COMO LO RECUERDO: A REMEMBRANCE OF MEXICAN FOLK SONGS FROM OUR RESIDENTS' HEARTS

A Thesis

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

Major Subject: Music

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

December 2022

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December 2022

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ABSTRACT

Trevino Jr., Arturo, Como lo recuerdo*:* A Remembrance of Mexican Folk Songs from our Residents' Hearts. Master of Music (MM), December, 2022, 90 pp., 10 figures, references, 68 titles.

Educators today face the challenge of finding either the individual in the community or the community in the individual. This study applies Jeff Titon's idea on communities as musical ecosystems to explore the sustainability of John A. Lomax's April 1939 Southern Collection field recordings, examining how and where these musical works exist in Brownsville, Texas today and investigating the meanings of these Mexican folk songs to Rio Grande Valley community members. In this work, I put the Lomax song collection in greater cultural, historical, and musical context, and argue that the songs can assist Rio Grande Valley individuals in both claiming and celebrating a Mexican musical legacy, even when they were not born in Mexico, and in maintaining a Spanish-speaking identity within an English-speaking majority nation.

Border residents' individual and culturally inherited memories evoked by Mexican songs learned in childhood weave a shared Mexican identity that can help build pride in the heritage of Mexican American students today and contribute to the narrative of Spanish usage. I explore the sustainability of these children's songs and games over time and unpack their role in maintaining cultural solidarity in the music classroom and in the community at large.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my loving husband and family who gave me everything I needed as I worked diligently on the various tasks this thesis and graduate work required of me. We did it!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Susan Hurley-Glowa, Dr. Teresita Lozano, and Dr. Cynthia Paccacerqua for their guidance throughout this project. Deep gratitude goes to my participants for allowing me to interview them and providing their advice, experiences, and testimony. Ms. Milagro Resendez, of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Library Special Collections Department, thank you for your assistance in locating artifacts for my study. Thanks also goes out to all the graduate professors whose courses pushed me and led me to the artifacts I needed to build my thesis. Dr. Rentfro, of Brownsville Independent School District, thank you for your encouraging words. My coworkers at Aiken Elementary, thank you for being patient with me and continuously willing to hear me talk about this research non-stop. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and give deep thanks to my committee members without whose presence and council I would not have completed this program.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It was 2020 in Brownsville, Texas, and I reclined in the barber's chair with my eyes transfixed on the darkness before me as a warm towel steamed over my face. I heard an infant's cry nearby. A father cooed at it, calmly clicking his tongue, and then began singing a lullaby. He hit every note on pitch. Perplexed, my mind raced, processing it, and comparing it to songs I knew. I did not recognize the lullaby, but the sound was familiar, like the songs my mother sang to me. In this intimate space between parent and child, this father's role expanded beyond parent to become a culture bearer as well. While the song's role was to soothe, it was also shaping the little one's identity and place in the world: an identity tied to Mexican culture and the Spanish language within the border region. This blended identity along the *frontera* made me reflect on Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestizaje*, a cultural and spiritual mixing (Anzaldúa 2007, 102-103). From shared family meals to songs during celebrations, whether they include "*Las Mañanitas*" or "Happy Birthday," a blend of activities builds each child's identity.

My phenomenological experience at the barbershop triggered an interest in folk songs in my culture. I wondered whether the Mexican folk songs typically sung to children in the border region of Texas play a role in a child's cultural development for just a finite time. Are these songs in Spanish gradually forgotten, or do they remain important cultural markers? To answer questions about the sustenance of Mexican songs within my community, I began to plan an oral

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history project that utilized ethnographic interviews that would allow me to work within the surrounding bilingual, bicultural community that has nourished me.

I am a first-generation Mexican American, native to the Rio Grande Valley specifically from McAllen, Texas. I have worked as an elementary music educator in Brownsville, Texas for seven years. I make sure that my teaching sustains the Mexican heritage and culture so integral to this region, but I also include other world music content. The background of my students is highly varied, from those with little exposure to Mexican culture to other who cross from Matamoros daily. The contrasting language skills and culture groundings makes teaching a challenge.

Looking for musical recordings that might provide a foundation for studying music in my community over time, I found an entrance via John A. Lomax's 1939 Southern Collection, which includes Mexican songs for children recorded in Brownsville. While listening to songs in the collection, I wondered if others along the Lower Rio Grande Valley border would recognize these songs today. I called my mom and grandma, asking if they could recall the songs and associated games. I played the songs over the phone and could hear my grandma singing along in the background! I wondered to what extent others in the community might recognize them. With this question, a project was born: one that is close to my heart as a community member and educator.

Jose Ramiro Rivera, a graduate from Texas State University's Spanish department program, examined the Lomax's 1939 Southern Collection in his 2020 master's thesis. In reading his thesis, I noticed some gaps and an opportunity to build on his scholarship. The work of Jose Ramiro Rivera provides more insights into local culture. Rivera recently completed a dissertation that asserts that music served as a vehicle to preserve the Rio Grande Valley's

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distinctive colloquial Spanish by comparing the lyrics of folk songs and/or *corridos* with songs as close to the present as possible (2020). Rivera also cites recordings from the 1939 Southern Collection as a primary source, but he leaves out local testimony concerning the folk songs and evidence of their continued existence. I investigate the longevity of these children's songs and games and their role in maintaining cultural unity through music at various localities, including school and the greater community.

The prolific American folklorist John A. Lomax (1867-1948) recorded a unique collection of Mexican ballads, *corridos*, and children's folk music for the Archive of American Folk Song (affiliated with the Library of Congress) on a fieldwork trip to Brownsville, Texas in 1939. As part of an archive project documenting and preserving folk songs endangered with extinction throughout the US in the 1930s and 40s, John and his family traveled the US with sound equipment and recorded a variety of traditional styles including the work songs, reels, and blues of the deep south. During the 1939 Recording Expedition, Lomax and his wife Ruby focused on songs in the southern states. While in the Texas, they recorded some 350 songs in Spanish including examples of *corridos*, lullabies, and ring dance songs, adding to previously recorded ballads and vaquero songs ("The 1939 Recording Expedition" n.d.).

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During the Texas expedition in 1939, Ms. Manuela Longoria, a local school teacher, met with the folklorists at her Brownsville, Texas home near the intersection of East Monroe Street and East 13th Street (see Figure 1) and sang these songs in Spanish for them: "*Naranja dulce, límon partido*," "*Al corre y corre*," "*Si la reina de España muriera*," "*Zape, gatito*," and "*Los Patos"* (Lomax 1939).

Figure 1. Image of the Intersection between East 13th Street and East Monroe Street (Trevino 2021).

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During the same excursion to Brownsville, the Lomaxes also recorded students from the Blalack School singing *"*Children of America," "*La Indita*," "*Maria Blanca*," "*Señora Santa Anna*," "*A la mar fueron mis ojos*," "*Los florones de la mano," "La pájara pinta," "Las águilas de San Miguel*," and "*A la ru"* (Lomax 1939).

My research focused on select songs from the Lomax 1939 Southern Collection and their legacy within Rio Grande Valley communities. These musical pieces are a vital part of Brownsville's Mexican musical heritage and they have appeared in many scholarly publications over the past eighty-two years. Yet, their place in today's community repertoire is not completely secure (Rivera 2020; Rodriguez and Torres 2016). Back in 1939, Lomax's informants undoubtedly chose to sing and record these particular Mexican folk songs because they knew them well and recognized their ongoing importance to local culture. I believe that the songs still have deep connections and meaning within the Rio Grande Valley community today. In this

work, I put the Lomax song collection in greater cultural, historical, and musical context by means of ethnographic interviews and historical research and argue that the songs can assist Rio Grande Valley individuals in both claiming and celebrating a Mexican musical legacy, even when they were not born in Mexico, and in maintaining a Spanish-speaking identity within an English-speaking majority nation. Border residents' individual and culturally inherited memories evoked by Mexican songs learned in childhood weave a shared Mexican identity that can help build pride in the heritage of Mexican American students today and contribute to the narrative of Spanish usage. I explore the sustainability of these children's songs and games from the late 1940s into the late 1970s from my participant's experiences and unpack their role in maintaining cultural solidarity in the music classroom and in the community at large.

Delving deeper into the circumstances and specifics of the recordings, Judge Hobart Davenport invited Mr. John A. Lomax to Brownsville to record folk songs of Mexican origins sung in the Rio Grande Valley for his Southern Collection. Based on the itinerary in Lomax's fieldnotes, Lomax and his wife finished field recordings in Otey, Texas, on April 23, 1939, and they arrived in Brownsville on April 24, 1939 (Lomax 1939). In his field notes, Lomax thanks some of the people that helped with the recordings including Manuela Longoria, Judge Harbert Davenport, and Jim K. Wells, but he omits José Suarez, the blind guitarist who sang *corridos* for him, and he does not include the names of the children from Blalack School (Lomax 1939, Image 3).

For Lomax's recording project aims, Blalack School, located in Blalack, Texas, was located conveniently close to Brownsville and Olmito, and he was advised that the students there grew up with songs and ring games that they learned in Spanish. The population in the Rio Grande Valley is and was predominately of Mexican origin and Spanish-speaking and/or

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bilingual, retaining close ties to Mexican culture. Brownsville's public school system, developed in 1915, consisted of two city and six suburban schools at the time of Lomax's recording project. The schools included Brownsville High School, City Grammar School in the city center, and the Blalack School, the Las Matanzas School, the Media Luna School, the Nopalita School, the Linerro School, and the West Brownsville School outside the center ("What's so Special about the Year 1915?" n.d.). Local Historian Norman Rozeff mentions that in 1907 Peter Ebenezer Blalack built a school "four miles northwest of Brownsville, and five miles south of Olmito [where] twenty-four students were under the direction of one teacher (Rozeff 2021). In Lomax's fieldnotes, he partially identifies the students who participated in the Blalack School recordings: "Ramona Ramirez, Sophia H, Maria R. and unidentified girls" (Lomax 1939).

My research on the 1939 Southern Collection and its legacy raises perplexing questions about the songs and their relevance to local Rio Grande Valley communities today. Are they still in active use? If they are not, should they be reintroduced, perhaps as part of public school music curriculum? Which of these songs have survived over the years in songbooks, folklore, and children's literature, and why? In 1939, were these songs pervasive in Mexico as well as Hispanic Texas, or were they unique to the Texas communities?[1] How do the songs relate to early educational experiences and gameplay in Texas and Mexican communities? Do we still know the games associated with these Mexican folk songs for children? Have the games evolved

[1] Hispanic Texans here incorporate the notion that the early *Tejanos*, prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, included families from regions of the southwestern United States that existed outside of what we currently consider to be Mexico (Anzaldua 2012, 28). Numerous of these families already had their own distinctive cultural customs, which included music, food, and religion. Hispanic Texans may also include families who emigrated to the state following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and who may have Spanish ancestry.

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over time? Were the children from Blalack school typical Brownsville students, or was their background exceptional in any way?

These songs have histories on both sides of the Rio Grande Valley border. Do the songs play a role in the way that border residents form their distinctive Mexican and American identities, especially when they are pressured to conform as US citizens to speak English instead of Spanish in some contexts? Do we know if Lomax was fully aware of the region's distinctive historical context at the time the songs were recorded? In this work, I study the Lomax collection songs in old and new contexts and attempt to answer more of these important questions. I maintain that these folk songs and games can still play a role in the maintenance of Mexican American cultures and Spanish language retention today.

In essence, my research examines and analyzes the function of existing Mexican children's songs in border communities. I am interested in community memory and cultural meanings, I decided to do a small-scale ethnographic study concerning the Mexican folk songs and their associations. After obtaining IRB permission at UTRGV, I recruited a small sample of adults from the Mexican American border region of Brownsville, McAllen, and Edinburg to interview about the songs for this ethnographic study. Ethnomusicologist Andrea Emberly's insight into working with children in ethnomusicological research provides context for the challenges of working with children, giving me reasons to contemplate working with adults as participants in this research. She mentioned,

> Research with children and young people also presents a unique set of ethical concerns that must be addressed before research [begins]. What happens to the research data, where materials are stored, and how children can maintain access is central. In addition, research outcomes that support applied and wellbeing goals must consider how such

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goals are met as those involved in the project also have vested interest in long-term commitment (Emberly 2014,11).

Thus, since children involved even after the project will have access to data, IRB red-tape with children participants made it difficult to consider how even adult participants in context to Emberly's thought could allude to participant-driven communication where my participants become coauthors with me in this research. This active role is something that Campbell alludes to since adults were once children pointing out that, "children …are not passive recipients of the music they value but active agents in choosing the music they will take the time to listen and respond to, to make, and to choose to preserve, reinvent or discard" (Campbell and Wiggins 2013, 1). The adults selected in this oral history portion of this thesis work were once children, and they were actively involved in their community taking charge as to which folk songs to remember or let go. The roles these adults have taken on have also allowed them to be active agents of cultural preservation. Concerning the Mexican folk songs, I am curious as to why my participants opted to "preserve, reinvent, or abandon" any of these folk songs, and how this connects to cultural solidarity in the context of how they linked themselves with others around them (Campbell and Wiggins 2013, 1).

The participants' testimony in ethnographic interviews coalesces experiences from both sides of the border and provides context as they define what the folk songs are and what they mean to the individuals in the present. Participant testimonies assisted me in locating the songs and games in old and new children's literature and educational resources. They also provided context about the participants included in the 1939 field notes by Lomax, connecting the experiences and recollections of Brownsville and Rio Grande Valley inhabitants to Mexican traditional music in the Southern Collection.

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