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**Resilience and Unity:
The Immigrant Experience Through the Corridos of Los Tigres Del Norte**

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A capstone project submitted to
The UCLA Department of Musicology

Professor Joy H. Calico

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Introduction

The music of Los Tigres Del Norte was the soundtrack in the background of my childhood when my father would take us to go check out a new fencing job, on the way to church, going to the beach, and heading to family parties, and their music would often be played at these parties as well. Until around 2018, when we went to see the group in concert for my dad's birthday, I had never paid close attention to most of their lyrics or what they stood for in their music. My most vivid memory from that concert was my mom telling me to pay close attention to "Somos Más Americanos," which argues that Mexicans are more American than European Americans, and includes a spoken verse in which the singer, who had the Mexican flag wrapped around him, lists all the states that were ceded to the United States in the Mexican Cession. At 16 years old I had not heard of any artist that sang about any historical or political events, much less someone singing about the immigrant struggle and fear that millions of people still have to live with, including most of my family members that live here, documented and undocumented. In some cases, migration is forced upon a person. In others, it may be voluntary. Yet the struggle to adjust is something that is shared among all immigrants and is a traumatic event.¹ Given the horrific situation that has been unfolding since the beginning of 2025 with the start of President Trump's second term, now more than ever, it is vital that we learn and understand the history of how we have arrived at the situation we are currently in, and take the time to listen to the music that addresses these issues and that seeks to shine a light on the stories and experiences that immigrants have had to endure in the search for the opportunities and the life that this country used to provide.

¹ Ruth M. Lijtmaer, "Social Trauma, Nostalgia and Mourning in the Immigration Experience," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 82, no. 2 (2022): 307, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s11231-022-09357-8>.

Music has been a powerful medium for many people throughout history to express their resentment or issues with how their lives are being governed, feeling misunderstood, discriminated against, portrayed negatively, or even being lied to by the very people that are supposed to help provide opportunities for growth, stability and success. Arriving to a country that is unwelcoming or takes drastic measures to deport people is a deeply traumatic experience,² and music can aid the immigrant in coping with that experience. Music has been used as a tool for the voiceless, people who have “had [their] rights trampled on,” as Los Tigres Del Norte sing in “Mis Dos Patrias,” to feel seen and cultivate pride and solidarity with one another.³ Los Tigres Del Norte have an extensive catalog of sociopolitical *corridos* ranging from topics including gun violence, corruption in Mexico, violence towards women in Mexico, support for the LGBTQ+ community, and most notably and especially relevant today, immigration. Given the extensive Mexican diaspora in the United States, Los Tigres Del Norte have been a voice for the people, an example of what it means to use one’s platform for advocating, and highlighting the mental, emotional, and physical challenges that millions of immigrants have had to overcome in search of a better life for themselves and their families. Through lyrical analysis of “La Jaula De Oro,” “Tres Veces Mojado,” and “Somos Más Americanos,” and research into immigration history between the United States and Latin America, I demonstrate how traumatic struggles are brought to light in these songs and argue that these corridos, among many others, can be tools for change, foster a collective identity, and promote unity amongst immigrant communities.

² Ibid, 308.

³ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Mis Dos Patrias,” track 8 on *Jefe De Jefes*, Fonovisa Records, 2012, streaming audio, Spotify Lyrics, my translation.

Literature Review

There has been an extensive and valuable range of scholarship on corridos for decades and it has become a “fairly popular form of scholarship”⁴ approached through several different valuable contexts over time. Elijah Wald’s book, *Narcocorrido: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerillas*, focuses on the corrido subgenre and chronicles its history by interviewing notable songwriters that have given us some of the most popular narcocorridos yet often go unnoticed in a song’s success. *Corridos in Migrant Memory* by Martha I. Chew-Sanchez demonstrates how corridos “link many Mexican Americans and immigrants, both documented or undocumented, to their ‘Mexicaness’”⁵ and are ways for them to attempt to come to terms with their reality and their experiences. Maria Herrera-Sobek’s *Northward Bound* consists of an extensive collection of corridos concerning the immigrant experience throughout history and connecting them to certain legislation or political movements of the time, such as the Bracero Program in the 1940s or Operation Wetback of the 1950s.⁶ Jorge Luis Aguilar Cruz’s clever and insightful thesis explores how listeners of Los Tigres Del Norte have been influenced by their corridos and the values and experiences within them.⁷ He also takes the interesting approach of documenting interactions and reactions amongst concertgoers at a baile where Los Tigres Del Norte were performing. He took note of how the crowds responded to certain songs, the type of songs that they requested, the style and fashion among attendees, and the conversations amongst

⁴ Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerillas* (Rayo, 2001), 5.

⁵ Martha I. Chew Sánchez, *Corridos in Migrant Memory* (University of New Mexico Press, 2006), xvii.

⁶ Maria Herrera-Sobek, *Northward Bound: The Mexican Immigrant Experience in Ballad and Song* (Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁷ Jorge Luis Aguilar Cruz, "Vámonos Al Baile! Corridos, Regionalism & Cultural Symbolism: An Expressive Narrative Approach to Los Tigres Del Norte" (Masters Thesis, University of Texas at El Paso, 2012), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/vámonos-al-baile-corridos-regionalism-amp/docview/1024646653/se-2> (1513620).

friends at this concert, just to name a few things. All approaches listed above have supplied readers with invaluable cultural information and analysis. However, what I believe to be missing is the consolidation of all of these aspects, applied to “the most popular and the most influential nortño group.”⁸

Who are Los Tigres del Norte?

Los Tigres Del Norte was formed in Rosa Morada, located in the Mexican state of Sinaloa.⁹ The group was founded by three brothers: Jorge (lead vocalist), Hernán (vocals and bass), and Raúl Hernández (vocals, bajo sexto¹⁰) along with their cousin, Oscar Lara (drums) in 1963, and they have been based in San Jose, California since 1968, when they immigrated to the United States. Initially, the group had arrived legally, but overstayed their visas and lived in the country illegally until they were all able to obtain legal residency.¹¹ The group was created as a way for the brothers to help pay for their father’s medical treatment, as he was very ill at the time and they did so through performances at local events, cantinas, and parties in Mexico.¹² Since the group’s formation, there have been minor changes in personnel. Guadalupe Olivo joined the group as a saxophonist in 1973, and was later replaced by multi-instrumentalist Eduardo, another Hernández brother (accordion, bajo sexto, saxophone). After Raul Hernández left the group in 1995, he was then replaced by his brother Luis Hernández (bajo sexto). The group received their name from an immigration official when crossing into the United States, who referred to them as

⁸ Ibid, 1.

⁹ Elijah Wald, “Los Tigres Del Norte,” in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2093367>.

¹⁰ Translated to sixth bass. A bajo sexto is a 12 string bass guitar commonly used in Nortño music.

¹¹ Fidel Martinez, “Los Tigres Del Norte on Meeting the Political Moment, Playing at Folsom and Paving the Way for Música Mexicana,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/delos/newsletter/2025-02-28/los-tigres-del-norte-la-loteria-musica-mexicana-latinx-files>.

¹² Jorge Luis Aguilar Cruz, “Vámonos Al Baile!,” 7.

“little tigers,” on account of their young age at the time. As a result, the group has since called themselves Los Tigres Del Norte, or Tigers from the North.

The group has reached remarkable success since their formation and have become known as “La Voz Del Pueblo”¹³ (the voice of the people) due to their commitment to telling stories of the hardships and austerity that countless immigrants have to endure not only in the process of immigrating, but also while adjusting to life in a new country that in many ways has not been as welcoming as it has assumed to be in the past. The group has made it clear that they fully understand the influence and the visibility that they have, and they feel a responsibility to send a clear message for their listeners to facilitate change for audience members who have been impacted by discriminatory policies. In an interview for *Remezcla*, Luis Hernández states that “we try to remain aware and to have the basis to be able to send a message.... we have to be very careful with the message we want to send.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the sociopolitical music of Los Tigres Del Norte has become a way for immigrant struggles to be highlighted in popular culture, present as issues that merit respect, and demand meaningful policy changes that could transform the lives of millions of people who make valuable contributions to American society everyday.

Corridos and Narcocorridos

The group's primary genre is the *corrido*, which, at its most basic definition, is a narrative ballad and can best be described as a traditional epic Mexican ballad. This form has been in existence since the 18th century, and is derived from Spanish romance ballads, which shared

¹³ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴ Jeanette Hernandez, “Interview: Los Tigres Del Norte Talk Corridos Evolution & Their Gen Z Impact,” *Remezcla*, April 8, 2025, <https://remezcla.com/features/music/interview-los-tigres-del-norte-talk-corridos-evolution-their-gen-z-impact/>.

stories of romance and also included topics of religion,¹⁵ themes that continue in modern-day corridos as well. Corridos began to rise in popularity during the Mexican Revolution in the early 20th century, as they detailed the stories of the revolution and were utilized as a method for communicating with citizens in neighboring towns and areas. Evidently, this tradition has still carried on throughout the years. In her book, *Corridos in Migrant Memory*, Martha I. Chew-Sanchez recalls a memory of her family learning the news of the death of Lucio Cabañas through a corrido that they happened to hear on the beach. Cabañas was a guerilla leader of the Partido de los Pobres (Party of the Poor) based in the Mexican state of Guerrero.¹⁶ It was during the era of the Mexican Revolution that the corrido form which we are most familiar with today began to develop and take shape. Agustin Gurza describes the form of corridos (referring to the genre itself) as largely having been shaped by Mexico's relationship with the United States and the cultural history within Mexico.¹⁷ The genre is widely considered to be a manner of expression for poor, working-class people of Mexico, and is meant to be easily accessible to the ordinary person. In its simple instrumentation, the corrido can be performed with a guitar, an accordion, and a vocalist singing in the "first or third person, acting as a witness to an event."¹⁸ The beginning of "Jefe de Jefes" (The Boss of Bosses) by Los Tigres Del Norte offers an explanation as to why the genre has become so widespread and well-known within the Mexican community: "A mí me gustan los corridos, por que son los hechos reales de nuestro pueblo / Si, a

¹⁵ Jacqueline Avila, "Corrido," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2249156>.

¹⁶ Martha I. Chew Sánchez, *Corridos in Migrant Memory*, xi.

¹⁷ Agustin Gurza, "Strachwitz Frontera Collection The Mexican Corrido: Ballads of Adversity and Rebellion, Part 1: Defining the Genre," *The Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings*, November 2, 2017,

<https://frontera.library.ucla.edu/blog/2017/11/mexican-corrido-ballads-adversity-and-rebellion-part-1-defining-genre>

¹⁸ Jacqueline Avila, "Corrido."

mí también me gustan porque en ellos se canta la pura verdad.”¹⁹ This spoken introduction to the song suggests that corridos have become so important to many people because they tell stories that are considered true events and documented in these songs. Another explanation is that they often use language that is relevant to a community to recount the stories of that community, which make them that much more meaningful and relatable to the listeners.²⁰

It is important to distinguish corridos from the subgenre of *narcocorridos*. They utilize the same musical form and more often than not use the same instrumentation, but it is the lyrical content which distinguishes the two genres from one another. As previously mentioned, the lyrics in corridos can range from themes of love, heartbreak, politics, heroism, and endurance of racial discrimination and prejudice, whereas narcocorridos detail the lives and exploits of drug traffickers, and are often fictional.²¹ The repertoire of Los Tigres Del Norte includes narcocorridos, and it was their recording of a well-known narcocorrido, “Contrabando y Traición” (Contraband and Betrayal), written by Angel González, that helped launch the group and the subgenre into the mainstream as well as the narcocorrido phenomenon.²²

Throughout the years, there has been a substantial amount of controversy surrounding the subgenre, both in the United States and in Mexico. Some Mexican states have even tried to stop narcocorridos from being broadcast. During an interview with Los 40, a radio station in Colombia, LTDN member Eduardo Hernández discusses how some of their songs have been

¹⁹ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Jefe De Jefes,” track 1 on *Jefe De Jefes*, Fonovisa Records, 2012, streaming audio, Spotify Lyrics.

²⁰ Martha I. Chew Sánchez, *Corridos in Migrant Memory*, 31.

²¹ Elijah Wald, “Narcocorrido,” in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2093422>.

²² Jacqueline Avila, “Corrido.”

banned from the airwaves in certain states.²³ Hernández also mentions that they have even been asked to not perform corridos, rather than narcocorridos, which poses an issue, as the majority of their songs are corridos, because the two genres have been conflated. Most recently, one of the most popular regional Mexican groups at the moment, Grupo Firme, announced in May that they would not be able to attend a scheduled performance at a music festival due to their visas being suspended by the U.S. government.²⁴ Grupo Firme was just one of many groups and artists that have had their visas revoked this year due to their songs and performances of narcocorridos. While the concerns surrounding narcocorridos are understandable, given the impact of drug trafficking and violence that has plagued Mexico, it is critical to understand the differences between the two genres. In order to understand and analyze the group's corridos about immigration with an open mind, it is necessary to understand that the two may sound similar, but they discuss very different themes and should be analyzed and perceived as such.

Music Fighting for Change

For decades, music has been used as a tool to propel social movements and change throughout the country. Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," and John Lennon's "Imagine" are all iconic examples of music that has aided social movements in fostering a sense of unity and a drive for change. "Strange Fruit," for example, does so through vividly painful lyrics that demand the listener's attention and highlight extreme racial injustice. Los Tigres Del Norte have made an effort to do the same through their music, calling attention to

²³ LOS40 Colombia (@los40colombia), "¿Los Tigres del Norte hacen Narcocorridos? 🤔🇲🇽," TikTok, September 20, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@los40colombia/video/7416767928697146630>.

²⁴ "Popular Mexican band Grupo Firme cancels U.S. show, saying Trump administration suspended their visas," *CBS News*, May 31, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/grupo-firme-cancels-us-show-visas-suspended-trump-administration/>.

the discrimination and mental and physical struggles immigrants experience both during their journey to the United States and as they attempt to assimilate to life in the country. The three songs I examine address the social and political issues that immigrants ruminate over, as well as how these concerns impact the immigrant attempting to live with such a precarious status. These songs are just a glance at how Los Tigres Del Norte have aided in forming a collective identity for immigrants, and how music can be a way for people to share grievances, emotions, “and provide solutions and tie people together.”²⁵ Given the most recent policies and action taken towards immigrants, or anyone who may “look” or “sound” like an immigrant, such songs are vital in even beginning to fathom what immigrants face on a daily basis, and should be used as an instrument for change and empathy during a time of extreme hardship in the United States.

“La Jaula De Oro”

The title track from their 1984 album, “La Jaula De Oro” (“The Golden Cage”)²⁶ written by Enrique Franco, is one of Los Tigres Del Norte’s most popular songs related to immigration, specifically the internal struggles that the immigrant goes through once they have established their life in a new country, which the immigrant considers to be a “golden cage.” During the 1970s and early 1980s, there was an increase in unauthorized migration which coincided with a series of recessions at the time, which is presumably when the immigrant in this song arrived in the United States.²⁷ In the song, the protagonist expresses his gratitude for the opportunities and the wealth that he has been able to accumulate during his ten years in the country, but due to his

²⁵ William F. Danaher, “Music and Social Movements,” *Sociology Compass* 4, no. 9 (2010): 813, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00310.x>.

²⁶ Los Tigres Del Norte, “La Jaula De Oro,” track 1 on *La Jaula De Oro*, Fonovisa Records, 1984, streaming audio, Spotify Lyrics.

²⁷ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America’s Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 110, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvs1g9p1>.

status he feels like he is trapped and is afraid to even leave his own home, aside from going to work:

*De mi trabajo a mi casa
Yo no sé lo que me pasa
Casi no salgo a la calle
Pues tengo miedo que me hallen
Y me puedan deportar*

*[From my job to my house
I don't know what's happening to me
I almost never go out
Well I'm scared that they'll find me
And that they can deport me]²⁸*

In this verse, the protagonist expresses how he often feels a sense of danger during his commute to work and back home, something that the majority of people likely do not experience, and unfortunately the home is not promised to be a safe haven for immigrants. This unyielding fear is not without substance. A 1979 immigration raid in Huntington Park, California provides a frame of reference for the distress voiced in “La Jaula De Oro.” Local police helped the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) perform residential raids in the area and as a result, eighty people were arrested.²⁹ One of the residents, Fernando Artunez, described watching one of his neighbors be ““dragged out by the hair”” and his roommate being taken away in handcuffs.³⁰ In 1984, the INS detained 30 people who were in search of work on a street corner in Santa Ana. Fourteen-year-old Mario Moreno López was among the detained and although he was a

²⁸ Los Tigres Del Norte, “La Jaula De Oro,” (my translation).

²⁹ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 130.

³⁰ Ibid.

permanent resident and informed the officers of his status, they did not believe him and was then coerced into signing a voluntary departure form.³¹ Events like these actively taking place during the time period in which this song was written and released help provide context to his fears and concerns expressed in the verse above. If immigration officials had no issue coercing a fourteen-year-old boy searching for work into leaving, what would stop them from deporting an adult man with a wife and children?

Fear tactics have long been used as an attempt to curtail immigration and exhaust undocumented immigrants to the point of self-deportation. After the Immigration Act of 1929, which made illegal immigration a misdemeanor, immigration officials searched for cheaper and less tedious methods to deport undocumented immigrants.³² Immigrants' fear of apprehension drastically changed how authorities would enforce the law. Methods that had previously succeeded to the 1929 legislation became streamlined through different tactics, such as sending officers into dance halls, for example. One immigration officer stated, ““The people who are here illegally begin to sneak out only to fall into the arms of a cordon who are waiting for them. A guilty conscience does the job.””³³ Many immigration officials even believed that the home, which is supposed to be a place of safety and refuge, should not be a ““sanctuary”” if an undocumented immigrant resides there.³⁴ This fear of apprehension in turn made many people leave the country before they were caught. Simply put, the goal was to make life in the United States as an immigrant miserable enough that they would be coerced to leave on their own. The constant fear of detainment and deportation has been an unrelenting terror for millions of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 40.

³³ Ibid, 41.

³⁴ Ibid, 131.

immigrants and continues to be, nearly 100 years after this legislation and it is expressed in the verse above.

The immigrant in this song came to the United States for better opportunities and to provide a life for his family that would not have been possible in Mexico, but he feels that he is living life as a prisoner in a country that has historically boasted being the “land of opportunity,” a country where one can achieve their dreams, and grow to be a successful person. Interestingly enough, there is a quote of an immigrant expressing this sentiment from 1977: “Being here is like a prison, a beautiful golden prison. You have everything but at the same time you have nothing.”³⁵ He asks:

*¿De que me sirve el dinero
Si estoy como prisionero
dentro de esta gran nación?
Cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro
Que aunque la jaula sea de oro
no deja de ser prisión*

*[What good is money for me
If im like a prisoner
in this great nation.
When I remember this I even cry,
although the cage is made of gold,
it does not stop being a prison.]*³⁶

In a spoken verse of the song, the protagonist asks his son in Spanish about his thoughts on possibly returning to Mexico to live there, to which the son answers in English, “What you

³⁵ Patt Morrison, “Good Wages, Bad Jobs, Constant Fear” *LAT*, January 22, 1977, 3, quoted in Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 124-25.

³⁶ Los Tigres Del Norte, “La Jaula De Oro,” (my translation).

talkin' about dad? / I don't wanna go back to Mexico / No way, dad.”³⁷ The fact that he and his children do not speak the same language, and they do not communicate because of this barrier between them, is another emotional struggle the protagonist expresses in this song. This spoken verse is meant to convey the hope of the father that his son will share the sentiment of wanting to return to their home country. The father asks his son calmly, while the son answers in a way that sounds like he was shocked that his father would ask to go back to a country that he remembers nothing about, ending with a dismissive tone when he says “no way, dad.” Having these lines spoken in a song that is otherwise sung throughout helps the listener pay closer attention to what is happening in the song. The switch from singing to speaking draws the listener back into being an active listener rather than a passive listener. It also represents real conversations that happen everyday in immigrant families with different experiences and realities in a new country. At this point in the song, the father has expressed his disillusionment with the American Dream. However, life in the United States is all the child has ever known; he has likely established a routine and a community at school, for example. The tone used by both father and son here reveals the disconnect that has taken place within the family unit. This spoken verse posits the following verse, where he continues this painful reflection and comes to terms with the fact that not only do his children no longer speak their first language or have any recollection of Mexico, but that they have assimilated into American culture and society, rejecting their Mexican heritage altogether: “Piensan como Americanos / Niegan que son Mexicanos / Aunque tengan mi color.” (“They think like Americans / They deny that they’re Mexican / even though they have my color.”)³⁸ This further proves the disconnect between child and parent, not only through language

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

barriers but also their way of thinking and moving about society as well. The acculturation of Mexicans into American society was considered necessary to have a normal life, but was also a concern for many. The Mexican people greatly value their culture, “and loss of some or all aspects of this culture was viewed as a great tragedy.”³⁹ All of these internal struggles that the protagonist is experiencing could be understood as nostalgia for his life back in Mexico. In this song, the protagonist is comparing his limited and restrictive way of living here in the United States to his life back in Mexico where he would have been able to understand and connect with his family in a way that they struggle with here, and presumably did not have to fear suddenly being taken away from his family. This kind of mourning process is best explained by Lijtmaer, who states that “the exiled individual may enter a depressed state with accompanying feelings of self-pity, resentment, envy, and guilt.... when there is a blatant attack on the part of the authorities on minorities.... [this leads] to trauma.”⁴⁰ The loss of one’s culture can lead to the feeling of identity loss and a mourning process, which is what we see in “La Jaula De Oro.” Through this song, Los Tigres Del Norte have been able to capture how so many immigrants feel in the United States: constantly living in fear, longing for a home which they can never go back to, and feeling alienated not only in society but oftentimes at home as well.

“Tres Veces Mojado”

“Tres Veces Mojado,” also written by Enrique Franco from their album *Idolos Del Pueblo* and released in 1988,⁴¹ details the story of someone crossing a total of three Latin American

³⁹ Maria Herrera-Sobek, *Northward Bound: The Mexican Immigrant Experience in Ballad and Song* (Indiana University Press, 1993), 290.

⁴⁰ Ruth M. Lijtmaer, “Social Trauma,” 313.

⁴¹ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Tres Veces Mojado,” track 1 on *Idolos Del Pueblo*, Fonovisa Records, 1988, streaming audio, Spotify Lyrics.

borders in an attempt to enter the United States and create a better life for himself. This corrido was created to appeal to Los Tigres' growing Central American and Salvadoran audiences. Lead singer Jorge had asked Franco "for something that would reflect the aspirations and lives of the Salvadoran fans," and as a result "Tres Veces Mojado" has become one of the most requested songs at their concerts.⁴² I would like to link this song to Javier Zamora's *Solito: A Memoir*. *Solito* recounts Zamora's experience at just nine years old in 1999 crossing through El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico to reunite with his parents in California, who had left El Salvador several years prior due to civil war. Millions of people fled El Salvador and Guatemala because of the civil wars in each country, which were largely funded by the United States and resulted in the death of a quarter of a million people as well as the displacement of three million people throughout the Central American region.⁴³ Although the government data for immigrants from each Central American country is limited, it is estimated that 881,000 Salvadorans were living in the United States by 1985, and another 500,000 living in Mexico by 1990.⁴⁴ For the majority of his journey, Zamora was unaccompanied by any relatives and had to rely on strangers to help him safely cross multiple borders, overcome heat exhaustion and hunger, and avoid capture by immigration officials both in Mexico and during his attempts to cross into the United States. Zamora's story is just one of many tales of resilience and perseverance that many people have had to go through in order to have a chance for a better life. There are several situations in this song that mirror the experiences that 9-year-old Zamora went through on his own journey to the United States.

⁴² Elijah Wald, *Narcocorrido*, 161-162.

⁴³ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 183.

⁴⁴ Maria Christina Garcia, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (University of California Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1525/978052093943145>, 45, 85.

The immigrant in this song is from El Salvador, as is Zamora, and he recounts some of the mental and physical struggles that he had to endure throughout Guatemala and Mexico specifically. He also mentions that he had to accept the possibility of death or the fact that he would be apprehended before he even reached the United States: “Sabia que necesitaría mas que valor / Sabia que a lo mejor quedaba en el camino.” (“I knew that I would need more than courage / I knew that I might not make it.”)⁴⁵ Operation Global Reach was initiated by the INS with the purpose of deterring immigration not just at the border, but with the purpose of curtailing these attempts overseas before migrants could arrive at the border.⁴⁶ He then speaks about the discrimination that he faced while crossing through Guatemala and Mexico, singing “El mismo idioma y el color reflexioné / ¿Cómo es posible que me llamen extranjero?” (I reflected the same language and color / How is it possible that they call me a foreigner?)⁴⁷ Interestingly, in *Solito*, Zamora is taught by the coyote that is in charge of helping him and a few others cross to the States to use Mexican Spanish, and to practice their Mexican accent. Before reaching Mexico, he is constantly reminding himself of the difference between the Salvadoran Spanish that he is used to, and the Mexican Spanish he needs to quickly learn in order to blend in in Mexico.⁴⁸ For example, instead of *pajilla*, he must remember to say *popote*.⁴⁹ Instead of *chero*, *carnal*.⁵⁰ The way in which 9-year-old Zamora approaches trying to remember these differences in language makes sense for a child and reminds us of how traumatizing this experience can be. For example, throughout the book he pretends he is in a telenovela as an actor, pretending that

⁴⁵ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Tres Veces Mojado,” (my translation).

⁴⁶ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 184.

⁴⁷ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Tres Veces Mojado,” (my translation).

⁴⁸ Javier Zamora, *Solito: A Memoir* (Hogarth Press, 2020), chap. 3, <https://research.ebsco.com/c/ir3qdt/ebook-viewer/epub/zxv7cs27rr/section/navPoint-12>.

⁴⁹ Translated to straw.

⁵⁰ Mexican slang for “friend,” “brother.”

the people he is with are his family, trying to remember how to say certain words, or how to talk a certain way. He even gets frustrated with himself when he says *pajilla* rather than *popote*: “¿What’s wrong with me? I’m a bad actor today. ¿How did I forget to say popote?”⁵¹ We get a better understanding of the discrimination mentioned in “Tres Veces Mojado” when Zamora and other members of the group he was traveling with are asked for their papers at a checkpoint in Mexico. An immigration official had asked a woman who was presumably a Mexican citizen for her documents but believed them to be fake. She then accuses the men in Zamora’s group of not being Mexican citizens, as they claimed to be. A conflict follows involving Zamora’s “mother,” Patricia, and the woman, which ends in the woman calling her and the men *pinches mojados* (“damn wetbacks.”)⁵² This instance is one of the more notable examples of discrimination and racism that Zamora’s group faces in the book.

In a spoken section of the song, the singer reflects on the possibility that all immigrants must face when making the decision, or are forced to make, which is that they may never return to their homeland again and have to come to terms with leaving family behind. Like the spoken verse between the father and son in “Tres Veces Mojados,” this serves to command the listeners attention once again. Here, he is speaking directly to the listener with the goal of highlighting the issues in Central America that lead to people making the decision to cross through three countries in hopes of a better life: “En Centro América dado su situación tanto política como económicamente / ya para muchos no hay otra solución que abandonar su patria tal vez para siempre.” (“In Central America, given the political and economic situation / for many there is no other solution than abandoning their homeland, possibly forever.”)⁵³ I think the use of the word

⁵¹ Javier Zamora, *Solito*, chap. 6.

⁵² Javier Zamora, *Solito*, chap. 4.

⁵³ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Tres Veces Mojado,” (my translation).

“abandon” is very powerful in this song, even more so by the fact that it is directly spoken rather than sung. There seems to be this idea that immigrants make the life-changing decision to leave their country on a whim, leaving their family and everything they have ever known behind, just because they feel like it. He then continues to say that Mexican immigrants who attempt to cross the border but are apprehended have the “luxury” of trying again the next day, something he would not be able to do as he would be deported directly to El Salvador, rather than Mexico. Because of the sudden influx of Central American asylum applications, the United States had begun pressuring and even paying Mexico to detain and deport Central American migrants back to their home countries.⁵⁴ Goodman also includes a quote from the US Border Patrol Chief in McAllen, Texas, who states that ““the United States ha[d] quietly been paying Mexicans to deport Central Americans to Guatemala.””⁵⁵ The possibility of having to endure the same journey a second time is just one of many issues that a Central American immigrant has to take into consideration when making the decision to cross into the United States.

Somos Más Americanos

Their 2001 album *Uniendo Fronteras* (*Uniting Borders*) includes another one of their most popular tracks, “Somos Más Americanos” (“We Are More American”)⁵⁶ written by Enrique Valencia. “Somos Más Americanos” challenges the idea of what it means to be a true American. Typically, when someone says that they are American, they are implying that they are a United States citizen. However, Los Tigres Del Norte defy the idea that the only ones who can call themselves American are United States citizens. It is also important to note that in this song, they consider America to be all of South, Central and North America rather than the United States. In

⁵⁴ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 183.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 183.

⁵⁶ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Somos Más Americanos”, track 7 on *Uniendo Fronteras*, Fonovisa Records, 2001, streaming audio, Spotify Lyrics.

this case, they argue that Mexican immigrants are more American than European immigrants throughout the song, largely due to the fact that several states in the United States were originally a part of Mexico before the Mexican Cession in 1848.

*Ya me gritaron mil veces
Que me regrese a mi tierra
Porque aquí no quepo yo
Quiero recordarle al gringo
Yo no crucé la frontera, la frontera me cruzó
América nació libre El hombre la dividió*

*[They shout at me a thousand times
To return to my land
Because I don't belong here
I want to remind the gringo
I did not cross the border, the border crossed me
America was born free
It was man that divided it]⁵⁷*

The beginning of the song calls out the hypocrisy and resentment that is often directed at immigrants with a reminder that for many Mexican immigrants and even Mexican Americans, their heritage in the United States long predates that of many European Americans. The end of the Mexican-American War occurred at the same time as the discovery of gold in California. Only a small number of Mexicans joined the masses in traveling to California to try their luck at striking gold. The 1907 Gentleman's Agreement between the United States and Japan terminated the substantial labor migration from Asia and led to a rise in Mexican immigration in order to meet the demands of American employers, from less than a thousand a year from 1899 to 1907,

⁵⁷ Los Tigres Del Norte, "Somos Más Americanos;" (my translation).

to 15,600 in 1909.⁵⁸ The lyrics continue to challenge the idea of borders by reminding the listener that America never started out as countries divided by languages or imaginary lines artificially imposed to divide and sow hostility. It was throughout hundreds of years of imperialism and subordination of millions of people that these boundaries were created, and resulted in the “othering” of indigenous groups of people throughout the Americas. One of the more striking lines in this song interrogates the White American and challenges the narrative of who belongs in the United States:

*Y me llaman invasor
Es un error bien marcado
Nos quitaron ocho estados
¿Quién es aquí el invasor?
Soy extranjero en mi tierra
Yo no vengo a darles guerra
Soy hombre trabajador*

*[And they call me invader
It's an obvious mistake
They took eight states from us
Who here is the invader?
I'm a foreigner in my land
And I'm not here to bring you war
I'm a hardworking man]⁵⁹*

In this verse, the singer begins by rejecting the label that people try to enforce on immigrants. He calls this label an obvious mistake and demonstrates this by stating that the United States took eight states from Mexico, instead insinuating that the United States citizen is the one who is the

⁵⁸ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 32.

⁵⁹ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Somos Más Americanos;” (my translation).

true invader. He finishes this verse with a heartfelt statement, saying that he feels like a foreigner in what he considers to be his land, and one cannot help but sympathize with him. This further continues the idea of feeling constant isolation and uncertainty in one's day-to-day life. He has no intentions of disrupting order or trying to take things for himself. He is in the United States to contribute and provide for his family, quite the opposite of what an invader's goals may be. This narrative has lingered for at least close to one hundred years, as demonstrated in 1930 by William Randolph Hearst, one of the most powerful media moguls of his time, in one of his publications located in San Antonio: ““The farmer rids his barn of rats, his hen house of weasels. Good house keepers wage ceaseless war against vermin.... Uncle Sam should clear [the United States] of all ‘undesirables.’”⁶⁰

The chorus explicitly states the narrator 's sentiments about not being considered a true American: “Y si a los siglos nos vamos / Somos más Americanos... / Que el hijo de el Anglosajón.” (“And if we’re going by the centuries / We are more American... / Than the son of the Anglosaxon.”)⁶¹ “Somos Más Americanos” facilitates a collective identity on a larger scale than “Jaula De Oro.” The latter focuses on an individual experience while the former explicitly uses words like “us” or “we,” encompassing all Mexicans and Mexican Americans. While rejecting the viewpoint that Mexican people and their culture must remain within their national boundaries, this song cultivates pride and empowerment, once again rejecting the harmful stereotypes and labels that are imposed on immigrants.⁶²

I would like to briefly link this song to a very recent and high profile performance that also challenges the idea of what it means to be an American. During the finale of Bad Bunny’s

⁶⁰ Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine*, 41.

⁶¹ Los Tigres Del Norte, “Somos Más Americanos;” (my translation).

⁶² Bradley S. Tatar, “Latin American Immigrants, Identity and Nationalism in the Music of Los Tigres Del Norte,” *Journal of Latino/Latin American Studies* 1, no. 3 (2004): 12, <https://doi.org/10.18085/llas.1.3.28623x4100v34g42>.

halftime show at this year's Superbowl, the flags of every country in the Americas were flown during a portion of the performance. He then draws the show to a close by saying "God bless America," followed by the name of every Latin American country in the Caribbean, South, Central, and North America.⁶³ This conclusion to the performance is quite invigorating, considering President Trump's attempt to strip birthright citizenship for children born in the United States whose parents were born elsewhere. The President signed an executive order for the eradication of birthright citizenship on his first day in office,⁶⁴ just over a year before this performance. Reflecting on the hateful rhetoric that has been spewed at immigrants not only in the past century but in the past year, seeing the idea of "Americanness" challenged during one of the country's biggest nights of the year proves that this sentiment is still alive and well, and on a much larger scale, promoting solidarity within a larger community. Music and performances such as the ones discussed provide a sense of belonging not just within the Mexican community, but the Latino community as a whole.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The immigrant experiences showcased in the songs of Los Tigres Del Norte have been invaluable for millions of immigrants in feeling that their stories and struggles are being heard and told by a group that has not only experienced the fear and incertitude of being undocumented, but has also advocated for them and made it a point to be a voice for them.

Immigration and attempting to assimilate to life in a new country is an incredibly isolating and

⁶³ Bad Bunny, "Bad Bunny's Apple Music Superbowl Halftime Show," February 8, 2026, by NFL, YouTube, 13 min., 41 sec, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6FuWd4wNd8&list=RDG6FuWd4wNd8&start_radio=1.

⁶⁴ Cody Wofsy, "Trump's Birthright Citizenship Executive Order: What Happens Next," *ACLU*, August 6, 2025, <https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/trumps-birthright-citizenship-executive-order-what-happens-next>.

⁶⁵ Liliana V. Rodriguez, "From the Iron Cage to 'La Jaula de Oro': Music as a Cultural Object," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 33, no. 6 (2023): 1531, doi:10.1002/casp.2740.

oftentimes traumatic experience that can last for many years. This music enables people to find community and retain pride for their roots and culture because the genre is so ingrained in the culture and history of Mexico as well. Since the corrido genre is meant to be a manner in which someone can tell a story or an experience that can be accessible to anyone regardless of economic or social status, it is easy to see how immigration has become an integral theme. The songs discussed have covered only a fraction of what millions of immigrants have had to endure throughout the years. One recurring theme throughout these songs is prejudice and discrimination; another is the experience of alienation within the country that they now live in, or even on the journey to that country. Los Tigres Del Norte highlights situations that people oftentimes ignore or even weaponize in order to support prejudice against immigrants. I hope that through this study, more people expose themselves to music that is not only a cultural symbol of Mexico, but calls attention to the hardships that immigrants endure while fighting for a better life for themselves and their families, especially during a period in the United States in which things are extremely dangerous for immigrants. Even if listeners may not relate to these experiences, I hope that some of the experiences and connections discussed in this paper can be eye-opening to the reader, and kept in mind when reading about the horrific actions taken against a vulnerable community, one that is not just limited to Mexican immigrants.

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