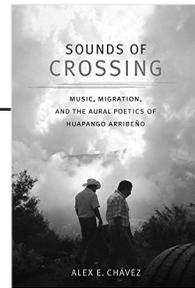


BOOK REVIEW

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Alex E. Chávez, *Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Poetics of Huapango Arribeño*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 440 pp.

Alex Chávez's *Sounds of Crossing* looks at the way the genre of music called *huapango arribeño* humanizes its primary participants—Mexican migrants—in a deeply dehumanizing political moment. Using the genre of *huapango arribeño* as an ethnographic text and treating *huapangueros*—the performers of this genre—as ethnographers, Chávez employs the lens of “aural poetics” to look at the way marginalized and often undocumented musicians perform this genre of sung poetry to voice their presence in a world that otherwise silences their place in it (9).

In this multi-sited ethnography, Chávez himself regularly crossed the border, conducting fieldwork in Indiana, Texas, Arizona, and in the Mexican states of Guanajuato, Querétaro, and San Luis Potosí. Chávez focuses in particular on the all-night performance contests between two *huapango* ensembles, an event called a *topada*. In these contests, two ensembles engage in “musical and poetic flying” (100), a highly stylized marathon that can last anywhere from seven to twelve hours. Integrating the fields of border studies, border ethnography, and borderland theory with transnational studies, ethnomusicology, and the anthropology of music, Chávez shows us an intimate portrait of the genre and how, when words are sung in public spaces, humanity, intimacy, and movement are regained not only for *huapangueros* but for the 5.6 million unauthorized migrants currently residing, working, and creating lives north of the border.

Sounds of Crossing is also auto-ethnographic: Chávez himself is the child of Mexican migrants and the grandson of a famous *huapanguero*. Thus, throughout the ethnography, Chávez is in conversation not only with his parents' experience as migrants to Texas, but also with his grandfather

Mauro, a character whose shadow has loomed large in not only Chávez's life but in the genre of huapango arribeño at large (27). Chávez notes: "ethnography, for me, has thus been a dynamic process embedded with an inescapable personal history, a struggle to understand and negotiate my entanglement with this powerful precursory cultural memory" (26). Sound, and the "sounds of crossing" that are voiced in musico-poetic form, invokes place and nostalgia for place, but also allows practitioners and listeners to exceed the limitations of time and space, particularly in situations where legal and physical barriers prevent them from actually crossing the border. Huapango arribeño allows huapangueros and their listeners a reprieve from the alienation that comes with migrant existence, even if for only a brief moment, and therein lies its affective power.

Chávez provides detailed context for the genre of huapango arribeño. Meaning "atop the wood," huapango arribeño is often accompanied by *zapateado*, a dance style that is done on top of a wooden platform or raised bench called a *tablado*. Comprised of improvised, multiple ten-line stanzas or *décimas*, huapango arribeño is a sung genre of music, typically performed by men (although there are sometimes also female participants), and is related to the stringed music genre known as *son*. Huapango arribeño is most typically a four-person instrumental ensemble, with the singer accompanied by two violins, a *vihuela* or *jarana huasteca*, and an eight-stringed, double-coursed bass guitar called a *quinta huapanguera*.

In the introduction, Chávez analyzes the idea of "noise," an "evaluative category for sounds that are, at best, considered culturally incomprehensible or, at worst, deemed to possess unassimilable and alien meanings thought to be of no social value," (10) and he elucidates the ways in which Mexican music in the US is often heard as "foreign Spanish-language noise" (10). The first chapter focuses on how the United States has come to "hear" Mexico via essentialized sounds in the genre of Mexican cinema known as *comedia ranchera* and epitomized by the first film in this genre, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936). Chávez forcefully demonstrates how the "traditional huapango sound" used in the scoring of the film's soundtrack has become "metonymically linked to the trope of the Mexican character" (41) and embodies a "near cartoon-like Mexican aesthetic of machismo" (38). In the subsequent chapter, he lays out the structure of the topada, or all-night performance events, outlining instrumentation, poetic content, and key harmonic configurations, including the ways in which the two ensembles, over the course of the night, shift from the keys of D, to A, to

G major by the time morning comes, such that knowing the key tells one exactly how far along the topada has progressed.

Performance (*reglamento*) and the compositional aspects (*fundamento*) of huapango arribeño are emphasized in Chapter 3, showing us the linguistic and musical complexity of a genre rarely given its due in scholarship on Mexican music and that has historically been dismissed as musically “simple.” Like Aaron Fox’s (2004) ethnography of working-class verbal art forms and country music performance practice in a Texas honky-tonk, Chávez’s nuanced analysis of huapango poetry elevates huapango arribeño by allowing us to hear all its internal nuance and complexity. Chapter 4 focuses on the tensions between Texas-born Mexicans or *tejanos* and more recently arrived Mexican migrants. Highlighting the performance of the “Star-Spangled Banner” by 11-year-old Mexican-American singer, Sebastien de la Cruz, at an NBA game in San Antonio, Chávez examines the limits of social citizenship for both Texas- and Mexican-born Mexicans. He demonstrates the ways in which, for some Americans, any expression of Mexicanness by definition exceeds the boundaries of American identity and thus is heard as matter out of place (199).

Chávez also tackles the musically improvised greeting done to honor someone, known as the *saludado*. In Chapter 5, he shows us how *saludados* are performed for people present in the room and also, crucially, for those not in attendance but whose presences on the other side of the border are keenly felt and missed. Thus, the *saludado* becomes a vehicle for voicing “solidarities otherwise severed,” where huapangueros emphasize relationality and social ties, focusing not on a person’s documented status but on their humanity and individuality, where migrants are instead cast “as friends, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, wives and husbands” (265).

Chapter 6 returns us to one of the key thematics in the book—aural poetics—in order to bring home the ways in which huapango’s improvised poetry is a genre that “builds intimacy, that travels, that crosses” (306). In his conclusion, Chávez lays out his own vision for a decolonized anthropology that humanizes its interlocutors—both authorized, unauthorized, and living on both sides of the US-Mexico border—more fully and more deeply through careful attention to expressive culture and the cultural politics that surround musico-poetic performance.

It bears mentioning that Chávez himself is a well-known and highly respected multi-instrumentalist and singer, whose primary mode of

participant-observation was singing and playing with the groups he documents throughout the book. He performs not only huapango arribeño but many other genres as well, and he actively performs with his own musical groups in Chicago, on the national festival circuit, and as a guest artist with internationally acclaimed musicians and groups including Lila Downs, Quetzal, and Grupo Fantasma. Self-described as an “ethnographer-composer-performer-academic-musician,”¹ in 2016, Chávez also produced an album of huapango arribeño with Smithsonian Folkways featuring a huapanguero discussed in *Sounds of Crossing*, Guillermo Velázquez, and his group Los Leones de la Sierra de Xichú. This recording project greatly increases the visibility and reach of the genre for music lovers of all stripes and adds much to our understanding of the genre as we read the book. *Sounds of Crossing* also provides detailed musical transcriptions—a staple of ethnomusicological monographs from an earlier era but a rarity in ethnographic texts—and gives the written versions of each *saludado* as appendices. Throughout the book, Chávez also provides the full lyrics of all songs discussed in each chapter in Spanish and then artfully translated into English; a beautiful color photo essay of photos taken by the author is also included. Finally, Chávez has produced a very fine guided listening list² of 11 annotated videos to accompany the book (available on the Duke University Press website).

Indeed, if I have one critique of the book, it is that I wanted to see—and hear—Chávez’s own voice and musico-ethnographic presence more throughout the text, along with more frequent ethnographic vignettes, as the vignettes he does provide are very powerful. If ethnography is the marriage of storytelling to deeply attuned social theory, it is the storytelling that creates the investment in understanding and caring about the theoretical analysis that follows; the more frequently we are reminded of these stories and brought into the life worlds of our interlocutors, the deeper our investment in the text.

I’ll close this review with an anecdote of a more personal nature. In December 2017, I had the distinct pleasure of presenting an evening of intimate performance by “Singing Anthropologists” at the American Anthropological Association annual meetings in Washington, DC,³ the “applied” portion of an earlier roundtable focusing on ethnographic songwriting as a genre in its own right, a la ethnographic poetry (Cahnmann-Taylor 2016, Kusserow 2013, Rosaldo 2013, Stone 2008). Chávez participated in the roundtable and played the show, serenading us with his original

songs, performed in Spanish and accompanied by a *jarana huasteca* from Veracruz, performing alongside five other anthropologists who are also singer/songwriters, myself included. His songs—and his exquisite delivery of these songs with a voice expertly switching into an expressive, quivering falsetto at moments of heightened expressive affect—was haunting, inviting, and deeply moving, referencing sensebound memories of family, home, and the scent of orange blossoms through his own expressive use of voice. Thus, Chávez’s own performance epitomized many of the musico-poetic features he so deftly analyzes throughout his ethnographic work. He reminded us, once again, why voice and voicing matter and how a few minutes ensconced in a world of song can feel like a lifetime, as it does for so many of his interlocutors traced throughout the text.

May Chávez continue to forge a path, intellectually and artistically, which integrates his own ethnographic and performer identities—and the strength and rigor these two identities lend to one another—as further inspiration for other “scholartists” (Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund 2017) as we each continue to explore the boundaries between scholarship, ethnography and performance in our own multi-modal work. I taught this book—supplemented by the Folkways CD and the guided listening list—in my “Anthropology of Music and Sound” class at the University of New Mexico last spring (Jacobsen 2018). For me, this is yet another model for students to see how they, too, might begin to forge their own paths as “antropoetas” (Rosaldo in Cahnmann-Taylor 2015), ethnographic songwriters, and ethnographers giving full weight to the social power of aesthetic forms. The rigor and depth of both the ethnographic and musical work in this text, and the joining of the two, is a rare find in contemporary ethnography, and I, for one, am much the richer for it. ■

Endnotes:

¹See link: www.aechavez.com.

²See link: <https://dukeupress.wordpress.com/2017/12/14/musical-duels-and-troubadour-poets-you-never-knew-existed/>.

³See link: <https://www.facebook.com/events/779965605539537/>.

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