



Review

Luis Diaz-Santana Garza. **Between Norteño and Tejano Conjunto: Music, Tradition, and Culture at the U.S.-Mexico Border**. Lexington Books, 2021.

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As a Chicana growing up in the Midwest, the music that often filled our home was the primary link for reconnecting to a temporality and spatiality steeped in our borderlands origin. The Conjunto genre was crucial to maintaining our cultural identities away from the U.S.-Mexico border region. Therefore, discovering Luis Diaz-Santana Garza's, *Between Norteño and Tejano Conjunto: Music, Tradition, and Culture at the U.S.-Mexico Border* was a foray into the nuances of a tradition that brought me back to the border region when we listened to the music at home.

Garza's treatment of Conjunto weaves together the historical, geographical, political, technological, syncretic, and ethnomusicological threads to create a textured and tapestried approach to the study of the music that characterizes the heart of the borderlands. It engenders a deep appreciation for the music of Conjunto and its historical context. Garza's broader argument is that the "music of norteño and Tejano Conjunto is a living heritage and a cultural tradition shared by Mexico and the United States. Garza argues that these bi-national traditions are two sides of the same coin: a transnational group that "builds bridges, not walls" (128). Garza's work explains in great depth precisely how such a diversity of cultures and musical traditions coalesced into what emerged as Conjunto. The polkas, waltzes, and mazurkas of Eastern Europe and later the cumbias of Columbia merge in a tradition whose sounds hearken to a colonial past of struggle, adaptation, resilience, and resistance, while simultaneously laying the foundation for a tradition in a constant process of syncretistic creativity and inter-cultural sound experimentation. His nuanced approach to the technological developments at the turn of the 20th century and technological access in rural spaces considers the impacts on Conjunto's development, diffusion, and augmentation.

Garza provides a powerful intervention on Conjunto in a way that straddles geographic and theoretical borders. Garza's intervention is unique in its intentional approach to Conjunto as a musical tradition worthy of full academic consideration. This book acts as a corrective to previous studies that overwhelmingly ascribe a secondary status to Conjunto. Garza is well versed in the prior literature and squarely confronts the academic marginalization of Conjunto. He links its "lower" status to the geographical marginalization of the borderlands by juxtaposing it against the consolidation of a centrally based national Mexican identity. Garza argues convincingly that most prior studies are steeped in an elitism that privileges the urban center over the rural periphery. He identifies the genesis of Conjunto in the creation of border identities as rooted in resistance to such political and cultural marginalization. Garza makes a compelling case that the cultural legacy of the borderlands must be understood as a unique tradition in its own right - one that arose from a need to consolidate a regional identity and a reflection of the lives, struggles, and migrations of borderland inhabitants. Although this work does not explicitly state it, Garza's study is notably valuable for

decolonial scholars as it reveals Conjunto as a creative wellspring that speaks (and sings) from the colonized interstices of “border thinking” (Mignolo 2000).

Additionally, this work serves as an excellent resource for ethnomusicologists, *folklorico maestros*, and musicians alike. Garza nuances his argument by delving into the histories of the diverse cultural influences that impacted Conjunto as well as the genealogies surrounding the technical development and trajectories of the instruments - particularly the bajo sexto and button accordion. Garza’s treatment of the musical influences, genres, technologies, and instrumental developments reveals an interwoven tapestry of feeling emanating from the sounds and instruments of Conjunto that subversively pushed back against the national cultures of both nations. Conjunto reflected the sounds of its own de facto border nation nested in the frictive interstices between the U.S. and Mexico.

Garza hails from Mexico but he is a borderland scholar and one that notably does not “choose a side” between Tejano and Norteño. For those familiar with a borderline that creates disassociations with *el otro lado*, it is a notable positioning. Garza accomplishes this with anecdotes from interviews with Conjunto artists on both sides, exposing that this rift is not reflected among the artists themselves, who express respect for their musical brethren. Garza successfully explains the sociopolitical genesis of the borderline schism while remaining loyal to shared origins and culture. Ultimately, this text performs a powerful act of subaltern solidarity that restitches the borderland as a historical locus of cultural resistance to hegemonic nationalism. It is important not to understate this because of the existing tensions between contemporary populations of Tejanos and Norteños, a tension that, in many respects, is expressed through loyalty to one side or the other. While Conjunto exists at the nexus of this tension, Garza uncovers how the tensions and rivalries are rooted in the social and economic histories between the U.S. and Mexico - tensions that stem from the divergence of what was once a singular unified regional culture rooted in a resistance that celebrated their rural marginality. Indeed, Garza’s work reminds Tejanos and Norteños alike that an understanding of their overlapping histories provides a path to potential comradery.

The book is accessible to lovers of Conjunto while remaining theoretically rich. The technical attention to Conjunto’s instrumentalization is equaled in its approach to the historical underpinnings of narrative *corrido* storytelling that remains at the heart of Conjunto to this day. Thus, it addresses both academic audiences and the broader community in a balanced manner. While it can easily be adapted for use in undergraduate and graduate courses in ethnomusicology, borderland studies, or Chicanx studies, it remains accessible to a broader audience both as aficionados and to other musicians. Perhaps the press will consider making a Spanish translation of this monograph to expand into Spanish-speaking markets.

Finally, Garza’s accompanying Facebook page contains audio and video links to the Conjunto music and musicians he describes in depth. This page is a boon to readers who may be unfamiliar with early musicians or who are looking to hear nuances of difference through geography and time. Listening and/or watching these recordings enhances the reading experience. Rich, meticulous, enjoyable, and in keeping with Garza’s desire to make research accessible to larger audiences, this is a text that speaks to scholars of music and sings to the hearts of the *familias* who originate from the borderlands regions.

Reference: Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

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