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Conjunto Sounds in a Company Town: Decolonizing Movidas, San Antonio's Quarrytown, and "La Piedrera" Polka

Alejandro Wolbert Pérez

> It seemed to me that the remembrance of human activities at certain locations vested them with a kind of sacredness that could not have been obtained otherwise. Gradually I began to understand a distinction in the sacredness of places. Some sites were sacred in themselves, others had been cherished by generations of people and were now part of their history and, as such, revered by them and part of their very being.
>
> Vine Deloria, Jr. *God Is Red*

The Texas Mexican conjunto remains one of the most prominent and enduring forms of Xicanx cultural expression. Conjunto first emerged in the Texas Mexican borderlands along with norteño, its northern Mexican analogue, a century ago; today, the genre's reach has spread beyond its regional origins, following factory workers and agricultural laborers north, throughout the Midwest, and along the west coast—as well as overseas, with prominent artists hailing from Japan and the Netherlands. The accordion and bajo sexto combination at the core of the modern conjunto ensemble became standardized with the advent of mass-produced recordings, played via commercial radio or purchased for listening at home, during the later years of the Great Depression through the rapid onset of performative and stylistic innovations that arose in the wake of World War II.[1] With its roots in the working-class Chicana and Chicano experience, conjunto musicians, dancers, and other participants create and share

[1] For more about the general history of the Texas Mexican conjunto and Tejano, I suggest starting with Manuel Peña's *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History of a Working Class Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985). Two other introductions to the genre, its history, and social significance are Juan Tejeda and Avelardo Valdez's edited volume, *¡Puro Conjunto!: An Album in Words and Pictures: Writings, Posters, and Photographs from the Tejano Conjunto Festival en San Antonio, 1982—1998* (Austin: UT Austin Press, 2001) and Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr.'s *Tejano Proud: Tex-Mex Music in the Twentieth Century* (College Station, TX: A&M University Press, 2002).

epistemologies of the self, or ways of knowing, through creative forms of bodily performances—dance—and musical expression, and between different venues or sites such as ballrooms, dancehalls, cantinas[2], or even kitchens and living rooms. Taken as a whole, these aspects of cultural production in movement across dance, music, and venues embody Xicanx history, thought, and knowledge.

My work on the Texas Mexican conjunto draws upon ethnographic and archival research, including the always-unfinished project of conducting oral histories and interviews with the genre's listeners, musicians, and dancers primarily in and around San Antonio, Texas. As importantly, I wish to highlight the conversations I shared with my grandmother Dora; her wisdom, experiential knowledge, and, above all, love continues to guide my thinking and theorizing around this music genre which brought her so much joy. Through an analysis of conjunto dance, music, and performance venues, I address Xicanx identity, cultural memory, and decolonial movidas, or struggles, across time and space. That is, who are we as a people? How are we shaped and how do we shape our histories? And how do we restore and reclaim our humanity through five centuries of colonialization, as guests as well as upon our Native lands? As Karleen Pendelton Jiménez reminded us during the 2021 NACCS opening plenary, we are still in colonial times, and as such we must wrestle with the question of decolonization of land, of space, of knowledge.

I write this essay for publication about two years after epidemiologists and researchers first detected the COVID-19 virus, following social distancing, sheltering-in-place, and other preventative health measures throughout wave after wave; where Black and Latinx communities are disproportionately affected; and where we as a whole have yet to truly grasp the immediate, let alone long-term, societal costs and changes resulting from this moment as we approach the loss of a million lives, officially, in what is presently the United States due to this pandemic. It is in this context that I think about that most social and communal of activities, dancing—specifically, conjunto dance—as well as the social spaces and

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[2] For more on the theorizing of spatiotemporality, or space and time, in the working class cantina, and its relationship to Xicanx (Tejanx) cultural poetics, please see Deborah R. Vargas's wonderful essay, "Punk's Afterlife in Cantina Time" (*Social Text* 1 September 2013; 31 (3 (116)): 57–73. doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2152837). While Vargas focuses upon San Antonio-based punk bands (Girl in a Coma, Piñata Protest) more so than conjunto, her depiction of cantina time bears noting, if only to acknowledge the influence it has had upon my own thinking in revising this essay.

performance venues where musicians and listeners congregate, communicate, and celebrate with one another. I situate these at-times daily acts of love within larger conversations around Xicanx identity, cultural memory, and decolonial movidas (Sandoval, 2000), or acts of resistance, across time and space.

Much like how oral histories are dynamic repositories of familial, communal, and cultural knowledge that change as they are shared and passed along, where each storyteller adopts and adds their own nuances, flourishes, and revisions, conjunto dance is likewise an archive of experiential knowledge documented and expressed though bodily movement. These knowledges, and knowledge practices, reside in the body, communicated through dance via quotidian forms of social intimacy like gestures and touch.[3] Hand touching hand; a gentle nudge turns a partner clockwise; a light press on the hip reunites the pair or splits them apart, stepping side-by-side to the polka ranchera played onstage. The practice and performance of conjunto music maintains multi-generational knowledges and experiences, collapsed under but not contained by the modifier of 'traditional,' as in the motto of San Antonio's Conjunto Heritage Taller, "Música Tradicional for youth of all ages." One way of reading this meaning of tradition finds it situated as a floating signifier that suggests the preservation of historical continuity, as well as a hewing to practices of the past, or even a sense of authenticity—purity—that is now missing: puro conjunto, conjunto puro. But what conjunto, and when? In terms of instrumentation alone, we can point to the many post-War innovations, or the use of electrical amplification, to say nothing of the earlier shift from the one- to two- to three-row diatonic accordion.[4]

Rather than contain conjunto in this way, as an artifact of one time—the past—now rendered inauthentic, I wish to offer a contrapuntal interpretation, in the spirit of Edward Said's insistence that we consider acts of imperialism and

[3] Here I am in conversation with Juana María Rodríguez' *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (NYU Press, 2014), in particular Chapter 3, "Gesture in Mambo Time," in order to theorize around touch and gesture in conjunto dance.

[4] Without belaboring this point, I think it's worth noting the variation and experimentation that took place in instrumentation prior to the post-WWII wave of innovations, specifically through just accordion modifications. While the earliest (recorded) conjunto artists used both treble and bass buttons—that is, they played both sides of the accordion—as the bajo sexto and, later, tololoche (or upright bass), and simple drum set provided percussion and rhythm, many performers removed the block of reeds on the bass side, or simply did not play on the left side entirely. So doing further distinguished the sound and style of the Texas Mexican conjunto. However, of the ardent 'traditionalists' continuing to perform today, Santiago Jiménez, Jr. can be heard playing bass as often as not; how we think of or imagine the sound of 'authentic' conjunto, as interpreted today, reflects the porousness and fluidity of the music at the time of its performance.

resistance in our efforts to find meaning in the text (*Culture and Imperialism*, 1994: 66). However, for our purposes, in place of imperialism I identify coloniality, and place it in context as part of the project of modernity: the coloniality of time and space; the coloniality of thought and knowledge; the coloniality of race, class, and gender (for examples, see Lugones, 2007; Quijano, 2000; Alcoff, 2007; Mignolo, 2011, 2012). Conjunto practice and performance maintains multi-generational knowledges and experiences, while resisting the hegemonic demands placed upon brown bodies by late capitalism. In Sunday afternoon dances or communal-based lessons at the Taller, conjunto's actors—dancers, participants—move in time to the rhythms of a cumbia or polka ranchera, in movement against the regulation of time; likes other social dances, conjunto dance defies the demands of capitalism and the Fordian ideologies that reduce bodies to units of profit and production. Dancers move forward with each step, collectively rotating in a counterclockwise, cyclical movement on the dance floor; in place of a straight line, and a beginning, middle, and ending point, the dancers return and return and return: to one another, if in pairs, and together around the floor, claiming and making space for the pleasure and community.

As a form of popular music, conjunto songs defy dominant notions of immediacy. In place of the continual 'new' and 'better', as tied to the project of modernity and the myth of progress, conjunto listeners enjoy and continue to enjoy songs first written decades prior.[5] This continual enjoyment does not take the place of an appreciation for new compositions, nor in conjunto do we encounter any sort of temporal distinction indicating a song's age. That is to say, in contrast to "the oldies," or "cruisin' classics," monikers indicating a body of R&B and soul songs dating back to or in the style of midcentury music from largely Black and Brown musicians, conjunto music bears no such equivalent—no a priori designation signaling that a particular composition dates back several generations. In fact, during my fieldwork I only encountered the term "old school" in reference to style and dress, to describe the appearance of a performer or dancer, never about a particular dance step or song. These reinterpretations along with original recordings stand alongside new compositions; played back-to-back on the same set or during an extended popurri, where an artist will blaze through portions of two, three, or more songs in succession, with nary a break. Immediately, I think of The Hometown Boys or Los Dos Gilbertos, closing down

[5] This cultural practice is not limited to conjunto listenership, as attested to by our love of the oldies.

the Tejano Conjunto Festival, of tracks appearing on CDs from Ruben Vela ("Popurri de Exitos," "Popurri en Concierto," "Power Polka Popurri," 1996) and Tony de la Rosa ("Popurri," 1996), still in rotation years after the artists passed away; to say nothing of compositions from seven decades prior: "Atotonilco;" "Sube y Baja;" "La Barranca;" "La Piedrera." (I will return to "La Piedrera," the song, shortly, in a discussion around La Piedrera, the place.) Rather than collapsing moments-through-music, conjunto's constant reimagination of the old with the new is expansive; an opening and point of entry—a portal, a cenote— for building community; a place of returning, through memory; and a claiming and making of space, through song and dance. This occurs daily, at home, where partners and loved ones might listen to records or streaming tracks; during special occasions, such as reunions, festivals, or outdoor celebrations featuring one or several bands, sometimes spanning a weekend or longer; and above all in the working-class dancehalls, ballrooms, and cantinas or corner bars that form part of the social fabric of Xicanx communities wherever they are found. These sites of conjunto performance and enjoyment are catalysts of creative synergy; they facilitate the transmission and sharing of bodily practices and knowledges; and as physical locations are shaped by the factors and forces of the urban city—in this case San Antonio—with the echoes of Jim Crow segregation still encountered today in patterns of residential segregation and educational access, development and displacement.

Far from being ahistorical, or of compressing linear time into a singular moment, I argue that conjunto challenges the teleological construct of modernity's linear progression of time, through the genre's continual enjoyment of musical compositions and dance styles drawn from across its history. Through the claiming of space and the creative making of communal forms of pleasure across dance and music, conjunto dancehalls, nightclubs, and other performative spaces function as living archives, shared repositories of a peoples' knowledges, made and remade nightly, and preserved through the song and dance that still exists even long after the physical sites are demolished. I return now to "La Piedrera," the song, and La Piedrera, the place: San Antonio's Quarrytown, or Cementville, a company town owned by the San Antonio Portland Cement Company that existed over a century ago, located where now sits San Antonio's Sunken Garden Theater and Alamo Quarry Market. Nicknamed "the Quarry," this mixed-use retail center opened in 1998. Anchored by a high-end grocery store and for the time state-of-the-art movie theater, the Quarry Market's most distinctive

feature are its smokestacks, almost all that remains of the factory and its surroundings. These now-iconic smokestacks feature prominently in the Quarry's marketing and branding: the capitol letter Q, shaded as if to resemble a wanning crescent moon, surrounds three of the smokestacks in silhouette.

It was here where Santiago and Virginia Jiménez, lived, worked, and raised a family, including their two sons, Flaco and Santiago Jiménez, Jr. Six years older than him, Virginia outlived the elder Santiago by another fourteen and a half years. She passed away in 2009, about two months shy of her 103rd birthday ("Virginia Jimenez," 2009). I recognize and name her here to rectify my previous omissions of her presence and role in supporting and shaping one of the genre's most prominent and enduring dynasties. Santiago Sr., Flaco, and Santiago, Jr. are all legendary conjunto musicians. While they have

Alamo Quarry Market, with its iconic smokestacks. Photo by author.

received critical acclaim and academic recognition, in the process Virginia has been marginalized or erased from the genealogies and narratives around conjunto's emergence, development, and continual endurance. What tales might she have told, had someone thought to inquire? How do we uncover the silences, and recover her stories?

Conjunto is more than the music of a male-dominated group of performers. By including the voices of the audience members—dancers—as well

as those from kin- and familial- relationships, research into conjunto can expand our scope of analysis, and give us new insights into the genre and beyond. Rather than constructing a patrilineal timeline of individual accomplishments and innovations, placing conjunto within a larger social context enables us to examine how it serves to generate and sustain community.

Santiago, Jr. recalled his father and Patricio Jiménez, his grandfather, working in the quarry, and playing conjunto music.

> Yeah, they used to have my grandfather say [to] my neighbor, 'Say, you know what? We're going to have a party here' or 'we're going to enjoy here in the summertime'. They would play [conjunto] outside in the dirt. They use to wet it to make it kind of hard, so people get [covered] in la polvadera [dust], and if it rained, they would get all the furniture out from the living room and put them on their back … so people could dance inside, en las casas (Jiménez, 2012).

As Santiago recounted, his grandfather

> would start playing at seven o'clock till seven o'clock in the morning or six. They would—amanecer—the whole night, enjoying the main band. And then the following week they, they would go to my, I would go to your house. And then next time you go to my house, we do it there. So then we rotate around the neighborhood (Jiménez, 2012).

While their labor, and the land upon which they lived, belonged to the company town, through these creative acts of cultural expression families and workers and families of the workers at the San Antonio Portland Cement Company made and created spaces for socialization and the pursuit of pleasure, through movement and music, before the advent of conjunto dance halls and performance venues following the second world war.

In 1942, Don Santiago Jimenez, Sr. y Sus Valedores recorded his song "La Piedrera," the quarry, naming the space and place where these working-class Mexican Americans, Blacks, and whites lived, worked, and loved. A lovely polkita ranchera, the track features Jiménez, Sr. on his two row Hohner accordion, joined by Lorenzo Caballero on guitar and Ismael Gonzáles on the tololoche, or upright string bass. Par for the course at the time, there are no vocals. (Valerio Longoria is credited with introducing singing to the genre, following World War II.) Must the textual, through lyrics, take precedence to determine or debate meaning? What of an instrumental titled after someplace? La Piedrera carries the name and history of what was—a community built around the extractive labor of limestone extraction, and the dances held in their living rooms or under the stars, where the elder Jiménez and his conjunto began to shape and form the contours of the genre.

Advertisement for San Antonio Portland Cement Company, from the San Antonio Express News*, January 29, 1930. "1930s ad for Alamo Cement shows views of ex-quarry," by Julie Domel, 13 August 2015.* San Antonio Express News*, https://blog.mysanantonio.com/vault/2015/08/1930s-ad-for-alamo-cement-shows-views-of-ex-quarry/*

Conjunto nightclubs and other venues first began to appear within a decade following the end of World War II. Among those hosting live musicians were Lerma's, the longest continually running conjunto niteclub, and La Gloria, a filling station-slash-grocery store, with an open air, rooftop patio. With the rise of a sustainable performance economy the weekly Quarrytown dances ceased, as Jiménez, Sr. and his conjunto joined others whose names we remember and whose names we now have forgotten, to play on stages throughout San Antonio, across South Texas, and in the cities, towns, and rural communities called home by Mexican Americans who worked in the factories and farms that dotted the landscape of what is presently the United States. Conjunto was on its way to becoming an industry as much as a culturally-rooted practice, and the conjunto dance hall was a key component to insuring, for a time, the

livelihood of working musicians and a space where dancers, fans and the Mexican American working class would spend their leisure time and disposable income.

Eventually, the Portland Cement Company ended their local operations, and La Piedrera, Quarrytown, Cementville, shut down. The Jiménez familia moved north along I-35, to Dallas, for a brief spell before returning back to San Antonio. "La Piedrera" endures.

Flaco and Santiago, Jr. both recorded their own versions of "La Piedrera," the song, along with countless other artists. A search of the Strachwitz Frontera Collection turns up 29 versions alone, including several variants recorded by all three Jiménez men, solo or in conjunction with one another. (At least two of the tracks, "La Piedrera Parte 1 and Parte 2," by Luis Hernández y Leonardo Sifuntes, are recordings of corridos. The remaining 27 all appear to be an interpretation of Don Santiago Jiménez, Sr.'s composition.) "La Piedrera" is one of the first pieces students learn at the Conjunto Heritage Taller, in San Antonio; while valued for its simplicity among beginners, the hands of seasoned accordionists add their own embellishments to it, innovating and improvising in their own style.

"La Piedrera," the composition, names and identifies La Piedrera, the location. Conjunto's participants and performers defy modernity's insistence upon an erasure of the past that breaks with history, and the individualist edicts of late capitalism and the neoliberal state. Conjunto musicians and conjunto dancers are living archives and repositories of knowledges; they embody our peoples' histories and experiences. These are decolonial movidas in every sense, set in motion to the sounds of an accordion, making and claiming space with each and every note; each and every step an act of creation, of forging community.

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