

Winter 2-17-2016

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## Augustana Digital Commons Citation

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**Music and the Migrant: A Transnational Account of Cumbia**

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GEOG 331: Geography of Latin America

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Winter Term 2015/16

Wollstonecraft Submission-Long Analytical

February 17th, 2016

GEOG 331

Dr. Strunk

Music and the Migrant: A Transnational Account of Cumbia

*“Above the music — her own mix of Katy Perry, Taylor Swift and Mexican cumbia — Maria lets her thoughts wander beyond this sandy field along a rural stretch of Interstate 4”.*

*~Anna M. Phillips, Tampa Bay Times*

The Quote above references a small but poignant detail in the story of a migrant woman. Maria to whom the quote refers to is a strawberry picker in Florida. She and her husband have a one year old son. Maria graduated from high school and had hopes of going to college but could not afford it at the time, so she ended up back in the fields like her parents. United States political efforts to make things easier on immigrants have not had much impact. As she picks strawberries she listens to a mix of music to help pass the time as she works diligently. The relativist may explain Maria's mix of American pop and cumbia music as the expected acquisition of American culture after being around it for multiple years, however, I argue her mix of American pop and Mexican cumbia is representative of transnational identities many migrants acquire as they cross borders; new stops along their migratory journey become entwined with their own histories and stories in a transnational identity. Their homeland will always be home, but as they migrate, as Maria does for work, life does not stop, so their cultural identities keep evolving, picking up new ideas and integrating homeland traditions and beliefs.

Migrants like Maria have many transnational ties with their home country and their life in America. Her husband dreams of going back home to Mexico where his family was able to build a house for themselves and for himself with the money he earned and they might raise their son there. Yet if they go back to Mexico Maria would not be near her mother which would be sad. These are a few of the transnational connections and dilemma's migrants have to deal with. As these migrants acquire transnational ties, their lives become more complex and choosing which side is to be home is not easy as is seen with Maria and her husband. What I want to focus on in this paper is the transnational culture of Latin American music, specifically looking at the cumbia. As Maria's music mix shows, cultural synthesization is a product of transnational ties.

Cumbia began in Colombia and spread to much of Latin America. In various parts there is a lot of Afro-Caribbean influences in cumbia from the earlier history of slavery. More recently, I argue that the variations of cumbia music reflects greater social movements, historical events, attitudes and beliefs of a group of people. Cumbia is fluid and constantly evolving and can help explain larger cultural feelings and beliefs; it offers a great insight that popular culture has the ability to uniquely capture. Furthering that point, broader social movements or societal issues reflected in music such as cumbia take on a greater representative qualities that help individuals define their people and their struggles as is explained here; "It is cumbia's very popularity and fluidity throughout the Americas that raise important questions about how transnational flows mediate difference, identity, and national popular culture (L'hoeste 2007). I am

going to focus on cumbia as a transnational global identity of individuals from Latin America. I am going to look at various ways it stands as a transnational identity in three case studies including Maria's story (told above), cumbia corridos by the cumbia band Vox Urbana and the U.S. role in the song "La Bestia". At the end, I am going to use a framework of music that looks at music as a concept, music as a object and music as an activity to analyze the three case studies of Maria, cumbia corridos by Vox Urbana and the song "La Bestia".

The next case study of cumbia is going to look at the role of cumbia music in the telling of migrant stories. An article on the Tucson Weekly by María Inés Taracena spotlights a cumbia band called Vox Urbana. Vox Urbana has been working on a two year long project to incorporate the story of migrants into their songs. They have heard the stories of migrants and the harsh realities of their journeys. They call these songs cumbia corridos. Similar to the narco corridos, but instead tell the journey of the migrant rather than the escapades of a drug lord. Vox Urbana struggles to fully do justice to the stories and fully represent the migrants accounts through song, but they feel that it is their duty as one of the members explains here:

"[I] feel obligated to do a good job, especially since there is this other level of us transforming it into a song, you have poetic licenses...the people whose stories [you heard], you want to be true to it," Colby says. The band also feels they have the moral responsibility to use their music to promote awareness on these issues, and encourage people to approach them with more empathy' (Taracena 2016).

What Vox Urbana is doing is a great example of using cumbia as a medium to tell the story of a group of people in the hope of greater social change. It is also very symbolic because cumbia has a long history in Latin America and as a part of its global cultural identity. They are taking the tradition of cumbia and adding stories of real people about a contemporary social issue. This demonstrates the idea that cumbia is fluid, can function as a medium for various social issues and is ever evolving.

Furthermore, by telling the stories of real migrants they are humanizing the migrants. In the U.S. there is a tendency to see the undocumented immigrants as something “other”, they are often branded “illegal” or “alien”. This in effect dehumanizes the immigrant because it is easier to deport someone who is said to be “illegal”. It becomes much more difficult to deport someone and take them away from their families when you hear, their pains, their losses, their hopes, their dreams and most of all their reality.

Immigrants like Maria are hard working, they have goals for their family and goals for themselves, but the system holds them down. Vox Urbana’s cumbia corridos humanize the migrants by telling their stories. The cumbia beat is multicultural and the music transcends boundaries so it is a very neutral territory to tell the migrant’s story, which also makes it very effective at evoking empathy. Just as the narco corridos inspire glorification and a sense of rebellious power in its listeners, the cumbia corridos inspire empathy for the fellow human being. Storytelling is almost an inherently human trait, much more of a natural trait than a manufactured trait. People may not take the time to listen to a migrant’s story on the T.V. nor may a reporter even take the time to interview them, but when a cumbia corrido riff of the music float off the radio it is

impossible to resist empathizing with the struggle and losses a migrant endures. It hits home for every human, because all humans experience similar feelings in one way or another.

The final case study I am going to look at is a song called “La Bestia”. It is based around the train called “The Beast” that many migrants make the treacherous journey on up to the U.S. border. It is extremely dangerous but many of the migrants are trying to escape violence back home to simply be able to live life free from fear. Migrant researcher Elizabeth Kennedy identifies gang violence as the key driver of migration of unaccompanied minors as she explains here:

“When asked why they left their home, 59 percent of the Salvadoran boys and 61 percent of the Salvadoran girls list crime, gang threats, or violence as a reason for their emigration. Whereas males most feared assault or death for not joining gangs or interacting with corrupt government officials, females more feared rape or disappearance at the hands of the same groups” (Kennedy 2014).

The migrating kids riding La Bestia are escaping violence so the ride is not as fearful as what is back home. However, despite the violence they are escaping, this should not undermine the sheer danger and death that La Bestia has proven itself to be. The train has taken many lives and there are also many adult migrants riding it. Researcher Óscar Martínez rode “La Bestia” to hear the story of the migrants and here he explains the circumstantial reality for the migrants; “These are the migrants riding third class, those without either a coyote or money for a bus. The men repeat this fact over and over. ... They’ll travel in these conditions for over 3,000 miles” (Martínez 2014). The

migrants on these train have to endure weather, gangs, bandits, and witness horrific deaths (2014). Many are escaping violence but others are going to find work to help their families back home. It is also important to note that most of the kids who are migrating have one parent in the U.S. and that is why they are going to the U.S. specifically and not another country to escape the violence (Kennedy 2014). The song “La Bestia” was commissioned by the U.S. Customs Border Protection to explain the various dangers of riding the trains in an effort to curb the influx of child migrants around coming up to the border. The song is “loosely based on the Caribbean cumbia style” (Walker 2014). The U.S. didn’t want anyone to know they commissioned the song fearing it might lose its impact. This is a very complicated use of cumbia and brings up various ethical questions. Is this the musical metaphor for saving people from themselves? The U.S. picks up Latin America’s favorite musical pastime, injects it with public service announcement about La Bestia and then slips away hoping it will have the desired effect. Granted that is a very sinister comparison, that does not mean there was any mal intent. A similar yet contrary controversy is over the signs at the Mexico border of how to cross the border safely, the goal is to save lives and prevent human rights tragedies; the purpose of the signs is not to encourage migrants to slip into the U.S. as some people think. The U.S. goal with “La Bestia” could be seen as simply using a popular medium to reach a wider audience that otherwise would not necessarily respond to standard public service announcements.

Continuing on the previous point from an anthropological standpoint, “La Bestia” is very creative because it is finding out and utilizing the best way to communicate a

message to a wide and diverse audience. It did prove to be effective at reducing the number of migrants coming up, which from an anthropological standpoint is great because the number of human rights tragedies are decreased which is the number one goal, however the song is speaking to an audience that doesn't really have a choice. They are faced extreme violence and threats back home, so the journey is not as intimidating. The song does not offer an option of what to do if your hometown poses more of a threat to your life than the dangers of the train. In addition to this, the idea that the U.S. government commissioned it but didn't want anyone to know they are behind it is kind of uncomfortable to think about. It is a bit manipulative towards the Latin America people, even though the intent is good; however, if it saved more lives that is the important part. The song put on by the U.S. government wants listeners to come to their own conclusion to not to let their children ride the train up to America by letting them listen to information in a comfortable and familiar medium that which is the cumbia music, as explained in the article:

'Pablo Izquierdo, the vice-president of Elevation, told *The Independent* that the song's warnings about the dangers of migration would be less effective if its listeners were aware of its links to the US government. "It's not that we're trying to deceive people," he said. "The message itself is the goal, and we don't want to let the messenger interfere with the message" (Walker 2014).

In all, the U.S. used cumbia in a very unconventional way. It could be seen as using a people's culture against them or using their culture for their own good. It brings up a lot

of ethical questions, but at the end of the day the most important thing is that it prevented human rights tragedies and saved many lives.

Emily Achieng' Akuno article *A Conceptual Framework for Research in Music and Music Education within a Cultural Context* focuses on music education and acquisition of musicianship in Kenya, Africa. At the beginning of her work she references a framework of music as stated here:

“A three-mode view of music (Akuno,1997) is proposed for the understanding of music:

- I. Concept - Music is an impression, a thought or an idea that can occupy the mind. The concept of music as a body of sounds attributes to it four elements that define and characterize it: temporal, tonal, qualitative, and expressive.
- II. Object - Music is an object, that work of art created by the relationship between several clusters of sound.
- III. Activity - Music is also an activity, an event of sociocultural significance to the individuals that take part in its performance.

Music is hence summarized as a multidimensional entity, each element contributing to its conceptualism. The three modes of music above are explained by Paynter (1997), who sees music existing as thought, that which engages the mind and has a presence; as an object, that which continues to exist and has continuance; and as an event, that which occurs and ceases and has occurrence” (Akuno 2000/2001).

Now, this framework explained above can be applied to the three case studies in this paper to help better understand how they place cumbia in a transnational context. For Maria, as she works in the strawberry fields, music is both a concept and an object. The music occupies her mind as she works, yet at the same time allows her to focus on the demanding task she has to complete. The article about Maria mentions her music choices as a minute side detail, but it can be assumed that Maria's music choice coincides with music being an object. It is safe to assume she would not be listening to the music while she worked if she did not like the sound of it. In regards to music as an activity, Maria is not actively participating in the performance of the music, but her music choices actively represent her transnational ties to both Mexico and the U.S.

Turning to Vox Urbana's cumbia corridos, their music focuses strongly on music as a concept and music as an activity. They want the stories of the migrants in their songs to be heard in the mind of the listener and ultimately evoke empathy and understanding towards the migrants and their struggle. This in turn segways right into music as an activity. If the cumbia corridos are able to evoke empathetic feelings and understanding of a diverse audience toward the migrant, they in may be able to transfer this empathy and understanding into greater socio-cultural change to bring about significant changes that could improve circumstances for the migrants in the long run.

In the case of the song "La Bestia" the U.S. government employs the idea that music functions as a concept to help spread a message. They take advantage of the idea that music can occupy the mind and therefore is the best way to reach the people who need to hear the message most. In regards to music as an object, they are using

cumbia type music for the song since it is widely popular and will reach the desired audience in Latin America. The goal of “La Bestia” is to reach the stage of music as an activity which it did. The song reached the desired audience, in turn slowing down the number of migrants traveling on the trains. However, other policy implementations may have also contributed to the reduction of migrants on trains.

In conclusion, cumbia has a wide and diverse history in Latin America. As seen with Maria, Vox Urbana’s cumbia corridos and the song and story behind “La Bestia”, it shows how cumbia can play a big role in larger socio-cultural movements. It can function as a mechanism to protect people as with “La Bestia” because the music can reach into the homes of ordinary people far and wide and most importantly reach into their mind and evoke feelings. On that same idea, it can function as a neutral medium to tell the stories of the migrants and evoke empathy in turn humanizing the migrants in a world that makes them the enemy. Cumbia is enjoyed immensely by many people and migration from Latin America has brought cumbia into the U.S. where musicians such as the late Selena Quintanilla and Kumbia Kings music is widely popular and enjoyed as explained by L’Hoeste; “The Texas-based Selena incorporated cumbia into her arrangements, and following her tragic death, the glamorization of her life in a Hollywood movie created a surge in Anglo interest in Latino music associated with the border” and that interest is still firmly rooted today and here to stay with the many migrants who are in the U.S. (L’Hoeste 2007). Cumbia became transnational by migration; people who grew up with the music continued to enjoy it even though they migrated to a different area as again explained by L’hoeste:

“Cumbia has proved to be especially adaptable to popular nationalism in various nation-states, a vivid illustration of how transnational flows create local meanings. At the same time, cumbia’s foundational articulation as a multicultural form has made issues of difference - race and class, in particular - obvious themes for its expression, albeit with dramatically different political meanings” (2007).

In all, it is important to understand the role of cumbia in greater socio-cultural events and movements because it represents how music and art can bring about greater social change because it connects the individual and personal feelings with broader social messages which in turn can change the attitudes and beliefs of an immense amount of people. The power of music and the power of people are limitless when they speak what needs to be said.



**Maria**

Source:<http://www.tampabay.com/news/humaninterest/dreams-of-nursing-are-on-hold-as-strawberry-picker-remains-in-the-fields/2222292>

Link to “La Bestia” Song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGimonYeqsk>



“La Bestia”

Source:<http://esblog.panampost.com/adam-dubove/2014/04/24/la-bestia-el-tren-que-fagocita-las-esperanzas-de-miles-de-migrantes/>



**Vox Urbana**

Source: <http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/corridos-migrantes-vox-urbana/Content?oid=6020227>

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