DEBORAH R. VARGAS
Rutgers University
Email: deb.vargas@rutgers.edu

Freddy Fender's Blackbrown Country Ecologies

ABSTRACT Country music has often been held together in dominant public narratives by binaries, such as Mexican-white or Black-white in an attempt to maintain a sense of authentic whiteness. A similar historiographical move occurs in Chicano/Mexican American Studies with regard to the binary brown/white. My focus then is to consider how we might listen to the Black musical sounds of country music through the performances of a brown country boy, Freddy Fender. KEYWORDS popular music, brown, black, ecologies, sound

"'My father is more of a brown soul brother than anything else.'"[1]
TAMMY LORRAINE HUERTA FENDER

"'The other side of my music [of country] has always been blues—rhythm and blues and shuffle.'"[2]
FREDDY FENDER

In March 1975 the Jim Haley Agency featured an advertisement promoting singer Freddy Fender's hit song, "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," with the caption: "This Tex-Mex legend with the soulful sound has a half-English, half-Spanish hit that's breaking all over the world."[3] The publicity flyer went on to exclaim that "over 200,000 'Gringos' can't be wrong!" These statements celebrate and publicize Fender's achievements in sales while attempting to make a brown, Spanish-singing subject legible to a mainstream white country audience.[4] Accordingly, the flyer also symbolizes the race-, gender-, and

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[1] Tammy Lorraine Huerta Fender, personal conversation with author, June 2, 2019.

[2] Tammy Lorraine Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days and Wasted Nights*: *Freddy Fender; A Meteoric Rise to Stardom* (self-pub., Xlibris, 2018), 265; brackets in the original. This quote appears in *Wasted Days*. This quote is a transcription of a conversation between Freddy Fender and his daughter Tammy Lorraine Huerta as they discussed his performance and recording of country music and thus her use of brackets. This conversation is from her self-produced documentary of Fender's life and music titled "From My Eyes." The documentary has yet to be released for public reception and remains in personal possession of Huerta Fender.

[3] The flyer also noted that "Before the Next Teardrop Falls" reached the top five in pop sales in Memphis, Louisville, Kansas City, Houston, Nashville, St. Louis, Phoenix, and Dallas. Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days,* 278.

[4] There is extensive Chicana/o literature historicizing the term brown in its circulation within a US context, particularly during its emergence during the Brown Power social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. See also the following scholarship as examples of the use of brown to designate Mexican/Chicana/o literature and cultural studies, Curtis Marez, "Brown: The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style," *Social Text* 48, no. 14 (Autumn 1996); Ralph E. Rodríguez, *Brown Gumshoes: Detective Fiction and the Search for Chicana/o Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press). Moreover, I find Jose Esteban Muñoz's theorization of "brown" as emphasizing a concern with "brown people in a very immediate way, people who are rendered brown by their personal or familial participation in south-to-north

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class-based assumptions Fender negotiated throughout his music career as a brown man whose vocals channeled the soul and blues genres he grew up on. In other words, the approval of hundreds of thousands of gringos signals the multiple axes of difference that converge in Fender's country music sound, one characterized by soulful lyrical intonations, the use of Spanish in concert with Spanglish and accented English, Mexican ethnicity, and brown masculinity.

Freddy Fender was born Baldemar Garza Huerta in San Benito, Texas, on June 4, 1937. At the time of his passing in 2006, he was best known as a founding member of the Texas Tornados. Fender was one of the most successful Chicano singers on the country charts in the 1970s.[5] In the popular press, Fender was known for singing with a "sweet tenor" and bringing his "soulful tenor to country music," and in the 1970s he had four songs reach number one on the country music charts, including "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," "Secret Love," "You'll Lose a Good Thing," and "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights."[6] Between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, Fender charted twenty-one country hits on Billboard. For nearly five decades, Fender's music comprised various genres including Tex-Mex, Spanish-language covers of rock 'n' roll, and country. Nonetheless, no matter the stylistic variations of his music, Black sonic genres, especially rhythm and blues, formed the infrastructure of his musical performances. "Blackbrown Country Ecologies" chronicles some of Fender's country journey.[7]

While most print and online music journalists read Fender as a brown or Tex-Mex singer of country music, I understand Fender's presence in country music as one charted through the sounds of Black musical performance and musicianship.[8] In other words, I argue that Fender's country music resonates with the unique structural relationalities among Black-brown labor, incarceration, and racial segregation in Texas and, more

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migration patterns," critical in my approach to the term brown. Jose Esteban Muñoz, "Preface: Fragment from the *Sense of Brown* Manuscript," *GLQ* 24, no. 4 (2018): 396. In this essay, I find it necessary to designate the term brown in reference to people's migration, cultural texts, and aesthetics that are aligned with identity terms such as Mexican American/Mexican/Chicano even while my aim is not to reduce brown to simply an identity category, key argument made by Joshua Javier Guzmán in "Brown" *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* eds. Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence La Fountain Stokes (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

[5] Johnny Rodriguez also made critical inroads in the country music recording industry in the 1970s. See Deborah R. Vargas, "Brown Country," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 32, no. 7 (Spring 2007): 219–28.

[6] For example, see John Morthland, "Wasted Days," *Texas Monthly*, October 1995, https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/wasted-days/; and Garth Cartwright, "Freddy Fender: Singer Who Introduced Tex-Mex to a Wider Audience," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/oct/16/guardianobituaries.usa.

[7] I use the term *Blackbrown*, one word combining the words black and brown, with no separation or hyphenation to gesture towards a cultural text, in this case a musical one, that disrupts an additive, exchange, or either/or model. In other words, Blackbrown draws attention to the possibility that Fender's music offers something other than a simplistic combination of or interaction between two distinct categories of racial identities. Moreover, I capitalize the word Black throughout this essay to affirm the critical race and feminist practices of naming Black peoples, cultural productions, and histories within systems of white supremacy. As yet, there has not been a move by scholars to capitalize brown in these contexts; therefore, it is not capitalized in this essay or in my construction of Blackbrown.

[8] This essay moves through Freddy Fender's country music by following the various transformations he makes during his life. These changes are aligned with the name changes he goes through; therefore, I attempt to honor these by referring to him variously as Baldemar Huerta, El Bebop Kid, and Freddy Fender. In addition, Fender also recorded as Eddie Medina and Scotty Wayne. For an analysis of Fender's working-class style, see Curtis Marez, "Brown: The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style," 109–32.

widely, along the GulfCoast.[9] While the popular music press occasionally mentions the influence of Black musical forms on Fender's catalog, there has yet to be more focused scholarly analysis of the significance of blues, soul, funk, and rhythm and blues genres in the performance of Freddy Fender's country music or, in the words of his daughter, Tammy Huerta Fender, the resonances of a "brown soul brother" singing country music.[10]

Drawing from the term *uncharted* that guides this special issue, I explore previously uncharted country music tropes through the musical life of Freddy Fender. Accordingly, I consider the unmapped or unfamiliar musical contours of Fender's country through a set of sonic ecologies that emblematize his complex status as a young, Mexican American brown soul brother. This essay extends critical scholarly contributions made about the gender and racial politics of country music as a genre that has consistently relied on and reaffirmed binary structurings of race, gender, and sexuality.[11] For example, when critical attention has been devoted to analyzing brown and Black such as Johnny Rodriguez or Charley Pride, their participation in the country genre is, for the most part, still a music understood as white and heteromasculinist.[12] While I have found scholarship addressing musical productions as "black *and* brown sound" or "Chicano soul"—along with terms such as hybridity, exchange, cross-pollination, and bi-ethnic—useful for exploring Mexican/Chicano and African American musical productions, these terms and constructs typically reproduce and essentialize white/Black and white/brown as polarized binaries.

I propose that the racialized whiteness that dominates country music often draws from an ecology of colonialism and white settler masculinity. That is to say, one of the ways in which country music's white heteromasculinity is produced is through iconographic ecologies intended to reflect and construct freedom, individuality, strength, triumph, and possession as specifically white, heterosexual, and cisgender. Very often these constructs are associated with rural landscapes and ecological tropes common to country songs, including land (property, farm, ranch); water (lakes, wells, rivers); sand (deserts, oases); and pavement (truck driving, highways). Following Huerta Fender's moniker for her father as a "brown soul brother," I follow Fender's unique trail of country ecologies to chart country music through soundscapes that emerge through Blackbrown country ecologies.[13] I am, therefore,

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[9] For more on incarceration and racialized labor practices in this region, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1999); and Tyina Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

[10] Huerta Fender, personal conversation with author, June 2, 2019.

[11] See, for instance, Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); and Diane Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

[12] The popular controversy concerning Beyoncé's appearance at the 2016 Country Music Awards, for example, was less about singing with the often-outcast Dixie Chicks and more about how Beyoncé's African American music and subjectivity was interpreted as not belonging in the genre at all. Notably, the song Beyoncé performed onstage with the Dixie Chicks, "Daddy Lessons," was also rejected for the Grammy Awards country categories. See Joseph Hudak, "Beyoncé Country Song 'Daddy Lessons' Rejected by Grammys," *Country* (blog), *Rolling Stone*, December 8, 2016, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/beyonces-country-song-daddy-lessons-rejected-by-grammys-119339/.

[13] The relationship between country and soul has been productive to think about for my approach of Fender's music, in particular, the work of Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

interested in establishing a rendering of country music that unsettles additive models of cross-cultural interactions *between* Black and brown music and artists. In other words, my focus on racial ecologies in the sonic archives of country music is my attempt to place productive pressure on the ways ecologies in country music—song lyrics, metaphors, images— are never outside of racial capital. Moreover, Freddy Fender's country music allows us to reimagine country ecologies of heteropatriarchal individualism and conquest as, instead, Blackbrown ecological conditions of possibility for listening, sharing, and creating music amidst the structural racism built into those very ecologies.

In this essay, the formulation of Blackbrown country ecologies draws on Rowland Atkinson's notion of sonic ecologies as denoting place and demarcating space through musical sound as well as the constructions of racial ecologies defined by LeiLani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams as the shifting and intertwining relationships between embodied racial identities and ecological space and place.[14] Moreover, Blackbrown country ecologies should be understood as part of a broader scholarly context of US-Mexico popular music and cultural studies that takes up questions of geography, soundscapes, and border ecologies.[15] That said, the contribution of this essay to these theorizations is two-fold: it places African American studies of music in the borderlands musical imaginary and considers US-Mexico borderlands musical figures like Fender in tune with country music. Put simply, Fender's heretofore uncharted country ecologies reimagine different(ly) racialized and gendered sounds within country music. Blackbrown country ecologies, I propose, chart the unique sound tracks of Black and brown lives, labor, and the crossroads of their musical matter.

In order to consider the performative sonic ecologies of this brown country boy, I complicate the racial and ethnic binaries that have been maintained by material and symbolic force, unequal and horizontal modes of exchange, intercultural and market relations, and cross-ethnic solidarity and antagonisms. That is to say, I consider such musical productions not as the uncomplicated result of an additive model of racialized subjectivities but through the material—that is, the matter that Black and brown people move through that both makes possible musical relationality and transforms the rigidly structured spaces and institutions where Black and brown coalesce. The notion of Blackbrown country ecologies—namely soil, concrete, and swamp—metaphorize movement and stasis, constraint and freedom to offer a unique perspective on racialized brown masculinity in country music that draws primarily from Black sonic archives.

Fender's vocal fluidity, his movement between musical genres and racialized communities, and his sonic and stylistic travels between Black and brown scenes and sounds occur in personal interactions and musical exchanges within the lived realities of physical contact

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[14] LeiLani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams, *Racial Ecologies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 4–5.

[15] See for example, Alejandro L. Madrid, *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the US-Mexico Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Josh Kun, "Playing the Fence, Listening to the Line: Sound, Sound Art, and Acoustic Politics at the US-Mexico Border," in *Performance in the Borderlands*, ed. Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

with soil, concrete, and swamp. Soil and dirt connote contamination, the tainted, and defiled purity. Concrete connotes association and the conjoining of two bodies or distinct masses. A swamp suggests excess residue that holds a vestige of past lives even as it produces new life forms. While soil, concrete, and swamp each encompass their own physical, audible soundscapes, they also represent unique ecologies of country music when understood through Fender's Blackbrown musical sound.

The singer we have come to recognize as Freddy Fender grows as the result of numerous transformations through musical sounds emblematized by the evolution of his legal names and pseudonyms. The spatial environments and material ecologies of soil, concrete, and swamp cover a range of discrete periods in Baldemar Huerta's life and his various and sundry artistic monikers. Baldemar Huerta lived multiple lives—as Balde, the youngster who consumed all the sounds around him; as "El Bebop Kid," a young artist developing a singing persona; and eventually as Freddy Fender, the person who would make a uniquely racialized brown mark in country music. I consider dirt, concrete, and swamp through three musical productions in Fender's life, his rock 'n' roll persona as "El Bebop Kid," his 1975 album *Freddy Fender: Recorded Inside Louisiana State Prison*, and his 1978 album *Swamp Gold.* Dirt, concrete, and swamp are not merely the ecological places upon which Fender's music is produced: they become life forms that move and live through Black and brown music-making.

Freddy Fender's country music insists on its production as Black musical sound. If Fender—as one of only a handful of Mexican/Chicano singers to have many hit songs on the country charts—can be understood to have contributed to making country music brown, then I propose that Blackbrown country ecologies allows us to not only embrace Fender's country music irreducible to additive and binary cultural models but also emphasizes the centrality of Black life on his brown country sound. In so doing, I consider the geopolitical, historical, and structural conditions that Blackness and brownness share as conditions of possibility for Fender's country music. Moreover, my reflections on brownness in such conditions of possibility are informed by Joshua Javier Guzmán's assertion that "if brownness tells a story of dispossession, then it is this history of divestment that gives back to brownness its meaning, modifying a field of possibility often dominated by white colonial forces.[16] Accordingly, Fender's artistry and popularity are thus forged in a new sonic ecology, one set *within* the imbrication of Mexican musicianship and style, Black soul, and rhythm and blues. In effect, Freddy Fender offers a Blackbrown-tuning of country music.

Any consideration of Fender's sonic texts should engage Baldemar Huerta's physical experiences with the soil of Black and brown agricultural labor conditions as well as his incarceration within concrete walls, during which, he repeatedly stated, he practiced his singing. We might imagine just how often those crop winds and prison cells reverberated with Black blues. These knowledge exchanges and circuits for soul vocalities undoubtedly moved through Fender's body, adding to what he learned as a youngster listening to the radio. Moreover, Fender's life, like those of other Mexicans who experienced de facto racial segregation in Texas during the mid-twentieth century, included spaces where Black musicians played in venues that welcomed brown audiences.[17]

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[16] Joshua Javier Guzmán, "Brown" *Keywords for Latina/o Studies* eds. Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence La Fountain Stokes (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 26.

These modes of racialized social organization shaped Fender's life with a surround sound that included Mexican tunes as well as country music. Despite forms of structural racist separation, Huerta Fender suggests that Freddy Fender's country ears and vocals were tuned by various musical forms but particularly rhythm and blues and soul singing styles.[18] Moreover, numerous books have complicated previous mappings of country's musical terrain through queer and white working-class analyses.[19] Such critical interventions, however, generally reduce their readings of race to binaries of Black-white social class relations and collaborations. In contrast, I am interested in what Freddy Fender does for the brown listener of country music at the intersection of brown cultural politics and Black sound.

DIRT (ROADS)

In L.H. Stallings "Dirt Manifesto," we are asked to reimagine the qualities purposes, and possibilities of dirt from sensual and sensorial properties that "intervenes on the capitalist parsing of it for property."[20] The lived environment of Huerta's childhood was surrounded by dirt, especially the dirt roads and farmland of Mexican migrant agricultural labor. For Fender, digging into the dirt was oftentimes connected to the musical circuits that would form an important foundation of his music. Baldemar Huerta, or Balde as he was nicknamed growing up, experienced harsh field working conditions as a child agricultural worker. Neil Foley has historicized the central role that Mexicans played in the cotton industry, particularly in Texas, after the massive immigration of Mexicans escaping the 1910s Mexican Revolution. Agricultural migrant laborers, including Balde's Mexican family, have commonly included children as part of the labor force: "The pickers were accompanied by their wives and children, which was to the liking of the planters because children as a rule will pick as much cotton as grown-ups."[21] Balde himself recalled "migrating north to pick beets in Michigan, cucumbers in Indiana, tomatoes in Ohio, and cotton in Arkansas."[22] A childhood friend recalled that Balde hated picking cotton from sunrise to sunset because the cotton's tiny thorns caused his fingers to bleed.[23]

These early migrant labor circuits of Mexican and Mexican American families, including Balde's, allowed access to music throughout various and diverse states and regions. Huerta Fender recalled that radio allowed Balde to understand his and others' experiences of poverty.

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[17] In a 1990 interview with an unnamed interviewer, Fender shared that he "fronted a black band in Texas." "Adios Freddy Fender," *Sun-Times Wire* (blog), *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 17, 2006, https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2006/10/16/18566694/adios-freddy-fender. Balde played with Black bands in the Rio Grande Valley in the mid-1950s when racial segregation was still being experienced by Black and brown people in various parts of Texas; therefore, it is likely that he fronted the Black band during this period. Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days*, 134.

[18] Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days*, 63–64.

[19] For example, Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music.*

[20] L. H. Stallings, *A Dirty South Manifesto: Sexual Resistance and Imagination in The New South* (Berkeley: Univeristy of California Press), 17.

[21] Foley, *The White Scourge*, 42.

[22] Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days,* 60.

[23] Ibid.

Throughout their travels, "Balde listened to the latest music being played on the radio of his stepfather's truck."[24] For example, border radio played an important teaching device as it allowed him to draw inspiration from multiple geographic and linguistic environments. According to Tex-Mex disc jockey Dr. Jazmo, "'the exposure of Tex-Mex music in South Texas and the Mexican music coming out of the radio stations across the river—from mariachis to boleros to polkas—all that gave [him] a very rich source of music. There was a lot to pick from.'"[25] While on the road as a migrant agricultural worker he heard hillbilly music and first heard the music of Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb blaring from radios in pickup trucks. Huerta Fender states that "Balde had seen black folks singing across the fields as well. He heard heartening blues and gospel melodies sung with such passion that they reached the core of his soul."[26] Fender was first attracted to music through the rhythm and blues he heard on migrant farms in the Midwest and Texas: "'Music was whatever came out of the radio. [He] was mostly exposed to black music, like "Screamin' Jay" Hawkins and Elmore James.'"[27] Drawing on Stallings' proposals that dirt offers us teachings to craft alternative visions, socialities, and things, I suggest that the Blackbrown country ecology of dirt in Balde's early life partly formed such crafting of alternative musical lessons.[28]

The conditions under which Balde's family and other Mexicans toiled should be understood in relation to poor white and African American families who often worked the same fields as sharecroppers for the same owners: "When Mexican sharecroppers settled in central Texas farm communities, they were subject to segregation in schools, neighborhoods, churches, and public facilities, as were more permanently settled African Americans in the Jim Crow South, including Texas."[29] Balde's early life experiences in and around Texas occurred within sites and spaces where Mexicans and African Americans shared similar agricultural labor conditions, traveled the same dirt roads, interacted with the same powerful white land owners, and were vulnerable to similar, albeit unique, manifestations of racist violence from, among others, the Texas Rangers and the Ku Klux Klan.[30]

Chicano Studies scholars, including David Montejano, have analyzed Mexicans' unique experiences of segregation in Texas during the mid-twentieth century. Montejano explains that although there were no constitutionally sanctioned political or sociological "separate but equal" provisions for Mexicans, African Americans and Mexican Americans were "seen

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24. Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days*, 63.

25. "Adios Freddy Fender."

26. Ibid.

27. "Adios Freddy Fender." Elmore James (1918–63) was best known as a singer, guitarist, and songwriter of the blues. James was influenced by Robert Johnson, Tampa Red, and others. Screamin' Jay Hawkins (1929–2000) was best known as a singer, songwriter, and musician of blues and rhythm and blues and is best known for his song "I Put a Spell on You" (1956).

28. Stallings, *A Dirty South Manifesto*, 18–19.

29. Foley, *The White Scourge*, 40.

30. African Americans and Mexican Americans shared a similar caste, as it were, as a racial problem for white supremacy: "On the eve of World War II, segregation was a formidable solution to the 'Negro problem' in the South and the 'Mexican problem' in the Southwest." David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas: 1836–1986* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1987), 160, 259.

as different aspects of the same race problem" in Texas.[31] This formulation, which Montejano views as a manifestation of racist de jure and de facto Jim Crow practices, is critical to comprehending the limits upon the movement of Black and brown bodies that often occurred within systems of containment, including social and work contexts, that enforced a "nearly complete separation and control" of African Americans and Mexicans.[32]

Such mechanisms of control and separation functioned not merely in relationship to Anglo people or "white only" institutions and public spaces, they also effected and maintained the separation of Black people from brown people. These racist structures of containment and control of African Americans and Mexican Americans in Texas and Louisiana set the foundation upon which Baldemar Huerta honed his skills at maneuvering the musical world as well as his experience with punitive control, prison.

Fender's earliest persona as "El Bebop Kid" would comprise much of his lived experience moving through the ecologies of Black musical sound. Freddy Fender went by the nickname El Bebop Kid early on in his career. For example, Luis "squeezer" Moreno Garcia recalled El Bebop Kid singing in a Black club in Harlingen, Texas.[33] Baldemar's musical lessons were directly connected to similar agricultural labor hardships often traveling the same dirt roads to Black clubs as Black musicians. Recalling the significance of these early years where music and work overlapped, Huerta Fender asserted that her father "'was truly a blues, soul, funk, and R&B guy: that's who he was at his core and what he brought to his music.'"[34]

Nicknaming himself "El Bebop Kid" meant that Baldemar Huerta created an identity for himself based on African American musical traditions. Choosing the musical form of bebop—considering Huerta thrived on blues and rhythm and blues during his youthful years—to cultivate his musical identity made sense considering that bebop emerged in the post-World War II era as a political response to the structured standardization that frustrated many Black jazz artists. Instead, many African American music makers turned to the ambitious improvisational style of bebop to make their names as serious artists.[35] An offshoot of jazz standards that evolved from big band swing in the 1940s, bebop is characterized by faster tempos; complex melodies, harmonies, and improvisational styles; and varied rhythms.[36] According to Scott DeVeaux, "the birth of this style coincided with the revival of New Orleans Jazz."[37]

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31. Ibid., 262.

32. Ibid.

33. Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days*, 254.

34. Huerta Fender, personal conversation with author, June 2, 2019. Huerta Fender went on to state that she and her siblings listened primarily to Black music and that she felt those musical traditions were more prominent in their musical soundscape. One of Fender's earliest groups, Los Comancheros, she emphasizes, "were Freddy's original funk, rhythm and blues band." *Wasted Days*, 264.

35. Ingrid Monson, "Jazz," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, ed. Melonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 154.

36. Portia K. Maultsby and Melonee V. Burnim with contributions from Susan Oehler, "Intellectual History," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, ed. Melonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby (New York: Taylor and Frances Group, 2006): 18.

37. DeVeaux, Scott, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no.3 (Autumn 1991): 538.

It is conceivable that the improvisational characteristic of bebop, along with its vibrant circulation during the years after Huerta's rebellious years in the military, combined to form a musical identity that he could align himself with. "El Bebop Kid" was created to market Huerta's Spanish-language covers of rock 'n' roll hits south of the border.[38] Bebop's music was based on self-taught manipulation of jazz and blues musical styles and forms, and Huerta drew on this improvisational technique by switching languages spontaneously. He began to play Spanish covers of rock 'n' roll songs and was good enough to get local radio play as El Bebop Kid. As such, he garnered moderate success in Mexico with his early Spanish-language versions of Elvis Presley's "Don't Be Cruel" or "*No seas cruel*" and Harry Belafonte's "Jamaica Farewell." One of his more popular Spanish covers was Hank Williams's "Cold, Cold Heart" or "*Tu frío corazón*." Other translations of rock 'n' roll covers included "*El twist*" (Chubby Checker's "The Twist"), "*Johnny se bueno*" (Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode"), and "*Cantando los blues*" (Marty Robbins's "Singing the Blues").

CONCRETE (WALLS)

Famous country songs with prison themes include Merle Haggard's "Life in Prison," "I Made the Prison Band," and "Mama Tried." Others include Marty Robbins, Tom T. Hall, Loretta Lynn, and Lucinda Williams. The country singer most associated with prison and its sonic themes is Johnny Cash via his hit song "Folsom Prison Blues." Cash, like Baldemar Huerta, was also briefly incarcerated. All of these country singers reference the ways in which concrete cells and iron bars prevent mobility and freedom. The material and physical properties of concrete and bars also determine how sound is transmitted and transferred within the prison complex. Concrete is a hardened mass, a material that solidifies in form as it cures, yet its etymology also connotes association, coalescence, and bonding. The concrete prison structure—while relentlessly prohibitive of movement, amity, and correspondence—managed to allow for the voices, circuits, and lyrical traces of Black sound that came to reside within Baldemar Huerta's musical lessons.

Angola State Penitentiary, nicknamed "The Alcatraz of the South" and "The Farm," sits less than two miles from the Mississippi River and about fifty miles north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It is surrounded on three sides by water. Angola State Penitentiary, described as a "maximum-security prison farm," is named after the former plantation that had once occupied this territory, a plantation whose name, in turn, came from the Portuguese colonizers' term for the kingdom of Angola, where many of the slaves who worked the plantation had been born.[39] Plainly, the land upon which this penitentiary resides holds multiply imbricated layers of racist settler colonialism and chattel slavery: it is situated on four contiguous plantations, where it has operated since the 1880s, exploiting convict labor to work the cotton fields.[40] Many sites of agricultural labor in the South and along the Gulf Coast operate on these original plantation models.

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[38] *Latin Music USA*, episode 7, "The Legends: Freddy Fender," aired October 19, 2009, on PBS, https://www.pbs.org/video/legends-freddy-fender-pye3qr/.

[39] Oliver Geer, "Angola Prison: A Plantation Turned Prison," *Neighborhoods* (blog), *ViaNOLAVie*, February 26, 2018, https://www.vianolavie.org/2018/02/26/angola-prison/.

One recognizable trait about Angola State Penitentiary is its connection to notable blues singers who tag it in blues and rhythm and blues recordings. In the 1930s folklorist John Lomax and his son, Allan, set out to locate and record folk music by African Americans and Mexican Americans and found an immense collection of work songs being sung by prisoners together in the fields. In 1950 folklorist Harry Oster did field recordings of songs being sung by men incarcerated in Angola State Penitentiary. For instance, four of Robert Pete Williams' blues songs appear on the 1959 recording of *Angola Prisoner's Blues*.[41]

In April 1961 Baldemar Huerta was sentenced to several years in prison. Most narratives cite the cause for this prison sentence as the possession of marijuana. Yet, Huey Purvis Meaux, later Freddy Fender's record producer and manager, explained that Fender was targeted by the lieutenant governor of Louisiana, who became aware that Fender was dating a white girl. Meaux recalled: "They were very prejudiced in Louisiana and they didn't want Mexicans anywhere around Louisiana. They told him to 'get the f—k out!'"[42] This incident exemplifies the racial proximity of brown masculinity to Black masculinity, for Fender was read as a suspect sexual predator within racist regional discourses of white supremacy.[43]

Baldemar Huerta spent over three years in the Louisiana prison system and spending the first six months of his incarceration in Angola. The labor conditions he experienced echoed residual models of field labor settled into the very ecological structures of Angola since slavocracy. "Freddy and his fellow inmates," recalled Huerta Fender, "did the hoeing. If they were caught cutting too much sugarcane instead of weeds, they would be written up and put in the hole. It was not until between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. that they were allowed to come in from the heat, and beaten down from working the sugarcane crop fields all day long. Each day, the prisoners were loaded into big, long trucks and hauled off to work the fields."[44]

Although inmates endured harsh constraints upon their every aspect of human mobility along with racial segregation (as remains the case in today's prison industrial complex), their labor conditions of containment and control were often defied through the creation of sonic interactions. Just as Black gospel and work songs resonated in the agricultural fields of Huerta's youth, the field work in Angola formed circuits of soundwaves that made lasting impressions. Huerta would recall that he tried several times to cross those racist barriers of separation intended to produce tensions and deter forms of comradery and association in order to learn, make, and play music with Black inmates. Huerta revealed that interactions between Black and brown inmates were routinely restricted, "'to the point that [he] was spotted by one of the guards playing guitar with a black person and they put [him] in the hole for a week.'"[45]

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[40] "Angola State Prison: A Short History," Voices Behind Bars: National Public Radio and Angola State Prison, Knight Case Studies Initiative, Columbia University, accessed March 10, 2020,. See also, W. T. Whitney, Jr., "Louisiana's Angola: Proving Ground for Racialized Capitalism," *People's World*, June 25, 2018, https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/louisianas-angola-proving-ground-for-racialized-capitalism/ and http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/54/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_54_id_547.html.

[41] Robert Pete Williams, Matthew "Hogman" Maxey, Rogert "Guitar" Welch, Rooseelt Charles, Clara Young, and others recorded on *Angola Prisoners' Blues*. (Louisiana Folklore Society LFS A-3, Collector JGN 1003, reissued Arhoolie 1996), recorded 1959.

[42] Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days*, 271.

[43] For an analysis of how the lynching of Mexicans in Texas was driven by sexualized racist ideologies, see Monica Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[44] Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days*, 169.

Huerta further recounts many occasions that demonstrate how—despite the persistent racial segregation of inmates—he was able to play with Black prisoners and listen to Black music. Once he was transferred to DeQuincy Correctional Institute, Huerta found that more structure was provided for musical production through the system called "the Walk," a process of yet further racial segregation created to allow musical performances during visiting days. When Black inmates visited with their families, white inmates would have access to the music room and vice versa. Following mid-twentieth-century racial classification systems, Mexicans like Huerta were often lumped in with white inmates for these processions. Despite efforts to keep inmates apart by race during the Walk, the efforts of musicians, like Huerta, effectively created a concrete soundscape whereby music could circulate and echo throughout segregated spaces, allowing Huerta to join in with Black musicians.

In 1975 Freddy Fender recorded an album aptly titled *Recorded Inside Louisiana State Prison*. The album, recorded during 1962–63 and released in 1964, included "Hello Loneliness," "Carmela," "Oh My Love," "Bye Bye Little Angel," "The Village Queen," "My Happy Days Have Gone," "Quit Shucking Me Baby," and "I Hope Someday You'll Forgive Me."[46] The songs, all written while in Angola and DeQuincy penitentiaries, were recorded inside the concrete prison walls, amid the movement of bodies attempting to connect across racial lines, the flow of voices across cells, and the short-lived gatherings of makeshift musical ensembles.

The best example of this ability to create musical life within the concrete ecologies of incarceration occurred when a DeQuincy prison guard who thought Huerta and his bandmates had great musical talent recorded one of his jam sessions and allowed Eddie Shuler of Goldband Records to hear it. Shuler eventually became interested in recording some of Huerta's music, and Huerta scrambled to figure out how to record some for consideration by producers. This meant finding a drummer who was able to give him the rhythm and blues sound he desired. Ultimately, Huerta would write ten songs, some of which he was also able to capture on a Webcor reel-to-reel tape recorder. He recounted the experience with verve:

> The convicts played the instruments. It was actually one of the best albums I ever recorded! I recorded Spanish language versions of "Corina Corina" [*sic*] and Little Richard's "Slippin' and a Slidden'" [*sic*] and called it "Boracho y resvalando" [*sic*] and made up a story of a drunken guy trying to get somewhere.[47]

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[45] Ibid., 170.

[46] Ibid., 183. According to Huerta Fender there is a release date of 1964 and according to the discography there is a release date is 1975. Both dates are likely accurate with 1975 being a re-release of the original in 1965 although at the time of this publication I am still in the process of obtaining more clarification on these dates, especially the 1964 release, from conversations with Huerta Fender.

[47] Ibid., 184. "Corrina, Corrina" is considered a country blues song and was originally recorded by blues singers Bo Carter and Papa Charlie McCoy.

Whereas concrete in country music songs has appropriately conveyed the oppressive conditions of solitude, isolation, and loneliness, as a Blackbrown ecological material it also points to creative refusals by Black and brown musicians to abide by these conditions. Accordingly, Fender's experiences chart a different country music through an ecology of concrete that forms a resounding circuit of music tunes, vocal styles, and transient collaborations.

SWAMP (LANDS)

In the early 1970s Fender gained notoriety in the country music charts with the hits "Before the Next Tear Drop Falls" and "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights."[48] These hits, along with "Holy One," would become standards in a genre called swamp pop. Jim Worbois described Fender's swamp pop very much as Fender himself likened making music to making tacos, as "a little TexMex, a little New Orleans, a little soul."[49] In 1978 Fender released the album *Swamp Gold*, which included fifteen covers performed in swamp pop style, such as, "Tell It Like It Is," made famous as a hit by Aaron Neville; "Just a Moment of Your Time," a huge hit by blues and rhythm and blues singer Roland Stone; and "It's Raining," a soul-meets-rhythm-and-blues ballad by Naomi Neville. These songs conveyed highly emotive registers of love and longing made famous by swamp pop icons including Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Sam Cooke, and Roy Orbison.

I draw on the ecology of the swamp—understood here as a musical metaphor for saturation, overflow, excess, and deluge—as another Blackbrown country ecology for Fender's country music. Drawing from this usage of the verb to swamp, I propose a different way of engaging Fender's musical productions of swamp pop music. A trope associated with overabundance, a Blackbrown ecological meaning of swamp is antithetical to mixed or additive musical models that keep racial, ethnic, and linguistic categories neatly intact; instead, Fender's swamp pop offers a surplus sonic form, one in which sounds, performative gestures, and lyrics shape the racialized remains and excesses of this genre's country music standards.

In its natural ecological form, the swamp is a place of active life, growing new species, reproducing (anti)bacterial properties, and feeding ecosystems: "Swamps are among the most valuable ecosystems on Earth. They act like giant sponges or reservoirs."[50] Moreover, "the swamp ecosystem also acts as a water treatment plant, filtering wastes and purifying water naturally. When excess nitrogen and other chemicals wash into swamps, plants there absorb and use the chemicals."[51] Swamplands are bodies of excess, often including human refuse and agricultural detritus. Simultaneously, the swamp has held a significant alternative archive of Black and Indigenous life in Louisiana folklore and culture. For example, Black archaeological studies considering how fugitive slaves and indigenous peoples made use of the swamplands to sustain their freedom: "In the early 1600s, Native Americans fleeing the colonial frontier took refuge here, and they were soon joined by fugitive slaves, and probably some whites escaping indentured servitude or hiding from the law. From about 1680 to the Civil War, it appears that the swamp communities were dominated by Africans and African Americans."[52]

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[48] The various languages and vernaculars in swamp music, I believe, provided a linguistic home for Fender, a Spanglish speaker who was often made to feel inadequate. He reflected, "'I don't talk about this much, but my vocal style developed from my obsession to pronounce my English words correctly. English was my second language, and I was determined to get it right.'" Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days*, 118. Nevertheless, Fender deftly plays with English grammatical conventions in the opening lyrics to "Wasted Days," specifically interrupting verb/adverb modification with a prepositional phrase in the line "I have left for you behind."

[49] "Freddy Fender," in *All Music Guide to Country Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Vladimir Bogdanov, Chris Woodstra, and Stephen Thomas Erlewine (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003), 245.

[50] *National Geographic Resource Library*, Encyclopedic Entry, s.v. "Swamp," accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/swamp/.

[51] Ibid.

Based on its range of meanings from ecosystem and receptacle for overabundant matter to symbol of freedom, the swamp holds a significant place in Louisiana's settler colonial histories as a literal and figurative place for generative sonic and surplus life. Accordingly, the genre of music that holds such uniquely racialized histories and spirits of dissent in Louisiana is understandably referred to as swamp pop. During the 1950s, when young Cajun and Creole musicians began to experiment with the popular music of the day, swamp pop emerged as "a distinct rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll subgenre that combine[d] New Orleans-style rhythm and blues, country and western, and Cajun and black Creole music."[53] Moreover, "the swamp pop sound is typified by highly emotional vocals, simple, unaffected (and occasionally bilingual) lyrics, tripleting honky-tonk pianos, bellowing sax sections, and a strong rhythm and blues backbeat. Upbeat compositions often possess the bouncy rhythms of Cajun and black Creole two-steps, and their lyrics frequently convey the local color and joie de vivre spirit that pervades south Louisiana."[54] Slow, usually melancholic swamp pop ballads exhibit the heart broken, world-weary laments common to many traditional Cajun and black Creole compositions.

To be sure, discussions of swamp pop music reflect the binary racial politics of a Louisiana landscape flattened by renderings of "Cajun" descendants of white, French settlers vis-à-vis "Creole" peoples of African descent. Typically, both terms come up in definitions of musical genres unique to Louisiana, such as zydeco music, which is generally described as a musical conversation between discrete Cajun and Creole influences. This slippage between polarized definitions—either Cajun/or Creole—often maps onto racialized categories as Black or white despite numerous examples of music that moves within and around such rigid binaries. For example, Clifton Chenier, regarded as a king of zydeco music, is also often referenced as a central figure of "black Cajun music."[55] Fender similarly offers a brown/Mexican Cajun or "Cajun funk" musical form that further complicates these cultural, geo-historical, and racial markers, particularly in his 1975 release of "Loving Cajun Style."[56]

Considering Baldemar Huerta's lived experiences and the influence of Louisiana on his personal and musical life, it makes sense that Freddy Fender would gravitate towards swamp

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[52] Richard Grant, "Deep in the Swamps, Archaeologists Are Finding How Fugitive Slaves Kept Their Freedom," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2016, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/deep-swamps-archaeologists-fugitive-slaves-kept-freedom-180960122/.

[53] Bill C. Malone, "Swamp Pop," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson, vol. 12, *Music*, ed. Bill C. Malone (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 365.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ben Sandmel, "Zydeco," *Off Beat Magazine*, May 1, 1999, http://www.offbeat.com/articles/zydeco/.

[56] "Biography," on Freddy Fender's official website, accessed March 16, 2020, https://www.freddyfender.com/bio.html.

pop music. Louisiana was a second home to Fender, key to shaping his musical repertoire as well as his vocal and guitar playing style. Huerta Fender reveals that Fender learned quite a few words in Cajun French because of the artists with whom he associated.[57] Moreover, as a Mexican American who spoke both Spanish and English and whose music moved across a variety of English- and Spanish-language genres, Fender was drawn to Louisiana's multiracial, multi-ethnic musical sound: "Although Fender was a Chicano . . . much of his formative career was spent in South Louisiana: spiritually, Fender's music was from the Louisiana swamp."[58] Fender himself admitted as much in illustrating his style of composition: "'The most important thing . . . was to take a little bit of this and a little bit of that and put it all in one taco.'"[59] Familiarity with the ability to bring together these leftovers or surplus bits of music allows us to imagine that Fender's musical taco and swamp pop musical sound are quite analogous.

Like the spongy and absorbent swamp ecosystem, the lyricism of Fender's soul tenor captures "the porous nature of musical boundaries and the futility of separating music into neat, precise categories."[60] Surely, the permeable nature of swamp pop corresponds well with Baldemar Huerta's musical trajectory through Black musical forms within a segregated, carceral, and racist world as a brown young man growing up along the Gulf coast region of Texas and Louisiana.

In country music the swamp in "swamp pop" has conveyed a multi-lingual, multi-racial, and multi-cultural musical environment. As a Blackbrown ecology the swamp also materializes those musical life forces of previous life forms, that is, a ground that has continually channeled sounds, held connections, and created refuge for new existence.

CLOSING: BLACKBROWN "LOWER FREQUENCY"

Fender's musical virtuosity was cultivated across geographies, institutions, and languages formed within what I term Blackbrown country ecologies of race and musicianship. I have focused on three ecological sites that formed the conditions of possibility for the Black musical resonances so central to Fender's unique country music performances. This acquaintance with what would become Fender's core musical foundations of blues, rhythm and blues, and soul should not, I propose, be reduced to unilinear or monoracial transactions of borrowing, influence, or exchange. A sonic ecology framework encourages a different engagement with Black and brown musical sounds, racialized labor histories, and sonic circuits that emerged from and produced new life through music. Moreover, these environments—the dirt roads of agricultural labor, the concrete walls of incarceration, and the swamplands of Louisiana—are significant for comprehending the Black musical forms and white sonic circuitry that a brown boy from South Texas reconfigured as his very own. Fender's masterful sound emanates from what Alejandro Nava terms being attuned to a "lower frequency,"

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57. Huerta Fender, personal conversation with author, June 2, 2019.

58. Shane Bernard, *Swamp Pop Music: Cajun and Creole Rhythm and Blues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 64.

59. "Adios Freddy Fender."

60. Ben Sandmel, "Swamp Pop Music," in *Music Rising at Tulane: The Musical Cultures of the Gulf South*, accessed March 10, 2020, https://musicrising.tulane.edu/discover/themes/swamp-pop-music/.

a frequency that picks up the channel of creative fights against the realities of existence colored by "the style and substance of struggles and suffering, terror and jubilation, vulgarity and sublimity."[61]

Fender always stressed that the core of his music was Black music. This was evident in one of the earliest bands he led, a group called Los Comancheros, which played funk and rhythm and blues.[62] His own descriptions of country music consistently centered the blues and rhythm and blues."[63] Even when Fender recorded covers of classic country songs like Hank Williams's "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," his renditions uniquely changed the originals because of the soulful tenor he injected into his vocals. Closure and inevitability characterize Williams's version; hence, Williams's truncating of words at the ends of lyrics gives his version its somewhat robotic pace.[64] In contrast, Fender's lyrics are sung with a soulful inflection, drawing on his distinctive vibrato to extend and lift the ends of "die" "cry," and "fly." In listening to Fender's "I'm So Lonesome," it is crucial to consider that Fender sings this cover as someone who learned blues music by ear, surrounded by blues music and blues musicians throughout his life and labors. Fender's singing style, I suggest, put the Rufus "Tee-Tot" Payne back into "I'm So Lonesome," thereby highlighting the blues progressions and acoustic guitar-playing Payne taught Williams, that eventually was invoked by Fender's vocals. And yet, Fender is never simply performing Black music. It is something else, a music we might consider creates Blackbrown musical life forms. Take for example, that Fender's lyrics are so often tinted brown by his Spanglish accent and his "incorrect" pronunciations that brown-tune "is" into "ez," "his" into "he's," and "begin" into "began."

Ecologies comprise biological matter, but they also proffer a variety of knowledges that we might consider in thinking through other forms of matter, specifically the institutions, social spaces, and racialized boundaries that pertain to music. In other words, reading Fender as that "brown soul brother" draws attention to the structural conditions of contact that bring bodies, knowledges, and genealogies together, a process and circuit of contact that Jacqui Alexander has theorized as *crossings* that emerge irreducible to binaries of gender, race, and standard geographical bearings of migration.[65] In other words, determining that Baldemar Huerta comes to learn and sing Black music because he hears soul music or blues vocals while working in similar labor and incarcerated conditions as Black people can only provide us with an incomplete analysis. Stated another way, I propose that Fender's uncharted country music occurs in relationship with and through sonic ecologies of Blackbrown musical matter, that is, musical offerings brought forth by the toil of the very bodies that kept rhythmic time. To be sure, the ecologies of dirt, concrete, and swamp represent histories of racist labor structures. The iterations of these ecological terms—dirt roads, highways, ranches—in

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61. Alejandro Nava, *In Search of Soul: Hip-Hop, Literature, and Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 105.

62. Huerta Fender, *Wasted Days*, 264.

63. Ibid., 265.

64. For a discussion on vocality and race, see Geoff Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 73–100.

65. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

song lyrics as well as visual productions and country musical performances continually erase racial conquest and degradation as central discourses of heteropatriarchal white supremacy. Fender's country journey as a "brown soul brother" not only disturbs those performances of conquest but encourages us to rethink about such musical matter covered here as a key force in Fender's oeuvre. While the proposed notion of Blackbrown country ecologies cannot undo the power held in country music's metaphors for racial capital, it does attempt to recognize the creative refusals to concede rhythm, lyrical stories, musical vernaculars, and socialities that have sustained and nurtured Black and brown life.

I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for taking the time to provide critical feedback, as well as the co-editors of this special issue Nadine Hubbs, Francesca Royster, JPMS managing editor Esther Morgan-Ellis. ¡Muchísimas gracias N. San Martin! ■

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