

# **Informal Education, Sociocultural Expression, and Symbolic Meaning in Popular Immigration Music Text**

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## **Introduction**

They had left Mexico City, in Tijuana they arrived  
For lack of documents, they slipped past the fence.<sup>1</sup>  
DE MEXICO HABIAN SALIDO, HASTA TIJUANA  
LLEGARON  
POR NO TRAER SUS PAPELES, DE ALAMBRADOS  
SE PASARON

One February morning as I noted the events of the primary school talent show, a sixth-grade boy belted out this song made popular in two countries by the Mexican rock group, Los Bukis. It was 1987, and I was doing fieldwork in a rural Mexican immigrant-sending community I call San Felipe, for an ethnography of families and their children who emigrated from Mexico to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In different phases of this transnational study, I have collected data on a variety of topics in both Mexico and California. Although immigration to the United States has been of key interest as the encompassing context of both formal (school) and informal (home and community) education, its actual extent and centrality in everyday life became clear as I started interacting with, observing, and interviewing the residents of San Felipe. Individuals frequently volunteered what they knew about this phenomenon and spoke freely about specific cases in migration familiar to them. The vast majority of families have relatives living in the United States, and many current residents of San Felipe have lived in or frequently visit the states. Large numbers of youth and adults expect to emigrate to the United States at some future point as individuals or as part of a family or other group.

Well before they emigrate, residents begin to acquire a kind of cultural knowledge or learning—a variety of notions, images, and expectations about life in the United States and the process of immigration that can take them there.

Although this information is sometimes highly stereotyped, its influence on residents of the community is significant because it is based on actual personal experience, vivid second-hand reports, and in less direct, yet powerful, forms such as the popular media.

One interesting way people learn about immigration to and life in the United States is through the narratives of a particular genre of popular music. This is *Norteña* music, the popular songs of various recording artists broadcast daily on the radio and commercially available for purchase. This music is important because actual and potential immigrants are influenced, motivated, and sustained by the messages conveyed by this music. Shortly after beginning fieldwork, I had already concluded that my ethnography would be incomplete without an examination of international migration in the lives of San Felipe residents. But not until I heard students sing popular immigration songs at school did I fully appreciate the role of this particular music for its audience.

In the remainder of this article, I examine this domain of popular Mexican music within the context of the immigrant cultural experience as I observed it or as it was related to me. Through selected examples, I illustrate how prospective immigrants acquire knowledge about immigration and form perceptions about life in the United States, as well as how the collective and personal meanings of an immigration experience are reflected in this music. As a cultural anthropologist, I must be clear in stating that my analysis here focuses on the texts, the sung words and narratives, rather than the total complex of musical elements and meanings of the selected songs, as these require comprehensive examination by other experts grounded in musicology.

The fundamental problem or goal here is the development of yet another perspective to enhance the understanding of one of the most pressing social issues in the United States—immigration. Because this is a growing, complex, and dynamic phenomenon, study of all aspects of the multifaceted immigrant experience is essential for enhancing our humanities, social, and behavioral science knowledge bases. Furthermore, fuller understandings of this issue hold value for large numbers of professionals directly involved in aiding the transition of immigrant and refugee populations to the United States, including specialists in fields such as education, health and human services, the workplace, government, and social policy. Our efforts to better understand and interact with growing numbers of immigrants, migrants, and refugees must include an attempt to understand the full range of their public and personal experiences, and the relationship of these to behavior, adaptation and integration in various social settings.

### **Understanding Culture Through Music Texts**

Ethnomusicologists, folklorists and anthropologists are among those who have used music narratives to examine the experiences of social, cultural, and ethnic groups. These analysts are well aware that “Song texts . . . provide a number of insights into questions of primary concern to students of human behavior.”<sup>3</sup> Used as a data source, music texts can provide multilevel insights into group experience. At a global level, music is “. . . an integral part of culture

and . . . is bound to reflect the general and underlying principles and values which animate the culture as a whole.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, description of the cultural and historical contexts of group development can be informed by song texts that have arisen and are imbedded in specific social and cultural settings.<sup>5</sup> For researchers working with this kind of qualitative data “ . . . attempting to understand a particular text or set of texts in relation to a social and historical context is nowadays a reasonably well-established principle in the methodology . . . “ of musical analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, music provides a window to the more private areas of experience, including the covert domains of cultural ethos, motivation, and meaning. Music and song are particularly rich in revealing emotion and meaning because they provide:

. . . the freedom to express thoughts, ideas, and comments which cannot be stated baldly in the normal language situation . . . song texts, because of the special kind of license that singing apparently gives, afford extremely useful means for obtaining kinds of information which are not otherwise easily accessible.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these varied possibilities, research on the relationship between music and culture has focused largely on traditional expressive genres such as folk music. By contrast, popular, electronically disseminated “pop” and “rock” music, the “ . . . music that most of the world’s people listen to most of the time . . . the music disseminated by radio, records, perhaps film and TV, the music of the large urban populations,”<sup>8</sup> generally has been ignored in academic studies.<sup>9</sup> This is a significant omission, considering the worldwide, international influence of pop and rock music.<sup>10</sup> In Mexico, for instance, Spanish-language pop and rock have flourished in recent decades—largely as a result of the post-1950s influence of U.S. rock ‘n’ roll and youth-dominated music—to the point of becoming mainstream music in that country.<sup>11</sup>

One instance of the “multinational and multicultural” character of this music is found in the case of international migrants.<sup>12</sup> Although “Music has had a recognized role in the communities of immigrant groups in the Americas and elsewhere for centuries . . . ,”<sup>13</sup> wide and rapid dissemination enables contemporary immigration music to keep pace with the mass social and cultural change of contemporary international migration. An immigrant audience spanning two countries is responsible in large part for the commercial popularity of Mexican immigration music, because it is aesthetically satisfying, but also because for immigrants themselves it is a readily available means of sustaining continuity, stability, and meaningful expression in an uprooting, transitional situation.

For the present inquiry, I assembled and analyzed the narrative content of a sample of commercially recorded popular music with immigration themes. The underlying assumption of this approach is that song texts reflect or relate directly experiences, beliefs, attitudes and emotions, and their meanings to audiences, and that the text itself “ . . . delimits and initially generates the possible number and type of meanings which can be derived from it.”<sup>14</sup> Song

texts contain direct descriptions of historically-grounded events and social experiences, and their rich, figurative content allows extraction of more hidden elements, such as an ethnic group's ethos or the underlying motivations of individuals. Thus, categorical and interpretive analysis of the data, i.e., the narrative content of selected immigration songs, was the means of exploring the shared culture and experiences of immigration as depicted therein.

### **The Popular Music of Mexico—United States Immigration**

Modernization has left intact the traditional place of music as a valued cultural form in Mexican society. Actually, its impact on Mexican society probably has grown as a result of developments in both the music itself and its electronic means of production and dissemination. As in the United States, popular music, including rock, occupies a majority of AM radio air time in Mexico.<sup>15</sup> Its prevalence is audible in the streets of a large city like Guadalajara, where musical strains from personal radio/cassette players and music shop loudspeakers continually bombard the ear.

But the sounds of music are not for the exclusive enjoyment of the urban mainstream of Mexican society. Perhaps because Mexicans show relatively less interest in television, music is readily available and enjoyed in the most “backstream” of communities. Most households, for example, have radios; and some, record players:

... record-playing equipment is owned by people in all but the poorest stratum in society. There are record stores dotted throughout the commercial sectors ... and furniture and department stores feature record players prominently in window displays and in newspaper advertisements. Many families living on a poverty level with otherwise few material possessions own television receivers and radio-phonograph consoles.<sup>16</sup>

Residents of San Felipe enjoy music in a variety of ways. Car radios blaring the latest “hits” draw the attention of nearby listeners, especially when produced by a powerful stereo system installed in the states. At community events, such as the annual patron saint festival, a stereo phonograph system on loan from a local household provides the music. On one occasion a group of teachers took me along on a picnic that required as vital equipment, besides all the necessary cookout food and supplies, a cassette player with a selection of popular tapes. In the schools, “boom-boxes” made in Japan (bought more cheaply in the United States, and brought across the border) represent the totality of technological resources for improving the educational experience.

Mexicans play their records, tapes, and compact discs on these electronic apparatuses, enjoying music ranging from a relatively pure rock meant for true *aficionados* (“acid,” “heavy metal” and other hard rock styles have little following) to softer styles meant for the “teenybopper” or more conservative ear. Among these styles are regional genres such as modern *Norteña* music, a kind of “country rock” developed and performed primarily by groups from Northern Mexico.

*Norteña* music's roots are grounded in the traditional Mexican *corrido*, or ballad, whose history parallels that of the Mexican nation. Over this course, the *corrido* has served Mexicans as a means of oral expression<sup>17</sup> and a chronicle of a wide range of events and topics from the personal (e.g., love, family, religion), through everyday social life (e.g., humor, criminals, politics, regional life), to the heroic, tragic and ideological (e.g., folk heroes, catastrophes, the Mexican Revolution). Whether about the individual, social life, or the collective national experience, all *corridos* are distinguished by their social meaning or intent. *Corridos* with immigration themes have been traced to at least the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>18</sup> with Fernandez' estimate of two hundred known immigration *corridos* indicating the extent of this musical treatment.<sup>19</sup>

Today, the influence of the traditional immigration *corrido* is audible in *Norteña* pop music, which has enjoyed tremendous concomitant growth in both Mexico and the United States with the dramatic increase in Mexican emigration since the 1970s. After I first heard the aforementioned student sing "Los Alambrados," I asked where he had learned the song. "From the radio," he answered. Other boys, whose gender seemed to be overrepresented in the singing acts, agreed that these were popular songs played on the radio, while others stated that they learned them by listening to older brothers or other relatives who sang them.

What do these students and other listeners hear in the words of this music, the "hottest new rage" enjoying national popularity in Mexico?<sup>20</sup> This tradition of immigration music has been adapted to the popular music of Mexico today. This discussion will be based only on the song narratives and will focus on two functions served by popular immigration music as revealed in these texts: 1) those serving instrumental purposes, and 2) those that are expressive or symbolic in nature.<sup>21</sup>

### **Instrumental Functions of Immigration Music**

The multi-faceted role of immigration music begins as a simple documentary function through which it conveys to listeners a general view of the world of immigration. Following the traditional immigration *corrido*, for example, narratives describe the economic push/pull factors motivating immigrants to make the move North.<sup>22</sup> Because these song texts originate from existent social situations,<sup>23</sup> their rich descriptions ring true to listeners' own experiences and knowledge of this widespread phenomenon.

Immigration music acts largely as a means of informal education, "teaching" its listeners in some detail about the actual mechanics of immigration. "Los Alambrados" (The Fence), is a good example of this. Recorded on an album of *Norteña* music by the popular Mexican rock group, Los Bukis, this song tells of a successful case of illegal immigration to the United States. The immigrants in this story lack legal documents, i.e., visas or "green" (resident) cards, and are forced into the position of clandestine border-crossers:

They had left Mexico City, in Tijuana they arrived  
For lack of documents, they slipped past the fence.

DE MEXICO HABIAN SALIDO, HASTA TIJUANA  
LLEGARON  
POR NO TRAER SUS PAPELES, DE  
ALAMBRADOS SE PASARON

After crossing over, the migrants' immediate fear and uncertainty of being caught by the immigration authorities can be overcome through absolute secrecy:

They circled around blockades, as they had remembered  
It was by night and because of that, they fooled the  
(border) patrol.

HIBAN RODEANDO VEDEDAS, COMO LO  
HABIAN ACORDADO  
ERA ANTE NOCHE Y POR ESO, LA VIGILANCIA  
BURLARON

and:

But a "chopper" was trying to find them  
But in the underbrush, they could see nothing,  
UN HELICO PERO ANDABA, QUIERIENDOLOS  
ENCONTRAR  
PERO ENTRE LOS MATORALES, NADA  
PUDIERON MIRAR

and also by prior planning, such as having a predetermined route in mind:

They crossed through the mountains, they had taken  
their direction,  
SE CRUZARON POR EL CERRO, SU RUMBO  
HABIAN AGARRADO

and someone to shuttle them away from the immediate border vicinity:

And over there in Chula Vista, the guys waited for  
them.  
Y POR ALLA EN CHULA VISTA, LOS TIPOS LOS  
ESPERARON

More than an isolated incident, this story is about the kinds of experiences which a large segment of the Mexican population has had or can expect to have. To indicate the extensive scope of Mexican-United States immigration, a teacher once reminded me of this everyday Mexican saying: "Every Mexican family has a member in the United States."

San Felipe itself is part of the immigration infrastructure within which families, communities, and whole regions throughout Mexico continue sending large numbers of emigrants to the United States in search of the work and socioeconomic mobility that is unavailable in their homeland. An immigrant's explanation in one song that he came to the United States *por necesidad*—out of necessity<sup>24</sup>—clearly points to the fundamental economic impetus underlying this movement.

Some narratives provide prospective listeners with perhaps their first images and expectations of the kind of life awaiting them. Personal economic improvement is undoubtedly the foremost image portrayed, as these songs abundantly represent the great opportunity available to the North:

They told me that over there earning was easy<sup>25</sup>  
ME CONTARON QUE ALLA SE GANABA FACIL

and:

Now they're in Chicago, having fun with dollars!<sup>26</sup>  
AHORA YA ANDAN EN CHICAGO, CON  
DOLARES SE DIVIERTEN!

In San Felipe the lucrative opportunities available across the border are well-known, and the news of migrants who are leaving for or have just returned from the states travels fast. For instance, one evening I was out celebrating with a group of teachers during the patron-saint festival, when a pickup truck with California license plates pulled up. As the driver and teachers chatted, I overheard the gist of their conversation to be about several young men, some of whom were in the pickup, preparing to leave the next day to resume their annual employment in the California vineyards.

More dramatic examples of the economic promise of immigration are visible to San Felipe residents. They have seen or heard of young men making purchases in the local community with rolls of cash earned in the states (the result of dollar to peso conversion is an impressive sight). They see the impact of U.S. dollars on their immediate environment, for instance, in the improvement or new construction of homes financed by U.S.-generated income. Some of the older residents have worked most of their adult lives in the United States, but have returned to a comfortable, sometimes luxurious, retirement in their home village. Thus, residents' actual observations confirm the economic imagery of popular immigration music, which portrays the United States as the land of milk and honey, continuing a theme in Mexican immigration music that predates the Mexican revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Other texts portray the harsher realities of immigration and United States and another side of the milk and honey image. A popular song recorded by Los Tigres del Norte,<sup>28</sup> "El Otro Mexico," is a good example of this realism. As the song opens, an immigrant, accused of abandoning the homeland by those still in Mexico, defends his move as something done out of pragmatic necessity, adding that years of United States residency have changed neither his culture nor citizenship:

Don't criticize me because I live across the border, I'm  
not a rolling stone  
I came out of necessity  
Many years ago I came as a "wetback," my customs  
haven't changed  
Nor has my nationality.  
NO ME CRITIQUEN PORQUE VIVO AL OTRO  
LADO, NO SOY UN DESARRAIGADO  
VINE POR NECESIDAD  
YA MUCHOS AÑOS QUE ME VINE DO MAJADO,  
MIS COSTUMBRES NO HAN CAMBIADO  
NI MI NACIONALIDAD

Another verse refers to the position of the majority of immigrants in the lowest-paying jobs, under Spanish-speaking, Anglo bosses who nevertheless recognize the value and quality of their work:

I'm much like many other Mexicans, who earn our  
living  
Working under the sun  
Recognized as good workers, that even our own bosses  
Speak to us in Spanish.  
SOY COMO TANTOS OTROS MUCHOS  
MEXICANOS, QUE LA VIDA NOS GANAMOS  
TRABAJANDO BAJO EL SOL  
RECONOCIDOS POR BUENOS TRABAJADORES,  
QUE HASTA LOS MISMOS PATRONES  
NOS HABLAN EN ESPAÑOL

The refrain reminds listeners that even Mexican professionals and others with relative means are among those who cross the border illegally to seek economic opportunity and security:

When they hear that a doctor or an engineer has  
crossed as a laborer  
Because they want to progress  
Or that a chief leaves land and livestock, to cross the  
Rio Grande  
They'll never see (understand) that.  
CUANDO HAN SABIDO QUE UN DOCTOR O UN  
INGINIERO SE HAN CRUZADO DE BRAZERO  
PORQUE QUIERAN PROGRESAR  
O QUE UN CACIQUE DEJÉ TIERRAS Y GANADO,  
POR CRUZAR EL RIO BRAVO  
ESO NUNCA LO VERAN

Teachers who I interviewed share with other villagers the knowledge and concerns about the material possibilities in immigration. One teacher has friends from his home village (not San Felipe) who work in the United States. These friends, one of whom gave up a teaching career in Mexico for more lucrative, unskilled work across the border, continually invite their friends to join them in California construction work for the high wages they can earn—when there is work. The clear implication in this example, as in numerous song narratives, is that most immigrants will labor in unskilled positions. Some even give up professional or other significant roles because employment, a sufficient means of livelihood, is the overwhelming need of the economic migrant, first in Mexico, later in the United States.

Other songs warn about a variety of perils associated with immigration, like having to endure separation from loved ones:

Better to return  
Because I found out what it was to live without you.<sup>29</sup>  
MEJOR ME REGRESO  
PORQUE SUPE LO QUE VIVIR SIN TI



Another popular recording details the linguistic separation between would-be lovers, one of whom has emigrated to the United States with her family:

One day they left here, for the United States  
She doesn't speak Spanish, when I talk to her she  
doesn't understand.<sup>30</sup>

UN DIA SE FUERON DE AQUI, A LOS ESTADOS  
UNIDOS

NO SABE HABLAR ESPAÑOL, CUANDO LE  
HABLO NO ME ENTIENDE

The song ultimately leaves the listener with the impression that language differences are more of an inconvenience, rather than a substantial, looming barrier, as its protagonist resolves his dilemma by vowing to learn English, while teaching his *pochita* (United States-reared Mexican) Spanish.

Another facet of immigration music involves the socialization of immigrants with the values and attitudes of two cultures, as well as the transitional immigrant subculture bridging them. For example, portions of the texts emphasize the Mexican culture of origin:<sup>31</sup>

So many years ago I came as a "wetback," my customs  
haven't changed.

YA MUCHOS AÑOS QUE ME VINE DE MOJADO,  
MIS COSTUMBRES NO HAN CAMBIADO

and:

I'm so much like many other Mexicans . . .<sup>32</sup>

SOY COMO TANTOS OTROS MUCHOS  
MEXICANOS . . .

This narrative takes on poignant meaning when we consider that immigration is no new phenomenon, but typically has a generational history within immigrant families and communities. The father of one of the teachers had worked in the United States throughout much of the young man's growing years, his financial remittances paying for the education of his son (through normal school) and his siblings. The father's visits to Mexico were few—"I grew up without knowing my father," this teacher explained to me once—but the senior man's eventual return to retirement in his home village was ensured by the maintenance of a cultural memory and commitment such as that fostered by certain immigration songs. In any case, an individual who takes the pioneering step of immigrating alone is at highest risk for cultural isolation in the United States, and estrangement from Mexican cultural roots.

Concurrently, listeners are presented with material describing, if not forwarding, selected aspects of the dominant United States cultural ethos, the work ethic<sup>33</sup> as a means of material, if not spiritual, salvation:

They told me that over there . . . money buys everything<sup>34</sup>  
ME CONTARON QUE ALLA ... EL DINERO QUE  
TODO LO PUEDE

and:

The other Mexico that we've built here . . . is the effort of  
all our brothers ... who have known how to progress.<sup>35</sup>

EL OTRO MEXICO QUE AQUI HEMOS  
CONSTRUIDO ... ES EL ESFUERZO DE  
TODO NUESTROS HERMANOS ... QUE HAN  
SABIDO PROGRESAR

Throughout Mexico and the United States, the presentation of new kinds of ideas and attitudes about immigration through *Norteña* music has the added effect of socializing migrant listeners into the “culture of immigration”<sup>36</sup> in which they function:

What must be done in life, to earn dollars!  
Later they decided, to risk life or death  
But the faith they had, carried them with much luck.<sup>37</sup>  
LO QUE HAY QUE HACER EN LA VIDA, PARA  
DOLARES GANAR!  
MAS TARDE SE DECIDIERON, A DAR LA VIDA  
O LA MUERTE  
PERO LA FE QUE TENIAN, LOS LLEVO CON  
MUCHA SUERTE

These narratives reflect the complex socialization of immigrants. That is, immigrants are alerted to the fact that acculturation to the culture of the United States is a pragmatic necessity.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the song texts are reminders of the importance of remaining a Mexican at heart, with some messages perhaps serving as subtle forms of social control,<sup>39</sup> warning the immigrant not to lose his Mexican culture or behavior. Finally, themes focusing on the act of immigration interweave throughout. For prospective immigrants still in Mexico, this music provides a form of anticipatory socialization<sup>40</sup> that presents them with the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of immigration before actually becoming involved in that process.

The various qualities of immigration song narratives, some attempts at realism notwithstanding, combine to give listeners ultimate hope for resolving their problems through immigration:

I went toward Texas, looking for something better.<sup>41</sup>  
YOMEFUIRUMBO A TEJAS, BUSCANDO ALGO  
MEJOR

While in some instances the music gives a hopeful message that immigration will always change things for the better, at other times it provides a form of active control by helping the immigrant anticipate the real problems of such a transition. For the most part, however, the portrayal of immigration is positive, ultimately motivating action directed toward the resolution of a variety of problems<sup>42</sup> that threaten the prospective immigrant if the step is not taken.

### **Expressive and Symbolic Functions**

O.K., boys—let’s go earn lots of dollars!<sup>43</sup>  
AHORA SI MUCHACHOS—A GANAR MUCHOS  
DOLARES!

The hopeful messages in immigration music cannot directly improve their lives, but they do serve immigrants in another way—as a mechanism for

emotional release, escape and refuge.<sup>44</sup> Although typically portrayed as a social group phenomenon, immigration is “first and foremost an emotional experience,”<sup>45</sup> with its representation in music giving the listener opportunity to release the feelings, conflict, and pain of that experience. Some *Norteña* narratives address the conflict inherent in a decision to emigrate,<sup>46</sup> as in the case of the immigrant who finds himself leaving home, family, and all that is familiar:

And when reaching the Rio Grande and feeling so far  
away  
Through the cry in my eyes, I told myself, “Now’s the  
time I can still return.”<sup>47</sup>  
Y AL LLEGAR AL RIO BRAVO Y SENTIR ME  
TAN LEJOS  
POR EL LLANTO EN LOS OJOS, ME DIJE “AHORA  
ES TIEMPO DE PODER REGRESAR”

Immigrants’ inevitable culture shock and conflict,<sup>48</sup> however, is tempered somewhat by the prospect of exciting adventures<sup>49</sup> such as those described in “Los Alambrados,”<sup>50</sup> and with the promise of employment, hard work, and the monetary and personal goals these can bring about:

We are always working, dollars to gather  
'Cause we will have to marry our sweethearts.<sup>51</sup>  
SIEMPRE TRABAJAMOS, PARA DOLARES  
JUNTAR  
PUES CON NUESTRA CHICA NOS TENDREMOS  
QUE CASAR

Ultimately, the music helps to instill in these individuals the positive outlook and self-confidence that will see them through their immigration experience and beyond:<sup>52</sup>

Faced with problems, we won’t back down  
We know we’ll triumph.<sup>53</sup>  
ANTE LOS PROBLEMAS, NO NOS VAMOS A  
RAJAR  
SABEMOS QUE VAMOS A TRIUNFAR

Thus, immigration music does not create merely a dream world for escape from everyday reality.<sup>54</sup> Since “. . . in song the individual or the group can apparently express deep-seated feelings not permissibly verbalized in other contexts,”<sup>55</sup> this music is also a means of expressing, confronting, and working through the problems and stresses of life in a way that provides relief from an otherwise inescapable reality.

The ultimate function of immigration music may be found in two kinds of symbolic representations. The first of these is concerned with the preservation of cultural identity. Immigrants are a group literally in transition on more than one experiential level—geographic, cultural, linguistic, social, and economic. In such a dynamic situation the need for a stable cultural identification is great:

Music is frequently involved in the process of marking  
out cultural territories. Different musics have their

own audiences, their own radio channels and their own classificatory sections in record shops.<sup>56</sup>

In consciously selecting immigration music, the listener also makes a personal statement of social and cultural identification with other immigrants, as well as with the various protagonists represented in these song texts.

The primary group identification facilitated by popular *Norteña* music is not Mexican, but Mexican *immigrant*. The texts portray change, instability, and ambiguity<sup>57</sup> in the movement of a group to new social conditions. They portray the movement of social identity by individuals shifting membership between social groups,<sup>58</sup> in this case from Mexican to Mexican immigrant and, ultimately perhaps, to Mexican-American (an ethnic identification emphasizing national origin) or Chicano (an identification emphasizing, in addition, history and social status in the United States). What listeners intuitively understand is the power of popular immigration songs to help them in their journey by providing:

... the focus of cultural identity and cultural solidarity;  
they become the anthems of cultural groups and the  
musical effect becomes amplified by labelling and  
cultural stereotyping . . . .<sup>59</sup>

When the surrounding world apparently is in flux, a secure cultural identity and group membership provide a more secure basis for further individual struggle and development.

A second set of symbolic meanings enhances the social status of immigrant culture and its members. Illegal immigration, the kind that many of these songs chronicle, is a solitary, dangerous, and secretive matter. It is accomplished outside normal social networks, and undocumented immigrants are legally prosecuted. Typically surviving with few means, immigrants receive negative criticism from non-immigrants in Mexico; they migrate illegally and continue to live without legal sanction in the United States; and, even with an absolute improvement in their economic conditions, they typically occupy the lowest economic and social levels. In other words, to be an illegal immigrant is “no picnic,” and other than protection from legal prosecution, the lot of many legal immigrants may not be much better. But immigration music conveys to immigrants “a deep sense of personal and collective pride and dignity,” despite their low social status.<sup>60</sup> It does this through building and promoting positive self-images and meanings for individuals,<sup>61</sup> and tying their solitary experiences to the mass social phenomenon of immigration.

The narrative messages of Mexican immigration music are not without problems. For instance, both Mexican culture<sup>62</sup> and life in the United States are continually idealized. The immigrant and his experiences typically are put in their most positive light by these songs, reflecting the stereotyped impressions initially conveyed by family and friends in the home community. However, the greatest influence of music is intentionally metaphorical in nature:

Song texts do not tend to provide objective knowledge  
of historical reality, yet they do generally relate . . . to  
that reality as lived. The aesthetic experience of song  
is of necessity interpretive. . . .<sup>63</sup>

Thus the fact that some of these immigration songs are overly “concerned with self-praise”<sup>64</sup> or emphasize positive outcomes does not mean that immigrants are not aware of the negative experiences, hard work, and personal struggle inherent in their pursuit of economic mobility, social respect, and a better life—they are all too aware of these negative aspects permeating their lives. But music is perhaps one of the few outlets enabling immigrants to visualize their own personal heroism more clearly than their daily lives allow, and to persevere toward the goals they are pursuing through immigration.

### **Popular Music Text, Immigrant Narrative Accounts**

A general purpose of the present exploratory treatment of Mexican immigration music has been to illustrate the utility of popular music text analysis for learning about the social characteristics and experiences of a group of people, as well as to initiate an understanding of their deep-lying values and problems.<sup>65</sup> Popular music narratives are rich qualitative data for cultural group description, as well as the analysis of cultural knowledge<sup>66</sup> and change.<sup>67</sup>

The present analysis indicates how older popular narrative styles as the *corrido* have not only survived, but also transformed the social impact of traditional folkloric forms. The transformation is in contemporary popular music’s ability to tap into the modern world and its values—through topical narratives, music styles (rock and pop), technology (electronic) and dissemination patterns (local, national, and international availability) that reflect the varied experiences of its audiences.<sup>68</sup> In this context, the present study provides a base for further investigation into the social and cultural meanings of immigration music narratives through “. . . ethnographic and interactionist accounts in an altogether more comprehensive analysis. . . .”<sup>69</sup>

The present analysis has illustrated some examples of the functional and symbolic representations of Mexican immigration music from the point of view of the immigration experience. The most visible effect of immigration is its familiarization of individuals with the immigration culture, as it helps create and transmit knowledge, reinforces a set of beliefs, and reflects “popular attitudes toward events.”<sup>70</sup> Popular immigration songs are presentations on why and how to immigrate, and on alternative outcomes to immigration. Their messages support an existent belief system purporting that jobs, money, and, therefore, the solutions to one’s problems, await north of the border. And they reinforce the pervasive attitudes that Mexicans have toward immigration—that it is an everyday fact of life and, despite the difficulties, risks, and costs, faith and self-confidence will see the illegal migrant across the border to a better life. Modern popular music is perhaps the immigrant group’s most accessible medium for representing, understanding, and managing their social world. In this sense, the ultimate importance of music for the immigrant audience may not be in its reflection of group interests and material or social conditions but, rather, in the opportunity it offers for mediation of social reality through metaphor and imagery.

At this time of major worldwide movements of immigrants, refugees, and other displaced groups, the need for continuing study on the experiences of

these migrant populations cannot be overemphasized. The theoretical understandings developed will be crucial as receiving societies work to integrate or otherwise foster mutually beneficial relations among all of these mobile populations. Explanatory attempts must include analyses at various levels of individual and group behavior, knowledge, and meaning. Popular music narratives, and the wider descriptive and discursive material inherent in other cultural forms, represent a rich focus of future efforts in ethnic, social, and cultural group studies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Los Alambrados,” performed by Los Bukis in *Norteñas y Chicanas*, (c 1987) Marco Music.

<sup>2</sup>José Macias, “Scholastic Antecedents of Immigrant Students: Schooling in a Mexican Immigrant-Sending Community,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 21, 4 (1990): 291-318.

<sup>3</sup>Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 208.

<sup>4</sup>Merriam, 250.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Pickering, “Song and Social Context.” in *Singer, Song and Scholar*, ed. Ian Russell (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986), 74.

<sup>6</sup>Pickering, 73.

<sup>7</sup>Merriam, 193.

<sup>8</sup>Bruno Nettl, *Eight Urban Musical Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 84.

<sup>9</sup>Andrew Goodwin, “Editorial,” *Media Culture and Society* 8, 3 (July 1986): 259.

<sup>10</sup>Joseph A. Kotarba, “Introduction,” *Youth and Society*, 18, 4 (June 1987): 323.

<sup>11</sup>David K. Stigberg, “*Jarocho*, Tropical and ‘Pop’: Aspects of Musical Life in Veracruz, 1971-72.” in *Eight Urban Musical Cultures: Tradition and Change*, ed. Bruno Nettl (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 280.

<sup>12</sup>Harold G. Bensusan, “A Consideration of Norteña and Chicano Music,” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 4 (1985): 158.

<sup>13</sup>Bruno Nettl, *The Western Impact on World Music: Change, Adaptation, and Survival* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 163.

<sup>14</sup>Pickering, 75.

<sup>15</sup>Stigberg, 281.

- <sup>16</sup>Stigberg, 261.
- <sup>17</sup>Celestino Fernandez, "The Mexican Immigration Experience and the *Corrido Mexicano*," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 2 (1983): 116.
- <sup>18</sup>Maria Herrera-Sobek, "Mexican Immigration and Petroleum: A Folklorist's Perspective," *New Scholar*, 9 (1984): 99.
- <sup>19</sup>Fernandez, 115.
- <sup>20</sup>Bensusan, 163.
- <sup>21</sup>Merriam, 223.
- <sup>22</sup>Herrera-Sobek, 223.
- <sup>23</sup>Merriam, 207.
- <sup>24</sup>"El Otro Mexico," performed by Los Tigres del Norte in *El Otro Mexico*, (c 1985), T. N. Ediciones Musicales.
- <sup>25</sup>"Mejor Me Regreso," performed by Los Yonic's in *Nortefías y Chicanas*, (c 1987), D. R.
- <sup>26</sup>"Los Alambrados" by Los Bukis (1987).
- <sup>27</sup>Herrera-Sobek, 100.
- <sup>28</sup>"El Otro Mexico" by Los Tigres del Norte.
- <sup>29</sup>"Mejor Me Regreso," by Los Yonic's.
- <sup>30</sup>"El Bilingüe," performed by Los Tigres del Norte in *Heroes del Pueblo*, (c 1987), T. N. Ediciones Musicales.
- <sup>31</sup>Merriam, 205.
- <sup>32</sup>"El Otro Mexico" by Los Tigres del Norte.
- <sup>33</sup>Herrera-Sobek, 104.
- <sup>34</sup>"Mejor Me Regreso."
- <sup>35</sup>"El Otro Mexico" by Los Tigres del Norte.
- <sup>36</sup>Macias, 313.
- <sup>37</sup>"Los Alambrados" by Los Bukis.
- <sup>38</sup>Herrera-Sobek, 101.
- <sup>39</sup>Merriam, 197.
- <sup>40</sup>Gary W. Peterson and David F. Peters, "Adolescents' Construction of Social Reality," *Youth and Society*, 15, 1 (September, 1983): 73.
- <sup>41</sup>"Mejor Me Regreso" by Los Yonic's.
- <sup>42</sup>Merriam, 204.

- <sup>43</sup>"Los Alambrados" by Los Bukis.
- <sup>44</sup>Merriam, 222.
- <sup>45</sup>Fernandez, 117.
- <sup>46</sup>Herrera-Sobek, 101.
- <sup>47</sup>"Mejor Me Regreso" by Los Yonic's.
- <sup>48</sup>Fernandez, 128.
- <sup>49</sup>Herrera-Sobek, 104.
- <sup>50</sup>Los Bukis.
- <sup>51</sup>"Los Chicanos," performed by Los Bukis in *Mejor Me Regreso*, (c 1987), Rimo.
- <sup>52</sup>Herrera-Sobek, 104.
- <sup>53</sup>"Los Chicanos" by Los Bukis.
- <sup>54</sup>Keith Swanwick, *Music, Mind, and Education* (London: Routledge, 1987), 37.
- <sup>55</sup>Merriam, 190.
- <sup>56</sup>Swanwick, 16.
- <sup>57</sup>H. Stith Bennett and Jeff Ferrell, "Music Videos and Epistemic Socialization," *Youth and Society*, 18, 4 (June 1987): 360.
- <sup>58</sup>Bennett and Ferrell, 360.
- <sup>59</sup>Swanwick, 100.
- <sup>60</sup>Fernandez, 128.
- <sup>61</sup>Fernandez, 128.
- <sup>62</sup>Herrera-Sobek, 104.
- <sup>63</sup>Pickering, 80.
- <sup>64</sup>Merriam, 196.
- <sup>65</sup>Merriam, 205.
- <sup>66</sup>Bennett and Ferrell, 344.
- <sup>67</sup>Nettl (1978), 5.
- <sup>68</sup>Nettl (1978), 10.
- <sup>69</sup>Pickering, 79.



<sup>70</sup>Rodolfo J. Cortina, "Research on the Corrido: The Questions of Origin, Toponymy and Persistence—A Review Essay," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 3 (1984): 205.

## Critique

The role of song texts in evaluating human behavior has received relatively little attention by either anthropologists or ethnomusicologists and their value as social documents, consequently, has been sadly overlooked. As Macias observes, the texts of *corridos* popular in San Felipe function simultaneously on several levels. As historical chronicle, social commentary (and criticism), and as vehicles for teaching and proselytizing, these texts reinforce a sense of community and cultural identity, and serve, also, as reminders of economic reality, articulating their subjects' aspirations and incumbent moral obligations.

The *corridos* referred to in Macias's paper are narrative ballads, sung to instrumental accompaniment—guitars, or *mariachi* ensemble. The origins of the *corrido* can be traced back to the Spanish *romance* of the Conquest era. Texts commonly chronicle notable or unusual historic or current events, sometimes humorously or satirically, often with sharp social criticism expressed openly or implied. The prototype is a narrative text, set in quatrains of octosyllabic lines, with assonance or end-rhymes on alternate lines. As Macias's examples indicate however, there are many variations to the traditional form. The *corrido* took on new significance during the Mexican Revolution as musical outlets for expressions of popular sentiment and as anthems of nationalistic fervor.

In our own time, apparently, the *corrido* serves to chronicle and immortalize the events and heroes of Mexican emigration. In this role, the heroes, glorified, romanticized, and vindicated by the song texts, are those who have dared the border guards, risking prison and death to reach the promised land. Their heroic status is reinforced by the accounts and evidence of new economic prosperity and is validated further by poignant expressions of longing for home and family. The hardships suffered by the emigrants, their economic privation, discrimination and oppression, related by the *corridos* and by returning emigrants, serve only as a "cross" which must be borne as the price of economic progress.

The *corridos* cited by Macias imply emigration to the United States is regarded by San Felipeños as their inevitable and inexorable destiny. Is this implied attitude simply coincidental, the result of the particular song texts cited, or do the San Felipeños consider themselves "immigrants" even before they have emigrated? Is this attitude characteristic of other communities as well? Is the incidence of emigration in San Felipe abnormally high, in comparison to other towns in the region, or elsewhere in Mexico? How do the emigrants/immigrants themselves regard the *corridos*? Do they consider these