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“Sobreviviendo”: Immigration Stories and *Testimonio* in Song

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*For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.
It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams
toward survival and change, first made into language,
then into idea, then into more tangible action.
Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.*

AUDRE LORDE (1984)

Abstract: Informed by experiential methodologies, this study demonstrates how those who engage in collective creative expression, significantly songwriting and dance, affirm a sense of community to usher social and political ideas forward, while reinstating a sense of humanity for migrants within and across nation-state borders. It discusses a specific recording and collaborative composition titled *Sobreviviendo*.

Key Terms: *Testimonio*; Fandango; Translocal; Collective songwriting; Son jarocho; Veracruz migrants; *Convivencia*

A song as a sonic and literary manifestation is life's soundscape; a unique, cathartic memento as well as a powerful political tool. A song can also be an important historical text. A person's *testimonio*—life views, triumphs, aphorisms, and struggles—can be expressed in song lyrics. In this way, song lyrics can transmit ways of knowing and theorizing about life. It can also be viewed as alternative ways of creating knowledge. When practiced in community, songwriting can be a powerful exercise in consensus building and collective knowledge production.

This essay explores methodologies utilized in the creation of the translocal music project, *Entre Mujeres: Women Making Music Across Borders*. As I have noted elsewhere (Gonzalez, 2014), I have been an active practitioner in a translocal, community-based, participatory music, and dance practice informally known as *fandango sin fronteras*. The organization, *Entre Mujeres: Translocal Feminine Composition*², was formally initiated in Veracruz, Mexico, between Fall of 2007 to Summer of 2008. *Entre Mujeres* was one of many music projects generated as a result of the Fandango Jarocho Movement and the transnational dialogue between Chicanas/os, Mexicanas/os, and Latinas/os in the U.S. and Mexicans in Veracruz, Mexico.

Utilizing auto-ethnography and participant observation, I recount the inspiration, development, and recording of track eight on the “Entre Mujeres: Women Making Music Across Borders” (2012) album recording titled “Sobreviviendo.” Although several compositions were recorded for the final music project, I have chosen “Sobreviviendo” for its reflection on the migrant experience and for the ways it demonstrates how cultural politics can be a site of creation and possibility. Co-written by Silvia Santos from Xalapa, Veracruz (via Yucatán), “Sobreviviendo”—and the process of engaging in the composition—generated a physical, spiritual, and ideological space from which participants were able to theorize and imagine new realities for themselves and their families. I demonstrate how the lyrical and poetic composition of “Sobreviviendo” incited dialogue around nation, country, place, mass exodus, crossing, and the possibility of return. With an understanding that music, as a public sound source, can potentially inform beyond borders, participant Silvia Santos co-wrote the song with the deliberate intention of sonically reaching migrant families and friends on the U.S. side of the border. Ultimately, the *Entre Mujeres* project and the engagement

of collective songwriting underscore what Audre Lorde has so beautifully stated above. Poetry and other creative expressions are not luxuries but rather important factors in the lives of women and, I would argue, in the lives of all people. Indeed the testimonios and dialogue around the migration experience gave way to the construction of poetic prose that predicated hopes and fashioned new visions for a more just future for migrants. My intention is to contribute to the body of knowledge in music, performance, and immigration studies by demonstrating how people engaging in collective creative expression affirm a sense of community and can usher social and political ideas forward, while reinstating a sense of humanity for migrants within and across nation-state borders.

FROM FANDANGO TO ENTRE MUJERES

As a professional and community musician, and active practitioner in a translocal, community-based, participatory music and dance practice known as fandango,³ I was moved by the significant participation of women, children, and the elderly the first time I witnessed a fandango dance presentation in Veracruz in 2003. Women's presence is seen and felt in every aspect of the event, from the *son*⁴ *jarocho* music, dance, and poetry that give currency to the practice, to the organizational aspects, including food preparation and guest accommodations.

African, Indigenous, and Spanish (Andalusian) influences that began taking shape in New Spain in the early sixteenth century inform the music, dance, and poetry at fandango gatherings. New Spain's booming economy of coffee, silver, and sugar created a demand for Indigenous and African slave labor. Rooted in a history of labor exploitation and resistance, the music, poetry, and dance of fandango-son jarocho emerged as a unique cultural mixture. Mostly prominent in the region currently known as Veracruz, Mexico, fandango is now exercised as ritual celebration in honor of a town's patron saint or as part of other community celebrations such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals. From fandango ritual celebration emerges the music, dance, and poetry known as the son jarocho. *Convivencia*, the deliberate act of being with each other, is an aesthetic of fandango-jarocho practice and a central reason for the gathering.

Due to the process of *mestizaje* and Afro-Indigenous mixture, jarocho is now synonymous with the music/culture of the southern part of the state of Veracruz, Mexico. The son jarocho (fandango's music) is manifested

and maintained through everyday practice of the *jaraneros* (musicians who play a small, eight-string five-course guitar called a *jarana*), *versadores* (improvising poets), and *bailadoras* (dancers). As a point of reference, the most well-known *son* in the son jarocho repertoire is "La Bamba." Chicano rock musician Ritchie Valens' version of this Mexican son jarocho became a hit in the 1950s, and it has remained popular ever since. "La Bamba," however, is just one of many *sones* played in fandango ritual.

Women play important roles as dancers and percussionists on the *tarima* (a wooden platform). Mexican anthropologist and *bailadora fandanguera* from birth, Rubi Oseguera Rueda from Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, has documented the significance and presence of women in fandango roles in *Biografía de una mujer veracruzana* (1998). Oseguera's important work was the first to instigate the son jarocho music world to take note of the important roles women had always occupied. With this publication, Oseguera urged the fandango community to take note of all labors generated by women, both in the kitchen and in music making, especially on the tarima. The tarima is the vortex of fandango-jarocho, where all musicians gather around the dancers who strike their feet on the wooden platform in a percussive manner. It is here where women execute their musical contributions to the fiesta in the intricate percussive dance that is the pulse and drive of the son jarocho.

Inspired by the broad participation of women and children in this practice, I initiated the project "Entre Mujeres: Translocal Feminine Composition in Veracruz, Mexico," between the Fall of 2007 and the Summer of 2008. The goal of the project was twofold: 1) to document women's role in fandango practice, and 2) to engage in musical dialogue with the women in the practice and possibly create original music compositions with those who were willing and able to participate. With support from the Fulbright-García Robles Scholarship Program, I was able to move with my partner and child to Xalapa, Veracruz, where we spent nine months composing with various fandango practitioners.

I never initiated a formal call for the project before arriving in Xalapa; I approached women who I knew through previous fandango-jarocho celebrations. After many years of engaging in fandango-jarocho, both in Veracruz and the U.S., and knowing the community well enough, I had an idea of who would be interested in participating. Some women volunteered after having

heard about the project, and others were recommended. In the end, the final music project included eight Mexican and seven U.S.-based musicians.

ENTRE MUJERES: FROM FANDANGO TRADITION TO COMPOSITION

Most of the women involved in *Entre Mujeres* were very receptive to working on original compositions. However, it was still a challenge to move comfortably beyond their social and musical understanding of the fandango and son jarocho music genres. Regardless, I believe that the strong, *mujer*-driven tradition on the tarima made it easier for *Entre Mujeres* participants to interact with one another. The fandango—specifically the son jarocho repertoire—offers many instances where it is solely women and girls who participate on the tarima during *sones de a montón* (songs where many are signaled to dance). The syncopated rhythmic patterns they create on the tarima are meant to both keep time and contribute to the polyrhythmic character of the son jarocho. These moments offer invaluable interaction, *convivencia*, and dialogue, especially among women whose bodies and feet become conduits of individual and collective expression. The female homosocial space on the tarima, especially during the *sones de a montón*, provide moments Angela Davis might refer to as “quotient expressions of feminist consciousness” (1998: 196). Davis uses this phrase in reference to women in the blues tradition, but I extend this black feminist consciousness to the fandango-jarocho as a related African diasporic expression. Here the tarima is a space where the “collective consciousness” of women gathers in the presence of community. Most of the women in the *Entre Mujeres* project had previously experienced a collective consciousness on the tarima in the midst of fandango practice. I believe this alleviated the difficulties of composing original works in a collective fashion. Despite initial anxiety by some of the *mujeres* concerning music composition, the musical ideas began to slowly flow.

TESTIMONIO, THEORY, AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

My partner and I rented a small, furnished flat in the center of Xalapa. We settled in quickly, creating a kitchen, living room, and a small makeshift recording nook, all in the same one-room space. Most days we would wake up to Xalapa’s orchestral city sounds. Being

from a big city like Los Angeles, we were used to vehicle traffic noise. However, Xalapa city-sounds were also intermingled with the voices of *vendedores ambulantes* (street vendors) announcing their goods and services, or the gas company’s rhythmic metal tapping, the trash collection cowbell, and the single stroke of the knife-smith’s metal pan flute. All were sonic reminders that we were far from home. My partner and I would make our morning coffee and breakfast for my son, and then wait for the *mujeres* to arrive.

We had previously made arrangements and invited the *mujeres* to our little flat *para tocar* (to play music) hang out, and/or compose. Unfortunately, most of their time was completely taken up by *chamba* or work. I, on the other hand, was ready for every visit, instruments out and eager to begin. Often one of the ladies we had scheduled a session with would call and say that something had come up with family and cancel our writing session. Other times we would schedule many women at once, everyone would show up, and we would manage to play some *sones* and/or jam for a while. I soon found it difficult to gather them all in one place. And even if we did manage to compose something, I knew that rehearsal and recording time would also be difficult to schedule. Technology was very helpful in this regard. We owned portable recording equipment and began to utilize it in every jam session. The technology also allowed us to record some of the impromptu lyrical ideas that were generated during the sessions.

Lyricism became a vehicle that facilitated individual and collective expression. In all instances, there were moments of *testimonio* and the telling of experiences that generated more dialogue and sharing during the collective songwriting process than I would have expected. As we began to compose, I encouraged an exploration of topics. Each *mujer* chose a topic that resonated with her but this did not limit our collaboration, as we would often co-write the lyrics or each author a stanza or verse. Song topics were often driven by experiences in motherhood and love, or views on the state of the world. The most intimate moments of creativity in the collective songwriting process brought discussions pertaining to participants’ experiences as women, life lessons, and general life philosophies. Most participants shared and learned from other *testimonios*, and this process bound the group in an intimate way.

“SOBREVIVIENDO”

As windows to the mind and soul, lyrics often focused on the women’s sharing of embodied knowledge, as well as their community knowledge. Mothering and the birthing process were common topics throughout the *Entre Mujeres* project. However, the sharing of community knowledge and migration experience was also expressed, as in the piece “Sobreviviendo,” or “Surviving.” The lyrics read as follows:

La gente vive luchando
sin saber que pasará
Con sus pasos van surcando,
caminos nuevos harán
No saben si hay una mañana
pero al fin se marcharán

Sobreviviendo, sobrevivir
Solo siguiendo, ya sin sentir

Por fuerte que sean los vientos
la palma siempre será
Me doblo por la tristeza
me enderezo por amar
La raíz es lo que importa
para toda humanidad

Solo soy sobreviviente
de la tierra abandonada
Con mis recuerdos presentes
en el día voy sin pausa
Haciendo por los ausentes
un trabajo que no acaba

People live and struggle
without knowing what is to come
As they walk through their journeys
new roads emerge
They don’t know if there will be a tomorrow
but nevertheless they depart

Surviving, survive
Just moving, without sensing

Despite the strongest winds
The palm tree will always remain
I bend to sadness

I stand tall for the loving
The roots are what matters
for all humanity

I am only a survivor
From these abandoned lands
With my memories present
I move through the day without rest
Doing for those who are absent
never-ending work.⁵

Originally from the state of Yucatán, Silvia Santos moved to Xalapa as a young college student. With her husband, David, she managed a son jarocho group called Hikuri and were active participants in the fandango-jarocho networks, mostly in the Xalapa area. The mother of a ten-year-old daughter, Santos came to my home whenever she had a free moment, which was usually during her daughter’s school hours. “Sobreviviendo” became Santos’ idea. Although there were extensive discussions on other subject matters, Santos initiated the composition and was adamant about writing on the subject of immigration. I contributed a verse and the final chorus, but for the most part, Santos had a clear vision of what she wanted for the song. My partner, Quetzal Flores, also played a key role in the arrangement of the piece and final recording. Having played several tours in the U.S., Santos had visited California four years prior to her participation in the *Entre Mujeres* project. While visiting the Santa Barbara area, Santos had an opportunity to meet and converse with various undocumented immigrants from Mexico. Aware that I was from California and that the music generated in the project might reach this community, Santos seized the opportunity to create a piece that expressed the effects migration can have on families on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border. “Sobreviviendo,” or “Surviving,” expresses the views of both those who migrate as well as those who stay but are affected by the loss of *los ausentes*, those who are absent. Through personal correspondence, Santos states:

Esta pieza es una síntesis de algunas vivencias de una estancia en California, en donde me encontré con migrantes que me contaron su sensación de tener el corazón lejano y en la mente el lugar que dejaron a sus seres queridos. Y

cómo eso los motivaba a seguir en un mundo diferente. En el mundo físico de las jornadas extenuantes y una cultura diferente. Creo que todos somos viajeros en este mundo, pero ser viajero con el corazón dividido es algo muy duro, y ver tantos rostros, escuchar tantas historias de desarraigo, es algo que me dejó la huella que trato de plasmar en “Sobreviviendo.” (Personal correspondence, 2009)

This piece is a synthesis of a lived experience I had in California. Where I found myself with [Mexican] migrants that told me how they felt having their hearts and minds with their loved ones far away and how this motivates them to continue living in the physical world of everyday laborers away from their homeland and in a different culture. I think that we are all travelers in this world, but to be a traveler with a divided heart is something that is very difficult, to see so many faces, and listen to so many different stories of uprooting, is something that left its mark on me and I try to communicate this in “Sobreviviendo.”

Santos was moved by the testimonios she heard in Santa Barbara, but also by the families she knows in Mexico whose loved ones have migrated to the U.S. She utilized the testimonios of migrant workers in the U.S. and families left behind in Mexico as a source of knowledge from which to create song lyrics for “Sobreviviendo.”

In a follow-up interview I conducted in Xalapa during the Summer of 2014, Santos reflected on the ways in which undocumented audience members would often approach her after a performance by Hikuri. Santos states:

Con la música, mucha gente se acerca a nosotros y nos contaba sus experiencias de viaje y de migración...pero además es como cuando alguien de pronto no tiene como comunicarse y encuentra una vía de escape. Llegaban

y nos decían, “Ay qué bonita música, me recuerda a mi tierra.” Y entonces, después de eso, se les abría esta válvula de los recuerdos. Y entonces era imparable lo que surgía. Surgían minutos, hasta horas de plática. De lo que era su experiencia como migrante. Incluso había experiencias traumáticas en medio de todo esto. Que yo no sé cómo habían sobrevivido también ellos a esas experiencias aparte de sobrevivir físicamente. Y eran tan fuertes que, de plano, mi pareja se llevaba a la niña para que no escuchara lo que me estaba contando porque se veía que la otra persona tenía la necesidad de contar, de decir lo que le había pasado. Un poco para sanar. Realmente el hablar, cura. (Personal interview, 2014)

With the music, many would approach us and tell us about their experiences, about migration ... but it's like when someone hasn't someone to communicate with and then they find an escape. They would come to us and say, “Wow, what beautiful music, it reminds me of my country.” And then the memory valve would open up. Then it was unstoppable. There were minutes, hours of discussion and telling of their experiences as migrants. There were even traumatic moments in all of these experiences that I don't even know how they survived emotionally, let alone physically. And these stories were so heavy that my partner would take my little girl away so that she didn't hear what they were telling me, because it was obvious that the person needed to speak about what had happened to them a bit to heal. In reality there is healing in the telling.

Santos states that “*la válvula de los recuerdos*,” or “the memory valve,” would often open to reveal painful experiences of the dangerous, often fatal, migrant trails. The

people who approached Santos were survivors of the grueling journey. Indeed, the stories she was entrusted with in Santa Barbara were in her consciousness when I arrived in Xalapa and approached her about participating in the Entre Mujeres project. Santos acknowledged the healing process of testimonio as she describes the change of energy once the *válvula de los recuerdos* was exhausted. She continues:

Entonces hablas de tu proceso. Hasta que llega un momento en el que ya no lo ves como en tercera persona. Ya no es lo que le pasó a él, sino lo que me pasó a mí, como lo asimilé, y cómo es, que a pesar de eso, sobrevivo. Por eso finalmente, el son se llama “Sobreviviendo”. Porque es este proceso para mí también de reflexión como uno puede sobreponerse a cualquier circunstancia siempre y cuando haya algo por lo cual sobrevivir. Que conserves la fe en que vas a ver a las personas que quieres. Que vas a regresar a tu tierra. Que vas a darles algo mejor, a las personas por las cuales te fuiste. Y las cuales están lejos siempre. Pero estás lejos físicamente y tu mente está ahí de todos modos. Es un asunto de dicotomía muy fuerte que todos tenemos en mayor o en menor medida.

You then speak of your process. Until there is a moment where you don't speak of it in third person. It is no longer what happened to *him*, but rather what happened to me, how I assimilated it, and despite all of it, how I survived. That is why finally the son is called “Sobreviviendo.” Because it was also a moment of reflection for me on how someone can survive any circumstance if and when they have someone to survive for. You maintain faith that you will see the people you love. That you will return to your homeland. That

you will provide something better to those whom you left and the reason for which you left and are far away. They are gone physically but mentally always there. It is a dichotomy that we all have in a greater or lesser sense.

As Santos states, to “keep the faith,” or to hope for and envision a successful return to your homeland, was part of her intention and process as she wrote these lyrics with her migrant friends in mind, and advocated for the song's recording as part of the project. Importantly, “Sobreviviendo” encapsulates first- and second-hand testimonio. Santos recounts people's experiences of perilous migration but most importantly their resilience to move forward regardless of what the future held.

Testimonio has been an important intervention in an effort to de-center subjective knowledge and Western research paradigms that often “other” communities of color. Testimonio centers first-hand knowledge and experience as an invaluable resource and a place from which knowledge can be formulated. In this way, testimonio has been recognized as a powerful research praxis for people of color. Testimonios, when shared in a community, may also initiate what Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson cites as “relationality,” which results from moments of sharing and healing. Citing relationality as part and parcel to an Indigenous ontology, Wilson states that “rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationships with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are a part of” (Wilson, 2008: 80). To this end we must recognize not only the importance of sharing one's testimonio through the collective songwriting process, but also the spaces that are generated in the process and thus allow for this relationality. As Gaye Theresa Johnson has articulated, “Meaningful space is essential for the survival of communities, but also for the discursive practices encoding the stories that define and redefine who people are, where they fit into the world, and what they envision for the future” (Johnson, 2013: xxii). “Sobreviviendo” is a culmination of both primary (immigrant women in Santa Barbara) and secondary (Santos in Xalapa) testimonio sources, and speaks to the impact of migration from multiple perspectives. Through the gathering of testimonios on both sides of the border, Santos' composition is an ode to immigrant people's stories in both Santa Barbara and Mexico, and

all at once a synthesis of the grand effects migration can have on two communities at once. "Sobreviviendo" is a double-sided view of migration as a global phenomenon that affects those who leave as well as those who remain in their home country.

Finally, similar to theories regarding testimonio, the most important aspect of collective songwriting is not the song itself, but rather its ability to "engender solidarity" (Acevedo, 2001: 3). Testimonio was utilized in the *Entre Mujeres* project as a way to create knowledge and theory through personal experiences toward the goal of creating a song, or what I began to see as "sung theories." It became a space from which to discuss and create collective ideas among women, which simultaneously created a sense of community among all *mujeres* involved. Collective songwriting as an enactment of spatial entitlement, and the varying ways that the participants like Santos created new collectivities in the face of adversity is not just based "upon eviction and exclusion from physical spaces, but also on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces" (Johnson, 2013: xv). With one eye on Santa Barbara, Santos weaves migrant testimonios into lyrical prose that reflect their exodus from their homeland and the daily hardships they face in new territory. "Sobreviviendo" recounts an enduring strength and resilience.

ENTRE MUJERES PROJECT COMPLETED

Five years after completing the project in Xalapa, we released *Entre Mujeres: Women Making Music Across Borders* (2012) in Los Angeles, California.⁶ In the end, the mothers, women, men, and children involved participated in different ways, either through lyricism, music/instrumentation, *zapateado* (percussive dance), or voice. The compositions touched on familiar musical themes such as being in love with "Sirena Lanza" (Mermaid Rising), coping with a broken heart with "Agua del Mar" (Ocean Water), and hope for a positive future with "Quién Nacerá" (Who Shall be Born), and "Vida" (Life). Other music tracks such as "Chocolate" speak on the cocoa trade from the perspective of a small child caught up in the throes of slave labor. We also explored unconventional topics; "Encinta" (With Child), for example, describe the final physiological stages of pregnancy.

"Sobreviviendo" has received the most acclaim. The final recording of the piece is sung by Silvia Santos (Yucatán, Mexico), Raquel Vega (Boca de San Miguel,

Veracruz), and Laura Cambron, a Chicana from California. Cambron can also be heard playing *requinto* in the recording. With permission, it has been utilized by various social justice organizations both in the U.S. and in Mexico since the album's release. The professional organization, *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS), for example, utilized the song for their website and a video promo. In Mexico, it was used to raise awareness about domestic violence. These are only a few of the many organizations or audiences that continue to approach me about the song. "Sobreviviendo" seems to resonate with many groups in struggle.

CONCLUSIONS

At present, the *Entre Mujeres* recording project stands as an archive that documents one of many translocal dialogues between Chicana/o, Latina/o, and Mexicana/o communities in the U.S., and jarocho communities in Veracruz, Mexico. In order to accommodate multiple schedules, as well as to engage with and document music dialogues across political borders, a manipulation of recording technology was important to the project's completion. Utilizing these technologies, *Entre Mujeres* through *convivencia* created a space that prompted testimonios, discussions on music, love, mothering, politics, and overall life experience. Ultimately, "Sobreviviendo" represents process and archive. Songs as archives or "sung theories" are important elements of the *Entre Mujeres* project, especially when one considers them over time. Recordings, lyrics, and performances of these songs stand to be remembered, revisited, reconstructed, critiqued, or honored by future generations. For as bell hooks reminds us, "As we work to be loving, to create a culture that celebrates life, that makes love possible, we move against dehumanization, against domination" (1981: 26). In this way, Santos understood that songs and the theories imbedded in them can inform across time, disciplines, borders, generations, and other ways of knowing, but most importantly, songs can register the hope and resilience that inspired their creation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The author does not use an accent over her last name.
- 2 I borrow "translocal" from anthropologist Lynn Stephen (2007). The term "translocal" disrupts the social science binaries-global/local, local/national, transnational and instead offers a view of the "social field" that makes

- visible the material survival strategies of these communities that abstract theorizations can miss (22).
- ³ Fandango as a dance genre is most notably linked to Spain due to its most widely known form, the flamenco. It is found in other regions of the world, however, including Mexico and other parts of Latin America, as well as Africa where it is believed to have originated. Mexican anthropologist, Antonio García de León, has noted, *fandango* may have derived from the Bantu word “fanda” meaning *fiesta*. In Veracruz, the word is applied to the participatory music and dance practices primarily in the mountain and costal region of the state of Veracruz, known as the *Sotavento*.
- ⁴ *Son* (derived from “sonido”) is used in Spanish for a type of musical rhythm.
- ⁵ All translations are my own.
- ⁶ The release of *Entre Mujeres: Women Making Music Across Borders* was made possible by the community of supporters generated through a Kickstarter campaign. We managed to raise \$10,500.00 to complete the mixing, mastering, and printing of the project. <<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/mgonzalez/entre-mujeres-translocal-musical-dialogues>> (Accessed March 8, 2013).
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