonographs and the radio, but not a concomitant change in lyrical content reflecting industrial labor or urbanization. Instead, country music maintained its identification with southern, rural life even while expressing “an ambivalence about work and worker identity” as the nature of work and the locations that construed the workplace dramatically changed over the course of the twentieth century (Malone, 44).

For Fender, the years following WWII meant continued farm-work in *la pisca* until 1953, when he enlisted in the Marines—by lying about his age. Three years later Fender received a dishonorable discharge and returned to South Texas to record original songs and Spanish-language covers of Elvis Presley tunes and R&B standards under the moniker “El Be Bop,” or the “Be Bop Kid.” This knowledge of Fender’s earliest forays into performing pushes back the clock on the rise of rock en español by at least three decades, in both Mexico and the United States, and alters the one-note portrayal of him as, simply, a Chicano country musician.

Throughout his whole life Fender traversed genres, borrowing and blending from country, conjunto, R&B and a catalogue of Mexican standards. Trade journalism and genre scholarship about Fender emphasizes his cultural difference, thereby marking his otherness in imagining him as a familiar outsider, or, more benignly, a “crossover” star, while simultaneously failing to situate him, as a (once) working-class heterosexual Chicano entertainer, within and in relation to a broader, culturally-specific social world. Along with Flaco Jimenez, Augie Meyers, and Doug Sahm, he barnstormed with the Texas Tornados, playing festivals and fairs as a supergroup of sorts. Towards the end of his life he returned to Spanish-language standards, recording *La Música de Baldemar Huerta*, an album of traditional rancheras and ballads, and released a conjunto album with Flaco Jiménez, the quietly understated *Dos Amigos* (2005), shortly before his death.

In 1959 Fender recorded “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” his signature tune, and “Holy One,” both of which were “regional smashes” in Louisiana and Texas.¹³⁷ But Fender’s rise to fame was cut short by his arrest in Baton Rouge, in 1960, for the possession of two marijuana joints, and sentenced to five years in Louisiana’s notorious Angola State Prison. In his discussion of the bad boy or outlaw persona—itsself an extension of the “folk fascination with badmen and outlaws”—in country music Malone lists Fender, almost in passing, as one of a handful of singers (including Waylon Jennings) who had actually served time in jail, pointing out that until the 1960s—with the popularity of Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard—no one “had borne the reputation of ‘badman’,” or “exploited the image for commercial reasons.”¹³⁸ Certainly this is true of Fender, who eventually served two and a half years before being released. In contrast to Cash’s lyrics and his on-stage persona’s casual, celebratory approach to criminality—listen to the whoops and cheers that greet “Folsom Prison Blues” on his 1969 live “At San Quentin” recording when he sings “I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die”¹³⁹—Fender

¹³⁷ Morthland, John. “Wasted Days,” *Texas Monthly*. October, 1995. P. 64. I first heard Fender sing “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” on his 1974 LP, *Before the Next Teardrop Falls*.

¹³⁸ Malone, *Raisin*, p. 137.

¹³⁹ The irony being, of course, that Cash had never been to prison or, presumably, killed anyone. However, by giving concerts in prison and through his promotion of convict rights he gained the respect of the incarcerated. Please see

expressed both indignation at the excessiveness of his sentence—with its attendant allusions to institutional racism—as well as regret and remorse, not for that which landed him behind bars, but for the time he spent—“wasted”—there.¹⁴⁰ “Prison for me was like a burial cemetery,” he once said; certainly, this influenced what he called his “born loser” songs.¹⁴¹ As Curtis Márez argues, “one can hear both punishment and intense, almost visceral despair in the majority of his work. His public persona, with its history of poverty and prison, helps explain his popularity” among working class Chicanos, Indians, and white country western fans (“Brown,” 113).

In his definitive *Country Music, U.S.A.*, Malone briefly discusses Fender (and fellow Mexican American country musician Johnny Rodriguez), situating him as an artist who “emerge[s] in the context of the increasingly tolerant racial atmosphere of the sixties, and in a region of the country—South Texas—where cultural forms had often intermixed.”¹⁴² Not only did Fender represent—or, rather, embody, both physically, as a Chicano, and ideologically, as a symbol or marker of the cultural diversity of South Texas, if not its ‘tolerance’—in the mid-70’s he came to occupy that position via the work of “swamp pop” promoter Huey Meaux, the so-called Crazy Cajun, and not through the Nashville establishment or the Austin alternative, best characterized by a braided, bandana-ed Willie Nelson, that had begun to achieve recognition during that era.¹⁴³ Márez tempers Malone’s reading of Fender, advising us to remember “that Tex-Mex hybridity is not a happy melting-pot resolution of difference, nor is it a sort of stylistic pluralism.” Instead, he reminds us, it is more commonly the outcome of violent struggles; Fender’s music, he writes, “expresses this pain of racial oppression.”¹⁴⁴

The act of playing, of performing, and of listening, of dancing, to the cultural production of a people are inexorably related. Barthes suggests that “the grain of the voice” is “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue.” But, Márez asks, what if the body is not speaking its “mother tongue”; moreover, what if there is not one “mother tongue,” but many. For in the case of Chicanos the processes of colonization, adaptation, and negotiation, as well as the pressures of survival and resistance, have resulted in Chicano speech communities that reflect the diversity of its population: a continuum that includes the English-dominant, to users of Spanglish or caló, to monolingual Spanish speakers—as well as those proficient in indigenous Mexican languages (Náhuatl, Mam), among other mother tongues. Is the body the embodiment of the voice? Is the voice the body made material? How does the mother tongue resist or reify gendered norms?

And what of the instrumentation, what of the tuning? For Tejano conjunto the accordion is perhaps *the* central distinguishing image. Instantly recognizable, it appears on everything from

Bill C. Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 136-138, for a further discussion of Johnny Cash and his outlaw personality.

¹⁴⁰ See also Márez, Curtis. “Brown: The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style,” *Social Text*, No. 48 (Autumn, 1996). Márez recalls Fender discussing his prison experience—“an integral part of his public image”—during his appearances on the Merv Griffin Show in the mid-1970s (p. 113).

¹⁴¹ As quoted in Cook, Bruce. “Tex-Mex Troubadour.” *Newsweek*, November 24, 1975. Pg. 85.

¹⁴² I read this generous assessment of tolerance and inclusion with a hearty sense of irony. Malone, Bill. C. *Country Music, U.S.A.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002 (Second Revised Edition). As an aside, Malone misidentifies Fender’s birthplace as neighboring Weslaco, instead of San Benito.

¹⁴³ For more on Meaux, including his role as a promoter and his arrest for child pornography, please see Patoski, Joe Nick, “Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll,” *Texas Monthly*, May 1996, as well as McVicker, Steve. “Wasted Days, Wasted Lives (Parts I and II): Record Producer Huey Meaux was a legend in the music business. Now he’s an accused pedophile on the run.” *Houston Press*, February 22, 1996.

¹⁴⁴ Márez, Curtis. “Brown: The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style,” *Social Text*, No. 48 (Autumn, 1996), p. 114.

albums to publicity photos to posters—witness three decades worth of publicity material for the Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio, and the near fetishization of the humble squeezebox. As Cathy Ragland explains,

Conjunto music, with its two-row (and now three-row) button accordion, has become a powerful symbol of identity, initially among working-class Texas-Mexicans, and now within the local society as a whole. And while switching to the chromatic-button or keyboard-style [90] accordion might offer greater range and more accommodating fingering options, the diatonic, three-row model persists because of its symbolic resonance (“Tejano and proud,” 90-91).

But why the accordion, and not the bajo sexto? Why not the tololoche? What about the fiddle, the one-time contender for lead instrument in the earliest days of the emergent genre, or the clarinet, the saxophone?¹⁴⁵ If we think of conjunto and Tejano together the accordion remains integral, despite decades of Tejano experimentation with and incorporation of Farsia organs, saxophones, and synthesizers, among other instruments. Conversely, does the accordion occupy such a central positioning in norteño genre iconography? Does the lowly, humble squeezebox operate as a signifier for Mexican regional groups, be they from México, Tejas, or Califas? I leave these questions unanswered, for there remains much work to be done among and across Xicanx and Mexican listening communities.

I will, however, consider the mechanics behind playing the accordion in the service of creating sound. As Helena Simonette details, the accordion produces sound through the pulling and pushing of bellows—hence the squeeze in squeezebox— as the operator presses buttons or keys that open valves, thereby allowing airflow to vibrate the instrument’s reeds and producing the instrument’s sound. She elaborates, writing

Volume, accents, intonation, varying tone intensity, and an overall expressiveness that resembles the human voice all depend on the handling of the bellows. Combined with the unvoiced sounds of the bellows, the accordion is able to express an array of human feelings. It cries, sings, screams, hisses, whispers, groans, mutters, squeals, sighs, sobs, wails, whimpers, and wheezes; it breathes as it becomes alive in its player’s hands (Simonette, *Accordion in the Americas* pg. 7)

Like many musicians, writers, cultural critics and conjunto enthusiasts, Simonette anthropomorphizes the instrument, imbuing it with the qualities of a living, breathing organism. It is this respiratory quality that, I believe, lends the accordion readily to this interpretation; lungs as bellows in the making of musical song.

Building off the work of Veronica Doubleday, Sydney Hutchinson suggests that the accordion in Dominican popular music embodies a sort of “gendered doubleness” (256): Coded masculine, in part due to the upper-body strength and agility needed to play it, yet commonly played by women who themselves enact a masculinized role, the accordion does not neatly fit nor is contained by one category. Even the term used for it can be masculine or feminine. Furthermore, Hutchinson finds that the tuning used for *merengue típico* contrasts a “hard,” “strong” masculine sound with a feminine “shine,” producing a strong “masculinized” or

¹⁴⁵ For more on this please see Chapter Two.



Figure 13: Eva Ybarra's beautifully maintained, vintage Gabbanelli 100 accordion, at her home in San Antonio. Photo by the author, 2012.

machihembriado sound (256). While compelling in and of itself, Hutchinson's work prompts several questions by comparison to gendered dynamics in the conjunto genre.

In a parallel sense, Vargas' analysis speaks to the production of sound as a product of the body itself. If scholars neglect to frame musical creation as such, or collapse the making of music under a Marxist discussion around labor, it could be because productions (and reproductions) of the body are seen as and therefore devalued for being 'women's work.' The work of the home, the work of caring, the work of reproduction; emotional work, sex work, pleasure itself; the messy contradictions of everyday life: these are all sites and spaces deserving continual theorization and constant disruption.

Márez' analysis of Fender and his discussion of brown working-class Chicano aesthetics suggests both an alternative reading and an other way of listening to Fender and other Chicano and Chicana country and western performers, such as Linda Ronstadt. Márez argues that, in spite of the "implicit and explicit racism of some country performers and fans, an opposition to uptight, upper-class restraint can sometimes serve as the basis for the shared tastes of working-class whites and Chicanos" (120).¹⁴⁶ In addition to this act of inclusion and interpretation, by raising the question of the "crossover," Márez opens a discursive space to "dilute the power of a unitary whiteness" (129).¹⁴⁷ Several of the articles I encountered referred to Fender as a

¹⁴⁶ Márez references Richard Dyer's essay, "White," while discussing this particular point. See also Dyer, Richard. *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*. New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 148, as cited in Márez (1996).

¹⁴⁷ Interestingly enough, one of the themes I encountered in several articles that mentioned but were not necessarily about Fender was that of marketing country music to Mexican and Mexican Americans—a crossover trope if there ever was one. What was particularly revealing about this was the timing of these articles, as they tended to coincide with a marketing campaign associated with a Chicano artist's promotional tour or new release. See, for example, Loller, Travis. "Music Row hoping Hispanics will be Next Big Audience," *The Associated Press State & Local Wire*, November 4, 2006; Stark, Phyllis. "Nashville Scene: No Habla Español," *Billboard*, May 7, 2005; Clark, Michael D., "More 'Mex' Than 'Tex' for Treviño," *The Houston Chronicle*, October 9, 2003, Preview, p. 6; Flippo, Chet. "Quien Es Mas Country?" *Billboard* (Nashville Scene), February 15, 1997; Wooley, John. "Crossing Over:

“crossover” artist in the country and western genre. This begs the question of perspective as I return to the concept of a crossover: crossover to whom? crossover from where? As this chapter encompasses Texas Mexican popular musics beyond conjunto, I continually wonder about the limitations and implications in taking such an approach. Even as I seek answers to my questions new ones emerge, beckoning further inquiry. Were Augie Myers and Doug Sahn (of the Sir Douglas Quintet), Fender’s Anglo bandmates in the Texas Tornados, considered crossover artists for being loved and respected by the Chicanas and Chicanos who were already familiar with Flaco Jimenez? What of the Black R&B and blues artists who influenced working-class Chicanos like Fender and Sunny Ozuna (of Sunny and the Sunliners) and Little Joe Hernandez? How about Johnny Cash, whose songs crossed over when Mingo Saldívar recorded conjunto versions of them?¹⁴⁸ What does it mean when Los Angeles-born banda singer Yolanda Pérez sings a R&B-laced version of Barbara Lynn’s “You’ll Lose A Good Thing”—a tune that Fender popularized nearly half a dozen years before Pérez’ birth?¹⁴⁹ How do we make sense of these crossovers and cover tunes that blend genres, disrupt borders, mix languages and in doing so change meanings?

What critics like Habell-Pallán, Kun and Márez offer is an alternative framework for conceptualizing and discussing artists like Freddy Fender, El Vez, Tijuana NO!, Café Tacuba, ? and the Mysterians, Sunny and the Sunliners, Mingo Saldívar, Selena, Yolanda Pérez, or Carlos Santana, in ways that are neither neat nor contained within genre conventions or narrative tropes. While conversations around and about these artists in the mainstream press and scholarly publications (when or if they appear) tend to emphasize the silences around race and the authors’ inability to discuss it—especially in conjunction with class and gender—when taken from another vantage point, they suggest more than one way to listen, more than one way of understanding. As performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña asks, “What if yo were you and tú fueras I, Mister?” (*Warrior for Gringostroika*, 1993: 71). Decentering whiteness in cultural studies alters the narrative. No longer is assimilation the goal, as in a unidirectional crossing-over. The rhythm has changed; the dancers make their own steps; the doors are open wide and there’s room on the floor for everyone.

Emilio Takes Tejano to Another Level,” *Tulsa World* (Oklahoma), October 4, 1996, Entertainment, p. 3; Ragland, Cathy. “Spanish-language music draws diversity from numbers,” *Austin American-Statesman*, August 20, 1996, Entertainment, p. E2.

¹⁴⁸ Saldívar has been playing conjuntopified versions of country western songs since he started out performing in the 1950s. Individually or together, Saldívar’s Rounder releases contain both originals and interpretations of Johnny Cash tunes, including “Rueda de Fuego” (Ring of Fire), off of 1992’s *I Love My Freedom, I Love My Texas* and “La Última Milla” (The Last Mile, a rendition of Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues”), found on 2002’s *A Taste of Texas*.

¹⁴⁹ Yolanda Pérez’ interpretation of “You’ll Lose a Good Thing” can be found on her 2003 album *Dejenme Llorar*.

Conclusion

Listening to Aztlán¹⁵⁰

Aztlán is everywhere I've ever walked.

Anonymous Xicana¹⁵¹

When the anonymous Xicana quoted by Roberto Rodríguez states that Aztlán is everywhere she has ever walked I do not take that to be a statement of settlement, or one of advancing the colonial project. This is not a Reconquista, in name or in deed.¹⁵² Rather, I interpret this as a declaration of belonging, of being. The anonymous Xicana is an embodiment of Aztlán. Thus situated, her self—her personhood—is an act of reclamation, not reconquest. The body as Aztlán resists possession ordained and regulated under patriarchal authority.

I think, too, of the poem “Raíces/Roots” by Francisco X. Alarcón.

Mis raíces

Las cargo

Siempre

Conmigo

¹⁵⁰ As I played around with possible titles for this chapter, I ran an online search on several possible contenders to ensure that I was not unintentionally coopting someone else's poetically-phrased intellectual work. As it turns out, in a bit of serendipitous synchronicity, I had encountered this chapter's title before—as part of a conference presentation at the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies 42nd Annual Conference in San Francisco. Along with my colegas Wanda Alarcón, Marie “Keta” Miranda, and Alexandro Hernández we shared our work as part of a panel entitled “Listening to Aztlán: Brown Sounds, Bodily Movements, and Movimiento Building,” the morning of April 18, 2015. I remain appreciative of the conversations we shared and their lasting influence—consciously or not—in shaping my work here.

¹⁵¹ This passage has taken on a life of its own—a colleague reports seeing it printed on t-shirts, even—over the course of the approximately two-plus decades since I first encountered it. Patrisia Gonzales and Roberto Rodríguez, in a 1998 editorial column attribute it to an anonymous Xicana who wrote to them the previous year. Please see Gonzales and Rodríguez, “Aztlán Draws Ire of Anti-Immigrants,” April 10, 1998. Retrieved from <http://www.mexica.net/mecha/undersiege.php>, on August 8, 2018.

¹⁵² I cringe whenever I read Xicanx and Latinx academics, writers, or cultural workers use the term ‘reconquista’ without critique. For example, see the rock en español compilation album *Reconquista!: The Latin Rock Invasion* (Rhino, 1997); journalist Gustavo Arellano responded to readers' inquiries with a humorous mix of coraje and corazón in his now defunct long-running alt-weekly column ¡Ask a Mexican! A simple online search will turn up numerous, farcical instances of his use of the term to mock nativist fears of a Mexican reconquest of the U.S. southwest. For example, see his response to a letter writer asking “What is it with you Mexicans who want to take back California?” in *¡Ask a Mexican!* (New York: Scribner, 2007, p. 89).

I cannot separate the laudatory, boastful implication—we are taking back something, be it rock music, or the food we eat, or the land itself—from the historical context. The Reconquista spanned eight centuries, during which the Spanish sought to expunge the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula. This process of reconquering not only restored the Spanish crown but provided the stage from which Columbus initiated the opening waves in the invasion of the Américas, and set forth a worldwide system of exploitation and domination. No thank you.

Enrolladas

Me sirven

De almohada

I carry

My roots

With me

All the time

Rolled up

I use them

As my pillow¹⁵³

Through this poem Alarcón suggests a recognition of the deterritorialization and displacement experienced by Xicanxs. His roots are not bound geographically or contained by imposed boundaries set by a particular nation-state. They are mobile, moveable, and a part of his self. But rather than the profound sense of alienation or exclusion, even, that impacts his sense of being across multiple identities—as implied by the title of the collection (*No Golden Gate for Us*) and accompanying pieces (i.e., “Extranjero/Foreigner”)—here he finds belonging and comfort in his roots. Much like the anonymous Xicana, Alarcón carries an embodied awareness of who he is, everywhere he goes.

In writing this dissertation I use the social world of the Texas Mexican conjunto to explore questions of identity, resistance, cultural expression and survival. In doing so, I seek to valorize that which has been maligned, dismissed and devalorized for its working-class origins, for its style of dance, for its distance from an authentic conception of Mexicanidad as well as acceptable Anglo norms. It is a grave error to proclaim conjunto is merely cantina music for drunks, and therefore not worthy of study. Even if conjunto was cantina music for borrachos, ¿y que? So what? I would still argue it merits our attention. And if it was—that is to say, if the lowliest and most marginalized of our forms of cultural expression deserves respect and dignity, then all of it does. To say that conjunto is not complex, or to say that conjunto is not political, begs the question of worth: not complex enough? Not political enough? When measured against whose standard and for what purpose?

But what of the syllogism that states that conjunto is the hybrid music of a hybrid people? Or the one that places it outside and beyond Politics (with a capitol P, and not the politics of everyday life)? What of the spoken and unspoken narratives around conjunto which refuse to critique its adherence to patriarchal tropes, normalizing male dominance in the process? Or, conversely, those which dismisses it as sexist outright, a genre incapable or unable to change?

¹⁵³ *No Golden Gate for Us*, 16.

Can we as scholars, as intellectuals, and as Xicanx cultural workers carry on a conversation about that which we create—in this case, conjunto—in a way that is grounded, critical, analytical, and open to complexity and contradiction? One that moves beyond one-dimensional interpretations, beyond easy dismissals, beyond conversations of authenticity or assimilation. I believe we can. I believe we must. I believe we need to if we are to survive as a people.

Identity and Memory

We are what we do, especially what we do to change who we are. Our identity resides in action and struggle.

Eduardo Galeano¹⁵⁴

I write against forgetting. I write to preserve a history of a people, my people, and in telling this history I attempt to honor it, with humility and respect and pride for the struggles of my antepasados. To claim my identity as Xicano is an act of decolonization. (And of generation; if I was two decades younger, I might perhaps now more readily write Xicanx, in defiance of the imposition of a gendered binary that's inexplicably intertwined with the colonial process.) And so, this dissertation is in some small way a conversation around xicanidad. It is a conversation around identity, around knowing and belonging. Around claiming and creating a space and a form of cultural production that is wholly and uniquely our own, despite or because of its historical antecedents. To understand conjunto, I ask that we look within. Not to Mexico, not to a mythological past, certainly not to Europe or Anglo America. Because the conversation I want to have is not about how close or how far we are from something, be it God or the United States, or anything else. It is not about hybridity as our point of entry into modernity. And this is not to dismiss those conversations, because I think they are necessary. However: if we continue to frame Xicanx cultural expression as something borne from and of somewhere else—this melding of Mexican and Eastern European forms of musical production, never quite of our own making—then we remain a perpetual foreigner. We remain an immigrant, a newcomer to the nation and the imagination of that nation, if we ask to be let in rather than state definitely that we are here.

This is not to assert some sort of United Statesian identity.¹⁵⁵ Rather, it is to claim a place within (and beyond) the confines of the nation-state and to proceed accordingly. Are Xicanxs a nation within a nation? I do not intend nor desire to limit the conception of xicanidad to a finite, geographically-defined space. As the migratory routes of agricultural and industrial workers confound the limits of any algebraic limiting of Aztlán to the US southwest (in which A(ztlán) = M(exico) – L(ands seceded as according to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) the very notion of a limited, material space becomes, at best, complicated. And yet, with this in mind, what of the spaces, the structures and buildings and talleres and performance venues? What are their possibilities, and what are the limitations to their possibilities? In considering the space(s) of conjunto performativity and its construction we find it to be mobile and adaptive. It exists not because it existed before; rather, it exists because it exists. It is because it is. And if it is that

¹⁵⁴ “In Defense of the Word,” *Days and Nights of Love and War* (p. 175).

¹⁵⁵ I use moniker deliberately, however awkwardly it sounds in English, as I assert that America refers to the continent, or two continents, and not one particular nation. Perhaps estadounidense, as the Spanish-speaking amongst us say, would be more appropriate.

means it can be again. Xicanx space is what we make of it; by being Xicanx we make space. Xicanx space is not limiting. We coexist, in concert and communion with others. Xicanx spaces are not exclusive. They are porous and malleable and inviting and mobile and transformative. Xicanx spaces are living spaces that must be claimed and protected, recognized and remembered. Otherwise they are forgotten, lost, and erased, as are a people. To argue, as I do, that the dancehall and pista de baile are Xicanx space is to reclaim not a physical space but a living process of being; a memory embodied in the flesh.

From Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's collaborative conceptualization of a theory of the flesh—"one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" that attempts to "bridge the contradictions in our experience" (1981: p. 23)—I came to see conjunto dancing—the taquachito—as an embodied expression of a peoples' knowledge and an epistemology of movement and desire. Through these pages I have attempted to reclaim a site of pleasure and performance and position it as a producer of knowledges. No, not all Chican@s listen to/dance/participate in conjunto; however, for Chican@s, conjunto has multiple meanings; and in unpacking those meanings and the complexity of Chican@ identity in and of itself I take Chicanismo from a territorial definition, one rooted in the lost lands of Aztlán or a socio-historical origin story rooted in the Mexican national imaginary, and instead locate it in action and movement that is autonomous and self-determined. Here I play with dual meanings attached to movimiento: the movimiento of the Chicano Movement, and the movimiento of bodily movements, or, dancing. In other words, Xicanxs are through our doing. This is the X in La Raza of Rodríguez, the X in Xicano of Arteaga, the chiasmus that creates us, whether crossing borders or bailando en la pista. In other words, I ask: Who are we, as a people? Through the social world of conjunto music I fathom an answer. To do so I question the tropes associated with conjunto music and break from the dominant narratives around hybridity and origin stories.

Instead of who perhaps it is better to ask: When are we Xicanxs? Where are we Xicanxs? And how are we Xicanxs? To ask how speaks to the process, one that I separate from the nation-state and its imaginary. For, bailando al estilo taquachito, are not those pairs and couples, the heteronormative ones and those who dance in the face of heteronormativity, those who twist and turn and spin and strut, enacting Xicanismo? Their—our— bodies move, and through this act of movement enact and embody knowledges and practices, constructs and complications. Why do we hold on to bloodlines or birthright? Why not reframe ourselves in terms of action and process, movement and motion?¹⁵⁶ How else can we complicate desire and question teleological determination? If the arc of Western thought is a unidirectional line of time leading towards an oft-indeterminate progress for those viewed as individuals, then what better way to decolonize than by locating and embracing multiple sites of pleasure and forms of community-building found in the fabric of our everyday life? Collectively, as a people, we cross and turn, al estilo taquachito. "Ando Xicando," Alfred Arteaga wrote, poetically reminding us how

xicano is the subject of Aztlán the cultural nation but not the state and not subject to capricious borderlines. It is not a state of being but rather an act, xicando, the progressive tense, ando xicando, actively articulating the self. The infinitive xicar meaning to play, to conflict, to work out dialogically unfinalized versions of self (155).

¹⁵⁶ I position Xicanx music as antiessentialist praxis, both for its resistance to being neatly defined by bloodlines, and in its refusal to be contained or constrained by boundaries or borders.

Ando xicando, bailando xicando; dance as an act of creation and resistance. It is Texas, it is Michigan, it is Califas; San Quilmas or San Pancho; it is in the dances held in dusty cotton fields and following the beet harvest, on the weekends or Wednesday nights, for those working in the auto factories or shipyards. It defies colonial constructs, and resists borders or binaries that seek to contain, to regulate, to limit. To erase. To forget. Listen: do you hear it? It is everywhere we have ever walked; everywhere we have ever danced; everywhere we are and have ever been. The point is not to go anywhere. Rather it is here, here, here, and the here is Aztlán.

Appendix A: Conjunto Venues in San Antonio, 1978-2018

Historically, as today, San Antonio's conjunto venues and related sites of interest have been concentrated in the city's working-class Mexican American South and West Side. As a contribution to a larger project around identifying and preserving historically and culturally significant sites I have initiated an interactive mapping project (accessible via <https://drive.google.com/open?id=16FdvtDA1GBItoyGFToYUOkVR5dhgFDch&usp=sharing>). Far from being comprehensive, at this time this project presents a representative sample of conjunto venues spanning the past four decades—and beyond. As the editor's note prefacing one of a series of articles documenting the mid-eighties conjunto scene stated, "In San Antonio there are easily more than 1,000 clubs and other sites where Mexican/Chicano music is at home" (Broyles-González, 1985a). Out of this amount the fourteen clubs I found identified in the years 1978 and 1981 combined represent but a small fraction of a greater scene; in contrast, the eight venues from the *San Antonio Current's* cover story in the year 2000 and eleven (including Lerma's) nightclubs active between or shortly before the years spanning 2010-2018 present a far more comprehensive snapshot of the contemporary conjunto scene.

I made every attempt to identify and indicate active sites featuring live conjunto performances between when I started my formal fieldwork research in 2010 to the present. Furthermore, I identified locations from 1978, 1981, and 2000 based upon reporting that appeared in the *San Antonio Express News*, *San Antonio Light*, and *The San Antonio Current*. Unless indicated otherwise I selected all other locations and sites for inclusion upon the following maps. Some of these sites from 1978, 1981, and 2000 have generation-spanning histories dating back mid-century; yet of the clubs and dancehalls found on either list active before 2010, by 2019 only the Royal Palace Ballroom remains open and still functioning as a conjunto performance venue. Although the curated lists of nightclubs and dancehalls reflect the interests and biases of the authors, they also serve as a snapshot of the scene at the moment of their writing. That Lerma's, El Camaroncito, and the Fiesta Night Club appear more than once is a testament to their popularity and longevity—especially so, considering that Lerma's had been in operation as a music venue since at least 1951. I did not encounter any references to the Fiesta Night Club during the course of my research and fieldwork (although the location where it was once active remained in operation as a dancehall), in spite of its endurance. In contrast, I can trace mention of El Camaroncito back to the 1960s. Of those three only Lerma's remained active through the first decade of the present century. Perhaps by the time you are reading this it will be open again.

Conjunto Dancehalls and Performance Venues en San Antonio, 1978 – 1981



- Club Intimos, 2600 S. Flores St.
- El Camaroncito, 411 Old Hwy 90 West.
“Larger dance hall, Los Rayos del Alamo house band.”
- El Ranchito, 7167 Somerset Road.
“Large club brings in major acts like Los Alegres de Teran.”
- Fiesta Night Club, 1112 Pleasanton Rd.
“Favorite South side, Fred Zimmerle plays.”
- Jimmy’s Mexican Restaurant and Party House, 4400 Rittiman Road.
“Santiago Jimenez, Sr. \$2 cover.”
- La Alma Latina, 5310 S. Zarzamora St.
- La Fuente, 3310 S. Zarzamora St.
- Latin Corner, 1581 Bandera Road.

- Lerma's, 1602 N. Zarzamora.
 "Its specialty is the Sunday afternoon dances known as tardeadas."
- Mendiola's, S. US 81.
 [Not on the map—Incomplete listing, no verifiable address found.]
- Los Troqueros, 434 Old Hwy 90 West.
 "This place has a wild reputation but it is a major hangout for musicians so you never know when you'll hear an unforgettable jam session."
- Ramirez Common Market, 11255 Moursund Rd.
 "At the heart of a Southside flea market. Free Sunday dances."
- Tanya's Party House, 6545 Old Hwy 90 West.
 "More intimate club. Santiago Jimenez, Jr. a regular performer."
- Western Palms, Interstate 35 North.
 [Not on the map—Incomplete listing, no verifiable address found.]

As much a snapshot as a time capsule, Broyles-Gonzales' list notes concurrent performances by Santiago Jimenez, Sr. and Jr. By this point the elder Jimenez played at Jimmy's Party House on the North Side of San Antonio, in part because of the 'wild reputation' of some of the other venues. In a 1984 profile on his family, Jimenez, Sr. said, "I like the north side of town because it's safer for an old man like me. Playing in those clubs in the other parts of town these days can sometimes be dangerous, you know?" In 1982 Jimmy's relocated to a smaller location; Santiago Jimenez, Sr. passed away in 1984, a few months after the article's publication (Young, 1984). Please note: I compiled the above list based upon reporting by Ben King, Jr. (1978) and Yolanda Broyles-González (1981). All descriptions are from Broyles-González' article.

Conjunto Dancehalls and Performance Venues en San Antonio, 2000



- Arturo's Sports Bar & Grill, 3310 S. Zarzamora.
- El Camaroncito, 411 Old Highway 90 West.
- Felipe's Casa Grande & Party House, 10111 S. Zarzamora.
- Fiesta Club, 1112 Pleasanton.
- Hacienda Salas Party House, 3127 Mission.
- Lerma's Night Club, 1602 N. Zarzamora.
- Royal Palace Ballroom, 3506 SW Military Drive.
- Urdiales, 6545 Old Highway 90 West.

In a preview piece for the May, 2000 Tejano Conjunto Festival, Debbie Nathan identified eight conjunto nightclubs under the heading “Where to see the best bands” (2000, p. 13). Her listing includes a few sites found two decades prior, including Lerma's and El Camaroncito. La Fuente, from King's 1978 list, has by 2000 become Arturo's Sports Bar & Grill.

Conjunto Dancehalls, Performance Venues, Cultural Centers and Other Sites of Interest en San Antonio, 2010-2018



Conjunto Dancehalls and Performance Venues, 2010-2018

- Arturo's Sports Bar & Grill, 3310 S. Zarzamora St.
Closed circa 2009-2010.
- Back Canteen, 650 VFW Blvd.
One of two VFW Halls featuring conjunto on weekends. Open to the general public.
- Blue Mustang, 8902. S. Presa.
Dance hall on the outskirts of the city, now closed.
- Bosmans, 5318 S. Zarzamora.
Popular venue known for featuring local and touring acts on their outdoor patio.
- Farwest San Antonio, 2502 Pleasanton Rd.
Tejano-themed night club.

- Hi-Tones, 621 E. Dewey Place.
Opened in 2011. Featured an occasional conjunto act alongside punk and dance music. Considered a spiritual successor to Salute.
- Royal Palace Ballroom, 3506 SW Military Dr.
Long-running ballroom that hosts afternoon conjunto dances as well as special events on evenings and weekends.
- Salut , 2801 N. St. Mary’s.
Iconic bar on the St. Mary’s strip. Closed in July, 2012. Conjunto legend Esteban Jordan played here on a regular basis until his passing in 2010.
- The Squeezebox, 2806 N. St. Mary’s.
Music venue opened in the summer of 2016, frequently featuring live conjunto acts.
- VFW Post 4700, 2219 Frio City Road.
Second of two VFW halls with conjunto performances, typically Sunday afternoons. Open to the public.

Cultural Centers and Other Sites of Interest

- Conjunto Heritage Taller, 1443 S. St. Mary’s.
Community-based cultural center offering instruction in accordion and bajo sexto.
- Del Bravo Record Shop, 554 W. Old Highway 90.
Opened in 1966, this iconic conjunto-themed record shop was run by legendary songwriter-producer Salom  Gutierrez until his death.
- Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, 1301 Guadalupe St.
Cultural arts center, sponsor of the Tejano Conjunto Festival.
- Janie’s Record Shop, 1012 Bandera Rd.
Since 1985 Juanita Esparza’s store has been the place for all things Tejano and conjunto related. This is the most recent location, as of 2015-2016.
- La Gloria, corner of S. Laredo and S. Brazos.
Demolished, 2002. Built in 1928, for three decades this multipurpose gas station, bakery, market and theater held rooftop dances featuring jazz, blues, and later conjunto music under the moniker "La Gloria Roof Garden."
- Lerma’s, 1612 N. Zarzamora.
Closed, but projected to reopen in 2020 as a conjunto heritage cultural center through the efforts of the Save Lerma’s campaign.

- Mission County Park, 6030 Padre Dr.
Former home to KEDA's periodic Conjunto Stampede outdoor festivals.
- Palo Alto College (PAC), 1400 W. Villaret.
Since 2001, PAC has offered a program in conjunto music—the first college or university to do so.
- Rosedale Park, 303 Dartmouth St.
Annual host of the Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio.

The above locations include primary and secondary sites where I conducted my fieldwork, as well as sites of historical and cultural significance, and other nightclubs and performance venues that have opened during the past decade. While the number of locations indicated here might imply a renewed vitality or restored vigor in San Antonio's conjunto scene, keep in mind that the places listed on the map for 1978-1981 represent a mere sample of the total number. In contrast, in mapping venues active between or just prior to 2010 through 2018, I have attempted to be as comprehensive as possible. Of the hundreds or possibly thousands of conjunto venues in San Antonio, across Texas, and throughout greater Aztlán active during the height of the genre's popularity few survive today.

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