

Sounds of “Difference,” Stories of Strength: Femininity in Professional United States

Mariachis Femeniles

by

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ABSTRACT

Following mixed method ethnographic research conducted between January 2020 and January 2022, this thesis discusses how United States all-female mariachi musicians, or mariacheras, express femininity in the mariachi femenil. Mariachis femeniles are all-female mariachis. Building upon Mary Lee Mulholland's (2013) discussion of how mariacheras in Jalisco are often valued more for their physical appearance than for their musical skills, this thesis investigates how similar phenomena manifest in the United States' professional mariachi femenil circuit. Applying a Chicana Feminisms lens to a collection of 28 mariachera *plática*-interviews, generational and transborder mariachi knowledge production, visual expressions of mariachi femininity, and aural feminine expressions in the mariachi setting are complicated. Each participant details what it means to be a mariachera, breaking down concepts of purity in the face of dichotomous cultural gender expectation and the genre's visual expectations of how female musicians should present themselves in society. These sociocultural phenomena led these women in many ways to disidentify and resignify various pieces of the mariachi tradition to “carve out” their own space in the practice, expressing the concern they want to be respected as a musician, not as just a visual object. Ultimately, the “carved out” space allows mariacheras to perform a “different” sound of mariachi—a negotiation of strength, femininity, and balancing sociocultural expectations of the mariachera in and out of performance.

DEDICATION

This thesis truly would not have been possible without a few people in my life I want to dedicate this space of print to. Thank you, Dr. Wells, for your advocacy and support of minority students, especially myself, throughout my time at ASU and throughout COVID-19. I can only hope to become half the professor you are today. Thank you to my family as well, who sent as many virtual hugs, laughs, and musical tips as they could in this process. You help me remember my “roots,” the best place to thrive. And thank you to my partner who has been my rock throughout this amazing process. Your support means so much to me, and to the people we hope to work with one day.

IN MEMORY OF LAURA GRACIANO SOBINO, 1954-2015

For the women who carry on tradition, thank you for teaching me how to carry it
alongside you.

&

For my old best friend smiling down on me, grandpa. You got me into storytelling, told
me they're always worth something. Look... here I am.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: AIMS AND IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study is to document and address discussions about female-identifying mariachis, how they choose to perform mariachi, and how femininity intersects with their roles as professionals in their musical lives. By complicating the mariachi's historically deep-rooted gender binaries and historically female-exclusionary dynamics, I investigate how female mariachis in United States professional all-female mariachi ensembles express their understandings of femininity visually and aurally.¹ While mariachi is an important cultural signifier of *mexicanidad* and subsequently *latinidad*, its presence in popular culture and media seen today positions this genre as a cornerstone of Latinx identity. However, when I asked colleagues about mariachi, most individuals thought about uniforms, instruments, sombreros, and the people who interact with them—men. While performing preliminary image searches under “mariachi” via Google, Yahoo!, and Bing through various VPNs on colleagues' devices around the country, the first ten images of each search produced the same result—all-male groups in their *trajes*.²

¹ See Virginia García's (2020) chapter on the use of the word “mariachi” for help distinguishing between its multifunctional use for performer, ensemble, ensembles, practice, and tradition. I use “mariachi” as a catchall term for each of these definitions, as mariachis do, throughout this thesis.

² Mariachi uniforms.



Figure 1. Sainz 2016. Google Search Result, VPN in Alabama.



Figure 2. YMT Vacations 2019. Yahoo Image Search. VPN in Maine.

These searches rendered images of male mariachis (mariacheros) holding their instruments, or photos of ensembles posing for the camera. Other photos contain single images of iconic mariachero figures like Vicente Fernández or José Alfredo Jiménez. Where are the



Figure 3. Figure 3: MM Group Entertainment. n.d. Bing Image Search. VPN in Nevada

female mariachis? Why am I using the word “female” before “mariachi” in the first place? Why can’t women just be called mariachis as well?

In this thesis, I focused on interviewing 28 female-identifying professional musicians that participate in all-female mariachi ensembles, also called mariachis femeniles. I use these terms interchangeably. I purposely chose to work with professionals, whom I define as women who make (or made) a consistent income from performing, though “consistent” may not entail a general living wage that supports a female mariachi’s (or mariachera’s) financial needs. I use the word “professional” to refer to participants as women who received regular gig requests from clients, performed at various venues pre-COVID on a booked or scheduled basis, or had group managers to handle their band’s performance scheduling.

Explaining why there are not a lot of mariacheras in the United States professional circuit, seasoned mariachi and Doctor of Education Leonor Xóchitl Pérez describes the work-life balance issues that mariacheras encounter. Where a mariachera may struggle to consistently participate in mariachi programs because they tended to face larger societal repercussions in their respective social circles if they did not tend to their families’, children’s, and homes’ needs, they still are participants in the mariachi gig economy (Pérez 2002). I am interested in their stories of positional success. While work-life balance is not the focus of my research, I acknowledge that there are larger, systemic factors that prevent many women today from entering the professional mariachi circuit including neoliberal economic structures, workplace discrimination, access to education, and more. Each of these struggles are valid in their own respect, limiting women from participating in this study as well.

I aim to discuss how femininity is expressed in professional, all-female mariachi settings. Early mariachi scholars like Mexican musicologist Vicente Mendoza (1956), Smithsonian Folkways Curator and Director Daniel Sheehy (2006), musicologist Russel Rodriguez (2005, 2006), and Donald Henriques (2011) tended to talk about all-male groups or male solo acts. However, contemporary mariachi scholars like author and transborder musicologist Candida Jáquez (2000) or Virginia García (2020) discuss varied gender dynamics in mariachi settings. I could not help but notice as a mariachera myself that my voice was not and still is not well-represented in such academic accounts. Mariachi is a popular genre that is taught in school districts across the country, seen in movies like *Coco*, displayed in political protests across the world, represented in comedy sketches hosted by Jimmy Kimmel, or simply displayed on beer bottles to display *mexicanidad* adjacency. I must point out the cognitive dissonance I experience when I compare mariachi's popular visual *and* aural presence in the United States with the lack of academic attention mariachis, and especially mariacheras, receive. While scholars like ethnomusicologist Leticia Flores (2015) and cultural anthropologist Mary Mulholland (2013) make important contributions to the field of mariachera scholarship, laying important groundwork for me to build upon, in the words of Chicana Feminisms founder Gloria Anzaldúa, and her collaborator, Cherrie Moraga,

We women need each other. Because my/your solitary, self-asserting “go-for-the-throat-of-fear” power is not enough. The real power, as you and I well know, is collective. I can't afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let's do it: this polite timidity is killing us. (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981, 34)

It is here, in *los intersticios*³ of *la frontera*⁴ that I focus on my positionality as a researcher amongst and outside my interlocutor's work in the mariachi circuit.

An Intersectional Positionality

I am also a female-identifying mariachi performer. My father is a musician by all definitions of the word. As a poly-instrumental music educator, he would bring home instruments in need of string changes or with stuck valves to fix when I was young. I loved to help him work on these instruments after school, sparking my fascination with poly-instrumentalism myself. He opened a summer camp long before I could truly remember, and he always needed musicians to fill in and help fill out his orchestra, band, jazz, or mariachi groups for his final concert. Though my primary instrument is flute, it was at this camp that he would throw a guitarrón in my hand or lend me a trumpet over the summer. Simply telling me to “learn it,” he gave me a fingering chart, threw me into an ensemble, and let me swim with the mariachi fishes, so to speak. Here, my relationship with mariachi music was solidified.

I did not grow up in a Mexican household but rather a mixed-race household – my dad is first generation Mexican, and my mom is fourth generation German and Scottish from Michigan. Because of this mixed status, some mariachis have called me a “seasonal Mexican” or a “halfsican,” colorist terms to describe that when my skin is exposed to the sun, I look more

³ This term is a false cognate and Spanglish in nature. By combining English's preconceived notions that this word means “intersection” (it actually translates to interstice) and the Spanish joke that false cognates create preconceived notions, Anzaldúa demonstrates that the word itself is an embodiment of mixed identities in the borderlands—a perfect word to describe reclaimed, embodied Chicana intersectionality.

⁴*Intersticios* are demarcated by borders (*fronteras*), suggesting borders are not purely a physical manifestation in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Mexican, but when I am less exposed to UV rays, I look more Scottish and German, “whiter.” While these terms are contested in varied discourse communities, this lived experience defines my insider-outsider status as an ethnographer in Mariachi. While attempting to build rapport with some of my participants, my credibility as a mariachi performer was immediately tested because I did not “look the part” on my paler days, meaning that my skin tone did not immediately signal to the communities I worked with that I, too, am familiar with this genre of music. To be frank, I did not look “brown enough” even though I am half Mexican. Although mariachi is a popularized genre in the United States, its spectacle-based⁵ connotations do carry harmful stereotypes that can be internalized by the community at large: not all mariachis are Mexican, nor are they male. The visual emphasis on what makes a mariachi an “insider,” in my experience, and in Cindy Shea’s experience after interviewing her, is literally colored on a visual basis. I began wondering, reclaiming the derogatory language used against me: how does my visual presentation of seasonal Mexicanness make me an insider or outsider in mariachi? What else defines women as “brown enough,” or “Mexican enough” to grant them access into mariachi? Perhaps language is a barrier.

Nor do all mariachis speak colloquial Spanish. My positionality as a fluent school-taught Castellano Spanish speaker indicates to native speakers that I truly did not grow up speaking Spanish. My parents did enroll me in *folklorico* when I was six, which was my gateway into mariachi. I started playing guitarrón when I was 14 and began playing paid gigs when I was 16.

⁵ Mariachi is used as a display of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) in the globalized music market—Its popularity holds potential to be a reductionist image of Mexican culture inasmuch as it was intended to make the newly nationalist Mexico look strong to the globalized post-WWII world under Porfirio Diaz.

At this point, I joined my university's mariachi, Lobos de Plata. By age 18, I knew trumpet and was singing along with the *coro*, and by 21, I was teaching full mariachi ensembles in the Washoe County School District, performing on vihuela and violin. I consider my primary instrument to be vihuela now. I play gigs when I can in the COVID era and teach mariachi to colleagues who want to know how to incorporate it into their school's or classroom's curriculum. I realized that a lot of my colleagues are bilingual and have varying written, spoken, and reading Spanish skills. Their reading and writing skills did not matter in mariachi performance, but their spoken skills were really important— each individual's level of spoken skill fluency demarcates them, and myself, as insiders in mariachi. The less colloquial Spanish we know or are fluent in, the less “qualified” we are to teach and engage with the community. This stigma creates an interesting insider/outsider dichotomy to individuals who want to teach mariachi, as they must not only prove their musical prowess, but their *mexicanidad* in language performance with peers in the mariachi world. My Castellano Spanish, deemed as formal and not colloquial, demarcated me with some mariachis as an outsider: when they realized this, they immediately code switched to English with me. Sometimes we held conversations in Spanglish. Other times, still, I conducted interviews in Spanish only, according to how comfortable my participants were with the language they wanted to interview in and how they perceived my language communication abilities attached to Castellano stigmas. Straddling this line of being a linguistic insider and outsider, I wondered, then: does my gender impact whether I am an insider or outsider in mariachi as well?

Upon entering my studies at Arizona State University, I knew I wanted to write about the female experience in the mariachi world. After immersing myself in it so much, I realized that there were many men on stage and I was oftentimes the only woman performing in a mariachi setting. When I talked to other professionals, men marveled that I, *too*,⁶ could participate in “their world.” This marvel only became novel as I entered the mariachi scene in Arizona for my Master’s degree. Having freshly cut my long hair to a long taper cut, my lesbianness showed more brightly on stage than any other aspect of my identity did. While perfectly comfortable on stage with my short hair, other professionals criticized me, saying I was not a “real deal singer” in mariachi. I was neither feminine enough, nor masculine enough to fit into the strict gender binaries enforced in mariachi tradition.

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Personally, I have encountered hardship fitting into strict gender binaries when it comes to how I choose—and how I need to—wear my hair. This does not mean “oh, I can just throw up my unkempt hair into a ponytail and style it into a mariachera bun.” It is reflected in my short haircut, something that is harder to mask or reverse. When I had long hair, I found that it aggravated my migraine condition, leading me to cut my hair short. This prevented weeks of recurring pain. In my experience, this has not been a concern many of my male or female mariachi peers have wondered about. Rather, it is typically understood as a fashion concern. Absent such a concern, why would a mariachera who grew up around the tradition cut her hair short when she knows her hair needs to be long for the bun? As a mariachi myself, I found it

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to spell out that the phrase “you, *too*, can do this?” is a form of gendered microaggressive behavior.

incredibly difficult to find gigs, let alone a home mariachi when I arrived to study in Arizona from my home in Nevada. Not knowing a single musician, I longed to find a place to belong with mariachi. The problem I encountered frequently was in the very question “Ah... ¿Me estás diciendo que el público querrá ver *eso* cuando cantes?” or “Ah... You’re telling me that the audience will want to see *that* [gesturing to my short hair] when you sing?” I was advised to “make it long, then we’ll talk.” I heard a lot of versions of that type of comment when I tried to gig with groups until I just got my own bun extension and grew my hair enough to slick into a tiny bun. Although the people critiquing me were men, I could not help but observe how, despite the length of my hair, as a mariachi my femininity was defined simply in terms of how long or short little strands of social construct fell off my head.

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Following Maxine Baca Zinn (1979) and Robert Emerson et. al. (2011), my insider/outsider statuses informs my positionality as a researcher. Because this study is as much reflexive as it is ethnographic, my personal experiences informed how I built rapport with my participants, and although it was fairly easy for me to build trust in some circles of mariachis when I talked about being excluded by men with other women, my lesbianness also dictated some of our conversations and was met with some resistance. As I talked with some participants and asked about dress code enforcement, I was reminded that even though the male-dominated mariachi tradition can treat women as outsider counterparts, some LGBTQ+ community members are marginalized by male/female dichotomies coded in many mariachi settings across

the United States. I am in the unique position where I must visually code switch⁷ as a mariachi. This is a tool of disidentification-based social survival, meaning that I can look very feminine if that is absolutely needed in order to continue to play the tradition I love. Part of my identity strays away from dressing in normative feminine clothing, making me feel extremely uncomfortable some days in dresses. Other days, I dress to *look* feminine to preserve my safety, professional name, and get gigs as a “real female mariachi.” Having grown up quite feminine and in the closet, the “girly,” *falda* skirt I must wear to be a “real” mariachi is like speaking a language I’ve been out of practice in for a while. My visual performance of femaleness is curated with muscle memory for eye makeup, slicked buns, a quick red lip. I speak the language of androgynous presenting woman, my unpracticed feminine language is a tool for survival.

Raised as a mariachi, identifying as female-- I am an insider in one respect, yet I chose not to take a professional mariachi route. Professionals are individuals who regularly gig and/or make a semi-consistent income from music-based performance. To further discuss my researcher positionality, I gig irregularly so my income is not solely dependent on my musical prowess, making me an outsider to the professional mariachi circuit. I am also not a mother, nor am I a family provider at the time of this writing, so I do not (at the time of this writing) fully understand the difficulties some of my participants face who have families and are juggling a work-life-family-motherhood balance. Similarly, because I do not fit these occupational stereotypes that are projected onto some of the women I worked with—I do not go to rehearsals with children and am not particularly straight presenting—I do not face the stigmas in coed

⁷ See Michael Baggs (2018) “Code-Switching: How BAME and LGBT People ‘Blend In.’”

mariachis that some of my participants face who are mothers or are straight presenting and face larger spouse-jealousy issues. However, I am presented with unique challenges in mariachi settings beyond the scope of this thesis in my intersectional experience where binary pedagogies, colorism, and homophobia on top of my female experience color my perspective of my mariachi experience. I know I can leave the field and that affords me a privilege that mariacheras in professional circuits do not have; they continue to face their own personal struggles as musicians, teachers, colleagues, and more while navigating their profession. I choose to continue staying in the field for now, following my Master's degree, inspired by Chicana feminists and mariacheras alike to build upon their work in both professions.

Chicana Feminisms Theoretical Overview

I finally came across Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* in a graduate seminar about music in the desert. Anzaldúa's text introduced me to Chicana feminisms, the theories this thesis is primarily based upon. In a manner that resonates with what Chicana feminists like Aida Hurtado (2020), Chela Sandoval (2000), and Cecelia Menjivar (2011) describe, I find myself constantly negotiating and renegotiating my researcher positionality with each participant at each research site. Depending on the context of each song we play together, each question we confront, and each challenge we discuss when it comes to coexisting with men in mariachi performance, research positionality shifts. Though "coexistence" is how I originally described my relationship with male mariachis before this study, my understanding of my own fluid position with some mariachis (not all, of

course) shifted as each participant informed me of their navigational techniques in their professional experiences. Anzaldúa refers to this constant negotiation of the multiple identities among which an individual is caught as an *intersticio* (1987: 42).

The main theories I utilize throughout this thesis are drawn from Chicana feminisms, which are an elaboration on first and second wave feminism. Chicana feminisms acknowledges that the first and second waves of the feminist movement advocate for white women, who hold more societal power than women of color. Chicana feminisms are a part of what scholars called “Third World feminisms,” which strive to represent women of color, giving them a platform to voice their need in an unbalanced society. Inspired by Chicana feminist and scholar Aida Hurtado’s *Intersectional Chicana Feminisms: Sitios y Lenguas* (2020), I combine Chicana feminist scholars’ ideas to apply concepts such as disidentification and resignification (Muñoz 1999, Sandoval 2000, Aparicio 2019, Trujillo 1997, Anzaldúa 1987, Hurtado 2020). As female mariachis begin to disidentify from tradition, resignify pieces of mariachi signifiers, and redefine what it means to be a woman on the mariachi stage, they are able to “carve out” their own space to express their version of feminine strength in mariachi visually and aurally.

Methodology

The bulk of this thesis’ research occurred between January 2020- January 2022 which took place during the beginning and bulk of the COVID-19 pandemic. After careful consideration within my thesis committee, we decided that my original plan for in-person interviews in this ethnography would be safer for all parties involved to occur in virtual, then

hybrid, socially distanced spaces. Varied sections of this ethnography were conducted solely in a virtual format via Zoom. Other sections occurred in outdoor, masked, and distanced spaces adhering to Arizona State University's (ASU's) shifting policies on COVID-19 mitigation. Each interaction was carefully weighed, considering the at-risk status of each participant, including the author's health status following weekly COVID-19 tests and daily health check-ins.

Given the state of the world and shifting global perspectives on how ethnographies are conducted, I consider a large part of this thesis' methodologies as experimental, yet derivative of ethnographic techniques discussed by Susan McClary and William Cheng (2016), D. Soyini Madison (2012), and Dwight Conquergood (1991).

This research consists of embodied, social, and musical observations, participant-observations drawing on personal experiences in the field, open ended interviews, semi-structured interviews, and structured interviews. Though these research strategies were helpful in the data-gathering process, I rely heavily on my fieldnotes from both my observations and semi-structured interviews from online and in-person interactions with participants. Fieldnotes were first conceptualized as jottings or headnotes, then developed into broken down bullet points, reflections, and journals connecting mariachera experiences to each other.

Though each study participant belongs to and/or descends from⁸ one of the following mariachis— Mariachi Mariposas, Mariachi Divas de Cindy Shea, Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000, Mariachi Veronica Robles, Mariachi Pasión, Mariachi Reynas de Los Angeles, Mariachi Rosas

⁸ Some mariacheras belong to many mariachis femeniles, moved from one ensemble to another, left a mariachi to form their own, grew up in one ensemble which dissolved and joined another, etc. "Descend from" highlights the complex social networks these musicians move between, a topic too broad to cover in Chapter 2, let alone this thesis.

Divinas, Flor de Toloache, and Mariachi Las Catrinas— I change their names, external mariachi affiliations, and any other personally identifiable information to ensure personal anonymity. I chose these mariachis based on their locations, ranging from Boston to Los Angeles, in hopes that their site-specific locations would help to inform this study. I also chose each mariachi based on their repertoire preferences, their wardrobe diversity, and of course, if we were able to establish contact before my research cutoff deadline in January 2022. I engaged in snowball sampling, contacting each participant via their official website, Facebook page, or Instagram page, and was referred to other members from other mariachis from one lady to another. Each participant is or was a member, founder, manager, or affiliate of one or more of the groups. Considering the impact of immigration stories, trauma stories, and struggles each woman went through to become a professional in her respective field, I quickly realized in our conversations and interviews (as much as the world needs to know about the feminine mariachi world), I needed to honor the hard work each woman contributed to get into her profession by masking her name in more controversial topics covered in this paper. As they fought to retain their professional spaces in the circuit, they encountered moments of discrimination, misogyny, harassment, and more that, when recounted in this thesis, could potentially impact their careers. At the end of the day, akin to cultural anthropologist Dr. Maria Cruz-Torres' teachings on ethnographic ethics, Emerson et. al.'s (2011) publication on fieldnote ethics, Baca Zinn's (1979) cautionary tales, and more, my primary duty as an ethnographer is to protect my participants. In doing so, I make the conscious, reflexive decision to anonymize their names unless I highlight a specific contribution a female has made to the all-female mariachi circuit.

It is my hope that by refining my skill through this degree and more to come, my job as a future professor— a professional translator of abstract thought— will make inaccessible texts accessible. This calls for a shift in writing style, pioneered by these scholars. The writing style of this paper is inspired by the works of Jason De León (2015) and Christi Jay Wells (2021), whose respective thick-description ethnographies and performative-reflexive written fingerprints make academic work more accessible. After conducting preliminary open-ended interviews with multiple participants, I formed semi-structured interview questions asking mariacheras about what I learned from my preliminary interviews. Although not all interviews included every question, nor did they completely stay on topic as we delved into deeper topics as we began adopting more interest in one subject over another. This general interview format dictated most of our initial conversations when we sat down to talk about feminine mariachi performance.

As we laughed, cried, and sang together, our collective love of music drove our conversations into many late evenings. Invited to participate in birthday party gigs, doing group watch Zoom events, contributing to concert programming ideas, and collaborating across the country in curriculum building activities, it has been a pleasure working with each mariachi who agreed to be a part of this study.

Thesis Structure

This study is structured in five chapters, including the introduction. Using Chicana feminisms as my main theoretical framework throughout the thesis, I put two years of in-person and digital interview fieldwork in conversation with Mary Lee Mulholland's work about

women's visual prioritization over their musical talent in Jalisco. I argue that mariacheras disidentify from tradition, resignify pieces of mariachi signifiers, and redefine what Mulholland's critique of the phrase "una cosa bonita," or "a beautiful thing" means in the mariachi femenil circuit. Expressions of visual and aural femininity vary widely between different between varied mariachi femenil communities. Here, as mariacheras, they are able to "carve out" their own space to express their version of feminine strength in mariachi visually and aurally, so are mariacheras femeniles able to do so.

Chapter 2 discusses how mariacheras participate in mariachi knowledge migration without borders, rather within the realm of oral histories and *pláticas*. I unpack how private and public realms of knowledge transmission presented themselves in the lives of the 28 participants who agreed to partake in this study. This chapter then triangulates how stereotypical understandings of the drunken mariachi, female social expectations, and my participant's lived experiences intersect to problematize what femininity in mariachi should—or should not—look like in the eyes of their mentors, family members, audiences, and more.

Chapter 3 discusses how visual representations of femaleness in the mariachi setting adhere to or stray from an unspoken dress code. After analyzing how my participants' home mariachis femeniles dress and arrange their hair for performance, I place their voices in conversation with each other about this unspoken dress code. By complicating what it means to be a visually presenting female mariachi, how mariacheras are treated as a tool of visual interest instead of as a musician in coed mariachi settings, and discussing what the mariachi skirt, or *falda* signals to the male-dominant mariachi community, I argue that social pressures

surrounding visual female presentation in mariachis femeniles impacts how mariacheras are understood as musicians.

Chapter 4 shines a light on how female mariachis are not different from men just because of their visual signifiers, but because of how they musically differentiate themselves from male mariachis. Referencing how my participants defined their musical skill, compared to all-male mariachis, as “different,” I venture to find what this aural “difference” might mean. In a comparative analysis between four all-male mariachis and four all-female mariachis, I musically and statistically analyze how mariachis femeniles differ from their male counterparts in how they perform the *huapango* “Cucurrucucú Paloma” and *son jarocho* “El Cascabel.”⁹

Chapter 5 is a brief conclusion that summarizes my research findings and points toward directions for future research. Rounding out how knowledge attainment, visual expression, and aural expressions of femininity are described in this study, I recognize the groundwork other women laid before me to allow this research to happen. In the spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa, I round out each chapter’s discussions with nods to the participants who are helping me build bridges between music, humanities, Latinx communities, and more.

⁹ *Huapango* and *son jarocho* are styles of mariachi music

CHAPTER 2

FROM MEXICO TO THE UNITED STATES

The mariachi tradition began making popular headway to the United States during *La Epoca de Oro* (The Golden Age of Cinema) as it began to gain international musical attention (Sheehy 2006). Mariachi became increasingly visible on a global scale in the 1930s largely because it was commodified and globally exported via film under Mexican president Lázaro (in office 1934-1940). Cardenas followed Porfirio Diaz's initial 1905 ensemble nationalization, using the mariachi as a tool of *mexicanidad* signification (Clark 1996). While *La Epoca de Oro* gave mariachi a larger international stage and much visibility in the U.S., historians Leonor Pérez (2002) and Vinicio Sinta (2020) continue to uncover larger bodies of mariachi oral histories that reveal that some form of mariachi was in practice in the United States before *La Epoca De Oro* came to fruition in the 1950s. President Cardenas subsidized mariachi, facilitating its escalating migration to the United States via popular media. The *Epoca de Oro* did not just export film; it exported the idealized image and sound of mariachi, informing mariachi consumers and future performers on a global scale of how a mariachi should look, sound, and socially act in society today. This image was of masculine strength— *machismo*— in the face of a post-WWII world.

In this chapter, I show how the influence of mariachi music from Mexico to the U.S. is linked to the migration patterns between these two countries. Much like historical migration patterns typically characterize sojourners¹⁰ as male, mariachi music in the U.S. has been

¹⁰ Individuals who stay in one place temporarily before moving to another new location.

predominately a male dominated music form. The *machismo* embedded in this music form is rooted in its early pre-migration origins in Mexico and it has been popularized in a similar fashion in the U.S. through early media influences during *La Epoca De Oro*. In the first section of this chapter, I trace the mariachi history from Mexico to the U.S. Most of this early history to date is male-centered, but I also highlight the important role that women play in mariachi, both in Mexico and the U.S.

The second section of this chapter focuses on interviews from the 28 women I interviewed for this study. My respondents reveal how these early representations of mariachi during *La Epoca de Oro* have made it difficult for women to join this music profession. These women have also been made to feel like they do not belong in this profession. Historical *machismo* and social reputation associated with the world of mariachis are cited by these mariachera's families as reasons to disapprove of their daughters' desires to join mariachis. Despite the multiple barriers that originate for historical stigma attached to the profession, the women I interviewed told me that they learned mariachi at home and through formal mentorships.

Plática Positionality

Mariachi genre knowledge is shared between family members and mentors across borders and time. Where migration can be understood in the physical sense, where people must physically migrate from Mexico to the United States to live there, sound and tradition can travel differently. Music Scholar Sophia Enriquez's study parses out how musical knowledge moves

and migrates in the form of *pláticas*; in one of her *pláticas*, or emotionally vulnerable, story-telling conversations with an interlocutor, she describes a cross-cultural musician's role as a *son jarocho* in his social circles. Through their *plática*, he shared knowledge as a mentor toward his friends and toward Enriquez, where the *plática* served as a “strategy for building cross-cultural relationships with other musicians, and as a way to better connect with and understand notions of *las raíces*—the roots—of a people and their music” (Enriquez 2021, 171). It is in this “roots” perspective, a way to connect with others who may not totally understand the fuller story of a musical memory or culture, where my participants and I participate in knowledge movement (migration), where our interview turned into *pláticas*.

Although I started my interviews as formal, semi-structured interviews with questions that would help lead our discussions in what I hoped would generate organic conversation, our interviews turned into moments of storytelling and entire storytelling sessions. Similar to Enriquez, I held *pláticas* with my participants where we told stories of our experiences in mariachi. *Pláticas*, in the Chicana feminist lens, fosters an environment for stories, ideas, and traditions to be shared via conversation in a less formal, though just as informative way, of collecting data (Fierros and Bernal 2016). These accounts tend to be spaces of mutual vulnerability for anyone participating, including the researcher. We recalled funny, sad, or joyous memories and connect with each other in the process of storytelling (ibid). In these *pláticas*, not only did I learn more about mariachera and mariachi femenil tradition, but I also realized that this is how the women I talked with learned about mariachi themselves—through the movement of traditional knowledge in story format. As these women were points of

receiving or giving knowledge (movers or migrators of knowledge), through their active participation—listening to the histories or sounds of mariachi they were exposed to when they were young, listening to the lessons from their mentors or families, or they teach fellow peers or children about mariachi—they are taking part in the larger system of mariachi knowledge movement. My participants attained their mariachi music knowledge and/or pass it on through the *plática*. It is apparent that mariachi tradition has been mobilized generation to generation in the form of aurally passing mariachi knowledge. I was lucky enough to be included in the movement of knowledge from this tradition in my thesis.

La Epoca De Oro mid-1930s–1950s: The Early Masculine Reputation of Mariachi that Transcends National Borders

Mexico’s film industry during *La Epoca de Oro* can be credited for portraying *lo mexicano*, or an idealized Mexican ethos (usually associated with men), for the world to see (Clark 1996). Many scholars also argue that this period reinforced *machismo* culture, or masculine behavioral expectations, among the early form of mariachi that still lingers today. *Machismo* is a social type similar to excessive masculinity or male pride, stereotypically describing men’s social interactions with women negatively.¹¹ As a result of this history, female mariachis today continue to experience microaggressions, unfair treatment, tokenization, and more in coed mariachi settings (Salazar 2017, Mulholland 2021, Mulholland 2008, Pérez 2002).

¹¹ I use this term advisedly. It holds a tendency to create reductive statements about men and is not always a negative descriptor of male-male and male-female social interactions. See Sociologist Alfredo Mirandé’s (1997) “And Ain’t I a Man” In *Hombres y Machos: Masculinity and Latino Culture* for further complications on the subject.

While male mariachis are cognizant of how *La Epoca de Oro*'s stereotypical depictions of the drunken, sexist *machista* have become attached to the genre (whose truth of the matter is beyond the scope of this thesis), this awareness only goes so far toward alleviating women's marginalization, as we will see in the following chapters. A *machista* is defined as a toxic, sexist social type men typically inhabit that belittle women (Mirande 1997). More prominently, the *machista* was defined by their "drinking behavior," which exacerbated violence, sexual prowess, or female denigration in *La Epoca de Oro*. Idealized men in Mexican cinema during this period were described as *Alteños*, referring to their occupied geographical location to Jalisco, Mexico. Historian Áurea Toxqui describes *Alteños* in her book as:

admired because of their manliness. They were daring and skilled men who rode horses and knew how to successfully manage a hacienda (large rural estate) or a rancho (small rural property). Their devotion to women, and their readiness to defend their property and their family, defined them. They were able to afford expensive charro suits, characterized by the elaborate silver embroidery work in the suit itself and in the wide-brimmed hat. An important component of their manhood lay in their sexual capacities, projected by the tightness of their pants, as well as the innuendo included in the reference to their reliability, their guns, and the fact that these men never back off. Their manliness also resided in their quick wit, gambling skills, mostly in cards and cockfights, their talent for mariachi music, their alcohol tolerance, particularly for tequila. (Toxqui 2015, 262-263)

These *Alteños* were oftentimes depicted in cantinas, drunkenly singing rancheras as they

contemplated their love interests or emotional woes in Mexican cinema. Notably, they wore elements of the mariachi *traje*—silver embroidery, the sombrero, tight pants from the *charro*, or simply entire *charro* suits—while singing ranchera music¹² on screen. This feasibly aligns mariachi with these popular depictions of Alteño drunkenness. This stereotype infiltrated popular perceptions of mariachi behavior. The idealized and popularized image of the deviant mariachi had a powerful influence beyond television. These stereotypes transcended the screen and had real impact in places all over Mexico including Guadalajara, a large city in Jalisco, Mexico. In other words, the bad reputation of mariachis extended and permeated to public recreational spaces making them masculine and socially inappropriate for women to participate in.

It was not until the mid-2000s that the famous Plaza de Los Mariachis in Guadalajara, an essential site for mariachi connection-making, gigging, and interaction, was able to shed its association with “*ambiente bajo*” (“low” environment/sketchy scene). The famous plaza had such a negative connotation that tourists, especially women, were discouraged from visiting the area. Following 15 months of fieldwork in Mexico, Mulholland (2021) found that these stereotypes impacted men, women, children, business partners, and more. She also noted that “Due to its reputation, the plaza was not recommended for women or tourists, particularly female tourists, by locals or by any staff working in tourist booths whom I asked” (Mulholland 2021).

Mulholland elaborates on the topic:

While many argue that its reputed danger is inflated, during the first 10 years of the festival, the Plaza de los Mariachis in Guadalajara was marked as a profane and

¹² One of many subgenres of music mariachi performs.

masculine space of danger perceived to be inhabited by working-class, uneducated, and uncultured men. These men in the popular imagination embodied all that was negative about the Mexican macho: an overly sentimental lower-class mestizo unable to control his appetite for booze and women ... This negative stereotype of the macho was extended to the mariachis that worked there (Mulholland 2021).

In the same space essential to professional mariachi networking, women were discouraged from participating in the Plaza's interconnective environment for their safety, potentially barring them from entering further mariachi-based opportunities. The drunk mariachi stereotype continues to color how mariachis are understood in mariachi households, especially in the United States, barring women from entering mariachis.

Mariachis in the U.S.

The films produced during *La Epoca de Oro* not only served to entertain Mexican Immigrants in the U.S., but they also served to reinforce a specific type of male masculinity that promoted gendered dynamics and pride in the Mexican culture. Interdisciplinary Humanities Scholar Desirée J. García's 2010 book "The Soul of a People': Mexican Spectatorship and the Transnational Comedia Ranchera" positions the United States as a place that received *La Epoca de Oro's* media, consumed it, and reproduced it in its own image. In other words, macho representations of the Mexican man in these films were not questioned, they were taken at face value. However, as we now know, these *machista* stereotypes had negative consequences regarding how women were treated and excluded the world of Mariachis. Virginia García (2020)

explicitly connects mariachi's *portrayed* image in the Golden Age of Cinema to how the United States received mariachi media stating, "The male stars of these films, dressed in their finest 'charro' attire, exuded the essence of masculinity, bravery and pride in Mexican culture" as they 'were prominent figures in media (García 2020, 6). As García argues:

The Mexican films of La Época de Oro played a major role in establishing the popularity of Mariachi music. The films of this era made their way across the international border to entertain the Mexican immigrants residing in their new homeland, connecting them emotionally, culturally and patriotically to their roots. The male stars of these films exuded the essence of male masculinity, bravery and pride in the Mexican culture (García 2020, 21-22).

Mulholland and Ethnomusicologist Erika Soveranes (2017) continually assert that *La Epoca de Oro* was responsible for exuding images of the macho mariachi across the border to the United States, informing their media consumers on both sides of the border how male mariachis ought to act (Mulholland 2007, Soveranes 2017). Historically, by this time in Mexico, machismo was already firmly embedded in Mexican society. Though film could have metastasized machismo already prevalent in mariachi culture, film is only one of many reasons mariachi and *machismo* in the United States intertangle so much (Mulholland 2007). I expand upon Virginia García's film-as-a-medium of *machismo* travel notion to state that media exposure to normative male behavior systems in mariachi could have likely informed some male mariachis of *machismo* behavior standards to carry into their practice.

Historically, California was the receiving mecca of mariachi groups in the 1950s and 1960s. These mariachi groups arrived in California in congruence with the influx of Mexican immigrants who were incentivized to work seasonally in the United States through the 1942-1964 Bracero Program (Anderson 1976, Kosack 2021). This program was a bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexico that aimed to ameliorate the shortage of male labor in the U.S. during World War II. During the Bracero Program, the U.S. actively recruited almost five million Mexican workers primarily to California and Texas. Drawing up short term labor contracts with Mexican men to work U.S. crops and to provide more work opportunities for labor shortages in Mexico. The program asked for Mexican male workers to tend to the agricultural fields left unattended in California during WWII (Gutierrez 1995). As Mexican immigrants were specifically targeted to enter the U.S. workforce in California and Texas, so did these states see an increase in mariachi groups establishing themselves throughout the area. Right before the Bracero Program was established, markers of mariachi identity began to stand out in California. Most notably beginning in the 1930s, Mariachi Plaza in Boyle Heights served as a gathering place for Mexican migrants and mariachis in the area. The Boyle Hotel, often known as “the mariachi hotel,” was built in 1889 when the neighborhood was an up-and-coming suburb of Los Angeles (López Kurland 2009). Located across the street from Mariachi Plaza, the Boyle Hotel was a popular spot for mariachis to live in for extended periods of time, offering affordable extended stays for gigging musicians. Anyone looking to hire mariachis for a performance at a restaurant or private party could easily find them at the hotel or plaza. As mariachis met in the plaza and vied for gigs, the exchange of musical ideas between different groups was facilitated

by these two locations, making them migration “pull” sites for future mariachis—Los Angeles is now a mariachi mecca (Shea 2022).

Table 1. United States Mariachi Migration Timeline

United States Mariachi Migration Timeline		
Date	Event	Relevance
1934-1940	Lázaro Cárdenas in office	President of Mexico has mariachi play at his inauguration and becomes the first government official to subsidize mariachi
1942	Bracero Program begins	Incentivizes Mexican workers to take agricultural jobs in the U.S.
1950	Mariachi Plaza in Boyle Heights	A landmark that brings visibility to mariachis in Los Angeles and a space where mariachis can get hired for music gigs.
1961	Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano formed	First well-known mariachi in the U.S. to gain national attention
1961	Mariachi Uclatlán formed	First University-based mariachi at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
1964	The Bracero Program ends	
1969	La Fonda de los Camperos opens	First mariachi restaurant venue opens
Late 1960s	UCLA offers bilingual music classes	
1970s	Mariachi in public education and church settings becomes more common	
1971	Mariachi Cobre Inception	First Mexican American Mariachi
1979	1 st Mariachi Conference (International)	Organized by Belle San Miguel and Juan Ortiz

As musical ideas began moving between Mexico and the United States more during World War II and the initiation of the Bracero Program in the early 1940s, more than 4.6 million work contracts were signed, incentivizing Mexican agriculturalists to enter the United States

(UCLA Labor Center 2014). The U.S. was not only importing Mexican male workers, it was also importing their culture and music. Other sites in which mariachi flourished after it was exported and popularly accepted in the United States were Spanish-Speaking dominant churches and in some school districts in Southern California and Southern Texas. Though these spaces of mariachi performance began opening up to women more in ensembles like Las Rancheritas y su Mariachi, or Mariachi de Uclatlán, standard gigging mariachis were more gender exclusive. For example, Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano took decades to finally accepted Rebecca Gonzalez and Laura Sobrino into their regular rotation. Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán has never had a permanent female musician in their famous group.¹³

“Don’t Forget the Women”

Mariachi Women in México

While the history of mariachi has predominately focused on men, this does not mean that women have been absent from this music art form. The women I interviewed for this study build on the histories and traditions established by mariacheras before them. These mariacheras were women who faced difficult realities and found solutions to enter the male-only mariachi world. Much like Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of building on the backs of our ancestors, where the histories of the women before us help to establish new opportunities and pathways to success in life, these pathways to success led some women to a sense of community and belonging they could not find elsewhere in their lives, to educational careers, and even to Grammy awards. One

¹³ These two groups are amongst the most renown mariachis in the world.

of the earliest documented mariachera performers was Rosa Quirino. In 1903, Rosa entered the mariachi scene as a violinist at the age of 13. At that young age, she was known for her gun-toting. She used a pistol on her side to help enforce audience respect as she performed alongside her male peers. In Bermudez's (2014) article, she described how Quirino presented herself in society:

Rosa Quirino liked to perform with leather huaraches on her feet and a shawl criss-crossed over her chest, in a nod to Pancho Villa. When men teased her as she sang, she would tell them: 'Gentlemen, we are working.' Then, she'd pull out her gun (Bermudez 2014).

Quirino would pull her gun out to threaten *machista* men who wanted to "pull a fast one" or "mess around" with her (Jáuregui 2007, 18). Jáuregui stated that "Con ella no se podían pasar de listos [With her, they could not take advantage.]" The idiomatic expressions "messaging around" or "pulling a fast one" imply that Quirino was met with sexualized comments and offers. Using the gun as a tool to demand respect and earn her place in the mariachi scene beyond the context of her body allowed her to carve out her own space in mariachi, even if it was with the threat of violence. Quirino was notorious for her immersion in the mariachi scene, where she drank like men but also took the time to learn how to play every stringed instrument of the standard mariachi ensemble (Jáuregui 2007, Soto Flores 2015). Women drinking until they were drunk, especially in public, was also understood as the antithesis of womanhood in Mexican society, yet, getting drunk at bars was a regular occurrence for some mariachi groups. Contrary to social expectations, Quirino did get publicly intoxicated in her mariachi career (Jáuregui 2007). For

many people who encountered her, Quirino likely seemed to exemplify a recognizable social type in Mexican society: *la malinche*, a woman who fails to conform to feminine behavioral norms (see Aparicio 2019).¹⁴ The term carries negative connotations, and being described as a *malinchista* is an insult. According to her bibliography, Quirino was not interested in raising a family, marrying in her young mariachi career (Jáuregui 2007). Historically speaking, women who did not conform to societal standards like creating a family at a young age, working in the home environment, or even marrying young, were seen as *malinchistas*. Being associated to La Malinche had connotations of treason and lack of loyalty to one's own culture. In this context, being called "*malinchista*" meant that a woman was therefore "traitor" to Mexican womanhood for deviating from normative female behavior in society (Hurtado 140, 1998). Quirino's social deviance laid the groundwork for other females who also challenged these social norms and expectation attached to their gender entering mariachi.

Mariachi performance includes audience participation, where audience members are encouraged to interject *gritos*, sing along, or call song requests to the mariachi. However, strangers participate too much with musicians, overstepping musician-audience boundaries in performance settings. These types of interactions can be more difficult to manage for women when a predominately male audience is involved in breaching these musician-audience boundaries. As we will see in the following sections, this type of "closeness" is distinct and unique to some mariachi performers, where verbal "teasing" takes the form of commenting on

¹⁴ It bears noting that Chicana feminist Marysa Navarro has critiqued scholars who assume this social type is common to all Latinx communities rather than more specifically to the Mexican communities where it arose (2002). I use the term advisedly, and I assert that it is appropriate to this thesis because it is a term that mariacheras encounter.

their lack of musicianship skills, exuding *machista* behavior, and reinforcing stereotypical feminine expectations. Quirino's "teased" experience was not the only one in mariachi, but it is part of a common phenomenon recurring in male-female mariachi relationships today.

The first mariachi femenil, Mariachi Las Adelitas, named after cofounder and director Adela Chávez, was formed in Mexico in 1948. The name "Adelitas" is significant in Mexican history, used to homogeneously describe female soldiers who participated in the Mexican revolution (Linhard 2005). "Adelitas" is a term historically assigned to women who fought in the war alongside men, acknowledging their contributions to the revolution while minimizing individual experiences and demarcating them as socially deviant from other Mexican women who did not take to the battlefield (ibid). In some regards, naming a mariachi "Las Adelitas" gives honor and pays respect to women like Rosa Quirino whose importance in the world of mariachi is now being recognized. Shortly following the creation of Mariachi Las Adelitas, Mariachi Las Estrellas de Mexico was founded in 1951; in 1953, Las Coronelas became Mexico's third all-female mariachi in existence (Soto Flores 2015).

While the mariachi genre was growing in the U.S. during the *Epoca de Oro*, all-female mariachi bands were starting up in Mexico. Between 1948-1953, the inception of these three pioneering all-female groups was initially spurred by the help of Victor Angulo, Adela Chávez's husband and co-founder of Las Adelitas. According to Leonor Pérez, "Each group was formed by a [female] band member and a male manager or musical director with the intent of capitalizing on the growing popularity of the [mariachera] style," crediting men with the

inception of mariachis femeniles and their subsequent successes in the mariachi world we do see today (Pérez 2018, 12-13).

Mariachis Femeniles in the U.S.

The first mariachi femenil to form in the United States was called Las Rancheritas y su Mariachi, also originally cofounded with a male figurehead. Las Rancheritas y su Mariachi was formed in 1964, the same year the Bracero Program was terminated. Sisters Quetta and Cookie were known as “Las Rancheritas,” who learned mariachi from their father, Rafael Elizondo, when they were young and quickly began professionally gigging. They learned how to play multiple mariachi instruments in Alamo, Texas. Their younger sisters, Elvira and Criola, also learned mariachi. Before Elizondo passed in 1962, the family regularly performed mariachi music. After he passed, the girls continued to play, making them the first mariachi femenil in the United States we know of today (Muñoz 2020). Las Rancheritas stayed in Texas, occasionally going on tours for the government overseas and beyond Texas’ borders. Over the years, they took on more female instrumentalists, teaching them how to play in the genre while increasing their client base for gigs around the Alamo (ibid).

Mariachi music knowledge travels orally and is sustained through time just like it did between Elizondo and his daughters and from his daughter to other women outside the family interested in learning about the genre. Also, Las Rancherita’s father, Elizondo, passed on his knowledge of mariachi to his family and it has slowly disseminated to a larger public beyond his reach, into the United States. Las Rancheritas was the first mariachi to travel to an active combat

zone (during the Vietnam war) to perform for American troops. A timeline of milestones in mariachi femenil history is listed below.

Table 2. Important Dates in Mariachi Femenil History

Important Dates in Mariachera History		
Year	Event	Significance
1903	Rosa Quirino’s participation in mariachi is documented in writing	Challenged preconceived notion that mariachi is for male musicians only
1948	Mariachi Las Adelitas formed in MX	Mariachis Femeniles Form All based in Mexico, these 3 groups are considered the “pioneering” groups of mariachi femenil ensembles
1951	Mariachi Las Estrellas de Mexico (MX)	
1953	Mariachi Las Coronelas (MX)	
1936-1969	La Epoca de Oro	Mariacheras begin to take stage in film
1967	Las Rancheritas y su Mariachi formed in U.S.	1st U.S. mariachi femenil formed
1975	Rebecca Gonzales becomes 1st female to join Los Camperos de Nati Cano	Gonzales was invited to perform based on musicianship
1976	Las Generales	Second mariachi femenil in the U.S.
1991	The Hollywood Bowl	Pays tribute to “American” mariachis femeniles
1994	Mariachi Reyna De Los Angeles	Well-known U.S. mariachi femenil formed
2008	Mariachi Mujer 2000 Olympics performance	Represented “The Americas” in Beijing

2009	Mariachi Divas receives their 1st Grammy	This was the 1st Grammy ever a mariachi band won-- male or female
2013	2013 – ¡Viva El Mariachi Femenil! Exhibit Launches	First curated exhibit of mariachis femeniles and history of mariacheras

Las Rancheritas gained more popularity within the public sphere via Weslaco Texas’ channel 5 broadcasting system, where they performed Las Mañanitas and Feliz Navidad for their viewers (ntmunoz 2014). Here, knowledge of mariachi traditional looks and sounds were transferred from the private, family sphere to the public sphere via Las Rancheritas’ broadcasted performance. A large amount of mariachi’s canonic literary histories are colored with male perspectives. Such accounts range from case studies on sociological and musical mechanics and Mexican music analysis to general overviews that focus on the male mariachi almost exclusively (Sheehy 2006, Madrid 2008, Ku 2016, Ku 2017, Margolies 2005). More recent ethnographic studies have recognized that this canonic literature repertoire has excluded the female experience and seeks to remedy these oversights. This is apparent in Janet Sturman’s book, *The Course of Mexican Music* (2016), which points out how many mariachi history books talk about male, not female, experiences and contributions. Case studies filling in critical knowledge gaps surrounding mariachera misconceptions conducted by Mulholland in Mexico (2008) or Leonor Xóchitl Pérez’s publication and reflections on her experience as a mariachi begin to unpack what the mariachera experience looks like. Likewise, rich historical overviews created by former director of the Escuela de Mariachi Ollin Yoliztli en Garibaldi and fieldwork conducted by

Candida Jáquez (2000) and Leticia Soto Flores (2020) help to explain why women are treated the way they are in mariachi (2002, 2014).

Vinicio Sinta's (2020) oral history project, titled "De Viva Voz: Mariachi Musicians Share Their Stories" conducted interviews with 14 different mariachis. Six of those mariachis were women. Sinta's project collected lived histories from these musicians about their time in the mariachi world. Part of the study considered how a study participant's citizenship status was destabilized, questioning how mariachi entered different periods of political turmoil in the United States. This study also accounted for how knowledge moved between different generations of mariachis. Sinta found that "As one moves through generations, the perception of family influence is different. For the second generation (and beyond) Mexican Americans whom we talked to, parents and grandparents were definitely an inspiration, but they were also facilitators into a more formal system" (Sinta 2020). The passage of information between family members, mentors, and individually-motivated causes was briefly mentioned throughout this collection but not analyzed in depth. Sinta is the second scholar in mariachi to help untangle oral histories from both males and females. Her work followed Candida Jáquez's dissertation, which uncovered performed notions of tradition (Jáquez 2002). Other scholars have worked to collect oral histories from male or coed mariachis, emphasizing the *machismo* culture of mariachi and not giving attention to how females participate in the migration of mariachi knowledge (Rojas 2012, Pearlman 1988, Moreno 2005). Mariachera pioneer oral histories have been extensively collected by a research trio composed of Leonor Xóchitl Pérez, the late United States mariachera pioneer Laura Sobrino (1954-2015), and technology specialist Nancy Muñoz (Clark 2020). This

trio has been working since the summer of 2007 in the mariachi field collecting data from various male and female mariachis (Muñoz 2020). I build on their endeavors to gather oral histories beyond the mariachi femenil pioneers with the voices of their following generations. What is particularly unique to my study is that I also shine a spotlight specifically on the contributions of women from mariachis femeniles to the migration of mariachi knowledge between Mexico, the United States, and specific points of knowledge production in mariachi. Because mariachi is an oral tradition, or a musical tradition that is not written down but passed down from generation to generation via memorization and listening techniques. Oral histories involve the transfer of knowledge beyond and through different types of borders. According to Deep Listening pioneer and American experimental composer Pauline Oliveros, “[t]he word “border” is ambiguous as it can be a noun such as a line that divides two areas geographical, physical, political, theoretical, or virtual, or it can be a verb” (Published 2006, published collection 2010, 171). Oliveros elaborates on what a sonic border can mean beyond a geographic border that separates what recently has deeply divided the United States from Mexico—the U.S.-Mexico border wall. Oliveros proposes that sound, which includes music, voice, and even the cry of a baby when they take their first breath, transcends borders, saying

The rise of technology in ancient music-making led to the creation of instruments like bone flutes [...] These instruments are an extension of human body vibrations to instrumental bodies. The body may be connected to the instrument by the mouth, hands, or feet, and it may also resonate with the sounds of the instrument, blurring (but not eliminating) the border between humans and technology (ibid, 172).

Instruments—both voice and mariachi instruments alike—are extensions of the body that blur borders instead of concretely defining human and sound. Music can surpass the border of human-and-instrument. Therefore, if sound can surpass humans and instruments, then sound can cross geographic and ideological borders without consequence, blurring the concreteness of these borders. This means that sound, the tradition of sound, and therefore culture can migrate between geographic spaces as much as sonic spaces. The migration of sound, culture, and tradition is a prominent theme that developed in my interviews with my 28 participants. However, as these mariacheras traveled between Mexico and the United States, between different school districts, between mariachi mentors, and within family conflicts, the acquisition of mariachi knowledge no longer *only* occurred orally but was also attained through fixed mediums like CDs, records, or educational mariachi curricula. This indicates that mariachi is becoming a hybridized form of knowledge, transmissible both orally and through written notation. Seventeen of the 28 interview participants had some sort of mariachi education from public school (written mediums) and 25 received some sort of group mentorship upon entering mariachi (oral mediums). The other three mariachis practiced and learned privately by themselves before exploring entering mariachi ensembles, using the following fixed mediums: CDs, film, YouTube, cassette tapes, records, magazines, history books, and notated methodology books. Nineteen participants were immersed in mariachi at a young age through education, mentorship, socialization, or media. This immersion oftentimes came from family necessity or a lack of family childcare resources, exposing the young females to mariachi performances or practices while one or both parents participated around or worked in the mariachi gig scene or professional circuit.

Mariacheras in the U.S. Today

This section focuses on interviews from the 28 women I interviewed for this study. My respondents reveal how these early representations of mariachi during *La Epoca de Oro* have made it a difficult for women to join this music profession. As mariacheras participate in the movement and migration of oral knowledge in public and private spheres, these women have also been made to feel that they do not belong in this profession. While they all expressed an initial desire to join mariachi, entering the world of mariachi helped them learn about gendered dynamics of the practice. Machismo and questionable reputation associated with the world of mariachis are cited by family members as reasons to disapprove of their daughters' desires to join mariachis. Despite the multiple barriers that originate for historical stigma attached to the profession, the women I interviewed told me that they learned mariachi at home and through formal mentorships, granting them access into the male-dominant practice.

Facilitating Knowledge Movement

Based on personally conducted interviews and archival research, I categorize this migration of knowledge into two primary categories. These two groups describe how knowledge is passed down from one informed mariachi to a lesser informed mariachi or new mariachi. In this chapter, mariachi is a space where parents and mentors can help women assimilate into the tradition, but also recreate systems of gendered tension, resulting in a movement of gendered knowledge that informs and creates a resistance to genre assimilation some of my interlocutors

encountered. Knowledge migrates between these bodies (mainly) via oral transmission. Knowledge transmission and subsequent dissemination occurs in both the private sphere of the family setting and the public mentor/mentee sphere of mariachi education. Knowledge-transmitting family members and mariachi educators who participate in moving mariachi tradition between bodies places them in a position of power, where they can enforce or teach cultural customs or behaviors that inform the female body how it should behave in the male-dominant mariachi performance setting. These individuals become cultural knowledge gatekeepers. The first category of knowledge movement occurs in family capacities where encouragement, discouragement, and family ties to the mariachi informed my interlocutor's eventual entry into the professional mariachi femenil circuit. This is called the private sphere. The second category of knowledge attainment occurs in the public sphere. This occurs through mentorship, where group or one-on-one mentorship helped mariacheras enter professional mariachi settings outside of the family unit.

These models can work within each other, especially within mariachi group dynamics or larger family patterns. An example of this lies within Flor de Toloache's story of mariachi knowledge acquisition from Mexico to the United States. Band co-founder Mireya Ramos holds deep mariachi connections in her family. Her grandmother and grandaunts, Josephina, Clara, and Elisa, sang mariachi boleros for radio stations and their families before they came to the U.S. from Mexico (Llamoca 2019). These matriarchs passed their love of music, and specifically mariachi, down to Ramos's father, who was an active mariachi musician from Mexico as well. When Ramos' father's family came to the U.S. and Mireya was born in California, raised in

Puerto Rico, her father played mariachi music around her throughout her young life. Mireya learned how to play classical-style violin but was also constantly exposed to mariachi music performance practices before she moved to New York to pursue her musical career (ibid, Kal 2022).

After gigging in coed mariachis on the East coast, Mireya Ramos decided to branch off from coed mariachis, expressing discomfort with the machismo scene she was surrounded by in the genre (Jezebel 2017, Jazz 2020). Her solution to her discomfort: forming Flor de Toloache. Following

Ramos was able to master mariachi music, in part, because of her family immersion, where mariachi tradition was passed from her grandmother and grandaunts to her father, and from her father to Ramos herself. Ramos then asked Shea Fiol and Julie Acosta if they wanted to form this mariachi femenil with her, and she passed her knowledge along to other women who joined mariachi in the United States. Shea Fiol had no experience in mariachi, but was already an accomplished blues, folk, and rock vocalist and guitarist (Jezebel 2017) interested in learning mariachi music. Ramos served as a mentor alongside accomplished mariachi Don Tonio to Fiol, where Fiol “had to listen carefully to the way Mireya would sing and our mentor Don Tonio would take us on gigs and we really had to tune into the specifics and the nuances of the mariachi sound.” Fiol spoke on behalf of Acosta as well, who attested that she had limited mariachi experience upon entering mariachi—Acosta listened to mariachi, but did not play it often (Lucar 2019). Fiol’s discussion of taking extra time to seek out small “specifics” and “nuances” of mariachi attests to her depth of immersion in mariachi, defining her not only as an

individual who was taught by Ramos, a byproduct of multigeneration mariachi knowledge migration, but also as a mentee and a seeker of knowledge. Flor de Toloache as a group encapsulates how mariachi groups can incorporate various levels of knowledge movement into an all-female ensemble. For specific participants that I worked with, some were only impacted in family settings whereas others were only impacted in mentor settings as we will see below.

Plática Findings: Women Don't Belong

“...a *princesa como* myself shouldn't be associated with *lo ambiente*”

In one of my interviews, a guitarrónist named Kenzie told me she grew up in Sonora, Mexico until she turned 13. Before coming to the United States, she never understood why she could not join a mariachi band, recounting:

“Siempre estaba llorando, queria canta con los mariachis pero mis abuelos me dijeron solamente hombres tocan los instrumentos con tequila y un tambaleo.”	“I was always crying, I wanted to sing with the mariachis but my grandparents told me only men played the instruments, with tequila and a stagger.”
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Kenzie watched *Allá en el Rancho Grande* and sang both the song and the movie's famous mariachi songs through her childhood happily, expecting that she, too, would be a mariachi performer. Her grandparents worried about the drunken male mariachi stereotype, barring her from entering the ensemble by telling her she did not have access to join a mariachi at all. The

tag at the end-- “with tequila and a stagger,” indicates that mariachi is not *just* a male-only genre, but is male-only because of its alcohol-based stereotypes Mulholland points out.¹⁵ Another interlocutor named Ceci told me a story from her days as an elementary schooler when she aspired to be a mariachi player. When she was in the third grade and expressed interest in playing guitar in the United States, she was discouraged by family members from entering the field of mariachi. She informed me “My uncles would never let me join mariachi when I was young. They told me there was too much *cervezas*, there was too much *cochinos* and a *princesa como* myself shouldn’t be associated with *lo ambiente*.” Her uncles viewed her as a pure “princess” who should not associate herself with impurities like the foul-mouthed, alcohol-stereotyped mariachi. Leonor Xóchitl Pérez recounts that at her young age, her family dynamics discouraged her from becoming a mariachi. She reminisces about her past, saying

We never listened to mariachi music as I was growing up because it was secular and had an association with the bar scene, thereby making it “worldly” or “*del mundo*” and unsuitable for entertainment in our Christian home (Pérez 2002, 147).

Upon her entry into the mariachi, her Christian father believed she was being groomed for street life. He associated the mariachi with “*el ambiente bajo*.”¹⁶ Pérez’s father held her to a standard called *marianismo*, a set of values based on an idealization of the Virgin Mary. According to these values, women are expected to be pure and holy, remain chaste until marriage, and maintain good relations with men as wives, daughters, or sisters. Pérez’s recollection inadvertently

¹⁵ See David Trouille (2021) and Toxqui (2015) for information about masculine sociality, affect, and stereotypes about drinking.

¹⁶ “sketchy” scene or environment

categorizes mariachi as an impure genre of music—not holy, “worldly.” Because of the genre’s adjacency to “*el ambiente bajo*,” founder of the eponymous ensemble Mariachi Veronica Robles, vocalist, and multi-instrumentalist Veronica Robles was also discouraged from joining mariachi by her stepfather who was a musician and well-aware of the stereotypes, tendencies, and formalities of mariachi performance in Mexico. When alcohol-based stereotypes exacerbated by *La Epoca de Oro* became increasingly visible in the 1950s, some study participants were faced with difficult decisions: should they enter the mariachi and sacrifice their social status as a woman adhering to *marianismo* standards of femininity? Many participants were met with familial resistance because their families worried about their innocence when the women would eventually confront stereotypical *machista* behavior popularly seen in film, or in some cases, by family themselves.

Interestingly, the bar scene did encourage one of my participants to enter the mariachi scene at a later, college age. Lily, initially a classically trained violinist, told me

But my aunt owned a bar and obviously I couldn't go... I was only 18 and I couldn't go by myself. But my parents took me to hear the mariachis, since it was my aunt's bar, they took me to hear the mariachis and I was just 'bit.' I loved it. (Anonymous 2021)

Lily displayed a joy from her bar-related experience that helped her enter the mariachi world.

Though she did not talk about family or friend approval of her joining the very mariachi she heard at this bar, she told me how she was openly received into this group. She was sized for a *traje*¹⁷ for free, given her *traje* for free, and continued to regularly gig, starting her now

¹⁷ Mariachi suit. Her suit, like most *trajes*, was custom made as well.

successful career with this group. The bar and alcohol “*ambiente bajo*” did not make this a group that drank nor did it prevent this interlocutor from entering the mariachi.

Though *La Epoca de Oro* did oftentimes depict mariachis as drunken musicians, stereotyping them negatively as inherently inebriated, some mariachis, unfortunately, fall into this category of drunkenness in the *traje*. Rarely seen now, drinking in a *traje* is seen as a disrespectful act to the tradition of mariachi. Today, professionals work to uphold a sense of professionalism in their respective gigging workplaces (Shea 2022). If females were socially discouraged by mariachi’s association with “*ambiente bajo*,” which could potentially interfere with their *marianismo* image, how did females enter the male-dominated genre?

Private Sphere: Learn Mariachi at Home

In family settings, the passage of mariachi knowledge between grandparent to parent, parent to child can simply occur, or it can be complicated by family discouragement, cousin encouragement, or varied family talents. Though not all mariachi knowledge was intergenerationally passed between family members to my participants, family did play a large role in how knowledge was or was not attained for mariacheras. Family support in the male-dominated field allows mariacheras to have a safe space of comfort and refuge in their own culture. This is prominent when individuals who participate in mariachi exclude or marginalize women who do not conform to their social expectations of what a mariachera should be. I will address this issue in the following section of this paper. The movement of knowledge around multiple participants centered within and around the family unit, either intergenerationally

(musical talent or knowledge passed) or supportively, primarily via the matriarchal line of their family trees. Fathers were responsible for passing along firsthand mariachi knowledge—how to play, strum, or dress—where mothers raised children in mariachi environments, which is just as important. If a child is exposed at a young age to any form of singing or recorded music, like a mother singing mariachi music, then the child is more likely to be able to pick up on stylistic nuances of the genre they grew up listening to, setting them up for early success in that genre.¹⁸

One example of how gender roles are learned within private sphere family dynamics comes from Taylor's experience in mariachi. Taylor's father learned about mariachi after he moved to the United States from Mexico. She recounts that "He visited family back home quite a bit, they showed him how to play, they reminded him of stories from Mexico" that helped him learn about his own roots in mariachi and his own connection to Mexico. This helped move mariachi from Mexico to the United States, allowing him to become a professional mariachi. He then passed this information and tradition to her, which impacted her positively, as he taught her how to play guitar and sing professionally. As knowledge moved between countries and family generations, the patriarch was able to facilitate this interlocutor's knowledge attainment, which "established fundamental mariachi basics" that blossomed into her successful career in a mariachi femenil.

¹⁸ According to musicologist Kathryn Marsh (2008), children are able to flexibly learn different genre styles if they are immersed in the genres by listening to them.

Taylor, who hails from the Southwest region of the United States, mentioned how “Things have just kind of been verbally passed down” in her family’s mariachi practices. After her father learned about mariachi against her grandmother’s wishes, she said

But, dad grew up listening to mariachi music when his family came here, to the States.

Um ... so I guess ... She helped bring mariachi from Mexico to the U.S. by playing you know 45s¹⁹ that she brought from Mexico to you know kind of bring a piece of home with her to, you know, make that transition a little easier for the family.

Here we see an interesting inclusion of family participation in the transmission of mariachi knowledge: the use of recorded music. By crediting her grandmother as a carrier of tradition by immigrating with fixed traditional objects like records, we can see that her grandmother may not be a mariachi practitioner, but is a carrier of tradition because of her choice to connect the sounds of “home,” Mexico, with recorded mariachi media.

When I interviewed Veronica Robles, she fondly recounted how she was exposed to mariachi at an early age:

I grew up in a traditional mariachi community in Mexico in Plaza Garibaldi. So I was not directly connected with them, but my grandmother used to work there, and she worked there all her life ... And so anyway, growing up as close to my grandmother, I used to be with her a lot. I spent a lot of time with her in Garibaldi and had the opportunity to learn the tradition from the elders, that, you know, had to pass this tradition for generations.

And of course, [it was] males mainly [who passed this tradition down].

¹⁹ Vinyl record

Robles was exposed to mariachi at a young age, learning about the traditions and customs because of her grandmother's work in Plaza Garibaldi.²⁰ Robles mentions how mariachi is passed between "generations" of mariachis, referencing how the oral tradition itself is mainly passed down by men to men. Crediting her grandmother, Robles' exposure to mariachi was not because she was initially brought to mariachi and taught by a man, but because she was allowed to immerse herself in the tradition by her grandmother (and mother, discussed later in the interview). Her family's support of her interest in mariachi, and especially in watching the mariachis in Plaza Garibaldi, is what helped Robles learn and attain knowledge from the tradition, enabling her to potentially move this information from Mexico to the United States.

Robles is an interesting case in terms of intergenerational family knowledge structures, however, her stepfather discouraged her from entering the mariachi as a musician. He himself was a musician and associated mariachis with the "easy life" of prostitution, inebriation, and gambling. He did not want Robles, as an innocent young woman, to associate herself with this type of lifestyle by performing with mariachis in Plaza Garibaldi. His discouragement of her participation displays how the father figure in her family attempted to police Robles' appearance of social purity nearby and around the Plaza. With her grandmother encouraging her to help support a mariachi in the plaza who was short a singer, and her father asking her not to go, she was only allowed to learn the vocal tradition of mariachi in Mexico as a woman. After she

²⁰ This area is a famous place where many mariachis come to perform and attempt to make a name for themselves in the professional mariachi circuit in Mexico.

immigrated to New York she was allowed to take up multiple instruments and learn how to play mariachi instrumentally.

Much like Robles, Leonor Xóchitl Pérez was also discouraged in her family from performing mariachi, where her parents deemed the tradition “*del mundo*,”²¹ and her mother worried about her virginity “*Tenía miedo que te vayas a ir con un hombre* [I was afraid that you'd go with a man],” characterizing mariachi not only as a space of impurity for women in the eyes of some of my interlocutor’s experiences but as a space of deviance (Pérez 2002, 151). This failing support system put Pérez in a difficult position, lending to a larger, systemic “tradition of silence” that is starting to be unpacked in this thesis-- where Pérez is caught in the crossroads of family expectation. Trying to attain knowledge and facilitate the movement of mariachi tradition between multiple spheres of class and cultural barriers, like her landmark mariachi work with “Viva el Mariachi Femenil!” did in 2014, Pérez notes from her 1995 observations joining UCLA’s mariachi program “Although women played in mariachi in greater numbers, and their participation was not as strongly contested, their influence on the music and its performance was greatly limited” but this is not the case anymore with the rest of the participants I interviewed.

Immigrant mothers in the United States, whether deemed undocumented or documented in the eyes of the United States government, are in the unique position to potentially serve as female role models for their daughters in mariachi settings. Larger structural issues like citizenship status or family income may impact how my participants were able (or not able) to

²¹ “Worldly.”

attain certain degrees of mariachi knowledge from their mothers (Lo 2016).²² Knowledge movement between mother and child is oftentimes studied in caretaking capacities, and interestingly, knowledge attainment from mothers was cited to occur at young ages by my participants. Whether or not these moments of knowledge transmission were in moments of caretaking is a place where other scholars may find fruitful research. In one example, we can see how a seasoned vocalist and violinist, Paloma, was impacted by her mother's tutelage at a young age. Paloma's mother, though not a formally trained mariachi or musician, taught her how to sing in the operatic style of a mariachi, encouraging her to project her voice with clarity and confidence.

I know I definitely took kind of like my singing style from her as well. She would, like, try to show me how she would do it. I like, I never really got it until probably later in life. To be like "you have to throw your voice. Throw it up, like you have to, have it like a ring" and that's about what I'm doing now. [laughter] and ... I think I got it now.

Musical knowledge traveled from her mother, an immigrant to the United States, to Paloma in the form of musical training. This type of early-age vocal pedagogy gave Paloma a leg up in the field of mariachi, helping her to become a successful professional in the field at a young age.

A mariachi violinist and vocalist named Rachel talked to me about how her mom was an untrained singer as well but sang to her frequently growing up. She happily recalled

²² See Leisy Abrego (2014) or Jason de Leon (2015) for further discussions on citizenship, legality, family survival structures, and more.

My mom was a singer, and she didn't, you know, sing for a living or anything like that, but she loved mariachi music. And I was a baby, you know. And I would hear her sing every single day, and this is how I grew up learning the music.

Her early exposure to mariachi by her mother gave her a jump start in her mariachi education as a child in the United States, as she entered a mariachi class at the early age of eleven. The passage of knowledge in Rachel's case between mother and daughter happened throughout her entire life, as mariachi music was a normalized part of her household, credited to her mother's singing. Now Rachel is a successful mariachi educator and mariachera, working to include women in the practice.

Family group singing was another way knowledge moved from family members to two of my participants. Participants recalled singing karaoke with their families, and when aunts, uncles, or cousins joined in the family affair and heard these participants sing with their mothers, in operatic, well-supported and projected styles, they were met with suggestions that they were "meant," "built for," or "should be" in mariachi because of how their mothers influenced their singing. One "was asked to step up because my mom never had the chance to be a real mariachera, the men were not great to her when she tried. So, it was my turn to step up." This interlocutor's mother was not described as a trained mariachi but an aspiring mariachi, and after this interview in follow up conversations, she did reveal that her mother now believed she could try being a mariachi, if this interlocutor passed on knowledge back to her from her own formal training within her mariachera career.

Public Sphere: Learning Mariachi via Schooling and Mentorships

The second structure of knowledge migration that I refer to is attained through mentorship, but it must be broken down into insider-outsider relationships within the culture of mariachi. The culture of mariachi itself is much like western art music: performers are considered insiders who hold vast amounts of knowledge and prefer to keep this knowledge within their own social circles as a classist practice. In mariachi, classism may not be a deciding factor in how oral traditions are passed between giving and receiving knowledge between mentors and mentees, but windows of opportunity are quite limited depending on who knows whom and on word-of-mouth knowledge transmission. Mentors are teachers, educators, or cultural gatekeepers and mariachis who have typically held multiple years of experience in the field. Mentees are individuals who are novices to the field of mariachi. Oftentimes, mentees already have established connections in mariachi— be it in educational curriculum opportunities, family friend connections with band members, or access to private lessons with mariachi professionals. Though there are few professional mariachis femeniles in the United States in comparison to their male counterparts even today in 2022, my collected data shows that public schooling, or, at least, mentor-mentee relationships, were foundational to the successes of a large part of my participants' knowledge acquisition. These relationships are also foundational to what is currently understood as a central mission for the majority of my participants: to educate more young girls so that they, too, can be professional mariachis when they grow up.

One of the 17 mariacheras who received formal public school mariachi education told me that “growing up, it was common practice to be in mixed [male-female] mariachi ensembles.” A

trompetista nicknamed “Joya” shared her “culture shock” with me once she left high school and entered college mariachi bands, saying: “I wasn’t told by any of my teachers that mariachi is usually just guys. It was really discouraging you know, I just felt frustrated.” In fact, while 17 of the 28 participants did acquire some degree of instrumental and/or vocal mariachi training, historical information of mariachi tradition, and histories of Mexico, 14 of the 17 reported that they were not informed about what the “real world,” or the professional mariachi circuit, looked like until they graduated high school or started gigging at younger ages. It was male dominated. While musicological information was passed between mentor and mentee, there seemed to be a large information gap between mentor and mariachera circuit reality education for these participants.

Tracking knowledge acquisition specifically retained from mentors, I spoke with a few women about how they tended to receive mariachi education. Naomi, a mariachi in Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000 spoke about how she was “lucky to have a school district that had an established mariachi program” growing up. She initially felt discouraged moving from her middle school mariachi to her high school mariachi because she did not see a lot of female role models in professional mariachi. Feeling like it was potentially a dead-end extracurricular activity until she saw Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles and came across a female mentor who encouraged her to keep up with her performance, she is now an established violinist in Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000. The transfer of knowledge from mass media’s coverage of Mariachi Reyna to inform Naomi that she could have a career in mariachi enabled her to continue her mariachi

studies and eventually become a mariachi teacher herself, now passing on mariachi information to children around her.

Another professional mariachera vocalist, Emerald, and I were talking about my participation in mariachi ensembles and how I accidentally served as a mentor to her. We joined the same mariachi program in college together before she branched off gigging with a group from our collegiate program. My father, Jose Flores, ran the mariachi program (and he still does to this day) at my undergraduate school, so I decided to continue playing mariachi with him while earning credit for his class. When I asked how she became a professional mariachi, she exclaimed

It actually is because of you. I think you, remember right? [laughter] Yeah! Well, just for your records, just to recap pretty much, I think when I was doing or starting to do the SAI stuff with you, we were talking and then like you told me “oh, my dad runs the mariachi program here” and I was like “nooo ...” and you were like “yeah!” And so you got me in touch with him. And that's this kind of how it went. [Both laugh] And it was cool.

Reflecting on my mentor role with her, I honestly did not realize how I influenced her entry into mariachi, I was just excited to promote the establishment of a mariachi on my undergraduate campus. Originally a classically trained musician, this interlocutor learned a great deal about mariachi from my father, a professional mariachi as well, who taught her how to belt, sound gritos, shift her arm weight on her violin to perform in a mariachi style, tradition histories, sociopolitical genre issues, and more. His transfer of knowledge to her was primarily in the teacher-student classroom and occasionally during university-sanctioned events. As she, a few

students, and I eventually started gigging outside of class, we then taught each other what we knew about mariachi, serving as mentors and mentees to each other in all-female settings quite frequently, but not exclusively.

Instances of participants transmitting instead of receiving knowledge to facilitate the migration of mariachi's oral history were more prevalent throughout my interlocutor's recollections of their experiences in mariachi femenil settings. Founder of Mariachi Mariposas, Mayra Garcia, talks about how she was a teacher in one of the first programs in La Jolla County, Texas to help establish a mariachi curriculum for youth in her school district. Excited to help disseminate and carry on the tradition of mariachi beyond her personal knowledge, she talked about the impact mariachi programs in La Jolla County had on young musicians:

And so, then from here, this is how most schools started to, I guess you know, serve as an inspiration to their districts to start growing their programs and embed them in the curriculum. So yeah, by the time I went in, I think the program had been established already for about five to six years. (Mayra García, 2019)

García's direct participation in La Jolla's mariachi program initiative has reached out to hundreds of children in a state where mariachi thrives in competition and allows youth to create educational pathways to their cultural heritage and future careers in Texas. Acting as a mariachera mentor to her students, she then created Mariachi Mariposas to give women professional mariachi opportunities beyond public education, beyond high school.

After Veronica Robles learned how to play multiple mariachi instruments and immersed herself in various dance styles from Mexico and Latin America, she recently opened the

Veronica Robles Cultural Center in Boston, hoping to move her knowledge of mariachi attained from Mexico and varied immersions to the youth in her community. Having already established her mariachi femenil, Mariachi Veronica Robles, and striving to empower women to have a voice in the male-dominated field, this cultural center is a high point in her knowledge transmission career. Per its mission statement, her center seeks to “promote Latino arts and cultures as an engine [mode] for stronger communities and economic growth,” and her primary mode of communication with her community—mariachi (Veronica 2022). In my various interactions with Robles, she has served as a mentor to me, too, helping me uncover information on questions I had about costuming and traditions in mariachi I could not necessarily find in various research journals. She has served as an inspirational point of contact for me to spread information as a mariachera myself.

Frequently, participants identified as simultaneous mentors and mentees of mariachi knowledge movement within their communities. Three participants who identify as mariachi music educators spoke of the necessity to learn how to play every mariachi instrument in order to teach a mariachi ensemble. Isla, a trumpet player and educator of 16 years, commented “I really wanted to learn them, the other instruments I didn’t know, um ... I mean, in order for me to teach my students.” In this single sentence, she displayed how she embodied a point of knowledge acceptance *and* dissemination. Not only did she want to teach, but she learned more about mariachi in order to teach more mariachi, fueling her student’s love for the practice. Her work in “fueling” the movement of this oral transmission, much like the other two educators who spoke

of similar circumstances, is an action of purposeful knowledge movement for the longevity of mariachi.

Recall our discussion of how Mayra García initially was a facilitator of mariachi knowledge, especially as she formed Mariachi Mariposas. In continued conversation and discussion with her, García revealed that she also learned a lot from the women she recruited from her high school program that ended up in Mariachi Mariposas. She had to learn how to navigate her community's needs in a mariachi market that demanded male-dominant mariachis. She learned how to promote her mariachi so it was successful in Texas. Following years of hard work with her mariachi, she learned as the group's founder how to help empower herself and her members within her community while teaching her members how to navigate the professional mariachi market as well. By residing in a space where she received and gave information about this oral tradition, García also helped to keep mariachi performance alive in an all-female setting in Texas.

Mariacheras still work to practice societal equilibrium so they can profit *and* socially navigate the male-dominant mariachi market, as seen in Mariachi Divas de Cindy Shea's case. In our interview, Cindy Shea noted that she does not encounter a lot of issues with her male counterparts in the professional mariachi; rather, she struggled to acquire mariachi knowledge as a mariachi outsider because she came from a jazz salsa trumpet playing background. It took her a bit of time to figure out that, in the mariachi femenil she joined, solos are typically not incorporated into mariachi songs as they are in jazz. She eventually left the group she could not solo in, creating the Mariachi Divas de Cindy Shea we know today. This allowed her to take on

mariachi tradition she learned in her younger years while giving her and her Divas a space to express themselves in the male-dominant tradition, practicing societal equilibrium by making their own space where they can musically express themselves the way they need to while making ends meet in the competitive musical market.

Concluding Remarks

Since *La Epoca de Oro*, mariachi has been displayed to the world as a *macho* practice following the practice's nationalization. Popular depictions of the drunk *machista* mariachi created an imaginary social type that mariachis were associated with: "*el bajo ambiente*." When considering how women wanted to enter the mariachi tradition, social expectations like *marianismo* and *malinchismo* colored how their families encouraged or discouraged their interactions with the mariachi. As popular depictions of the drunken mariachi influenced family understandings of the mariachi practice, they also influenced how this study's participants were informed about the mariachi's gendered dynamics when initially entering the mariachi world. As these women negotiated their femininity entering the mariachi circuit, finding new ways to attain oral knowledge in public and private spheres despite the many gendered barriers they encountered, their understanding of the mariachi was informed, in part, by their initial entrance into the genre by their families and mentors. In our *pláticas*, these women also spoke about how the imaginary social type—that of a pure, tradition-keeping *marianismo* practitioner—translated into how they were expected to dress themselves, fix their hair, and wear their makeup on stage as mariacheras. Despite their association with a stereotypically drunken, *machista* setting they

were warned about in their youth, many of my participants still had to overemphasize their adherence to tradition in order to be a professional mariachera, as seen in chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

VISUAL SIGNIFIERS OF FEMININITY

This chapter discusses how my participants negotiate and understand how they are valued in the mariachi community based on their visual appearances in the mariachi femenil. The first half of this chapter addresses how mariacheras navigate and resignify parts of their *trajes*, carving out their own space in the professional mariachi community. The second half of this chapter breaks down how these examples of visual navigation are difficult feats, as mariacheras' choices to adhere to or deviate from an unspoken *traje* dress code are met with audience and *machista* critique. Visual femininity is expressed and negotiated, occurring in response to multiple factors that influence mariachera's and mariachis femeniles' livelihood and wellbeing.

Mary Lee Mulholland's 2013 article "A Beautiful Thing: Mariachi and Femininity in Jalisco, Mexico" unpacks how mariachis femeniles are described as "una cosa bonita," or "a beautiful thing." Where Jalisco beauty is the centerpiece of Mulholland's research, the focus of mine is to investigate how these mariacheras view themselves as musicians who navigate their femininity in complex visual ways in response to how they are visually valued in the male-dominant genre. Mulholland's fieldwork yielded the following finding:

When I asked fans, male mariachis, and local experts about how they felt about women playing in mariachis, most replied with the same approving response: mariachis femeniles are 'una cosa bonita' (a beautiful thing), (Mulholland 363, 2013)

Thus many people thought of women in mariachis—whether they be mariacheras or mariachis femeniles—as beautiful *things*. While the mariachi femenil could be understood as a

phenomenon, therefore a “thing,” an individual mariachera deemed a “thing” is objectified. Mulholland continues to detail how women are principally visually valued, not aurally valued in mariachi settings, as she cites how Mariachi Perlitas Tapatias describe themselves: “Full of beauty, sensibility, and affection, these women win applause wherever they perform. To listen and see Las Perlitas Tapatias is always a great spectacle.” Later she mentions that “As much of the success of the female mariachi is situated in their presentation of dependability, there is a focus on maintaining a sober, reliable, and clean professional image,” once again stressing the importance of the *image* and upkeep of mariacheras or mariachis femeniles. What is clear, however, is that her complication of how women are visually valued and how they are aurally valued in the community are inherently linked. Here, she states

To a lesser extent, women are also criticized for choosing such an unfeminine vocation...At the heart of the critique, that women are merely ‘pretty things’ who ‘just carry their instruments,’ is that they play ‘without flavour.’ (Mulholland 368, 2013).

The term “plays into Jalisco’s claim to the land of beautiful women but also reproduces and represents traditional and conservative notions of Mexican femininity such as piety, stability, sacrifice, and reliability” and “is also the basis for excluding women from an authentic performance of a Mexican national symbol of machismo” in mariachi settings (Mulholland 2013 363, 368). As Mulholland critiques how women are viewed as “Just a Beautiful Thing,” by “fans, male mariachis, and local experts” she resignifies²³ the phrase in the final sentence of her

²³ Resignification is a term created by Chicana feminist, Aida Hurtado (2020). The term describes how a minority can create a new, positive meaning from a sign or symbol which has been used to hurt their identity. Many facets of mariachi culture hurt their identity, like being policed in *marianismo/malinchismo* social type values. Recognizing the complexities inherent to being “othered,” harmful stereotypes blossom from dichotomies mariacheras are

article: “Rather, they [mariacheras] are beautiful women enjoying new freedoms as artists while challenging, appropriating, and invading a macho space” (Mulholland 2013, 363,370). The women I worked with were quick to shut down discussion about wardrobe, wanting respect as *musicians*, saying that they are “more than just the *traje*.” They were tired of being “the showpiece,” “only eye candy,” or “just a beautiful” thing. They wanted to be heard, not seen as interesting only because they are a *female* mariachi. Yet, as women are visually prioritized in both my study and Mulholland’s, I seek to add onto the concept of “a beautiful thing” with Glenda Flores’ 2011 study on racialized tokenism.

Racialized tokenism describes women in varied fields of male-dominated middle- and upper-class work—like law, medical school, or education—are excluded from the workplace. Here, she parses out how women of color are tokenized not only because they are female, but because they hold a minority racial identity or ethnicity in society. Glenda Flores’ (2011) discussion of intersectional minorities, also known as multiply oppressed peoples, parses out how women of color are specifically ostracized in places of work. Mariacheras and mariachis femeniles are othered in the professional mariachi circuit, where gender on top of varied minority statuses meet in the mariachi setting. It is here in the mariachi femenil that mariacheras and the ensemble itself is the subject of racialized tokenism, where they are excluded from mariachi because of their intersectional minority status. The phrase “a beautiful thing,” although it recognizes the contributions women bring to the mariachi world, also holds the same linguistic

positioned within. Resignification mediates how mariacheras can control their own image and narrative against the status quo they are immersed in.

power to oust women, tokenizing them not only as an object, but as a multiply oppressed ensemble or individual operating in a larger, male-dominant socioeconomic structure. As I use the term “beautiful thing,” I use it with the same affect as tokenism, where women are used because of their visual status in the mariachi world, an “other” to their male counterpart: gendered tokenism. While my perspective is not an authoritative contribution to the mariachi femenil field, I add to Mulholland’s discussion of Jalisco beauty synonymized with mariacheras, scratching the surface of a larger, systemic issue my participants discussed with me in the mariachi femenil world.

In this study, I break down how the very tradition that shapes who a mariachera is also creates systems of tension for mariacheras; the women who are negatively affected by these tensions resignify them to make them positive experiences. Aida Hurtado’s concept of resignification is derived from Chela Sandoval’s (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed*, which positions a multiply oppressed person, like a female member of a minority race, and shows how that person may empower themselves. Resignification is the process of taking an originally hurtful or oppressive symbol, action, or tradition, and giving it a new, positive connotation. Multiply oppressed individuals apply resignification, reclamation, disidentification, and other survival tactics to their environments around them in order to cope with their personal situation—these are learned skills. While the mariachera is already a Chicana or performing in a Chicana-associated role, these musicians had to learn how to adapt to their roles as “pretty things,” a stigma that male mariachis attach to them when they describe what mariacheras are good for (Flores 2011, Mulholland, 2007).

The process of disidentification occurs when a person rejects parts of their identity, deconstructing it and rebuilding it into a new identity. José Muñoz notes that “Disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy”; if an individual is tokenized and therefore a minority, they are able to disidentify as a survival tool (Muñoz 1999, 39). In the context of Mariachi performance, disidentification, music, and performance work together to reflect current realities and then distort them, transforming their meaning within the mariachis femeniles I worked with. Through subtle deconstructions of the historically tokenized mariachera, the women I studied with disidentify from pieces of male mariachi to create and project new spaces to perform in.

Lo Mexicano 1910 – mid-1930s

Although mariachis had performed for official functions under Porfirio Díaz in 1905 and in 1907, it was not until after the Revolution of 1910 that the mariachi became widely adopted as a symbol of nationalism. Since Álvaro Obregón’s administration (1920–24), Mexican presidents have used mariachi music for political events, with Lázaro Cárdenas being the first to officially subsidize it during his term (1934–40). Mexico’s multiple governing officials pushed to create an image of Mexican strength and unity to the world after Mexico ended its 100 years’ strife, hoping that foreign powers would associate Mexico with a stable sense of identity and internal peace would follow. General Porfirio Díaz's (1877–80, 1884–1911) nationalist (dictatorial) presidency especially pushed for a strong image of *lo mexicano* in the mariachi when he had dinner with Elihu Root. He personally decided that the mariachi’s typical *trajes de campesino*—

huaraches, *chilapeños cotónes*, and *calzones blancos*—were not suited for the importance of this event, so he had Mariachi Cuarteto Coculense wear *trajes de charro* instead. Now, the *traje de charro* is the visually distinctive factor that demarcates musicians as Mexican and as mariachis. It is a common belief that the *traje* makes mariachi mariachi and is therefore an integral part of the tradition and culture (Henriques 2006, Jáuregui 2007, Mulholland 2007, Moreno 2009, Ku 2015).

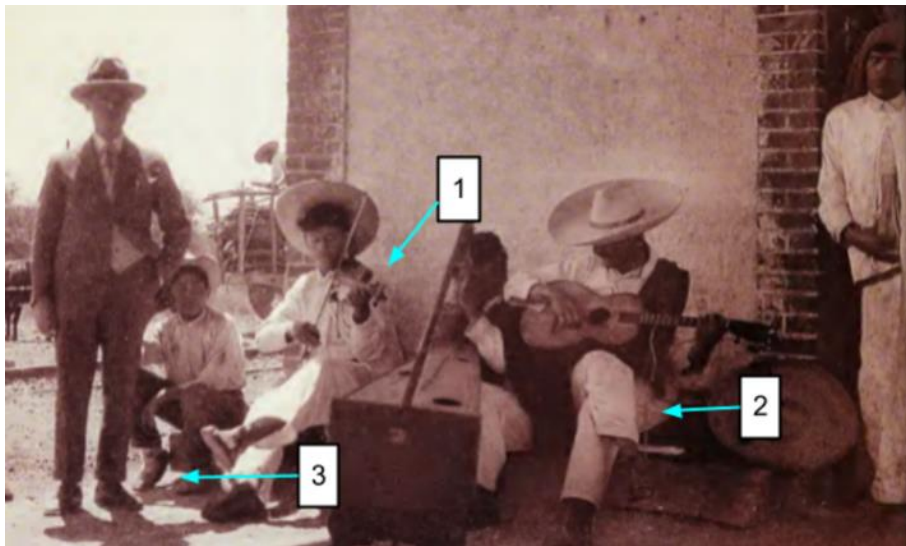


Figure 4. *Traje de Campesino (ropas calzones)*. From Jesús Jáuregui. 2007. “Mariachi en Zapotiltic, Jalisco.” In *El Mariachi: Símbolo Musical de México*. Spain: Taurus. Photo edited by Cameo Flores.



Figure 5. Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán Wearing their Trajes de Charros from Lozano, Mandi. 2019. “We’re Turning 25 in 2019!” On MariachiMusic.com. August 17, 2019. <https://mariachimusic.com/blog/2019/08/mariachi-vargas-extravaganza-celebrates-25-years-in-san-antonio/>.

Table 3. *Traje* Glossary

Glossary		
Spanish	English	Pin Number
<i>Trajes de campesino</i>	Peasant clothing	Figure 4
<i>Huaraches</i>	Sandals	3
<i>Chilapeños cotones</i>	White cotton shirt	1
<i>Calzones blancos</i>	White pants	2
<i>Trajes de charro</i>	Mariachi suit	Figure 5

On the Surface: Clothing and Appearance

Hair

Mariachis that wore full *trajes*—Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000, Mariachi Veronica Robles, Mariachi Pasi3n, and Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles all wore their hair in bun variants. Some buns were slicked back with gel. Others followed natural parts. Some were messy buns. All were low and middle placed to help accommodate sombreros or accentuate hair pieces. On the other hand, the mariachis who do not wear full *trajes*—Mariachi Divas, Mariachi Catrinas, and Flor de Toloache—all tend to wear their hair down uniformly, while some ensembles presented with mixed hairstyles. Interestingly, more individuals with short hair appeared in *traje* deviant groups than in groups who wore full *trajes* according to traditional expectations and enforcement.

During my own performances in mariachi ensembles, I conducted an experiment to see if I would be treated differently wearing a fake bun. Of the six performances I did, I wore the fake bun three times and my natural hair three times. I talked to audience members after each performance, in each of which I sang crowd pleasers women are usually asked to sing: “La Reyna es el Rey,” “Besame Mucho,” or “Volver Volver.” When I talked to both men and women with my bun, they praised my performances, commenting on my “elegance,” or “beauty.” After my natural hair performances, I received input like “So ... trying to blend in?” “How do the men feel, about, you know, [pointing to my hair],” or “you’re not like the other ladies!” None of these comments was provoked by my specifically asking about my appearance; rather, I simply struck up normal conversations about the venue space or how the audience member in question had

heard about the evening's performances. When unprovoked comments had to do with appearance, and especially when they interpreted my natural hair as breaking the "traditional" expectation of a bun-laden woman, I asked audience members how they understood femininity. The general consensus regarding hair upkeep for mariacheras was that women usually look "womanly" or like the "real, en serio [serious] deal" if they have the bun, fake or not. These visual expectations of feminine performance hold mariachis femeniles to a standard of long-hairedness. If they are to present as female mariachis, long hair (or simulating it with fake buns like my own) dictates how "female" a mariachera is perceived to be: the longer the hair, the more feminine and female she is.

Other women with short hair have had options to use berets, flower pins, or other decorations to remain included and coordinated with group accessories. While reports of audience and mariachi *machista* behavior in response to short haired mariacheras on and off stage has commonly occurred to women I have worked with for this project and throughout my mariachi career, this seemed to be a touchy subject for the women I talked to. Though I have made the active decision to discuss my story here, withholding names, venues, and audience member descriptions, this common *machista* behavior is reported to be prevalent today, but as Eden, a mariachi who has performed much of her life and is now in her 60s, put it, it is "not as bad as it used to be, you know ... back before we had mariachera role models to look up to."

When referring to "role models," this interlocutor refers to the pioneering mariachis of the U.S. mariachera world—Laura Sobrino, Rebecca Gonzales, Catherine Baeza, and Monica Treviño (Soto Flores xv, 2015). These mariachis took similar approaches to feminine

performance in mixed gender performance settings. Each woman entered the mariachi world as a singular woman in an all-male mariachi. For example, when Laura Sobrino became popular, it was not because she immediately started her own mariachi femenil and got famous. Rather, she found a way to enter into the male-centric arena and make a name for herself. By joining Mariachi Los Galleros de Pedro Rey, she quickly became nationally recognized for her virtuosic singing and violin performance, integrating herself into the mariachi as an instrumentalist as well.

When discussing what “traditional” hairstyle should look like for mariacheras, it was commonly agreed that hair slicked back into a bun is the typical “initial thought” that each woman visualized when discussing a mariachi’s hairstyle. When I inquired if this was a style that was actively discussed when women cut their hair or had different types of hair that may get damaged in the slicking process, I received multiple replies that suggested that this “initial thought” was also an “unspoken” ideal that mariacheras simply conformed to in traditional settings. Take, for example, Monica’s experience and discussion in the mariachi femenil circuit regarding hair slicking:

I think it’s kind of like an unspoken thing. I think more, it is spoken about when a group breaks from the traditional look. For example, I noticed, and I don’t know much about them, but I noticed that Divas often wear their hair down. With a maybe a flower on the side, and I think that [when] they do that, it seems like they do that purposefully, because also their sound is also breaking from tradition. They bring in nontraditional instruments, they break out different types of genres of songs too. And so I imagine that’s like their

whole concept, is kind of breaking that mold and stepping out of that that boundary. So I think it's more something like that happens, then, because we haven't had the talk about *how* we're going to look very traditional. We're always going to wear our hair back as something that just organically happens.

An example of what Monica describes—that non-traditional hair often coincides with non-traditional musical performance—is reflected in musical repertoire for Mariachi Divas, who break away from the common consensus that hair is typically tied back and also incorporate many genres into their repertoire. Traditional groups tie their hair into gelled buns and tend to only play canonic mariachi music, avoiding fusion or *popurrís* of single artists or other genres outside of the mariachi canon. Concepts of long, untied, or “loose” hair are typically understood as less moral, according to Mary Lee Mulholland, and as more mariachis break away from full *faldas*, *trajes*, entire faces of makeup, and more, this is seen as socially deviant (Mulholland 2013). Social deviance in the Chicana feminisms lens is an act of *malinchismo*, but also may be an act of modernity and while there is an “unspoken standard” of how a mariachera should look, if a mariachera is to adhere to more social norms like having her hair gelled and tied back into a bun, she is considered “more traditional.” What Monica described was the typical style of a contemporary mariachi, which may sometimes, but not all the time, allow female musicians to let their hair down literally and figuratively. This unspoken rule is indeed prominent in other interlocutor’s understandings of what a mariachera should look like. When I asked Nathaly, a seasoned violinist, vihuelist, and singer from the West Coast who has been exposed to coed mariachis for a large part of her mariachi career, she pointed to her hair neatly brushed out of her

face, situated in a bun stacked on the top of her head, and described hair etiquette as typically “pulled back like this, but lower.” In conversation with Mariachi Pasión about preparation for an acceptable visual feminine performance, hair placed in a bun was casually discussed as a normative behavior for traditional mariachi. Comments like “buns are normal” or “we [mariacheras] prefer buns” confirmed that placing hair in a bun in a traditional mariachi femenil setting is common enough in the community for this practice to be incorporated in common conversations I could overhear as a researcher when they interacted with each other.

Makeup

Makeup was a touchy topic when I interviewed mariacheras, as this colored how participants understood “performed,” but not necessarily *genuine*, femininity. I reached out to several groups in this thesis that had male leaders as well for this section to investigate how makeup application in an ensemble setting was determined. As was the case for every ensemble I talked with, the co-ed groups expressed an interest in maintaining some sort of group visual uniformity to indicate to their audience members that individual members are a part of a larger, cohesive unit. Where some all-female ensembles did not stress visual uniformity down to makeup application, other all-female groups “highly encouraged” the use of makeup and other all-female ensembles “required” women to wear one or more elements of makeup “to look like a traditional woman’s group” according to one interlocutor. Individual member responses to the use of makeup in mariachi varies from discomfort to enjoyment in the form of group bonding.

Groups who “require” makeup use are split into two categories: 1) women *must* wear some form of makeup of their own choice and 2) women *must* wear a full face of makeup with matching or similar coloration, right down to the same color lipstick. In the cases where mariachis femeniles were required to wear some form of makeup or the same type of makeup colors, leaders were more interested in maintaining “uniformity for uniformity’s sake.” One mariachi, Camila, felt that audiences expected mariachis to look a certain way and saw her peers dress and put makeup on. In our interview, she told me “it’s an unspoken then that we’re required to wear makeup to look similar, you know.” In our follow up interview, she told me “no one forced me to put it on, but it was another one of those ... you just do it or you’re different things. You don’t ... you, you want to avoid that sort of thing as a female.” The unspoken “requirement” that women must wear makeup in order to fit into a cohesive, uniform group setting shows that tradition and visual peer pressure dictate how this mariachi feels she must wear some form of makeup to be a mariachera. Amongst my findings, I found that mariachi ensemble leaders often coordinated makeup application choices. These leaders were musicians, while other times they were band managers or male mentors. Fernanda claimed that in her mariachi, her ensemble leader required all women to wear the same color lipstick. In our Zoom call, she explained that “wearing the red lip is just what we do... it gets all over my mouthpiece and ruins it but I just reapply. It’s gotta be for the look.” When I asked why she continued to use the red lipstick even though it degraded her mouthpiece, she responded that “it would be helpful if someone talked to me about looking the same instead of needing to look like what the people wanna, I guess, see.” Here, this interlocutor thought that she had to wear makeup to impress her

audience, but she was never told by any fellow mariachi that it was for ensemble uniformity. Straying from the status quo, the tradition predetermined by a vast amount of her peers in the mariachera setting, this interlocutor felt pressured to wear makeup for the sake of fitting in and playing the part of a mariachera. In this unnamed mariachi, an ensemble leader expected their members to coordinate make up coloration, not leaving room for this interlocutor to choose *not* to wear makeup.

Especially when required to wear specific makeup elements, the women I interviewed discussed how they felt unable to express autonomy over their own bodies when forced to wear makeup. Guitarrónist Rocio said it made her feel “not female, but a fake, you know, woman who can’t show herself from her own perspective.” Note that in this interlocutor account, she does not emphasize beauty but rather personal identity with the word “self,” where makeup transformed who she saw herself to be. Ceci told me “makeup is my mask, where on stage it looks like the happy mariachi, it’s covering the years of wrinkles brought to me from life’s difficulties. That’s no longer me.” Here, this interlocutor expressed a worry that a full face of makeup is a “young person’s game,” and when she wore makeup similar to the younger ladies in her group, she felt comradery, but she also felt unable to express the badge of honor from her older age—wrinkles. Her frustration caused an age-gap discomfort in her ensemble, leading her to feel isolated when makeup uniformity is supposed to give spectators the impression of group unity and cohesion. Because of the requirement to wear makeup for visual cohesion juxtaposed with the “masked” tension of not being able to be herself, Ceci was unable to feel comfortable performing on stage. Interestingly, when talking to two participants, even though they expressed emotional comfort

with wearing makeup, they did worry about chemical interactions with their skin causing physical discomfort after gigging so much.

One mariachi, Ann, told me that their band did not enforce or require women to wear makeup. She stated that women would help each other apply it before performances as a form of bonding with each other. Each woman was allowed in the group to have her own individual style of application that helped her feel like herself, and following continued interviews within this mariachi, I noticed that their take on makeup was that makeup is a choice for performance, not a uniform standard. Ann's understanding of makeup extended beyond uniformity, but created a sense of what seven other participants called "sisterhood:" where autonomy, choice, and individual expression were encouraged within their mariachi ensembles.

Makeup raises questions of agency within a sisterhood of musicians. What if makeup does not have to be part of the uniform? In today's society where standards of beauty, feminine autonomy, and feminine expression are becoming more diverse and inclusive, uniformity within a performance setting regarding makeup begs the further question: why do some groups continue to require and enforce makeup? I attempted asking these mariachis about this and across the board, got no response. Rather, I got general feedback on what makeup means to one mariachi, Rocio, today:

You know how some people call makeup a mask? I like putting it on, not as a mask but because it is a part of me, and makes me feel like a woman. For other women, maybe not so much. I think you have to sign up in mariachi knowing you need masks or makeup to

play the part of female, that's what makes us different than male mariachis of course.

Why not emphasize that?

The power of “general feedback” speaks to how makeup is a normalized part of mariachi tradition for these ensembles. In the United States, women are surrounded by varying standards of beauty largely dictated by the media, which often show largely filtered, photoshopped images of women wearing makeup. I postulate that when I asked about makeup and was met with comments like “oh yeah, I wear makeup” without women questioning why they wear it, it is truly because it is an intrinsically essential and perhaps unquestioned practice to some of my participants.

Female Traje

The female *traje* has many variants, where the *charra*'s color, embroidery, *falda*, *china poblana*, and more indicate “mariachiness” to a mariachi's viewers. The *traje* is a product of Díaz's nationalistic push for *mexicanidad* exportation, and the *charro* was officially adopted under the Cárdenas administration as the official male mariachi suit.



Figure 6. Left- *Traje de Botonadura* by elcharro1.com, Right- *Traje de Charra* by ebay.com



Figure 7: *Shae Fiol Traje* shared by Gaby Mendez



Figure 8. *China Poblana* by Ricardo Pérez Monfort

Table 4. Glossary of *Traje* Terms- Mariachis Femeniles

Glossary		
Spanish Term	Meaning	Pin Number
<i>Moño</i>	Bow tie	1
<i>Chaquetilla</i>	Short outer jacket	2
<i>Falda</i>	Skirt	3
<i>Sombrero</i>	Wide-brimmed hat	4
<i>Botonadura</i>	Buttons	5
<i>Campesina</i>	Puffy armed, oftentimes worn off the shoulder blouse	6
<i>China Poblana</i>	White blouse (campesina) and full skirts	7
<i>Cinturón Bordado</i>	Embroidered belt	8
<i>Charro/a</i>	Specific style of mariachi suit. Usually synonymous with <i>traje</i>	9
<i>Traje</i>	Full uniform or mariachi suit	10

Traditional mariachi practitioners tended to wear full black *trajes*. For example, Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000 and Mariachi Veronica Robles are both self-proclaimed traditional mariachi bands, and each of their performances I analyzed via YouTube, Instagram, NPR, or Facebook, yielded the same result: they all wore full, “traditional” *trajes*. According to these participants, these suits consist of a gala-style floor-length *falda* and a *chaquetilla*.



Figure 9. Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000 example of sombreros and shoulder sashes with matching earrings. On official website by Nancy Muñoz (2020).



Figure 10. Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000 at Mariachi USA, Hollywood Bowl, 2019. Photo from Durazo (2020).



Figure 11. Mariachi Veronica Robles, photo from Frank Conte, 2018.



Figure 12. Mariachi Veronica Robles in Performance, Photo by Robert Torres in Pennington, 2021.

What makes it “gala” are the *botunadoras* and embroidered patterns on the suits. Interestingly, embroidery is important to these women, as the color of the decoration oftentimes determines accessory colors for mariachis. For these two mariachis, their embroideries use the “traditional” silver coloring. Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000’s *moño* colors are typically silver and blue, all members wear *faldas*, and they use sombreros. Similarly, Mariachi Veronica Robles uses sombreros, but they wear black *moños*. The founder of Mariachi Veronica Robles stated that part of the mariachi’s traditional image includes the *falda*, which she understands as an essential requirement in demarcating the mariachera. This has led her to turn away potential members in her mariachi who wanted to wear pants. Given that colored *trajes* are “nontraditional,” it is

interesting to see how in this mariachi, Robles has also moved away from wearing the traditional black *traje*, wearing her signature blue *traje* with a red lip and red *moño*.

Environment impacts how the *traje* is worn sometimes, too. When I first met Mariachi Pasión in Phoenix, Arizona, Betty Duarte, their director, told me that they decided to remove their *chaquetillas* for member safety in the scorching daytime and evening temperatures.



Figure 13. Mariachi Pasión by Betty Duarte from Official Website.²⁴

²⁴ See <https://www.mariachinuevomujer2000.com/>.



Figure 14. Mariachi Pasión without *chaquetilla* in Arizona heat by Betty Duarte, On Official Website.

Although they did not wear the “full *traje*,” this particular mariachi still wore matching *faldas*, vests, and blouses under their *chaquetillas* as a compromise that was better suited to the heat. They also interchange *moño* colors at different venues, but still work to coordinate group uniformity.

More contemporary mariachis femeniles also wear the traditional black *traje*, modifying it as needed in their embroidery. Take, for example, Mariachi Divas, who wear *faldas*, *moños*, and *chaquetillas*. Note, however, sombreros are absent from this group’s typical *traje* set. Their embroidery colors may vary from red to purple to blue, and they coordinate their *moños* with the stitching color to match.



Figure 15. Mariachi Divas matching embroidery, *moño*, and flowers by Los Angeles County Arts & Culture, 2022.

Other mariachis femeniles opt to wear full *trajes* that are not black. Some examples include Mariachi Mariposas or Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles' *trajes*. Mariachi Mariposas has signature pink or purple *charras*, including the embroidered *chaquetilla*, *moño*, *falda*, and *sombrero* whereas Reyna de Los Angeles interchanges their colors in a larger range of colors including but not limited to green, pink, blue, or red. Both groups' *moños* are lightly hued with dyed stitching that compliments and/or matches the *traje's* main color.



Figure 16. Mariachi Mariposas by Mirelle Acuña from Official Website, 2022.



Figure 17. Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles by José Hernández, 2022. On Official Website.

Some of the mariachis I talked to take elements of the full *traje* and put their own personal spin on it. Mariachi Las Catrinas from Los Angeles always incorporates *faldas* with *botonaduras* into their uniform, but they usually wear *campesinas*, commonly seen in *folklórico chinas poblanas*.²⁵ Their color palette changes frequently in their uniform, but each member dresses alike for performance.



Figure 18. Mariachi Las Catrinas by @mariachilascatrinas, 2020.



Figure 19. Mariachi Las Catrinas by @mariachilascatrinas, 2019.

²⁵ Folklórico is a style of folk dances from Mexico. Mariachi music often accompanies baile folklórico or folkloric ballet, which is the national dance of Mexico.



Figure 20. Flor de Toloache in Tiny Desk Performance, cover screen by Contreras, 2016.



Figure 21. Flor de Toloache “Meet las Flores” Screenshot, website by Kal, 2022.

Flor de Toloache wears black close-fitting pants with *botonaduras*, atypical of the mariachera, with matching high heels, *cinturón bordados*, *chaquetillas*, and red *moños*. Toloache’s signature color is red, and this group occasionally deviates from this uniform; the *botonadura* pants are the

single *traje* element that is carried through their performances. When I viewed Flor de Toloache’s interview with the culture, gender, and politics-based YouTube interview channel “Jezebel Quickies,” vocalist and vihuelist Shae Fiol asserted multiple times that mariachi is a “very traditional genre.” She acknowledges that the band’s *trajes* are not like other mariachis because they incorporate pants instead of *faldas*, a perspective that complicates Victoria Robles’ aforementioned notion that mariacheras wear *faldas*. What counts as traditional is negotiable; Fiol says that

Going into this very traditional genre, we wanna be respectful of the tradition of it. Sometimes it comes across as if we aren’t because of the way we dress; normally women wear dresses and we alter our uniforms a lot of times because we have limited access to mariachi resources in New York, you know, we are way out there, way far out from where it started. (Jezebel 2:12–2:37)

Similarly, she notes in a 2020 interview with YouTube channel “Jazz Memes” that the group’s use of pants may look atypical, but they provide a “New York” flare for the group (Jazz Memes 0:11-0:20).

Flor de Toloache received an undeniably large amount of media coverage and became more popular following their 2015 and 2019 Grammy nominations and 2017 Grammy win for *Las Caras Lindas*, Best Ranchero/Mariachi Album. Yet public mariachi history websites like KCET (a branch of PBS) or sheshreds.com do not write about this band or their accomplishments as a legitimate mariachi.²⁶ This raises a question: what makes Flor de Toloache

²⁶ Apeles, Teena. 2020. “The Rise of the Female Mariachi: A Brief History.” On KCET, PBS. <https://www.kcet.org/shows/southland-sessions/the-rise-of-the-female-mariachi-a-brief-history>. and Reyna, Fabi. 2015. “The Women of Mariachi: Breaking Barriers in a Machismo Culture.” On SheShreds. Photos contributed by

an outsider (Kal 2022, Apeles 2020, Reyna 2015)?²⁷ They perform fusion songs like Mariachi Divas or Las Catrinas, but where are their accolades in the community? Does the *falda* make a *true* mariachera? This is the sole anomaly distinguishing Flor de Toloache from any of the other contemporary and traditional mariachis femeniles I worked with.

One potential way to justify excluding Flor de Toloache from these histories might be to question the legitimacy of their training. Some musicians like Shae Fiol or Julie Acosta (vocalist, trumpet) did not grow up in the mariachi tradition, but worked to immerse themselves and learn about it under the tutelage of other mariachis, like Mireya Ramos. In Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000, multiple members were trained classical musicians all the way through college until they learned that they, too, could perform in mariachi. Yet they acquired their knowledge of mariachi in similar ways to other elite mariachis femeniles in the professional circuit including Fiol and Acosta, who learned from more seasoned mariachis how to play and perform in the genre. Flor de Toloache also claims that they have been ousted from the mariachi community because they are not of Mexican descent. However, Cindy Shea of Mariachi Divas de Cindy Shea told me that a vast majority of her musicians are also not of Mexican descent. Yet these are considered legitimate mariachis in the all-female circuit (Goldberg). Although Flor de Toloache performs

Leonor Pérez. Published September 16, 2015. <https://sheshreds.com/the-women-of-mariachi-breaking-barriers-in-a-machismo-culture/>.

²⁷ Here, we confront issues of public access to history. In Chicana feminisms, the lens I primarily operate under, and Chican@/x studies, vast amounts of literature is purposely published as open access resources for the public to consume. Unfortunately, there are still limited resources and publications at the time of this writing both in the public and private academic spheres of knowledge that have been able to trace a *comprehensive* history of female mariachi in both the United States *and* Mexico. Leonor Xóchitl Pérez, Nancy Muñoz, and Laura Sobrino were working on an open access website, Mujeres en el Mariachi, but its last update is from 2020. Sheshreds and KCET are regularly updated websites that are more accessible to the public online via my VPN satellite searches, emerging in the top ten “history of female mariachi” Google, Yahoo! and Bing searches, following the same access protocol outline in my introduction. Mujeres en el Mariachi at the time of my research culmination regularly did not show up in any top ten search sites.

stylistic fusions as well using non-traditional instruments, Mariachi divas plays fusion, Mariachi Mariposas plays other genres, and Las Catrinas plays other genres as well. Despite how questions are posed around the legitimacy of a mariachi femenil's upkeep of tradition, the theme of "traditionalism" in instrumentation and genre performance attests to how they, as females, align themselves as custodians of tradition, and likewise *marianismo*. By maintaining or modifying how mariachi is performed instrumentally, song-wise, or visually, each interpretation of mariachi still lies under the umbrella term "mariachi femenil." Mariacheras and mariachis femeniles are still tokenized in the professional mariachi circuit, regardless of how much each group strives to uphold notions of feminine mariachi tradition.

Revisiting "A Beautiful Thing"

So, why do mariacheras wear the *falda*? It is not simply because the *falda* represents female tradition, but because it allows mariacheras to express themselves and to display that they belong in the female mariachi scene. One interlocutor, Jay, finds that the *falda* helps her connect to her "roots," empowering her with a new sense of identity in an increasingly globalized world. "The skirt is more than being girly, um ... we, I mean, I ... I feel like it's a roots thing," she told me. "My family didn't teach me a lot about them, so by wearing the *traje*, I'm closer to my heritage, and I get to know myself more." Mayra Garcia, Director of Mariachi Mariposas, taught her students how to play and perform in mariachi since they were in grade school, and she teaches these young women to understand the *traje* as a way to connect with other mariachis. In her view, the *falda* can help to distinguish them, as women, in mariachi while allowing them to

have their own space to empower themselves in a new, strong way of performance which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Another interlocutor, Sara, treats the entire *traje*, especially the *falda*, as a point of feminine resignification. Even though the female *traje* holds the potential to force her to accentuate hip curves because of the *falda*'s construction,²⁸ a point of objectification oftentimes highlighted in the *machista* gaze, it also allows her to express her femininity without having to show a lot of skin in order to appeal to the male gaze. Sara told me:

One day my grandmother called me, and said, “[Sara], please put on your mommy’s high heels,” I was 14 years old, “and put a serape on and go to the gig because they need a singer. And because you know, they know you sing, and they really need somebody right now.” And my grandmother, I don’t know why, she always said, “you should be,” *como*, “*un mariachi* singer, you, you're very talented. I know you will buy your house, if you start singing.” And my mother, my grandmother had this, you know, idea of me becoming what I am right now. So anyway, so I, I went there thinking that it was the first and the last time that I will do it. But I don’t know, I was *joven* [young], I was in a serape, and a long dress. And I don't know what I felt like, and they put me [in] a hat. And I feel like “oh my God, this is me.” This is because I was singing and people will like it. And they started requesting songs here and there and everywhere, so I was kind of popular right there, but people was not looking at my body. Because I was covered, you know, from top to bottom, and so it made me feel comfortable that I didn't really need to

²⁸ The *falda* exposes parts of a stereotypically feminine figure with a tighter fit around the hip and glute area of the body.

be showing something in order to be accepted by the audience. But you know they were all male in the group.

Sara's original interest in mariachi came from a point of being able to entertain her audience at a young age without the audience or her male mariachi peers making a spectacle of her body.

Where ensembles consist of all male mariachis with a single female performer featured as the singer, audiences may tend to ogle women on stage. Sara loved the *traje* because it covered her body, not showing her skin, and thus allowed her to feel like she was being watched as a musician, not as a sexualized figure. Sara continued to elaborate on the difference between sexualization and feeling sexy, where feeling sexy is for the self,²⁹ a form of empowerment, and she found this in the *falda*:

Immediately my idea of a female mariachi is with the skirts of course, with the long skirts and the hair in the back and the flower right here [pointing to her pulled back hair], because she looks elegant, you know. And it's, it's like being in the military, you know. You have this, and I feel very proud about having my outfit. I feel ... I feel happy, I feel sexy, I feel secure. I feel comfortable.

Feminist scholars have often critiqued women who force other women to conform to conventional norms of femininity, including wearing dresses. Some women may not feel empowered by wearing a *falda* the way Sara does. But at least some women like Lily and Cindy Shea may experience the *falda* as empowering. In our interview, Shea discussed what femininity looked like for mariacheras in the professional mariachi circuit, stating that she felt more

²⁹ Compare dance scholar Jasmine Johnson's discussion of Fela Kuti's "Queens" (2016).

comfortable in a *falda* as she “fell in love with it,” and it “garnered respect” for her stage presence.

I never felt the respect that I felt walking off the stage than I felt with a mariachi suit on. Never in my life. Ever. I put the pants on in, you know, 2000, 2001, and I played the fiesta broadways here, and the concerts. You know, changing out the suit and putting on the pants. And being Divas with that look. And it was sexy, no doubt, beautiful young ladies surrounding me and you know it was definitely hot and we got attention, but in the interim, I told myself, you know is it because we look good, because we’re dancing, or do they really enjoy the music or combination of both? I’ll never really know, unless I put this back on the way it's supposed to be on and go out there and you know ... do it that way. Which is no disrespect to anyone who does that.

The respect Shea refers to suggests another unspoken rule I’ve observed in my time, interviews, and readings in the mariachi world. The *traje* is something that is to be treated with respect.

From the modern-day shame male mariachis now feel and internalize when drinking in the *traje* to Shea’s learning to not take her *moño* off until she was out of the public eye in order to respect the suit, this visual symbol of tradition holds a lot of power in the mariachi world.

Flor de Toloache’s decision to wear pants exemplifies Chicana Feminist Aida Hurtado’s (2020) concept of “resignification,” where people take the actions or behaviors associated with one social identity and assign them to the opposite gender, race, ethnicity, or sexuality.³⁰ Because the resignified behavior violates a social identity expectation, the same act becomes a radical gender statement.” (Hurtado 2020, 135). As this ensemble chose to modify the female *traje*, they

³⁰ See Appendix A3 for Participant response to Flor de Toloache’s use of pants

violated social expectations of how a mariachera should visually present herself in the public eye. Although common consensus, even in Fiol's statement, acknowledges the skirt as "tradition," mariachis like Mariachi Divas de Cindy Shea see pants not only as a sign of femininity, but of female sexualization as well. In the larger all-female community, it seems as if the *falda* is around every corner, seen in every mariachi I worked with except Flor de Toloache, who has met resistance in the community. In the smaller, pants-wearing community, although pants are signifiers of femininity to them, they are not popularly accepted in the larger mariachi community as part of the female *traje*. While acknowledging that they broke with tradition for the sake of being themselves, not necessarily for sex appeal, Fiol does lament that their use of pants turned out to be a "big deal":

Female mariachis are supposed to wear long, high-waisted skirts, which we did for one show. After that we switched to knee length, but that didn't feel right either. And then we decided on pants—little did we know that would be such a big deal. (Goldberg 2017).

What made this situation a "big deal" was how Flor de Toloache was received by male mariachi traditionalists. An article published by The Blue Banner news outlet from the University of North Carolina, Asheville, quoted Mireya Ramos elaborating on her choice to wear pants before the group performed a concert on campus: "Mariachi is a genre of music that is dominated by man, but the music industry in itself is also dominated by men ... For example, we get criticized quite often for our pants" (Hooper 2019). Other mariachis in my study likewise accounted for the adaptations they made to the *traje* as necessary to fit their own group identity, insisting that they did not intend to disrespect the *traje*. Some of their comments were similar to Flor de Toloache's descriptions of the struggles they experienced with traditional visual appearances in all-female

performance settings from male mariachi traditionalists. Trying hard to legitimize themselves as mariachis, yet, working to empower themselves with their own unique style, Flor de Toloache got caught up in the pants-*falda* struggle of feminine mariachi expression.

In one of my interviews, a musician also talked about how the *falda* failed to express their femininity in an adequate way. When I interviewed “Lola,” a female-identifying mariachi who prefers to dress androgynously, she told me that

androgynous clothing makes me feel like a woman, a woman who doesn’t need to prove shit to no one. Girly stuff is like needing to cat fight with [other women]. I never thought much about having to *look* like a woman until I had only one choice of bottoms, the skirt I mean. The first time I wore it, I hated myself, I betrayed myself and who I was, I didn’t feel woman. And it’s not because dresses and skirts mean that someone is a woman; anyone of any gender can wear those! The problem here is that I, [Lola], am a pants-wearing woman. Just like my best friend could be a wedge wearing woman, not a heel wearing woman, the look just isn’t her, the feel isn’t her, the expression isn’t her. Anyways ... where was I? [laughter] I had to wear the *falda* if I was gonna get paid for the gig, so I did. And although I hate that part of me, I have to wear that skirt mask if I’m to stay in the circuit. These women, even when I look at festivals and stuff ... they don’t take kindly to pants.

In some regards, the *falda* signified femininity to some of my participants, but others like Lola saw the *falda* as a tool of defemination. In a 2020 study, social psychologist Jaimie Arona Krems found that in typical U.S. female environments, women oftentimes dress more “feminine,” showing their figures, skin, and using more “socially coded” female clothing to try to challenge

other females in social settings on their femaleness. This study brought to light that when women wore more androgynous clothing, other women tended to not challenge each other or feel the need to prove personal worth to one another (Krems 2020). Lola's perception of using androgynous clothing to not need to "prove shit" to anyone holds an interesting parallel to Krems' study: Lola's motivation to stay away from proving personal worth within the female sphere by avoiding wearing the *falda* was to truly keep herself out of personal worth challenges typical of the U.S. female code of dress.

In follow-up interviews with Lola, I discovered that she actually wore a male *traje*. She did not modify the *traje* or accidentally remove her *moño* in the public eye like Shea did; rather, she adhered to traditional dress code, but wore the men's version of a *traje*. Following her first time wearing a *traje* on stage, she experienced similar stage disrespect to that which Shea received and which Flor de Toloache describes in multiple online platforms like Jezebel Quickies. Lola was harassed by audience members for being "fake," "*malinche chingada*" (a colloquial slur meaning "fucked/screwed one"), and "*maricón*" (an offensive way to refer to a gay-identifying person).

Complications: *Just* "A Beautiful Thing?"

When my participants were confronted with my initial question: "what does femininity in mariachi look like to professional mariachis femeniles?," I distilled from our many conversations that femininity is intertwined with visual appearance. For the sample group I interviewed, femininity in mariachi means that mariacheras are often appreciated more for their visual appearance than their musical performance. In Mary Lee Mulholland's account of mariachis

feminiles in Jalisco, she recalls a moment where Ana, a 17-year-old mariachera, is teased by older mariachis for hopping into their car with her hair with *pelo suelto*, or hair down which Mulholland details as a taboo-coded practice in mariachi. The mariachi femenil leader enforced Ana's hair management; in the "begrudging" moments Ana put her hair up, pressured with gel, Mulholland recounts how male and female mariachis are compared described in Jalisco:

Whereas the performance of male mariachis is judged first and foremost for their ability to capture the gritty sentimentality of the music, female mariachis are assessed by their presentation, which is based on the perception that mariachis femeniles are comprised of beautiful women who are responsible and dependable performers. This not only plays into Jalisco's claim to be the land of beautiful women but also reproduces and represents traditional and conservative notions of Mexican femininity such as piety, stability, sacrifice, and reliability. (Mulholland 2013, 363)

But there is truly more than meets the eye to both Mulholland and myself. Mulholland notes that "Thus, the idea of women mariachis as beautiful is both a means of excluding them from the masculine spaces of mariachis and reifying an ideal Mexican femininity and, by extension, Mexican masculinity" (Mulholland 2013, 368). Where femininity can be reinforced more, as we see with Ana, what is actually happening is the opposite—it is becoming more abstract in the United States for some mariacheras. This was the case for one of my youngest interlocutors, Carmen, an accomplished violinist, who came to talk to me about her experience of being perceived as "a pretty little prop."

Even as mariachis femeniles like Mariachi Reynas de Los Angeles gained national attention and rose to fame, they served as professional role models to young women like

Carmen, aspiring to make a career out of their love of mariachi. When Carmen was twelve, she started playing violin in her local middle school program and enrolled in mariachi classes. Inspired by her female instructor who was a professional mariachi, she found that she had a talent for music. She looked up to these well-known mariachis femeniles in the United States, but she never knew that her *visual performance* as “A Pretty Thing” in mariachi was more important than her musical skills in her high school program.

She started getting serious about her career in high school as a young teenager, practicing hard every day, listening to mariachi as much as she could, and she hoped to gig when her parents gave her permission to; “when I was old enough to gig. I was SO EXCITED.” She noticed more of her female colleagues were dropping out of class, and she had a male professor, but decided to join a professional coed mariachi outside of her high school setting.

She told me she was pretty in her own regard, but being treated as a “thing” for men to use, was frankly “disgusting and horrific for women who work as hard as I do.” As a young underage teenager *and* a professional mariachi, she discussed how older male mariachis in her coed mariachi ensembles treated her: “like just a piece of meat” for the audience *and ensemble* to look at. Here, she was wearing her traditional *traje*, with her skirt. She was used as a front singer more than an instrumentalist to garner attention at gigs, and the men in her mariachi consistently made comments about her young, underage body’s ability to lure in crowds to entertain. She recognized at this age that her musical skills were good enough to perform with professionals, however, and “always felt weird about how they talked about my body for the stage.” Her body, used as a spectacle to draw attention to the mariachi, and talked about in this manner, is now an

object of entertainment commodification and fetishization. It is used as a site of commodification and ogling, no pants necessary.

My research thus confirms a number of Mulholland's findings. In my discussions with her, Robles' described experiences that resembled Mulholland's participants' accounts of being tokenized. All of my participants also commonly expressed similar pressure to appear "professional." Lily and Naomi reported carefully monitoring their own self-presentation and behavior in hopes that they would be recognized as better mariachis than their male counterparts by being "more reliable." Mulholland's participants also were "expected to embody a femininity characterized by decency, morality, and beauty" (366). This general guiding principle where these larger societal structures dictate feminine mariachi performance were similarly thrust upon my participants, a result of societally enforced tradition. They were to uphold tradition which *included* looking beautiful according to idealized images of the mariachera. They were expected to conform to codes of moral behavior so as to not upset or create drama for the men who accepted them into *their* mariachis. They had to maintain a level of over-compensating professionalism, being a well-polished player who plays "strong" while not tempting men to stray from their wives.

In my discussions with these participants, there were six cases in which my participants clearly remarked that, in coed mariachis, a male mariachi's wife would get jealous of her playing in the ensemble, and the mariachera would be ousted, hazed, need to prove her monogamy, or simply get kicked out of the mariachi. Three other cases described points in mariachi situations where women attempted to maintain professionalism in their ensemble, but male mariachis insisted on creating exclusionary situations for the women in order for them to earn a spot in the

coed mariachi. All participants stated that this would likely not have happened if they were not positioned as the “front singer,” “showpiece,” “sweet dancer,” or “main attraction.” Each of these labels is indicative of the major theme of Mulholland’s article: that a woman is visually valued over her musical abilities. This gendered tokenization that reduces a mariachera’s value to her outer appearance effectively erases her musical talents or skills. Sherrie Tucker’s describes a similar phenomenon in her discussion of how black women’s bodies are racially tokenized in the United States’ 1940s swing band scene. Here, however, mariacheras are expected to uphold tradition in coed mariachi settings. This not only speaks to the frequent mistreatment my participants experienced at least once in their careers, but also includes the microaggressions and occasional sexualization each interlocutor reported experiencing at least once in their careers when interacting with their male counterparts.

Concluding Thoughts

As Robles recalled earlier in this chapter, she was keenly aware of her distinct separation from her coed mariachi as a singer, rather than an accomplished musician.³¹ This dichotomous state, which positioned her as an outsider from the cohesive mariachi unit turned her into a spectacle: *just* a singer. Here, she inhabits an insider *and* outsider position within the mariachi. Robles’ experience resembles that of Mary Lou Williams, the famous jazz pianist, whom scholars argue is truly a jazz great (therefore an “insider”) because of how she assimilated into the male-dominant genre and successfully emulated “swing” styles while confronting sexism,

³¹ This is a common issue vocalists run into in the classical music conservatory, where they are not legitimized as musicians, but othered as “singers,” even though they receive the same music history and theory training as their instrumental counterparts. I use this term as an example of othering advisedly.

gender exclusion, microaggressions, and more (Blandford 2006). Robles and other mariacheras I worked with likewise emulated “strong” male mariachi styles of performance while being marginalized in some ways by the larger mariachi community. Some have argued that, as a successful black female jazz musician who was nonetheless marked as “other,” Williams was tokenized both by academic histories and the jazz community (Boornazian 2022).

Williams was not the only female in the male-dominated world of jazz to encounter similar hardships mariachis femeniles encounter today in the professional mariachi circuit. In Sherrie Tucker’s (2000) survey of 120 female swing band musicians, she found that “all-girl” swing bands encountered gendered hardship, needing to perform femininity in gowns and high heels, a trademark visual signifier of their genre, alongside their own music. This is similar to how mariacheras in the United States consistently perform gender alongside their own respective music. As mariacheras today perform femininity with hair, makeup, and skirts, both all-female mariachi and swing ensembles were and are held to beauty standards that must be performed on stage. Interestingly, this phenomenon occurs within these all-female ensembles in the United States.

The visual elements of feminine expression via hair arrangement, makeup presentation, and *traje* wearing expresses how mariacheras distinguish themselves from their male counterparts. This visual demarcation of difference can be conscious or unconscious. Clothes, hair, and makeup are mediums that make mariacheras “feminine” according to their tradition, the customs which deem that they must visually present a certain way, or the social taboos that ensure mariacheras adhere to dress code norms. These “unspoken” rules speak to how these women have historically been prioritized for their looks, however, highlighting a major issue:

where is the music? When the mariacheras talked to me, quite frequently, about how they are not acknowledged for their musical talents, they said that their looks were prioritized over their musical talents in many social, professional, and gig settings. The following chapter will investigate how the mariacheras I interviewed wanted to be known as “mariachis, musicians. Not just the eye candy,” working to describe what feminine mariachi performance sounds like.

CHAPTER 4

SOUNDING FEMININITY

The mariacheras who participated in this study constantly negotiated their gender performance in response to how their surrounding communities valued their adherence to stereotypical images of the feminine mariachi. Two common themes that cropped up in every interview I conducted, however, were that the mariacheras who participated in mariachis femeniles experienced pressure to emphasize their looks over any other aspect of their performance and expressed a desire to be seen as musicians instead of “ornaments” or tokens of sexual commercialization and marketing for coed or male mariachis. This pressure highlights a major issue that resonates with Mulholland’s discussion of women’s visual appearance: the outward image of “beauty” and professionalism is important to mariacheras, but are there negative repercussions of upholding a standard of beauty? This chapter breaks down how female mariachis responded to having their visual presentation prioritized over their musical talent by performing their own versions of “strong” and “different” in mariachi. I describe this through two comparative-quantitative music analyses: one of study about gendered embellishment performances and one case study about falsetto performance choices.

Chapter content warning: *cultural exile, underage sexual harassment*

Every time I walk down a darkened hallway to a gig, I think about one of the mariachi’s stories I heard during my interview sessions. When I think of her experience working with coed mariachis, I feel my chest tighten up.

Me: So by writing this [thesis] more people will hopefully understand that and we can carve out, as you were saying earlier, more space for females to come forward and talk and have their own space. So, how are you carving [out] your own space [in the professional mariachera circuit]?

Sara: Um ... How am I carving [out] my own space? Well, by setting boundaries for sure. The group that I play with locally—there's now another female in the group with me—but when I joined, I was the very first female that was invited to be a permanent member. I had done some work with them on shows and recordings before, but they had, I mean adamantly, said they would never hire a female for many, many years. [Pause] They got called “chauvinist pigs.”

They definitely had determined they needed a “certain type of female,” um, that's drama free ... that's not going to you know, make them late every gig because they're taking too long doing their makeup—like that kind of thing [she laughs]. I blend in pretty well with the personalities that are there. And really, my main focus the first two years I was in the group was laying low. Like I said, I didn't want to give them any excuse to say, “this is why! this is why we don't hire females.” So if we were on the road and we needed to be ready in 30 minutes, I was there in 20 minutes.

I'd, you know ... I'd get up early. I had to do whatever I needed to do, you know? We're on a road trip. I hold my pee, as long as I can, because I can't just ask them to pull over on the side of the road, so I can pee. Like [strained laughter], you know, think about,

you know, there are many times when we've gone on the road to do shows, and the venue has one dressing room. So I have to change in the bathroom or in a small abandoned hallway. Or whatever I need to do. There are a lot of things like that.

I have had the fortune in a lot of my coed mariachi gigs to have separate changing rooms and even seen some non-binary changing areas for my peers, signaling a change in how mariachis understand and accept gender binaries today. Yet some mariacheras still deal with a lack of dedicated changing rooms for women-only. Part of what Sara ran into was figuring out how much she was willing to endure in her mariachi experience. She had to set personal boundaries to keep her place in the mariachi by asking for basic bathroom breaks, and not become burdensome as a woman to the men around her. The other issue she ran into was a problem of *tradition*. Yes, as she changed into her own *charra* with her *falda* and her slicked back hair, she was visually coded as a female to her peers and her audience, but she also adhered to the tradition of the mariachera style. On one hand, societal expectations dictate separate changing rooms, which determined the outcome of Sara's story. She must look a certain way in order to be a *mariachera*. On the other hand, I also wonder: how do the perceptions that women "take too long" to get makeup ready or "create too much drama," coupled with the lack of dressing rooms, shape Sara's feminine experience as a mariachi? Who enforces these expectations of *needing* to take extra time to apply makeup when there is no clear traditional standard of how to express femininity with mariachi clothing? She specifically noted that she had to "carve out" her own space earlier in the interview in order to be taken seriously as a musician in this genre by her professional counterparts. Note that she told me that she had to set

“boundaries,” personal rules that helped her succeed in this difficult coed situation. Rather than negotiating her needs with her peers, she had to adhere to the “traditional” look of mariachi while finding ways to *cope* with her experience. As she adjusted how she needed to act by not asking to use the restroom on traveling gigs in order to stay an active mariachi in her ensemble. She negotiated moments of discomfort without a changing room or showed up early to ensemble meetings to fight the stereotype that women take too long to get ready for a gig. She created a space of belonging for herself in this ensemble by creating her own set of rules—how to act around her male peers to stay in their good graces. This personal character negotiation is how she “carved out” her own space in the coed mariachi world.

Mariachera behavioral modification to suit male mariachero environments occurs beyond social dynamics in the mariachi. It arises in musical performance as well. In order to be comfortable in an ensemble and stop a member from socially ousting her in a coed mariachi, Ronnie had to modify her behavior from just being a musician to talking and acting carefully around her peers, so as to not upset them and give them reason to kick her out; they did not take well to women joining their previously all-male mariachi. Her response to my question regarding how she responded to individualized and targeted social exile in order to be accepted in the ensemble clarifies how mariacheras are treated differently just because they are women in the male-dominated field. Her recollection happened before she joined an all-female ensemble.

Ronnie: I have to stand up for myself ... So there was a man in the group that we just kind of clashed, and I didn't understand why. One day, he just told me in Spanish, like “you know what this is a men's group, you have no place here.” And I was like. “Well

then, again that's two of us like I'm not sure what you're doing here, because you seem to be full of drama." And he didn't say anything else to me, but he didn't speak to me for a whole year.

Cameo Flores: Oh, wow ...

Ronnie: We worked together several times a week, went on road trips, and he wouldn't speak to me. And the thing that finally got him to speak to me again—and I wasn't trying, honestly I didn't care, I was like “that's probably better with what he has to say; you can stand right there and I'll be over here, I'm fine”—but we had a show in another part of the area, and I had a solo. *And* it was my first time playing a solo with this group. It was the first time I was given the opportunity to play a solo with this group, I should say [voice cracks, tears up/blinking tears back]. And I played it.

And he stopped by me backstage, right after we got off stage. And he just told me “felicidades, te sonio muy bien.” And I was like “gracias.” [pause] And, after that, like, I guess, I had to earn his respect. Which honestly, I could give or take, but I'd much rather get along with my *compañeros* than not, so I'm not gonna make more out of it than I needed to, and we moved on and that was it. So ... Many things like that you know holding my ground when I needed to and stepping away if I need to or going above and beyond, to just, you know, I've said it over and over—just not give anybody an excuse to say I don't truly belong there.

Cameo Flores: So, holding yourself to a higher standard is how you work through things?

Ronnie: Absolutely ... musicianship. Being a woman. [nods, looks down, tearing up].

Cameo Flores: Is that exhausting?

Ronnie: [she nods “yes,” breaks down crying] It can be.

Musical Beliefs: Untangling Male Strength and Musical Skill

A Note on “difference”

In this opening vignette, Ronnie was placed under a lot of social pressure to perform with a high amount of skill. Many of the women I interviewed held themselves to a high standard of musicianship on stage to avoid conflict with their male peers, *machista* comments, or other types of negative treatment. Mariachera participants must adapt their performance style to be different from an all-male mariachi setting in order to succeed. My interviewees described this imperative using words like “grace,” “unique,” “distinct,” “light,” “peculiar,” “special,” and “different.” I use the word to “difference” in the context of the subgenre of music a mariachi plays in, not as a term of othering. For example, the genre *huapango* is characterized by long bow arm strokes in moving violin lines, a distinct vihuela-guitarrón strumming-picking relationship seen in Figure 22, and frequent falsetto usage from the song’s lead vocalist. If a vocalist were to display that they are a “different” musician, then they would use a variety of vocal techniques like vocal breaks, indeterminate falsetto fermatas, and frequent falsetto leaps more than other mariachi

peers in order to display their unique musical skills. This is a neutral alternative to more value-based comparative terms like “weaker” or “stronger” that have been used in mariachi.



Figure 22. Huapango vihuela-guitarrón strumming-picking relationship

By contrast, the genre *son jarocho*, from the Veracruz Gulf region of Mexico, is characterized by a fast-paced polymetric 3/4 or 6/8 pattern established by the vihuela and guitarrón. This subgenre is usually used to display musical technical proficiency from varied performers and involves both instrumental and sectional run precision and vocal displays of well-supported held chords. “Difference” in a *son jarocho* takes the form of an ensemble-wide use of embellishments to display their various technical skills *and* their ability to elaborate upon them.

Ornamentation is a common part of mariachi performance, but is not typically improvised as jazz solos usually are. Ornamentation is typically predetermined and well-rehearsed in ensemble settings, where an entire violin section will perform a tremolo in time together, using the exact same bow length, speed, and timing to sound like one violin is tremoloing. In atypical solo settings of improvisation, oftentimes seen in the *son jarocho*, musicians may perform unrehearsed, but canonic solos that are highly embellished.³² Following

³² Canonic solos are melodic solos that are commonly quoted from other popular mariachis and became standardized with individualized embellishments and elaborations over time.

an interview I conducted with mariachi professor, musician, and scholar José Flores, he stated that mariachi ornamentation is

that special something you have to pass down from generation to generation. There are many freedoms you have to take to stay in the realm of mariachi, but you also have to stick to the structure somehow. There's no book that's been written about this. (José Flores 2021)

This lack of formal guidelines makes distinguishing ornamentation from other aspects of performance tricky. I choose to focus on embellishments like appoggiaturas, mordents, tutti trills, extreme dynamic shifts, or glissandi, all of which will be described in greater detail in the methodology and analysis section of this chapter. Embellishments are interjected in *son jarocho*'s quick-paced lines to show off various musicians' musical flexibility and range of ornamentation skills. "El Cascabel" is an example of a famous *son jarocho*.

What "difference" meant to Ronnie was holding herself to a standard of musicianship higher than the male mariachis who surrounded her. If she were to be accepted, she not only needed to be okay with how she was poorly treated by her peers, but had to play significantly better than them in order to get a solo in the group, let alone *earn respect* from a male counterpart. This clearly took a toll on Ronnie, and this was a common experience for some women in this study before they entered mariachis femeniles. Her story is one of twelve similar stories that emerged during my interviews. These women told me, for example:

I had to accept I had to play 301% better than all the guys or I was gonna get kicked out [of the group] because women weren't welcome

I put in twice as much work as them to sound better and outplay them for them to never respect me, just try to slap my ass,

I mess up once, frown once, I'm replaceable. So women, we must be *mejor que perfecto*.

This pressure that my participants faced in their experiences with male mariachis forced them to work significantly harder at perfecting their craft in a way Leonor Pérez called “trailblazing” (Pérez 2002, Muñoz 2020). They made their own path in a mariachi world where they not only had to adhere to the unspoken visual standards of mariachi to be marketable, but to also perform flawlessly if they were to be perceived as equal to their flawed counterparts. Where my participants called this hard work toward high standards “normal,” all of my participants also framed it as a response to the idea that “women don’t play as strong as men.” It was unclear in many cases and conversations how my participants felt about this assertion—some women actively pushed against this idea and wanted to create their own sound of femininity. Other women were dejected and felt that it was a fact of the genre, so they just played the way they liked playing. Yet other women played strong to try to play strong like men but some women created their own versions of musical strength to resignify what mariachi strength meant to them. Ultimately, while their reactions to the idea that women could not “play strong like men” varied greatly, “carving space” for feminine strength and difference was the goal my participants strived to achieve by being in mariachis femeniles. Being strong mariachis and striving toward high standards of musicianship worked together, where the notions of strength (or a lack thereof) imposed on mariacheras led women to hold themselves to high standards of musical skill.

For example, when I asked Carmen why she joined a mariachi femenil, and she told me: “Because we see each other for our talent and we're not like ‘yeah you're bad.’ It’s your team, a

goal now, 'you're so good.' In the male group, they don't see that." In all, twelve other women I interviewed described joining a mariachi femenil because they felt that in this context their talent was validated by a group effort to better each other and build on each other's personal strengths in the ensemble. So how did these experiences shape the way that they performed?

By exploring how mariachis femeniles perform differently than all-male mariachis in slow and fast mariachi music, the social pressures all-female mariachis experience that impact their musical performance can be illustrated through music analysis. I analyze the details of all-male and all-female performances through two case studies: the popular fast-slow-fast-slow *huapango* "Cucurrucucú Paloma" and the fast *son jarocho* "El Cascabel." In my case study of "Cucurrucucú Paloma," I compare falsetto technique as employed by four mariachis femeniles and four all-male mariachis. In my case study of "El Cascabel," I quantify and compare the frequency with which four mariachis femeniles and four all-male mariachis deploy embellishments including tremolo, grace notes, glissandi, growls, harmonics, secondary dominants, *rasgueo* strokes, and more detailed below. Through these case studies, I aim to identify differences between how female and male musicians perform, and I argue that mariachis femeniles do perform differently than their male counterparts in measurable ways. These differences may result from the social pressures my participants have experienced in their careers.

As the mariacheras in this study expressed their difference from mariacheros by meeting high standards of musicianship, other female musicians in professional music settings around the world confront barriers in male-dominant music genres or industries. My research thus has a relevance beyond the mariachi femenil setting. For example, African music scholar Rosalind

Duignan-Pearson's (2019) analysis of how women navigate their professional DJ livelihoods in Johannesburg³³ reveals that women create opportunities for themselves by making their own "path" to succeed in their male-dominated profession. Their attempt to "negotiate" new ways of surviving in their respective career paths is similar to how these mariachis resignify their musical skills and complicate how they dress in order to carve a new space for their success in the mariachi circuit. This allows both music-practicing women, half a world away, to create new space for professional women in music to thrive and to survive in sometimes uncomfortable, traumatizing, and frustrating systems of patriarchal dominance.

In another similar study of music production in a male-dominant tradition, the mariachi femenil that is informed by a long history of patriarchal dominance and gender dichotomies, my participants are not sole anomalies in the larger network of music around the world. In Helen O'Shea's (2008) study of historical placehood and placemaking with feminine occupation typically occurring inside the home, and male socialization occurring outside the home with music production, as women entered the pub scene in Ireland, she reveals that larger systemic issues color how women break into the pub music scene in Ireland. While she works to separate what "woman" means in relation to the concept of national identity, she finds that womanhood is not synonymous with musicmaking in the pub scene and is therefore a taboo practice, much like my participants encountered while trying to enter the mariachi scene in bar settings.

Musically speaking, my participants face a reality where they need to "carve out" their own space in mariachi in order to make their own version of mariachi music sound like them, negotiating what "strong" sounds like instead of trying to sound exactly "strong like a man." In

³³ Located in Gauting, South Africa

ethnomusicologist Claire Jones' (2008) study of the Shona women's rise to popularity in the increasingly globalized music market, she breaks down how women navigate their gendered position in society, cultural and religious tradition, gender normative practices, and nationalist standards of female representation around the *mbira*. While unpacking how her fieldwork and immersion with female *mbira* players began to break gender barriers in this traditionally male performed instrument, she concludes that "Each of the women *mbira* players has had to carve out her public identity and space within (or against) the confines of national and cultural stereotypes" (Jones 2008, 143). The need for women to create space in musical traditions that were male-dominated seems to be common to this study, my thesis, and in Duignan-Pearson's research in that aural distinction from male counterparts is an integral part of creating a feminine space for performing music.

Methodology

Here, I engage in two comparative case studies, exploring how all-male and all-female mariachi ensembles perform "difference" in the *huapango* "Cucurrucucú Paloma" and the *son jarocho* "El Cascabel." I chose four all-female mariachi ensembles' and four all-male mariachi ensembles' performances of "Cucurrucucú Paloma," comparing the key elements of what makes a *huapango* a *huapango*: falsetto usage. Then, I chose four all-female mariachi ensembles' and four all-male ensembles' performances of "El Cascabel" to listen to, comparing the females' use of embellishments with the males' use of embellishments throughout each voice's and instrument's performance. I analyze the quantity of embellishments used per minute throughout each performance.

For “Cucurrucucú Paloma,” I listened to all-female groups Mariachi Pasión of Arizona, Flor de Toloache of New York, Mariachi Mariposas from Texas, and Mariachi Femenil Nuevo Tecalitlán from Mexico. The all-male groups I listened to were Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán from Mexico, Mariachi Cobre from Arizona, Mariachi Los Galleros de Pedro Rey from Los Angeles, and Mariachi Real de San Diego from San Diego. I listened to officially released recordings of both songs, unless a group did not have an official album release, in which case I used the audio from YouTube videos. In these cases, a colleague rendered audio for me in order to decrease a possible visual bias I may encode into my analysis, where body language may suggest embellishments that are not audible. I used rendered audio of live performances from Mariachi Femenil Nuevo Tecalitlán and Mariachi Pasión.

As I listened to the entire song, I tallied how many beats in 6/8 a falsetto hold consisted of. I noted what the longest falsetto hold in eighth note form was in the song for each group. I also tallied how many falsetto techniques were used throughout the entire song, counting the number of falsetto holds that occurred in total, how many vocal breaks were performed, and how many *llantos* were utilized by both the soloist and ensemble vocalists combined. I counted falsetto holds as holds if they lasted six beats or longer while also noting each ensemble’s tempo at the time of the hold, counting how long a hold was. I double checked my time measurements (measured in seconds) with the time stamps I aligned in each recording by dividing a minute by the hold’s BPM and multiplying that sum by the beat hold length to cross reference millisecond marker counts that I analyzed in ProTools waveforms for more exact time lengths. Continuing along the same process for falsetto technique quantification, I then divided the total amount of

techniques utilized by the number of minutes each performance lasted, creating an average number of falsetto techniques per minute (FPM) for each ensemble.

In my analysis of “El Cascabel,” the four mariachis femeniles that I listened to were Flor de Toloache from New York, Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000 (who originate from Los Angeles but consist of performers from across the entire United States), Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles from Los Angeles, and Mariachi Divas from Los Angeles. The male mariachis I listened to were Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán from Mexico, Mariachi Sol de Mexico from Mexico, Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Canos from Los Angeles, and Mariachi Los Toros from Austin, Texas. I listened to each individual part (i.e. trumpet 2, violin 3, harp, etc), listening for stylized embellishments incorporated into their performance of “El Cascabel.” I tallied every embellishment I heard in each performance from each voice and instrument cumulatively. After adding the total number of embellishments together from all performers, I calculated the average number of embellishments per minute (EPM) women from all four ensembles cumulatively made in their individual ensembles. Then, I cumulatively averaged all four ensembles’ EPM categories together to find the average number of embellishments mariachis femeniles in this study made per minute in comparison to the all-male mariachis I analyze here. I did the same process for the EPM of all four individual male ensembles and then combined their four collective ensemble EPMs together.

I was also curious to see if either men or women would solo relatively longer in “El Cascabel,” so I calculated the percentage of the performance dedicated to soloing. This is important because I was wondering if an increased amount of solo time per song would allow a certain gendered mariachi to also embellish more than their opposite-gendered counterpart. I was

curious to see if there was a correlation between the amount of time spent soloing and the amount of embellishments used by men and by women respectively in the song—perhaps if an ensemble allowed for more solo time, then more embellishing would occur in a song because of its longer solo sections. I dropped time markers on how long each instrumental solo was. Afterward, I added each solo time up to find out how much of the entire song was spent soloing. Finally, I divided the amount of solo time performed by the total time “El Cascabel” ran for each group to see what percent of each song was used to solo.

Ethnographic Data: Expecting Women to Accept and Commit more than Men

The women I interviewed kept relating their understanding of mariachera musicality with strength, where if they did not compete with a male to show that they, too, could “play strong like a man,” then they were not truly encapsulating the sound of mariachi and were therefore not musical mariachis. In a larger ensemble setting, as was the case with 24 of the 28 participants I talked with, male mentors or figures in their lives instructed these participants to play like men—strong—and their female mentees disseminated aural information about how a mariachera should sound in mariachi circuits. Lily told me that once she transitioned from playing classical violin to mariachi violin, she “got told very often at the beginning [she] played ‘too quiet’ and ‘too pretty’.” Recall earlier in this thesis that Lily entered the mariachi after seeing a mariachi perform at her aunt’s bar and approaching them to ask how she could join. She took the initiative to seek out a connection with this community, finding an opportunity to gain information about this oral tradition. By playing with the band, she learned about some of the differences between classical and mariachi violin playing styles. Quoting what she was told, she said

[In mariachi,] You don't have to worry about only touching one string at a time. You don't have to worry about being light on your bow, like 'this is not the place,' like 'yes, we only have four violins and we got some trumpets right behind you,' like, you got to get in there you gotta dig in.

Commenting on her response to this instruction, she continued:

So, I learned very quickly, the difference in style. I mean that's not to say I perfected it quickly, and I, you know, who perfects that ever? But I definitely knew what to work on, let me say that. I learned very quickly, what I needed to work on, and it took me a while to have a heavier bow arm really because that's what it took, and learning that, you know, sones have a completely different style than playing a bolero than playing a polka than like everything is different. And so, I think that was one of the things that I loved so much about mariachi, it was the opportunity to be able to transition from one style to the next and just invoke different emotions and, I don't know ... I love it.

Lily benefitted stylistically from learning how to play "stronger," using more arm weight in her bowing techniques. The positive side of receiving feedback about how to project, acquiring knowledge about multiple genres, and assimilating into mariachi style was that it helped her to fit in initially as she entered the mariachi world. Lily's initial interest in learning about the "difference" of mariachi styles, not only because of how each genre is distinguished from one another but because they are emotionally evocative, allows her as a female to uniquely connect to the music in a way that drew her into the tradition. This "difference" of digging into her instrument, evoking varied emotions on stage, all while being a mariachi was Lily's version of "strong."

Another interlocutor, Jasmine, discussed how the notion that “women don’t belong” socially and musically in mariachi put pressure on her to prove that she belonged. Not belonging meant that she had to reframe how to approach female musicality. She had to play not just “strong” but “differently” in order to make a name for herself. Interestingly, as she found her own way to express her femininity toward power in mariachi instead of “playing strong like men” in mariachi, this allowed her and her ensemble members to become empowered:

a lot of my teachings and the way that I am now was brought up upon because of the situations that I lived in, the experiences that I lived with these male mariachis. You know the constant, you know, I want to say “nagging” of them telling me all the time, “you know you need to be stronger, you need to be stronger, you need to be you need to play like a man.” You know, and so this is what God embedded in me. And so I, am a person that is very much goal oriented. But more towards in mariachi. I teach my kids how to play strong. And my girls, I always tell him, you know, you *have* to embrace your femininity. But, you have to play strong like this [takes a deep breath, gestures upward and inward toward diaphragm, palms faced up into the diaphragm implying air support is needed. Volume is changed, increased by straightening posture, heightened projection ability]. This is what’s going to get you to a certain point where you're going to feel empowered. And so that's how I kind of direct my life. And I want to say that, I don’t know, I’m just different, you know, because I know that some groups out there, there’s female mariachis that are very, I want to say, they have a different view of how they want to direct their groups. More like being more feminine but, in my case, because of the way I am, I always feel like I want to direct *towards* power. And, and in some way, making it.

And I guess it goes hand in hand, because you know, they feel like, and I'm just assuming that this is correct, but, my girls, they feel—my ladies—they do feel like they're powerful enough to even compete against men.

By projecting her voice in a well-supported manner, holding her posture higher to help her support her diaphragm and exude self-confidence, and slightly raising her chin with a smile as she demonstrated this for me, I too felt a little empowered in her presence. This mode of empowered music-making is this participant's version of strength.

In other cases, microaggressions made it obvious to women that they would have to compete with men in terms of their musicality instead of work on their musicality to primarily empower themselves. Men in the music industry often at first doubted mariachis femeniles' musical skills and prowess. In a published interview, members of Flor de Toloache talk about this kind of experience explicitly:

I just know, obviously, from years of experience that's not the way that men are treated as musicians, they're treated like professionals [in studios and concert settings] and that's been hard now because some people know us and they invite us to these performances and studios. They know we're professionals, but even still [it] happens, you know? We walk in [to a studio] and I can tell that they think that we're not good enough, we shouldn't be there, that we're not in our place ... there's a place for us and that it's not on stage (Latino USA 2020).

Despite their many years of experience in professional studio recording, Flor de Toloache is treated like they are new to the studio recording scene, not as professionals who may or may not be in the studio for their first or seventeenth time. This type of biased treatment that carries over

into their performances on stage because they are female in the male-dominated tradition discredits the hard work it took for them to become famous musicians. Because other industry professionals tend to disregard their musical feats in the genre, Flor de Toloache actively strives to show that women can play music and express and perform their own musical skills in different ways than men do. As seasoned mariacheras who are treated like they are out of place, they are clearly marked as a “different” mariachi, atypical to the male mariachi, yet they resignify this image of industry-imposed difference. This occurs as they continue to set an example of positively taking back elements of the *traje*—even if it’s male—resignifying the mariachi image for other women who aspire to perform in the genre.

In other cases, uninformed individuals who have not seen or understood the hard work mariacheras put into their performances and into perfecting their craft reveal their ignorance through verbal microaggressions. Lily told me about how a producer assumed they must have edited their recordings to make them sound like better players than they were:

When the [COVID19] shutdown happened, our rehearsals, our shows, all got canceled indefinitely, so a lot of groups began putting out virtual recordings, if you will. So we did a few of those, and the very first one, a well-known producer reached out, and really liked it, but didn’t believe that the way we recorded them—which was on our phones and iPads, sent them into one person, who then layered them together—he didn’t believe it. [frustrated look, slow nod] I mean, I guess you don’t have to believe it. Like, okay, you know, it was another one of those backhanded-type compliments. Like “this sounds great” or “how’d you fix it up?” Like no ... that’s not how it works.

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In our discussion around this microaggression, this mariachi kept saying “you know,” gesturing at me in a moment of connection, as if we had gone through the same or similar kind of experience. And in our conversation, I *did* know. I’ve lived this conversation over and over in my life, the “Oh! So you *do* know something that *I* know?” Working in the world of audio visual and information technology, a male dominated industry, off to the side for seven years now, this is my least favorite conversation to have with clients and coworkers. The certain tonal inflection I get from the person asking me about technological basics, much like the producer asking this interlocutor about her ensemble’s ability to record their song collaboration. It is not something I can completely recreate in print and text here, and it is not something I can quite translate to my male audiences, as it truly is a uniquely female experience: that slow nod paired with a “you know” from another woman miming the inflection of someone who doubted her ability to do something. And even then, I cannot recreate the tone of this statement on paper for people who have certain class privileges in music. Furthermore, women of color struggle even more than white women, and there is a tone of frustration that women of color *can’t* express because they must be cordial to their male mariachi counterparts, the male mariachis who may also be men of color. As another woman of color—albeit one in not exactly the same position as this interlocutor—these comments resonated deep within me. We talked awhile about what these microaggressions looked and sounded like in her experience. Many examples did not make the final cut of this thesis. I took a few weeks off of fieldwork and researching to regroup because it took a toll on me to know that when I came here to this very sentence, I would only be able to tell part of her story. I once again stress that this is not the only interlocutor who was faced with

this situation. As you read this, take note that Flor de Toloache is with you as well in this publication.

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I was told that there have been musical responses to needing to play strong that have colored some of the experiences my participants had with their male peers in mariachi settings. These responses oftentimes included overcompensating, or in Ronnie's words, women's setting a "high standard" of musicianship for themselves so as not to give their peers a chance to criticize them or treat them in a manner akin to what Flor de Toloache or the mariachi making the virtual recording experienced. Describing one possible way to respond in such situations, Monica, from *Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000*, told me that "We do want to be as polished and together as possible. So, I think it just comes with when we put ourselves out there, we just kind of brace ourselves for whatever can come back to us." As Monica speaks of "bracing," anticipating potential feedback or negative reactions to her work in her mariachi, she also talks about "polishing" her performance as much as possible. This act of polishing, practicing music to the point that it cannot be critiqued because it is performed almost flawlessly, is a high standard to hold an ensemble to. Yet other mariachis set this standard for themselves as well to avoid conflict and drama with male peers. Kenzie, from chapter 2's case study about *La Epoca de Oro* and sobriety, told me that

We gotta bring that 'A' game or they [her male mariachi peers] criticize us. What's hard is we don't criticize them back ... it's the right thing to do. Lift our heads up. Be better in

music and in attitude. It gets to me sometimes and I see we work so hard ... I don't know they don't ... didn't rehearse as hard as they rehearsed me when I was with them.

She found herself in a difficult situation: she had to maintain her cordial, polite manner of communicating with other professionals in the field as they unfairly criticized her based on her gendered appearance and gendered sound on stage. She was under pressure to stay on her “A-game,” not letting herself make a mistake that could be used as a point of criticism against her. This type of social pressure led women to work toward perfecting their craft even more, setting a high standard of musicianship to “be better in music and in attitude.”

Case Study I: “Cucurrucú Paloma:” Vocal “Difference”

Why this Huapango?: Context

Cucurrucú Paloma, or coo-coo dove, is a mariachi *huapango*. The lyrics of the song talk about a man who is mourning the loss of his lover, using the image of the coo-coo dove, or the mourning dove as a driving factor of his grief. The mourning dove is a bird that has a bird call typically associated with sadness, hence its name “mourning” dove, and the vocalist singing “Cucurrucú” is literally cooing like a dove, mourning the loss of a loved one in their performance.

Dicen que por las noches

They say through the nights

no más se le iba en puro llorar;

He does nothing more than purely cry

dicen que no comía,
no más se le iba en puro tomar.
Juran que el mismo cielo
se estremecía al oír su llanto,
cómo sufrió por ella,
y hasta en su muerte la fue llamando.

Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay cantaba,
ay, ay, ay, ay, ay gemía.
Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay cantaba,
de pasión mortal moría.

Que una paloma triste
muy de mañana le va a cantar,
a la casita sola
con sus puertitas de par en par.
Juran que esa paloma
no es otra cosa más que su alma,
que todavía la espera
a que regrese la desdichada.

They say he does not eat
All he does now is drink
They swear that the same sky
Shuddered when it heard him cry
How he suffered for her
That even in his death he was calling for her

Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay singing,
ay, ay, ay, ay, ay wailing.
Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay singing,
Of mortal passion dying.

What a sad dove
Early morning, I was going to sing to him
To the lonely house
With its little doors open wide
They swear that pigeon
Is nothing more than his soul
Still waiting for her everyday
For the wretched to return

Cucurrucucú paloma,	Coocoo dove
Cucurrucucú no llores.	Coocoo don't cry
Las piedras jamás, paloma,	The stones never, dove
¿qué van a saber de amores?	What will they ever know about love?
Cucurrucucú Cucurrucucú	Coocoo coocoo
Cucurrucucú paloma ya no le llores	Coocoo dove do not cry anymore

—Translated by Cameo Flores

Mariachi vocal performance techniques are used to express a wide range of emotions. Leonor Pérez recalled that Laura Graciano Sobrino, one of the first women in the United States to perform professionally in male-dominated mariachi groups, told her that “mariachi performance provided a space in which to dramatically and loudly unleash her feelings” (Pérez 2002, 150). The “drama” behind unleashing sentimentality is made especially possible by two techniques called the *grito* and the *llanto*, which are unique to the mariachi genre as a whole.

El grito, or “the call,” is a well-supported positive expression of emotion that, at least in my experience, is used to help enliven audience members, encapsulate the energy of a performance, or express excitement over a song. The mechanics of the *grito* itself varies from performer to performer but may include non-lexical syllables such as “aye yai yai ya hah hah

hah,” *chifles*³⁴ (whistles), or “rrrrrrr” tongue rolls. A variant of a *grito* is called a *llanto*, but *el llanto* is a sad expression, translating to “the cry.” In “Cucurrucucú Paloma,” *llantos* are used in the form of held falsetto notes. They incorporate glissandi in well-supported falsetto notes or chest voice notes, pushing a vocalist’s range to its extremes. In a *llanto*, vocalists not only hold the note as long as they can, but they also incorporate a vocal fall, run a scalar line into a hold, also known as a rubato-based fermata, in a single breath, or incorporate vocal breaks to a hold. In “Cucurrucucú Paloma,” the word “Cucurrucucú” is repeated multiple times throughout the song, and the morphology of the word affords opportunities to incorporate these vocal techniques. The “rr” allows for a rolled *llanto* and the “u” vowels can be held in the falsetto or chest voice. This structure grants the vocalist ample options to perform the *llanto* in a variety of ways. These *llanto* holds are usually performed for an undetermined amount of time, and mariachi musicians are trained to vamp until they hear or see that their vocalist is ready to move on to a new section of music as a standard practice of mariachi performance.

Although we have already established the fact that “Cucurrucucú Paloma” is a strong example of a *huapango* and is a piece that incorporates both fast and slow tempi, there are additional reasons to analyze this specific song. The song was composed by Tomás Méndez and was famously sung by Lola Beltrán, one of the big female Mexican figureheads of *huapango* and *ranchero* music. It can be sung by both females and males. If a woman sings it, she sings it as the tale of a man with a broken heart, while a male vocalist might embody the role of the brokenhearted man. Many mariachi songs position mariachi vocalists to embody the position of

³⁴ *Chifles* hold both positive and negative connotations. Although the direct translation is a bird call whistle, *chifles* are also used as catcalls which demean mariacheras in live performances.

the character in a song's lyrics. Two good examples are the songs "El Rey" and "La Reina es El Rey." These songs are famous for their connection to each other. Men typically sing "El Rey," or "The King," in which a macho man pities himself, proclaims he has a difficult life, and will not let anything dethrone him from being a king among his friends and loved ones. A woman is supposed to sing "La Reina es El Rey," or "The Queen is the King," which is a song written in response to "El Rey." In this song, the woman explains how a man's downfall is a combination of the machismo social type and his own conflicting love for a woman. These themes of social type attributes and love are sometimes incompatible with idealized machismo characteristics in *lo mexicano*. Many mariachi songs can be highly gendered, but "Cucurrucucú Paloma" is a timeless tale of heartbreak and mourning that can be sung either by a male embodying the character in the song or by a female from the perspective of a narrator. The key is also easily transposable between different vocal ranges for male and female voices to give men and women the ability to perform the various falsetto techniques that a *huapango* asks for, making this song a prime candidate for vocal analysis: a specific gender and vocal range is not restricted to singing the song, traditionally speaking.

Huapango Technical Skills: Voice

A variety of vocal technical skills were implemented in "Cucurrucucú Paloma," and as previously stated, they are dominantly centered around the falsetto. According to veteran mariachi singer Arturo Vargas, falsetto, vocal breaks, holds, and *llantos* are normalized canonic methods of performance in mariachi (Dover 2021). Vargas is considered a consultant in mariachi, or an authoritative voice in how style is dictated in vocal performance not only because

of his famous skill and vocal flexibility or his experience in the field, but also because he is a fifth-generation mariachi *and* a member of Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, whose performances set a standard of stylized performance for much of the mariachi world. Arturo Vargas cites his young training with Mexico City's famous vocalist, Lulú Quintero, and he also proudly talks about how he worked with Lola Beltrán and Maria Mendoza. He learned how to use his falsetto and make it better from these interactions with female musicians (ibid). As he puts it,

Si no tiene una buena técnica de respiración y no se la apoya exactamente la técnica de vocalización no funciona. Las dos van de la mano. (Dover 8:52-9:00)

[If you don't have good breath technique and you don't apply the exact support vocalization technique to it, it won't work. They work hand-in-hand.] (Trans. Cameo Flores)

In order for a *huapango* to successfully be executed, the singer must have good breath technique that is well-supported. This is achieved through the use of frequent falsetto visits in the vocal register, when *llanto* is invoked to display vocal flexibility and an ability to support a held note while keeping it in tune (and sometimes playing with the note with mordents or dramatic volume changes), and in purposeful vocal breaks. All of this must be successfully executed while staying within the key of the song, staying in tune, and without the voice cracking in order for the song to be deemed musically successful in the mariachi world.

Findings

Table 5. “Cucurrucú Paloma” Findings

“Cucurrucú Paloma” Data					
Gender	Mariachi	Longest Hold (beats)	BPM at time of hold	Longest hold time total (seconds)	# of falsetto techniques used per minute (FPM)
Female	Flor de Toloache	34	105	19.43 s	5.553
	Mariachi Pasión	21	105	12 s	3.023
	Mariachi Femenil Nuevo Tecalitlan	12	88	8.18 s	7.311
	Mariachi Mariposas	18	100	10.8 s	9.592
Male	Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán de Tecalitlan	11	108	6.11 s	3.2
	Mariachi Cobre	17	115	8.87 s	3.515
	Mariachi Galleros de Pedro Rey	12	105	6.86 s	4.322

	Mariachi Real San Diego	12	108	6.67 s	5.156
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On average, women held their longest falsettos for 21.25 beats long in their respective BPMs ranging from 88–105 BPM; that means on average, women held their notes for 12.6 seconds in length. The men’s longest falsetto hold averaged at 13 beats long, BPMs ranging from 105–115 BPM. This data translates to the following: on average, the men’s longest held notes averaged at 7.13 seconds long. Women almost doubled the length of their longest falsetto holds in comparison to the men analyzed in this study. Looking at the difference between the all-male and all-female ensembles’ average longest falsetto holds presented in this study, the all-female holds saw a 63.46% increase from the 13-beat long male standard of “strong” falsetto holds. In time percent increase, the women performed a 76.72% longer hold in seconds than their male counterparts in this study. This percent change increase between the average amount of time male and female holds shows that women hold their falsettos longer than men do in “Cucurrucucú Paloma.” It is interesting to note, however, that Mariachi Femenil Nuevo Tecalitlán was the only group in the all-female category from this study that held a falsetto for the same number of beats as some of the male groups, Mariachi Galleros de Pedro Rey and Mariachi Real de San Diego. However, Nuevo Tecalitlán still held their falsetto longer in terms of absolute time (seconds) than these men did. Mariachi Cobre was the one male group who held a falsetto longer than one of the mariachis feminiles, Mariachi Femenil Nuevo Tecalitlán. Cobre held their longest falsetto hold 0.69 seconds longer than Nuevo Tecalitlan. Cumulatively, however, Mariachi Femenil Nuevo Tecalitlán still contributes to the all-female group average. The difference in these

averages displays how women perform longer holds than many of their male mariachi counterparts in this case study. This represents a distinct difference between how these all-male and all-female groups perform their iterations of the song.

In reference to the number of falsetto techniques used per minute (FPM), on average, women used 6.37 FPM in this case study whereas men utilized 4.05 FPM. Looking at the average FPMs gathered from the collective FPMs either all-female or all-male vocalists performed, women performed more falsetto techniques per minute than men while still maintaining well-supported musical lines, intonation, not cracking their voices, and other high standards of musicianship that made their performance sound well-practiced and well-executed. Given that women used FPMs at a 57.28% increase from the male baseline, the difference between all-female and all-male mariachis is that all-female mariachis performed *more* FPMs, musically distinguishing them from their male counterparts.

Case Study II: “El Cascabel:” Instrumental Technical Proficiency

“El Cascabel” is a *son jarocho* that requires a number of technical mariachi skills that define it as a difficult piece not because it is based on an ostinato progression of $am7-E7$, but because of how the entire ensemble and tutti sections must be precisely executed in order for the song to be performed well. *Son jarochos* are polymetric in nature, and although they are normally passed down from mariachi to mariachi orally as we have seen in Chapter 3, transcriptionists and composers do not typically agree on what time signature to use when transcribing songs in this genre. While a 6/8 feel would

allow for hemiolas to be easily notated in Western Art Music notation, sometimes a *son jarocho* is written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. Originally written by Lorenzo Barcelata, I transcribed “El Cascabel” in $\frac{3}{4}$ time to demonstrate how this song can hypermetrically be understood in 1, 3, or 4 depending how a musician or an audience member perceives the downbeat of the song. Figure 23 is the foundational ostinato that sounds throughout the entire song by the *armonía*-- the vihuela treble line and its relationship with the guitarrón bass line.

Figure 23. “El Cascabel” armonía and meter.

That the vihuela chord changes every $\frac{3}{4}$ measure indicates that the song is in 3.

However, the guitarrón line’s downbeats constantly cross the $\frac{3}{4}$ barring. The guitarrón line suggests a new rhythmic cycle every 4 beats, implying $\frac{4}{4}$ time. Thus mariachi musicians have to be high-level performers just to navigate this polymetric feel. The way mariacheros solo throughout this polymetric technical piece is what makes them “different” mariachis.

Technical Skills

A key reason I chose to analyze “El Cascabel” is because there is an open solo section in the middle of the piece. A vast majority of traditional mariachi songs recreate similar solos, and in many cases, idiomatic solos that are part of the mariachi canon are

not improvised upon because they are solos. “El Cascabel” is no exception.³⁵ In this study, each solo calls back to Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán’s famous, and now canonic, solo patterns. Violins follow the same down bow stylizations Vargas tends to do. Vihuelists tend to start their solo with the main *armonía* rhythm and develop it into a displaced accent chord progression which ends in a tremolo. The trumpet and guitarrón also have typical ways of playing solos in this song. Mariachi solos are pre-composed, unlike jazz solos, which are typically improvised. In addition to the standards of traditional dress described in Chapter 3, mariachi ensembles also conform to standards of musical tradition including performing specific solos from “El Cascabel” verbatim from generation to generation.

Vihuela/Guitar

Of the embellishments I heard vihuela and guitar performers use, they were not necessarily related to their *manicos* (strums), but the *paros* (stops) and secondary dominants used for brief moments in a solo. The job of the *vihuela/guitar* is to produce the *armonía*, which maintains the time, style, and forward momentum of the song. A secondary dominant is a type of temporary modulation out of a song’s home key (i.e. V/V), understood in mariachi, popular music studies, and in jazz studies as a chord embellishment. Where *vihuela* and guitar may have the ability to finger pick and perform

³⁵ Some mariachis do deviate from standard canonic solos, though. It is common practice from my listening, conversation, and experience, that popular solos established by a popular group are usually the solos that are played with little deviation from the original solo content. Few mariachis in this study—both all-male and all-female groups—deviate, but deviance still occurs nonetheless. More academic study is needed to discuss how social acceptance of solo deviance is accepted in various mariachi communities.

embellishments like trills, these instruments perform chord embellishments in the form of secondary dominants. While there was no embellishment occurring in these sections in every analysis I listened to outside of a given musician's personally allotted solo time, I noticed that the *vihuela* utilized more secondary dominants and occasional glissandi, whereas guitars, if there were any in a group, soloed with more *paros*. Embellishments and musical techniques utilized throughout the songs I heard were secondary dominants, varied *rasgueado*³⁶ patterns, displaced accentuation, closed and open *paros* sequences, and call and response.

Guitarrón

Similar to the *vihuela*'s or guitar's roles in "El Cascabel," the *guitarrón* also does not embellish their solo much, but they do deviate from their standard *jalón* strums in some solos throughout the different performances of the song to single plucks. *Jalones* are a specific type of plucking style for *guitarrón* musicians, where they pull two strings simultaneously (in octaves) in a clockwise direction with thumb and middle or index finger, seen in Figure 24. It is rare that *guitarrón* players deviate from this plucking style,

³⁶ A *rasgueado* is a flamenco-like strumming technique where the strumming hand flares out in a down stroke across the strings, stroking each string with each finger in quick succession following each other. Leading with the pinky, followed by the ring finger, middle finger, and first finger, this strum technique creates a full-sounding strum that *vihuelists* typically let ring before it is stopped or dampened.

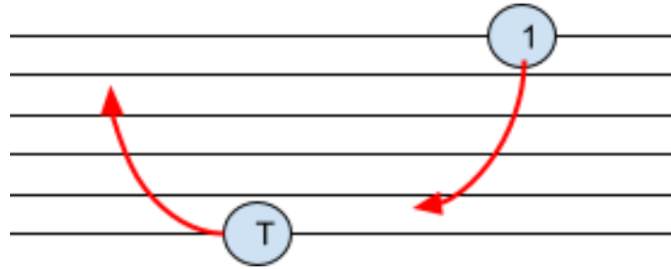


Figure 24. Guitarrón Jalón. T= Thumb, 1= 1st finger or middle finger.

as performing in octaves is expected even when performers see notation like the single notes written down in Figure 23. Musical techniques or embellishments used in these recordings included harmonic plucking, tapping the instrument’s body, glissando, hemiola-based figured bass, and secondary dominants.

Violin

In “El Cascabel,” the violin mainly performs melodic interludes when the vocalist is not singing, counter melodies when the vocalist sings, and harmonies within their own sections.³⁷ Stylistically, violins rarely play staccato in *son jarocho*s; rather, the entire range of the bow from frog to tip can be used for almost every quarter note. An eighth note can use up to 1/2 of the bow as well, unless otherwise indicated in style or notation (i.e. in “El Cascabel,” when performers deviate from this full bow arm in a staccato 3 note line, they customarily perform downbow-lift, downbow-lift, downbow-lift). Not only is this a normative practice for the purposeful break of long, moving lines in a *son*

³⁷ As a rule, when violins play with trumpet, they are to play legato, unless otherwise indicated in “El Cascabel.”

jarocho, especially in “El Cascabel,” but it also requires putting choreographed mindfulness into the physical labor involved. Sections like this, which are meant to appear more spectacular than the standard, more ergonomic downbow-upbow-downbow performance of staccato, emphasize how mariachi tradition as a whole is a spectacle, regardless of the gender of its performers. While a J. W. Pepper transcription of the piece rates the songs as “medium difficulty,” the stylistic interpretation of the original score is what increases the difficulty of the song, including this spectacular bowing and the challenge of maintaining ensemble cohesion in soli lines.

Typically, in Western art music concerts, when audience members listen to a violin section perform a tremolo, the style of a tremolo does not require all violins to pull their bows back and forth at the same time, speed, and bow length. In mariachi, and specifically in “El Cascabel,” it is expected that violin sections in their soli perform precise tremolos in which an entire section pulls their bows back at the exact same time, begins their tremolo at the same time, and uses the same length of bow and speed of tremolo to the point that it sounds like one single violin is performing a tremolo. This expectation carries over in trills, glissandi, or synchronized tutti bounce stroke sequences.

Trumpet

In “El Cascabel,” the trumpets functionally emphasize impact points of the violins’ or vocalist’s melodies while performing counter melodic material throughout the song. Stylistically, trumpets typically perform *secco*,³⁸ staccato, unless they have a

³⁸ A specific mariachi term for trumpet-only staccato.

quarter note or longer which should then be played largo. Much like those of the violins, trumpets’ embellishments in soli sections are performed with musicians starting a trill on the same note, trilling up and down on the same notes together, sustaining the same note lengths as they go up and down between notes, and ending on the same note as they began, ultimately working to sound like one trumpet instead of an entire section.

Regarding other brass embellishments, sections work together to use the same embellishments throughout “El Cascabel.” Thus if a trumpet decides to add a grace note, all trumpets perform this together. They perform together for the sake of uniformity, stressing this value much as they do by wearing uniform *trajes*. Embellishments and musical techniques performed in the trumpet sections I analyzed included grace notes, whole-tone scale runs, chromatic runs,³⁹ call and response, trading lines, growls, rips, glissandi, and appoggiaturas.

Findings

Table 6. “El Cascabel” Findings

“El Cascabel” Data			
Gender	Mariachi Name	Embellishments per minute (EPM)	% of Song Soloing

³⁹ Non-diatonic sonorities are atypical of the subgenre.

Female	Flor de Toloache	4.94/min	44.52%
	Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000	3.89/min	55.85%
	Mariachi Reynas de Los Angeles	2.41/min	36.13%
	Mariachi Divas	2.79/min	49.02%
Male	Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán	1.6/min	52.73%
	Sol de Mexico	2.81/min	75.89%
	Los Camperos de Nati Cano	0.821/min	58.90%
	Los Toros	0.625/min	68.39%

The combined average for all four all-female mariachis is 3.51 embellishments performed per minute (EPM) in this case study of “El Cascabel. After tallying and calculating the all-male embellishment average across each of the four mariachis in this study, I found that they averaged 1.46 EPM. If male mariachi performances represent the standard according to which females need to play “El Cascabel,” this finding complicates the situation. Where women are expected to prove that they can “play strong like men,” or that they can play like their male counterparts no matter what, this example shows that they in fact play differently. Not only do the women perform more embellishments than their male counterparts in this case study, but they also increased their embellishment usage from 1.46/min to 3.51/min, an increase of 140.41%, while still making no audible

errors in their aural performance that I could identify as a direct result from embellishments. Notably, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán does spend less time than Mariachi Nuevo Mujer 2000 in their solo section, where Mariachi Nuevo Mujer spends 3.12% more time soloing.⁴⁰ The difference between all-female and all-male mariachi performances of embellishments in “El Cascabel” is numerically visible in the percent increase of audible ornamentation in this analysis. On the other hand, however, men spent more time soloing than women in these performances of “El Cascabel.” Where mariachis femeniles soloed for 46.38% of their interpretation of the song on average, all-male mariachis soloed for 63.98% of their interpretations of “El Cascabel” on average. Women spent 27.51% less time soloing relative to the men.

Conclusion: Possible interpretations of the data

So how do we make sense of these numbers? In conducting a detailed analysis of mariachera performance, I wanted to thoroughly examine a small, manageable sample of a much larger phenomenon, asking: what does mariachera sound like? According to my participants, women sound different when they play. There are several possible explanations for this difference, however.

First, when women felt pressure from men and the tradition of mariachi to “play strong like men,” this pressure may have pushed them to create higher standards of

⁴⁰ This is not necessarily the case in live performance, where Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán is known for their long solo sections in concert, but since this study is limited to officially released and publicly available media, it is possible that recording contracts, compact disc memory parameters, or a larger set of issues prevented Vargas from recording their typically long solo sections.

musicianship for their ensembles, manifested in polished performances, and pushed them to always be on their “A game” to be seen as musical equals to their male counterparts. This is supported by the data rendered in “Cucurrucucú Paloma” and “El Cascabel.” Where in “Cucurrucucú Paloma” I noted the longest falsetto hold for each ensemble. The four all-female mariachis I studied held their longest falsettos 63.46% longer than the all-male mariachis I studied, and this may represent a social response to the idea that “women don’t play as strong as men.” They respond by outperforming the men in some ways. A 21.25-beat falsetto hold musically sounds more impressive to an audience than a 13-beat hold. In the same realm of thought, this “difference” of women performing 57.28% more falsetto techniques per minute than their male counterparts may be a stylistic choice, but it is also a way to outperform them. When performing to an audience that is listening for multiple technical skills executed to show off vocal flexibility through techniques like vocal breaks and expressive, mournful *llantos*, women are more likely to perform more FPM than the men did in this “Cucurrucucú Paloma” case study.

Outperformance could also manifest in the 140.41% greater use of embellishments among the all-female performances of “El Cascabel” in comparison to the all-male performances of “El Cascabel” that I analyzed. Interestingly, this outperformance occurred when women had less solo time in their songs in comparison to their male counterparts, where all-female mariachis soloed 27.51% less time than men did in their performances of “El Cascabel.” This means that even though women had less solo time to potentially incorporate embellishments than men, they still packed more embellishments into their performances than the men did. This shows how mariachis

femeniles in this case study are different *son jarocho* players in “El Cascabel:” they play just as clean as the men do, with more notes, further complicating the already technically difficult and note-heavy song for their performance.

Another possible interpretation of my data is related to my discussion of mariacheras’ worries about their appearances in Chapter 3. Rather than drawing visual attention to themselves, these mariachis add more musical embellishments, longer falsetto holds, and falsetto techniques per minute in comparison to their male counterparts. This could represent a strategy to deflect unwanted attention from the visual spectacle, bringing audience attention to the aural presentation of the mariachi femenil and mariachera: high standards of musicianship in the form of well-polished, but well-embellished, lines of music. Falsetto can be understood as an extended technique, an embellishment in and of itself, so if women embellish their music more to make it sound truly more impressive or musical in some listeners’ ears, perhaps attention can be diverted from the visual and toward the musical qualities of the performance. How does this explain the females’ shorter solo sections, then, in “El Cascabel?” Perhaps this is related to audience entrainment, where the ostinato of the *armonía* cannot be broken for too long by solos, or else the audience’s attention will be lost. Where a vihuelist plays the important role of maintaining a rhythmic ostinato while the rest of the ensemble is playing an outline of the chord progression- am, dm7, E7, E7-, stepping out of this role to play a solo may disrupt the rhythmic pattern they help to create. This suspends the driving rhythmic pattern that gives the song its momentum and the audience its expectation that the song will continue toward a resolution of the metrical tension

embodied in the *armonía* (compare Hasty 1997). If women use smaller solo section times, then this could keep their audiences' attention and help them re-entrain the audience back into the vihuela ostinato before losing the momentum of the song. This may also speak to the concept of "strength." If men do truly play "stronger" than women do, and their solos are more forceful and driving than their female counterparts' solos are, then it may be easier for men to keep their audiences' attention and therefore may allow them more time to solo.

Yet another possible explanation for the mariachi femenil's use of increased embellishments might be related to how Mayra García described the difference in sound between male and female mariachis, a difference she described in terms of "grace." Perhaps the sound of feminine mariachi is the sound of grace, where more embellishments are incorporated into the mariachi performance subconsciously as a byproduct of the constant pressure placed upon women to maintain high standards of musicianship or else fail as a female musician and receive poor treatment from male peers. I was told many times by my participants that they were "carving out" their own space in the mariachi world. They had to work hard to *make* their own space in the genre, where little to none initially existed. Perhaps women define this space by creating a mariachi sound transformed through embellishments and not through solos.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As we saw in Chapter 2, mariacheras are able to participate in the migration of mariachi knowledge via the practice of private family learning and encouragement and public mentorship and mariachi exposure. While my participants also facilitated knowledge migration via *pláticas* in this study, socially prescribed gender expectations shaped how they were taught to act and interact with men and women in the mariachi world. Chapter 3 delves into how the visual presentation of the mariachi femenil and the mariachera put pressure and subsequent high expectations of traditional maintenance and upkeep upon these women. While my participants were met with varied complications in how they visually presented their mariachiness and femininity to male peers, family members, friends, and audience members, social expectations emphasized their visual presence over their musical skill. Chapter 4 poses that because mariachis femeniles feel an increased pressure to uphold high standards of tradition, concepts of “playing STRONG” translate into women outplaying men in the two sampled case studies I conducted. In comparative case studies, looking at all-female performances of “El Cascabel” and “Cucurrucucú Paloma,” women play significantly more embellishments per minute, falsetto techniques per minute, and hold their falsetto notes longer than their male counterparts.

Within Chapter 2, the *pláticas* I held with my participants place the interviewed mariacheras in a unique knowledge acquisition situation: whether they learned about mariachi in a public or private setting, they all learned about mariachi orally, never once mentioning sitting down and looking at Western Musical notation. They learned through firsthand experience, family relations, and mentor-relationships, where their initial mariachi knowledge acquisition informs a large part of their later identity as a professional mariachi. Although not all mariachis are aware of their personal oral transmission and dissemination history, nor do they resonate with every piece of information provided here, the constant negotiation of identity to work with acquiring and disseminating knowledge within disapproving or empowering family dynamics, unstable mentor-mentee relationships, a lack of female representation in media, or limited access to females in the oral tradition is a common factor I have found lies before entry into the mariachera performance.

Social stereotypes like *machista*-mariachi behavior from La Epoca de Oro and *marianismo* from family worries about their girl's/woman's innocence informed how some of my participants were taught about the mariachi tradition. This occurred mainly in the private sphere of knowledge transmission, between family members who shared social classes rather than instituting gendered binaries,⁴¹ female social-type beliefs with their children, informing my study's participants how they ought to act as women in society. In the public sphere, however, following push factors like the Bracero Program

⁴¹ The Aztecas/Mexica practiced reciprocity, where men and women held complimentary roles in society before Mesoamerica was colonized, acknowledging that complimentary gender roles meant that men, women, and third genders each held important places and positions in society.

that initiated increased migration into the United States, an influx of immigrant populations also saw an influx of mariachis and an influx of mariachi programs established in California and Texas for newer generations of mariachis. This allowed mariachi knowledge to become more accessible to women, institutionalizing the mariachi tradition.

Mulholland states that many female mariachis are not taught mariachi by their fathers at a young age: women generally have to seek interest for mariachi themselves.⁴² However, in my study, participants like Robles and Taylor did seek out mariachi tradition knowledge at prepubescent ages. My study also found that mother figures help to foster an interest in mariachi music and training in the private sphere, indicating that father figures are not the central knowledge disseminators of mariachi knowledge dissemination.

This chapter highlights the importance of mariachis femeniles: women must first have access to mariachi knowledge networks in order to enter the mariachi world. Entering the mariachi world in of itself is a challenge for a mariachera, simply because she is a woman. In order to sociologically ascend in the mariachi world, they must attain more knowledge, but are limited to the knowledge networks they have access to, they support they have access to in their family units, and are faced with hurtful gendered dynamics in the tradition. In four participants' different statements about why they *did not* enter professional mariachis immediately after higher education, they mentioned that did not have access to a professional mariachi femenil in their area. These collective

⁴² Typically, young men and even young boys are expected to carry on intergenerational mariachi tradition.

comments prompted me to ask why they did not seek out coed settings and I was met with the following consensus: “coed and male-dominant mariachis aren’t comfortable.” These gender dynamic-based ensembles created spaces of mariachera criticism, preventing professional ascension in the mariachera circuit for these four women, even though they had access to some mariachi knowledge networks, discovered in our interviews. The mariachi femenil setting is described as “a necessity to create a space where our individual creativity can truly be acknowledged for female musicians.” I began to wonder: if females are learning the same knowledge that men disseminate from the same mariachi oral tradition, why do women need their own individual space to be acknowledged as *musicians*, the basic concept of mariachi?

Sherrie Tucker’s “all-girl” swing band survey yielded similar results to my study—her participants wanted to be understood as musicians more than seen for their visual performance. As my participants understandably met my questions about wardrobe with hesitance and frustration, we began to unpack why we felt this way about these visual expressions of tradition—taught and learned amongst many women between Mexico, the United States, within mentorships, families, and even through audience interactions. When we tackled this discussion, we were met with the question “but what forces women in all-female groups in the United States to have to perform femininity in such a visually feminine way?”

Chicana women in the United States are commonly caught in a “virgin-whore” dichotomy, pressured to conform to the limiting expectations of *marianismo*, where “good” women follow La Virgen de Guadalupe and are sexually pure, family-oriented,

selfless, and loyal, or else risk being labeled *la malinche*, the “bad” woman who is sexually promiscuous, deceives, lies, and sacrifices family for personal ambitions (Hurtado 2020). This was subtly reinforced by family members who discouraged mariacheras from entering mariachi at a young age. Leonor Pérez specifically reflects on how this dichotomy impacts her as a Chicana mariachi, through the lens of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as well. She points to the Mestiza consciousness, an educational route that allows a woman a back door out of this dichotomy. But in her continual reflections, she understands her intersectional mariachi self as a new type of person that she had to carve space out for in society (Pérez 2002). Space-making—the process of creating space in society for a social group that was not previously included in that society—is where these histories began, for mariacheras, starting with Rosa Quirino. This is also where they continue. When my participants and I talked about their entry into mariachi or how they navigated its male-dominant space, each participant utilized the same word Pérez used so many years ago: “carve.” They labor, tediously etching marks over time into the history of mariachi, knowing that before them, mariachi was (and still is) a male-dominant tradition that made it difficult for women to access knowledge. As women continue to carve their own space out in mariachi by finding ways to gain mariachi knowledge and pass it down to future generations, the male-dominant monolith is no longer what it seems if you look closer at its engravings.

While female mariachis work to carve their own space into the mariachi tradition, the tradition that they enter holds inherent beliefs about how the female mariachi

functions in the mariachi setting, as seen in the data collected in this study. Where mariachis femeniles did not have a predetermined dress code or code of conduct as we see in Chapter 3, an “unspoken” rule of how women are supposed to dress and act in mariachi settings is subtly enforced in mariachi culture from audience members, mariachi peers, and societal expectations. Where gendered difference on a visual level did not particularly or harmfully impact participants like Cindy Shea, who struggled more with colorism and cultural legitimacy, many participants were met with the joy of wearing a female *traje*, but social difficulties that came with the femininity the *traje* represented on their bodies. Emphasizing how femininity is *understood* to be expressed in a visual manner in the mariachi world, it is more evident in comparative coed ensemble to mariachi femenil settings for my participants.

Interestingly, in a coed setting, Robles performs with the mariachi seemingly as a member of the group she participates in. In her recollections, while she is occupationally a member of a coed mariachi, she is not socially integrated into the male-instrumental ensemble. She cites that this is because of how women are marginalized within the community—women are singers, men are mariachis. This shines light on her multiply oppressed state of being and of a classic othering trope seen in classical music as well—if a musician does not play an instrument, they are not a musician. This form of musical alienation discredits musician’s hard work to professionally ascend in their field. In this example, Robles is not only facing marginalization in the Latinx community practice of mariachi, but marginalization because she is a woman as well.

Many mariacheras I interviewed and met as a result of this project said that the female mariachi is used to attract audiences as a front singer. After they are marginalized for being a woman in an all-male ensemble (according to one participant: “side bar, add a female singer in a *traje* for the traditional effect”), they are quite literally used to “attract audiences” to the mariachi. According to seven participants, put simply, female mariachis are visually used to lure in crowds for male mariachis, allowing them to profit from the “eye candy,” “exotic, sexy-looking” experience of a female singer (not mariachi) front stage.⁴³ The experience of being tokenized—not fully integrated into co-ed mariachis—led women to form all-female mariachis.

This brings me back to the issue of pants, tradition, and the *falda* prominent in Chapter 3. Robles wears *faldas*, strictly, yet still endured visual prioritization over her musical notoriety as an “other:” a woman in the male-dominant mariachi space. This eventually led her to create her own mariachi femenil. Carmen also wore a *falda* as a child and was visually prioritized as a female to draw in audience members to mariachi performances. She was tokenized as a minor, prioritized as a singer, socially treated as if she did not have instrumental technical skills to contribute to the ensemble, and called “not a musician,” all while her visual appearance drew audiences into her ensemble’s performances.

Nine other interviewees reported ousting, hazing, and other general mistreatments in coed mariachis. These experiences led them to enter mariachis femeniles as a safe space to be able to express their own femininity without the drama created by male

⁴³ Compare bell hooks’ (1992) “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance.”

mariachi wives or having to worry about exclusionary situations to maintain their statuses in an ensemble. While this type of treatment was not universal amongst the 28 interviewees and was not reflected in my own experience, their individual experiences were not anomalies either. These nine participants found that their access to mariachi was limited if they were not willing to serve primarily as a visual and social other from their male counterparts and musical skills.

The data in this chapter sheds light on how all-male and all-female performances of *huapangos* or *son jarochos* can vary widely between mariacheras and mariacheros, highlighting what “difference” may sound like for mariacheras and mariachis femeniles today. This data specifically presents a unique perspective on how mariachi femenil performances of “Cucurrucucú Paloma” and “El Cascabel” are different from male performances of the songs. Similar to resignification, reclamation is a process where a minority community can take part of their own culture or tradition back from a dominant cultural gatekeeper, and change it to be their own cultural practice. In these 2 case studies, what we see is the reclamative process—mariacheras are taking a piece of their culture—mariachi — and are making it their own by performing embellishments and falsettos differently than their male counterparts.

In these performances of slight differences, a mirror-like reflection of “carving” out space comes to my mind. As my participants embedded themselves into the male mariachi monolith, they also put their own reclaimed sonic difference in their musical performance, despite the possibility that over-compensatory embellishing could be a byproduct of systemic sociological issues embedded within the mariachi community

outlined in this thesis. The narrative that was historically painted for these women, prior to entering the professional mariachi circuit, is that it is not a safe place for women, and if women do enter the field, they will have to uphold visual and cultural standards of femininity and mariachi belonging to professionally succeed in the mariachi world.

The “differences” I identify here are direct results of how my participants have navigated and responded to this narrative of the intersection of mariachi belonging and femininity. What techniques or sounds distinguish mariachis femeniles from all-male mariachis? What social factors, political policies, gendered interactions, or economic policies shape the narrative that “women don’t play as strong as men” beyond larger histories of misogyny and gendered inequity in the mariachi world? As we have seen, the women in this case study have truly outplayed, or held themselves to a higher musical standard, or have just embellished more than their male counterparts in these examples, and there is something *different* or *graceful* about that.

I see potential for this study to develop into a corpus study, where scholars track down every recording of both songs, applying the same analytical methodology I did to my comparative mariachi gender study. In a broader scope, this methodology can develop into a comparative embellishment and falsetto study across *huapangos* and *sones jarochos* beyond “Cucurrucucú Paloma” and “El Cascabel. Interestingly, this approach of quantifying and analytically comparing technical skill, when applied to a larger body of mariachi music, a corpus study of subgenres including *rancheras*, *boleros*, *son jarochos*, and more, could distinguish what the mariachi femenil technical skills look like. I limited my scope to “Cucurrucucú Paloma” and “El Cascabel” with a numerical analysis of solo

length, hold length, EPM, and FPM discussions in hopes that this sparks the interest of other scholars.

The implications of this study can truly reach into multiple books and articles. As I attempted to fill the gaps of oral histories that the field of mariachi femenil is missing in academia right now, there still is not a lot of data or information out in the world about female mariachis. Perhaps in the future, scholars could look into a comprehensive study of mariachera migrational patterns from Mexico to the United States, mapping out mariachi family trees and systems of knowledge. From Chapter 3, a comprehensive study of tokenism, objectification, and further exploration on traditional beliefs and expectations of mariachis femeniles is needed to provide a more comprehensive lens on the mariachera experience in the male dominated genre. Chapter 4 opens possibilities for future scholars to explore what mariachera sound is or is not, looking not only at the embellishments I focus on, but at more comprehensive instrumental or vocal techniques women employ compared to their male counterparts. I write with optimism that there is great potential for multiple comparative corpus studies just in how women perform vihuela compared to men, let alone looking at the entire mariachi femenil.

It is in these musings and hopes for future research where I also see the limits of my own research. Mariachi femenil research is truly in its early stages as I write this thesis. I encountered multiple issues surrounding access to knowledge many of my peers found odd. When I was asked by my advisors “who was this mariachi related to, and how old was she when she joined this mariachi?” I scoured as many resources, minds, and archives I had at my disposal, but could not provide an answer to these questions. Where

my peers could easily trace family lineage or find someone's age with their resources because their subjects were well-written upon, I was operating under a handful of valuable texts I read cover to cover, hoping to find new information. The reality of my research situation is and will continue to be a hard reality: mariacheras are under-researched in academia. There are few publications, oral histories, or other published works on all-female mariachis, making topic tricky, but incredibly rewarding to navigate. This also presents a research opportunity in academia to honor the work and struggles my interlocutors put into their livelihoods—I encourage scholars to work together to collect oral histories, archives, and more for mariachis femeniles.

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APPENDIX A
DISCOGRAPHY

Cucurrucú Paloma

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APPENDIX B

IRB EXEMPTION



EXEMPTION GRANTED

[David Fossum](#)
[MDT: Music](#)
480/727-3487
dcfossum@asu.edu

Dear [David Fossum](#):

On 2/16/2021 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Marianismo, Malinchismo, o Machofemme?: United States Mariachi Gender Embodiment in the 21st Century
Investigator:	David Fossum
IRB ID:	STUDY00013175
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flores Interview Questions_Themes.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);• Flores IRB Social Behavioral 1-11-2021 (2).docx, Category: IRB Protocol;• Flores-Recruitment-Script.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;• Flores-short-consent (3) (2).pdf, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 2/16/2021.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Cameo Flores
Cameo Flores
David Fossum