Undocumented Migrants and Engaging Public Spaces of Listening

Master’s Thesis

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Abstract

With new migration patterns extending border spaces into the interior of the United States, undocumented migrants living in the U.S. interior are forced to navigate the hazards and insecurities of illegal residence within the contexts of their daily lives. In the midst of these hazards, many migrants use listening to music in specific public spaces as a way of creating positions of security. Music and genre-normative modes of listening form a fundamental part of the social architecture of public space, and regional Mexican music forms part of the social architecture of Mexican grocery stores as a culturally “safe” environment for migrants.
Dedication

Dedicated to my deceased grandfather Emory Stewart,
himself an Ohio State alumnus.
Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Dr. Ashby and Drs. Skinner and Wibbelsman for helping me to focus and crystalize a rather complex research topic. I also extend a thanks to the faculty of the musicology program at Ohio State for the learning experiences that were created in my graduate courses, and for helping me to better understand the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology.
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Ethnomusicology
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Undocumented Migrants and Engaging Public Spaces of Listening

Introduction

The United States Congress passed the Immigration Control and Reform Act (IRCA) in 1986. This legislation, combined with the recent economic integration between Mexico and U.S. under NAFTA, has dramatically shifted the nature and social reality of Mexican migration to the United States over the last two decades.

While previous generations of Mexican undocumented immigrants have tended to settle in the U.S. Southwest, one consequence of both the IRCA and NAFTA has been a “nationalization” of undocumented migration, a creation of internal migratory flows that have allowed undocumented migrants to settle in the Midwest and other parts of the United States outside of the U.S./Mexico border region. One is now just as likely to find a presence of recent Mexican immigrants in Cedar Rapids, Iowa or Columbus, Ohio as in California or Texas.

Sociologists Víctor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández-León cite an over 200 percent increase in Mexican immigrant populations between 1990 and 2000 in several states outside of traditional settlement areas, including Utah, Georgia, Iowa, Indiana, Nebraska,
New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wisconsin, and over a 1000 percent increase in Arkansas, Minnesota, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama. By granting amnesty to many of the undocumented immigrants living here in 1986, the IRCA empowered those persons to freely relocate across the United States, to obtain better and more stable income, and to legally bring other family members from Mexico.

With the recent changes in migration patterns, there is now a need to adapt an understanding of borders to account for the localized significance of the “border” for undocumented migrants’ daily lives in the interior of the United States. There is a real sense in which an undocumented immigrant “carries the border” along wherever he or she goes in this country, whether an undocumented immigrant resides in Los Angeles, Knoxville, or Little Rock. In her study of quebradita dancing, for example, Sydney Hutchinson discusses how duranguense musicians in Chicago represent a manifestation of border-related inter-cultural contact despite their presence in the interior of the United States.

This “interior border”—the perceptive situation that an immigrant is followed by the edge of his or her adopted country no matter where he or she may go within that country—impacts every facet of daily life for undocumented immigrants. Every time a police officer drives by, undocumented migrants know that a failure to stop at a stop sign and lack of a driver’s license could lead to deportation and separation from their families. Spouses face the daily possibility of their loved ones being sent back to the other side by immigration raids on places of work. On the job, in the mall, driving down the freeway, going out to visit a friend, or taking a sick child to the hospital, an undocumented migrant
is keenly aware of the constant risk of deportation, giving a sense that the border is always “over ones shoulder.”

The more localized reality of “borders” and cultural boundaries can thus be a crucial component of how these new immigrants develop a sense of public and private space living in this country. That is, the ever-present tension of living both “here” and “there” is continually re-negotiated in the various contexts of migrants’ daily lives.

In public spaces, many migrants keenly feel their “foreignness” in the face of constant language and cultural barriers. Several of my informants expressed frustration and insecurity about their limitations with English. Even when they have tried hard to learn and speak English, they feel that many Americans criticize them because of their accent. Some of my informants described to me how in their families, there is an odd mixture of “foreign” and “home” as they interact with their children who may now speak primarily English, who may hold very different priorities and cultural values, and who may sense themselves much more clearly from “here” in the U.S. than from the home country.

The presence of the “interior border” can cause a pervasive sense of anxiety among undocumented migrants, but in some cases this anxiety may also be related to other factors. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, is frequently associated with soldiers returning from combat situations, but it can also relate to a number of other significant stressors or traumatic experiences. As confirmed by interviews that I performed with local undocumented immigrants, such migrants are subject to significant stressors in the process of migration, including the risk of potential drowning while
swimming across the Rio Grande, dehydration or snakebite in the desert, and physical exhaustion. One informant described the extreme fear she felt when river currents carried her several miles downstream at nighttime and she nearly drowned. Without giving specific identifiable information, other informants confirmed the difficulties and extreme risks of crossing the desert.

Often, PTSD is accompanied by an ongoing sense of danger and related “hyper vigilance,” a heightened mode of attention in daily life situations due to perceived threats. Clinical PTSD-related “hyper vigilance” is extreme and is specifically related to traumatic memories, but a perhaps a different type of “hyper vigilance” could be used to describe the anxiety of prudently paying attention to one’s environment because of actual hazards. In the case of many undocumented migrants who face both traumatic memories of dangerous border crossing and the daily real threat of deportation at the hands of law enforcement officials, either or both types of “hyper vigilance” could potentially apply.

This makes the development of “positions of security” crucially important. Such positions of security represent a means of preserving a measure of perceived control amidst significant imposed structural limits and daily anxieties. This paper will show that in environments where regional Mexican music is usually heard, that music is an integral part of creating an immersive environment that is culturally “safe” for migrants. Indeed within some of those contexts of listening, this becomes the music’s primary contextual function.

Ola Stockfelt makes the point that the modes in which we listen to music and analyze it should correspond with the specific contexts of listening. Stockfelt uses the
term “modes of listening” to refer to “the different things for which a listener can listen in relation to the sound of music,” taking into account differing musical contexts, differing views of how music relates to an individual and society, and differing activities in which a listener engages while he or she listens to the music. When Stockfelt heard a recording of Mozart’s 40th symphony in G minor as background music after settling into his seat on an airplane, he initially resented the dynamically homogenous and form-simplified recording that presented itself to him. However, once he realized that the purpose of the recording was geared toward social contexts of background listening, he also realized that his initial affronted question, “What does it mean to treat good music like that?” was incongruous to the context of listening.

As Stockfelt illustrates, Mozart’s 40th symphony has seen numerous and varying social performance contexts over its two-hundred years of history. In the 18th century, some listeners listened to and described the symphony as a “musical drama,” and a “grandiose,” “innovative,” or even “avant-garde” performance piece for musicians. By the 19th century, it came to be regarded as “a balanced work…with ‘classical’ proportions—something to which one could refer and which one could use as a model when arguing against the ‘excesses’ of newer music.” As the 19th century progressed and conventional orchestration in performing the symphony was expanded, some listeners sought to create a “refuge for the higher art,” holding up the earlier practices and conditions of classical music as being universal human principles with intrinsic value. As such, some came to listen to Mozart’s 40th symphony as an exemplar of these classical
values. In modern times the symphony has come to be rearranged to facilitate “sound bite” background listening in cafés, salons, and eventually airplanes.

These various “modes of listening” related to a particular musical work not only shape how we listen to music, but on a fundamental level, they shape what it is to which we listen. As Stockfelt puts it,

Identically sounding musical works, listened to through different modes of listening, may engender different kinds of music experiences and even experiences of fundamentally different musical works.

When undocumented migrants listen to regional Mexican music in a Mexican grocery store, the primary framework for listening or analyzing such music in that particular context is not so much related to harmonic or melodic structure, stylistic factors, vocal quality, instrumentation, musical form, social history of the musicians, or musical texture. All of these are important and relevant, but if we are to follow Sockfelt’s well-founded admonition to engage in adequate modes of listening and analysis appropriate to the context at hand, then we must primarily engage with the question, “How does the inclusion of regional Mexican music in a particular public space help migrants to feel safe?” In particular, how do the particular practices of listening in a particular public space transform that space into a place of security?
Modes of Listening to Music in Public Spaces

Before proceeding, let us define “public space.” The term “public” implies something “common” or “shared” by a community, but in modern America, both the ways in which a particular physical space may be “common” or “shared” and who precisely constitutes a particular “community” involve a number of complex factors. Moreover, what performative activities are sanctioned in a particular public space, for whom, and by whom, all must be taken into account.

Uslegal.com offers one helpful definition of “public space” as it relates to legal matters:

A public place is generally an indoor or outdoor area, whether privately or publicly owned, to which the public have access by right or by invitation, expressed or implied, whether by payment of money or not, but not a place when used exclusively by one or more individuals for a private gathering or other personal purpose. 14

Civil spaces such as parks, libraries, streets, or post offices, are clear examples of such public spaces, as are conventional commercial spaces such as malls, grocery stores, restaurants, open-air markets, etc. The common factor is that all of these examples are
spaces from which persons are not conventionally excluded, exclusion being instead the defining mark of private space.

Yet, if the “interior border” establishes a sense of exclusion wherever an undocumented migrant goes within the United States (by definition, being legally subject to deportation establishes exclusion) then it is debatable whether undocumented migrants can actually consider any of these spaces in the U.S.—parks, libraries, streets, post offices, malls, grocery stores, restaurants, open-air markets—to function as public spaces. It also raises the question of how the act of legally excluding a particular group of people from all “public” spaces in a country impacts those spaces being defined as “public” in the first place.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy offers a helpful investigation of transnationalism and public space, in which the European Union is advanced as one example of a “multiperspectival public sphere.” Because the European Union involves multiple nations that share a common economic tie, the critical question emerges of where the foundation for democracy lies in such a system, and what type of public space can serve as a forum for the needed pluralistic democratic processes involved.

According to the encyclopedia article,

For a nation state to be democratic it requires a certain sort of public sphere sufficient to create a strong public via its connections to parliamentary debate. A transnational and thus polycentric and pluralist community, such as the European Union, requires a different sort of public sphere in order to promote sufficient democratic deliberation.
Because of the diverse publics that constitute the new polycentric “Public” of Europe, a conventional national political system of parliamentary debate may not ensure adequate democratic representation of the diverse groups involved. Indeed, as the article suggests, in such a pluralistic system, nationally based parliamentary forms of governance can become a secondary source of democratic process, with the transnational public sphere coming to assume a primary role in democracy formation. In such a setting, decisions about who is granted access to particular spaces, for what purpose, and for what range of activities all become matters increasingly determined by a transnational public rather than by any one particular nation.

While the United States is not the European Union, nevertheless with the adoption of NAFTA and CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) increasingly the United States has come to function as a part of an economic network of nations. As the U.S. has come to integrate markets, communication, transportation, and other economic spheres with Mexico, integration of the labor market via migration is a natural outgrowth of the market forces involved. As such, U.S. immigration law aside, the economic policies implemented by the U.S. in the last two decades have thrust the United States many steps toward a de facto polycentric public system shared with our neighbors to the north and south.

Seen under this framework, one might advance the case that migrants have some basis to view U.S. public spaces as subject to a broader transnational “American” public, a public which they as Latin Americans would rightfully share. As such, by placing legal boundaries on all U.S. public space, the U.S. government would in some sense be seen as
attempting to make “private” that which could be considered “public” from a transnational perspective.

Thus, whether U.S. parks, libraries, streets, post offices, malls, grocery stores, restaurants, or open-air markets are public or private depends significantly upon one’s perspective. I hold that insofar as such spaces are situated by immigration law as sites of exclusion, by definition they may technically be considered contested private spaces\textsuperscript{18} even if they are conventionally regarded as “public.”

The undocumented immigrant tends to enter U.S. “public” spaces in a state of “hyper-vigilance,” a state of not being able or not wishing to take for granted what he or she senses in the surrounding environment. As mentioned, migrants often have a common fear or insecurity of being in such locations where they can be targeted as undocumented and thus deported.

In contrast, many Americans presume a degree of familiarity with “public” surroundings that is not available to undocumented migrants, due to specific structural reasons. Lack of familiarity with English makes it necessary for migrants to pay careful attention to non-verbal cues of other persons, careful attention when practicing broken English in conversation, and even to pay careful attention to find the right aisle of the supermarket. In these contexts, the English language background music designed to put Americans at ease may become one more point of unfamiliarity for the Spanish-speaking migrant.

Hyper-vigilance also involves a particularly heightened mode of listening, the opposite of the American citizen’s tendency toward a perceptual mode of
“dishearkening,” a modern tendency to unconsciously regard all music as “background music.” Much of our lives as naturalized citizens are spent in a social construct of a seamless, “derealized” space in which we indulge in uninterrupted distraction and insulation from the peculiarities, inconveniences, or drudgery of the real world around us.

We are insulated in various ways from that which would force us to take notice of unique surroundings, from jarring idiosyncrasies. The increasing prevalence of music that facilitates its own ignoring—music with rough edges “smoothed out”—goes hand in hand with interstate highways that smooth out variations in physical and neighborhood geography, malls and retail supercenters that obfuscate the origins of what we consume, television that offers hundreds of channels of customized distraction, and social networking sites that allow us to regulate the parameters of our interactions with our own friends. “Dishearkening” is a perceptual mode of continuous distraction, a way of surrounding ourselves with “eye-candy” (or “ear-candy” in this case) that comes to perceptually generate an innocuous, relatively seamless, and ubiquitous pseudo-world.

In contrast to “ubiquitous listening,” a “particular listening” could refer to modes of perceiving cultural expressions in public spaces that are marked by unfamiliarity, (as with signs, speech, foreign language song lyrics, or unfamiliar genres of music) or because of habitual unease in the social context of listening (as with vulnerability to being targeted as “foreign” and potentially deported). Being forced to pay attention to what is unfamiliar becomes a source of displeasure and tension, both for the migrants having to engage unfamiliar American cultural expressions and also for the Americans having to engage unfamiliar Mexican cultural expressions.
For many modern Americans—though definitely not for much of the immigrant population—any true sense of public space has been supplanted by derealized space, and this intensely private individualized space comes to take the place of public space. The placelessness of daily life seamlessly transitions us from one activity to another, watching television as a distraction at home until we climb into our vehicle and let the radio distract us on the freeway until we arrive at the mall or retail supercenter to engage in the distraction of shopping.

The intense privateness of the transitioned derealized space supplants social engagement with public life—television offers us a surrogate community that does not make demands on us, the freeway does not force us to see the jarring uniqueness of diverse landscapes or socioscapes, and the shopping centers do not force us to engage the complexity of origin of the goods we consume. We are offered the cocooning illusion of individualized source-less space, and that illusion becomes our defining daily reality.

Thus, one may ask what commonly shared “public space” might still exist in the United States. Shared “habitats of meaning”23 may exist, as when persons discuss music of common interest, but even those conversations may hinge on how one individual’s derealized space compares to another individual’s derealized space. Our defining social reference point becomes a social space that allows us the sense of individual control that subjugates community to the preferences of the individual. As with television, actual community can be replaced by a surrogate community in which we have the illusion of having people with us, but still allowing us to choose and control the terms.
Thus the primary shared habitats of meaning in the U.S., our “public spaces” if you will, may in fact be derealized habitats. Disturbingly, this could imply that the foundation for much of the average U.S. citizen’s social interactions is an intentional avoidance of what is real.

While this may apply to many native-born U.S. citizens, what if a person were not allowed the luxury of familiarity? What if access to freeways, sense of security in shopping malls or retail supercenters, and access to familiar television programming were removed? The illusion of derealized space would quickly unravel, and accustomed modes of listening to music in those contexts would change. This is the case for many undocumented immigrants, and as a result their connections between space, security of space, and musical style tend to be fundamentally different from those of American citizens.

Video tends to construct and divide space differently than audio — differently, that is, than music does. Of the sites of distraction Margaret Morse mentions, television is a somewhat different situation, in that with the advent of satellite networks, Spanish language television programming is readily available to most undocumented migrant families in the U.S. Yet, because most of the television viewing takes place in private homes or in specialized public spaces (such as Mexican stores or taquerías) this gains relatively little notice from the mainstream English-speaking U.S. public. After all, foreign language is usually one of those inconvenient realities that derealized space is supposed to insulate us from in the first place.
The sum result of this is that undocumented migrants seldom share the same “derealized” spaces as mainstream Americans. While migrants certainly engage in some forms of “ubiquitous listening” as do U.S. citizens (I am quite sure undocumented migrants frequently wash dishes while listening to the radio, too), the typical environments of an English-speaking U.S. citizen’s “dishearkening” are often environments of an undocumented migrant’s anxiety, and perhaps vice versa.

Thus, we begin to see how music is one component in the operation and processes of social segregation. Were one to swap the musical backgrounds of a mall and a Mexican grocery store, many customers would be somewhat uncomfortable. In either case, it would involve a violation of derealized public space, a breaking of the sonic “cocoon” that protects the customers.

Related to this, Geographer Gill Valentine underscores the importance of perception in the mechanics of maintaining cultural difference. In one of his articles, 24 he discusses how despite some scholars’ assertion that concrete social contacts among varying groups in urban “micro-publics”25 are a helpful catalyst for the embracing of diversity, nevertheless there exists a gap in many cases between stated values (publically expression of tolerance of diverse groups) and practice. (continuing prejudice, sometimes reinforced by perceived negative social contact between varying groups within urban micro-publics) As Valentine puts it,

There is increasing evidence that contact between different social groups alone is not sufficient to produce respect. Indeed, many everyday moments of contact between different individuals or groups in the city do not really count as encounters at all.26
Citing studies on social self-segregation, lack of meaningful social contact on city streets, the social isolation of mobile phone culture, and persisting anticosmopolitanism, Valentine makes the case that even concrete social interactions between persons in urban micro-publics may be of limited value in fostering respect between diverse social groups.

In another article, Valentine and Joana Sadgrove discuss the importance of factoring in time and space in understanding the construction of social difference. That is, particular places and particular perceptions of temporality inform individuals’ attitudes and perceptions of those who are different. Instead of making blanket assumptions about the difference between one group and another, one must take into account the individual temporal and spatial situatedness of individual actors in the construction of social difference.

Whether approaching the topic from the macro-level (transnational polycentric public spheres) or the micro-level (specific social encounters between members of diverse social groups) as Valentine and Sadgrove point out, any definition of “public space” must take into account the perceptions and situated-ness of particular actors within those spaces. When one does this, one comes to realize that from either perspective—the macro or the micro—the United States is clearly becoming an increasingly private place.
Public Space as Defined by Musical Style

According to Jonathan Sterne, music in commercial settings can serve as “a form of architecture—a way of organizing space in commercial settings.” He observes that in the Mall of America, music defines territorialization of space as shoppers pass from one form of music in the hallways to other forms of music present in each store.

In new immigrant settlement areas, Mexican grocery stores and restaurants are public spaces that are defined in part by Mexican music. Instead of playing English-language American pop music, one commonly hears norteña, banda, or other forms of Mexican music. Yet, it is important to clarify that even among “Mexican” music, not all genres are the same in their potential use in these public spaces. Part of the definition of public space involves which performative actions are sanctioned in those spaces, by whom, and for whom.

Perhaps surprisingly to some, it is not common to hear folkloric Mexican music in Mexican grocery stores. Folkloric music such as traditional Mexican dance music or mariachi would be more commonly heard in Mexican restaurants, in which Anglo clients are often engaging in a form of cultural tourism. In such a space primarily geared toward that purpose, the polished and identifiably exotic nature of the folkloric becomes far more important to the music’s contextual function.
Part of this contextual function of mariachi, for example, would involve specific referents that identify the music with foreign space. The easily identified trumpets and classical guitars of mariachi music give reference to its Spanish origins, while the Spanish-language lyrics also immediately mark the music as foreign to an American clientele. For many Americans, these markers are also linked in a semiotic web to a vague impression of “Mexican-ness” that involves piñatas, tacos, margaritas, bright colors, Aztec symbols, large sombreros, and/or the iconic image of a Mexican man sleeping under a saguaro cactus. Indeed, when one looks at the visual components in a Mexican restaurant, many of these very visual elements are present as part of the ambience and visual structuring of the space.

For many American clients of Mexican restaurants, the primary mode of listening to mariachi music in a Mexican restaurant is cultural tourism. While I am sometimes tempted to take Stockfelt’s initially affronted tone, (What about the rich cultural merging of European and indigenous elements, mariachi’s connection to the golden era of Mexican cinema, the complex poly-meter of the juapangos, the unique physical properties of the guitarron as an acoustic bass instrument, the beautiful parallel melodic lines of the violin and trumpets…?) I feel compelled to align myself with Stockfelt’s thinking and resign myself to a context in which mariachi is more about being good background music for eating tacos and drinking margaritas.

In contrast, in those Mexican restaurants that play regional Mexican music over the loudspeakers, frequently the clients are recent Spanish-speaking migrants and the restaurants’ ambience is usually more that of the *taquería* than the formal Mexican
restaurant. In this case, the ordinariness of the environment to native Spanish speakers, usually migrants, serves as the draw for clientele, and the more modern popular music of Mexico is the appropriate acoustic component to construct that type of public space.

If mariachi in the Mexican restaurant is specifically used to make the space feel “foreign,” then regional Mexican music in the taquería or Mexican grocery store is specifically used to make the space feel “domestic” (a transposed version of Mexican “domestic”) and for a very different clientele. If mariachi is referenced as part of a semiotic web of vague “Mexican-ness” in the service of cultural tourism, then regional Mexican music is referenced as a part of a very different semiotic web of particular “Mexican-ness,” and toward very different ends. In either of these scenarios, music helps to create the public space and is every bit as much a part of creating the business’s ambience as is the building’s architecture, furniture, and decorations.

While music is part of defining and structuring public space, it is important to remember that public space is also part of defining and structuring music. The mutually reinforcing habitus that develops from listening to particular genres of music in particular social spaces dynamically shapes listeners’ perspectives/behaviors related to both those music genres and those social spaces.

Stockfelt makes the case that each musical genre has “genre-normative modes of listening” grounded in particular environments, and these modes of listening are as much a part of defining the genre as are strictly musical elements. Stockfelt mentions that the genres of “opera” or “symphonic” music owe much of their genre definitions to the social contexts and social spaces where they are performed. Many, if not most musical genres
draw a significant part of their constituent definitions from the specific social contexts and modes of listening in which such music is heard.

This dynamic is critically important in how we listen to mariachi or regional Mexican music. Mariachi as a genre evolved from an intentional nationalistic project, in which Mexican president Lázaro Cardenas initially used the music in his presidential campaigns and later his administration promoted it and other forms of music over the radio with the specific goal of promoting Mexican nationalism.35

While early mariachi was subject to local stylistic variations from region to region, town to town, and even event to event, under this nationalistic project a formalized genre of mariachi emerged. This mariachi was cosmopolitan enough to appeal to mainstream Mexican culture, rural enough to invoke nostalgia among the newly urbanized, indigenous enough to internationally distinguish Mexican culture from that of Spain, and yet still European enough to court international approval. Mariachi was cultivated in radio and cinema in such a way that it fulfilled its role in Mexico’s various post-revolutionary national projects, and empowered the various “hearings” mentioned above.

Thus an originally-regional music from Jalisco became iconically linked with Mexican nationalism, and that particular genre of music became linked to contexts of listening where characteristically Mexican cultural expressions were distilled and packaged for both domestic and foreign consumption. Because the formalized genre of mariachi has always been about cultural tourism and nationalist projects, Americans hearing it as part of a semiotic web of vague “Mexican-ness” in the social architecture of
a Mexican restaurant would actually be an “adequate mode of listening” to both the genre and its conventional contexts of listening.

If mariachi is nationalistically-focused in its associated contexts of listening then regional Mexican music is, as its name suggests, more locally-focused. Perceived regionality is a strongly defining characteristic of regional Mexican music, and many groups identify themselves by town or region of origin. (Los Tigres del Norte, Los Cadetes de Linares, etc.) To an extent, there may be special significance in this for migrants—references to perceived regionality or locality may contribute to migrants feeling some sense of nostalgia for their home country and for the familiarity of a domestic environment that is no longer fully available, and at the same time, those same local references may also offer a sense of surrogate rootedness to a migrant in transient circumstances.

Because of its frequent inclusion in migrants’ daily life social contexts (listening to the radio at home, shopping in the Mexican grocery store, backyard parties, etc.), regional Mexican music holds strong habitual connections with those daily contexts. In many cases, the mode of listening to regional Mexican music is that of background music, in some aspects not unlike the mode of “ubiquitous listening” described by Anahid Kassabian.36

Some of the more common sub-genres of regional Mexican music include norteña, banda, and cumbia. Norteña music grew out of a standardization of the “canción ranchera” song form, a fusion of Spanish corrido ballad lyrics with a polka-style instrumental accompaniment that uses bass, bajo sexto, and accordion.37 Since the 1950s
and 60s, this “canción ranchera” form has become the standard of most norteña music, and norteña is distinguished from its U.S. cousin, tejano, by a more pronounced nasal vocal style, more stylistic conservatism, and more specific lyric references to migrant and working-class experiences.\textsuperscript{38}

One aspect of the divergence of norteña from tejano in the 1960s was related to the increasingly significant political importance of the border and the rise of undocumented immigration following the termination of the bracero guest worker program in 1968. The continued maintenance of the nasal vocal style, stylistic conservatism, and migrant-related lyric themes most likely speak to this music’s ongoing importance as an identity symbol for many first-generation migrants and also to audience preferences back in Mexico. While tejano increasingly adopted a number of conventions and practices from American pop music, norteña remained unapologetically Mexican in its use of cultural referents.

Banda music (and related tecnobanda) originally derives from military bands in Mexican cities and villages, and it is thus marked by the characteristic “oom-pah” of a march beat, brass and woodwind instruments, and heavy percussion. “Tecnobanda” is a modern adaptation of the banda style, one that makes use of electronic instruments to simulate larger ensembles. Banda music can be either instrumental for dancing or combined with singing, often love songs.\textsuperscript{39}

Banda, because of its association with small-town wind bands in Sinaloa and working class social contexts in cities, at times has anti-elitist associations.\textsuperscript{40} It is a music that one could say is “orgullosamente del pueblo.” This ties in with a sort of tactical
conservatism, in that banda is not so much music of those aspiring to be upwardly socially mobile, but rather music of those who are proud of who they already perceive themselves to be, and who seek to stay rooted in that perceived identity.

Cumbia fits loosely under the umbrella of “regional Mexican music,” but because of its widespread popularity and because it is frequently listened to in the same contexts as norteña and banda, it is worth mentioning. Cumbia actually originates in Colombia and has somewhat more mainstream “pop” or urban associations than either norteña or banda music. It is marked by slower tempos, strong percussion emphasis on counts 1 and 3 of each measure, and by guitar punctuation on the offbeats. There is also more common use of jazz chord voicings and freer use of electronic instrumentation in cumbia than in norteña or banda.41

As with many other kinds of popular music, regional Mexican music as a genre has stylistic properties that facilitate “sound bite listening”42 and that thus contribute to its value as background music in a Mexican grocery store or other public spaces. The song forms of regional Mexican music are often strophic or (occasionally) the conventional AABA song form of American pop music, since one usually does not have the inclination or capacity for foregrounded listening to complex song form while shopping for groceries or engaging in other daily activities.

Typically regional Mexican music uses simple harmonies, primarily the tonic, dominant, and subdominant chords of each key. Seldom are these used with sevenths or other extensions, (again, cumbia being the occasional exception) reflecting a harmonic conservatism somewhat akin to American country music.
Rhythm is quite important to regional Mexican music, and many of my informants said they liked regional Mexican music because of its catchy rhythms. The catchy-ness of the rhythms for listeners is part of this music’s appeal in Mexican grocery stores as a way of creating a pleasant shopping environment, a practice employed with American pop music in mainstream U.S. grocery stores.

A significant part of regional Mexican music’s appeal to migrants, though, is specifically related to its use of evocative sonic identifiers uniquely associated with familiar environments in Mexico. The accordion and nasal vocal style are two such identifiers from norteña, as is the characteristic wind and brass sound of banda.

One unique sonic characteristic of regional Mexican music is its pulse emphasis on beats 1 and 3 of each measure. This may suggest some generalizable contextual modes of listening specifically linked to the U.S. and Mexico—I have frequently observed Mexicans clapping to music on beats 1 and 3 of each measure to the exact same music that leads Americans to clap on beats 2 and 4.

While regional Mexican music has plenty of its own familiar sonic references for Mexican listeners, this music forms only one part of the overall social architecture of the spaces in which it is heard. To better understand how such music can interrelate with a particular space of listening, let us turn to the spaces of Mexican grocery stores. Such stores are immersive environments that intentionally utilize a number of elements to invoke a sense of familiarity for migrants.

In most Mexican grocery stores, the primary language used is Spanish. This comes from the employees of the store speaking Spanish, the products’ labels being in
Spanish, and all of the signs, sales, and offers on goods being presented in Spanish. The Spanish-language music over the loudspeakers is an integral part of creating a particular linguistically marked environment.

Beyond the language and music, there are significant cultural referents that many migrants would recognize from their home countries, including familiar brand names (Bimbo, Knorr, Goya, etc.) and the specific types of goods offered. (fresh nopal cactus, tomatillos, yucca, milanesa, arrachera, prayer candles, crema mexicana, sopa de fideos, pan dulce, etc.)

The social environment of the Mexican grocery store is also strongly linked to the development and maintenance of social networks, including the display of posters promoting local community events, the selling phone cards, and the offering of money-wiring services for sending financial support to family members in other locations.

Instead of discouraging loitering, Mexican grocery stores are typically integrated with taquerías and eating spaces that encourage persons to remain and socialize. This may stem in part from the dangers of being out in public and fear of deportation. When a migrant goes shopping at a Mexican store—often either walking or catching a ride with a friend because she or he cannot legally drive—several objectives must be accomplished in one outing, and it is considered appropriate to linger and fellowship in what may be perceived as a “safe place.” From a Mexican store owner’s perspective, this is a “win-win,” since clients remaining longer are more likely to make use of the store’s various services.
In this sense, given that there is an implicit invitation to Mexican migrants to openly and freely participate in activities at the store, a Mexican grocery store could accurately be considered one of the few “public” spaces available to undocumented migrants living in this country. Other examples could include immigrant churches and nightclubs, places where unrestricted participation for migrants is implicit in the nature of the institutions and social spaces.

Because of the Spanish language, the cultural referents from Mexico, the variety of services offered, an ambience conducive to socializing, and their location in migrant neighborhoods, Mexican grocery stores come to be seen by migrants as “their space.” Living with the cultural border ever present over their shoulder and the constant threat of deportation, migrants find in the Mexican grocery stores some measure of security. Because regional Mexican music is typically absent from mainstream U.S. commercial settings, malls, and other “public” spaces—spaces that are essentially “private” to migrants—migrants may feel more vulnerable there. Conversely, because regional Mexican music is typically present in those spaces that are functionally “public” to migrants—spaces in which unrestricted participation to migrants is granted—there is a certain association of regional Mexican music with a sense of public security.

Combined with regional Mexican music’s sonic semiotic referents of domestic Mexican identity, familiar and catchy modes of rhythm, and associated modes of listening from familiar daily life contexts, these stores create an environment that is perceived as deeply “safe” for undocumented migrants. For persons who by necessity
practice daily hyper vigilance in “public” spaces, the position of security offered by the regional Mexican store can be quite appealing.

I finish this section with an anecdote. My wife recently went shopping in a Mexican store in San Antonio, Texas where we now live.\textsuperscript{43} Usually she values being in the Mexican grocery stores because they remind her of growing up in Monterrey, Mexico. She mentioned that on this particular occasion, she felt oddly like she was still in Texas, not with the sense of being back in Mexico that she usually experiences in Mexican grocery stores, or even in that same store. Only after a few minutes of shopping did it dawn on her that the store happened to be playing American pop music over the loudspeaker.
Regional Mexican Music and the Future of American Public Life

As I have observed with second and third generation migrants clapping to popular music on beats 2 and 4 and first generation migrants clapping to popular music on beats 1 and 3, there are cultural assimilation factors involved in how migrants listen to music. Part of this has to do with which repertoires of genre-normative modes of listening that migrants are exposed to over time, and in which specific contexts. As American popular music becomes more familiar to migrants and they accumulate a deeper pool of experience with U.S. contexts of listening, American modes of listening become more readily available.

Also, as migrants spend more time in this country, there are structural factors that facilitate familiarity with the environment. As their U.S.-born children grow into teenagers and acquire the ability to legally drive, a migrant’s family can travel from place to place with a greater measure of security. As the English language becomes more familiar to a migrant over time, there may be less fear of linguistic unfamiliarity or failing to understand important lexical references in public or quasi-public spaces. These structural changes eventually contribute to a reduced sense of “hyper vigilance” and increased capacity to be at ease in U.S. public spaces, thus reducing the urgency of perceiving familiar Spanish-speaking environments as places of safety.
For many migrants, nostalgia may become an increasingly important mode of listening to regional Mexican music, reminding of them of the home country to which they cannot return. In one sense, it might be said that nostalgia is a form of constructing a position of temporal security rather than a physical one.

It remains to be seen what is to come of American public space. If the trend toward privatized social isolation continues, one wonders what forum will exist in which U.S. democracy is sustained, and perhaps the logjam of the U.S. congress in recent years on budget and other legislative issues reflects the critical and growing lack of a meaningful U.S. public. As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy puts it:

For a nation state to be democratic it requires a certain sort of public sphere sufficient to create a strong public via its connections to parliamentary debate.44

Where there is no truly public space, sooner or later there comes to be no true public.

As the over 13 million undocumented migrants and their families become a long-term part of the fabric of American society, the notion of U.S. public spaces may come to be refined, as will how persons listen to music in those spaces. It remains to be seen whether an emerging polycentric public sphere develops in the Americas, and to what extent that sphere will come to influence U.S. cultural and democratic practice. The answer to this question holds great significance to the future structuring and implementation of U.S. immigration policy, and accordingly what public spaces are made accessible to immigrants in the future. As an American polycentric transnational public
sphere may come to have increasing cultural and democratic influence, perhaps one day in the not-too-distant future an increasing number of persons in the U.S. will find themselves listening to accordion music in the grocery store and clapping to popular music on beats 1 and 3.

In the meantime, regional Mexican music will continue to serve as a sonic backdrop for those spaces that remain “public” to undocumented migrants. Both the musical genre and the spaces in which it is heard will continue to hold strong significance for many Mexican migrants as a public site of safety.
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Appendix: A Note on Interview Methods

My knowledge of undocumented migrants’ lives comes from a variety of sources. I have learned a fair amount of the metacommunicative norms\textsuperscript{45} of Midwest-residing Mexican migrants from several years of participating in church ministries with and for migrants in Nicholasville, Kentucky and Cincinnati, Hamilton, Middletown, Dayton, Columbus, Lima, and Toledo, Ohio. Indeed, my fluency in Spanish has primarily been gained from conversations with migrants in those various settings from 1999 through 2011.

The primary descriptive material for this paper has come from frequent visits to Mexican stores and a series of interviews with 22 undocumented migrants in Columbus, Ohio. Related to interviewing, some readers may immediately wonder (1) How can one identify undocumented persons for interviewing? and (2) How can one conduct interviews in a way that does not compromise the anonymity of such persons?

I arranged a series of interviews with undocumented migrants according to Ohio State University IRB procedures and oversight. In the course of her job in church ministry, my wife had helped an undocumented woman to find legal assistance, and as a gesture of appreciation and friendship, the undocumented woman arranged for interviews with her undocumented friends in a neutral location so that identifiable information of the interviewees (such as their addresses) would not be exposed. All interviewees were
instructed not to give names or specifically identifiable information for the sake of protecting those interviewed. While this manner of “snowball sampling” introduces an element of bias into sampling process, nevertheless, with undocumented migrant populations, this has become a somewhat accepted research practice. This woman’s pre-existing knowledge about which of her friends are undocumented allowed me to avoid awkward lines of inquiry as to persons’ legal status. All interviewees were given a $10 grocery card for their time, and the woman was given a $40 grocery card for her help.

Each interviewee was first asked basic information about place of origin, family members present in the home country and here in the U.S., and without giving specific times and places or other identifiable information of border crossing, how they came to be in the United States. Following this, they were asked a series of questions about musical preferences and tastes, what music or songs they consider meaningful and why, and then I played listening examples and asked for their reactions.

The primary listening example I chose was “Jaula de Oro” by Los Tigres del Norte. I chose this because of Los Tigres del Norte’s iconic status as norteña musicians and because of the specific subject matter of the song, namely living with cultural difficulties as an undocumented migrant on this side of the border. My primarily goal with discussing this song was to explore how the experiences in the song’s narratives might correlate with undocumented migrants’ daily lives in various contexts, including public spaces, home, work, etc.
Notes

1 A word on terminology: Throughout this work, I generally use the term “migrant” to describe undocumented persons from Latin America residing in the United States. Because of the transnational dynamic of these person’s daily lives, this is in many cases a more accurate term than “immigrant.” However, at times, the term “immigrant” may accurately be used to specifically refer to those migrants who have chosen to settle more permanently and are thus in the process of integrating into their cities of residence.


3 Ibid, xvi.


8 Ibid, 132. (Italics are the author’s)

9 Ibid, 130.

10 Ibid, 130.


12 Ibid, 131.

13 Ibid, 132.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 “Private” deriving from Latin privus (singular person or individual) or privare (to deprive or remove from) implies some sort of social boundary delegating something to an individual or exclusive social group that which would otherwise be considered public property.

19 “Adequate Modes,” 140.


21 Ibid.


Examples given of urban “micro-public” interactions include holding doors for others, sharing seats, relations between customers and cashiers, passengers and cab drivers, waiting in line together, frequenting businesses, being neighbors, etc.

Ibid, 326.


Ibid, 136


Kassabian, “Ubiquitous Listening.”


Stockfelt, “Adequate Modes,” 142.

“La Culebra” Mexican store, located in a shopping center on at the intersection of Nacogdoches and O’Connor Roads in northeast San Antonio.

