ACROSS BORDERS AND BARLINES: CHICANA/O LITERATURE, JAZZ IMPROVISATION, AND CONTRAPUNTAL SOLIDARITY

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In this study, I examine Chicana/o writings and Black and Brown musical traditions as they entwine in urban centers and inform local visions of inclusion and models of social change. By analyzing literature and music from South Texas, Southern California, and Northeastern Michigan, I detail how the social particularities of each zone inform Chicana/o cultural productions rooted in the promise of empowerment and the possibility of cross-cultural solidarity. I assert that highlighting localized variations on these themes amplifies contrapuntal solidarities specific to each region, the relationship between different, locally conceived conceptions of Chicana/o identity, and the interplay between Brown and Black aesthetic practices in urban centers near national borders. Through literary critical and ethnomusicological frameworks, I engage the rhetorical patterns that link poetry, jazz improvisation, essays, musical playlists, and *corridos* to illumine a web of discourses helping to establish the idiosyncratic yet complimentary cultural mores that shape localized social imaginaries in the United States.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In this study, I examine Chicana/o writings and Black and Brown musical traditions as they entwine in urban centers and inform local visions of inclusion and models of social change. By analyzing literature and music from South Texas, Southern California, and Northeastern Michigan, I detail how the social particularities of each zone inform Chicana/o cultural productions rooted in the promise of empowerment and the possibility of cross-cultural solidarity. I assert that highlighting localized variations on these themes amplifies contrapuntal solidarities specific to each region, the relationship between different, locally conceived conceptions of Chicana/o identity, and the interplay between Brown and Black aesthetic practices in urban centers near national borders.

Many current debates about Chicana/o identity overlook the idiosyncrasies of life captured in localized literary texts and musical compositions. While expansive and thorough, these debates often elide the complementary roles of sounds and sentences in the construction of regionally specific conceptions of individual and communal identity. Thus, through literary critical and ethnomusicological frameworks, I engage the rhetorical patterns that link poetry, jazz improvisation, essays, musical playlists, and corridos to illumine a web of discourses helping to establish the idiosyncratic yet complimentary cultural mores that shape localized social imaginaries in the United States.¹

A note held and transformed in each of the zones I analyze is that of Aztlán: a Mesoamerican city retrieved from the pages of history and used as a symbol of empowerment during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Writers in each of the zones I analyze

¹ While Chicana/o cultural productions emerge from more than just the zones I feature, I focus on Texas, California, and Michigan because of their differing social and physical geographies; Texas and California are at opposing ends of the U.S.-Mexico divide, and Michigan, bordering Canada, provides yet another extreme contrast.
define Aztlán according to their politics and thus encapsulate their visions of equality—visions informed by local soundscapes and cross-cultural solidarities. As opposed to the essentialist overtones embedded in Chicano Nationalists’ uses of Aztlán, the artists in my study present this geo-conceptual zone as porous and reflective of their varying local struggles—as a blank canvas on which to paint personal experience.

While the artists in my study render their varied experiences in complicated ways, reading them against each other proves an ever more complex endeavor; thus, I present improvisation and counterpoint as organizing metaphors for describing the generation and comparison of new identities.\(^2\) Using improvisation as a model for reading affords us insights into the creative processes of marginalized communities; using counterpoint encourages us to detail how these creative processes come together in a multifaceted whole.\(^3\) Thus, as metaphors for cultural production, these musical concepts provide a useful framework for mapping how Chicana/o artists come to articulate their subjectivities, and how those subjectivities vary by region rather than conform to reductive conceptions of Chicana/o identity as informed only by Mexican and Anglo-American dissonances. Just as contrapuntal melodies move independently, converging and diverging at different moments over time, so too do the focuses of Chicana/o artists striving for social change in their respective parts of the United States. With this in mind, I


\(^3\) While cultural theorist and trained pianist Edward Said pioneered his own contrapuntal criticism in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), my approach differs from his on two fronts. First, I do not suggest a teleological end to social dissonance by using counterpoint as a metaphor for understanding cultural production; in fact, I resist this by pairing it with uncertainty, offsetting any contrapuntal mandate of prescriptive order with improvisation. In other words, in the theoretical framework of this thesis, I place counterpoint and improvisation in a dialectical relationship both as musical phenomena and as social metaphors to create a more balanced, democratic mode of cultural critique—to engineer a set of critical checks and balances.

Second, I concern myself not just with music as metaphor, but actual music—music as sound, as event, as a site of knowledge production. I pair the knowledge-generating capacities of literature and music to amplify an already existent, organic relationship between the written and the sonic, the linguistic sign and the musical sign. It is my understanding that this theoretical framework has the potential to generate productive juxtapositions—improvisatory, epiphanic realizations.
amplify each zone in my study as a semi-independent melody in a larger contrapuntal narrative, and thus illumine Chicana/o artists’ idiosyncratic yet complimentary efforts to use literature and music as platforms for improvising new identities, strategies for dealing with political and social strife, tools for enacting social change and community building, and, as Kenneth Burke would write, equipment for living.4

To accomplish this, in the first chapter, I engage the writings of Raúl R. Salinas, a Xicanindio poet and political activist who borrows from the jazz idiom when forging his unified, inclusive vision of Chicana/o identity. Specifically, I argue that through his political articles, poetry, and jazz criticism, Salinas expands the field of Chicana/o identity to include African-American intellectual and aesthetic practices, challenging notions of the South Texan Chicana/o, or tejana/o, as simply a hybrid of Northern Mexican and Anglo-Texan cultures. Salinas, writing from within the borderlands of Black and Brown aesthetic practices in the context of one of Texas’s most culturally rich cities, provides us an unparalleled look at the entwining narratives of Mexican American and African American cultural history in the American Southwest.

In the second chapter, I turn from Texas to California and amplify local resonances between Chicano poetry, jazz improvisation, the essay form, and the deejay’s practice of juxtaposing musical samples to create new compositions, mapping a system of shared poetics in the process. Further, I describe how Chicano poet Alurista and tijuanense essayist-DJ Rafa Saavedra activate these poetics from within the borderlands of the Californias in ways distinct from the other zones in this study. In brief, I argue that Alurista and Saavedra’s associative poetics reflect and contribute to the heterogeneous soundscape of the Californian borderlands

and shape a regional imaginary of the San Diego/Tijuana border informed by Mexican, Mexican American, and African American aesthetic practices.

In the third chapter, I shift from the Californias to Michigan and engage inclusive politics and local solidarities by analyzing the works of poet Trinidad Sanchez, Jr. and musician Sixto Rodriguez. In effect, I argue that discourses emerging in the American Southwest migrate to and thrive in Detroit, MI, contributing to a social imaginary unique to the city’s realities; this imaginary imbues Sanchez and Rodriguez’s works with the energies of the U.S.-Mexico border and Detroit’s Black and Brown soundscapes, allowing their arguments for universal justice to resonate with marginalized communities throughout the Global South, though particularly in South Africa.

Finally, after amplifying localized enunciations of Chicana/o identity and cross-cultural solidarity in Texas, California, and Michigan, I complement these three zones with a conceptual fourth—a space of in-betweeness, of sonic modulation, of newness not bound to one specific location, but informed by many and free to move between them via linguistic and sonic code switching. In this modulatory fourth chapter, I unpack the works of musician Lila Downs and Chicana intellectual Gloria Anzaldúa to engage a vision of inclusion that moves toward a new key: a contemporary Coatlicue State.5 In short, I argue that Downs’s music allows us to read mestiza aural and literary imaginations as complementary, as well as to hear sonic border crossings as strategies for imagining unrealized zones of inclusion.

The celebration of opposing and oppositional energies encapsulates what we see occurring on a larger scale when reading the works of Salinas, Alurista, Saavedra, Sanchez, Rodriguez, and Downs as contrapuntal voices, as well as Texas, California, Michigan, and the

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5 For Gloria Anzaldúa, the Coatlicue State approaches a transcendence of the oppressive structures of colonialism and celebrates a consciousness informed by liminality. For more, see “La herencia de Coatlicue / The Coatlicue State” in Borderlands/La Frontera (1987).
Américas themselves as harmonious at some instances and dissonant at others. As presented in this study, ethno-racial identity is a product of fracture and fusion, as well as inextricably linked to globalizing forces. Further, the artists I engage promote politics structured by a desire to push against mono-ethnic identity categories while also preserving and celebrating distinct cultural histories. This complex balancing act is a smaller-scale example of larger social phenomena driven by oscillations between local specificity and global connectivity. The balancing act between harmony and dissonance, inclusion and exclusion, sound and sentence, tradition and innovation, history and improvisation, and nation and self establishes each of these writers and musicians as visionary intellectuals improvising brighter futures across borders and barlines.
CHAPTER II

RE-IMAGINING AZTLÁN: JAZZ IMPROVISATION AND CHICANA/O ACTIVISM IN

THE WRITINGS OF RAÚL R. SALINAS

...in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where
space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and
identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.
- Homi K. Bhabha

I imagine Thelonious Monk—a man responsible, among others, for moving myriad
musicians into a freer, more modern form of jazz—would have chuckled through rising cigarette
smoke had he known his records would help Raúl R. Salinas, an intriguing Xicanindio poet-
activist, map the geopolitical borders of Aztlán onto mid-20th century America. Perhaps Monk
would have smiled, his dark glasses and daft hat tilting to the side, had someone told him that
Salinas would find a cultural counterpoint in Ralph Ellison by way of the Monk sound. Perhaps
Monk would have nodded contemplatively had he known that his music would contribute to the
soundscape of Salinas’s porous utopia: Aztlán.

Although Aztlán lives in the American cultural memory as a geopolitical space for
Chicana/os in the 1960s and 70s, Salinas presents it as a culturally-hybrid zone extending beyond
brown/white binaries. Salinas celebrates jazz improvisation as a component of Chicana/o
intellectual practice—a mode of thinking emerging from cultural exchange between Chicana/o
and African American communities in urban centers. In Texas, we can trace the merging,
splitting, and soloing of cultures by charting interactions between Chicana/o literature and
African-American aesthetic traditions. In this chapter, I deal with these literary-musical
counterpoints as manifested in the writings of a South Texan Xicanindio poet-activist, jazz critic,
and ex-prisoner: Raúl R. Salinas.
My argument is divided into roughly four sections: first, I briefly describe the project of “Aztlán” in Salinas’s political articles, as well as articulate a link between music and cross-cultural identity; second, I unpack Salinas’s jazz-influenced poetry; third, I analyze Salinas’s jazz criticism on Thelonious Monk; and finally, I describe Salinas’s Aztlán as a voice in an idiosyncratic, regional imaginary in the Texas-Mexico borderlands.

Jazz improvisation as a social practice is an entry point to an emerging discourse on identity studies spanning American ethno-racial, literary, and sonic disciplines. With this in mind, I argue that through his political articles, poetry, and jazz criticism, Salinas expands the field of Chicana/o identity to include African-American intellectual and aesthetic practices, challenging notions of the South Texan Chicana/o, or tejana/o, as simply a hybrid of Northern Mexican and Anglo-Texan cultures. Rupturing this binary is part of Salinas’s larger vision: to map his own Aztlán as an improvising space rather than a cultural essentialism—as an inclusive utopia informed by his upbringing in East Austin and time behind bars. In his hybrid texts, Salinas amplifies Aztlán as a geo-conceptual zone in which marginalized communities, Brown and Black, are free to code-switch between cultures, sing in Other keys, and solo over the borders and barlines dividing the American social landscape.

Resisting Borders and Barlines: Salinas as Political Activist

In the 1960s and 70s, Chicana/o artists theorized an ethno-racial identity rooted in the land of the American Southwest. Chicana/o poets, musicians, and visual artists amplified their indigenous origins, fueling an emerging mode of Chicana/o representation in the American socio-political realm. In short, these indigenous origins crystallized into the concept of Aztlán, a space linking the Chicana/o to the Native American by way of shared indigeneity. Using Aztlán
as a vehicle, Chicana/o artists of the 1960s and 70s pursued political visibility by trumpeting social justice and the value of their ethno-racial identity, coalescing in rhetoric that made clear that they, as a people, were among the continent’s original dwellers and should not be swept aside, subordinated, or disregarded.

Salinas seeks to unite Chicana/o people in Texas by repainting the Chicana/o subject in the gaze of the American mainstream, doing so under the umbrella of his own Aztlán. Informed by years spent in a Huntsville Prison cell, Salinas focused his energies on a political project: *Aztlán*, the newspaper. The first issue of this periodical delivered his “statement of philosophy,” conflating Aztlán’s manifestations throughout history into a “site well within the boundaries of the Southwestern United States.” 6 7 This site was to be the geo-conceptual space in which all Chicana/o people were to find a home after a long period of relegation on various fronts: Spanish, Texan, American, etc. The final paragraph of Salinas’s manifesto announces his goal of “destroy[ing]” and “rebuild[ing]” readings of the Chicana/o figure in American society:

> The goals of our newspaper [Aztlán] are twofold: to Destroy and Rebuild. To destroy the Myths of the worthless Chicano; the misconception of his non-productivity; the prejudice that exists, for lack of understanding, and in the minds of many; the inferior feelings which we may, or may not, be possessed by. To rebuild the image of ourselves in the eyes of others; the dignity to face the world as Chicanos and Men; the sense of pride in who we are. And finally, to establish communication among ourselves and with our people, wherever they may be. We can accomplish these goals because: SOMOS AZTLAN!8

That Salinas’s aim is to “rebuild the image of ourselves in the eyes of others” foreshadows an aesthetic that responds to a history and culture of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. It prefigures an art and political focus born in opposition to the dominant

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid. 54.
culture. Though Salinas does not specify to whom he responds, given the historical moment, it seems he writes to all without the ears to hear the voices of a respected Chicana/o community. He does not suggest that the Chicana/o, defined in opposition to a hegemony, is perfect, but instead aims to uncover the extent to which Chicana/os have internalized the myth of their “worthless[ness]”: “the inferior feelings which we may, or may not, be possessed by.” As he states in this inaugural issue of Aztlán, Salinas seeks to repair the (self-)image of the Chicana/o subject—to create a new Chicana/o perception against the backdrop of its opposition. Through his energetic rhetoric, he aims to embolden the Chicana/o—to exorcise the haunting specter of worthlessness from American soil. Further, by dispelling this thinking, Salinas establishes a line of communication among “ourselves and our people, wherever they may be.” His qualifying statement—that people can find strength in Aztlán “wherever they may be”—highlights perforations in Aztlán’s borders that Salinas sews throughout his oeuvre like contrapuntal melodies. To be sure, Aztlán is synecdochical for the Chicano Movement; in the 21st century, however, it is also an entry point to an emerging discourse on border perforations in contemporary transcultural criticism.

Chicana/o aesthetics parallel its peoples’ heterogeneous narratives, and the multiculturalism of Salinas’s aesthetic mirrors that of the South Texan Chicana/o community. As literary critic Ramón Saldívar argues,

The political and ideological struggles represented by the narratives of Chicano women and men exhibit no necessary homogeneity, allegorical or otherwise. This means that the narrativization of the real, in turn, cannot exhibit a singular ideological instance, but offers instead a nonunitary, differential complex of social practices and systems of representation that do have political significance and consequence even when they operate…within the realm of the fantastic.9

The “differential complex of social practices and systems of representation” manifest in the text and music swirling around the urban barrios of East Austin, especially when Salinas called that space home in the 1950s. Further, Saldívar corroborates that despite Chicana/os’ common struggles, they “exhibit no necessary homogeneity,” meaning that their struggles are unique to their regional, sub-cultural contexts, as well as their historical moments. This is, as Chicana poet and critic Gloria Anzaldúa states, movement towards a new, hybrid subjectivity—a state of being “[o]pposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, [a] theory [that] is one of inclusivity.”10 Thus, a Chicana/o aesthetic cannot seek to represent a unified narrative of struggle, but instead offer a “nonunitary, differential complex of social practices and systems of representation that do have political significance and consequence.”11 On some level, the myth of Nuevo Aztlán—the idea of uniting Chicana/o people via a re-definition that in its very articulation is exclusive—is at odds with the complexities of varying Chicana/o communities. That jazz improvisation plays such an integral role in Salinas’s theorizing of Aztlán highlights his underlying effort to resolve this tension by defining a space by inclusion, rather than exclusion.

By tracing the salient characteristics of Chicana/o art-songs to Indios, Salinas privileges the indigenous strand of the Chicana/o identity. In a piece for Aztlan entitled, “Music for the Masses,” Salinas writes of music’s role in establishing a sense of cultural identity and inclusiveness. He states that people from varying backgrounds can only appreciate the music of Othered communities if they take the time to understand its idiosyncrasies.12 He follows with a

brief genealogical history of Chicana/o music as part of a greater Western musical tradition
descended from Europe, though muses on the idea that “there is a unique quality to the Chicano
form of art song. This quality, we can proudly proclaim, stems from the Indio side of our noble,
hybrid race.”13

Salinas’s tracing of the uniqueness of Chicano art-songs to the indigenous peoples of
America accomplishes two things: it subordinates the European influence on Chicana/o music to
that of an indigenous influence; and it privileges the indigenous quality of Chicana/o music as
possessive of inherent value. 14 Salinas privileges the drops of native blood rooting Chicana/o
peoples in American soil, and suggests that an indigenous spirit manifests in Chicana/o art: that
the Indio spirit in Chicana/o music is representative of its aesthetic value. However, Salinas
rejects the drops of Chicana/o blood steeped in Spanish colonialism—that shadow gene in the
Chicana/o’s DNA that subsumes other cultures, speaks for them, and imposes on them its own
systems of value. Because Chicana/os are a “noble, hybrid race,” one cannot overlook this
cultural chromosome: the colonial dialectic, a byproduct of Hegelian philosophy, constructs a
portion of the Chicana/o identity, ultimately complicating the Chicana/o figure’s re-presentation
in America. Salinas wrestles with these dual heritages in his writings and ultimately offers jazz
improvisation as a possible solution to the brown/white binary plaguing the Chicana/o’s identity
formation. By privileging the indigenous side of the Chicana/o genome, Salinas makes us privy
to a cultural desire for an underlying Chicana/o essentialism, and of a need to represent that
essentialism in art. These acts magnify a complex oscillation between the colonial dialectic and
the indigenous, oppressed genetic strands in the Chicana/o’s cultural consciousness. In short,

13 Ibid.
Salinas discovers a need for a new, non-essentialist discourse beyond the Indio/Spanish binary underlying the Chicana/o’s *mestizo* past.

Salinas resolves this dissonance by incorporating jazz improvisation into his *Xicanindio* genealogy and modes of representation. Jazz, another indigenous American cultural product, is rooted in African American intellectual practices. Salinas reconciles his privileging of the essential qualities of Chicana/o identity by creating a hybrid aesthetic and a cultural dialogue among the nation’s marginalized communities. The Chicana/o and the African American, as ethno-racial communities in a quasi-musical partnership, converse and create in opposition to the dominant, oppressive environment in which they find themselves, and improvise out of their respective cultural traditions ways to describe their experiences in the American body politic without falling into the traps of colonial thought. Therefore, Salinas’s Aztlán is a conceptual solo improvised out of not one, but many traditions, sounding in opposition to a single oppressive force. While this metaphor has its limitations, it is a useful way to rethink Aztlán as an inclusive definition of marginalized identity.¹⁵

Salinas wrote to reimagine the Chicana/o figure in the American public, and I write to amplify his Aztlán as a space extending into ethno-racial categories beyond the Chicana/o in writing and sound. In an interview at Stanford University in 1994, Salinas echoes this sentiment as he describes music as a form of oppositional rhetoric among his barrio brethren:

> Music became another form of resistance. I said it somewhere, “Here I was a Mexican Indian and one of the most racist prisons in the country writing about African-American music.” To me that certainly was a form of defiance and a form of resistance. So I began to write jazz articles. Then as I develop my writing, my poetry I began to write jazz poetry. I then took the next logical step of development and transformation and then I actually picked up a horn.¹⁶

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Here, Salinas links his interest in and incorporation of jazz improvisation into his own works as a means of resistance. He entwines jazz rhythms and sounds with his own poetic voice as a step toward “transformation.” Salinas differentiates himself from many professional musicians and composers in that he writes about oppositional music in a critical sense before incorporating it into his own artistic production. To an extent, that Salinas first cuts his teeth on jazz criticism echoes his “Music for the Masses” piece in *Aztlán*: one must work to understand a culture’s musical tradition if one is to appreciate it. Further, Salinas reiterates that he is of Mexican and Native American descent, yet while imprisoned in a dangerous institution, he chooses to funnel his energies into writing about jazz—a musical tradition that, strictly in terms of his heritage, is foreign to him. Rather than write exclusively about Chicana/o music, he draws inspiration from his upbringing alongside African Americans in East Austin’s *barrios* to establish himself as a jazz critic.

Further, Salinas redraws the boundaries of Aztlán to accommodate the bonds he formed with his prisonmates. As he states later on in the interview, “My brother’s in the next cell with me, and he happens to be black, and I am brown, and next to us our brother is white, and you can’t afford anymore to make those distinctions.”\(^{17}\) The prison is a microcosm of the world beyond the walls. Salinas accomplishes his transformation via a melding of jazz improvisation with a burgeoning Chicana/o identity; as he also stated in the interview, “…I didn’t know that I was adopting this jazz thing as a tool of defiance and resistance. I was doing it because here was a people marginalized on the streets who had a music like I did, who had a culture, like I did.”\(^{18}\) Jazz defies the model of much scripted music by allowing soloists to explore their worlds in real time and interact freely with their fellow musicians; Salinas, realizing that he shared a culture

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\(^{17}\) Ibid, 319.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
with “people marginalized on the streets” latched on to jazz because of its communal energies. Thus, as Salinas sought to reimagine a conceptual space—an America—that could accommodate the transcultural, transracial bonds he formed in prison and in East Austin, he articulated, as a result of a conscious incorporation of an African American musical tradition into the representation of Chicana/o identity, an Aztlán that is perforated, complex, and the product of improvisation as a social practice.

Transcending Borders and Barlines: Salinas as Jazz Artist

In his Xicanindio poetry, Salinas experiments with form in ways that reflect his deep appreciation for the jazz idiom. On the page and musical stage, Salinas presents a version of the Chicana/o experience that reflects his solidarity with African Americans and, by extension, highlights the role of urban soundscapes in the creation of ethno-racial literatures. Of the many poems in Salinas’s seminal work, Un Trip Through the Mind Jail: y Otras Excursions (1980), “Jazz: A Nascence,” “Epiphany,” “No Tears for Pearl,” and “Song for Roland Kirk” speak directly to Salinas’s interest in jazz improvisation as a literary, musical, and cultural modality out of which Chicana/os can improvise new identities.

From his Huntsville Prison cell, Salinas envisions a life beyond bars by building musical structures into his poetic forms, crossing ethno-racial borders in the process; “Jazz: A Nascence” illustrates this imagination. Salinas splits the poem into two sections of text, one of which imitates a melody, the other a solo. Based on the musical roadmap Salinas provides—“(Part 1),” “(Chorus I),” “(solo),” and “(out)”—this poem is at once a piece of writing and a jazz chart suited to the live performances Salinas later enjoyed. The beginning of the poem provides the
context—the metaphorical key, chord changes, and melodic hook—out of which Salinas
improvises a textual solo in the second half of the piece:

Late night SHRIEKING Sounds!
   commence
sweeping out the mental cobwebs
awakening brains from their torpor
tonal (poem) cascades
   Gently
washaway
musty/ dust settled within
thin lines of genius/ madness.

O’ JazzBird fluttering in the darkened sky,
the willows have shed their tears too long
does no one hear their mournful cry?

La Tejana / Huntsville 1964

In his solo, Salinas bursts into a virtuosic display of technique, riffing on the power of
sound as a tool for “sweeping out the mental cobwebs” and “awakening brains from their
torpor”; in this poetic parallel to his writings in Aztlán, Salinas comments on a torpid,
mainstream America in need of awakening. He then highlights his poetry’s hybridity by making
the word “poem” parenthetical, allowing readers to interpret the line as a description of sound
and the process by which hybrid poetry can cleanse the “musty/ dust” in the cognitive borders
between ideologies—between the “genius” of a home ideology and the “madness” of the
Other’s. Salinas ends his solo with an apostrophe to the “JazzBird,” tapping into the well of
literary tradition to improvise in a social realm under a “darkened sky.” The “willows” weeping
for change, stuck in a never-ending minor key, resonate with the marginalized people among
whom Salinas counts himself. Their yet unheard “mournful cry” sets a precedent for a new kind
of song: that of the jazzbird, the muse of innovation upon which artists at the edge must call.

Thus, in much the same way Rafa Saavedra, a *tijuanense* border intellectual, would later mirror the deejay’s practice of sampling in his own essays about 21st century Tijuana, so too does Salinas translate the elements of a jazz piece into a form of Chicana/o poetry.

Salinas extends this line of thought by championing jazz improvisation and African-American political activism in “Epiphany.” In this poem, he directly addresses the Black America he has only alluded to through his literary jazz by recounting a reading by UMKC poets in the late 1960s. Their calls for social justice and ethno-racial equity resonate with Salinas’s efforts to bring about positive change for the Chicana/o community:

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i heard some black cats blow today
    who spoke of pigs, of being free, of many things.
    No Shakespeare/Keats/ or Shelley, they;
    no bullshit sonnets of nobility & kings.

Oh, No!
Their was street poetry/turn on poesy
    of the wake-up kind;
with snap-to-it rhythm
    the type that blows your mind.

Eric Dolphy knew
    & Malcom too

And so with clenched-fist i salute them:
Boss Bitchin’ Black Bards!
Spread out the deck and deal ‘em
it’s time to play some cards.
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(afterthought)

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the MAN’S stepped on our toes his final hour
from now on he should get
steady bombardment of our
People’s Power.\textsuperscript{20}
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\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 45.
In the first stanza, Salinas recalls the sound of “black cats [blowing]” solos, momentarily leaving their mode of articulation—poetry, prose, jazz music—undefined. Salinas then states that the “bullshit sonnets of nobility & kings” were absent from the soloists’ enunciations; instead, the improvisers focused on, among “many things,” freedom. Additionally, Salinas again trumpets the value of solos that can wake people out of torpor and into action: “street poetry/tune on poesy / of the wake-up kind.” He plays with “snap-to-it [rhythms]” as catchy, toe-tapping sounds and tools that call listeners to attention. Calling upon his own knowledge of jazz and political activism, Salinas then celebrates “Eric Dolphy,” a multi-instrumentalist and pioneer of free jazz, and “Malcom [X],” an intrepid African-American intellectual. Salinas does so while articulating his solidarity with these “Boss Bitchin’ Black Bards” by saluting them with a “clenched-fist.” Finally, at the end of his “Epiphany,” Salinas argues that the subalterns of the United States have reached a critical mass, stating, “the MAN’s stepped on our toes his final hour / from now on he should get / steady bombardment of our / People’s Power.” Thus, Salinas unites himself with black communities by celebrating African-American aesthetic traditions and political activism, determining that cross-cultural demonstrations of “our / People’s Power” is a step toward social change.

Salinas again echoes jazz improvisation as a tool for social change in “No Tears for Pearl,” doing so as he commemorates Janis Joplin for her contributions to American culture. In verse, Salinas captures the spirit of la frontera and Homi Bhabha’s theories on the creation of newness: “From nether regions / —out of desperation— / comes an unrestricted / SOUND!”21 In these “nether regions,” the geo-political, artistic, and cognitive borderlands, innovation emerges

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21 Ibid, 73.
“out of desperation.”22 23 In Salinas’s poem, Janis Joplin, a 1960s psychedelic rock singer, illustrates this necessary innovation as she emerges from a tumultuous nation-state bumping against its internal, ideological, and legislative borders. Her song “Turtle Blues,” celebrates her autonomy and stays with Salinas long after he hears it, “remain[ing] tattooed / forever on [his] eardrums.”24

Salinas paints jazz improvisation as central to his vision in “Song for Roland Kirk,” championing the jazz multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk as a guiding light for marginalized communities. At the outset of the poem, Salinas provides a parenthetical subtitle that also reads as a map for musicians with whom Salinas would later perform: “(in a minor blues mode).”25 In his first extended sentiment, Salinas praises Kirk for “dispelling fears / of / being / Sane” and concludes that Kirk, “in spirit tongues,” and “jokes / of / Hurt & Pain / Raining / Jazz / Tears,” was “close / to / Something.”26 Salinas later states that the sounds of “Struggling Saxophones” battling through improvisation were “SOUNDS / that somehow / made it / RIGHT / for / US”—for those “crowds of jazz” in “1950s Austin” to which Salinas and his barrio brethren belonged.27 Finally, Salinas links Kirk’s widespread appeal to his “talk[ing] to trees,” echoing Salinas’s attention to the “willows” in “Jazz: A Nascence.”28 29 Thus, through praise, Salinas involves Kirk in the construction of an inclusive, transcultural Aztlán.

24 Ibid, 74.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid, 179.
28 Ibid, 180.
29 Ibid, 43.
In his written poetry, Salinas captures the improvisatory spirit of jazz music; his experimentations with form and focus on cross-cultural solidarity position his utopic vision of Aztlán as an inclusive zone informed by his prison years and urban upbringing. In addition to his written efforts, Salinas also participates as a voice in actual jazz ensembles, reciting his poetry in the context of live performance. Of the many pieces he produced, “Riffs 1” and “Tejazz” on *Los Many Mundos Of Raúlrsalinas: Un Poetic Jazz Viaje Con Friends* (2000) concretize the post-binary hybridity Salinas senses as necessary for social progress. In lieu of a musical score, I provide a textual transcription of both pieces:

“Riffs 1”


Whenever I hear Lester (Young) blow his tenor saxophone . . .

[A ride cymbal enters with a swing pattern, followed by an upright bass.]

Jazz was 1950s hipster days of dingy, yellow chords, cashmeres of forest green, lean and keen, we called each other “Miles” and “Diz” and “Sir.” We sat in East Austin town cafes and grills thrilled with talks of Herschel Evans, Chu Berry, and the Prez. Enigmas of Joe Albany, (Lennie) Tristano, educated tunes. No moonlight in Vermont.

[Salinas gives way to a bass solo, then a drum solo that dissolves musical time over the barline.]

No moonlight in Vermont, no educated tune. Instead those stigmatized sounds, so close to bird and but, to jug and stiff, blues up and down, blues up and down. . .

Whenever I hear Lester blow his tenor saxophone . . .

In this piece, Salinas recounts his first experiences with jazz, doing so through the jazz idiom itself. He references many notable musicians, including Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Herschel Evans, Chu Berry, Joe Albany, and Lennie Tristano, though gives special preference to

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Lester Young by opening with the melody of Charles Mingus’s eulogistic “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat.” Each of these musicians pushed the boundaries of improvisation and form during their careers, and that Salinas latches onto their sounds only complements his efforts as a Xicanindio poet-activist. That Salinas followed these artists in 1950s Austin amplifies the cross-cultural solidarity of Mexican and African Americans in the barrio; further, that these artists impressed Salinas enough to, roughly fifty years later, compel him to compose and perform a hybrid text celebrating their “stigmatized sounds” is a testament to their resonance with his vision. While “Riffs 1” lives up to its title by recording Salinas’s nascent grooves on jazz improvisation and South Texan Chicana/o identity, “Tejazz,” another of Salinas’s jazz pieces, crystalizes his vision into sounds reminiscent of Roland Kirk.

“Tejazz”

[The piece begins with a bass solo, followed by saxophone and ride cymbal colors that lead into a swing pattern, a broken walking-bass line, and “comping” from the saxophone. Salinas then begins to solo through spoken word.]

Tejazz, music que dejas, senses saboreando, no mas Tomás, coloriando en not-too-subtle shades, blending hues, rendering ballads and blues, does dearly paid for, nothing yet, tripping on sentimental viajes, Southwest jump style, mystic smiles for middle-eastern sounds.

Subterranean elefantes in flames framed in 1950s South Tejas orquesta, precursor [Tiajualez] stride, on the sunny side of river city streets, ten-time tenor, titan, titán locos tus tunes compa of urban, rural jazzmanias.

Premont besos for Quintana, grown up, uptown, uptempo, Latin and saucy, pursuing the spirit, eight Rios to cross. Bosby blowing freeflowing phrases in funkng frenzy, jovitas al fresco, pachangas on the patio, lusty licks of Ofally trickster diablo, endangered species sing in soulful song.

There’s a train a-coming. There’s a train a-coming. Mellow tejana mama moods make good medicine, a taste of the dames, cooling for a spell, hellish devil of the haunting horns. Dale gas, Tomás, dale gas, Tomás.

[The saxophone takes over. The trapset provides occasional interjections and stylistic changes, including loud rim-knocks. The bass explores the upper register before the saxophone soars into...
an exploratory phrase. The trio then evaporates, and the lone saxophone drifts through the end of an idea.]31

Salinas’s code-switching portmanteau of “Texas” and “jazz” in “Tejazz” (pronounced “Tejas”) marries his Mexican-American experience in urban Texas with jazz improvisation. After a short instrumental introduction, Salinas provides a phenomenological description of “Tejazz,” following the contours of the senses as they rise and fall with Tomás Ramírez’s saxophone counterpoint, occurring in real time. Through his interjections, Ramírez colors Salinas’s soundscape in “not-too-subtle shades, blending hues [and] rendering ballads and blues” in short, lyrical phrases. Salinas invites the listener to enjoy the interplay between his spoken words and the sounds of the saxophone—to relish entwining linguistic and musical signifiers as they dance in real time. By doing so, Salinas concretizes his poetry as a form of jazz improvisation, elevating it from extended metaphor to a leading voice in a jazz quartet.

In “Tejazz” Salinas references “1950s South Tejas,” this time alluding to the “orquesta” ensemble of música tejana. By doing so through linguistic code-switching and live jazz improvisation, Salinas places African-American, Mexican, and Mexican American musical traditions in conversation, demonstrating that the regional imaginary of South Texas is one characterized by a counterpoint between languages, cultures, and expressive modalities. Moreover, rather than break into a coherent narrative after the introduction, Salinas grooves steadily within his phenomenological description of “Tejazz,” combining “pachangas on the porch” with “freeflowing phrases in funking frenzy” as parts of the same experiential fold. Finally, to end a long, lyrical phrase, Salinas echoes his sentiment about the emergence of an “unrestricted sound” out of desperation: “endangered species sing in soulful song.”32 33 This

highlights his own liminality and positions his larger concept, Aztlan, as a refuge for those at risk of erasure by an American hegemony.

Salinas’s live, hybrid poetry concretizes his larger philosophical project and complicates literary critical discourse by situating Xicanindio poetry in a “jazzscape” for multicultural audiences. During live performances, the musical and linguistic signifiers interact, illustrating the cross-cultural exchange Salinas trumpets. That said, Salinas’s vision of solidarity in Aztlan emerges not only from his upbringing in East Austin, but also from his years as an inmate at Huntsville Prison.

Behind Bars and Barlines: Salinas as Jazz Critic

While incarcerated, Salinas funneled his critical energies into his prison-circulated jazz column, “Quartered Notes”—an effort laying the foundation for his poetry. In his column, Salinas surveys a multitude of styles and artists, though takes special interest in Thelonious Monk—particularly in Monk’s role as jazz’s hapless painter. In the “Quartered Notes” column of April, 1964, Salinas reports:

When Monk plays his music, he is like a painter who stands away from his easel and slings paints at his canvas. But you can’t object because of the beautiful colors he chooses.34

Here, Salinas writes of Monk’s sonic experimentation in a sideways manner, via a comparison to another artistic medium. The image of Monk standing away from the canvas and improvising art by “sling[ing]” paint echoes, in a way, Salinas’s experiments with new modes of expression via his appropriation of jazz as a mode of thought. The “colors” Salinas chooses for

his experimentation are iridescent and steeped in many traditions—perhaps one being Indio, another Mexicano, and yet another African American. Though brief, for our purposes, Salinas’ description of Thelonious Monk’s sound and process in this April column speaks volumes of his translation of jazz practices into Xicanindio enunciations. Therefore, the impact of jazz music on Salinas’s subjectivity, and by extension, his conception of Aztlán, is amplified by his jazz criticism.

Monk’s impact on one of Aztlán’s most prominent theoreticians embeds him in the aesthetic code of Chicana/o literary and musical production. Of Monk, Salinas writes in the same April 1964 column of “Quartered Notes” that:

Thelonious Monk has always been considered somewhat of a weird and offbeat character, and his music has been described as the meanderings of a madman. Still, he remains an individualist, a prime requisite in the performing arts. Monk has yet to be swayed by the numerous schools and fads which have arisen since the advent of jazz. He lives in a wealthy land of dissonant chords, harmonic interplays, and rhythmic interpolations. From these he has never deviated.35

That Salinas sees Monk as an “individualist” and a “prime requisite” for art, and thus, for culture, demonstrates Salinas’s respect for Monk’s sonic imaginings. Salinas’s apt description of Monk’s sound as laced with “dissonant chords, harmonic interplays, and rhythmic interpolations” also speaks of Salinas’s grasp on complex musical structures—though perhaps more importantly, of “traditional” jazz practices, and, in terms of Homi Bhabha’s work, what the sonic representation of newness in jazz might sound like.36 For Salinas, then, Monk is a great model. He exhibits all of the qualities someone theorizing a Chicana/o identity would want an artist to exhibit—individuality, a knowledge of the aesthetic tradition, though also departure from it. Thus, we can position Monk as the sonic representation of the inclusive consciousness

35 Ibid.

Salinas fights to actualize through his art. Salinas’s jazz criticism affords us a look into the machinery of the Chicana/o identity, like photographing the microscopic components of human DNA for the first time. Moreover, for Salinas, Monk—as an aesthetic, genetic mutation—is an example of what he values in jazz and culture.

According to Salinas, good jazz is mimetic and “indigenous”; further, cultures mix in the musical and social structures of jazz music, and its sonic representations are, like the Xicanindio, native to the United States’ geographical space. In July of 1964, Salinas described jazz as a “product of our environment.” He continues by stating that:

Predominant in this musical environment is the African culture blended with the European influences. There are also traces of the Latin culture inherent within its structures. But it is a native American product, nonetheless. One which we should not allow anyone to defile and desecrate…especially if we are to consider ourselves enthusiasts of modern jazz.

Salinas acknowledges “foreign” influences, but hails good jazz as native to the American experience. While under the moniker of “America,” this consciousness echoes the indigenous qualities of the Chicano art-song and the identity encapsulated by Salinas’s Aztlán. This moment in Salinas’s jazz criticism places Chicana/o identity formation in conversation with the greater African American tradition from which jazz descends. Salinas, rooted in sonic improvisation, positions himself as a counterpoint to artists like Ralph Ellison who, engaged in jazz improvisation as it relates to finding a new form of novelistic, jazz-influenced, improvisational prose, extend into the world a novel improvisation—newness in the novel via improvisation. To the extent that, as Walton Muyumba argues, “the improvised mark is a useful place to begin thinking about identity formation and the evasion of racial essentialism,” we can

38 Ibid.
place Salinas alongside not just other influential Chicana/o artists and critics, but also jazz musicians and African American literary and critical contemporaries to read their collective artistic production like a large ensemble improvising identities of the oppressed.\footnote{Muyumba, Walton M. 2009. \textit{The shadow and the act: black intellectual practice, jazz improvisation, and philosophical pragmatism}. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 52.} Thus, through the lens of jazz improvisational practices, we can better understand Salinas’s role as a Chicana/o poet in a historical moment when American artists and activists amplified the coalescence of Chicana/o and African American folk traditions.

**Free of Borders and Barlines: Aztlán as Jazz Improvisation**

Salinas was laying the groundwork for his version of Aztlán when Thelonious Monk was on the frontline of jazz experimentation, pushing against aesthetic boundaries through lyrical phrases extending over the barline. In terms of Salinas’s Aztlán, Monk’s music is among the first of its sonic representations. Cultural critic Fred Moten describes Monk as a revolutionary figure “way beyond simply achieving”—as a jazz icon who “reorganizes and reaestheticizes the natural” “circling away from and back to the piano in the ecstatic pause of somebody else’s solo,” exploring, as in tunes like “Ugly Beauty,” the boundaries of harmony and rhythmic consonance in his own improvisations.\footnote{Moten, Fred. 2003. \textit{In the break: the aesthetics of the Black radical tradition}. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 167.} Through Monk’s sonic experiments, he refigures subjectivity by “reaestheticiz[ing] the natural”—an aesthetic of sound recapitulated via Salinas in South Texas and within the multifarious Chicana/o narratives from the 1960s and beyond. Thus, Salinas’s Aztlán is an improvised category that is, in part, aligned with Monk’s aesthetic.\footnote{Ibid.}
Further, for oppressed communities, Monk is a great model: what he does sonically disrupts the ongoing narratives about what music can do, how it should sound, and how it should be played. Of Monk as aesthetician and Ellison’s invisible man, Muyumba theorizes that they both “[realize] that by improvising and interpolating different cultural perspectives [they] can create new political space for [themselves] in Harlem and in America.”42 This is also the case for Salinas: in a style akin to Monk’s, grounded as it is in the jazz tradition yet radical in its innovation, Salinas seeks to improvise an improved “Chicana/o motif” in the context of the greater American soundscape. Just as Ellison aims to “push his discipline and creativity to absorb the sounds and emotions of American culture in order to produce a freer, more complex and driving form of the novel,”43 so too does Salinas in his jazz-infused poetry and politically-charged prose.

Though Chicana/o artists resurrect Aztlán to define an ethno-racial category, Salinas creates perforations for others to enter. In fact, the conceptualization of the Chicana/o body involves referring to the forces constructing it, including external, foreign practices in addition to indigenous traditions. Consequentially, even in a place like Austin, a city nearly three hundred miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, there is “border [of] culture-clashing, a prime documentary mode of border history, and a prime stage for witnessing the performance of interstitial hybridities and identities-in-flux,”44 as critic Josh Kun describes the literal and sonic U.S.-Mexico border. In the audiotopia of Salinas’s Aztlán, the borders are perforated by jazz improvisational practices. At this point in American history and onward, these perforations link the evolving Chicana/o identity with the similarly developing African American identity.

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43 Ibid. 78.
Monk’s dissonances and jarring rhythms, praised by Salinas, permeate an Aztlán designed to be inclusive for those with ears to hear while simultaneously unifying Chicana/os across America. Thus, just as Jocelyne Guillbaut argues, “Musical discourses are therefore conceived not as the mere reflection of racial projects, but rather as being actively engaged in their very production.” Salinas’s Aztlán as engaged in the production of Chicana/o identity and articulated as a poetic improvisation is a form appropriate to its content—a hybrid space and sound for a hybrid people. Therefore, I describe Salinas’s Aztlán as the product of a jazz-like improvisatory practice.

Salinas’s Aztlán is a solo played in the context of a metaphorical, multicultural ensemble riffing on identity during the Civil Rights movement. As he states in his Stanford interview in 1994,

… as a player and a lover still today of music, the lights, the sounds of people on the streets certainly gave me that affinity with other people marginalized such as we consider ourselves to be and we lived in a community that was both Chicano and African-American. We were in a black community and the brown community that was mixed and so the music of that particular community certainly became a part of us. To this very day, as both of you know, I am a lover of jazz. Jazz is a music that I love and respect. I knew individuals and I followed it and became a student of jazz history.

Salinas makes clear that he is connected to other downtrodden people “on the streets.” He relays that he lived in “a community that was both Chicano and African-American”—that was racially and culturally mixed, implying the creation of, as scholar Ramón Saldívar so aptly names, a borderlands of culture—a Bhabha-esque third space created by the intermingling of Chicano and African-American people united by marginalization. Moreover, Salinas states that he and his people were “in a black community and a brown community that was mixed and so

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the music of that particular community certainly became a part of us.” The jazz improvisation in this community, as Muyumba argues, can be mapped onto social interactions as a way of understanding artistic and cultural production; the Chicana/o and African-American art-songs combine in urban settings, playing off of each other like jazz musicians’ measured interjections.47

Fundamentally, reading Raúl R. Salinas’s poetry alongside his jazz criticism and political writings enriches our conception of the Aztlán he envisioned by enacting the cultural porosity he theorized. Moreover, Salinas’s varying modes of writing contribute to the regional imaginary of South Texas’s ethno-racial, sonic, and cultural borderlands that differs from that of other liminal zones around the periphery of the United States. Salinas improvised his Aztlán as a geo-conceptual space for Chicana/os out of his own East-Austin, urban tradition—one characterized by types of heteroglossia, musical heterogeneity, and cross-cultural solidarity unique to urban Texas. As we will see in the following chapter, the interaction of hip-hop deejays with essayists at the San Diego-Tijuana border produces a related yet distinct imaginary born of that border’s realities. Nevertheless, in South Texas, between Mexican, Native, and African American cultures, Raúl R. Salinas’s experiences as a Xicanindio poet-activist equipped him with a border tradition from which to improvise and amplify an Aztlán free of borders and barlines.

CHAPTER III

RE-MIXING AZTLÁN: SONIC HISTORIES, ASSOCIATIVE POETICS, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING IN THE WRITINGS OF ALURISTA AND RAFA SAAVEDRA

Yet language as literature, as a transformative poetics, as sound, is itself a reality that invests us with the imperative to reconsider and review the very terms of aesthetical and ethical sense; that is, to rethink the very conditions of “reality.”

- Iain Chambers

At the edge of the Californias, a fence, high enough to tower over people yet low enough to taunt them, extends into the Pacific and reminds all who see it of the arbitrary gulf between those north and south of its posts. The surrounding area, characterized by heavy traffic and twinkling lights, is at once a conceptual and actual borderland producing discourses that have informed those artists who would argue for equality, articulate communal values, and imagine possibilities for social change. Two of these artists—Alurista, a Chicano poet and political activist, and Rafa Saavedra, a Mexican writer, DJ, and cultural critic—have not only written to remap this liminal zone, but also to remix traditional literary forms into hybrids pairing the sounds and sentences bleeding over the border fence.

From the 1970s through the 2010s, Alurista and Saavedra improvised bricolages out of the processes of invention around them. Through mestizaje expressions, they amplify the transcultural, hemispheric mixing of cultures occurring throughout the Américas through localized expressions informed by and acting on the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands. In the process, their writings extend across national and ethno-racial borders and barlines, creating a Nuevo Aztlán alive in the barrios of San Diego and the streets of Tijuana.

My argument is divided into roughly four sections: first, I amplify the pluralistic multiculturalism of Alurista’s Aztlán; second, I highlight Saavedra’s resonances with Alurista’s Aztlán and the music-making, marginalized communities at the San Diego-Tijuana border; third,
I theorize an associative poetics based on the musical sampling and essayistic juxtaposition Alurista and Saavedra incorporate; and finally, I outline how these poetics contribute to a San Diego-Tijuana imaginary in which sounds and sentences can remix reality and foster cross-cultural solidarity.

Musical sampling as a literary practice and associative poetics as a model of cultural production in the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands are entry points to pressing, contemporary debates about cross-cultural solidarity in urban America and beyond. With this in mind, I argue that Alurista and Saavedra’s associative poetics reflect and contribute to the heterogeneous soundscape of the Californian borderlands, in turn shaping a regional imaginary informed by Mexican, Mexican American, and African American aesthetic practices.

Reading Music, Writing Aztlán

Though at the western end of the U.S.-Mexico border, Alurista is not so distant from Raúl R. Salinas in his aim toward unifying Chicana/o peoples through artistic expression; and, like Raúl R. Salinas, he does so in ways that challenge notions of inclusion and borders—namely, by weaving varying musical traditions, including jazz, *tejano*, and *corridos*, into his literary expression, punching more holes in an already porous border to allow for ethno-racial crossings.

Alurista writes in “chicano heart” of *Floricanto en Aztlán* (1971), a monumental work of Chicano poetry, that “our heart sings in passional symphony / el amor a la vida.” Such

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symphonies—including “beethoven’s *quinta,*” as Alurista refers to one of Beethoven’s masterworks in “la música en mis venas navega”—are characterized by a complex system of contrapuntal voices, each with their own idiosyncrasies.⁵¹ Like in Beethoven’s Fifth, the spirit unifying each of Aztlán’s voices is one of resistance—of a constant search of resolution, visibility, and ultimately, triumph over oppression.

Through “la música en mis venas navega,” Alurista argues that the music in the veins of the Chicano people includes the “profane songs of Orf / carmina burana,” “beethoven’s *quinta,*** and the “*uirapurú de villalobos.***⁵² Though these different musical styles seem removed from the traditional music of the Mexican *bailes* that “*mis abuelos danzantes*” enjoyed—which Alurista also mentions—they all use resistance as a means of realizing an idyllic dream. Despite their wildly different social functions, Alurista repurposes these musical traditions in a different context: 1970s California. By positioning these traditions as part of the blood running through Chicano veins, Alurista calls for cross-cultural solidarity. His emphasis on the dance highlights the social function of folk music traditions; further, he implies that each of these varying musical traditions should, due to their resistant energies, act as anthems of Aztlán.

In “*tizoc no legó su pelo,*” Alurista encapsulates this line of inquiry, incorporating “the mystery of matthew’s / and bach / and vivaldi’s inventions / mi porte / portador de monk’s “nutty” / y la jarana yucateca and its joy” as all part of the Chicano experience.⁵³ Bach, a prolific and influential composer and the father of Western music theory; Vivaldi, a virtuosic violinist whose performances altered definitions of technical mastery; Thelonious Monk, an African American who, as we have seen through the writings of Raúl R. Salinas, was an important figure

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⁵¹ Ibid. 22.
⁵² Ibid.
⁵³ Ibid. 24.
in the evolution of jazz improvisation; and *La Jarana Yucateca*, a Mexican dance tradition, are all incorporated into the Chicano’s musical lexicon—are all tools for working through strife, and are all involved in building a Chicano presence in the American body politic: *Nuevo Aztlán*.54 55

Though he celebrates a wide variety of musical traditions, Alurista does not forego the importance of Mexican music in the creation of a unified Chicano identity. In “la casa de mi padre,” Alurista mentions “the cantos / *corridos y jaranas* / *boleros* / *baladas tristes* / and the melancholia of our passion / to announce our arrival.”56 Each of these genres of Mexican music come with their own idiosyncracies: *corridos* typically possess a resistant spirit and celebrate heroes fighting for their right, often with pistols in their hands; *jaranas* are typically festive and danceable; *boleros* are the sophisticated, cosmopolitan expressions of early to mid-20th century Mexico in the process of modernization; and *baladas tristes* emerged from *boleros* and captivated audiences throughout Latin America (as well as become a commodified musical form).57 The key to this passage, however, is that these musical traditions, conflated as they are in Mexico’s cultural memory, will “announce our arrival”: they will serve as the first wave of unification for Chicanos throughout *Nuevo Aztlán*.58 Though traditional Mexican musical forms announce the arrival of the Chicano as a politicized figure in the American body politic, there is difference in the Chicano’s blood, and that difference promotes inclusion—it is a passport, a welcoming agent, and the seed for new, hybrid forms of Chicano identity to flourish.


55 Here, I am referring to Alurista’s understanding of Aztlán as a mobilizing, empowering, solidarity-creating concept.


58 Floricanto. 27.
In poetry geared toward Chicana/o audiences, Alurista creates a porous Aztlan by tapping into a pluralistic multiculturalism and mapping an Aztlan to include Thelonious Monk, Jimi Hendrix, Beethoven, Vivaldi, and Mexican musical styles, as well as Ancient Greek, Ancient Mesoamerican, and 17th century European cultures; this is a type of cultural quotation that mirrors the productive juxtaposition in the essay form and the practice of composing music by stitching together sonic fragments. On top of intersecting mythologies—Alurista mentions Roman gods alongside Aztecan deities—Alurista builds wildly different musical traditions into his work, creating a utopian, cosmopolitan vision for an inclusive Aztlan—a realm free of the hegemonies plaguing Chicana/o peoples for so long and resonant with the audiotopias of urban California.\(^5\)

In addition to the music of Mexico, the jazz of Thelonious Monk also echoes throughout the Chicano populations of the American Southwest. As evidenced in a poem by another Californian Chicano poet, Juan Felipe Herrera, Alurista listened to Thelonious Monk as he theorized his version of Aztlan. In this poem, “The Second Aztlan,” Herrera writes,

…the second Aztlan is the chicano Aztlan Alurista reconjured in a San Diego barrio rented room with anthro books on his desks & bossa nova playin & thelonious monk albums & a red beret & more ceviche on the table & cut yellow wax peppers this Aztlan the one everyone talks about the second Aztlan singing songs from Tijuana to Utah in cave glyph arias …\(^6\)

Thus, just as he is for Raúl R. Salinas in East Austin, Texas, Thelonious Monk is also an important figure in the articulation of Chicana/o identity in the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands. Herrera himself even references Monk as part of the cultural imaginary out of which he articulated his sense of place in the world:


Because we got hooked listening to Indian Jazz in Chiapas.61

Thelonious Monk, / Janis Joplin, sip with me when you can. / I am out here playing my blues. / my autobiography of penny arcade rendezvous.62

In sum, while jazz improvisation drives Raúl R. Salinas’s Xicanindo poetry, Alurista uses jazz as only one part of a more pluralistic multiculturalism; in Floricanto en Aztlán, Alurista brings Ancient Grecian, Ancient Mesoamerican, and 17th and 18th century European aesthetic traditions together with Mexican and American musics, creating a written mixtape of Chicano identity by piecing together cultural samples, and thus, histories.

In this written mixtape, Floricanto en Aztlán, Alurista aligns African-American rock pioneer Jimi Hendrix with his Aztlán, regarding him as “el indio” who embodies “Cuitlahuac,” an Aztecan selected to lead the people of Tenochtitlán during the Spanish Conquest.63 This anachronistic merger of Hendrix with Cuitlahuac highlights the philosophical project of the DJ as a transformer of history—as one who pairs unrelated sounds and beats to create new loops for audiences to enjoy and adopt. In written form, Alurista reaches into the history of the American Southwest, retrieves a ruler who lead his people as they endured their own conquest, and juxtaposes this history against an African American rock star lauded for pushing rock music into a more driving, dissonant, powerful mode, code-switching between English and Spanish in the process. Thus, Alurista’s effort to remix reality through poetry informed by music creates a complex counterpoint between the rhetorics, identities, and cultures of California’s southern edge.

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61 Ibid. 19-25.
62 Ibid. 246.
Alurista wrote *Floricanto en Aztlán* in 1970s San Diego—a liminal, urban, border zone rubbing up against Tijuana; some forty years later, essayist Rafa Saavedra recorded *tijuanense* sounds in sentences. Saavedra’s writings explore the role of music in building communities by piecing together sounds constructing the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands both in his essayistic writings and as a DJ in Tijuana’s nightclubs. Of Saavedra’s many notable works, his recent piece, “Crossfader Playlist,” encapsulates the emerging practice of building community by piecing together available materials, written and sonic.

**Sampling Sentences, Scratching Borders**

Saavedra’s “Crossfader Playlist” is a piece composed of short, essayistic, vignette-like blog posts that approach Tijuana from a variety of perspectives to arrive at a fuller picture of the city and the subjectivity of one of its citizens. In this piece, Saavedra echoes the aesthetic of a playlist at a party (hence the piece’s title)—not quite a carefully mapped-out symphony made up of carefully crafted movements, but more of an improvisatory collection of essayistic attempts arranged as a *tijuanense* soundtrack.

In a short section of “Crossfader Playlist” entitled “Tijuana Makes Me Happy,” Saavedra composes a text that behaves like a piece of music made entirely of samples, ala DJ Shadow’s monumental *Endtroducing . . .* (1996). It also echoes essayist Michel de Montaigne’s practice of juxtaposing seemingly unrelated quotations against each other and against his own prosaic explorations:

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64 Saavedra also performed as a DJ in Tijuana under the moniker “Rafadro.”


The adjective good is used / to describe people / and things that in principle I dislike. / The adjective bad is used / to describe people / and things that in principle I like.

—José María Fonollosa (City of Man: New York)

I have always said Tijuana is the center of the universe.

—Luis Humberto Crosthwaite at the presentation of his book Instructions for Crossing the Border

Tijuana is not Tijuana.

—Fiamma Montezemolo

The section is nothing more than three quotations; one from a poem, one from a collection of prose writings, and one that is a poetic-philosophical redefinition of Tijuana as not itself. It is the in the interplay between each of the literary “samples”—through the associative poetics of quotation and juxtaposition—that the reader intufts a meaning between the lines (from within the borderlands manifested on the page), creates an understanding of the arrangement of the pieces, constructs a new logic for interpreting non-linear narratives and juxtaposed histories, and thus begins to exercise a mode of thinking that borders foster. In short, on a formal level, the juxtaposition of literary quotations and musical samples—and by definition, cultures and historical moments—is a form of liminal rhetoric that forces readers and listeners to create meaning from within the edges of quotations. This practice thrives in the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands for many reasons, though perhaps the most striking is that essayistic rhetorics, utilized in text and sound, capture the experience of living in a space in which multiple cultures and histories find themselves juxtaposed arbitrarily; it is thus up to the artists—the improvisers and DJs, the poets and activists—to make this reality of juxtaposition productive—or said differently, to produce meaning from the arbitrary juxtaposition of the U.S. against Mexico.

In “Crossfader Playlist,” Saavedra describes Tijuana’s protectors as individuals who marry hip-hop with “a return to the cholo aesthetic”—the “break beats” and “hard rhymes” typically associated with contemporary assertions of African American identity are here part of what it means to protect a unique city at the border of the U.S. and Mexico.

The ones who defend the periferia of la city point to hip-hop, a return to the cholo aesthetic, and wager their lives for the barrio; through break beats and hard rhymes they show what’s going on: violence, police harassment, the influence of drugs, the legacy of neoliberal catastrophe, the poverty of la city. It’s the seventies otra vez. graffiti without a critique, monosyllabic Spanglish de El Ei, poverty all riled up and concentrated in isolated groups of young folks who’ll die young.68

Contemporary _tijuanenses_ articulate the realities of living at the border through “break beats” and “hard rhymes.” On some level, it is as though the only way they can do justice to their experience is to be artistically pluralistic and inclusive: they borrow from the music around them to protect Tijuana and its inhabitants. By stating that this act of recruiting hip-hop into the fight for Tijuana is part of a return to the seventies—and by extension, the early days of the Chicano Movement—Saavedra evokes the projects of San Diegan poets like Juan Felipe Herrera and Alurista. While Saavedra does not refer specifically to those two poets, he articulates a shared experience of physical and conceptual space: Aztlán is to Alurista as Tijuana is to Saavedra.69

Further, Saavedra uses “poverty” to stand in for a group of people. By referring to people by their class position, Saavedra leaves room for other minority groups to join in the fight for social justice.

Through “Crossfader Playlist,” Saavedra seeks a strategy—a new kind of equipment for living—while using one. It is writing in search of an answer—an attempt at an answer. Thus, we


69 Tijuana exists as a real city while Aztlán is an imagined space, eulogized for never materializing in the way its advocates initially envisioned. However, Tijuana is as much a textual city—a city written into existence and mythologized in the public eye of two nations—as Aztlán is a mythic zone. It is with this in mind that I posit that Alurista and Saavedra’s aims as writers and public intellectuals are more aligned than one may think.
can regard Saavedra’s prose as essayistic—as tapping into the same literary-cultural-philosophical energies of which literary scholar Christy Wampole writes.70 Saavedra demonstrates these energies in a subsection titled “Culturosa City”:

What can be done in a city that’s devouring itself? Write a post-everything j’accuse fingering the criminal impunity, the police corruption, and a state overwhelmed by its inefficiency and the lack of strategies for attacking the first problem and controlling the second? Analyze our debilitated value system and its impact on social breakdown, the ideals of the drug-dealing youths and their connection to consumerism and generalized disillusionment? Entrust Tijuana over to some supreme power (whichever one it might be)?71

Further, Saavedra seeks personal, communal, and cultural resolution in the 2010s in much the same way Alurista does in the 1970s: through a hybrid, multi-modal form of literary expression.

Tijuana is our home, our border roots, our web of friends, our work, our dreams. Like so many who head out every morning to face the uncertainty and turmoil of capitalism gone wild, I can say this: I’m not afraid, I don’t want to be afraid, I refuse to be afraid.72

Saavedra fights for social justice and personal freedom, though not from white on brown oppression, but from narco violence and the fear it breeds—he improvises strategies to combat cognitive and physical terrorism in Tijuana, and by extension, a 21st-century Aztlán. Specifically, he states, “Our fight is for freedom, for the power to move around this city, nuestra Tijuana, to not let them defeat us.”73 Thus, Saavedra resists defeat and chooses to walk freely around the city as a form of resistance, venturing out of his home and into the streets of Tijuana as a way of reclaiming the city from nervousness and terror: “I walked a few blocks listening to Ciëlo on my

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid. 302.
73 Ibid. 304.
headphones.74 That Ciëlo is the soundtrack to this resistance is significant, in that DJ Ciëlo, a
Spanish musician, wrote pieces for the dance floor using many of the same compositional
strategies Saavedra employs on the page. These shared strategies, alive as they are in Tijuana,
highlight literary pieces and musical compositions as involved in the same process of cultural
production, reflecting and shaping the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands.

Through his futuristic literary production (the blog post as a 21st-century remix of the
essay form) and his tapping into the regional imaginary by way of textual quotation, musical
sampling, and DJ-influenced aesthetic, Saavedra breaks the silence—the root of fear—by singing
and scratching the written word.

In a fashion similar to Alurista in the 1970s, Saavedra recognizes a need for a new form
of expression to create better social conditions, and he improvises out of the tools he has
available—popular culture, philosophical and literary texts, connections to local dance clubs and
their DJs, borderlands heteroglossia and code switching, and an encyclopedic, eclectic
knowledge of music—a new form of literary expression that, just like many people at the San
Diego-Tijuana divide, moves across borders and barlines.

In “Crossfader Playlist,” Saavedra reveals his frustration over the scholarly ogling of
Tijuana—a frustration fueled in part by the act of studying Tijuana as a “[laboratory] of
postmodernity” as “unproductive”:

Tijuana doesn’t keep still, she moves, she’s moving, that’s why it’s so hard to get a
handle on her and why it’s so easy to put labels on her post-Canclini that all end up
saying the same thing, cracking a fascist morality that condemns what it doesn’t
comprehend and providing an undercover preview in real time of what’s to come. That’s
why trying to define what is always mutating, besides being unproductive, is quite
pretentious. You choose: Tijuana as a rollercoaster in free fall or the übertrip de tu vida.
O las dos cosas at the same time. No big deal, really.75 76

74 Ibid. 304.
75 Ibid. 307.
Saavedra, a *tijuanense* himself, instead seeks to protect and improve his community—to transcend the myth of Tijuana as destitute and combat the *narco* violence that is part of Tijuana’s reality.

Saavedra’s literary form mirrors his reality—from the DJs he praised to the city he loved, the energies of associative poetics, juxtaposed histories, and the piecing together of a new, remixed reality from the fragments of different cultures surge throughout the San-Diego/Tijuana borderlands, and by extension, Aztlán. In short, Saavedra’s literary form is a “post-everything,” futurist, global-yet-regionally-specific improvisation emerging from an urban tradition characterized by productive contradictions.77

At the end of a sub-section titled “I Love Tijuana,” Saavedra provides a for-the-moment answer reminiscent of those that essayists reach at the end of a tangential, investigative piece of writing:

I love TJ . . . for being creative in spite of its precariousness and for pushing on despite tremendous neglect, for its multifaceted character, polychromatic and metathematic, for its bar-hopping nights and obvious social contradictions, for its incredible audacity and its obvious ingenuity dealing with everything foreign78

In this answer, Saavedra celebrates the “polychromatic and metathematic” character of his border city, also emphasizing “its obvious ingenuity dealing with everything foreign”—this ingenuity, this improvisatory creativity, echoes the deeper processes of the essay form, the textual quotation, the musical sample, and the playlist or mixtape as a magnified version of the

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78 Ibid. 307.
same juxtapositions and combinations—of the same “piecing,” as scholar and poet Kevin Young writes.⁷⁹ ⁸⁰

In sum, Saavedra’s writing is evidence of a complex mixing of discourses at the San Diego/Tijuana border. Conversations about racial and ethnic equality and representation in both Mexico and the United States abound, and Saavedra, in a subtle, hip, and powerful way, expresses the fusion and fission of identities in Tijuana through an essay form that mimetically captures the sights, sounds, and sobs of Tijuana—his writings are a collision of musical traditions, languages, and cultures. Thus, to read the larger implications of his and Alurista’s writings in and on the San Diego-Tijuana cultural imaginary, one needs a new mode of analysis informed by essayistic prose and musical sampling.

Associative Poetics and the Literary DJ

Cultural quotation, literary juxtaposition, and musical sampling as forms of associative poetics, essayistic exploration, and improvisatory compilation—as a strategy for living in the borderlands of culture, as a tool for social change, and as a means toward realizing social justice—align Alurista in the 1970s with Rafa Saavedra in the 2010s, as well as extend Alurista’s multicultural Aztlán into the San Diego/Tijuana borderlands Saavedra represents in his DJ-esque literary practices. To unpack the greater significance of these practices in the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands, I turn to scholar Christy Wampole’s writings on the essay form.

⁸⁰ Saavedra published many of his essays as blogs. In an age where physical border crossings between the U.S. and Mexico are incredibly difficult, Saavedra highlights that sonic and textual border crossings can happen with even greater ease. There has been an inverse development between the difficulty of physical border crossing and the ease with which art moves across artificial boundaries between nation-states. Saavedra realized that online communities are a major part of social imaginaries in the 21st century. His text, in many ways, is what I would call a post-postmodern essay collection with hyperlinks to musical clips. That is, Saavedra has not only an associative poetics, but plays with the tenets of hyperlink theory. The greater implications of this, however, are beyond the scope of this piece.
Associative poetics, as described by Wampole in relation to the essay, emerge out of “the order of . . . themes” and “the choice of themes themselves,” indicating that “the essay relies on intuition—of the essayist, of the reader—to find meaning in an otherwise tangled string of anecdotes and miscellany.” Thus, if improvising, as Wampole notes, is “[selecting] words . . . from all available ones and swiftly [arranging] them in a configuration that produces a desired effect,” then musical sampling—and by extension, literary sampling—is an improvisation in which the building blocks are not words, but cultural fragments.

Ultimately, as Wampole argues of the essay form, “[the] cognitive connections that link together thoughts make for a dynamic text more interested in the relationships between things than in the things themselves.” This holds special relevance for Alurista and Saavedra, in that through their textual juxtapositions of musical traditions connected to specific cultures, they reveal more of their interest in the relationship between cultures than to specific cultures themselves—a dynamic informed by a geo-conceptual divide mediating two cultural imaginaries: the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

These ideas about the relationship between juxtaposed ideas, relevant as they were to Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century, are prevalent today in studies of sound and critiques of culture. As Kevin Young observes, “a mixtape . . . meant something, a collage of sound and even sense . . . and connections between songs . . . [were] audible, choppy, and done in real time.” Such choppy movements between songs allow listeners to intuit meaning from the spaces between the songs, much like the conceptual spaces between Jimi Hendrix and Cuitláhuac, as

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82 Ibid. 40.
83 Ibid.
with Alurista, and those between the textual quotations Saavedra juxtaposes without explanation. Thus, just as “black folk,” as Young writes, “[use] quotation, sampling, storying, and saving the scraps of things to stitch together something altogether more powerful” as a strategy for mapping culture, so too do citizens of the San Diego-Tijuana border zone to remap social space and remix a problematic reality into something better.85

If the “audiotopia,” as scholar Josh Kun writes, is a utopic, heterogeneous, sonic space that foretells a future to come, then the DJ—whether musical or literary—“[means] infinity and possibility—in other words, prophecy.”86 87 The DJ, whether performing on the stage or page, organizes through juxtaposition “a history found in fragments. A remix.”88 The essayist, whether seeking answers through sound or sentences, “[borrows] not just the outside of the thing, the sound, but also a bit of its inner form, its meaning and history.”89 Thus, as artists engaging in both types of borrowing to make anew, Alurista and Saavedra are as much contributors to the soundscape of the San Diego-Tijuana border, improvising new connections between unconnected aesthetic practices, as they are creators of a borderless imaginary, remixing culture across artificial divides.

If musical sampling is a way of reaching back into and transforming history, then when one juxtaposes disparate sounds together, their combination not only produces novel effects, but also provides insight into the current moment. By juxtaposing historical moments in the context of an essayistic musical composition—an improvisatory, hip-hop influenced dance hit in Tijuana, for example—one gains insight into how those pieces of history are still in the cultural

85 Ibid.
88 Ibid. 362.
89 Ibid. 363.
memory, as well as how the arranger and the audience are participating in resurrecting those histories for some new purpose. Thus, sampling not only produces remixes of sounds, but also historical moments. Aztlán, deep in the history of the American Southwest, is a history Alurista retrieves and remixes in his work, *Floricanto en Aztlán*. Further, as evinced by Saavedra, the associative poetics in essays and hip-hop not only resonate with each other, but also have a particular energy in the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands.

Alurista, Saavedra, and the San Diego-Tijuana Cultural Imaginary

Cultural production can reconfigure the social imaginary, and as a result, can change the social reality. Writing and music—improvisatory intellectual practices in the borderlands of culture—are powerful agents for social change and a means by which many artists work toward social justice and cross-cultural solidarity.

Marginal youths at the San Diego/Tijuana border utilize hip-hop, *música norteña*, *cumbias*, and rock to articulate their identities. The result is the creation of a space—a 21st century Aztlán, if you will—that is, as ethnomusicologist Jesus Ramos-Kittrell writes of Monterrey, Mexico, “a phenomenological arena of cultural production and subject formation.”90 By composing music and writing literary pieces, artists map out their cultural territory—a conceptual and physical space that shapes its subjects through a communal, regional imaginary.

Alurista and Saavedra do not utilize the same strategies by accident; rather, via a cultural imaginary, the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands provide these artists with tensions between local realities and global connectivity, equipping them to improvise new forms out of the materials that are immediately available. These improvisations, structured by intersecting literary and

musical structures, demonstrate that, in the borderlands, not only are “our monocultural national categories . . . not the most sensible structures for understanding . . . emergent cultural practices,” but also that monodisciplinary lines of inquiry are not the most sensible ways of understanding emergent, multi-modal forms of expression.⁹¹

In sum, Alurista and Rafa Saavedra are, in many senses, literary sonideros—historians, compilers, and improvisers who sample, scratch, transpose, and layer cultures to imagine new social possibilities. Cross-cultural, transnational, multimedia literary expression are the hallmark of their idioms, and from within the San Diego-Tijuana borderlands, the two write anew by binding together seemingly unrelated elements into new wholes: remixed realities. For these literary sonideros, associative poetics are at the center of communicating lives at the edge. As we will see via the sounds and sentences of Trinidad Sanchez, Jr. and Sixto Rodriguez, the border discourses to which Alurista and Saavedra contribute extend beyond the geographical divides between the United States and Mexico—rather, they reach northward into a storied city perched at the edge of the United States and Canada, and, albeit circuitously, find homes oceans away. However far these discourses travel, though, Alurista and Saavedra—distanced by time yet united by a shared, specific locale—remind us of the possibilities of improvising new forms of knowing out of tools immediately accessible, remixing life across borders and barlines.

CHAPTER IV

RE-MAPPING AZTLÁN: LOCAL STRUGGLES AND GLOBAL RESONANCE IN THE WORKS OF TRINIDAD SANCHEZ, JR. AND SIXTO RODRIGUEZ

“There is nothing like having a harsh reality nudging you along to make you feel that there is some virtue in song.”

- Ralph Waldo Ellison

Perhaps, when one thinks of Detroit, Michigan, one envisions a jazz mecca coated with fresh snow—where headlights cut through icy flurries and the driving pulse of Detroiter hard-bop urges people, bundled and browbeaten, onward through the cold. Contrastingly, perhaps one hears the corridos that echo through the city’s mean streets—those once-migrant sounds and stanzas charged with the energies of border conflict. Though it may seem so, these improvisatory and resistant traditions do not exist entirely separate from each other; rather, at this urban edge of the United States and Canada, African American and Chicana/o aesthetic practices—and, by extension, Black and Brown cultural narratives—entwine and engender localized forms of cross-cultural solidarity. Moreover, as demonstrated by the works of Mexican American Detroters Trinidad Sanchez, Jr. and Sixto Rodriguez, such solidarity resonates on a global scale.

Sanchez’s poetry and Rodriguez’s music, cast from this same Detroiter mold, exhibit a shared, resistant spirit; Sanchez riffs on jazz to celebrate a multicultural component of Chicana/o identity, while Rodriguez argues for social justice and inclusion in ways that echo the corridistas of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Though these two artists tap into Detroit’s varying aesthetic traditions to map locally-specific zones of inclusion, only Sanchez’s comes with a name: Aztlán.

As we have seen in the writings of Raúl R. Salinas in Texas and Alurista in California, Aztlán is a zone that transforms according to its theorizers’ local circumstances—for Salinas, the zone is marked by jazz in East Austin’s barrios, and for Alurista, it is characterized by the multiculturalism of California’s urban borderlands. In each case, the rhythms and rhymes in each
zone help construct an inclusive paradigm of ethno-racial identity. Thus, in theorizing an Aztlán from within Detroit, Sanchez extends these constructive efforts and remaps Chicana/o identity to include Detroit’s urban realities.  

Such realities shape droves of Chicana/o Detroiter’s, including Rodriguez—an earnest, enigmatic musician of now transcontinental fame. While unconcerned with Aztlán as such, Rodriguez demonstrates through his music a disdain for oppression echoing Sanchez’s particular mode of productive opposition, conjoining their efforts to enact social change. Further, their desire for justice, while informed by their experiences as Chicanos in Detroit, also exudes a global consciousness that links them both, in differing fashions and degrees, to apartheid South Africa.

Thus, if we, like Sanchez, define Aztlán as an inclusive state that simultaneously celebrates and transcends ethno-racial categories; if we tie this definition to his experiences as a Mexican American living in Detroit; and if we can read Rodriguez’s music as cast from the same experiential mold; then we can successfully remap Aztlán—or rather, its core principles—to extend from the American Southwest to the American North, and from there, to South Africa. Such a transnational remapping highlights a global consciousness that can emerge when marginalized writers and musicians riff on localized forms of oppression.

Within this remapping narrative, I argue that discourses emerging in the American Southwest migrate to and thrive in Detroit, MI, contributing to a social imaginary unique to the city’s realities; this imaginary imbues Sanchez and Rodriguez’s works with the energies of the U.S.-Mexico border and Detroit’s Black and Brown soundscapes, allowing their arguments for universal justice to resonate with marginalized communities in the Global South.

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92 Here, I am referring to Chicana/o activists who retrieved Aztlán from the pages of history to help articulate a politically enfranchised ethno-racial identity in the 1960s and 70s.
To accomplish this, I have divided my argument into four sections: first, I provide a brief history of Mexican and Mexican American migration to and cultural production in Detroit; second, I analyze Trinidad Sanchez, Jr.’s poetry in the context of Chicana/o identity, jazz, and cross-cultural solidarity; third, I amplify the resonance of Rodriguez’s music with Detroit’s downtrodden communities and the *corridos* of the U.S.-Mexico border; and finally, I unpack how both artists’ works, informed by local struggles and entwining cultural histories, exude a global consciousness by focusing on and resonating with marginalized peoples in apartheid South Africa.

Socio-Historical Context: Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Michigan

Since the earliest days of the twentieth century, Mexicans and Mexican Americans have made their homes in Michigan, specifically Detroit; from the 1920s on, the promise of field and factory work drew many people from Mexico and the American Southwest to Greater Detroit where they have lived, worked, and forged connections within the city’s multicultural landscape. However idyllic these migrations may seem, they have come with the cost of uprooting families from Mexico and the American Southwest and moving them, on faith, into a city that has had trouble welcoming such newcomers. In spite of such difficulties, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Detroit have found ways to map spaces in which they can be free to thrive, using poetry and music as equipment for blueprinting and building these inclusive zones.

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As part of this building process, many Chicana/o and Latina/o poets have made Detroit the subject of their creative works, including Jose Leyva Garza, Rosa Maria Muñoz, Jacqueline Sanchez, and, especially, Trinidad Sanchez, Jr.\textsuperscript{95} When aggregated, their writings produce an image of Detroit shaped by the perspectives of its marginalized Chicana/o and Latina/o citizens, many of whom have interacted with the city’s rich jazz scene for years. Thus, as an object of study for these poets and a haven for African American jazz innovation, Detroit effectively transforms Chicana/o and Latina/o identity as much as the presence of Chicana/o and Latina/o communities shapes the city itself.

As a spokesman for his community, Sanchez concretizes in verse the shared concerns of many Chicana/o people dealing with hardships on the mean streets of Detroit, infusing his writings with the energies of Black and Brown aesthetic practices and the search for a Chicana/o identity that celebrates difference rather than excludes it.

Trinidad Sanchez Jr.’s \textit{Why Am I So Brown?: Chicana/o Identity, Musical Empowerment, and Black-Brown Solidarity}

While living in Detroit, Sanchez published a collection of poems emerging from his personal experiences in the city: \textit{Why Am I So Brown?} (1991). Throughout this collection, Sanchez emphasizes song as a force of liberation and celebration—as a tool for uniting aggrieved peoples across physical and conceptual divides. The types of song Sanchez cites as key to his experience of Detroit range from the \textit{corridos} and \textit{cumbias} associated with Mexican and Mexican American cultures to the jazz entwined with African American cultural history. By writing about these intersecting Brown and Black aesthetic traditions in the context of a

collection about Chicana/o identity, Sanchez stands in solidarity with Raúl R. Salinas in Texas and Alurista in California; distanced from these writers and the U.S.-Mexico border, however, he writes in a slightly different key. In his collection, Sanchez connects the discourses of Northern Mexico and the American Southwest with those of the American North, remapping Aztlán to include Detroit’s cultural particularities. I amplify these particularities by unpacking six key poems in Sanchez’s collection, all of which reside in the interstices between sound and sentence, Brown and Black, and aquí y alla: “Poemaphobia,” “Again – Again/Again,” “Adentro el Calor del Invierno,” “What is a Chicano?,” and “Chicano Warriors.”

In “Poemaphobia,” Sanchez argues that literary production, musical mixing, and black and brown solidarity are interwoven forces of resistance; he does this by arguing against those who police literary, musical, and cultural canons, summing up his inviting, empowering conception of ethno-racial identity:

Are you afraid
my Chicano español, querido lenguage
of all the niños and their gods
will become the official language
or my brown canela-colored words
will rub off on you and give you
a deep brown cocoa-colored tan or
you will turn into a bi-lingual
bi-cultural, bi-lateral, bi-sexual
person with a little picante
in your step.

Tienes miedo
que no lo vas a intendar
por el simple razón
eres un baboso without any rhyme

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Sanchez, Trinidad. 1994. *Why am I so brown?* Chicago, Ill: MARCH/Abrazo Press. 90. Sanchez is more aggressive when writing in Spanish. The word “baboso” translates, roughly, into “dumbass,” though stems from the word “baba,” which means “drool”—literally, “baboso” means “one who has drool on his face.” He writes, “Tienes miedo / que no lo vas a intendar / por el simple razón / eres un baboso [Are you afraid that you will not “understand/intend” for the simple reason that you are a dumbass] without any rhyme.” In this stanza, Sanchez
y la policía will ticket your meter
or the Detroit judge will not understand
what poetic justice is?
Are you afraid
the music in the words, the corrido sonido
mixed with the Mexican Mora jazz
will shake loose your bones, you just might,
stand up, undress fully naked in public
start to dance, to jitterbug
with some salsa in your cumbia! 97

Through verse, Sanchez demonstrates that poets can write “music” infused with the lilts
of jazz and the tambres of Mexican cumbia to align their work with the other cultural
productions of their communities: “Are you afraid / the music in the words, the corrido sonido / mixed with the Mexican Mora jazz / will shake loose your bones, you just might / stand up, undress fully naked in public / start to dance, to jitterbug / with some salsa in your cumbia!” 98 By referring to Brown and Black musical traditions in his poetry, Sanchez equips us to interpret “the music in the words” as not only the lilt and rhythm of poetic language, but as the fusion of literary and musical traditions. To wit, in writing about “Mexican Mora jazz,” Sanchez invokes Francisco Mora Catlett, a Detroit-based jazz musician whose album entitled Mora! (1987) fused Detroiter post-bop with shades of Latin jazz. Sanchez combines this music with the “corrido sonido [sound]” that originates in Mexico during the mid-nineteenth century, thrives in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in the early twentieth century, and migrates to Detroit through the Mexicans and Mexican Americans journeying toward new opportunities. Within the space of two lines, Sanchez encapsulates the sonic border crossing occurring in Detroit’s mean streets, doing so in

works to discomfort monolingual readers of English to mimic how Mexican and Mexican Americans have felt as marginalized immigrants to Detroit’s mean streets.

97 Ibid. 90-91.
98 Ibid. 90.
the context of a poem that pushes back against protectors of a mainstream status quo by celebrating Brown and Black aesthetic practices.

Just as composers traditionally employ pivot chords to move from one key to another, so too does Sanchez improvise pivot words to shift from one language to another. In “Poemaphobia,” for example, Sanchez invents the word “lenguage” to bridge the gap between the English with which he begins his stanza and the Spanish to which he modulates momentarily: “Are you afraid / my Chicano español, querido lenguage of all the niños and their gods / will become the official language.”99 Later, he creates the word “intendar” by combining the Spanish “entender” (to understand) and the English “intend,” artfully confusing readers as they read the phrase, “que no lo vas a intendar.”100 These inventions, while mirroring Sanchez’s musical proclivities, are relevant to Detroit’s language politics: while celebrating Brown and Black musical traditions, Sanchez code switches between English and Spanish, often improvising words that, like his cultural identity, lie at the borders of both worlds. These movements between language systems, expressive modalities, and cultural histories reflect Detroit’s multicultural environment and highlight Sanchez’s desire to unite people by their differences.

In Sanchez’s “Again – Again/Again,” jazz music, children’s voices, gunfire, and parents’ sobs conflate into an echo heard around Detroit, reminding its listeners of shared struggles in this space of conflict.101 I quote pertinent stanzas here:

I hear the echoes –
sounds of jazz –
blowing through Detroit
for children whose voices
will never-ever play again.

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99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Here, I allude to Gaye Theresa Johnson’s brilliant work on Black and Brown solidarity in Los Angeles. For more on this topic, consult *Space of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity* (2013).
I hear the echoes
sounds of Uzis – handguns
tearing flesh/breaking hearts
of children playing in the wind,
I hear them again – again/again.102

That Sanchez “hear[s] the echoes – sounds / of jazz - / blowing through Detroit”
highlights two things: music’s ability to transcend ethno-racial, geographic, and linguistic
divides; and the shared experiences of the Black and Brown working class of Detroit. Like Raúl
R. Salinas in East Austin, Sanchez demonstrates that he breathes jazz-infused air, calling upon
improvisatory energies to forge an inclusive social imaginary founded on the shared struggles of
Brown and Black peoples enduring the “sounds of Uzis” regularly “tearing flesh” and “breaking
hearts.”103 104 In short, Sanchez writes of music as equipment for living in multicultural
Detroit—as a tool for empowering marginalized peoples, forging cross-cultural solidarity, and
improvising better futures with the materials immediately available.105

In his poetry, Sanchez aligns the jazz he hears in Detroit with the corridos of his cultural
history, forging a model of productive opposition and cross-cultural solidarity out of their
combination; moreover, by combining these musical traditions in verse, he also includes poetry
as a voice in the community building effort. In “Adentro el Calor del Invierno” Sanchez aligns
poetry and music as forms of resistance rhetoric that possess the potential to unify aggrieved
peoples against oppression:

103 Ibid.
104 Notably, Sanchez worked in a Detroiter prison for twenty-seven years—a fact that resonates with Raúl R.
Salinas’s experience as a prisoner in Huntsville, Texas.
105 Here, I refer to Burke, Kenneth. “Literature as Equipment for Living.” (293-304). The Philosophy of Literary
Recite a poem like a song born in struggle
verses which bloom from this reality
and from the dreams we all have of peace –
those which are full of the odors of Spring
the freshness of the flowers.\textsuperscript{106}

For Sanchez, “song[s] born in struggle” “bloom from [Detroit’s] reality” and include not only “Mexican Mora jazz” and “corrido sonido[s],” but “verses” that emerge from “the dreams we all have of peace.” Such visions of a better future imbue Sanchez’s poetic riffs with an improvisatory energy informed by intersecting cultural histories.

In “What is a Chicano?,“ Sanchez celebrates his ethno-racial identity as a source of enfranchisement, connecting it to music in the process. This act highlights Sanchez’s deeply rooted understanding of race and ethnicity as linked with sound and sentence:

\begin{quote}
What is a Chicano? / La pregunta turned into an echo / which surround me. / El calor, sol de medio día / warmed my heart / my pulse began to beat / drumsounds. I heard them sing / cantando canciónes nuevos - / trabajamos por la libertad / con hambre de la justicia / encontramos de nuevo la paz.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

In opposition to Michigan’s brutal winters, Sanchez states that meditating on Chicana/o identity enveloped him in “[el] calor, sol de medio día [heat, noon sunshine],” a light that “warmed [his] heart.”\textsuperscript{108} Further, Sanchez juxtaposes “cantando canciónes nuevos [singing new songs]” with “trabajamos por la libertad [working for liberty],” effectively conjoining the projects of music making with community building. His desire to connect these projects with his meditation on the fluid boundaries of “Chicana/o” identity are, for him, a source of empowerment against a backdrop of damaging exclusions Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

\textsuperscript{106} Sanchez, Trinidad. 1994. \textit{Why am I so brown?} Chicago, Ill: MARCH/Abrazo Press. 2.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid. 11.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
have experienced in Michigan. In short, for Sanchez, articulating a Chicana/o identity in Detroit necessarily involves an engagement with music, liberty, and justice; further, it reflects a consciousness born at the edges of the mainstream.

In Sanchez’s writings, edges are sites of possibility and routes to a transformed center. In “Chicano Warriors,” he describes this transformed center as one where Chicana/os no longer remain relegated to the fringes of representation, but thrive in a new, bronzed future: “Celebrando la fiesta at the center - / celebrando el futuro!” Sanchez concretizes this future by celebrating the birth of twins Andrew Daniel and Matthew Mildiftonso Mellado, describing their entrance into the world in a near-Biblical mode: “on the edge / this side of the new century / this side of the year 2000,” the “gods break barriers of sound / through darkness of cosmic time.” Using the birth of stars as a striking symbol for the start of new life, Sanchez draws attention to the promise of a new generation and the benefit of breaking sonic edges, referring to the stars as “bursting forth – exploding,” and thus “breaking[ing] barriers of sound.” These barriers, broken by the birth of “Chicano Warriors,” “[bring Chicana/os] to the center / del arco iris / con nuevos horizontes” and forecast a “bronceando el futuro [bronzing of the future],” suggesting a cultural shift in the United States marked by the regular breaking of sonic and geo-conceptual borders. Such ruptures not only underscore Sanchez’s belief in edges as sites of innovation and transformation, but also imbue his writings with a border consciousness unique to his Detroiter environment.

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111 Ibid. 8.

112 Ibid.
Thus, like the other texts in my study, Sanchez’s writings do not present a monolithic Mexican American narrative, nor do they merely exemplify local color writing; rather, they exude a border consciousness that is cross-cultural, multi-modal, and driven by the promise of ushering in a tomorrow in which the edge and the center are no longer mutually exclusive, but entwined. His politicized focus on Mexican, Mexican American, and African American musical traditions position him as a Chicana/o activist conscious of his social and sonic environments and determined to improve his community—a vision in harmony with musician Sixto Rodriguez and the way his folk-influenced, psychedelic songs resonate with the corridos of border conflict.

Sixto Rodriguez’s Cold Fact and Coming From Reality: Corrido Echoes and Social Justice in Detroit, Michigan

Emerging from the same Detroiter landscape as Sanchez’s poetry, Rodriguez’s Cold Fact and Coming From Reality constitute a critique of the city’s social strife congruent with Sanchez’s poetry and resonant with the corridos Sanchez celebrates as alive in Detroit’s mean streets. Though Rodriguez’s sound more directly resembles that of The Beatles and Simon and Garfunkle than that of the border corrido, his desire for justice, oppositional rhetoric, and narrative linearity align him with the corrido tradition and underscore his marginalization as a Detroiter Chicano. To highlight Rodriguez’s resonance with the corrido tradition, I analyze representative moments of his two albums in the context of scholar Ramón Saldívar’s theorizations and in the wake of border intellectual Don Américo Paredes’s groundbreaking writings.

If the hero of the border corrido tradition is a peaceful man provoked into necessary social conflict, the persona in Rodriguez’s songs is, by congruency, imbued with a corrido spirit.
Ramón Saldívar’s scholarship on *corridos* is an entry point to mapping Rodriguez’s parallels with traditional *corridistas*:

…the typical corrido situation posits a common, peaceful working man put into an uncommon situation by the power of cultural and historical forces beyond his control. The corrido hero is forced to give up his natural way of life by his attempt to defend his home, his family, his very community. 113

Rodriguez’s lyrics concretize these ideas, which is suggestive of an aesthetic link to the *corrido* tradition. In “Cause,” a track on *Coming From Reality*, Rodriguez sings these lines somberly:

Cause they told me everybody's got to pay their dues  
And I explained that I had overpaid them  
So overdued I went to the company store  
and the clerk there said that they had just been invaded  
So I set sail in a teardrop and escaped beneath the doorsill…  
…Cause the smell of her perfume echoes in my head still  
Cause I see my people trying to drown the sun  
In weekends of whiskey sours  
Cause how many times can you wake up in this comic book and plant flowers?114

The speaker begins by facing an injustice—having “overpaid [dues]” (which suggests that the speaker has been through numerous hardships). The “invaded” clerk and the speaker are then foregrounded as antipodal figures. The speaker grasps the injustice of this moment and sees similar scenarios repeated as “[his] people [try] to drown the sun / In weekends of whiskey sours.” The final moment comments on the perceived permanence of the social structures creating these experiences for inner city citizens. In the traditional *corrido*, the hero “attempt[s] to win social justice”; his concern for his own personal life and his own solitary fate must be put aside for the good of the collective life of his social group.”115 In “Crucify Your Mind” of *Cold


Fact, the narrator undertakes a similar task: “I was born for the purpose / That crucifies your mind.” The persona in these songs demonstrates his obligation to oppositional action after some outside event provokes him, in a sense, to fight for his right. While the specifics of this resistance differs between the corrido hero and Rodriguez, the cause and function of such social actions unify Rodriguez’s songs and the corridista’s tales as types of music that share an oppositional rhetoric.

Further, though Sixto Rodriguez and Gregorio Cortez’s acts of resistance differ, the two characters, if we may call them so, are comparable in their larger aims of transcending institutions, money, and oppression in the borderlands (for Rodriguez, they are in the American North). Cortéz chooses to fight “with a pistol in his hand” and Rodriguez with a set of “angry young tune[s]” to which “the system’s gonna [sic] fall soon.” The corrido hero--“the peaceful man who defends his right”—and the subjectivity presented in the songs on Cold Fact and Coming From Reality act out of a similar sense of personal obligation, a desire for change, and a feeling of greater social responsibility. The song, “I Wonder,” voices these similar interests:

I wonder about the tears in children’s eyes
And I wonder about the soldier that dies
I wonder will this hatred ever end
I wonder and worry my friend
I wonder I wonder wonder don’t you?

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Here, there is a double concern—a concern with the defenseless (read: children), and the extent to which Detroit’s inner-city social climate harms those children at the dawn of the seventies—a concern over how deep the rivers of trauma may run, and how early those in Rodriguez’s world must drink from them. ¹²¹ This is a note sounded throughout “Gomorrah”: “A story of pure hate / With pictures between / A tale for your kids / To help them to dream…

Gomorrah is a nursery rhyme / You won’t find it in the book / It’s written on your city’s face / Just stop and take a look.”¹²² Though Rodriguez himself did not write the lyrics to that song, its inclusion on Cold Fact is key, for it riffs on living in a society of deep-seated hatred—in a realm of stunted growth. Thus, Rodriguez’s songs, though structured by “idiosyncratic experiences” not typically found in the corrido, actually through these personal experiences reveal a “view representing the political and existential values of the [underrepresented] community as a whole.”¹²³¹²⁴ This project of the corridista is similar to Rodriguez’s aim to voice the concerns of browbeaten Detroit through his musical narratives of non-violent resistance.

As the corridista situates narrative within song, he does so in a linear fashion—though musical material repeats, binding the piece together, textual elements typically do not, instead flowing forward as if in prose. Many of Rodriguez’s songs possess this quality; most do not engage in the standard Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus (in which the text of the chorus is the same each time) construction common to Rodriguez’s contemporaries—The Beatles and Simon and Garfunkle.¹²⁵ This is yet another echo of the corrido spirit in the music of Sixto Rodriguez. As

¹²¹ This concern for Detroit’s youth is one Trinidad Sanchez, Jr. shares.
¹²⁴ Ibid. 32.
ethnomusicologist Ric Aviso corroborates, “When...repetition happens, the narrative flow is broken and the song is engaging in a sentimentalism that is not part of the corrido tradition.”126

A song like “Establishment Blues” speaks to this narrative and musical form:

The mayor hides the crime rate  
council woman hesitates  
Public gets irate but forget the vote date  
Weatherman complaining, predicted sun, it's raining  
Everyone's protesting, boyfriend keeps suggesting  
you're not like all of the rest  
...  
This system's gonna fall soon, to an angry young tune  
And that's a concrete cold fact.127

There is a linear flow to this song that stems from its lack of textual repetition. Rather than by repeating words, Rodriguez achieves coherence through repeating sounds—pairs of rhyming words in each line unify the piece—perhaps an effort to bring some sense of order to a chaotic existence. When Rodriguez does repeat sections of text, he “aims at the search for universal sentiments with his/her audience”—that is, that he seeks to uncover a greater meaning or truth behind events by meditating on them in song. 128 This meditation, although not in line with the corrido tradition, is augmented by its proximity to songs that are. The “universal sentiments” are emphasized by the fact that such moments do not occur on every track of the record. Further, the non-repetitiveness of many of Rodriguez’s songs creates yet another parallel between him and the unseen corridista of the Texas-Mexico borderlands, suggesting much about

Specifically, Willem Möller: “In the mid-70s, if you went to a random white liberal middle class household that had a turntable and a pile of pop records, and if you flipped through the records, you would always see Abbey Road by The Beatles, you would always see Bridge Over Troubled Water by Simon and Garfunkle, and you would always see Cold Fact by Rodriguez. To us, it was one of the most famous records of all time.”


the influence of the *corrido* on Rodriguez and in Detroit, as well as the effect that the spirit of such resistance music can have on marginalized people.

Rodriguez resists marginalization by seeking to transcend it through art—to rise above oppressive structures, rather than accept them uncritically. This disestablishmentarianism is mirrored by border peoples fighting for their right with pistols in their hands, aligning Rodriguez’s songs with the *corrido*: they are both resistance narratives that push citizens to challenge the social norms structuring problematic realities. That these norms fall to “an angry young tune”¹²⁹ rather than violence differentiates the *corrido* hero, Gregorio Cortez, from the narrator of “Establishment Blues,” though does not cast them as polar opposites. Although their forms of resistance differ, their similar genealogies link them inextricably: they both push for a life “on [their] own terms.”¹³⁰

Thus, Rodriguez writes music specific to Detroit’s social particularities yet resonant with the *corridos* of his cultural history. When combined, these social particularities and this cultural history produce an aesthetic with the potential to matter to people across cultural and even national divides. As I will now demonstrate by reading their works against each other and in the contexts of Detroit and South Africa, Sanchez and Rodriguez’s cultural productions, steeped as they are in the experience of being Chicano in Detroit, exude a global consciousness informed by their local struggles—struggles that, when traced back to the dreams of inclusion guiding Sanchez’s conception of Aztlán, come to remap it across borders and barlines.


Local Struggles and Global Resonance: Resistance Melodies in the Global South

Sanchez’s poetry and Rodriguez’s music, when paired as dual Detroiter voices, harmonize in terms of form and focus: their rhetorical strategies, critical focuses, and desires for social justice sing in tandem to produce a complimentary picture of Brown and Black marginalization in Detroit, as well as a global consciousness informed by their shared struggles with other cultures. By pairing Sanchez and Rodriguez’s works, I will trace their shared web of experience in Detroit, as well as their fascinating dual resonance with and in South Africa.

Formally and topically, Sanchez’s “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” (1991) harmonizes with Sixto Rodriguez’s “It’s Not a Song, It’s an Outburst: Or, the Establishment Blues” (1970): both pieces critique Detroit’s social landscape, are cumulative in form, and emerge from the mean streets of urban Michigan.\(^{131}\) For ease of comparison, I place portions of them side by side:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“O Come, O Come Emmanuel”</th>
<th>“It’s Not a Song, It’s an Outburst: Or, the Establishment Blues”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>The mayor hides the crime rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they wait for winter to go south</td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they wait on sidewalk grills for steam heat</td>
<td>Garbage ain't collected, women ain't protected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>Politicians using people they're abusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they wait for never-ending bureaucracy</td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they wait for the red tape to disappear</td>
<td>This system's gonna fall soon, to an angry young tune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>And that's a concrete cold fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they wait for garbage to be thrown out</td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>Spinster sells her hopeless chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some wait for the revolution</td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some work for the revolution</td>
<td>The little man gets shafted, sons and monies drafted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in order that humankind will not have to wait</td>
<td>. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>Can you pass the Rorschach test?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what are you waiting for?</td>
<td>It's a hassle it's an educated guess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what are you working for?(^{132})</td>
<td>Well, frankly I couldn't care less.(^{133})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{131}\) This type of critique also manifests in poetry of another Detroiter poet, Rosa Maria Muñoz. For more on her poetry, consult Ruiz, Reynaldo, (Ph.D.) *The Detroit Poets: Cultural Pride and Social Condition*, JSRI Working Paper #04, The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1999. 5.

Sanchez’s infuses his poem with the experience of the marginalized working class in Michigan by describing the everyday realities of those living far from privilege: “they wait for winter to go south / they wait on sidewalk grills for steam heat.” Rodriguez does the same by writing, among many other things, that “the little man gets shafted” and that the “[s]pinster sells her hopeless chest.” While Sanchez writes that “they wait for garbage to be thrown out,” Rodriguez articulates that the “[g]arbage ain’t collected”; while Sanchez criticizes “never-ending bureaucracy” by stating that people “wait for red tape to disappear,” Rodriguez writes of “[p]oliticians using people they’re abusing” while the “[m]ayor hides the crime rate.” Finally, while Sanchez writes of “revolution” for the benefit of “humankind,” Rodriguez prophesies that “[t]his system’s gonna fall soon, to an angry young tune / and that’s a concrete cold fact.” That both Chicano artists describe their Detroiter environment in similar styles unites them and their expressive mediums in the community-building effort.

Both Sanchez and Rodriguez’s pieces are characterized by a series of statements that lead to a climactic moment. At the end his poem, Sanchez’s reaches a climax by breaking the pattern of “they wait for . . .” and effectively calling Chicana/os in Detroit to arms, albeit in a manner different from that of “Death of a Chicano Warrior”: whereas the end of “Death of a Chicano Warrior” is commanding, that of “O Come . . .” is interrogative yet pointed, illuminating how Sanchez employs a variety of rhetorical devices to move his community into an active state. Similarly, Rodriguez ends his song by exclaiming that “frankly,” he “couldn’t care less” if he or his listeners can “pass the Rorschach test,” implying that a change in the cycle of suffrage is not only necessary, but reliant upon everyone’s efforts, regardless of their limitations. Formally, both

artists end their pieces by breaking patterns they have established, mirroring the kind of social change they aim to inspire.

Thus, both Sanchez’s poem and Rodriguez’s tune read as a list of grievances against marginalization in Detroit. That their criticisms resonate with each other highlights a web of shared struggles for Mexican Americans in the mean streets of late-twentieth-century Michigan; that this web extends beyond the United States and into South Africa highlights a global consciousness that emerges from the shared struggles of Black and Brown people in Detroit, as well as the sparks that form when their cultural histories entwine.

Just as Mexicans and Mexican Americans have migrated to Michigan and established new communities there, so too have Mexican American cultural productions traveled conceptually and physically across the globe to South Africa; in poems about Chicana/o identity, jazz, and Detroit, Sanchez also expresses an interest in apartheid South Africa’s aggrieved communities; through songs resonant with the *corrido* tradition and driven by the promise of social justice, Rodriguez unknowingly helps those communities voice their concerns. To analyze this enigmatic, transnational web, I amplify Sanchez’s celebration of Steve Biko, a South African political activist who worked against apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as evoke the overwhelmingly positive reception of Rodriguez’s Detroit-born, *corrido*-resonant music among liberal white South Africans.

Although implicitly, a thread connects Sanchez, Rodriguez, and Biko in a global web that transcends the boundaries of ethno-racial paradigms while also celebrating them. At the end of “Missionaries for the Year 2000,” Sanchez cites, among other notable figures, “Steven Biko” as representative of the kind of justice he admires. Sanchez describes followers of this justice as such:
Brothers and Sisters
committed to building communities
where liberty is proclaimed to captives,
where the rich are sent away empty,
prisoners are set free sharing the good news,
singing songs of justice/peace/love
songs of liberation.135

Sanchez celebrates Biko’s efforts to fight against marginalization in South Africa because those efforts, though rooted in South Africa’s local particularities, resonate with Sanchez’s own in Detroit. Meanwhile, many white South Africans in apartheid South Africa celebrate Rodriguez’s efforts to fight for social justice because those efforts, though rooted in Detroit’s local particularities, resonate with their own experiences.136 Further, Sanchez’s empathy toward black marginalization is informed by his upbringing in Detroit and manifests in his celebration of jazz music and black poetry; white South Africans’ attraction to Rodriguez’s music is informed by their taste for similar musical styles and the way Rodriguez’s corrido-resonant songs speak to their socio-political environment. Though implicit, this triangular web between the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, multicultural Detroit, and apartheid South Africa manifests in Sanchez’s stanzas about Nuevo Aztlán and Rodriguez’s riffs on social change, indicating that the spirit of Aztlán as a perforated, inclusive zone characterized by celebrations of ethno-racial identity had been remapped in an extraordinary way.

While Sanchez’s poetry speaks to Chicana/o identity and the possibility of realizing cross-cultural solidarity in Detroit, Rodriguez’s albums “create[e] and reinforce[e] an awareness of shared experience among individuals irrespective of their geographical location” just as

135 Ibid. 65.

136 Fascinatingly, when Sanchez published this poem, recordings of Rodriguez’s voice indeed carried such “songs of justice/peace/love” through distant South African communities sharing in their own forms of marginalization, uniting them with the Detroiter Chicana/os.
corridos do in the greater borderlands from which Rodriguez’s parents sojourned. ¹³⁷ Sanchez and Rodriguez’s voices, steeped in Detroit’s social realities, embody the spirit of the jazz improviser and the corrido hero, as well as resonate globally.

In sum, like Sanchez’s poetry did among Chicana/o Detroiter, Rodriguez’s music sparked a paradigm shift among South Africa’s citizenry—a contagious move, especially among the young of that country, from the uncritical to the critical, from the downtrodden to the empowered. Sanchez’s visions of Brown and Black solidarity and Rodriguez’s search for a universal ethic through song unites three geo-political spaces—Detroit, MI, Greater Mexico, and South Africa—as part of global border zone energized by dreams of inclusion. In this sense, Sanchez and Rodriguez, through “Mexican Mora jazz” and the “corrido sonido,” anticipate current discourse on the marginalized in a global context and remap Aztlán—or better, what Salinas, Alurista, and Sanchez believed it could represent—across borders and barlines.

As we have seen through the writings of Salinas, Alurista, Saavedra, Sanchez, and Rodriguez, the identities and cross-cultural solidarities that emerge from locally-specific social realities differentiate each region, and by extension, each conception of Aztlán; in terms of our understandings of Brown and Black solidarity on national and international scales, however, these differentiations work in concert to paint a wider picture—like three distinct melodies sounding in a grand counterpoint. In idiosyncratic yet complementary ways, each artist mentioned strives to reimagine, remix, and remap identity to create anew—to improvise new melodies and enact social change. Unheard in this major triad of voices, however, is a voice combining all of these inventive strategies simultaneously—one that balances the tension between local and global, code switches between Other keys, and strives toward social justice, thus modulating the group, moving sound and sentence into a new key. Thus, if speaking in wild tongues means mapping new communities, if singing over the barline means soaring over the border, and if sound can disrupt oppressive practices and chart new political courses, then Lila Downs, an award-winning Mexican American musician, composes songs that dream and do simultaneously.

Despite never having lived along the 1,969-mile stretch between the United States and Mexico, Lila Downs, an award-winning musician born to a Mexican mother and a British-American father, embodies the border consciousness of which Gloria Anzaldúa writes in
Borderlands/La Frontera (1987). Through rich, eclectic compositions, Downs moves gracefully between many Mexican and American musical traditions while singing in English, Spanish, and mixtec, creating multi-modal art that operates along linguistic and musical axes and encapsulates the mestiza energies Anzaldúa champions. By reading these energies along linguistic and musical axes, I position Downs’s music as mestiza rhetoric that is at once rural and urban, local and global, and Mexican and American, capturing in sound the border subjectivity Anzaldúa theorizes.

My argument is divided into roughly three sections: first, I place portions of Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera in conversation with Josh Kun’s scholarship on the audiotopia; second, I analyze the music and lyrics of ten of Lila Downs’s pieces; and third, I describe how Lila Downs’s sonic spaces, mestiza rhetorics, and utopic imaginings promote a politics of inclusion characterized by difference.

Multi-modal code-switching as a strategy for reimagining the U.S.-Mexico borderlands is an entry point to transdisciplinary discourse on transnationalism and globalization. With this in mind, I argue that Downs’s music allows us to read mestiza aural and literary imaginations as complementary, as well as to hear sonic border crossings as strategies for imagining unrealized zones of inclusion.

Strategies for Enacting Social Change: Mestiza Consciousness and the Audiotopia

Anzaldúa’s complex project lends itself to an analysis utilizing kinetic and potential energy as organizing metaphors. For Anzaldúa, the mestiza’s kinetic energy—her movement

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139 On her albums, Downs navigates primarily between ranchera, son, cumbia, hip-hop, rock, and jazz.
between cultures—is made possible by her immediate access to more than one cultural lexicon, as well as her ability to improvise out of those lexicons fluently; the mestiza’s potential energy—her consciousness—is the possibility that her movements will map connections across cultural divides, mending the damage those divides regularly inflict.

For Anzaldúa, the mestiza at rest possesses the potential energy to unify “separate” ideas into a synthesis “greater than the sum of its severed parts” and removed from destructive dialectics; this energy is a new, mestiza consciousness.\(^{141}\) This potential energy of the mestiza—her resting state when she is not moving between cultures, not performing, but stationary—is one that possesses “the possibility of uniting all that is separate.”\(^{142}\) This unifying process speaks to the cultural mixing and global energy in which Anzaldúa and Downs participate as mestiza rhetors.

The mestiza consciousness emerges out of the necessary practice of performing different cultures for different audiences at the US-Mexico border. Everyday performances of culture—language, rhetorical register, clothing, music, etc.—are, for Anzaldúa, cultural passports; they are the means that allow the mestiza to gain access to social spheres that are, relatively speaking, more homogenous than social groups at the edges of the mainstream. Anzaldúa implies that having access to all of those cultural signifiers—being a cultural polyglot—affects decision-making, challenges traditional notions of inclusion and exclusion, and reshapes this sieve through which one experiences the world—consciousness.

Such obligation to move between cultures yields a politics of cross-cultural empathy and inclusion; though Anzaldúa leaves room for mestizas to abuse their performative powers through the Hegelian dialectical practice of subsuming the Other, she implies a trust in the experience of

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\(^{142}\) Ibid.
racial, linguistic, and sexual marginalization as a force that unites mestizas against the practice of wanton conquering.  

Anzaldúa implies that one must participate in cultural practices to be cultured, and that because she, the mestiza, participates in more than one culture, she actively constructs “yet another culture.” Part of this new cultural production is the telling of “a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet.” The drafts of this new story are to be found in the pieces scattered among the sights, sounds, and sentences we understand to be cultural productions.

For Anzaldúa, a necessary condition for progressive thought is a surplus of cultural inputs. In Borderlands/La Frontera (1987), Anzaldúa expresses a fundamental duality in her own theory and in cultural studies in general: that of inclusion and exclusion. By stating that she can “walk out of one culture / and into another,” she presupposes clean breaks between cultures, and that she possesses the ability to move across those cultural borders; by stating that she can do this “because [she is] in all cultures at the same time” not only gives a reason as to why she can move between cultures, but also refutes the idea that one must be in one culture at a time.

Further, by stating that she is “norteada por todas las voces que me hablan / simultáneamente [Disoriented by the voices that speak to me simultaneously],” she reveals that her ability to move

145 Ibid. 103.
146 Ibid.
147 Ibid. 99.
between cultures cognitively and through performing cultural signifiers via language—an ability informed by her experiences as a lesbian woman of color from the US-Mexico border—is a product of multiple exclusions.\textsuperscript{148} Rather than decry her disorientation as negative in itself, Anzaldúa suggests that it is symptomatic of the dissonance between discourses, and that to make sense of the cacophony is to step toward resolution and eventual social change.

An apparent problem with Anzaldúa’s line of inquiry, although necessary and brilliant, is that it is itself engaged in a politics of exclusion—she seems to argue for the superiority of marginalized, lesbian, borderlands women in comparison to all else. However, picking up on this tension in Anzaldúa only highlights the fact that she is aware that her mode of thinking is limited by the scope of her own everyday realities. She makes sense of the world as a marginalized, borderlands, lesbian woman because that is her frame of reference. The code-switching strategies she employs as a \textit{mestiza} woman simultaneously amplify her regional concerns—ideological and physical conflicts at U.S.-Mexico border—while magnifying her global energy and utopic vision of universal inclusion—that border dwellers can exist “in all cultures at the same time.”\textsuperscript{149} In short, by writing about her own border realities and expressing that these realities affect the way she thinks, Anzaldúa is attempting to reveal that in a globalized world, we are all border dwellers, and that we can all learn to code-switch as a strategy to building communities across the divides that structure our own modes of consciousness.

Those who imagine inclusive models of living at the US-Mexico border—a tumultuous, beautiful, liminal zone—cannot do so fully without addressing the edges of Western thinking along the axes of language, race, gender, and everyday instances of identity performance. For Anzaldúa, the realities of \textit{mestizas} are characterized by oscillations between convergent and

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
divergent modes of thought: between linear, teleological lines of inquiry “moving toward a
single goal,” and nonlinear, rhizomatic movements “toward a more whole perspective . . . that
includes rather than excludes.”\textsuperscript{150} This tension between Western and non-Western modes of
intellectual practice—whether they are equally valid, whether or not they can or should converge
to produce a unified historical narrative, or whether history, like identity, is nonlinear, divergent,
and rhizomatic—is at the heart of contemporary debates about globalization.\textsuperscript{151}

If we consider Anzaldúa’s cultural-philosophical project as an attempt, as a display of
both potential and kinetic \textit{mestiza} energies, then pairing it with the audiotopia—a concept born
of different regional realities yet resonant with code-switching as a strategy for imagining and
enacting new forms of inclusion—extends Anzaldúa’s vision of “a new value system” that can
“connect us to each other” along the same trajectory and with the same potential and kinetic
energies that she embodied.\textsuperscript{152} Thus, while the “symbols” with which the \textit{mestiza} “reinterprets
history” and “shapes new myths” are linguistic, visual, and delivered via the written word, Josh
Kun’s audiotopia expands this field to include sonic phenomenon; only when synthesized can
these frameworks equip us to read and hear the overtones and subtexts of Lila Downs’s multi-
modal heteroglossia.\textsuperscript{153}

Kun, an influential, innovative scholar of music, literature, and American culture,
theorizes a concept resonant with Anzaldúa’s \textit{mestiza} consciousness though specific to the sonic
realm: the audiotopia. Kun defines the audiotopia as a “sonic [space] of effective utopian
longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together, not only in the

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid. 101.
\textsuperscript{151} For more on rhizomatic structures and society, see \textit{A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia} (1980)
by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid. 103.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid. 104.
space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and the mapping
of geographical space that music makes possible . . .”—in short, as a utopic, heterogeneous
soundscape that imagines a better future. For Kun, the audiotopia is a “force of difference”
able to thwart homogenizing, “nation-building” rhetorics—projects that only perpetuate the
practices of exclusion. Rather than submit to these homogenizing forces, Kun embraces
difference, stating that in the United States, “race is heard . . . [and] the sounds of racial
formation and racial identity are made audible in the audiotopias of American popular music.”
According to Kun, music has the ability to “point us to the possible, to help us remap the world
we live in now . . . to absorb and meld heterogeneous national, cultural, and historical styles and
traditions across space and within place.” Unlike Anzaldúa, Kun plots his theory across a
broader cultural spectrum, often grounding his brilliant ideas about music, community, and
difference in the varied multiculturalism of urban America rather than the experience of life in
one liminal zone.

Further, Kun astutely argues that interpreting lyrics and music together allows us “to
focus on the space of the music itself and different spaces and identities it juxtaposes within
itself.” In other words, listening to the interplay between words and sounds in an audiotopia
allows us to chart its poetics—its form, its web of connections to other texts, and its resonances
among different listeners; further, charting these poetics makes us privy to the “contradictions
and conflicts” sharing sonic space. Such spaces allow artists like Lila Downs to connect

155 Ibid.
156 Ibid. 25-26.
157 Ibid. 23.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid.
“disparate identity-formations, cultures, and geographies,” to depict contemporary cross-cultural contact, and to forecast unrealized connections between social groups. According to Kun, enacting cross-cultural connectivity through music requires that artists celebrate ethno-racial difference in sonic spaces; according to Anzaldúa, remapping social spaces depends on individuals adopting a border consciousness steeped in multiple histories—namely, those of colonial and deracinated peoples.

Further, Kun argues that the “production of space is likewise contingent upon the production of cultural texts,” resonating with Anzaldúa’s notion that she “has a culture because [she] is participating in the creation of yet another culture.” The “cultural texts” Anzaldúa and Downs create work in tandem to produce new spaces of inclusion. While Anzaldúa code-switches between languages and literary forms, Downs does so between musical traditions, vocal styles, languages, and sonic spaces, creating different zones of cross-cultural contact as she moves from one song to the next. With each song, Downs invites listeners to picture the “spaces that the music itself makes possible, the spaces that music maps, evokes, and imagines.”

When one combines Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness with Kun’s audiotopia, one defines musicians who seek to enact social change as those who celebrate ethno-racial difference by layering, juxtaposing, and code-switching between musical traditions; exhibit a border consciousness through heteroglossic lyrics focused on the politics of exclusion; and display imaginative energies by marrying the sounds and languages of conflicting cultures.

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160 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
Both *mestiza* consciousness and the *audiotopia* capture a desire to rethink hegemonic models of inclusion and exclusion. This desire thrives in turbulent, increasingly globalized zones and revives the idea that the artistic imagination can not only record social realities, but also transform them. Thus, the combination of *mestiza* consciousness and the *audiotopia*—terms already resonant with each other—creates a conceptual harmony that equips us to analyze how Downs’s rich, imaginative sounds work with and on Greater Mexico.

Strategies in Action: The Music of Lila Downs

Lila Downs’s music, characterized by multiple languages and a multitude of musical styles, rings in the same key as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/Frontera*. Anzaldúa code-switches between languages at the levels of the individual sentence and paragraph, though also performs larger scale code-switching when she moves from prosaic to poetic modes. This resonates with what Downs does on her albums, indicating that, at a fundamental level, the two artists are operating with a similar set of skills—skills indicative of a *mestiza* consciousness. Of Downs’s seven albums, *Border/La Linea* (2001) directly highlights her concern with immigration, social justice, and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The album that follows it, *One Blood/Una Sangre* (2003), celebrates women’s dignity and imagines a global consciousness rooted in localized forms of cross-cultural solidarity. These albums’ sounds and strophes entwine to create an aural snapshot of a *mestiza* consciousness informed by Mexican and American discourses and inspired by the promise of social change.

Through “La Liña,” Downs’s creates a sonic space—characterized by a minor key, orchestral strings, heavy-percussion, an accordion, a tender vocal style, and Spanish lyrics
focused on the border strife that NAFTA made possible—that invites listeners to imagine a future in which all marginalized women experience social equality.165

Lyrically, Downs laments women working in *maquiladoras* by depicting one woman, Rosa María, as synechdocical for those of all women locked into that type of labor. In Downs’s narrative, when Rosa María prepares for work and washes her hands “in that soapy water of her sadness,” her “nails / and flesh, sweat and / strength, all her determination, all her dreams, are left / behind,” indicating Rosa María owns nothing despite her hard labor.166 However, at the end of the piece, Downs imagines a day when women like Rosa María will be able to liberate themselves from “this hell” more often than one day a week.167

Musically, Downs begins her piece in a minor key and incorporates sophisticated suspensions and harmonies, echoing the boleros of Agustín Lara. However, soon after, she breaks into a percussion-heavy cumbia laced with orchestral strings, occasionally featuring an accordion, a violin, and a string ensemble playing a single melody in unison. She ends the piece by sustaining an unresolved chord and a high note over a percussive violin ostinato, indicating through sound what she also points out in her words: that the tensions of which she sings remain, for the moment, unresolved. Thus, through her lyrics and music, Downs maps a new reality in which *maquiladoras* cease to structure the lives of many Mexican women living along the border.168

With “El Bracero Fracasado,” Downs demonstrates her in-depth knowledge of the musical traditions of Mexico while challenging traditional conceptions of national identity and

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166 Ibid. 5.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
A cultural citizenship. Musically, Downs sings “El Bracero Fracasado” in a nasal vocal style that at once evokes theatrics and rural sensibilities. The song is a polka, and, like many norteño subgenres, two singers harmonize in parallel thirds throughout the majority of the piece. During the beginning of the song, the instrumentation mirrors that of many música norteña groups; however, toward the end of the first minute, she introduces a clarinet voice that disrupts any effort to categorize her music traditionally. Further, in the context of a song chronicling a man’s deportation after illegally crossing the border, Downs quotes the melody of Francis Scott Key’s “The Star Spangled Banner” to subvert the allure of the United States. “The Star Spangled Banner” becomes a sonic symbol, and Downs incorporates it into her sonic space to highlight its signifying capacities and to ask that people listen critically.

Along with two of her bandmates, Downs composes “Dignificada: La Balada de Digna Ochoa” to honor Digna Ochoa, a Mexicana civil rights lawyer who was assassinated in 2001. Like “La Niña,” the lyrics of “Dignificada” focus on women’s rights in Mexico; however, Downs’s use of hip-hop provides an entry point for American listeners distanced from Mexican strife. These rhizomatic entry points characterize Downs’s idiom: to allow people, regardless of ethno-racial background, a way to enter her imaginative, sonic space and concretize hypothetical connections between cultures.

Further, Downs code-switches between vocal and musical styles to construct connections among varying audiences. Vocally, Downs code-switches between her powerful chest voice, her breathy, jazz-influenced timbre, and her deep, hollow speaking voice, which she uses to rap in

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170 Mexican polkas are entwined with the history of people emigrating from Germany to the Americas.
172 For more on Digna Ochoa, consult the documentary entitled *Digna... hasta el ultimo aliento* (2003).
Spanish. Musically, Downs begins with a psychedelic rock guitar juxtaposed against a shaker. She then sings in Spanish in a vocal style associated with contemporary Mexican pop music. A drumset provides heavy backbeats, playing off the upbeat strumming of a clean, electric guitar, reminiscent of reggae and evoking a sonic tie between Mexico, the United States, and the Caribbean. After a brief quotation of “Morenita Mía,” Downs bursts into a percussive vocal style and raps in Spanish, her voice soaring over a psychedelic, rock-reggae-sonic landscape.173

With “Tiringini Tsitsiki,” Downs highlights her ability to move between cultures by singing in mixtec.174 Musically, Downs demonstrates her mestiza consciousness by creating an idyllic portrait of indigeneity through lush, delicate, three-part harmonies. When paired with the bluesy riffs, heavy backbeats, rap interludes, and Mexican ranchera/son traditions characterizing Border/La Linea and One Blood/Una Sangre, Downs’s music demonstrates the characteristics of both mestiza consciousness and the audiotopia.

Downs juxtaposes “La Cucaracha” against the idyllic “Tiringini Tsitsiki,” beginning the tune with a distorted, static-heavy guitar and vocal melodies soaring through harmonic minor modes that evoke Indian vocal traditions.175 Downs taps into this Eastern tonality while singing the words of “La Cucaracha,” a tune embedded in the cultural memory of Mexico. She then breaks into a cumbia-rock hybrid exploring tonalities, raps in Spanish, and code-switches between vocal timbres as if they were characters, symbolizing the many selves constructing her mestiza consciousness. This interplay between linguistic and sonic signifiers produces an

173 Armando Villareal’s “Morenita Mia” is part of the Mexican cultural memory; tapping into it allows Downs to reference the memory of Digna Ochoa and Mexico in the same instant.


aesthetic that is global yet highly localized, highlighting Downs’s project as a form of multi-modal rhetoric that amplifies cross-cultural connections to imagine, in sound, a better tomorrow.

Through “Mother Jones,” Downs code-switches yet again, this time capturing through the twang of an acoustic guitar, a pentatonic scale, and a vocal style echoing that of Aretha Franklin a reimagined Negro spiritual aesthetic.176 As the piece progresses, a tinny brake drum provides patient yet purposeful downbeats, creating an aesthetic of toil, labor, and sweat—as if someone were hammering spikes into a railroad. This section also provides a standard blues chord progression, an accordion, and psychedelic guitar textures. Moments later, Downs changes styles yet again, shifting into the familiar jazz ride cymbal pattern and a huskier vocal style that aligns her with Ella Fitzgerald, a virtuosic jazz vocalist. By code-switching between sounds evoking African American aesthetic traditions, Downs aligns herself with other marginalized women of color and imagines widespread solidarity among Black and Brown peoples.

In “Sale Sobrando,” Downs creates a sonic space in which the lyrics and music are at odds.177 Musically, Downs embodies the mestiza consciousness of which Anzaldúa writes, yet lyrically, Downs depicts the mestizo as chasing an unattainable whiteness, betrayed by his body and an affinity for Mexican cuisine: “Your face is dark, but you want to be white, / but you really like your taco and tortillas.”178 Downs’s dissonance between the music and lyrics of this song echoes the tensions among Mexicans and Mexican Americans who assimilate into mainstream American culture and those who do not. Downs foregrounds this tension by creating a sonic space in which cumbia rhythms, Spanish lyrics, jazz piano, and the chorus of “Cielito Lindo”

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178 Ibid. 4.
This interaction between Downs’s music and lyrics exemplifies Kun’s idea that audiotopias resist homogenizing forces, which, in this case, whiteness represents.

In “La Linea,” Downs creates a sonic space—characterized by an arpa, a faux-reggae rhythm section, and a narrative about the effects of NAFTA on the everyday lives of poor citizens at the Northern edge of Mexico—that, like “La Niña,” invites listeners to imagine a world free of maquiladoras. While the song’s minor key and the rhythm section’s heaviness work in tandem with the sustained metaphor of the factory as a “wasteland,” the arpa’s lightness evokes nostalgia for a distant Mexican past and a future that has not yet happened. As a sonic space, “La Linea” imagines a future free of factory smoke and filled with the “spirit of the earth.”

Lyrically, Downs begins by referring to a maquiladora at the border as a “wasteland” out of which a “child of the Sun was born,” again indicating her disdain for maquiladoras, and, given her focus on the child, her belief in the promise of a better future. She then writes of a “medicine woman” who “rubbed / the skin of the little mulatto boy” with “cloth and herbs,” causing the boy to “[grow] feathers”; this magical realism aligns Downs with many Mexican American novelists and symbolizes the boy’s potential to fly out of the factory to freedom. Downs refers to the entire situation as a “marvelous thing that was caused by NAFTA / from an imaginary line,” creating an irony that may escape some listeners. She states that the border is an “imaginary line,” indicating that, though the U.S.-Mexico border is a physical boundary

179 “Cielito Lindo” is a song well known throughout Mexico.
181 Ibid. 11.
182 Ibid.
183 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.

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policed by border patrol agents, it is also a divide living in the cultural imaginations of those north and south of its imposing physical markers. She ends by stating that “this material world is only a passing thing,” at once comforting those people who experience the harsh realities of working in maquiladoras and criticizing those who seek only to reap what financial benefits they can from the U.S.-Mexico divide.

Musically, Downs’s repurposing of musical instruments in contexts different from their original musical traditions resonates with the practice of appropriating English words into Spanish and vice-versa; thus, through sonic and linguistic signifiers, Downs creates a multi-modal creole. Downs begins “La Linea” by featuring an arpa, an instrument traditionally associated with the son traditions of 19th century Mexico. Her use of the arpa reflects her knowledge of son traditions, and thus of Mexican cultural history. However, immediately after the introduction, Downs begins mapping a different space by introducing a bass guitar, a drum set, and a synthesizer. These instruments work together as a faux-reggae rhythm section while Downs’s vocals soar over heavy upbeats. After two minutes, the music becomes heavy: drums and auxiliary percussion punch out consonant rhythms, the bass guitar’s isolated notes stick out of the texture, and Downs adds more harmonies to her vocal melody. Out of this heavier texture, the arpa emerges once again, coloring the music with strummed chords, melodic flourishes, and at one point, another solo.

Finally, in “Medley: Pastures of Plenty/This Land is Your Land/Land,” Downs creates a sonic space that houses fragments of American folk lyrics, a handful of vocal styles ranging from accusatory to determined, and a musical aesthetic informed by Carlos Santana; as she filters

186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
Woody Guthrie’s music through Chicana/o rock, she taps into Mexican and American sensibilities to challenge the notions of inclusion and exclusion embedded in American popular culture.  

Lyrically, Downs articulates a skeptical yet optimistic vision of the United States as an inclusive zone by building an intertextual web between her own “Land” and Woody Guthrie’s “Pastures of Plenty” and “This Land is Your Land.” In the CD booklet, rather than provide a literal transcription of the lyrics she sings in the medley, Downs instead presents the lyrics to each of the three songs she combines, forcing the listening reader to move between the conceptual spaces of the songs just as she does.

Downs cites Woody Guthrie to tap into and change the mainstream American cultural imagination. Notably, at a relatively recent concert in Chicago, music scholar Alejandro Madrid reports that Downs’s version of Guthrie’s songs, “reinvented with cumbia and hip-hop touches, brought down the house, the crowd screaming and swinging, accompanying Lila’s performance.”  

Downs’s music, echoing in an urban zone geographically removed from the U.S.-Mexico border, thus equips audiences to map a new conception of plurality—not of homogenization, but of coeval cultures sounding simultaneously.

Thus, through the form and content of Downs’s lyrics, the rapid movement between musical genres, and the productive juxtaposition of dissimilar songs, Downs’s Border/La Linea and One Blood/Una Sangre embody the spirit of Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness and Kun’s audiotopia. Interpreting Downs’s project through these two theoretical frameworks illumines her

190 Ibid. 7-8.
efforts to subvert monolingual music industries, as well as to engage the politics of globalization and transcultural citizenship.

Strategies Writ Large: Globalization, Political Visibility, and Transcultural Citizenship

Downs perforates the borders between Mexican and American popular cultures by creating sonic spaces structured by *mestiza* rhetorics and utopic imaginings. Downs shares this utopic imagination with Tish Hinojosa, another Mexican American singer whose songs, as cultural critic José David Saldívar argues, “disentangle the segregated musical boundaries that divide the mass-mediated music industry in the Américas into monolingual genres and market segments.” Further, Downs catalyzes social change by code-switching between a multiplicity of languages and musical traditions on records sold in the Américas and beyond; as cultural texts that produce cultural imaginaries, Downs’s songs extend Anzaldúa’s efforts to establish a new consciousness informed by the *mestiza* experience.

Like Josh Kun, George Lipsitz, an established ethnomusicologist, argues for music’s prophetic energies, stating that sonic mixture is “a music in touch with tomorrow—a music that displays the possibilities of the world that is on its way, but not yet here.” Thus, the sonic space is a safe zone; it is a way of “[rehearsing] identities, stances, and social situations not yet permissible in politics.” The politics Down envisions support societies that are at once globally aware and locally attuned; through sound, Downs depicts a global community connected and characterized by difference.

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192 Border Matters. 188.
Downs’s sonic border crossings represent a mode of consciousness that is at once beautiful and painful—beautiful for its freedom to move across ideological divides, painful for the physical and psychological violence these movements can invite. As Alejandro Madrid argues of her strategy, “[Downs’s] choice of songs and language celebrate the many cultures she claims as her own and substantiates the many hardships that come with crossing borders.”195 Thus, while Downs did not grow up at a physical border, through her music, she lives between ideological divides and renders aural borders transparent, encapsulating the tension between the local and global in the contemporary historical moment.

The music of Lila Downs represents a large-scale desire to imagine and actualize new connections; moreover, as music, it may be more likely to enchant people on a large scale than even brilliant mestiza literature. Such literary texts, like Anzaldúa’s, emphasize knowledge of more than one language as necessary, while in heteroglossic music, the creation of sonic space subordinates the multilingualism of the listener—in short, one does not need to know both English and Spanish to enjoy Downs’s musical creativity and virtuosity. Nevertheless, though mestiza literature and music differ in their affective processes, they each promote a politics of inclusion based on cultural difference.

In a related context, Ramón Saldívar astutely points out that transnational spaces engender the potential for political and social change in ways unparalleled by other zones; further, he argues that living between worlds provides “an incomparable opportunity for attacking the future with a new key.”196 Saldívar’s claim rings in the same key as Downs’s

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prophetic musical pieces, linking studies of transnationalism, globalization, and social imaginaries with the rhythms, riffs, and rhymes constructing popular culture in the Américas.

Because Downs anticipates an unrealized future, she is a dissonant figure for those eager to fortify the borders within the Mexican and American music industries—borders that, if left intact, perpetuate the practices of exclusion by calcifying in cultural imaginaries north and south of the Rio Grande. If a cultural imaginary is a set of assumptions and practices that unite people in and as a culture, then a mestiza consciousness encourages people to move between cultural imaginaries, to critique unchallenged assumptions, and to create new zones of inclusion through the rhetorics of the border. Thus, as an artist pulling from her Mexican and American backgrounds, Downs employs music as mestiza rhetoric, as a strategy for creating new culture, and ultimately, as a tool for mapping the Coatlicue-state of which Anzaldúa dreamed.

The tension between the local and the global—between heterogeneous and homogenous space—is a dissonance with which Downs plays by building sonic spaces that, as scholar Javier Rodríguez states in a related context, both “[blur] differences and [accentuate] them.”197 By engaging this “key [paradox] of globalization,” Downs equips herself to hypothesize new models of cross-cultural contact and thus to write songs in the key of tomorrow.198 199

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198 Ibid.

199 For more on songs as tools for mapping place, consult Josh Kun’s *Songs in the Key of L.A.* (2013).
CHAPTER VI
AFTERWORD

If local forms of cross-cultural solidarity render Chicana/o identities as improvised and improvising, what are the consequences of positing that Chicanas/os in Texas, California, Michigan, and across the Américas have a contrapuntal relationship? What does a model of cultural production based on independent yet complimentary melodies do for understanding race and ethnicity, rural and urban life, tradition and innovation, merging and splitting, *aqui y alla*, and local and global concerns in the twenty-first century?

An improvisatory, contrapuntal framework equips us to break apart monolithic conceptions of American culture and to construct new models of inclusion and global identity driven by intersecting literary and musical imaginations. It de-centers ethno-racial identity as essentialized and cultural histories as linear, stable narratives, as well as celebrates the individual and her community as improvised and improvising. It grounds theorizations about global networks in regional realities by demonstrating that even individuals who identity with a single ethno-racial category and fight for social change do so primarily through the lenses of their own, varying local experiences, ultimately complicating large-scale generalizations about ethno-racial categories as cultures. Further, when we read Chicana/o texts as resonant with the soundscapes with which they entwine, we open literary criticism and the cultural critique it engenders to interpretations of sentence as sound and riff as rhyme—as complimentary voices and equipment for living.

In sum, the localisms of Texas, California, and Michigan open the possibility for scholars to theorize not only one, but many forms of Chicana/o identity and Black and Brown solidarity in the United States. Embracing this plurality allows us to sidestep essentialist arguments about
cultural history and welcome a framework for identity informed by the spirit of the
improvisatory moment. As informed by literature and music, cultural identity is at once
improvisatory and contrapuntal: we assemble it from specific, local experiences, as well as
through interacting with varying cultural traditions that, like contrapuntal melodies, weave and
intersect in ways that create harmony and dissonance, suspension and resolution. Chicana/o
writings, as resonant with African American aesthetic practices, redefine the borderlands of
culture, encapsulate the possibility of an inclusive tomorrow, and thus invite re-imaginings, re-
mixes, re-mappings, and modulations across borders and barlines.
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