

Book Review

Matías Hermosilla
Stony Brook University
matias.hermosilla@stonybrook.edu

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

Music and migration can now be approached as entangled concepts: people, musical styles, sounds, instruments, experiences, and artists flow around the world carrying, resisting, adapting, and transforming meanings in a process of “crossing” from one place to another. Alex Chávez’s exemplary book, *Sounds of Crossing*, studies the impacts of the “aural” and “physical” movement of people between Mexico and the United States. Chávez explores how musical works remain connected to their origins even as they are challenged and transformed by their migrations.

Chávez introduces readers to the understudied case of the *huapango arribeño*, a musical genre that originated in the Mexican states of Guanajuato, Querétaro, and San Luis de Potosí. The author argues “that transnational music making in everyday Mexican migrant life, specifically, positions itself at the tensive center of this volatile discursive terrain, where certain sounds . . . both symbolically and materially claim a place in the space of the U.S. nation-state, refiguring the borders of citizenship and alienage through embodied and agentive forms of cultural expression” (4–5). Chávez scrutinizes this musical genre through a transnational lens in which the *huapango arribeño* performers (*trovadores* or *huapangueros*) and their musical careers are entangled in the bidirectional flows of migrants across the US-Mexico border between the 1970s and 2006. The *huapango arribeño* was dynamically impacted by “illegal” crossings, deportation campaigns, and anti-immigration movements, as well as by music festivals, NAFTA, and 9/11.

Sounds of Crossing benefits from an interdisciplinary approach that echoes the literary theories of Michel de Certeau and Mikhail Bakhtin to address the specificities of poetry and the *décima*, a traditional Spanish poetic form used in *huapangos arribeños*. A historical approach to borderlands and migration policy showcases interest in the cross-border movements of people. However, the book’s central methodological pillar is the ethnographic/self-ethnographic approach that originated in anthropology. Ethnography is essential to this work in two principal ways. First, by studying his own experiences as both a child of undocumented immigrants and as a *huapango arribeño* practitioner, Chávez illuminates the tensions implicit in a musical form that evokes Mexican cultural roots while

being performed in the United States. Second, Chávez's background as a musician garners him respect from other *trovadores*, allowing him to build ethnographies that explore these performers' lives, songs, spaces, and feelings. Beyond ethnographies, Chávez's other primary sources are the lyrics and transcriptions of *huapango arribeño* songs, which give readers the opportunity to see how the experiences of back-and-forth migration produce changes in the genre's language and themes.

This book is organized into six chapters, arranged thematically and chronologically, which explore different aspects of vernacular *huapango arribeño* performance, transformation, and circulation. Chapter 1 offers a theoretical study of the cultural relationship between US and Mexican music, analyzing cultural stereotypes, temporalities, and racial implications. Chapter 2 studies camaraderie among *huapango arribeño* performers by arguing that back-and-forth migration produces changes and intertextualities within the genre. Chapter 3 first offers a comparative perspective by studying the case of Chicano hip-hop performers in dialogue with *huapangueros* after the passage of NAFTA. That chapter then analyzes neoliberalism-triggered flows of people from Guanajuato to Mexico City and the United States and how they influenced the creation of Guanajuato's Xinchú festival. Chapter 4 focuses on how the arrival of *huapango arribeño* in Texas impacted the creation of an ethnic Mexican identity in that state. Chapter 5 analyzes the poetics of the clandestine crossing experience and the ways it created transnational esthetic links between nonborder areas such as Tennessee and Potosí. Finally, chapter 6 uses various connections between Mexico and the US to argue that through cultural expressions like *huapango arribeño* songs, it is possible to map out a sense of everyday simultaneousness that is culturally and materially reliant on the continuous, dual-directional, cross-border movements of people, as it allows the *huapangueros* to tap into their national and local identities even while far from their places of origin.

Sounds of Crossing is an important book that offers new ways to think about cultural connections between different societies and how music can be used to problematize the unilateralism with which "cultural migration" has traditionally been studied. Through an ethnographic approach, Chávez shows how everyday cultural life can refashion transnational connections and identities, such that a *trovador* can be part of a little town in Guanajuato while playing a song in Texas. Consequently, this is an essential book for anyone interested in the study of transnational connections, borderlands, migrations, and cultural circulations.

Matías N. Hermosilla, is a Ph. D. student of History at Stony Brook University. He earned a Bachelor's and Master's of History at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. His research interests include the history of popular culture in Latin America, specifically, humor and popular music in the global 1960s. He is the general coordinator of RIEH–Chile (Red Investigación y Estudios del Humor) and a member of ISHS (International Society for Humor Studies). He has publications on graphic humor, and in 2017 he received the Paul Saever Graduate Student Award, granted by the International Society of Luso-Hispanic Humor Studies, for his master's thesis.
