
“Penned Against the Wall”

Migration Narratives, Cultural Resonances, and Latinx Experiences in Appalachian Music

ABSTRACT Although the Appalachian region has long been associated with white racial identity, Latinx people remain the region’s largest and fastest-growing minority. What perspectives and experiences are revealed when such narratives of whiteness are challenged by the visibility of Latinx migrants? What does music tell us about ongoing discourses of migration and border-crossings? This essay analyzes Latinx immigration narratives in Appalachian music and offers the possibility of a Latinx-Appalachian musical and cultural resonances.

I take up the music of artists who claim hybrid Latinx-Appalachian cultural and musical identities. Namely, this essay focuses on Che Apalache—a four-piece band based in Buenos Aires that plays “Latingrass”—and the Lua Project—a five-piece band based in Charlottesville, Virginia, that plays “Mexilachian” music. Using field recordings and ethnographic interviews with both groups, this essay analyzes references to U.S.-Mexico border politics, acts of border crossing, and Latin American-Appalachian geographic similarities. I engage U.S.-based Latinx studies and Appalachian studies to establish relationships of Appalachian and Latinx cultures and incorporate analyses of both Spanish and English lyrics. Ultimately, this essay suggests that listening for Latinx migration narratives in Appalachian music challenges assumptions of belonging in the shifting U.S. cultural landscape. **KEYWORDS** Appalachia, Latinx music, popular music

In August 2017 I was driving through Athens County, Ohio, amid a summer of regular participation at bluegrass jams across the central and southern parts of the state. I stopped at a small Mexican restaurant in Nelsonville where a collection of mariachi vinyl records was proudly propped up along the back shelf of the bar, complete with colorful cheap sombreros on both ends. I soon found myself deep in conversation with the restaurant’s manager about his arrival in Athens County by way of Central Mexico; a proud *jalisciense*. I explained my family’s migration from Northern Mexico to the Mississippi Delta and my musical journey to Appalachian music, which quickly pivoted the conversation to our shared adoration of Linda Ronstadt’s mariachi albums.¹ I asked the manager if he knew of other Latinxs living nearby, to which he replied, “*No, no hay nadie. Somos los unicos.*”² Although data from the 2010 census indicated there were between one and two thousand Latinxs living in Athens County in 2016, the Mexican restaurateurs in Nelsonville understood that they were,

1. Linda Ronstadt made important contributions to Mexican and Mexican American music traditions in the 1980s with her consecutive albums *Canciones de mi Padre* and *Mas Canciones*. She is not often given credit for this work or acknowledged as a Latinx artist.

2. Author’s conversation with the narrator, August 2017.

seemingly, the sole Latinx migrants in their area.³ If Appalachia's Latinx population in Athens County alone was sizable, why were Latinxs so seemingly invisible, even to other Latinxs, in this case?

Just days later, hundreds of neo-Nazis gathered 300 miles southeast of Nelsonville in Charlottesville, Virginia. Heather Heyer was murdered when one white nationalist drove a car into a crowd of protestors. Among those injured was Natalie Romero, a rising sophomore at the University of Virginia and activist in the local Latinx community. A few hours after the attack in Charlottesville, Che Apalache, a bluegrass band from Buenos Aires, Argentina, took the stage at the Galax Old Time Fiddler's Convention and sang their original song "The Wall" in solidarity with protestors. As the trauma sank in across Virginia and the rest of the United States the following week, Charlottesville-based band the Lua Project traveled to Page County, Virginia, with visiting Mexican folk musician Zenen Zeferino, to perform a series of concerts.

These simultaneities in August 2017 cut through assumptions to lay bare the greatest racial fallacy in the Appalachian region: that white people are tacitly present and people of color are not. Recent attention to the Appalachian region and the southern United States reveals the rise of white nationalist ideologies and violent acts of racism alongside unprecedented levels of Latinx migration. Appalachia has not been excluded from the so-called "browning of America," and with the movement of Latinx people within the region comes the movement and exchange of music.⁴ What perspectives are revealed when narratives of whiteness are challenged by the visibility and voices of Latinx immigrants? What do those voices tell us about experiences of immigration in the midst of the U.S.-Mexico border humanitarian crisis? And finally, what does it mean that the very region with which social rhetoric that demonizes and dehumanizes Latinx people is so often associated is also the region that Latinxs are claiming through music?

This article situates the ways artists Che Apalache and the Lua Project merge and navigate Latin American and Appalachian musical traditions, express relationships to the U.S.-Mexico border, and provide new, nuanced perspectives of Latinx immigration in the wake of Charlottesville. Joining together theoretical discourse, ethnographic insights, and lyric analyses, I identify "migration narratives" and argue that Latinx-Appalachian music signifies poetic, sonic, and cultural resonances across Latinx and Appalachian communities.⁵ I also identify an emergent Latinx-Appalachian ontology that offers new, compassionate ways of being in relationship to each other in the United States. Listening for resonances via Latinx-Appalachian music expands Latinx conversations in the U.S. beyond the U.S.-Mexico border and well-established Latinx urban communities and into the textures of Latinx

3. Retrieved from Berea College Loyola Jones Appalachian Center map, "Hispanic Population in Appalachia." <https://www.berea.edu/appalachian-center/regional-maps-appalachia/>.

4. William Frey identifies the phenomenon of the "browning of America" in the book *Diversity Exposition: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking*; the phrase has been widely used by journalists.

5. Attention to "migration narratives" has long been the subject of scholarship that concerns the transnational movement of people—specifically of women of color in diaspora. I use the term to refer to the imaginaries, stories, and memories of those who share, in this case, a Latinx migrant history.

cultural life east of the Mississippi River and throughout the Appalachian region. I show that Latinx-Appalachian music fosters a better understanding of how Latinxs find belonging in spaces where they are not part of the dominant cultural narrative and creates the possibility of musical resistance and response to xenophobic ideologies.

LATINXS IN APPALACHIA

A site of much academic inquiry since the 1930s, the Appalachian region is often defined in terms of its mapping by the Appalachian Regional Commission (a federal granting body) as the mountainous stretch from northern Mississippi up through southern New York. A marker of this inquiry is the way that Appalachian studies discourse has long interrogated stereotypes that portray this region as homogenous, white, backward, and impoverished.⁶ Although scholars such as Barbara Smith have thoroughly problematized and attempted to rewrite this narrative, cultural representations of Appalachia often default to whiteness as a dominant marker of regional identity. The emergence of the Affrilachian Poets in the 1990s began to clear space for non-white-centered histories of the region (Walker 2000). Still, as Meredith McCarroll recently observed, “There is a deep historical investment in seeing the region as ‘pure white stock’ and as deeply impoverished and backward” (McCarroll 2018). Such an investment in whiteness in the Appalachian region has also figured prominently in discourses of country music and Appalachian musical traditions. Country music studies, for example, has tended to narratives that portray practitioners and listeners of country music as homogenous, further associating whiteness with rurality and working-class socioeconomic status (Pecknold 2013; Fox 2004). Despite the growth of critical race studies in music scholarship, narratives of Appalachian and country musics are often not accountable to non-white listening geographies and populations.

Yet, as 2016 numbers in Appalachian Ohio suggest, Latinxs are the largest and fastest-growing minority population in Appalachia.⁷ A 2011 population report by the Appalachian Regional Commission revealed that the average change in “Hispanic or Latino” population from 2000 to 2010 per Appalachian county was more than 120 percent, almost three times greater than the U.S. average gain of 43 percent. In all, the Latinx population in Appalachia more than doubled during this decade, accounting for nearly 5 percent of the Appalachian population as of 2010. Still, this statistic is perhaps only marginally indicative of the number of Latinxs currently living in the region. The *American Journal of Public Health* has recently noted the multiple responses and self-identifications among Latinxs in the 2000 census such as “LatiNegro,” “Indígena,” and “criollo” (Amaro and Zambrana 2000). This observation indicates nuances beyond the scope of federally recognized language of racial and ethnic identification. Such nuances, scholars suggest, ultimately result in the severe undercounting

6. Barbara Ellen Smith, “De-gradations of Whiteness: Appalachia and the Complexities of Race,” in the *Journal of Appalachian Studies*; Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll’s 2019 edited volume *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy*.

7. Kevin Pollard and Linda A. Jacobsen of the Population Reference Bureau, report prepared for the Appalachian Regional Commission. Chapter three, “Race and Hispanic Origin,” shows growth of Latinx population from 2000 to 2010.

and misclassification of Latinxs in Census Bureau data nationwide, and particularly in rural low-population areas.⁸

The Latinx population growth in Appalachia is increasingly noticeable in the cultural and economic landscape of the region. The emergence of Spanish-language church services and radio stations, sustained success of Latinx-owned and -operated small businesses, and increased need for English-as-a-second-language learning services in public schools are just a few examples.⁹ The Latinx music scene in Appalachia is also substantial. In September 2019, Kentucky hosted the first Kentucky Latin Music Awards show, and the South American–Appalachian fusion group Appalatin took away the Latin Artist of the Year award.¹⁰ In 2015, Berea College in Kentucky launched the state’s first student mariachi ensemble, Mariachi Berea. Latin music festivals across East Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia attract salsa, cumbia, mariachi, and norteño bands and meet an increased demand for Latin dance DJs across the region who perform reggaeton and bachata.¹¹ Although historians, sociologists, and education scholars have written about Latinx life in the southern United States, there remains little scholarship that prioritizes these rich Latinx musical activities across the Appalachian region. In one such contribution, however, Dan Margolies comments on how Latinx migrant music in the borderlands of the New South might be heard as “representative of a profound shift in the character, trajectory, regional identity, and sensory experience of the region” and as a way to “explore globalization, hybridization, and the creation of a new borderlands culture in the region” (Margolies 2009). In a similar vein, scholars across ethnomusicology and popular music studies are increasingly interested in transnational and diasporic musical traditions, rejecting siloed narratives of vernacular music-making and instead emphasizing recent patterns of musical exchange and creative re-configurations (Bakrania 2013; Bigenho 2012; Fellezs 2019). As Anna Stirr demonstrates in *Singing Across Divides*, vernacular traditions are also constantly negotiated across geographic, social, and political borders, interacting with shifting national politics and solidarities (Stirr 2017). If Appalachian music studies, country music studies, and ethnomusicology are to remain committed to understanding the transcultural movement of music through and across real and imagined, musical and nonmusical borders, and particularly in the context of the United States, emergent traditions—such as those I describe as Latinx-Appalachian, in this case—must be received not exceptionally, but expectantly.

LATINX-APPALACHIA AND APPALACHIAN *LATINIDAD*

I use the term *Latinx* in this discussion to nod to the ways in which my research collaborators self-identify. Many are cross-cultural and transnational musicians who situate

8. For more on Latinx statistics in U.S. Census data see Arthur Raymond Cresce, A. Dianne Schmidley, and Roberto R. Ramirez, “Identification of Hispanic Ethnicity in Census 2000: Analysis of Data Quality for the Question on Hispanic Origin,” and Jorge Perez-Lopez and Sergio Diaz-Briquets, “The Determinants of Hispanic Remittances: An Exploration Using U.S. Census Data.”

9. See the 2019 North Carolina Annual Conference of Hispanic and Latinx Ministries, <https://nccumc.org/hispanic/>.

10. For more on the work of Appalatin, see “Bio” at <https://www.appalatin.com/bio/>.

11. See “Latin Music Awards KY,” <https://www.latinmusicawardsky.com/>, and “Mariachi Berea,” <https://www.berea.edu/mus/mariachi-berea/>.

their multicultural identities—and thus identity markers—in complex and nuanced ways.¹² I similarly acknowledge the particularity of my experiences as a Mexican-American ethnographer with a fraught, mixed settler-colonial history in Appalachia. My own positionality and history undoubtedly informs my perceptions of identity-making and belonging in the region. Personal experiences are bound up in this work, illuminating my own particular way of being Latinx in Appalachia—my Appalachian *Latinidad*.

In the same way that Appalachian studies scholarship has largely neglected Latinx communities in considerations of who and what is “Appalachian,” so U.S.-based Latinx studies have sequestered ideas about who stakes a claim to a shared Latinx experience and way of being, or *Latinidad*.¹³ Frances Aparicio recently argued that U.S. demographic changes call for the establishment of new conceptualizations of *Latinidad* in regions where Latinxs are “new communities in the making,” and she cites the U.S. Southeast as facing the challenge to incorporate Latinx communities into discussions of race, culture, language, and labor that have been historically informed by Anglo-Black relations. The “increasing hybridity” of Latinxs in Appalachia and the U.S. South that Frances R. Aparicio notes, then, demands a transformation of existing identity paradigms and *Latinidad* (Aparicio 2017).

Poet and scholar Michael Dowdy identifies such an Appalachian *Latinidad* enmeshed in the poetry of Latinxs Appalachians (Dowdy 2012). Specifically, Dowdy illuminates an “Appalachian Latino lyric mode” in the poetry of Marcos McPeck Villatoro and Maurice Kilwein Guevara. The work of Villatoro and Guevara articulates migration narratives from El Salvador and Colombia, respectively, to the Appalachian region.¹⁴ Dowdy notes the weaving together of Spanish and English and the slippages of metaphor and imagery between the languages. He locates themes that characterize Latinx-Appalachian poetic expression, concerning and found in “the ground and in the body, with feet moving across mountains, and ultimately within the transformative power of metaphor . . . returning frequently to such images of the body, blood, and mountains in both Spanish and English” (Dowdy 2012).

In emphasizing movement, it makes sense that Latinx-Appalachian poetic verse also evokes the *puentes y fronteras* (bridges and borders) that one builds and traces in coming to an Appalachian *Latinidad*. For Alex Chávez, sonic connections across place, poetry, music, and the body are “sounds of crossing” that are emphasized and amplified via an “aural poetic,” or “the dialogic interplay between embodiment and aesthetics” (Chávez 2017).

12. I would note that there is rich discussion and debate about the use of the marker *Latinx* within Latinx communities, specifically queer Latinx communities. Although I do not invoke the marker as an explicit gesture to queer identities, Richard T. Rodríguez’s 2017 article “X Marks the Spot,” *Cultural Dynamics* 29, no. 3: 202–13, provides an alternative perspective of this choice.

13. For a more robust discussion of *Latinidad* see Laura Halperin, “On *Latinidad*: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity”; and Arlene Dávila, “Mapping *Latinidad*: Language and culture in the Spanish TV battlefield.” For perspectives on performative and queer *Latinidad* see Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*; Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*; and Deborah Paredez, *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*.

14. Kilwein Guevara’s collections include *POEMA: Autobiography of So-and-So: Poems in Prose*; and *Postmortem*. See Marcos Villatoro’s collection *Dicen Que Soy Dos/They Say That I Am Two: Poems*.

If Latinx creative life in Appalachia is textured by the lyric themes Dowdy discusses, and if Chávez's "aural poetic" rejects a coherent conception of sound as it crosses borders and moves instead toward dynamic sonic reconfiguration and recontextualization, these tools invite a listening practice that casts a webbing open to local, national, and global ways of being-in-relation to the U.S.-Mexico border from Appalachia. Expressing Appalachian Latinidad, then, facilitates the building of both abstract and tangible bridges, in the words of the late Gloria Anzaldúa, "as one walks" (Moraga and Anzaldúa [1981] 1983, iv). *El camino* (the way) to an Appalachian Latinidad and the narratives of heritage, migration, and belonging ought to be emphasized and acknowledged in the expansive Latinidad that Aparicio calls for and to which music is essential. Appalachian Latinidad and its musical manifestations, then, reside in expressive evocations of the body, blood, movement across mountains, the building of bridges, and the crossing of borders—in the intimacy required of those bodies that share lived experiences through word and song, weaving sounds of Appalachiansness and Latinxness together into new songs and ways of life.

The case studies and analyses that follow are not sufficient portrayals of the musical nuances and relationships I suggest. Rather, they reflect local iterations of the larger work that Latinx-Appalachian music and migration narratives does in the world to cross borders and sing new songs along the way.

MEXILACHIAN MUSIC AND THE LUA PROJECT

I first encountered "Mexilachian" music in person during a visit with Estela Diaz Knott. The rhythmic revving up of an accordion into a norteño polka feel briefly transformed the packed dining room of Knott's Charlottesville home into a dim-lit cantina somewhere in her mother's pueblo outside Juarez, Chihuahua. Her strong and stylized voice told the story of her childhood breakfast plate full of tamales and sausage gravy and biscuits in Page County, Virginia. Warm bodies lulled to a memorable refrain, "In my home *no hay fronteras*, just my Mexilachian breakfast."¹⁵ I'd made my way to Charlottesville after a series of email exchanges and phone conversations with Knott, through which we learned of our shared Mexilachian heritage and musical interests.

Knott performs with her partner, David Berzonsky, as part of the Lua Project, a group that plays Mexilachian music as a "cultural pollinator, bridging together musical styles from different continents and different centuries" and draws influences from "Mexican Son, Appalachian song forms, Jewish and Eastern European tonalities, baroque melodic ideas, and Scotch-Irish narrative storytelling approaches."¹⁶ Specifically, Knott's work with the Lua Project draws on her and Berzonsky's formal study of *son jarocho*, a regional Mexican folk genre that emerged in the eighteenth century in the Mexican state of Veracruz.¹⁷ While the vision and presence of eclectic interests might suggest disaggregation, the Lua Project works to outline the resonances of these forms, as exemplified in their collaborative project with Zenen Zeferino of Jaltipan, Veracruz, Mexico. A celebrated *jarama* player, poet,

15. Author's field notes.

16. See "About," <http://luaproject.org/about-1>.

17. For an encyclopedic expansion of son jarocho see Brenda Romero's entry "Son Jarocho" in *Grove Music Online*.

and son jarocho expert, Zeferino spends several months of the year traveling across the United States to collaborate with musicians involved in various creative performance projects. In 2017, the Lua Project partnered with Zeferino and received a grant from Virginia Humanities to compose original songs inspired by Latinxs in the Shenandoah Valley. Titled “Mexilachian Son: New Songs for an Emerging Virginia Culture,” the songs of this public project followed the rhythmic and harmonic patterns of son jarocho but relied on lyrical themes similar to those of traditional Appalachian ballad.¹⁸

While programming for Mexilachian Son facilitated performances at local schools and public institutions in the Shenandoah region, Knott also performed a Mexilachian rendition of the son jarocho standard “La Guacamaya,” co-written with Zeferino, at the Festival del Río y La Palabra in Veracruz, Mexico, in the summer of 2019. The festival featured son jarocho performances in Minantitán, Cosoleacaque, and Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, over the course of three days, highlighting both traditional and more progressive practitioners of son jarocho—including Zeferino’s group Zenen Zeferino y el Sonoro Sueño. Knott’s performance at the Festival del Río affirms Mexilachian music’s claim to pollination—speaking to communities in Charlottesville, Virginia, that are more closely acquainted with folk, Americana, and roots music while also folding into more stringent spaces of traditional Mexican music-making.

“DESIERTO EN FLOR/IMMIGRATION SONG”

Verse, Part A

Rompo el viento con mis manos / I break the wind with my hand
 Se rompe el alma sin mis hermanos / My soul breaks without my brothers and sisters
 Se escapa el sueño de mis manos/ The dream escapes from my hands

“Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” is composed in two sections that I refer to as Part A and Part B. Part A is sung in Spanish and composed by Zeferino, Part B in English and composed by Knott. Part A of “Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” begins with a slow, sustained introduction disrupting son jarocho conventions that emphasize major tonality and more lively tempos. Speckled throughout Part A is accordion, jarana strum patterns and fiddle fill lines that demonstrate the creative potentials of Mexilachian music to manipulate texture. The relationship of son jarocho and Appalachian folk music broadly is not just lyrical in this case, but a visible, physical exchange of instrument participation. Part A also effectively weaves in Zeferino’s poetic and sensory interpretation of U.S.-Mexico border crossing.

Chorus, Part A

Hoy nacen flores en el desierto / Today, flowers are born in the desert
 Que se ha regado con nuestra sangre / That have been watered with our blood
 Con nuestro llanto / With our tears
 Nuestro dolores / Our pain
 Nuestro sudores / Our sweat

18. “Mexilachian Son Project,” <http://luaproject.org/mexison>.

Identifying the sting of the cold and the sharpness of wind that cuts across clearings, Zeferino's lyrics reflect the relationships of weather conditions and the natural landscape of the U.S.-Mexico border to the vehicle of crossing—the body. Zeferino's imagery of desert foliage that bears witness to those who cross also reflects the themes of the body and blood in Dowdy's "Appalachian-Latino lyric mode." Zeferino's verses engender sensorial experiences of crossing while also considering the ways in which those experiences and sensations remain and are remade—the ways in which they linger. The attention to embodied memory and turn to first-person language—a collective "our"—suggests the potential of Latinx-Appalachian music and poetics to articulate collective, relatable, embodied experiences across communities. As a Mexican musician working in Appalachia, Zeferino brings his U.S.-Mexico experiences and notions into Appalachia but artistically tethers them to his poetic and musical roots in the jarocho tradition.

I was reminded of Zeferino's chorus of blood, tears, and sweat in the midst of the sweltering heat of his home state in the days following the Festival del Rio. Knott and I made our way with Zeferino to his grandparents' pueblo, Chacalapa, for a *fandango*—an all-night gathering during which local jarocho musicians convene around the *tarima*, a wooden dancing platform, to accompany the sounds of *zapateada* style dancing and exchange improvised *decimas*. Knott noted the similarities of the *zapateada* and Appalachian clogging, making a convincing case for how the pervasive "café-con-pan" rhythms were present in the styles of clogging she grew up performing. The swarms of men surrounding the platform—all rapidly strumming along, although some seemingly lost and others puffing their chests with the arrival of each chorus—was familiar for me, as I immediately recalled the countless hours spent participating and observing in similar swarms at bluegrass jams across Southern Ohio. I noted those on the periphery of the musical energy—those who elected to listen, watch, or assist with the plentiful tasks to keep the *fandango* afloat, like shuffling jugs of water to nearby musicians or preparing the *tamales de pollo* for crowd distribution. Zeferino's verses about the desert of the U.S.-Mexico border rang in my head as I pushed through a crowd of sweaty bodies, but Mexilachian verses about the "manzanas de Luray" and the beauty of "Las Apalaches" rang, too, in the vision of seeing Zeferino return to Veracruz with his Mexilachian comrades.

From Charlottesville to Chacalapa, Zeferino's words did the work of poetic and musical tending to the various communities he crossed: tending to those from his hometown, who he understood did not share the opportunities he'd found as a musician working in the United States; tending to the Nicaraguan refugees who stopped by the *fandango* seeking rest on their way to the U.S.-Mexico border; and tending to the soil and newfound admiration for the Blue Ridge mountain home of his close collaborator Knott.

Knott explained to me that for her, growing up as a Latina in Appalachia was like constantly running back and forth across a bridge that was "never white enough, never Mexican enough."¹⁹ Knott's reflection raises the question of where and how one belongs in Appalachia if one's life is spent crossing physical and cultural borders. Knott, however, also sees

19. Author's conversation with Estela Diaz-Knott, 16 December 2018.

this oscillation of identity as revealing an alternative way of being in Appalachia, further reflecting that “I’ve realized that I’m not on the bridge. I am the bridge.” Knott’s metaphor of the bridge invokes Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s path-breaking 1981 collection, *This Bridge Called My Back*, echoing their sense of the bridge as a space of passage and transfer—manifested as the body—and enduring the various labors of belonging. Knott calls attention to the ways in which bridges facilitate *caminando*, but they also endure the treading of others and, for Knott, coagulate memories, experiences, and traditions in Mexilachian music. Knott positions the work of the Lua Project as a way not only to articulate her own experiences but also to build community and solidarity among Latinxs in Central Virginia through music.

Part B of “Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” speaks from this space of collectivity and belonging. Specifically, it tends to resilience and resistance across communities that share a Latinx-Appalachian migration narrative.

Rock, dirt, and sand, water drifting into land
We make our way from the bottom to the top

From the shame of history’s shack, there is much that we lack
But we must give it all that we’ve got

Breath and water make way, like a knife’s steady blade
Piercing right through the hardest of hearts

With love and persistence, the wall of resistance,
With faith, will just fall apart

Empty handed we may come, but the story we carry
Beats heavy in our hearts like a drum

Our song of what matters is absorbed in the chatter
And becomes part of the common strum

An accordion melody leads the transition into Part B, which shifts into a quick minor-key waltz, still fueled by the heavy 2–3 strum of the jarana but emphasized with moments of yodeling in harmony. Knott calls attention to actions such as “drift,” “absorb,” “spin,” and “bow,” signaling a state of motion in which the bodily actor—or the Latinx migrant in Appalachia—is neither fully visible nor identifiable. Simultaneously, however, poetry conjuring up actions, such as “pierce,” “beat,” and “focus,” suggests the agency of the collective body—the community—to act, to be visible. In this way, “Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” simultaneously communicates the intimate, embodied experiences of crossing and the possibilities of collective resistance in the wake of Charlottesville. In “Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” Knott further expresses a hope for future generations of Latinxs in Appalachia, like her daughters, whom she encourages to embrace Mexilachian heritage.

We stake it all on our children, who bear witness to the dream
Of becoming a little bit more

On the tight rope of hope, they wobble and wobble
As we pray that one day they'll soar²⁰

In November 2019, the Lua Project performed “Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” for a Día de Los Muertos fundraiser concert in Charlottesville. Flickers of candles from the community-built *ofrenda* lit the entrance of the IX Arts Park. Among an eclectic set of Tejano classics, *baladas*, *rancheras*, and Lua Project originals, Knott took a moment to address the audience, commenting on the current state of migration politics and the work of *Sim Barerras*, a Latinx-run Charlottesville nonprofit that provides social services to new Latinx migrants.

The space of collectivity from which Knott spoke is not only one of Appalachians, but of Mexilachians, or Latinx-Appalachians. She urges listeners to consider the ways in which migrant heritage and connections to the border shift across generations but still tether communities together. She also articulates the concern and uncertainty in post-Charlottesville Appalachian Virginia. As “Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” progresses from Spanish to English, from natural to abstract imagery, and from present to future generational relationships, it communicates the archaeology of Latinx-Appalachian life. The music of the Lua Project reveals how Latinx-Appalachian music-making is profoundly shaped by connections to borders and by the ways memories of crossing simultaneously connect and build solidarity with other Latinxs in Appalachia. Such Latinx-Appalachian music demonstrates a necessary way of bridge- and border-being for Latinxs who make their home in Appalachia.

LATINGRASS AND CHE APALACHE

When Che Apalache performed at the Prism Coffee house in Charlottesville in April 2019, I was eager to introduce the group from Buenos Aires to Knott and Berzonsky. Close listening and engagement with the music of the Lua Project and Che Apalache reveals that the connective tissue between these artists is their shared commitment to musical activism and solidarity with Latinx communities in Appalachia. While the Lua Project’s “Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” blurs conventions of Appalachian and Mexican folk genres with their Mexilachian music, Che Apalache responds to U.S.-Mexico migration politics within a framework they call “Latingrass.”²¹ Che Apalache’s “The Wall” colors another dimension of U.S.-Mexico border politics in Appalachia by closely engaging sentiments of protest and resistance from within a traditional Appalachian musical space.

A fiddle player from North Carolina, Joe Troop leads Che Apalache with bandmates Pau Barjua, Franco Martino, and Martin Bobrick. Che Apalache gained acclaim in 2017 when they were awarded first place in the Neo-Traditional Band Competition at the Appalachian String Band Festival in Clifftop, West Virginia. The group has since attracted the attention of Appalachian music media sources who have followed the group’s Grammy-nominated album “Rearrange My Heart.” Che Apalache’s energies are not only musical but

20. Used with permission from the Lua Project.

21. In an interview, Troop offered this explanation and definition of “Latingrass,” although it should be broadly conceived of and interpreted, not bound to binary ideas of Spanish and English language use or Appalachian or Latin American instrumentation.

also in the vein of social justice and advocacy. The group engages audiences as part of public cultural folklife programming and advocates alongside organizations that support undocumented migrants in North Carolina, such as Siembra NC, the Episcopal Farm Workers Ministry, and CIMA (Compañeros Inmigrantes de las Montañas en Acción). Not unlike the Lua Project, Che Apalache performed across North Carolina and Southwestern Virginia in 2018. Currently in the process of recording their second full-length album, Che Apalache spends as many as five to six months of the year touring the United States.

Verse

Come friends, come friends. Come gather 'round
For to sing, oh sing we joyfully!

(Let us sing about a better world)

Where different paths have been unfurled
Of a land where freedom rings.

Melodically and harmonically, “The Wall” maps neatly onto four-part *a capella* mountain gospel traditions that first emerged in the early twentieth century.²³ This opening lyric registers as traditional, maybe even patriotic, but also present are interjections and overt references to contemporary U.S.-Mexico border politics. Troop effectively makes use of Appalachian dialectic colloquialisms and conventional rhyme patterns to situate “The Wall” within a familiar musical space for bluegrass, old-time, and country music audiences.

Come sisters, brothers gather near.
We’ve come to share our worries

(We fear what some folks have been saying)

about Latin Americans
the truth’s been misconstrued
There’s all kinds of talk 'bout building a wall
down along the southern border.

('bout building a wall between me and you)

Lord, and if such nonsense should come true
then, we’ll have to knock it down.²²

“The Wall” demonstrates aural and physical dialogue between Appalachia and Latin America. Troop’s refined gospel style of singing alternates with Barjua, Bobrick, and Martino’s Spanish-accented choral responses in the third line of every verse. Troop’s close engagement with Latinx musicians and musics and Barjua, Bobrick, and Martino’s mastery of Appalachian musics further demonstrates the exchange of regional traditions across both local and transnational borders. Moreover, the relationships and activities of Che Apalache

22. Lyrics used with permission from Joe Troop.

bespeak the ability of Latinx-Appalachians to respond to incendiary attacks on Latinx personhood in the U.S. In this way, when Che Apalache performed “The Wall” at Galax, they were also singing a counternarrative to the miasma of white nationalism that was settling across the Appalachian region. As Troop shared with me, Latingrass is “a music that really resonates with [Appalachian music listeners], but with a message that challenges the ideologies that are widely accepted in the places [where] they live.”²³ This is the paradox posed by the lyrics of “The Wall”: they respond to the spread of white supremacy but do so within an Appalachian vocal tradition often associated exclusively with white racial identity. This contradiction reveals the power of a Latinx-Appalachian aural poetic to signify a particular moment and transgress conventions of musical genre.

To love thy neighbor as thyself
Is a righteous law to live by

(But leaders sing a different song)

They break us up so they stay strong
And ignorantly we’re strung along
Until we meet our doom

Yes, our leaders are so ripe with sin
They feed us chants to rope us in
But ’fore too long we’ll find, my friends
We’re penned against The Wall.

At the crux of the aural poetic of “The Wall” is an intentional call to action against U.S.-Mexico border wall policies. In the fall of 2019, Che Apalache released a mini-documentary film titled “Borderlands,” in which the group visited the U.S.-Mexico border. The documentary follows Che Apalache from Sahuarita, Arizona, to Nogales, Mexico, accompanied by Randy Mayer, a pastor of the Good Shepherd United Church of Christ in Sahuarita. Mayer drives off the paved road and follows the U.S.-Mexico border fence line closely, identifying the various wires and barriers in place. Troop, Barjua, Martin, and Bobrick explore the surrounding landscape and assemble in a semi-circle with their backs to Mexico and, amid the white noise of nearby highway traffic, sing their song “The Wall,” literally against the U.S.-Mexico border wall. Whereas the Lua Project’s “Desierto en Flor” reflects the interiority of Latinx-Appalachian communities and place-making, Che Apalache’s “The Wall” comments on national and global ideological shifts and warns listeners against the external forces at play in ongoing U.S.-Mexico border relations. “The Wall” offers a narrated commentary that encourages resistance and solidarity in response to corruption—a mode of resistance that, according to Bobrick, is “knocking down walls, metaphoric walls.”²⁴ Ultimately, “The Wall” responds, in Troop’s optimistic words, to “the

23. Joe Troop, interview with the author, 8 September 2018.

24. Martin Bobrick, interview with the author, 8 September 2018.

death growl of the dying white supremacist” and makes space for the voices of Latinxs who “are standing up and are here,” in the Appalachian region and beyond.

LISTENING FOR LATINX-APPALACHIAN RESONANCES

Marié Abe describes resonance as “the simultaneously acoustic and affective production of sociality” and as a phenomenon that weaves together sounds that perform the social, historical, and political (Abe 2017). Resonance not only captures a particular space at a particular time but dwells between time and space. Resonance fills in the gaps and facilitates connectivities across physical spaces and across stretches of geography, imaginaries, and communities.

I understand the scenes that begin this essay—Latinx bodies implicated in the violence of Charlottesville, a Mexican artist’s not-so-unlikely collaboration in the Blue Ridge region, and a Latin American bluegrass band singing out against white supremacy—as mutually defining resonances. Yet resonance implies both harmony and dissonance: the meeting of contesting resonances might create dissonant sounds, signify the dissonance of divergent lived experiences, break through buried histories.²⁵ As my analyses of “Desierto en Flor/Immigration Song” and “The Wall” show, Latinx-Appalachian music oscillates between these harmonies and dissonances, but ultimately resonates across traditions and communities.

Resonant thinking fosters a more nuanced understanding of Latinx experiences in Appalachia—and in other underinvestigated regions of the United States where Latinxs express themselves—in a variety of ways. Musically, Latinx-Appalachian resonances signal an emergent repertoire that draws influences through and across Latin American and U.S. borders, accumulating untranslatable textures and combinations and carving out rich artistic possibilities. Historically, these resonances illuminate the ways in which dominant cultural narratives of Appalachia have neglected the movement of Latinxs in and through the region, and how this historical oversight is drawn to our attention as Appalachia’s Latinx cultural footprint expands. Perhaps most urgently, these resonances tend to what it means to be Latinx in Appalachia—to simultaneously reside in the jagged edges and the porous membranes of American life—musically, politically, poetically, geographically; the Latinx experience in Appalachia necessarily lives and takes breath in Mexilachian music and Latingrass.

The migration narratives and resonances wrapped up in Latinx-Appalachian music don’t just make for metaphor. Rather, they capture real, shared sentiments and experiences across both Latinx and non-Latinx communities in Appalachia and will prove critical in nurturing more compassionate and vulnerable ways of being in relationship to each other. These particular musical fusions encourage careful thinking about bodies and sounds in conflict, about those who might be “penned against the wall”—penned as in to pen, *verb*: to write or compose. To pen submerged perspectives and narratives against walls of harsh, exclusionary histories. Or, penned as in to pen, *verb*: to be cornered, restricted, or confined. To be penned into and by narratives and scripts in dissonance and consonance with each other.

25. For more on bluegrass gospel conventions and history, see Neil Rosenberg, “Bluegrass Music,” *Grove Music Online*.

To be penned in ways that forge Appalachians and Latinidad in the same poetic-musical verse—crossing borders, moving across mountains, with bodies sweating, bleeding, strumming, and singing. ■

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