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*Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Poetics
of Huapango Arribeño* by Alex E. Chávez (review)

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emotional senses, causing reactions across a spectrum from overwhelming feelings of power to the chilling freeze of sudden fright, are the exact affects that inspires this music's sense of wonderment. Indeed, Lehman's *Hollywood Harmony* systematically not only instructs the film enthusiast in his theory of pantriadic chromatic harmony but leads us through a methodological class in how exactly that harmony evokes the spine-tingling thrills that make these films some of our favorites, a class we should all want to take.

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NOTES

1. David Lewin, "Music Theory, Phenomenology, and Modes of Perception," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1986): 327–92.

2. Robert Bailey, "An Analytical Study of the Sketches and Drafts," in *Wagner: Prelude and "Transfiguration" from "Tristan und Isolde,"* ed. Robert Bailey (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1985), 113–46.

3. Richard Cohn, *Audacious Euphony: Chromaticism and the Consonant Triad's Second Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4. David Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Poetics of Huapango Arribeño. By Alex E. Chávez. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-8223-7018-5. Paper. Pp. 440. \$30.95.

Several decades ago, Clifford Geertz reminded us that "the essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said."¹ In *Sounds of Crossing*, Alex E. Chávez makes available to us the answers, concerns, and aspirations of a Mexican migrant community. Chávez makes sure, from the onset, that the reader knows that this is not only an ethnographic exercise resulting from years of fieldwork but also a personal account of undeniable truths (1), a story not fixed in the past but of lived experiences, day to day, and with real musical and physical implications. The book is about people, about music, and about their crossings of political, social, and musical boundaries that have been socially and historically constructed. It is, in particular, an exploration of *huapango arribeño*, a musical genre originally from the states of Guanajuato, Querétaro, and San Luis Potosí in Mexico and mostly absent from current literature. The book expands and engages with previous explorations of Mexican music, Mexican migrants, and Mexican American lives and participates in a dialogue with preeminent ethnographers.² Following in their steps, Chávez traces the music from its rural origins to the many social, national, and transnational reinterpretations of the music, leaving aside intrinsic localized rationales while exploring the constant reconfiguration of American belonging against the grain of current issues of "mass expulsions, loudly voiced xenophobia, and violence with regard

to Latino/a communities across the continental United States" (4). In doing so, he argues that "transnational music making in everyday Mexican migrant life specifically positions itself at the tensive center of this volatile discursive terrain, where certain sounds—as expressive indices of a supposedly deficient culture metonymically linked to the corrosion of America—both symbolically and materially claim a place in the space of the US nation-state, refiguring the borders of citizenship and alienage through embodied and agentive forms of cultural expression" (5).

The book provides a long-overdue discussion about what it means to hear Mexico. Drawing from Josh Kun's ideas in *Audiotopia*, Chávez revisits the historical construction of Mexicanness through internal nation-building projects in Mexico, mass media, and the eventual "normalization" of archetypes firmly assimilated within the Mexican society at large and abroad.³ This discussion frames *huapango arribeño* and its singular position while "it participates in a U.S. racial markedness structure as a sonic index for a derided Mexican otherness. . . . [I]t is also the soundtrack to a powerful antimodernist Mexican national sentiment" (42). Along the same line of thought, the book revisits current academic scholarship on postnational identities and transnational approaches and, through the exploration of real people crossing boundaries, puts into question long-standing theoretical approaches and cultural perceptions of Mexican music within the academic discourses (297). In doing so, it contributes to a much-needed process of nuancing.

At the center of the music exploration are the *décimas*, poetic improvised verses, which the author explores wonderfully and manages to weave with intertextuality, semiosis, social theory, and poetry into a compelling narrative that allows the reader to inhabit the time and space of these performances. Each exploration of the lyrics is the culmination of a strong historical and theoretical background that in turn conveys to the reader the musical contours and the emotion infused in these performances. The descriptions of the *topadas* (challenges among troubadours) and the lyrics presented in Spanish allow the reader to witness the poetic compositional exchange between performers. Those familiar with Spanish will particularly enjoy reading out loud and listening to the cadences produced by the poetic figuration of the verses.

Most ethnographic accounts of Mexican migrants in the United States focus on the perils many in this community face in the United States. This book, however, shows the racialized and politicized realities of these migrants in the United States and similar dehumanizing situations taking place in Mexico, where the government "habitually marginalizes them" (58). The author recovers the voices of important troubadours such as Guillermo Velázquez and Mauro Chávez (the latter is the author's grandfather) and their assessment through soulful poetic lyrics about internal and foreign policies in Mexico during the preamble years of the neoliberal project in Mexico and their disastrous effects. If brief, the book also provides a window into the crossovers between *huapango arribeño* and hip hop taking place in the United States, a conversation well framed under his discussion of neoliberal practices.

In chapter 4, drawing from a strong historical-musical background, Chávez also provides a revision of the corrido in which he connects the historical Mexican migrant presence, particularly in Texas, with the Mexican migrant community

explored in this book. It reminds the reader that “Mexican migrants are not considered human beings north of the US-Mexico border: they are laborers, criminals, or, most egregiously, ‘drop-and-leave culprits’ and rapists.” He goes on to highlight Nicholas De Genova’s idea that, paradoxically, “their embodied presence is both in and against capital” (221) and that, within this context, *décimas* are the immaterial knowledges, the undocumentable aural poetics, and, ultimately, the embodied migrant knowledges. These in turn “are integral in sustaining a transnational cultural formation, for they voice affiliations that affirm social structures that are otherwise dehumanized and denied” (221).

The book provides a master class on integrating literature, theory, and ethnography. It immerses the reader in the lives of these Mexican migrants from the states of Guanajuato, Querétaro, and San Luis Potosí. It denounces the current racist worldviews against Latin American migrants and ponders the economic and political paradoxes that these communities pose to the political rhetoric that, while demanding and depending on migrant labor, also stigmatizes its presence. Chávez looks deeper into the performances to explore how these issues are sounded out and improvised not only under metaphorical approaches of transnationalism but also through the embodiment of the music by following musicians and their performances across very real national boundaries, where people have nearly lost their lives, and across imagined or socially constructed borderlines of nationality, Mexicanness, or “traditional” musical genres.

Chávez moves seamlessly from picturesque narratives to literature and theory while providing powerful insights. One could learn, through his exploration of *huapango arribeño*, about theory of place, intertextuality, phenomenology, and theory of self, among many more. The use of theory is not trivial or pretentious here; it is carefully placed and only appears in instances where it expands and clarifies points made by the author, making this book accessible not only to music scholars, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists but also to a wide array of scholars in other disciplines. This is evident throughout the book and particularly effective in chapter 4, “Regional Sounds.”

The book, however, seems to sit on a paradox, which is not the fault of the author but rather the intrinsic nature of the subject. On the one hand, it is evident that people and music effectively, through lived experiences, erase the borders inflicted upon them (historically and socially). On the other hand, it reminds the reader that sounds (and people) continue to cross; therefore, a border continues to exist. Certainly, the author acknowledges that “as anthropologists, we tend to want the ever-elusive patterns of culture to be clear and defined, and we wish for interpretation itself . . . to possess a degree of clarity” (24). However, as proven in this book, this is not always easy. To this end, Chávez shows how these Mexican migrants assess the crossing through a bridge, where “a bridge is a connection called up by desire—the desire to move, to greet, to reunite, to make a living. It’s a desire to go so that a return can come into being—a crossing” (219).

Hispanics will be more than a quarter of the total US population by 2060.⁴ Ethnographies such as this shed light on the current and forthcoming obsolescence of nationalistic discourses and the contention that stems from crumbling nativism. There is no doubt in this reader’s mind that the book will rightfully sit next to other remarkable ethnographies and hopefully be read in many seminars and academic programs. It is a success story for interpretative

anthropology and the most recent and well-crafted answer to Geertz's calling, where the author has negotiated a very daunting personal journey (319) with a reflexive, at times critical, but always insightful voice.

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NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973; New York: Basic Books, 2000), 30.

2. See, for example, José Limón, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); Manuel Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History of a Working-Class Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); and Olga Nájera-Ramirez, "Engendering Nationalism: Identity, Discourse and the Mexican Charro," Working Paper no. 3, Chicano/Latino Research Center, University of California at Santa Cruz, 1997.

3. Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

4. US Census Bureau, "National Population Projections and Vintage 2017 Population Estimates," <http://www.census.gov/popest>.