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Texas-Mexican Popular Music and Dancing: Some Notes on History and Symbolic Process

My purpose in this exploratory paper is threefold: I will present a general ethnographic account of Texas-Mexican popular music and dancing as an ethnically defined expressive cultural system; second, I propose to analyze this expressive behavior using Victor Turner’s ideas in the area of cultural anthropology that he calls “comparative symbology”; finally, I hope to integrate this analysis into a history of Texas-Mexican social subordination.

In a larger sense, this essay explores relatively new areas in the study of Texas-Mexican culture—an area whose scholarly exploration has had certain limitations in the past. Almost without exception the ethnography of this cultural group has focused on the related subjects of social organization, focal values, and folk medicine and religion—a focus that is at least partially responsible for a static, synchronic, and, some would say, a stereotypic anthropological portrait of this population (Madsen 1964; Rubel 1966). It is this kind of ethnographic production that came under fire in the late 1960s from native social scientists like Romano (1968, 1970) and Vaca (1969). However, this burst of native revisionist criticism accomplished only one of the two desirable goals of revisionist scholarship: it provided a searching criticism of the existing ethnographic corpus. But this critical review was not followed by a vital second step—the production of an alternative ethnography. To simply assert that contemporary Mexicans in the United States are not fatalistic, envious, present-time oriented, and apathetic is not enough; one is also obliged to show what it is they are, culturally speaking. Indeed, Vaca himself recognizes the problem when he states, “Is Mexican-American culture really composed of those negative values that have been attributed to it?” (1969: 51). Unfortunately, he never answered this question.

Certainly one approach toward developing a new view of Mexican culture in the United States is to take the traditional cultural categories such as kinship, social organization, and world view and revisit, in the manner of an Oscar Lewis revisiting Redfield’s Tepoztalan, the com-
munities Madsen and Rubel studied. One would undertake such a new ethnography with the expectation of discovering that Mexicans in Texas do not share the characteristics generally ascribed to them (Achor 1978; Foley 1978). Another approach, however, is to enter the field and view the group with different cultural frames of analysis, to use, for example, the concept of expressive culture as a way of grasping culturally significant activity in this and other communities.

In his fine study of the proletarian drama in Java called *ludruk*, Peacock points to these different emphases in anthropology:

> To grasp the total dynamics of the Javanese scene, we must grasp the dynamics of daily social life and of symbolic performances, such as *ludruk*. . . . The social scientist tends to draw from performances only those tidbits of content which lend support to his portrait of the society in which the performances are found; he cites a few proverbs or song lyrics to illustrate values and roles which are, he decides, after analyzing the natives’ daily social behavior, the dominant ones in the society. This kind of analysis, which fails to grasp the essence of symbolic performances, can yield no full appreciation of social dynamics. (1968:256)

He continues:

> In Java, as in other places, social scientists might lay less stress on representing groups’ lives as “social systems” or even “cultural systems” (logically related beliefs, values, symbols) and more on perceiving the dynamics of important communicative performances; a portrait of Java might well be a portrait of symbolic action patterns which the natives regard as moving, funny, beautiful. (ibid.)

Keying on this shift in ethnographic emphasis, I propose to examine a symbolic action pattern of significance to the Mexicano community in Texas and elsewhere. (A portrait of Mexican-Texas might well be a portrait of symbolic action patterns that the natives regard as moving, funny, beautiful.) My effort is not without precedent; it builds upon the rich ethnographic and historical corpus Américo Paredes provides in his studies of Texas-Mexican balladry, legends, and jokes (1958, 1966, 1971). Although deeply influenced by his work, I do hope to move forward in two dimensions: first, by moving beyond traditional folkloric genres to the anthropological and to analysis of popular culture; and second, by offering a more defined and explicit theoretical base for this analysis, a perspective that at least implicitly considers economic class influence on cultural behavior. This latter consideration will also result in an effort to integrate expressive symbolic behavior more closely into the social history of Mexicanos in Texas. I propose to begin my analysis with a brief but necessary review of this historical context.
The Historical Context of Expressive Performance

Juan Gómez-Q. has noted the prominence of accelerating change as the major social characteristic of the Mexicano community in the United States since the early nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, he tells us, we find conflict and turmoil, economic displacement, resistance, and, as the major phenomenon, "marginalization: socially, politically and economically" (1971:35). He also notes the appearance of some cultural fragmentation and demoralization and resistance. The twentieth century brings immigration, migration, urbanization, and an intensifying socioeconomic exploitation. World War II contributes to sociocultural change with probable effects on kinship patterns and language behavior (1971). And, I would want to add, Anglo-American schooling and the increasing effect of the media also assist the process of change, particularly after World War II.

Localizing these larger themes in Texas, we find the disruption of a monolingual, relatively homogeneous, self-subsistent village folk culture in southern Mexican-Texas by the arrival of increasing numbers of agricultural capitalist, ethnocentric Anglo and Germanic Americans. Although we find ample evidence of resistance, the net result was conquest and domination, and, to repeat Gómez-Q.'s words, "marginalization: socially, politically, and economically." Although cultural performances remained more viable, even those would feel the acculturative pressure from the new social order articulated principally through educational agencies.

The fundamental basis for change, however, was the economic conversion of the native population from settled agriculturalists to a labor-dependent, economically uprooted society. Events in Mexico compounded this disruption, as repression and revolution displaced thousands across the river, further adding to the surplus labor pool and intensifying the range of exploitation (Montejano 1982). World War II would result in the intensification of the oil and cotton industries in southern Texas and in the appearance of the massive military-base complex in San Antonio. Further change would then occur through urbanization into Houston, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi, and possibly through some degree of selective acculturation as a result of participation in the war.

In summary, induced and accelerating sociocultural disruption, change, and marginalization mark the fate of Mexicanos in this country. This process of change did not go unchallenged politically, economically, and culturally; it was neither total nor complete. However, it was substantial enough to produce a decisive shift from a relatively more stable sociocultural state of affairs (both in Mexico and in pre-Anglo village life in the Southwest) to a state of dislocation, subordination, and increased
acculturation. This shift in sociocultural stability is crucial to the development of my thesis in regard to expressive performances, particularly music and dancing. Let me now turn to a brief and incomplete sketch of musical history among Mexicanos in Texas prior to the massive culmination of sociocultural change during and after World War II.

Popular Music and Dancing: 1750–1955

The history of musical/dancing activity among the Mexicanos of Texas is largely unknown and constitutes a fruitful topic for another study. We know enough, however, to venture some tentative generalizations. It is very likely that the earliest settlers in the province of Nuevo Santander had some form of musical/dancing activity, although of a very limited variety and energy. Indeed, it would appear that these early people frowned upon excessive music and dancing. To the extent that people danced, it was very likely confined to infrequent ritual celebrations such as weddings and baptisms. This limited situation very likely persisted through most of the nineteenth century (Paredes 1958).

We begin to note more widespread activity in the later nineteenth century, particularly in connection with the worldwide diffusion of the new Germanic-Czech dance sensation, the polka, which very likely made its appearance among Mexicanos in the 1840s and 1850s, probably by diffusion from internal Mexico. Whatever its origins, this dance, together with other European and mestizo forms, such as the shotís and the huapango, soon became a major musical form for Mexicanos.

It would appear that during the 1920s and 1930s, the performance of polkas and other forms, such as the waltz, was growing, particularly in urban areas in the “new towns” of the lower Rio Grande Valley and upper South Texas. Even at this time such activity was largely confined to familial and ritual situations (including the celebration of the fiestas patrias) and not promoted for its own sake, with perhaps the exception of dancing performed in cantinas (Foley 1978:52). Sometime in the 1930s and certainly by the 1940s, we note a definite shift in the social context of performance from familial-ritual scenes to public, profit-oriented situations devoted exclusively and centrally to the performance and enjoyment of music and dancing. One of my informants in Corpus Christi, Texas, notes the increasing number of cotton pickers coming into the city from the surrounding area in the 1940s as a major stimulus for the development of dance halls featuring music and dancing as primary activities. By the late 1940s and into the 1950s we can clearly identify a proliferation of dance hall proprietors, promoters, and musical groups who engage in music as their sole means of subsistence, clearly indicating
a growing market for this music. Since approximately 1955, this activity has increased enormously in the new towns of the lower Rio Grande Valley, in Houston, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi. One dance promoter since the early 1950s estimates that his business has grown some 900 percent since that time. We come now to the contemporary scene (see Peña 1981).

Contemporary Music and Dancing

As a system of cultural behavior, Texas-Mexican music and dancing has certain definable elements. At its core are two major types of musical groups. The *conjunto*, dating back to the early twentieth century, consists of a lead accordion accompanied by one or two (often amplified) guitars and drums. The northern Mexican version often adds an alto saxophone. There is also a lead singer, with second or third supporting voices. Most of the *conjunto* members do not have formal musical training and acquire their art through apprenticeship. Because of their size, *conjuntos* are generally not very expensive and hence are readily available to the working class Mexicanos. Consequently, over the years they have come to be intimately associated with these rural and urban classes and produce an interesting and noticeable degree of aversion among the middle and upper classes—an aversion that appears more prominent among females. As one informant put it, "Es música baja . . . de los ranchos . . . para borrachos" ("It is low-class music . . . from the ranches . . . for drunks").

Somewhat in contrast is the big band, closely modeled after the Anglo-American "big bands" of the 1930s and 1940s. It usually consists of wind and brass instruments with a rhythm section, guitars, and electric keyboards. Among the earliest of such bands were those of Beto Villa and Mike Ornelas, who enjoyed enormous success in the late 1940s and 1950s throughout the United States, but particularly in Texas. Today there are almost too many of these bands to mention. Unlike *conjunto* members, big band people are formally trained in music, including several with advanced degrees. This training brings us to another element of the system, namely the high school marching and concert bands where these musicians are trained, often by Mexicano band directors who may moonlight on the side by playing in these bands. The high school bands in southern Texas are usually dominated by Mexicanos.

Both groups, however, play the same basic kinds of music. The major genre is the polka sung, played, and danced at a rather fast pace, but both groups also play slow tempo boleros and Latin-rhythm dances such as cumbias. The songs are sometimes original compositions, but more
often they are Mexican ranchera tunes popularized by such performers as José Alfredo Jimenez and Miguel Aceves Mejía, sung either at their original tempo or at a polka pace.

Such music and dancing are performed in three main arenas. The principal performance area is the commercial dance hall, such as La Fuente in San Antonio, or a local civic center, which is leased or rented for the occasion by a promoter. The promoter puts up the money for the dance hall and the band, subleases the beer concessions, and then takes his chances on a good turnout. He may also cooperate with a variety of social clubs, which also sponsor dances mainly for fund-raising purposes. Other performance areas are weddings and cantinas. Indeed, it is not at all unusual for weddings to be culturally evaluated not in terms of the bride’s beauty or the sermon, but rather, in terms of whether there was a dance and who were the performers.

And, of course, no respectable cantina on the west side ofSan Antonio or in Corpus Christi can afford not to have a dancing area, preferably one with a live conjunto on the weekends. Most of the performance action, however, goes on in the public commercial dances, which are the main expressive activity for the working class Mexicanos of Texas during the weekends. And often, as in San Antonio, Austin, and Corpus Christi, these dances are supplemented by a Wednesday night dance.

Ethnography of a Dance

Dances are held in dimly lit public dance halls of various sizes. The price of admission varies according to the quality and reputation of the band, but may range from $5.00 to $12.00 per person. Tables are arranged around a large central dancing area; the band is located at one end of the floor and the beer concession is usually close by. The clientele often attends in kinship or friendship groups, which may be female or male or mixed. Single individuals are found infrequently. With few exceptions, the entire clientele group is Mexicano. When people are not dancing, they appear to engage in a great deal of conversation on varying topics, but mostly they dance to the tunes and at the tempo described earlier. The dancing appears to intensify and becomes more stylized, that is to say, more intricate, as the evening and the beer wear on. The couples move in a counterclockwise direction, particularly when they are dancing polkas, but this general pattern holds even with the infrequent rock and roll numbers that are played. Following the circle is culturally and physically necessary. Performers and the audience that remains seated seem to place an aesthetic value on the male ability to execute a variety of turns and swinging movements and on the female’s ability to
follow. "Bailan como si fueran uno" ("they dance as one") is one of several approving comments that can be heard. Periodically, gritos of approval either for the dancing or for the music are also heard.

The Music

The people dance to the three genres described earlier. Polkas and boleros tend to have a dominant set of themes in terms of their textual content. As in country music, the predominant theme is one of male-female conflict, although it is not a simple matter of a macho type dominating and exploiting women. Rather, it may be described as the imagery of women who are viewed by male protagonists as objects of love and potential sexual fulfillment, but at the same time as constituting a potential threat to the male, because they can betray him or leave him. The exclusively male character of most musical groups accentuates this male perspective. Themes of direct societal conflict, such as those that characterize the traditional Mexican corridos, appear infrequently, as do corridos themselves.

The Concept of Social Drama

Having set out this general description of the various components of this mass expressive behavior, I now propose to offer a tentative anthropological interpretation of and a hypothesis for its growing and intensified performance since 1945. To this end I draw on the work of Victor Turner and the constellation of ideas that he condenses under the terms "social drama" and "comparative symbology." I want to suggest that Texas-Mexican music and dancing may be part of a repertoire of redressive symbolic actions that appear in the third phase of what Turner calls "social dramas." For him, significant and culturally revealing symbolic action emerges and develops structurally when a historically and momentarily stable "perduing system or set or field of social interaction" is thrown into crisis through the appearance of a specific, essentially political, disagreement between (usually) two sets of actors (1974:38). They carry different paradigmatic views of the world and are in competition for a limited field of resources. Such a disagreement "is signalized by the public, overt breach or deliberate nonfulfillment of some crucial norm regulating the intercourse of the parties" (ibid.). This first phase is followed by a second during which the mounting crisis develops more fully, the initial breach widens, and unless quickly resolved, the issue "becomes coextensive with some dominant cleavage
in the widest set of relevant social relations to which the conflicting or antagonistic parties belong’’ (ibid.).

A third, “redressive” phase follows in which the parties bring all of their resources to bear on the issue to settle the matter peacefully or by other means. Following Turner’s advice, I am most concerned about this third phase.

It is in the redressive phase that both pragmatic techniques and symbolic action reach their fullest expression. For the society, group, community, association, or whatever may be the social unit, is here at its most “self-conscious” and may attain the clarity of someone fighting in a corner for his life. Redress, too, has its liminal features, its being “betwixt and between,” and, as such, furnishes a distanced replication and critique of the events leading up to and composing the “crisis.” (1974:41)

For my purposes this replication function is of the greatest importance. It may occur “in the rational idiom of a judicial process, or in the metaphorical and symbolic idiom of a ritual process, depending on the nature and severity of the crisis” (ibid.).

Further, in this marginal state Turner finds the periodic and constant emergence of anti-structural social interactions that are profoundly unlike the real external, structured, pragmatic world. In these relatively unstructured play situations, which he calls states of *communitas*, an intensified interpersonal relationship emerges—a set of relationships that transcends and overrides the usual set of roles and statuses. These areas of *communitas* are qualitatively different and opposed to the “real” world, but they may speak to it symbolically.

The most important attribute of liminoid situations, however, is the proliferation of structured symbolic expression whose general function is to assist the people in the situation in managing their marginality by establishing relationships to the past, the future, and to the immediate, external, anti-structural present. The key notion, however, is that, upon external analysis and internal emic testimony, the anti-structural areas and their associated expressive activity bear a symbolic, metaphoric relationship to other states (Turner 1969, 1974). As a direct functional result, we will find that, in the fourth temporal phase, the stability and coherence of the system has either been restored, or there is “the social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties’’ (1974:41).

Frank Manning has applied this set of concepts, which he and Turner have called “social drama” to the emergence of black social clubs in Bermuda. These clubs are essentially night clubs, except that they function all day. In them, all members of black society may engage in intensive gambling, drinking, and sexual activity, and may take in intensive
and elaborate black musical performances called *shows*. For Manning, the emergence of this ludic area assists black Bermudians in effecting the transition from an insulated, black rural folk society to a larger, pan-black international society through exposure to international black music. The clubs and their extensive gambling also symbolize the continual risk taking that subordinate Bermudians practice under British colonial rule. Finally, they permit a metaphorized articulation of blackness, in a colonial situation where overt articulation is not desirable or possible. It is as if black nationalism is being tape-recorded and stored for later, overt articulation. The expressive scene at the black club becomes, then, an encoded preliminary prefiguration or assertion of the future state. The entertainment/artistic mode of expression becomes a kind of metaphorical guide for feelings of ethnicity and nationalism (Manning 1973).

In summary, then, the social dramatistic view conceives of marginal societies as moving from one "act" to another in social change. In the middle marginal phase, we find a creation of *communitas* or intensive antistructural areas and a proliferation of symbolic activity that symbolizes their condition and speaks to the conflict that produced change.

**Social Drama and Mexicano Culture in Texas**

It is my contention that the growing and intensified presence of the organized expressive behavior that is Texas-Mexican music and dancing can perhaps be understood in much the same terms as Manning’s black clubs in Bermuda, but with a greater degree of complexity. Mexicanos in Texas historically constitute a society continuously undergoing sociocultural change induced by the entrance of this population into a new capitalist social order—the breach of previously stable social relationships. The result has been the continuous physical and sociocultural uprooting of this population and its continuing socioeconomic position, a position Turner would call structural inferiority. To the degree that kinship patterns, linguistic behavior, and core values have been altered by society to fit the dominant American cultural model, we may also say that this population is culturally marginal.

It is this position of economic subordination and cultural marginality that characterizes Mexicanos as liminoids, in Turner’s terms. In this situation there is an intensive and massive proliferation of *communitas* or states of intensified interpersonal antistructure in the dance and its associated symbolic action patterns, including the music and the actual dancing activity. In Turner’s terms, however, what is the semantic reference for this symbolic activity? That is, what is the symbolic/ideological relationship between this activity and the other elements of the
social drama—the past, the future, and the immediate present outside the dance hall?

I take Texas-Mexican popular music and dancing to be a cultural contradiction containing both elements of nationalistic/class resistance and acquiescence to the dominant social order. As such, we might say that it is redressive action in the service of both contenders in the social drama: the Texas-Mexican community and the dominant, largely Anglo, society. In an earlier version of this paper I offered an interpretation that pointed only to the elements of redressive resistance and cultural assertion. I still hold to this reading, although it now seems to me to be too simple an understanding. Nevertheless, I offer again this earlier, restricted interpretation.

Redressive Action as Resistance

Like the black clubs in Bermuda, the most elementary and basic symbolic purpose of the dance is to provide an antistructural area away from the oppressive concerns of real, working-class life. The dance is fundamentally fun and relaxation in a not-so-fun, tension-filled world. The antistructural arena, however, has other more explicitly symbolic purposes that speak to the condition of social change. In a world of continuing kinship stress and breakdown, it may be the case that each dance is an intensive, concrete, but temporary assertion of various kinship ties—friends, nuclear and extended family, compadres, and indeed the entire cultural group. Further, the bounded ethnic nature of the group is a further symbolic statement of wholeness and integrity in the face of external threats, a wholeness and integrity that perhaps are articulated in the bounded circularity of the dancing. The music as well as the dancing styles, which are traditional in form, serve as symbolic reminders of a more stable past and as codified expressions of a discrete ethnic identity. Their expression in Spanish only serves to reinforce this function, as the sung language continues to serve as another anchorage in a world of threatening linguistic change.

Finally, the entire expressive system of symbolic action, which is the dance, is possibly a metaphorical articulation of ethnic nationalism: the kind of nationalism expressed at one time by elite, university-educated political activists—the Chicano movement (Foley 1978). The difference, of course, is that this kind of expression is easier in many ways for non-working class people with a high degree of standard English and Spanish fluency and a high degree of education. After all, the working class has much more to lose by overt expressions of nationalist sentiments; metaphor and symbol both express and disguise. By one interpretation the
entire expressive scene, in Manning’s terms, could be taken as a coded prefigurement of the future—a temporary symbolic depository and assertion of kinship, language, social analysis, and the recollection of a past—all necessary for the national future and awaiting only a successful marriage to an authentic political movement and the right societal conditions for the overt institutional emergence of *la raza*.

My earlier reading of this expressive behavior sees it exclusively as a redressive symbolic action generated and controlled by a beleaguered Texas-Mexican society, which possesses an affirmative and self-liberating ideological consciousness and uses “its” music and dancing in its own best interests against the cultural hegemony of the dominant social order. (Whether this self-affirming, ideologically laden symbolic action ultimately helps to produce “irreparable” schism or “social recognition” still remains to be seen.) The entire reading is perhaps a more sophisticated rendition of a general interpretive thesis first set out by José R. Reyna (1976).

In recent published and unpublished work, Manuel Peña has continued this line of interpretation with a greater amount of historical and ethnographic data and a somewhat more complex class analysis. Peña makes salient the musical/class division I noted in my earlier paper. The musical styles of *conjunto* and *orquesta* (big band) reproduce the conflicting ideological aspirations of the working class and the newly emerging post-World War II middle class. He proposes

> that *conjunto* music has historically represented the response of the Texas-Mexican proletarian worker to the antagonism, not only of an America which threatened from outside an ethnic boundary . . . but of the emerging Chicano middle class . . . who formed the backbone of a new and increasingly Americanized or Anglicized group which began to aspire for new cultural symbols to express its newfound identity. . . . It was at this point, in the late 1940’s, that modern *orquesta* music emerged among and for the middle class, partly as a result of that search for new cultural symbols. (1981:291)

Yet Peña correctly notes that both styles—though not classes—have been converging, and, indeed, that the big band style has also been appropriated by the working classes (1981). The result is that today it is largely the working class that dances a mixture of both *conjunto* and big band styles either at the same or at separate dances, or by the same or separate musical ensembles. Whatever their earlier ideological signification, these two styles and their associated dancing rituals are now the expressive instruments of the working class, and to judge from Peña’s ethnographic work, they speak in a contestative manner to the dominant social order. Drawing also on Turner, he concludes that the Chicano
dance is a scene of _communitas_ upholding key cultural values against the encroachment of the outside world. At the end of each dance the "revelers" go "out into the night and to their respective statuses in structural Anglo society, their sense of identity reaffirmed by their renewed communion with fellow Chicanos" (Peña 1980:66). With greater ethnographic detail Peña reaches conclusions not unlike those advanced in my earlier work, and first set out, tentatively and loosely, by Reyna (1976).

**Texas-Mexican Music and Dancing: Some New Thoughts on the Morning after the Dance**

I am no longer wholly satisfied with what I shall call the "symbolic/class nationalist" thesis with respect to Texas-Mexican popular music and dancing. It now seems to me that this reading unwisely privileges all the expressive cultural productions of marginalized sectors as necessarily creative, contestative, and affirming symbolic ideological acts. I suspect that this privileging occurs because the ethnographer (in this case, "natives") associates a style with a class, notes the class’s emotional attachment to it, and then draws the unwarranted (though perhaps emotionally and subjectively necessary) conclusion that said style is a contestative ideological expression. Reyna speaks of Tejano music as an "expression of nationalism"; I (earlier) spoke of the same musical complex as a ritual of cultural affirmation. Peña takes the farthest step in this direction. Although noting and critically rejecting the musical assimilating and contradictory tendencies of the middle class, Peña nevertheless wants to uphold historically and wholly the political/cultural autonomy and integrity of the working class. For him, "the move toward assimilation of some segments of Chicano society was countered by a corresponding move by the proletariat to strengthen its cultural position, and the music-and-dance innovations symbolically articulated this move" (1981:294). To judge from a recent unpublished paper, he continues to develop this historical thesis, and, as I indicated earlier, with the contemporary convergence of the two musical styles, Peña continues to see the contemporary Chicano dance as a ritual of cultural restoration and affirmation.

Although obviously once highly sympathetic to this as a total reading, I now want to suggest that, at best, this music—historically and today—represents a difficult cultural contradiction. We may begin this re-reading with Peña’s historical interpretive distinctions. The central difficulty here, I think, is the way that _style_ becomes, for Peña, the exclusive signifier of class consciousness. To play or dance _conjunto_ music seems to be a quasi-revolutionary act in which music becomes an almost
conscious "move" by the "proletariat." This language-of-activity continues to affect his depiction of the working class in his latest paper (1983).

Given my own early version of this position, I do not deny that some development of a critical consciousness may be going on through musical stylistics, but I would propose that we may have a more ideologically complex issue here. In his focus on style, Peña pays insufficient attention to two other aspects of the working-class conjunto production. Even though he notes the "rapidly increasing public-ballroom commercialization" and professionalization of the music following World War II, he does not draw any ideological implications from this trend (1981:289). Whatever gains the class made in "style," it was paying for it through the capitalist commodification of its music and paying at increasingly higher ticket and record prices. Second, along with "style" it also bought a wholly depoliticized lyrical content whose overwhelming message was of unrequited love. Indeed, one might go in the opposite direction and take note of the "political" albeit sexist messages of the musical content of both conjunto and orquesta music.

Although one wants to be attentively sympathetic to the conjunto's infectious style, one cannot ignore either the content of the style or its socioeconomic production context. (I need only compare this musical content, style, and context to that of the corrido of the lower border to make my point.) Along with the emerging middle class, the working class was also fraught with its own contradiction, because, as Peña does not seem to sufficiently appreciate, it no longer fully owned its own means of musical production.

Something of this same revisionary view may be applied to Peña's and my own earlier reading of the contemporary dance scene. Again, we find a dominating context of musical commodity production and an even more wholly pervasive content of love lyrics. However, in recent years, the dance also represents other kinds of social contradictions, which leads one to be suspicious of it as a scene where individuals "are reaffirmed by their renewed communion with fellow Chicanos" (Peña 1980:66). As one middle-aged informant put it to me, "Los bailes ya no son como antes" ("The dances aren't like they used to be").

I shall note only two such problems. Whatever its social-psychological origins, there does appear to be an increased consumption of alcohol at such dances, which leads either to fights, or, more than likely, to their exact opposite: namely, the obvious and intimidating presence of increased security guards. Second, and perhaps more important, one has to take critical note of the ideological implications of the change in performer-audience relationships. As dances seem to grow larger and larger to maximize profit, it becomes necessary to increase the social distance
between the performer and the audience, and, perhaps, between members of the audience themselves. The pervasive use of highly amplified electronic equipment, making conversation at the dance almost impossible, makes this distancing even more pronounced. Whether any of this assists in the production of an ideologically critical *communitas* is at least a question, a question for which the answer may not have a clear, positive resonance.

**Concluding Remarks**

I have suggested that both historically and at present the Texas-Mexican popular music and dancing scene may be a redressive symbolic act emerging as a result of the social breach between Anglos and Mexicans in Texas that began to develop after 1848. The musical complex responds to a situation of conflict and speaks to that conflict. Yet I have also suggested that it does so in ideologically complex ways. It becomes redressive action serving the interests of both parties to the conflict. For the Mexicanos it may in part be an exercise in cultural affirmation, but this comes at a literal and metaphorical cost, as certain other nonaffirming, socially debilitating ideological effects are also conveyed through the musical complex. As with so much of mass media culture, the result is a contradiction. Stuart Hall’s observations on the ideological status of popular culture in post-World War II Great Britain may have some pertinence here. In each cultural production,

> there are points of resistance; there are also moments of suppression. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. In our times, it goes on continuously, in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field a sort of constant battlefield. (1981:233)

Texas-Mexican popular music and dancing can have this contradicting signification because, like all “forms of provided commercial popular culture,” people find in it, “alongside the false appeals, the foreshortenings, the trivialisation and shortcircuits,” elements “of recognition and identification,” a “recreation of recognisable experiences and attitudes” that speak to their better selves (ibid.).

As with all marginalized peoples caught in historical-social contradictions, the popular mass media culture of Texas-Mexicans reproduces this problem. It is neither pure resistance nor pure accommodation, but both in any one instance.

I close with a quotation from Jean Paul Sartre’s preface to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*. Sartre is speaking of the Algerian natives under
French colonial domination, especially in the immediate form of French colonial settlers:

Under the amused eye of the settlers, they will take the greatest precautions against their own kind by setting up supernatural barriers and at times reviving old and terrible myths, at others binding themselves by scrupulous rites. It is in this way that an obsessed person flees from his deepest needs—by binding himself to certain observances which require his attention at every turn. They dance; that keeps them busy; it relaxes their painfully contracted muscles; and the dance mimes secretly, often without their knowing, the refusal they cannot utter and the murders they dare not commit. (Fanon 1963:19)

Notes

I prepared a version of this paper for presentation at the Conference on Chicano Culture at the University of California at Berkeley and circulated the manuscript among colleagues principally at the University of Texas at Austin (Limon 1977). This study is a revision of that paper.

1. Although I will be referring to “Texas-Mexican” culture and music/dancing, I wish to stress that Texas-Mexicans have carried this culture and its music to many parts of the United States, particularly to the agricultural valleys of California.

2. See, however, the recent, detailed works of Manuel Peña (1981, 1983).

3. Indeed, one might suggest that in part the new commercial music competed with and finally replaced the corrido tradition with attendant ideological consequences. This musical struggle for ideological hegemony was finely and perhaps bitterly captured by Américo Paredes in the following fictive account from With His Pistol in His Hand. The author’s persona says of the corridos:

That was good singing, and good song; give the man a drink. Not like these pachucos nowadays, mumbling damn-foolishness into a microphone; it is not done that way. Men should sing with their heads thrown back, with their mouths wide open and their eyes shut. Fill your lungs, so they can hear you at the pasture’s farther end. And when you sing, sing songs like El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez. There’s a song that makes the hackles rise. You can almost see him there—Gregorio Cortez, with his pistol in his hand. (1958:34)

See also Limón 1983.
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