Sonic Homes: The Sonic/Racial Intimacy of Black and Brown Banda Music in Southern California

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Abstract

This series listens to the political, gendered, queer(ed), racial engagements and class entanglements involved in proclaiming out loud: La-TIN-x. ChI-ca-NA. La-TI-ne. ChI-ca-n-@.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Authenticities, Black Studies, Chican@/Latin@ Studies



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This series listens to the political, gendered, queer(ed), racial engagements and class entanglements involved in proclaiming out loud: La-TIN-x. ChI-ca-NA. La-TI-ne. ChI-ca-n-@. Xi-can-x. Funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as part of the Crossing Latinidades Humanities Research Initiative, the Latinx Sound Cultures Studies Working Group critically considers the role of sound and listening in our formation as political subjects. Through both a comparative and cross-regional lens, we invite Latinx Sound Scholars to join us as we dialogue about our place within the larger fields of Chicanx/Latinx Studies and Sound Studies. We are delighted to publish our initial musings with Sounding Out!, *a forum that has long prioritized sound from a queered, racial, working-class and "always-from-below" epistemological standpoint.* ***—Ed. Dolores Inés Casillas***

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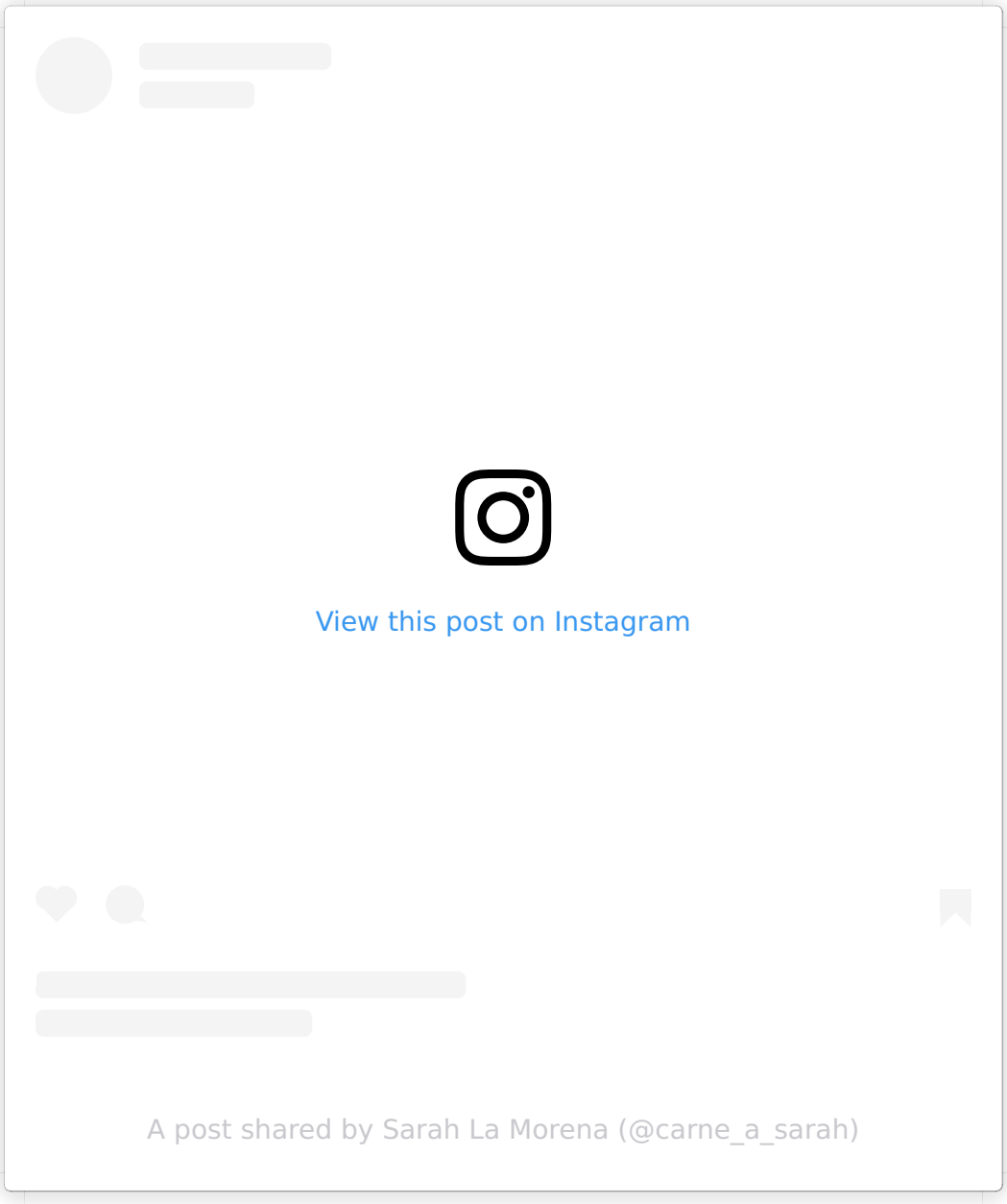
> *No tengo nada de sangre de Mexico. Soy afro americano.*
>
> *(I have no Mexican blood. I am African American.)*
>
> *El Compa Negro (Ryhan Lowery)*

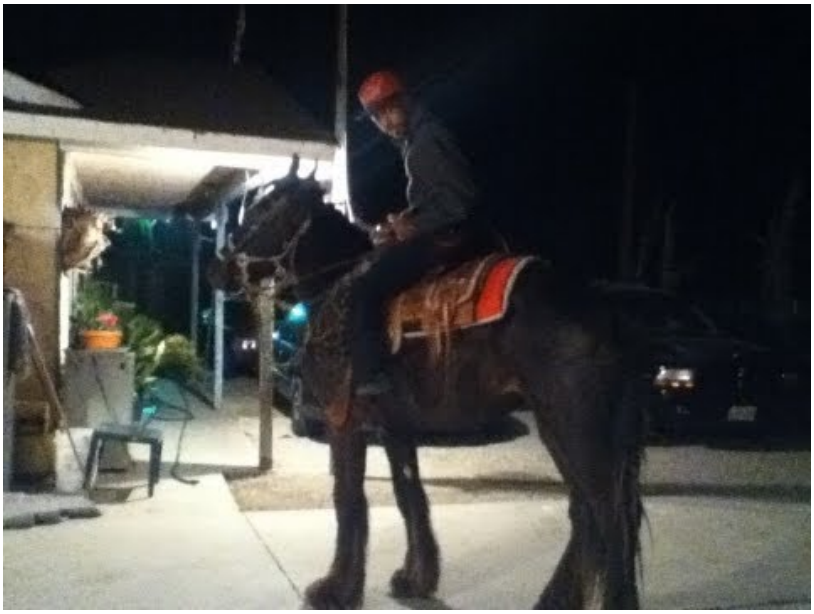
> *The grain is the body in the singing voice, in the writing hand, in the performing limb.*
>
> *Roland Barthes (The Grain of the Voice,1971)*

******This post is co-authored by Sara Veronica Hinojos and Alex Mireles***

Sarah La Morena (Sarah the Black woman), or Sarah Palafox, was adopted and raised by a Mexican family in Mexico. At the age of five, she moved to Riverside, California, a predominantly Mexican city an hour east of Compton. Palafox started singing as a way to express the racism she faced as a child in Southern California, feeling caught between her Black appearance and her Mexican sound. She found her voice in church, a nurturing environment where she could be herself, surrounded by her family's love. She gained attention with a viral video of her rendition of Jenni Rivera's "Que Me Vas a Dar." Palafox delivers each note with profound emotion and precision, leaving even the accompanying mariachi violinist in awe.



Similarly, El Compa Negro (The Black Friend/Homie) or Rhyan Lowery heard the sounds of banda coming from his neighbor's backyard in Compton; a historically Black-populated city with a current Mexican majority. Lowery couldn't shake the song out of his head and learned the song's Spanish-language lyrics. Like Palafox, videos of him singing in Spanish during high school made him a viral sensation. "They called me 'el compa negro' (...) All I heard was 'blah blah blah negro or negro' and I wasn't having it until they explained to me what it meant. And I was like 'ok, cool'."



https://youtu.be/Toj0Nh21ajc

The sonic stylings of El Compa Negro and Sarah La Morena within the banda genre enable transcultural connections beyond the pan-Chicano-Mexican-Central American popularity of tecnobanda and la quebradita. The 1990s banda craze, writes George Lipsitz "challenged traditional categories of citizenship and culture on both sides of the US-Mexico border." Banda music might sound like it was established south of the border, but multicultural listeners and dancers continue to influence its vibrations. Pop stars like Snoop Dogg, Shakira, Bad Bunny, and Karol G have released (tokenized) songs with Mexican-tinged, banda-recognizable beats. Yet, both El Compa and Sarah demonstrate a form of musical Black/Brown, working-class intimacy. Their respective musics are much less about a pop star (duet) kind of solidarity and much more about a deep knowing, a sensibility among working-class cultures and othered people that resonates through the aesthetics of sound. As Karen Tongson writes in *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*, about her experience of "queer, brown, immigrant musical discovery" in Riverside, the hometown she shares with Sarah La Morena: "It is the music that inspires us to ask questions" (26).



https://youtu.be/L7-K-FHbRMo

Certainly, US Mexican immigrant culture does not have the same (mainstream) cultural caché as African American culture, unless somehow softened or filtered. Jalapeños get "de-spicifed"; pre-made Día de Los Muertos altares are now at Wal-Mart, and huipiles are available as fast-fashioned "peasant blouse;" filtering out their Mexican-indigenous origins. Thus, classics like "La Yaquesita" and originals like "Yo Soy Compton" heard through the grain of Black voices affirm the possibilities of U.S. Mexican belonging or what D. Travers Scott characterizes as a form of "intimate intersubjectivities;" rooted in long-established Black/Brown co-existences across the borderlands and city barrios. Turning the volume up on these artists serves an important counterpoint to Latino anti-Black racism.

Their voices, blending with brass and tambora, embody a Black-Brown sonic and symbolic solidarity, or spatial entitlement. As theorized by Gaye Theresa Johnson in *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*, innovative applications of technology, creativity, and space foster new collectives which, even when "unheard" by historians, assert social citizenship and pave the way for new working-class political futures. In the contested neighborhoods of greater Los Angeles, Black and Brown communities are often pitted against one another through processes of containment and confinement leading to competitions for jobs, housing, status, and political power. Yet, they share the experiences of labor exploitation, housing segregation, and cultural vilification. Filmed in the intimate settings of backyards, the viral videos underscore Black/Brown hood/barrio soundscapes as multi-generational, familial, and culturally hybrid. Home is where shared class, racial, and gender politics are negotiated and resolved.

Asserting Black identity and the choice to perform in Spanish creates a unique visual and auditory experience within the Mexican-dominant world of banda. In fact, in 2024, Lowery made history as the first Spanish-language artist signed by Death Row Records, a label known primarily for hip hop. The lively rhythms of banda – oompah-oompah-oompah – offers both banda and hip hop listeners a new orientation to discern the racial-cultural politics of broader Los Angeles.



https://youtu.be/_w0W3BVkMAk

Like the mid-century Haitian-Mexican bolero singer Antonia del Carmen Peregrino Álvarez, alias "Toña La Negra," the added tags "Negro" and "la Morena" signals Black singers' recognition of the meaning(s) of their racial difference within the transnational Mexican music scene. The auditory discomfort that their vocal grain might cause is named and thus recognized as the persistent colorism of listeners at large. Lowery describes his initial unease with the given "Compa Negro" nickname. "My Mexican friends always tell me 'Hey, compa negro, you're Mexican, man. God just left you in the oven a little too long.'" The harassment came from both Black peers and Mexicans alike, for liking banda, dating Latinas, or dressing "like a Mexican." "They would say, 'You hate being Black. Self-hate. Self-hate. I'm like man it ain't that I self-hate, it's just that I embrace something. I took the time to have an open mind and study something, you know?" His way of being made sense in the context of a Compton teenage experience. "Becoming Mexican" by way of musical/cultural engagement surpassed skin tone-deep and nationalist differences.

Or, as Mexican ranchera singer Chavela Vargas–born in Costa Rica–famously asserted, "Mexicans are born wherever the hell they want!" Try listening to Juan Gabriel's "Amor Eterno" to find out. Black creatives like Evander, Vaquera Canela, and Terry Turner are just a few more examples of Black *mexicanidad*. Yessica Garcia Hernandez reminds us that Black and Brown sonic solidarities have been the driving pulse of US popular music. She argues, "Home and sound is acknowledging that both corridos, hip-hop, and G-funk relationally, has formed *paisas*."



https://youtu.be/UKlT5diIAs0

El Compa Negro's "Verde es Vida," a tribute to California's weed culture, lowriders, and corridos, booms loudly. The song begins with an accordion playing reggae rhythms, soon interrupted by percussion, guitars, and El Compa's fast-paced verses. About a minute in, the accordion slows the tempo with a few reggae notes before the vocals return, reintroducing the corrido rhythm: "Hoy andamos en LA bien tranquilitos. En el lowrider escuchando corridos." The reggae-corrido fusion ends with the familiar "pom pom pom pom!" of the drums, typical of banda and corrido finales, as the accordion plays its last note. Through Lowery's reggae corrido, we hear his "sonic home" rooted in Black and Brown Los Angeles.

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Featured Image: still from Sarah La Morena's "La Llorona" (2020)

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Alex Mireles *is a PhD student in the Department of Feminist Studies at UC Santa Barbara. She writes on Latinx identity and queerness, labor, and global capitalism through aesthetic movements in fashion, beauty, media, and visual cultures. Her dissertation explores the queer potential and world-making capabilities of Chicanx popular culture through Mexican regional music, social media, queer nightlife, and film.*

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