

# Mariachi Accompaniment: Cultural Bearers for Communal Conviviality

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## Abstract

Utilizing the ideas of *convivencia* (convivial interaction) and Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz's framework of 'accompaniment', I suggest that the 'modern-urban' mariachi, often characterized as an expression of standardization and commodification, has established a capacity for facilitating culture that contributes to the development of convivial communal spaces. In the midst of marginalization and systemic oppression, migrant and aggrieved communities throughout Greater Mexico engage in cultural practices and actions to reaffirm a sense of belonging, to which mariachi musicians have contributed and at times served as cultural bearers. I examine mariachi practices of apprenticeship learning and *chambas* (contractual gigs), the emergence of the *Misa Panamericana* (the mariachi mass) in Cuernavaca, and the integration of Mexican cultural expressions in San José, California to illuminate the convergence of political, cultural, and religious action and how the mariachi expression has played a role in these intersections.

After presenting at the Society of Ethnomusicology meeting in 2004, where I gave a paper on mariachi music, I was approached by a senior member of the society who shared an appreciation for my presentation and then commented on a visit to La Fonda Restaurant in Los Angeles to see Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano. This person shared how they found the Camperos performance to be 'slick', which I could not help but read as meaning complex, modern, performative, commodified, and what a good friend characterized mariachi to be: 'pretentious'. Ethnomusicologist and *mariachero* (mariachi musician)<sup>1</sup> Daniel Sheehy also uses the term 'slick', referencing the arrangements of popular music ensembles that provide a competitive edge in the developing music marketplace. He states:

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1 Today the term 'mariachi' refers to the commonly known Mexican music ensemble composed of violins, *guitarrón* (a large guitar-type bass instrument), *vihuela* (a small guitar-type rhythm instrument), guitar, and trumpet. The word also may refer to the individual musician and the style of music. I will also utilize the term as a signifier of the larger sociocultural context in which mariachi ensembles, individuals, and music reside. I do, however, try to use the term *mariachero/a* to reference the individual musician or I will say mariachi musician.

The expansion of the instrumentation offered greater musical possibilities, but it also allowed the mariachi a broader range of repertoire and thus a competitive edge over other folk-rooted ensembles that did not adapt to the marketplace. The real competition in the urban marketplaces of Mexico and its northern neighbor, undoubtedly, was the Afro- and Euro-American popular music of the United States—dance-band music, popular songs, and their Spanish-language imitation—with ‘slick’ arrangements and aggressive marketing. While the types of music played by the mariachi expanded greatly in the second half of the twentieth century, commodification led to an opposite trend, the standardization of repertoire.<sup>2</sup>

While Sheehy was not attaching the term specifically to the developing mariachi ensemble of the 1940s–1950s, he contextualized the space to which the mariachi was entering as modern, a space in which commodification and standardization set the scene. Entering into a labour market of popular music, the mariachi undoubtedly adapts to the performative hegemony – to musical literacy, ‘slick’ arrangements, uniformity in technique and appearance, and standardization of form and sound – that transforms it from a rural folk tradition to a popular music form. Part of this hegemony is the commodification of the music, which provides a platform where the expression can travel and be diffused beyond the local origins of the practice. Furthermore, the recontextualization of the music practice in the urban setting leads to the development of a national, and eventually transnational, labour network of music workers.

Today, this transnational network of musicians is commonly seen as the ‘modern-urban’ mariachi and is often established as a pole opposite to the rural mariachi *tradicional* (traditional). Implicit in this dichotomy is the engagement of music as a commodity, framed by a market of popular music that characterizes the modern group often juxtaposed to the traditional ensembles’ position of upholding traditional knowledge within a community, but more importantly resisting the pull of markets and mass culture.<sup>3</sup> The goal of this work in examining the ‘modern-urban’ ensembles is to de-emphasize this dichotomy to recognize that the commodification of music works in tandem with service to the community in the experience of the urban musicians. I am specifically interested in the groups of musicians I identify as part of the ‘working’ group sector.<sup>4</sup> Those that have endured an

2 Daniel Sheehy, ‘Mexican Mariachi Music: Made in the U.S.A’, in *The Music of Multicultural America: Performance, Identity, and Community*, ed. Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 147–8.

3 Jesús Jáuregui, *El mariachi: símbolo musical de México* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia-Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes-Taurus, 2007), 242–3.

4 See Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). This book provides a model in deciphering the impact of a commercial popular genre of country music and its influence and disregard from practitioners and community members in the production of a working-class culture. Mariachi musicians throughout Greater Mexico similarly are tethered to ‘the logics of the music industry’ (24), at the same time they maintain traditional and historical repertoires (e.g., Rigo Tovar cumbias from the 1970s, *baladas gruperas* from the same era, standard boleros from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s) that continue to be requested by the communities that they serve and where they reside.

apprenticeship in the cultural expression of mariachi and depend on it as a means of income, working during the week in bars, plazas, and restaurants *al talón* (finding clients and charging per song) or funerals, and weekends playing weddings, birthday parties, and all other types of social events. This is juxtaposed to other types of groups such as the ‘show’ groups – a handful of ensembles in the United States and Mexico that tour with major artists, are part of concert series, and play national and international festivals – and ‘student’ groups, which develop in educational institutions or cultural centres that establish limited and set manners of presentations.<sup>5</sup>

It is fortunate today that there are mariachi musicians, in both Mexico and the United States, who have achieved successful careers in mariachi music, touring and performing in the finest venues around the globe, working as studio musicians, and providing instruction to a worldwide constituency. The majority of working mariachi musicians and paid work, however, are still tied to music-making within local communities.<sup>6</sup> Mariachi and its concomitant ways of knowing, despite the powerful processes of commodification and standardization, continue an organic relationship of ‘accompaniment’ with the communities that sustain it. By focusing on music-making activity at the local level, I want to make apparent how the musical groups and musicians playing mariachi are positioned in and serve the community, and at times, play a central role as cultural bearers. I argue that *convivencia* (convivial interaction) characterizes the most common and typical social gatherings in which mariachi musicians work (weddings, birthday parties, anniversaries, funerals).<sup>7</sup> These musicians contribute to the vibrant role that cultural practices play in sustaining collective consciousness about linked fates and promoting feelings of mutual respect and responsibility in Mexican communities throughout, what Américo Paredes has referred to as Greater Mexico.<sup>8</sup>

5 See Russell C. Rodríguez, ‘Politics of Aesthetics: Mariachi Music in the United States’, in *Inside the Latin@ Experience: A Latino Studies Anthology*, ed. Norma Cantú and María Fránquiz (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 207. An in-depth discussion of the different sectors of the mariachi art world is presented in Russell C. Rodríguez ‘Cultural Production, Legitimation, and the Politics of Aesthetics: Mariachi Transmission, Practice, and Performance in the United States’ (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2006). See also, Steven R. Pearlman, ‘Mariachi Music in Los Angeles’ (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1988).

6 It is worth mentioning that musicians working with the handful of touring groups such as Mariachis Vargas de Tecalitlán, de América, and Los Camperos de Nati Cano always maintain a connection to the local scene, either working freelance with or rehearsing local groups. During the shut-down of tours, concerts, and festivals due to the COVID-19 pandemic a few members of Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán took up residence in places such as California and Texas, working with local groups and providing group and private classes.

7 A clarification, while there are many presentational settings considered convivial, there are those in which the contractual agreement leads to nothing more than a business transaction. These are performances where musicians may be a sound adornment to an event, where interaction between musicians and attendees is not central or significant.

8 The work of Américo Paredes is foundational to borderland studies and his concept of Greater Mexico was initially conceived as a geographical reference of the US/Mexico border and the entirety of the Mexican nation, which Paredes and others further developed to understand a larger transnational imagination that extends to Mexican communities far beyond the national region, which he referred to as *Mexico de afuera* (Mexico from abroad). He introduces the term ‘Greater Mexico’ in Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1958), 130–1. He further discusses the concept in his article ‘The Folklore of Groups of Mexican Origin in the United States’, in *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, ed. Richard Bauman

This article is a social history ‘from below’ examining the intersections between expressive culture, political consciousness, and religious contexts, demonstrating different communal strategies and how activists, artists, and clerics were called into action.<sup>9</sup> I attend to the participatory field of cultural expression to determine how music and musicians engage spaces of *convivencia* that promote a sense of belonging in disempowered and disregarded communities facing the effects of systemic marginalization and oppression. First, I provide a very quick historical overview of the mariachi ensemble followed by a discussion of the central ideas of *convivencia* and accompaniment. I then provide a view of how *compañerismo* (fellowship/partnership between musicians) manifests within the convivial acts and spaces in which mariachi musicians work and socialize. Two ethnographical and historical narratives illuminate the centrality of Mexican cultural expressions within convivial participatory engagement. The first narrative specifies the convergence of the political, cultural, and religious actions that surround the emergence of the *Misa Panamericana* (pan-American mass, a mariachi mass) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, which coincided with the rise of liberation theology in that part of the nation. For the second narrative, I examine the integration of Mexican cultural expressions in San José, California during the development of the Chicana/o power movement. This is followed by a discussion of how the mariachi mass currently functions as a transnational expression, providing further examples of how mariachi musicians play a central role within the convivial spaces of the Mexican community found throughout Greater Mexico.

### El Mariachi Moderno (The Modern Mariachi)

In the book *Apuntes sobre el pasado de mi tierra* (1961), Rafael Méndez Moreno writes about the Cuarteto Coculense, a musical ensemble that ventured out from Cocula, Jalisco, to Mexico City to play for the birthday party of then president, Porfirio Díaz, in 1905.<sup>10</sup> In 1908, during a return visit to the capital, representatives from Victor and Columbia Records encountered the

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(Austin, TX: Center for Mexican American Studies, 1993), 3. See also Ramón Saldívar, *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginery* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 35–7.

- 9 The term ‘from below’ has been established in the work by scholars such as Marcus Rediker, who examines the historical experiences and actions of people and communities that have always been dismissed and the power structures that marginalize. An inciteful piece is an interview with Rediker in which he discusses the term and ‘history from below’ found in Carl Grey Martin and Modhumita Roy, ‘Narrative Resistance: A Conversation with Historian Marcus Rediker’, *Workplace* 30 (2018). These historical examinations provide counter narratives to the ‘top down’ accounts of history. In doing so, agency, contributions, and different ways of knowing are unveiled that support a richer understanding of historical moments and events. More recently, Catherine Walsh, in providing further value and establishing a focus of theory, succinctly states that it is ‘with the knowledges resurging and insurging *from below* (that is, from the ground up) within and through embodied struggle and practice, struggles and practices that, in turn, continually generate and regenerate knowledge and theory’. Catherine E. Walsh, ‘The Decolonial For: Resurgences, Shifts, and Movements’, in Walter Dignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 19.
- 10 Rafael Méndez Moreno, *Apuntes sobre el pasado de mi tierra* (Mexico City: Costa-Amic, 1961), 132. This information about the Cuarteto Coculense is cited in Hermes Rafael Origen e historia del mariachi. (Mexico City: Editorial Katún, 1982), 117; and Jáuregui, *El Mariachi*, 52.

quartet and recorded a series of *sones abajeños* (the typical dance music of the lowland region of Jalisco) that have since been recognized as the first mariachi ensemble recordings.<sup>11</sup> Together, the recordings and attendant movement of the music from the small town to the metropolis index the onset of the modern mariachi. The popularity of mariachi in Mexico City grew exponentially in the post-revolution era between the 1920s and 1940s, fuelled by the escalation of new media technologies. Groups such as Mariachi Coculense de Cirilo Marmolejo, and a bit later, Mariachi Tapatío and Mariachi Los Coyotes, became mainstays in bars and restaurants, but eventually were sought out to work in theatres, radio, cinema, and audio recording. During the golden age of film in Mexico (1933–64), mariachi groups graced the sets and soundscapes of hundreds of productions. Singing stars Lucha Reyes, Jorge Negrete, and Pedro Infante, along with ensembles such as Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán became household names not only in Mexico but also throughout Latin America and parts of the United States.<sup>12</sup> By the 1950s the mariachi ensemble noticeably transformed from a small rural folk music group into a modern aggregation that contributed immensely to the mainstream of popular music in the nation of Mexico and beyond.<sup>13</sup>

Seventy years later the practice of mariachi music in Mexican communities continues to be singularly formative of a living culture, far beyond the national borders of Mexico into the transnational communities of Greater Mexico. Throughout Mexico, and in large communities of Mexicanos, Chicanos, and Latinos throughout the hemisphere, mariachi musicians can be seen and heard at restaurants and playing in churches for weddings, *quinceañeras* (coming of age celebrations at fifteen years old), and funeral ceremonies. They can be found in the poshest wedding venues to the smallest neighbourhood grange hall, to backyards and garages of community members playing for a birthday party, a twenty-fifth anniversary, or a *mañanitas* (morning serenade) for the Virgen de Guadalupe on 12 December. In this article, I make evident the transnational movement of the music and its musicians between locations in Mexico and Greater Mexico, influencing and being influenced by conditions across national boundaries. This history reveals, as Alejandro L. Madrid observes, ‘the ways in which cultural meaning and significance is created in complex processes of production, representation, consumption and regulation’.<sup>14</sup>

11 Cuarteto Coculense, *Cuarteto Coculense Mexico's Pioneer Mariachis, Vol 4: The Very First Mariachi Recordings 1908–1909*, reissue edited, produced, and transferred by Chris Strachwitz. Arhoolie Records CD-7036, 1998.

12 To hear the development of the mariachi sound, compare the Cuarteto Coculense with later recordings by Lucha Reyes, *Recordando Lucha Reyes la inmortal*. CD, BMG US Latin 74321-41893-2, 1996; Jorge Negrete, *El charro inolvidable: volumen III*, LP, RCA DK11-3056, 1962; Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. *El mejor mariachi del mundo*, LP, RCA MKL-1156, 1958.

13 For an analysis of the modern mariachi sound, see Daniel Sheehy. *Mariachi Music in America: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

14 Alejandro L. Madrid, ‘Transnational Musical Encounters at the U.S.-Mexico Border: An Introduction’, in *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, ed. Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13.

### ***Convivencia y acompañamiento (conviviality and accompaniment)***

In her article ‘Caminos y Canciones en Los Angeles CA’, Martha Gonzalez argues that *convivencia* within the transcommunal practice of *son jarocho* and the *fandango* constitutes a deliberate act of being with others communally. It establishes

a social, moral, and musical aesthetic of *fandango* practice and a central reason for the gathering. The reconceptualization of music as an activity rooted in *convivencia* is an important disruption in how we think of music in our present age. My use of *convivencia* as a moral and musical aesthetic in community music practice aims to bring focus on relationships and process rather than sounds, outcomes, or product.<sup>15</sup>

Gonzalez’s declaration emphasizes that the space of *convivencia* is a conscientious site of performance, instruction, and apprenticeship to which community members come to share joy, talents, and knowledge. From this perspective, the musical product is not the goal of the *convivio* (the space of *convivencia*), but rather the means for facilitating an interactive process that brings vitality to the space. Gonzalez’s concept of the *fandango* as a unique convivial music-making space of performance and participatory engagement illuminates how communities are called into being through performance, and how networks of apprenticeship and instruction contribute to social and moral dynamics as well as the goals of the community. In this framework, Gonzalez explains, musicians are not the sole masters who create this space, but rather part of a communal and collective effort grounded in an ethos of active participation and co-creation.<sup>16</sup>

Ethnomusicologist Charles Keil has long advocated for a cognizant mapping of convivial participation in music and its societal impact. He reminds us that

All humans were full participants once upon a time, and I believe we still experience much music and perhaps some other portions of reality this way. I also believe we need more of this participatory consciousness if we are to get back into ecological synchrony with ourselves and with the natural world. At the very least, it is important to recognize the capacity in human beings to defy logic, to defy the so-called laws of contradiction, and to insist upon identity, to insist upon participation.<sup>17</sup>

This call to participation and a participatory consciousness shows how music and musical gatherings afford a potential to regaining a groove with the natural world as a ‘tool of conviviality’.<sup>18</sup> Ivan Illich was unyielding about working towards a communal conviviality. His vision was much more focused on the failings of societal institutions such as the medical industry, the education system, and government, which in their professional mass-oriented

15 Martha E. Gonzalez, ‘Caminos y Canciones en Los Angeles, CA’, in *The Tide Was Always High: The Music of Latin America in Los Angeles*, ed. Josh Kun (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 270.

16 Martha E. Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2020), 78.

17 Charles Keil, ‘Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music’, *Cultural Anthropology* 2/3 (1987), 276. See also Charles Keil, ‘They Want the Music but They Don’t Want the People’, *City & Society* 14/1 (2002).

18 Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

structures indoctrinated systemic marginalization and racist conditions that impact large sectors of our society. The tools of conviviality propose a framework to encourage people to work together collectively to educate, care, and administrate productive living that would challenge the hyper-capitalistic and hegemonic state.

The type of cultural production emulated within *convivencia* is further outlined in Aaron Fox's pioneering work on the production of 'real country' working-class culture. He describes,

the central place of country music in the culture of a class-based community—with 'culture' understood as an active and hegemonic (or power-inflected) process of organizing communal experience and social relations. Within this cultural framework, I treat country music primarily as working-class art, some of the resources for which circulate as musical commodities. But my view of what 'art' is entails embedding aesthetics in a nexus of social conduct, discourse, and ideology, rather than isolating canonical texts within a narrowly stylistic history or formalist analysis.<sup>19</sup>

Fully aware of the hovering popular imagination that defines 'country' in a hegemonic manner, his focus on working-class engagement with the music as a commodity provides a different read on the commodification of culture.

For mariachi musicians, the values of engagement, performance, and dialogue reside in the idea of *acompañamiento* (accompaniment). Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz argue that accompaniment serves as a key tool for creating 'insubordinate spaces' – social sites where subordinated people 'can cultivate a collective capacity to discern the "what can be" inside the "what is", where they can hone and refine tools for turning the toxic presence into a tonic future, and where they can refuse closure and open up possibility'.<sup>20</sup> They explain that '[a]ccompaniment is a disposition, a sensibility, and a pattern of behavior. It is a commitment based on a cultivated capacity for making connections with others, identifying with them, and helping them'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, they recognize the centrality of music-making as a practice of accompaniment because 'it starts with careful listening, empathy and identification', to which one can respond and create space for others to have a voice and to be heard as well.<sup>22</sup>

For Mexican musicians, accompaniment as a practice has contributed to the longevity of the mariachi's popularity. Accompaniment demonstrates profound commitment and capacity to participate in social gatherings that address the hopes and desires of the Mexican/Chicano family and community. It is apparent in examining these gatherings that social shared values and protocols of being and knowing are re-established through performance. They are repositories of collective memory, ethical witnessing, and methods of moral

19 Fox, *Real Country*, 31.

20 Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces: Improvisation and Accompaniment for Social Justice* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 14.

21 Tomlinson and Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces*, 23.

22 Tomlinson and Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces*, 27.

instruction that are passed between generations as long-time relationships are evoked, invoked, reborn, and reinvigorated.

The convivio, in which mariachi musicians provide accompaniment, offers the non-mariachera/os an opportunity to engage in dancing, singing a chorus, or even singing the lead to a song. Requesting to sing with the mariachi by an uncle of the bride, the father of the quinceañera, or the sisters of a woman celebrating her fiftieth birthday, is commonly expected and a welcomed collaboration.

The skills, ability, and capacity of accompaniment, as well as improvisation – going with the flow of the situation – illuminates the work that musicians carry out so that they can contribute to the forging of community. Being committed to serving as an accompaniment takes work. The mariachera/o must develop social as well as musical skills, through an on-the-job apprenticeship with experienced musicians. This includes ear training, transposing, and building a strong repertoire, but the apprenticeship also nurtures the ability of deep listening – of responding to other musical voices as well as to those who are listening.<sup>23</sup> The musician must master a specific role within the ensemble, but also participate in uplifting the sound of the group rather than the individual. This requires the capacities for ‘empathy and identification’ that Tomlinson and Lipsitz suggest, not only with other musicians but also with the entire community.<sup>24</sup>

For example, at a wedding in Redwood City, CA, while working with Mariachi Azteca based in San José, CA, we were going from table to table taking requests from the guests when the father of the groom came up to us and asked ‘¿disculpen muchachos, pueden acompañar a mi sobrina en una canción?’ (‘Excuse me fellas, can you accompany my niece on a song?’). The niece was standing next to him and wanted to sing for the wedding couple. Right there we asked her to sing a couple of lines from the song she requested in order to establish the key. We walked over to the *novios* (the wedding couple) and began the song. Suddenly the young woman began to sing in another key. Immediately, the guitarrón player, the vihuela player, and I (on guitar) shifted a whole step up, aligning to the woman’s pitch.<sup>25</sup> The rest of the ensemble followed in sync. From that point on, the young woman did a wonderful job, and the song came off as a big success. Fortunately, most people did not notice the young woman’s discrepancy and the adjustment the mariachi made to resolve it. Another example occurred while working with Mariachi Los Tecolotes de David Becerra in Guadalajara. We were playing in a local *casino* (clubhouse) for a family when an older woman joined in the song with the musician that was already singing. Recognizing that the woman did not sing harmony but unison with him, he turned to the musicians and yelled out ‘La’ (the key of A) to accommodate a better key for the woman. Unfortunately, she was thrown by the key change and could not find her starting note. After failing a few times to get back into the song, she turned to us and said ‘¡Ay muchachos, acompáñenme bien!’

23 Tomlinson and Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces*, 36.

24 Tomlinson and Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces*, 27.

25 The guitarrón is a large guitar-type instrument that functions as a bass, the vihuela is a small guitar-type instrument that plays strumming rhythmic patterns, along with the guitar, and together these instruments form the rhythm section for the ensemble.



(‘Come on you guys back me up better!’), her comment received playful responses from her family: ‘¡Ay tía, tú cántale bien!’ (‘Oh auntie, you need to sing well!’), ‘no los culpes’ (‘Don’t blame them’). The musician who was originally singing faced the women and began to sing again so that she had a reference, she then joined him and after a verse he stopped singing and let her take the song. The ensemble’s ability to do what Tomlinson and Lipsitz describe as ‘adjusting to mistakes and helping others sound better’<sup>26</sup> characterizes how mariacheras/os often work when backing up singers, whether professional or amateurs, and these experiences represent common occurrences significant to working as a mariachera/o.

There is also an element of choice that is involved in deciding whether to be helpful in the act of accompaniment, for not all events merit this investment. The first vignette, for example, demonstrates a dignified and mutually respectful interaction, in which the father *con respeto* (with respect)<sup>27</sup> approached the ensemble to ask for their accompaniment amid the positive enthusiasm of the gathering. This encouraged both the musicians and the invited singer to perform well. Other situations can be very different. There are events in which many of the guests, particularly men, are intoxicated and aggressive.<sup>28</sup> These *chambas* (gigs) become much more defined as typical contractual transactions in which the musicians are just watching the time, notably when the client proceeds to act in a superior and condescending manner, viewing the musicians solely as his labour for hire. In these spaces, musicians are continuously reminded by the client or the client’s guests to ‘keep playing’ and to not take much time between songs. The musicians are yelled at ‘¡les estoy pagando, cabrones!’ (‘I’m paying you assholes’) and ordered to back up the inebriated as they sing, ‘¡EH! MARIACHIS, ACOMPAÑENME. ANDALE, AHORITA!’ (‘Hey, mariachis. Back me up. Come on. Now!’). In these situations, it is difficult for musicians to identify with or feel empathy towards these clients, nor are they invested in uplifting the space. On the contrary, in contentious conditions the musicians may demonstrate acts of defiance. Musicians will retaliate by playing in a key that is too high, exaggerating the rhythmic groove and playing louder, not leaving space for the ‘guest’ singer, and dooming the person’s performance to fail. Even within the modality of celebratory energies, the temperaments stoked by intoxication that lead to expressions of class and racial superiority, misogyny, or homophobia may transpire, countering any type of communal building. Hence the mariachi musicians, who typically play a charismatic role within the convivial space, are equally susceptible to being caught up in the marginalizing and discriminating acts by other community members.

In a *convivencia*, family and friends of the client, together with the mariachi, connect under the same banner of cultural aspiration to celebrate, sing, and imagine, contributing to a repository of collective memory. The intimacy established when a mariachi surrounds a table at a wedding and plays the song requested brings to light a commonality affirmed by sound,

26 Tomlinson and Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces*, 29.

27 For further reading on the notion of *respeto*, see Guadalupe Valdez, *Con respeto: Bridging the Distances between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996); and Renato Rosaldo, ‘Cultural Citizenship in San José, California’, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 17/2 (1994), 58–9.

28 To clarify, it is not uncommon for people to be drinking and even intoxicated at an event, yet an interaction of respect is still upheld and expected.

producing connections that are embodied, not only among the musicians but also among those at the table. People respond with *gritos* (yells of encouragement) as well as singing or dancing along with the musicians. In the convivial spaces of weddings, birthday parties, and funerals, the gratification of having one's specific request fulfilled is a memorable moment and for many of the *mexicano* and Chicano communities it is an expectation. In a conversation with master mariachi musician José 'Machetes' Pérez, he suggested that if he wanted to see an *espectáculo* (a rehearsed show) of mariachi he would go to a concert in a theatre, but when he wanted to hear and feel specific songs so that he can interact without regard, he would go to the Meson or Bariachi (venues in Guadalajara) or a bar to hire the musicians so that they play for him at his table.<sup>29</sup>

The sentiment of this statement reaffirms that the mariachi, like many different forms of music, vacillates between performance spaces, which can be distinguished as Thomas Turino proposes as components of 'participatory and presentational performance'.<sup>30</sup> It is in the participatory space where *convivencia* is most vibrant, where participatory engagement is determined by all present, not solely by those considered performers. Even in the space of the urban-modern mariachi, participatory performance illuminates a continuity of engagement with clients, guests, family members, as well as with other contracted labour for the event (cooks, food servers, photographers, and videographers). Going up to a table to play a request for a group of people is committing to an encounter in which many different things can occur. These can be pleasant, fun, serious, educational, contentious, or incredibly bland. It is possible that people at any given table may not have a request, may not respond to the music, and at times may even get up and walk away – especially when their table has been called for the buffet line.

Clearly, a mariachi plays a central role in impacting the *convivencia*, contributing a musical aesthetic and *ambiente* (ambience) that is enhanced by charismatic musicians, who will converse with guests between songs and during their breaks and attend to the requests and desires of those attending the gathering. It is through this attention that the mariachi has established a longevity and continues to be a sought-out entity to enhance the social gatherings of the Mexican, Chicana/o, and Latinx communities.

### ***Compañerismo***

With the commodification of mariachi music, musicians of the working group sector are most often viewed as labour for hire, but the acts of accompaniment and conviviality illuminated earlier provide a deeper understanding of mariachi musicians. The ideas of accompaniment and conviviality start within the ensembles before they extend out to the spaces of the *chambas*. Musicians refer to each other as *compañeros*, which translates to 'partner', but should be thought of as fellow musicians. The notion of *compañerismo* entails an ideal of membership and fellowship within the ranks of mariachi musicians. Deeper relationships, as well, develop

29 José Perez, personal conversation with author, Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico (23 December 2004).

30 For a full discussion, see Thomas Turino, 'Participatory and Presentational Performance', in *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

among musicians as they grow into the world of mariachi, especially young musicians who enter into an apprenticeship. This includes learning on the job, working closely with musicians who maintain and share diverse knowledges (musical and cultural), woodshedding or rather practising on one's own, and receiving positive confirmation from the *compañeras/os* (both elders and contemporaries), as well as experiencing harsh negative criticism and working in taxing situations (paying dues).

The potential for intimate comradery, as well as contention, increases among musicians when they drive together to gigs, eat together during breaks, or drink together after a day's work, all of which are common in this line of work. Within these interactions, musicians inform each other about themselves, their families, struggles, and successes. Sometimes they bond by sharing simple nonsense in a horizontal manner. Many of the musicians, especially those that are migrants, depend on the *compañerismo* and social networks to navigate within their new context so that they can find their bearings, learn what repertoire is popular, but also attain help in finding resources for work (e.g., music stores, luthiers, dry cleaners for their suits), a place to live, learn where to eat, secure companionship, and know where it is safe and where it is not safe for them to be. In San José, California musicians also find social spaces outside of the performance arena to interact. For example, on Mondays after a weekend of working, they often gather together to barbeque and play music, and on Tuesdays meet for soccer games regularly followed with sharing of food, spirits, and music.

Related to the aspect of *compañerismo*, musicians will commonly articulate the desire *de acoplar*, which literally means to couple or attach. For musicians, this refers to the idea of falling into groove, to get in sync, either within their musical section (rhythm, violin, or trumpet) or within the ensemble as a whole. This reaction is shaped in part by how one engages outside of the commodified driven musical aspects. The intention *de acoplar* is to enhance the ideas of membership, being part of an ensemble, establishing a sense of belonging to which one can contribute and benefit. For example, members of an ensemble will volunteer their time to play for the wedding (mass and reception) of another *compañero* from the group. Between the 1970s and 2000s it was not out of the ordinary that if a mariachi musician got married, musicians from other groups, if they were not working or if they finished their *chambas* early, crashed the reception uninvited with the intention of celebrating and playing for the wedding couple. Equally significant is when a musician dies, many of the local musicians, from different groups, make an effort to play at the wake, the funeral mass, or the burial. Most recently in San José, Hector Sanchez, affectionately known by his friends as 'Ampoya', died on 27 February 2019. He was a fine *vihuelero* (vihuela player and luthier, maker of vihuelas and guitarrones) and a kind person. He was not a well-known musician; nevertheless, he accompanied and contributed to the success of thousands of gatherings celebrated by the Mexican community in the larger San Francisco Bay Area. Sanchez was bid farewell by more than fifty musicians (who came from Oakland, Hayward, Redwood City, Salinas, Gilroy, Watsonville, Santa Cruz, and of course San José), in front of many family members and friends on 5 March 2019. Musicians began gathering on that Tuesday evening at 5 pm and played continuously until 11 pm, when workers from the funeral home took the body to be prepared to be sent back to his hometown in Jalisco. Various musicians still stayed a bit

longer after Sanchez was taken away. They shared stories, sang songs, ate together, and remembered and grieved the loss of their comrade with other compañeros.<sup>31</sup>

### Misa Panamericana in Cuernavaca

For mariachi musicians the majority of chambas are weddings, quinceañeras, anniversaries, and funerals. Musicians often times are contracted to play in the central ceremonial facet of these events: the Catholic mass. The repertoire of the contemporary mariachi includes a body of liturgical music based upon readings and ceremonial processes of the Catholic mass, initially referred to as the Misa Panamericana, but commonly identified as the mariachi mass. This *misa* (mass) is an outcome of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) meeting of clerical leadership, called into convening by Pope John XXIII between 1962 and 1965.

Dolores Gonzalez (MSW – Master of Social Work), a nurse and former nun who has lived and worked in Mexico, characterized Vatican II as the result of Pope John ‘deciding it was time to let some fresh air into the church’.<sup>32</sup> Some of its changes focused on revitalizing the Catholic mass by utilizing common local languages in place of Latin, turning the focus of the officiating priest towards the congregation rather than the altar and, central to this discussion, integrating vernacular music into liturgical sections of the mass. As a result of the latter, a Canadian priest, Jean Marc Leclerc, who was stationed in Cuernavaca, Mexico, began integrating different forms of indigenous and mestizo music into the Catholic mass services, ultimately adapting and arranging music and compositions from Chile, Brazil, and Mexico to produce the Misa Panamericana recording. The mass became so popular that it was immediately adopted by different parishes in Cuernavaca, and eventually spread throughout Mexico. By 1968, mariachi masses were being performed throughout Mexico and the US Southwest.

According to Gonzalez and her long-time friend and colleague Barbara Richmond (MSW), both of whom served under the auspices of the Cuernavaca Diocese as community workers, a central goal of the church was to establish participatory engagement among the parishioners. The mariachi mass exerted a tremendous impact towards that end. The emergence of the mariachi mass occurred in the context of struggles by indigenous and impoverished communities that sought and secured allies in the church in the name of the theology of liberation.

One of the key architects of liberation theology in Latin America, Gustavo Gutiérrez, credited Vatican II with having ‘strongly reaffirmed the idea of a Church of service and not of power’.<sup>33</sup> Liberation theology challenged reigning state and capital-centred discourses of ‘development’ and the gross economic inequalities that they produced and excused.<sup>34</sup> Some

31 Since I began working on this piece, various musicians have passed from COVID-19 or other ailments, specifically Felipe ‘Trancas’ Avila and Carla ‘La Patita’ Díaz, both of whom were bid farewell by an overwhelming show of musicians in the midst of the pandemic.

32 Dolores Gonzalez and Barbara Richmond, interview by author, 7 September 2019, San José, California.

33 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2019), 7.

34 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 22.

Latin American clergy throughout the hemisphere were ready to engage in a social praxis around the theology of liberation. They reframed the teaching of scripture to include a modality of social justice. Under the auspices of Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo,<sup>35</sup> the diocese of Cuernavaca initiated impactful strategies and programmes concurrent with Vatican II and the development of the theology of liberation. Of them, *comunidades de base*, also known as Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (CEB) (Base Ecclesial Communities) figured prominently. Barbara Richmond relates ‘*de base* is the people from below, the poor . . . once a week we had a meeting and we would do scripture’, but framed in understanding the concerns and issues of the community.<sup>36</sup> In these meetings, the base were accompanied by clergy, nuns, and social workers, who listened and worked with the people on ways to find solutions to common problems. Dolores Gonzalez remembers that the theology established with the *acompañamiento* of Bishop Méndez Arceo

was very empowering for the people and what was happening. What I thought was so exciting, was the people were talking, they were organizing and overnight they would take an empty lot, a lot that had been there empty for years, and then start building their little tents, their *casitas* you know with pieces of wood and cardboard.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the CEB, Méndez Arceo supported the work of Ivan Illich who established the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (Intercultural Centre for Documentation, CIDOC), a centre for research and language, which, according to Richmond, provided training for incoming clergy and missionary workers to orient them to understand that they come as visitors to the communities, and as a result their participation in them must be framed as horizontal and reciprocal rather than vertical and hierarchical.<sup>38</sup> She explains, ‘this was not to go down and impose anything, this was to be guides and learn from the people and empower the people’ thus, decentring the hierarchal structure long established by the church’s colonial and ongoing histories.<sup>39</sup>

Richmond explains that their work in the diocese of Cuernavaca took place in a community where people endured living in shacks built with wood from crates, where they had very limited (if any) access to medical care, and where homes lacked running water and electricity.<sup>40</sup> The residents witnessed children dying of dehydration because the local municipality would only open a line of water to the water spigot in the village for a few hours a day. Yet they could

35 Bishop Méndez Arceo was a very influential theologian of liberation committed to aggrieved communities that were dismissed by the nation state, local government, and power. According to Richmond there were many efforts to discredit and to denigrate his work. One example was that he was nicknamed ‘*el rojo*’ (‘the red’) painting him as a radical communist, which has unfortunately stuck within the popular imagination, even with some of the dedicated spiritual and communal workers. See also Roderic A. Camp, *Crossing Swords: Politics and Religion in Mexico*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91–3.

36 Richmond, interview by author.

37 Gonzalez, interview by author.

38 ‘A Joyful Place’, *Time Magazine*, 29 August 1969, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,901309,00.html>.

39 Richmond, interview by author.

40 Wood crates from the Datsun factory.

see with their own eyes down the hill from this village, another community of large vacation homes that had full access to water for swimming pools and gardens. Many of the impoverished had long accepted these conditions as ‘la voluntad de Dios’ (‘God’s will’). This passive stance aligned with the idea that ‘nosotros somos pobres, ellos son ricos, y entonces nosotros vamos a tener nuestro tesoro en el cielo’ (‘we are poor, they are rich, and so we will have our treasure/wealth in heaven’).<sup>41</sup> The work of Méndez Arceo, the CIDOC, CEBs, and mariachi mass cultivated a different vision, working towards *concientización* by enabling people to transform their thinking via the reframing of liturgical readings that show ‘that the people were worthy enough to have the kingdom of God now, to have peace and justice now’.<sup>42</sup> This also led to community members recognizing their rights of equity and access, along with an active on the ground praxis that manifested itself in actions such as demanding water service and inhabiting empty lots to build homes, activities which amplified voices from below.<sup>43</sup>

The transformation of the mass as a result of Vatican II was viewed as radical and was not openly accepted by the conservative guard within the church or by the oligarchies, governments, and militaries that this conservative branch of the church actively served. The threatening proposals and actions by the advocates of liberation theology caused an immediate defensive reaction by the local masters of capital, whose existence depended on hierarchal rule. Richmond remembers ‘we would go to the mariachi mass on Sunday . . . it was extraordinary to participate in, but also it was dangerous, because the, whatever you would call them, the secret police, were there, documenting everything . . . *abiertamente* [openly], *en ese tiempo era* [at that time it was the] little cassette recordings’, recording every word that Bishop Méndez Arceo would say during the mass.<sup>44</sup> Throughout Latin America, military police and death squads assaulted, disappeared, and murdered organizers, activists, priests, and nuns who worked towards lifting up the impoverished and decentering the hierarchies that continue to oppress those in the margins – anything that appeared to promote socialism or communism.<sup>45</sup> This included the members of the CEBs as they used liturgy to make evident that everyone on this earth is entitled to human and civil rights, which was justified as actions towards communism by those in power.

41 Richmond, interview by author.

42 Barbara Richmond, phone interview by author, 21 May 2021.

43 This was the case in the outskirts of Cuernavaca according to Gonzalez and Richmond, interview by author.

44 Richmond discusses how the previous old priest was in alliance with the *caciques* (land owners or those with power), and collected monies from the poor to support local celebrations of the patron saint, rather than the church and/or *caciques* (who were still often seen as the *mayordomos* (patrons)) paying for the event celebrations. Richmond, interview by author.

45 Documentation on assassinations and disappearances are available, but most often focus on well-known events or martyrs; less material is readily available about occurrences in rural areas of Mexico where CEBs were established. Jon Sobrino, ‘Compañeros de Jesús. El asesinato-martirio de los jesuitas salvadoreños’, *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 18 (1989); Rodolfo Cardenal, ‘Rutilio Grande: mártir de la evangelización rural en El Salvador’, *Jesuits*, 12 March 2019, [www.jesuits.global/sj\\_files/2020/05/Conferencia\\_Rodolfo\\_Cardenal\\_2019-03-12.pdf](http://www.jesuits.global/sj_files/2020/05/Conferencia_Rodolfo_Cardenal_2019-03-12.pdf). See also Gustavo Castillo García, ‘El halconazo, historia de represión, cinismo y mentiras se mantiene impune’, *La Jornada*, 9 June 2008, <https://jornada.com.mx/2008/06/09/index.php?article=018n1pol&section=politica>.

Richmond and Gonzalez, along with Padre Morfín, a new young priest who was posted in a church forty-five minutes outside of Cuernavaca, experienced this type of violence when they were attacked by a 'lynch mob' that local landowners incited. This occurred when Bishop Méndez Arceo replaced the long-time priest who had served the local oligarchy with Padre Morfín, who immediately began sharing truths with the poor and shifting the priority away from providing special accommodations and services to the wealthy. Henchman for the landowners, thus, created allegations that the CEB meetings were supporting the practice of black masses, orgies, and teaching communism. Gonzalez and Richmond describe how this contention culminated to the point in which a meeting with the *responsables* (community CEB facilitators) was disrupted by various men with guns signalling a mob to attack the people in the meeting. The attack led to Padre Morfín being shot, which he survived, Richmond being thrown in front of an oncoming bus, and Gonzalez along with the responsables being beaten and jailed. The CEB members were saved because Richmond managed to escape from being hit by the bus and got into a taxi that took her to Cuernavaca, where she was able to get help.<sup>46</sup>

This kind of horrendous experience of being assaulted to a point close to death, Richmond shared, 'is what happens to people who were involved with the theology of liberation', explaining that this attack was not an isolated event and that throughout the Americas there were people who did not survive these types of targeted assaults.<sup>47</sup> Richmond is also clear to explain that while their work often appears as political activism, it is much more based on the idea of *conscientização*,<sup>48</sup> being aware of realities and how people use their own knowledge to find accord and resolve.<sup>49</sup> Yet these communal workers consistently demonstrated a resolute commitment to continue to accompany the poor and the marginalized, and to listen and learn from those who had been historically silenced. Tomlinson and Lipsitz point out how the well-known emissaries of liberation theology, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Gustavo Gutiérrez, rejected a past where 'even advocates for the poor from the Catholic Church and oppositional political parties tended to treat poor people instrumentally, as a polity to be converted rather than respected, as people in need of education, uplift, and inspiration rather than as people with knowledge who need to be listened to and accompanied'.<sup>50</sup> The efforts of those mediating the CEB meetings and training and investigating at the CIDOC were quite conscious of

46 Gonzalez and Richmond, interview by author.

47 Richmond, interview by author.

48 Richmond refers to the teachings of Paulo Freire, who was known to have accompanied Illich at the CIDOC providing workshops and seminars. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

49 Richmond felt that activist was not a term that characterized their work, which did move towards a better sociopolitical and economical condition but was much more based in a spiritual awareness that included ideas of love, faith, and care in a collective manner. Barbara Richmond, phone conversation with author, 8 February 2022. See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxi, 6, 30–1, in which he questions how organizing communal work is never seen outside of the political sphere: 'Everything has a political color.' He suggests that action through faith and love can lead towards distributive justice.

50 Tomlinson and Lipsitz, *Insubordinate Spaces*, 25. This discussion relates to what Gustavo Gutiérrez identified as 'the preferential option for the poor', indexing a concept of poverty as it pertains to a reality and a spirituality, but significantly to a 'solidarity with the poor, along with protest against the conditions under which they suffer'. See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxv.

the capacity and capabilities of those living in the aggrieved communities. Similar to musicians who have to observe, listen, and respond to the wishes of the people, the social and cultural workers committed to liberation theology engaged in careful listening with the intention of understanding the aspirations, visions, and needs of those who resided in oppressed and surveilled communities.

Prior to the violent confrontation that Richmond and Gonzalez describe, yet still in the context of an oppressive class system in Cuernavaca, Father Jean Marc Leclerc began his work at the CIDOC by arranging and presenting music designed to enable people to celebrate and contribute convivially to the eucharistic service. It is not necessarily clear why Leclerc chose a mariachi to develop the *Misa Panamericana*, but on the back cover of the *Misa Panamericana* album the notes state 'Brother Jean [Leclerc] felt it would be convenient that the project be executed by a professional ensemble, so he called upon the group of the Macías Brothers.'<sup>51</sup> Leclerc's choice in turning to the mariachi ensemble to perform the mass demonstrated his affinity and attention to the community, while the musicians offered Leclerc a working flexibility and capacity to listen and develop new music. With the help of the Mariachi Hermanos Macías, Leclerc worked out arrangements for the mariachi instrumentation, but more importantly he established an aural familiarity that reverberated with the people of the Cuernavacan community. Los Hermanos Macías helped create a musical environment that encouraged communal participation, a sense of comfort for parishioners with which to sing along. Ultimately, the *Misa Panamericana* presented by Mariachi Los Hermanos Macías raised the sense of belonging through the music being performed, thus encouraging a more vibrant participatory engagement with liberation theology and its imperatives. Gonzalez explained that the 'people learned and sang along with the musicians and the mariachi masses were always over capacity'.<sup>52</sup>

The mariachi mass started in the small parish where Leclerc worked, but 'the novelty of these musical introductions to the Holy Mass was spread by word of mouth and one day the Chapel at the Center [which I believe was at CIDOC] was insufficient to host the growing population that came to listen. It was thought then to place it, as an experience, in the Cathedral'.<sup>53</sup> The mariachi mass in a roundabout way served in a strategic manner to attract people to church, and was highly successful in engaging the congregation, which in turn transmuted into an investment by the parishioners and by the musicians. From this point the mariachi mass began serving 1,500 to 2,000 people. Bishop Méndez Arceo celebrated the scripture and the eucharist framed in the theology of liberation and the sounds of mariachi with the congregations and communities of Cuernavaca.<sup>54</sup> While Vatican II envisioned a new

51 'el hermano Juan [Leclerc] creyó conveniente que la obra completa fuera ejecutada por un conjunto profesional, y se llamó al de los 'Hermanos Macías'. Mariachi Hnos Macías and Jean Marc Leclerc, *Misa panamericana: grabada en la catedral de Cuernavaca, Morelos*, LP, Discos Aleluya, A-015, 1966.

52 Gonzalez, interview by author.

53 'la novedad de estas introducciones musicales en la Santa Misa se corrió de boca en boca y un día la Capilla del Centro (CIP) fue insuficiente para albergar la creciente población que acudía a escuchar. Se pensó entonces en ponerla, a modo de experiencia, en la Catedral'. Macías and Leclerc, *Misa panamericana*.

54 'A Joyful Place'.



kind of engagement among Catholics around the world, liberation theologians in the Americas, such as Oscar Romero, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Méndez Arceo, and Ivan Illich, not only imagined and theorized about a church in communion with its communities but enacted, through praxis, concrete ways to generate commitment and investment among the congregations, especially among the poor and marginalized, through accompaniment and participatory engagement.

### Struggling to practice ‘our own’ culture

Similar to the state violence and oppression that led to the formation of the CEB, CIDOC, and ultimately the mariachi mass in Cuernavaca, poverty, exploitation, and police brutality provoked a fusing of politics and cultural expressions north of the US–Mexico border. In the US Mexican and Chicana/o communities, police violence in the mid-1960s emerged as a central issue of concern. In San José, California, organizers and activists such as the late Sofia Mendoza worked to make this problem evident to the city council to no avail. A trained social worker who worked as a faculty member at San José State Graduate School of Social Work, she was a foundational community organizer who helped create the grassroots organization United People Arriba. Mendoza explains that she turned to organizing and mobilizing,

because there were many problems in the east side of San José; lack of transportation, problems in the schools, a lot of police brutality. In a matter of five years there were sixteen individuals killed by the police. So, we became very concerned about that and we felt that we had to go out and organize the community, so that we could have the police oversight that was really required.<sup>55</sup>

The efforts of Mendoza, her husband Gilbert Mendoza, and other community activists led to the formation of the Community Alert Patrol (CAP), an organization of citizens committed to ‘direct action against the SJPD’s abuse of Mexicans’. Nanette Regua notes how in their mobilization, ‘CAP members patrolled San José, using radio scanners, two-way radios, cameras, and tape recorders to monitor and document the police’s abuse of power.’<sup>56</sup>

The need for organizing in East San José extended beyond police brutality. Chicanos and Black citizens were disproportionately sent to the war in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a major concern for families and university students who were connecting on this issue across generations. Mendoza was also working with the farmworkers’ movement in 1965 in San José, which at the time was an agricultural centre. Another issue of central concern involved combating the housing segregation that resonated from previous eras in which

55 Sofia Mendoza, interview by Olga Nájera-Ramírez and Russell C. Rodríguez, 16 December 2004. This interview contributed to the documentary project, *Danza folklórica escénica: El sello artístico de Rafael Zamarripa* (2010), which was produced by Olga Nájera-Ramírez and associate producer Russell C. Rodríguez.

56 Nannete Regua, ‘Women in the Chicano Movement: Grassroots Activism in San José’, *Chicana/Latina Studies* 12/1 (2012), 134.

neighbourhood pledges and binding deed restrictions forbidding white people to sell property to people of Mexican descent were enacted.<sup>57</sup>

Mendoza also made public the discriminatory acts of racism towards Mexican students at the middle school where her son was attending. Regua shares,

Mendoza remembers Mexican American students being called ‘pepper bellies’, ‘bean chokers’, and ‘taco benders’ (Mendoza 2009). Sixteen teachers disciplined Mexican American students with wooden paddles. Mexican American students were routinely tracked out of honors or advanced courses and tracked into special classes for developmentally disabled children. In addition, numerous Mexican American students were given daily worksheets rather than textbooks because the school administrators and teachers believed the students were not sufficiently responsible to take care of books. Ultimately, many Mexican American students from ages eleven to fifteen dropped out.<sup>58</sup>

Along with other parents, Mendoza responded to abuse in schools and dismissals from it by gathering students, two faculty members, and the Black Berets for Justice group to organize a walkout on 26 April 1968.<sup>59</sup> This occurred immediately following the blowouts in Los Angeles that took place in March the month prior, in which an estimated 10–15,000 students, the majority of whom were Chicana/os, walked out of classes from five East Los Angeles high schools.<sup>60</sup>

The legacy of Sofia Mendoza was undoubtedly defined by her activism and the significant impact of her work in San José. What is often not mentioned in articles and reports about Mendoza, however, is how she was an advocate for Mexican and Chicana/o expressive culture as a practice that could hold in abeyance radical ideas and aspirations too dangerous to voice in public. In an interview she states:

My whole family was involved in organizing the farm worker movement here in San José . . . When I got involved with the police problems it got a little bit dangerous, you know, and I wanted my children to continue participating but I felt that I could not get them involved in that . . . I felt that it was not really safe to take my children on a lot of these things. So, I really pushed them into the culture.<sup>61</sup>

57 See Stephen Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2003), 88–9.

58 Regua, ‘Women in the Chicano Movement’, 119. Mendoza 2009 indexes an interview that Regua did in San José, Calif., 22 April 2009.

59 Regua, ‘Women in the Chicano Movement’, 120.

60 Rebecca Contreras, ‘East Los Angeles Students Walkout for Educational Reform (East L.A. Blowouts), 1968’, *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, 24 April 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190315172454/https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/east-los-angeles-students-walkout-educational-reform-east-la-blowouts-1968>. For an in-depth discussion on the East LA Blowouts, see Mario T. Garcia and Sal Castro, *Blowout! Sal Castro and the Chicano Struggle for Educational Justice* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

61 Sofia Mendoza, interview.

Mendoza, along with her sister Margaret Ota and sister-in-law Dolores Magdaleno, converted an old, small two-bedroom house into a cultural centre in East San José. They named it Teatro Indio. The goal of the centre was to share Mexican folk music and dance with the youth of the community. Between 1969 and 1971, children, including those of Mendoza, Ota, and Magdaleno, took lessons in Mexican folk dance.<sup>62</sup> Mendoza was also central in helping found one of the premier US Mexican folklórico ensembles, Los Lupeños de San José in which her older children (Rick and Linda) were founding members. She worked to obtain rehearsal space for this group in the old Guadalupe Mission building, no longer of use when a new church was built.

Mendoza also saw the value of expressive cultural workers accompanying the rallies and marches occurring during this time. Some of the first performances of the students of Teatro Indio were at Chicano Power rallies at places such as St James Park. Mendoza recalled how activism and expressive culture accompanied each other to inform and enhance the identity and lives of Mexican and Chicana/os. In talking about her oldest son Rick, who was a cultural bearer of Mexican folk music and dance in San José, she relates

I really felt that the culture was so important, and I really felt that he was going to be able to, really because of his talent, be able to give our community what was needed. And also, he would still continue serving in the movement. Because he danced at a lot of the fundraisers, he danced at a lot of rallies and so that was still a lot of participation. So, I didn't see the culture any different than anything I was doing.<sup>63</sup>

Teatro Indio, unfortunately, did not have the longevity of cultural sites such as Plaza de la Raza (Los Angeles) or La Peña (Berkeley), nonetheless, it generated powerful energy and enthusiasm that necessarily brought Chicana/o activism into dialogue with Mexican expressive culture. Don Ramiro Perez, the guitar teacher at Teatro Indio, taught corridos, rancheras, and boleros, and was also a founding member of the ensemble Flor del Pueblo, along with his daughter Yolanda Perez. This ensemble presented music of the Chicano movement, but also performed songs of Cuban and Latin American artists Carlos Pueblo, Suni Paz, and Aníbal Naoza in a repertoire that included protest songs from the farmworker's movement, union songs from labour movements, songs from the civil rights movement, and original music collectively composed by the members of the group.

As a student of Teatro Indio in 1970, I entered into this world of dance and music somewhat reluctantly, as did most of my friends. Rick Mendoza demonstrates this type of hesitation in relating that, 'I was like "no I don't want to go," I wanted to be out there on the streets riding my bike with my friends, play in the yard, basketball. So, she [Sofia Mendoza] used to drag me, God I would go crying.' He later states that it was when he saw the dance Los Machetes, in which the male dancers danced with two machetes hitting them between

62 I was a student at Teatro Indio learning and growing up with the Mendoza family. My first teacher was Mendoza's sister-in-law Dolores Magdaleno. Her son, Rick Mendoza, was the first person to teach me some chords on the *jarana huasteca*, which opened up a lifetime experience of Mexican music.

63 Mendoza, interview by Olga Nájera-Ramírez and Russell Rodríguez.

their legs, behind their backs and tossing them, he was ‘hooked’.<sup>64</sup> For myself, being hooked entailed connecting with the aesthetic and political power of collective cultural expression, but this sense of connection also stemmed from the friendships developed within the context of playing music and dancing. I was ushered into the magical vibrancy of the movement, propelling a powerful enthusiasm about learning expressive cultural forms from Mexico, and experiencing a convivial ambiance within the young cohort, which led to mentorship between the young children and the teenagers who were dancing. While Willie Mays, Carlos Santana, Marvin Gaye, and Muhammad Ali were our household idols, I grew up with another set of people that I looked up to and who became my teachers, mentors, and friends. It was in this space where as a child and later as a young adult I became a first-hand witness and contributor to the burgeoning Chicana/o Arts movement in San José. The dance group accompanied the Chicana/o crowds at the rallies, sharing the stage (often the small platforms of flatbed trucks) with Flor del Pueblo, Teatro Urbano, Teatro Campesino, Teatro de la Gente, Danny Valdez, Rudy Madrid, José Antonio Burciaga, and Bernice Zamora, preparing crowds to hear speeches by activists Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Luis Valdez, and Sofia Mendoza. The intersection of music, dance, art and activism was shaped by a sense of *convivencia*. The dance rehearsal time was enhanced by the breaks we took to get snacks and then go outside and play around the dirt field near where the Teatro Indio house was located on Alum Rock Avenue. An intergenerational connection was fused between US born children and their migrant parents and grandparents through convivial accompaniment and performance as the crowds watched us children doing *folklórico* dances, or when we heard local musicians such as Ben Cadena and Rudy Madrid do their version of Álvaro Carrillo’s classic bolero ‘Sabor a mi’. This romantic song seemed right at home in the midst of a political rally. Activists, musicians, and dancers alike, put themselves out there to raise awareness about the unjust conditions that Mexican and Chicano families were enduring. An aesthetic of engagement and accompaniment enabled the Mexican and Chicano community to affirm the memories that documented their linked fate and promoted a moral responsibility to envision and work towards a more decent and democratic society.

### Misa in the barrio

The energy and activities of Teatro Indio emerged in close proximity to an important cultural, political, and religious site for the Mexican and Chicano communities in San José: Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. This specific church, located in the Sal Si Puedes barrio (neighbourhood),<sup>65</sup> was established by the Franciscan order in 1962. Prior to the Franciscans, an archdiocesan priest, Father Donald McDonnell, had served mass in a small building that was

64 Rick Mendoza, interview by Olga Nájera-Ramírez and Russell Rodríguez, 16 December 2004. This interview contributed to the documentary project *Danza folklórica escénica: El sello artístico de Rafael Zamarripa*.

65 Sal Si Puedes (Get Out If You Can) was a neighbourhood characterized by its dirt roads. When it rained, its roads transformed into unmanageable mud in which cars and carriages would get stuck. Thus, ‘get out if you can’. However, later, the nickname became relevant to the disregarded state of overpopulation, lack of resources, and certain violent tendencies that marked its marginality.

referred to as Guadalupe Mission. It was at this time in 1953 that he met parishioner Cesar Chavez and began to mentor him in the ideas of social justice and the principles of non-violence, providing the church as a site for gatherings and meetings. Journalist Monica Clark notes that as the Franciscan order took on administration of the newly built church, McDonnell ‘responded to a Vatican appeal for priests to serve in Latin America and was sent to Cuernavaca, Mexico, to teach Spanish language, culture and history to priests, brothers, sisters and lay volunteers preparing to work in Latin America’.<sup>66</sup>

The Sal Si Puedes neighbourhood, since the 1920s, hosted a significant Latino population that included Puerto Ricans early on. By the 1940s, large numbers of Mexican migrants settled in this area. It was historically, and continues to be, a marginalized neighbourhood with very few resources and a severe lack of infrastructure.<sup>67</sup> Today, known as the Mayfair neighbourhood, community organizations such as Somos Mayfair, The School of Arts and Culture, and other grassroots groups work to secure government support, promote fair housing opportunities, demand educational equity, and mobilize for an end to blighted conditions in this district.

My family regularly attended the 12 o’clock mass at Guadalupe Church around 1969. My mother enjoyed the music provided by a handful of mariachi musicians, who played the *Misa Panamericana*. This is how the melodic themes of ‘El angelus’, ‘Señor ten piedad’, ‘El santo’, and ‘Cordero de Dios’ were ingrained into my memory. This experience ultimately served me well once I became a mariachero. One of the musicians that filled in as part of the small ensemble at Guadalupe Church was Juan Fernández, who became a mentor of mine when I began my apprenticeship in mariachi. Another musician, Don Jessy, was an older man who played the violin in a wonderfully vibrant manner. He did not sing, but played all the introductions and embellishments and even covered the melodies of the stanzas. I remember clearly that he never stopped playing during the different hymns. I never worked with this man; however, I remember him well because he was an active participant at the Teatro Indio. As Teatro Indio brought the worlds of Chicano politics and Mexican culture into dialogue, Guadalupe Church also served as an intersection of the same fusion of politics and culture along with a spirituality that resonated with the ideas and work of Méndez Arceo, Illich, Leclerc, Gonzalez, and Richmond in Cuernavaca. Guadalupe Church was a natural location for the mariachi mass.

In the United States, the mariachi mass is commonly observed. It can be heard every Saturday at Catholic churches in any highly Mexican populated community where wedding nuptials, quinceañeras, or baptisms are performed. In Houston, Texas, Mariachi Norteño has been accompanying the mass at St Joseph Church since 1967.<sup>68</sup> In addition to serving the church as a musical frame, the mass is also used as a pedagogical tool to initiate learning

66 Monica Clark, ‘Priest Who Inspired Cesar Chavez Dies at Age 88’, *National Catholic Reporter*, 2 March 2012, [www.nconline.org/news/people/priest-who-inspired-cesar-chavez-dies-age-88](http://www.nconline.org/news/people/priest-who-inspired-cesar-chavez-dies-age-88). See also Pitti *The Devil in Silicon Valley*, 150–1.

67 See Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley*, 78–102.

68 John Burnett, ‘Our Soul Music is Mariachi Music: Houston’s Mexican Mass’, *Texas Public Radio*, 3 January 2014, [www.tpr.org/post/our-soul-music-mariachi-music-houstons-mexican-mass](http://www.tpr.org/post/our-soul-music-mariachi-music-houstons-mexican-mass).

about mariachi music. In the San Francisco Bay Area, various mariachi musicians have created similar programmes in coordination with Catholic churches. These musicians were provided facilities by the church to run their classes, and in return the students learned the mariachi mass and committed to performing at the church, one service every Sunday.<sup>69</sup> While the history presented on the nascent moment of the mariachi mass in Cuernavaca is not common knowledge among the musicians, the value and the need for it within the communities of Greater Mexico are understood as serving the community as well as being something that is marketable.<sup>70</sup>

Nonetheless, for some musicians the mass is a cherished practice of devotion. The act of making a *manda* (promise) for the health of a loved one or for a successful year of work is not uncommon amongst musicians. In a 2013 interview, Angel Martínez of Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán talks about how his group experienced a downturn in work during his transition to the directorship, and how turning to their Catholic faith carried the group through some of the hardship.<sup>71</sup> He states

We began to establish very good relationships with the members. You can say that we became a group of friends within the same mariachi. We are of faith, we all believe [in God], practitioners of the Catholic religion. And we made an offering in those years [the struggling years] . . . that we would play on the first day of each month, we would try at least, because sometimes the tours or other commitments do not allow us . . . every month we gift a mass to different churches [within Guadalajara] making an offering to God and to give thanks for what we have received. Well at the root of this it has gone very well. We began to do this 15 years ago . . . and little by little it began illuminating results. That is, with faith things can happen.<sup>72</sup>

69 Abigail Torres and Demetrio Gonzalez are two San Francisco Bay Area mariacheros who have been coordinating and teaching such types of programmes in Richmond California since the early 2000s.

70 Mariachi groups charge to play the mass, the equivalent to one hour of work. Musicians, however, will donate their time to play a mass for the funeral of a fellow musician or family members of a fellow musician and for the feast of Santa Cecilia (patron of musicians). Weddings for fellow musicians might also be a place for musicians to gather and donate their time. These events make convivial accompaniment most evident.

71 Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán was one of the most prolific ensembles from Mexico founded by Angel Martínez's father, Fernando Martínez, and uncle, José 'Pepe' Martínez, the latter went on to be the musical director for Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán up to his retirement in 2014. Angel acquired the directorship of the Nuevo Tecalitlán when his father died in 1998.

72 'Empezamos a tener muy buena relación con los elementos. Se puede decir que llegamos a tener un grupo de amistad de entre el mismo mariachi. Nosotros somos creyentes, todos somos creyentes, profesamos la religión católica. Y hicimos un ofrecimiento para en esos años . . . tocamos todos los días primeros de cada mes . . . procuramos, porque a veces las giras o algo no nos permiten . . . cada mes regalamos una misa en diferentes templos para ofrecer a Dios nuestro trabajo y agradecer lo que nos ha dado, no? . . . Pues a la raíz de eso nos ha ido muy bien. Empezamos con eso ya hace 15 años . . . y poco a poco empezó a tener resultados. O sea, con fé se podrían dar las cosas.' Mariachi Nuevo Tecalitlán, interview with Jonathan Clark for the *Mariachi Channel Studio Sessions*, 15 November 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1800&v=XyKs-mKxDv8&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1800&v=XyKs-mKxDv8&feature=emb_logo).

It is clearly understood that the musicians' devotion was in hopes of better work opportunities and results, but at the same time the musicians strengthened their personal relationships as a collective and drew closer to their faith while developing deeper relations with their community. This was affirmed later in the interview when Angel's brother, Alejandro, made reference to conversations with the priest about the parish where the musicians live, in the Colonia de San Andrés (the San Andres neighbourhood).<sup>73</sup> The idea of coming into communion with each other is a sentiment that Martínez shared throughout this interview, testifying to the convivial aspects of the group's activities.

The members of Nuevo Tecalitlán affirm the special bond that exists within the group and note how the Catholic mass and devotion play a part of the ensemble's existence. Other musicians display a similar commitment, as illustrated by my interactions with Javier Vargas, a well-known mariachi musician from Watsonville, California. On a Thursday evening in autumn 2017, Vargas phoned me to see if I was available to work with him: 'Quiero saber si me puedes ayudar este sábado, tengo 7 horas' ('I was wondering if you can help me out this Saturday, I have 7 hours'). This is a typical manner in which a gig is offered, by letting the person know how many hours of work are available, which translates to a quantifiable understanding of the money to be earned at an hourly rate. I took the gig.

I met Vargas at a parking lot in Watsonville, where I could leave my car. From there we headed to the first gig, which was a mass for a wedding in Salinas, about a 35-minute drive from Watsonville. This gave us a chance to catch up with each other, conversing as we drove. We arrived at the church and right away Vargas went directly to greet the priest, while I went to meet with some of the other musicians. The *guitarronero*, Benji, immediately started to prepare me for the mass. This was important because Javier's group played different versions of the cantos that diverged from the mariachi mass that was more common. Most of the music was simple, but quite interesting.<sup>74</sup> We were ready to begin the mass, and I realized Vargas had never tuned his guitar nor took it out of the case. I turned to Benji and asked, 'Is Javier going to play?' He said 'No, he just sings.' So, that meant I had to read through the charts provided for each canto. The priest gave the sign for us to start the mass, and at that moment, Javier walked up to the pulpit, asked the congregation to stand to begin the mass, turned to us and signalled to begin. From that point we went through the whole mass with him leading us and the congregation.

It is common for the mariachi ensembles to stand in line off to one side of the altar, and whoever sings does so from where they are standing within the ensemble. Vargas's action of going up to the pulpit raised questions for me, and at the same time it seemed very appropriate. In an interview with him later, I asked if he considered himself, in the situation of the mass, a cantor or a mariachero. He simply stated that he is a mariachero. I then asked why he went up to the pulpit to sing rather than stay with the mariachi. He went into a long history of

73 The Colonia de San Andrés is a district in Guadalajara where many mariachi musicians have taken up residence.

74 This version of the mass was composed by Eleazar Cortez, a fellow seminarian with Javier Vargas, who also became a working mariachi musician.

the psalm tradition that related to the Judea cantor. He continued to explain that his goal in going forth to lead the congregation was not to draw attention to himself as a performer:

The singing and music have occupied a place, a very important role within the liturgy, the songs are now a very integral part. . . a mass without hymns could be considered an incomplete mass. Now the singer [cantor] has been given a very important role. The singer you can think about as an animator. The singer is like glass, their service is not to distract from the motive of the congregation. . . it is to animate the people to sing.<sup>75</sup>

Vargas illuminates a foundational knowledge that is based upon his years of study as a seminarian, making clear he believes he must be transparent in going up to the pulpit to provide a service to encourage and engage participation of those in attendance, rather than presenting as a performer or an artist. His ability to do this is also informed by his experience as a mariachi musician/performer, *de acoplar*, to fall into groove with the priest and the congregation. Ultimately, Vargas's mariachi provides a service to the community, a facilitation of the ceremonial processes of music that is integral to the Catholic mass. Musicians such as Javier Vargas not only keep certain knowledges and traditions vibrant, but also serve as cultural bearers providing instruction and guidance to the communities in which they live.

### ***La Salida (The Exit)***

The actions I presented occurring in the intersections between the social, cultural, and political are not unique to mariachi, they are, however, necessary as part of the survival strategies of aggrieved communities. Through these intersections, opportunities emerge for the communities to convene and be called into action. The work of accompaniment performed by Méndez Arceo, Illich, Leclerc, Gonzalez, Richmond, the CEB facilitators, Mariachi Hermanos Macías, Rick and Sofia Mendoza, and many others led to powerful instances of communal organizing, making public claims on space, envisioning social justice, producing participatory engagement, and fostering cultural and spiritual production in the face of enormous and perilous obstacles. These struggles of people 'from below' require energy and resolve. They ask people to contribute what they can, be it by facilitating a meeting, going out and collecting materials to construct a dwelling, putting oneself out on the line, teaching a dance class, or playing a mass. It is in these actions that people need accompaniment to achieve a goal or task, but also to work towards a conviviality in which interaction continuously leads to fostering understanding and value with the 'folk'.

Mariachi music has contributed productively to the realm of ceremonial practice within the Catholic church. The *Misa Panamericana*, which emerged in the midst of the theology of liberation movement in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, indicates how mariachi music served as a

75 'el canto y la música han tomado un lugar, un papel muy importante dentro la liturgia, el canto es parte ahora ya integral . . . una misa sin cantos se considera como que no es misa . . . misa completa. Ahora al cantor se le ha dado un papel muy importante. El cantor se lo podía llamar 'animador'. El cantor es como un vidrio, su servicio es que no distraiga el motivo de la reunion . . . es animar a la gente que cante.' Javier Vargas, phone interview by author, 19 June 2020.



unifying practice point that resonated with *el pueblo* (the people). The Mariachi Hermanos Macías *se acopló* (connected) with the people of Cuernavaca making the bishop's mass on Sunday a profoundly popular convening that continued for many years, consistently filling the 2,000-person cathedral to its capacity. The phenomenon of the mass today illuminates an empathetic accompaniment that is now integrated into a relationship between mariachi musicians and Mexican communities throughout Greater Mexico. The mariachi mass also makes apparent an epistemology, a way of knowing, maintained by mariachi musicians, which is much deeper than simply providing a commodified service to the Mexican and Chicano communities. Mariachi musicians who are members of these communities also serve as cultural bearers and facilitators not only for the ceremonial mass, but also for a series of living cultural practices that are central to the communities of Greater Mexico. The sacred mariachi mass serves as a template for secular cultural workers in cities such as San José, where expressive culture functions as an archive of a linked fate, a repository of collective memory, and a source of moral and political instruction.

### Afterthought

Understandably, the fact that this traditional music form is now unexpectedly positioned as a popularly commodified style characterized by standardization is the basis for many contentious debates about defining the mariachi among and between researchers and practitioners. These investigations have been valuable and generative. Various researchers have been extremely productive in providing historical analysis, drawing out events and exploits that musicians have endured, excavating, and rescuing cultural items from these forms. The investigators have also been productive in examining the social constructions around the music, all of which have created a wonderful foundation for the field of mariachi studies.<sup>76</sup> Concurrently, however, some of this research has been centred on fixed notions of the *mariachi tradicional* (traditional mariachi) that set up fixed binaries between traditional and modern, folk and commercial, in the process inherently severing historical continuity between previous generations of mariachi and today's urban contemporary scenes. This is especially apparent with those studies geared towards excavating what has been 'lost' or transformed rather than identifying the innovations that emerge from current spaces of practice. This preservationist ethic misses the ways in which tradition has never been static, but instead has always entailed creative transformation, as demonstrated from inter-disciplinary work. As Philip Bohlman observes, '[R]ather than expressing concern over the disappearance of folk music, it preferred to see change as normative and creative; rather than subscribing to restrictive categories that limited folk music to rural venues'.<sup>77</sup> Following Bohlman's line of

76 See Méndez Moreno, *Apuntes sobre el pasado de mi tierra*; Hermes, *Origen e historia del mariachi*; Jáuregui, *El mariachi*; Álvaro Ochoa Serrano, *Mitote, fandango, y mariacheros*, 3rd edn (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2005); Arturo Chamorro Escalante, *Mariachi antiguo, jarabe y son* (Zapopan: El Colegio de Jalisco, 2000); and Sheehy, *Mariachi Music in America*.

77 Phillip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), xiv.

argument, it becomes evident that the music forms, styles, ensembles, instrumentation, repertoires, and venues within the mariachi world have always been in flux, changing in response to new circumstances, and will continue to transform through time, space and practice. By no means are we obligated to either celebrate or denigrate this change, but it is important to understand why and how cultural transformations occur, and how they are connected to social, political, and economic changes, especially as the product of trauma caused by exile, refuge, and enslavement.

Compounding these changes is the act of migration, as people move from their places of origin to new sites of arrival, taking with them their cultural memory and possibly a few material items. In these migrations, the need to re-establish traditional ways of knowing and to create a firm sense of belonging in new locations of residence is crucial. As a result, people have turned to expressive culture to rediscover, reinvent, and re-envision the ways they hear and see their lives.<sup>78</sup> Folk and traditional forms of music and dance have played a central role in the lives of migrants (and all displaced people, especially those of colour), and through these forms a call to collective being expressing a linked fate as viewed through acts of social gathering provides opportunities to build spaces for belonging and collectively affirming epistemologies grounded in acts of socializing, listening, responding, dancing, singing, playing, and knowing.<sup>79</sup> Re-engaging cultural expressions beyond their state of origin unfortunately does create an opening for painful feelings of loss through the absence or transformation of traditional forms, but it also provides opportunity for new developments based on the new realities and needs of the community. In the case of mariachi music, as it travelled beyond the rural regions of the Western plateau of Mexico, to urban centres such as Guadalajara, Mexico City, and then beyond the national borders of Mexico, new and established ways of hearing and practising mariachi music have been affirmed and contested by the community in the new locations, illuminating the now transnational nature of mariachi.

It is exactly this idea of communal engagement of mariachi that pervades the case studies in Cuernavaca and San José that I present in this article. Mariachi music has endured transformations and transitions of practice and space, and it has proven to be resilient, establishing a longevity of practice and significance within communities throughout Greater Mexico. In this study I ask what is it that has made mariachi popular? How do musicians forge an ongoing relationship with community members at the local level? Ultimately, does the mariachi provide a significant service that contributes to the forging of community?

78 Rosalinda Fregoso utilizes Stuart Hall's notion of the 'imaginative rediscovery' in her work *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). See Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', *Framework* 36 (1989), 69.

79 For further reading on this topic, see Deborah Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Alex E. Chavez, *Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Poetics of Huapango Arribeño* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Esailama G. A. Diouf, 'SAUCE!: Conjuring the African Dream in America through Dance', in *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities*, ed. Kariam Welsh, Esailama G. A. Diouf, and Yvonne Daniel (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019); and George Lipsitz and the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, *SaludArte: Building Health Equity on the Bedrock of Traditional Arts and Culture* (Los Angeles: Alliance for California Traditional Arts, 2020).

The popular imagination around the traditions of mariachi has historically been based upon media productions (mostly film) from earlier eras, and more recently on news media reports on current mariachi events such as festivals, conferences, and school programmes. This imagination continues to focus on the stereotypes of the *borracho*, *parrandero*, y *jugador* (drunk, partyer, and gambler) juxtaposed against a more recent move towards legitimacy that identifies the mariachi as made up of capable musicians playing any type of music and integrating into the logic of a Western art musical understanding. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, José L. Hernández, founder and director of the renowned Mariachi Sol de México, was asked

Q: What's the worst stereotype people have of mariachi?

A: That we're just folk musicians who don't know how to read or write music, or that we're the stereotypical Mexican a lot of people have been exposed to in the media: a fat Mexican, with a fat mustache [*sic*], with a bottle of tequila next to him in the bar. When they see a group like Sol or Reyna, young guys, well-groomed, good musicians, a lot of people get blown away. When they see real musicianship, see me conducting a symphony, or playing with a symphony, they learn to admire the musicianship of mariachi.<sup>80</sup>

The persistence of cultural stereotypes and forms of commodification and standardization are part of the social meanings attached to mariachi. Yet if we focus only on musical texts, we miss the broad array of social contexts in which mariachi is produced, performed, and embraced. In local sites in Cuernavaca and San José, and throughout Greater Mexico, the meaning of mariachi does not depend simply on fidelity to tradition or transformations of it, but on the concrete uses and effects for which the music is mobilized by people resisting the unliveable destinies meted out to them by the state and capital.

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80 Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, 'Mariachi in L.A.: As Vital to Mexicans as their Flag', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 2000, [www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-aug-10-ca-1875-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-aug-10-ca-1875-story.html).

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