

University of Texas at El Paso

From the Selected Works of Richard D. Pineda

2009

Will They See Me Coming? Do They Know I'm Running? Los Lobos and the Performance of Mestizaje Identity through Journey

Richard D. Pineda, *University of Texas at El Paso*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/richard_d_pineda/1/

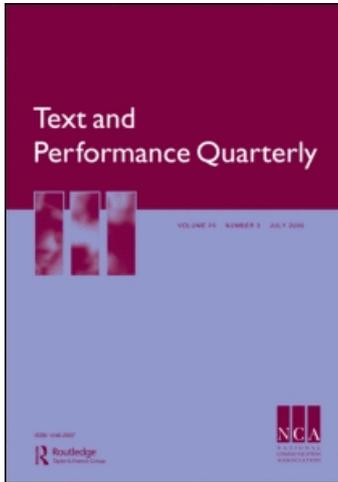
This article was downloaded by: [Pineda, Richard D.]

On: 31 March 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 910017277]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Text and Performance Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713709382>

Will They See Me Coming? Do They Know I'm Running? Los Lobos and the Performance of Mestizaje Identity through Journey

Richard D. Pineda

Online Publication Date: 01 April 2009

To cite this Article Pineda, Richard D.(2009)'Will They See Me Coming? Do They Know I'm Running? Los Lobos and the Performance of Mestizaje Identity through Journey',Text and Performance Quarterly,29:2,183 — 200

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10462930902774874

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10462930902774874>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Will They See Me Coming? Do They Know I'm Running? Los Lobos and the Performance of *Mestizaje* Identity through Journey

Richard D. Pineda

Los Lobos' album The Town and The City represents a lyrical narrative and performance of journey. The album's strength and appeal is that it offers a poignant commentary on journey at time when the odyssey undertaken by immigrants to the United States are often demonized, misunderstood, or purposefully manipulated for political benefit. I argue in this essay that the Los Lobos album illustrates and complicates the performance of Chicana/o identity, mestizaje, and hybridity through the metaphor of journey. This metaphorical journey is represented as both a process and event that establishes a sense of connectivity for audiences.

Keywords: The Town and The City; Chicana/o; Popular music; Immigration

Popular music and the performance of identity are inextricably linked, particularly for Chicanas/os, for whom the expressive power of music has informed and shaped the condition of Chicana/o identity. From early scholarship on *corridos*¹ (Paredes), the evolution of protest as a function of Chicana/o identity (Lewis), expressiveness of Chicano masculinity (Delgado), to the implications of performance styled by the context of working-class Chicanas/os (Márez), musical performances influence and reveal a great deal about contemporary Chicana/o identities. Kun contends popular music is one of the best sites for “witnessing the performance of racial and ethnic difference,” because this space opposes mainstream pressures such as conformity to language or specific notions of citizenship (11). This is consistent with Holling and Calafell’s discussion of artistic expression as performative “recourse” for Chicanas/os

Richard Daniel Pineda (PhD) is Assistant Professor of Communication and Research Fellow at the Sam Donaldson Center for Communication Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. Correspondence to: Richard D. Pineda, Department of Communication, University of Texas at El Paso, Cotton Memorial, 500 W. University, El Paso, TX 79968, USA. Tel: (915) 747-6678; Email: rdpineda@utep.edu

that creates access to the public sphere (59). The development of Chicana/o identity is complicated. Delgado explains, because there are literal and figurative borders omnipresent in the lives of Chicanas/os creating cultural hybridity and making static identities difficult to maintain (389). Traveling across both physical and psychological borders results in a *mestizaje*² identity, informed through the exchange of ideas with other people as much as the influence of “alterations in worldview” (Jackson 362).

Los Lobos’ 2006 album, *The Town and The City*, illustrates performances of this *mestiza/o* identity through the metaphor of journey, in this case the one undertaken by the album’s narrator. Through the album’s various *mestizajes* in language and musical style, Los Lobos offer an empathetic perspective on the struggles of immigrants to the United States. Competing discourses on and about immigration dominate current events. A better understanding of the performance of *mestiza/o* identity and the struggle involved in immigration challenges notions of difference and conformity. Although Los Lobos’ performance comes from a masculine perspective, both as the male voices of the band and the masculine identity of the narrator, their insight into the struggles of immigration are important. Further, as Holling and Calafell suggest, analysis of masculine voices can always reveal “insights about the confluence of culture, performance, and narrative” (59). Additionally, as Moreman observes, globalized music and other artifacts can be consumed in various places by various people; commentary about perspectives such as identity can reach many audiences of different ethnicity and gender (93).

In this essay, I start by first discussing the significance of Los Lobos and the rationale of using *The Town* as the site for my investigation of performance and identity. I then move to a discussion of the relevant literature guiding my essay, presenting the theoretical framework of *mestizaje* and contextualizing the idea alongside hybridity and borderlands theory. The final part of the essay examines the narrator’s trek. The narrator in *The Town* is travelling from one place to another. Through the performance of mixed languages and mixed genres the band presents a complicated story that highlights the struggles and challenges of such an odyssey while remembering that the reward for such a journey may be worth the cost. The formation and performance of *mestiza/o* identity parallels this trek and incorporates the same risks and rewards, particularly as Chicanas/os deal with maintaining expressive space for their identity, experiences, and culture. Los Lobos’ performance of journey establishes connectivity among audience members shaping their understanding of the immigrant experience. And it enables them to relate this harrowing process to their own experiences, whether as immigrants themselves or as participants in discourse about immigration in the contemporary context.

Los Lobos and *The Town and The City*

Los Lobos del Este Los Angeles, more commonly known as Los Lobos, have been a significant presence in popular music with a career that stretches from 1973 through the present day. Los Lobos have produced a substantial catalog of songs and albums in addition to performing their music live for audiences around the world. Los Lobos’

contribution to music has led cultural critic Charles Tatum to suggest they are “the most enduring . . . the most adaptable . . . and the most resilient” of all contemporary West Coast Chicana/o bands (40). The band’s cover of Ritchie Valens’ “La Bamba” in 1987 drew significant media attention, but they had already recorded their first major label debut, *How Will the Wolf Survive?* on the Slash/Warner Brothers label; an album still listed on Rolling Stone’s list of *500 Greatest Albums of All Time*. Los Lobos and their music have endured because they represent the history of their community and the identity of being Chicana/o, while moving forward and incorporating diverse influences and musical styles recognizing that music, like identity, does not grow in stasis but thrives through the process of adapting and absorbing elements of the contemporary world.

Los Lobos have secured their place in popular culture with a unique *mestizaje* of styles, language, and cultural influences in their music. The scope of *mestizaje* informs and reflects several factors: language, experience, culture, and ideology. Reyes and Waldman argue that from the beginning of the band’s career, Los Lobos have remained committed to Mexican music, and yet they bring a performativity “steeped in funk, rock, and soul” (146). From the traditional folk album *La Pistola y el Corazón*, released after the success of *How Will the Wolf Survive?* to the release of the experimental *Kiko* and on through the most recent album, *The Town*, Los Lobos have made music that is diverse and popular. Their songs and performances personify living on the border between many worlds; they offer a level of permissibility to be Mexican, to be American, or to be Chicana/o all at once. The music of Los Lobos is representative of Latinas/os in the United States and of Chicanas/os in particular, whom as Valdivia explains, “exhibit . . . radical degrees of fluidity, hybridity, and collaboration and/or cooperation between the substream and the commercialized mainstream” (152).

Music critic Greg Quill has written that the band’s newest album, *The Town and The City*, “sets a new standard” for Los Lobos as it “blends impressive musical muscle with the folk, dance, and traditional threads of their Latino origins and the visceral saloon rock they’ve practiced for years” (K3). *The Town* was received strongly by critics (Danton; Quill) and has received attention nationwide through intense radio airplay and with a concurrent concert tour. The album, released in October 2006, came shortly after the country had witnessed massive protests and public rallies sparked by the passage of House Resolution 4437: The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act. The album’s appeal comes from its poignant commentary on immigration at time when journeys undertaken by immigrants to the United States are demonized, misunderstood, or purposefully manipulated for political benefit. Band member Steve Berlin explained in one interview that this album was different from others that the band produced, “We had a notion about an immigrant’s journey—it’s a story that starts in one place and ends in a different place” (Touzeau 90). Lipsitz contends that the production of musical texts driven by social and cultural tensions can lead to a “richer cultural vision” (*Dangerous* 86), which is what I argue in this essay. *The Town* promotes a sense of *mestizaje* while avoiding the tug of assimilation and does not dilute the significance of

the message that identity is important for Chicanas/os. The performance of connectivity is, as Belgrad suggests, part of a tradition in Chicana/o art emphasizing “transgression of boundaries” and also “creating an awareness of those boundaries” (251).

Los Lobos have made an impact on popular music, and their contribution to the performance of *mestizaje* also makes them significant to communication and performance scholars. I argue in this essay that the Los Lobos album *The Town* illustrates and complicates the performance of Chicana/o identities, *mestizaje*, and hybridity through their metaphor of journey that establishes a space of connectivity. Pérez-Torres explains that *mestizaje* is central to cultural production in the Chicana/o community, because it allows for the gathering of audiences, enactment of “fluid subjectivities” and for the affirmation of ethnic identities (1998, 155). In a contemporary, critical context, *mestizaje* is about performing identity and style influenced by many aspects of culture. Lipsitz argues that Los Lobos create access for audiences in and outside of Chicana/o culture, while juxtaposing musical styles and practicing “intricate forms of intertextuality by connecting their music to community subcultures and institutions” (1986–1987, 162). The music of Los Lobos is about connecting to and celebrating identities through the performance of a distinct *mestizaje*.

Performance Informing Connectivity

Communication and performance literature has grown in size and depth; however, there remains a considerable gap as far as a research regarding the intersection of performance, Chicana/o identities, and popular music. Conquergood’s work on ethnography and performance studies emphasizes the need to be able to build from the “historical process, contingency and ideology,” in a way that informs experience and identity (187). As popular media attention toward Chicanas/os grows, it behooves scholars to consider the way in which the performance of identities creates space for expression and comments on the treatment of Chicanas/os in the United States. Performance of identities is about connections for audiences that are Chicana/o as well as those that are not Chicana/o. For Chicanas/os, the performance of identity allows generations to connect with the immigrant experience and to connect with broader dimensions of culture. For non-Chicanas/os, the performance of identity is about being sensitized to experiences such as immigration and about seeing humanity in the faces of individual immigrants.

Notable studies of performance of Latina/o and Chicana/o identities come from the work of Delgado, Calafell, and Holling, whose research, respectively, examines performativity of Chicano masculinity, the reclamation of voice in Chicana feminism, and the performativity and staging of identity as emancipatory practice. Delgado argues Chicana/o marginalization, justifies the need to understand how cultural dynamics interplay with identity, particularly in creative expressive spaces such as those in popular music (388). Using performance ethnography, Calafell lays her own identity under the microscope seeking a path toward critiquing and actualizing memory and pilgrimage on her journeys throughout Mexico City (54). Holling and

Calafell dissect stage performances, highlighting narratives on and about Chicana/o identities, which “challenge and rewrite” constraining discourses on and about those identities (59–60). Los Lobos resist dominant discourses, express cultural identity and masculinity, and relate the story of pilgrimage, but they also create a performance of connectivity for themselves and audiences as they narrate journey through lyrics, musical style, and use of Spanish, English, and *caló*. Understanding immigration and the immigrant experience through a performance studies lens offers new insight into Latina/o cultural identities.

Los Lobos have reconstituted the idea of *mestizaje* in their album *The Town* through a theoretical framework of *mestiza/o identity* conceptualized as journey. The essence of *The Town* is about challenging the US normative discussion about immigration and also about the space in which these discussions of immigration are taking place. For many Chicanas/os, identity has been and is influenced by the movement of people across borders. Thus, it is important to conceive of a way to register and to study these movements of people. Los Lobos' *The Town* is an artifact produced by voices familiar with Chicana/o identities and performed at a time when immigrants are scrutinized while politics reify borders and demarcations. Los Lobos perform identities that are everyday practices for immigrants, but by doing so they bring forth and privilege that performance. It is, as Holling and Calafell suggest, a way to capitalize on middle space, part of the empowerment of marginalized discourse and a celebration of the identity that immigrants practice every day while on their journey(s).

There are several *mestizajes* or mixes present in this cultural fusion. These mixes have been traditionally overlooked, and it is the recently renewed popularity and consumption of Latin popular music in general and Chicana/o popular music in particular that demands new exploration of these *mestizajes*. In this essay I argue that Los Lobos represents the ongoing and dynamic nature of journey, physically and psychologically, through an exploration of both the process of journey and how journey serves as a compelling metaphor for understanding the performance of identity for both Los Lobos and their audiences. The album represents journey as both event and process, both individually and collectively. For audiences, witnessing, understanding, experiencing, and embodying the performance of these treks creates a connective process. That is, Los Lobos do not just perform the narrative of journey; they perform connectivity among both Chicana/o and non-Chicana/o audiences who in turn connect through the individual narrative as well as through language and musical styles.

Theoretical Framework of Journey

Defining Chicana/o identity is problematic. It comes wrapped in an oppressive history that started with Cortés' conquest of the Mexica and continues through contemporary struggles over civil rights right up to the recent turmoil over immigration reform in the United States (Pérez 8). Chicanas/os remain proud and expressive even as they deal with these contexts and pressures such as identity being

ascribed through what Fregoso calls “hegemonic discourses of U.S. popular culture” (659). Chicanas/os maintain expressive space for identity through the acceptance of *mestizaje*. *Mestizaje*, as Pérez-Torres argues, is a trope that “roots cultural production and change in the physical memory of injustice and inhuman exploitation, of desire and transforming love” (2006, 4).

Chicana/o identities exist in a state of constant transition under the pressure and influence of a broader society. Flores and Hasian argue that public discourses, such as music, both “invite audiences to share in collective traditions, histories and future possibilities,” as much as they also influence identification, process, and social relationships (189–90). Bhabha adds that identity emerges as a performance that is complex and crosses borders engaging in cultural hybridities (2). The border represents a space where engagements between cultures are negotiated. It is a fluid space but the influence of history plays out with contemporary contexts and influences intertwined. Jackson notes that an individual’s personal and cultural histories “offer a baseline for social cognition” (364). Merging the significance of history with Bhabha’s notion of identity is consistent with Fregoso’s conceptualization that identity functions to privilege “becoming” rather than being (664). It becomes necessary to investigate the spaces where *mestizaje* becomes, particularly in the form of cultural, expressive space, because it is in this space where there are fewer constraints imposed by society. Additionally, Frith explains, noting Mark Slobin’s work on subcultural musical practices, music is a space that simultaneously projects and dissolves the self in every performance (110).

In understanding the Chicana/o experience of hybridity, it is necessary to position the role of borders and demarcations in the culture. The border has imprinted itself on the identity of Chicanas/os in the United States in a fashion best categorized by Anzaldúa as “*una herida abierta*”³ that distinguishes “us from them” and serves to demarcate physical space as well as psychological space (25). In the United States the border and surrounding discourses about immigration very much reify the buffer/rigidity dichotomy. Márez contends that immigration discourse is contradictory, encouraging movement for economic gains in the United States, but isolating border crossers as threats, effectively scapegoating them as the cause of social disorder (129). Yet for border crossers, the border may be the most important place in the process of becoming. Chicanas/os came to their present locations after a great deal of travel and movement. Some of these treks were physical and others still were more about moving across metaphysical space. The struggle in any journey is about accommodating the challenge of traveling and moving to a new place. Both physically and mentally, that movement can be about exploring new space or about living in a different consciousness. The journey requires struggle in either example and can be celebrated or conversely criticized depending on the toll taken by the journey.

To journey is a process rather than a one-time event. There is a struggle that goes on as identity becomes and changes, in the same way that the journey encompasses struggle. For Mexican Americans, whether or not they themselves crossed the physical border or if their families and ancestors before them made the trek, or even if the border demarcating the United States from México changed around them, the

journey is an important part of *mestiza/o identity*. In the case of Los Lobos' *The Town*, I argue that there are several elements that illustrate a journey as another way of thinking about hybridity, *mestizaje*, and *Chicanidad* through the performance of connectivity. The language used in the performance of songs blurs lines between languages and even between formality and colloquialism. The style or genre of music is blurred as artists anchor themselves in historical styles but bring forth technology and sensibilities anchored in the present. The structure and presentation of an album speaks to *mestizaje* as the narrative is unwound often in a linear fashion but with certain assumptions ever present about how listeners in the audience can relate to the narrative. As Connell and Gibson hypothesize, popular music is an important subject for research, "because it is so tangled up in the activities of everyday life" (5). *The Town* highlights this observation in a powerful fashion as journeys unfold and progress in the album, for the band, and for their audiences.

The Journey and Immigration

Los Lobos' album *The Town* presents a metaphor of journey, retold through the trek undertaken by one person, the narrator of the album. The focus on the individual is important because all too often the metanarrative about immigration, popularized by news media, addresses immigration as a wide body of nameless and faceless people who are potentially disruptive and dangerous (Gonzalez 190–91). Focusing on the individual's struggle and success along the journey can, as De Fina notes, "help defeat overgeneralization and stereotyping" and add a level of complexity to the understanding of immigrants in the United States (3). Quill best explains the power of *The Town* by describing the overall sound of the album evoking "the unspeakable anguish of immigrants in a nation suddenly at war with foreigners and surrounded by fences" (K3).

Representations of immigration in popular culture, especially the way in which immigrants and newly immigrated people seek out how to represent themselves, are important due to their influence on the general public's perceptions about the issue. Chew Sánchez's scholarship on migrants and their consumption of *corrido*⁴ music is a good example of the salience of popular culture and popular music influencing identity and representation. Artists whose families have come to the United States have played an important role using artistic platforms such as music to communicate their histories full of both accomplishments and struggle. *The Town and The City* was released in October 2006 at the height of an invigorated national discourse about immigration policy and reform. Both immigration advocates and opponents have disagreed vociferously about the economic and political concerns inextricably linked to immigration, but popular culture informed by changing Latina/o demographics has reflected a new, more sensitive perspective on immigration. In addition to the music of Los Lobos, one need only look to recent popular press books such as Martínez, and Thompson, to recognize this trend. Lipsitz has argued that marginality determines minority contributions to majority culture and that "mass media images never grant legitimacy to marginal perspectives," and yet at the turn of the new

century Latina/o popular culture is spreading and connecting across the wide expanse of the Americas (1986–1987, 158).

The narrative of the journey is composed of several parts on this album starting with a broad historical view of the journey from an ancient homeland to a new geographic location. The album also includes tropes that are important in describing a journey, namely the sense of struggle in taking part in a journey and the growth an individual experiences in looking back at a journey reflectively. The album opens with a track titled “The Valley,” which anchors the journey undertaken by the narrator of the album in the trek made by ancestors “in ancient times,” ostensibly looking for a better place than the one they came from. The sense that immigrant movement is about moving to a better place is recognized in the lyrics of the song, when the narrator acknowledges that “a crimson sun” broke through dark, grey clouds and with that change “their lives had just begun.” Composers David Hidalgo and Louie Pérez use an interesting lyrical device in “The Valley” that relates to the contemporary political dialogue about immigrants and the need for immigration policy reform. Hidalgo and Pérez have used the expressions “out of the shadows into the light” and “out of the darkness into the light,” in one sense to legitimize the journey taken by immigrants even if only reflecting on a process that might have been started a long time ago.

The struggle in the song “The Road to Gila Bend” is a powerful example of the contemporary immigration narrative on the album. The song recounts the experience of crossing the border into Arizona from México. The immigrant, “keeping an eye out for the law,” recounts the sacrifice involved in travel. The narrator sings, “missing everything I left behind . . . five hundred miles or more from a broken heart . . . road twists and turns is there no end.” The setting of the song provides an important context, as the desert between the states of Sonora in México and Arizona in the United States has seen an increase in the number of illegal crossings over the last several years (Harman 1). The trek across this harsh landscape has resulted in a number of deaths and near fatal experiences for immigrants trying to cross into the United States. For example, Walsh reported in August 2007 a double-digit increase in the number of deaths along the United States–México border in Arizona in comparison to the previous year, with most deaths attributed to prolonged heat exposure and lack of water. The decision to cross the border and embark on a journey is a step to *mestiza/o identity* as a belief in the opportunity and benefits on one side of the demarcation that make it worthwhile to risk everything to get there. The narrator’s repeated cry, “will they see me coming, do they know I’m running,” is as much a comment on the struggle of the journey as it is a recognition that reaching the conclusion of the voyage is not likely the end of the struggle.

Another strong thread in the lyrics of *The Town* is about struggle in the ongoing process of journey. The second song of the album, “Hold On,” presents the pain of struggle in its lyrics: “And if I make it to the sunrise just do it all over again . . . I’m killing myself to survive.” The narrator sings on, “every night I stare this thing down knowing that you’ll win in the end, there’s blood on the rag and only dust in the bag.” Even the end of the song speaks to the finality of the struggle, “telling myself a big lie

can I say I'll go another day or will this be the time that I die." The lyrics of "Hold On" speak to the challenges of farm workers in the fields, trudging through the monotony of their tasks. The lyrics speak to what Viesca calls a "counter-response" in the music of Chicana/o artists, whose experience with contemporary "conditions of oppression and disenfranchisement" comes through in their confrontation of these realities (720).

Sacrifice and struggle are important elements of the immigrant narrative and of immigrant identity. De Fina's work on immigrant discourse revealed that one of the challenges that immigrants face when deciding whether or not to come to the United States is deciding to abandon their families in the short term. Furthermore, once immigrants get to the United States the sense of isolation is compounded by "loneliness and lack of freedom," as expounded by many of De Fina's interviewees (41). "If You Were Only Here Tonight," speaks to the loneliness faced by immigrants on their trek to another place. The complication for the narrator in the song is that his plea for having someone with him comes in light of things he has done and regrets, "I wouldn't have did what I just done . . . it wouldn't have been such a fight . . . I wouldn't have put up such a fight if you were only here tonight." The narrator is clearly male, but female immigrants undoubtedly experience similar loneliness, isolation, and possibly regret, albeit in different ways. However, because Los Lobos write, sing, and perform from male perspectives, in many ways, this album is a performance of immigrant masculinity, even though female audiences may relate to aspects of Los Lobos' music and performance.

The album presents a linear narrative about journey starting with "The Valley" and ending with the last track on the album, "The Town." If "The Valley" starts with an ancient journey laying the groundwork for others to make a similar trek to a new place, then "The Town" is an example of reflexive performance about the place that a traveler started out from and the desire to return to that place or town in the end. The place the narrator sings about comes only in dreams, but is also acknowledged as the place "where my heart will be found, it's where I'll finally lay myself down." The song mixes themes of societal turbulence, "I heard a shot go off in the night," with the recognition that there is safety in "the town where I come from." Travel is laden with reward and risk, but moving to a new place is worth encumbering the challenge. The key tenet of hybridity, mixing ideas, is evident here as the narrator is celebrating the place where they are while also recognizing that "home" is still at the start of the metaphysical trail. Existence is about accepting these places together in a hybrid form, much like the mantle of Chicana/o identities are anchored in the history and place of México but lived in the contemporary United States.

The power of the narrative for Los Lobos on this album speaks to the importance of journey, whether it is for the immigrant or for the Chicanas/os who have been in the United States their entire life. The scope of the metaphor emphasizes the struggle of becoming and recognizes that the process comes with a price whether it is the fear of being "caught" in a physical sense or perhaps being revealed as "not being enough" of one group or another. *The Town* is a reminder that for Chicanas/os there is a struggle that has been going on to form identities under the pressure of

assimilation. However, the celebration of identity is important as it connects Chicanas/os to the past and to the future. Becoming requires historical perspective. However, for many Chicanas/os, that historical perspective can only be informed by popular culture created by artists like Los Lobos rather than through familial narratives about border crossing because their families might not have made such a physical trek. The album is powerful because it presents the journey and a context for audiences to relate to and learn about these journeys and what those journeys mean for becoming in their own identities. Madison and Hamera contend that performance is about a comprehension and recognition of the power of individuals to “make culture” and “reinvent” the ways of being (xii). Popular music can serve as the impetus for power and the remaking of culture, particularly if the challenge is to contest and re-arrange images and ideas of people like those that cross the border.

Mestizaje of Language and Music

The Town speaks to the hybridity of journey both stylistically and discursively through the use of mixed genres and intertwined languages in every song. This hybridity in genre and language represents the journeys the band and their audiences perform and experience beyond the stories within the songs. As Chicanas/os move through Mexican(ness) to being/performing Mexican American(ness), decisions are constantly made about language and culture. As Chicanas/os perform their identity amongst other groups there is pressure to conform to language or cultural norms, particularly as minorities in a nonminority dominant environment. Even engaging with other Chicanas/os requires strategic decisions about how to talk and what to say or how to relate. The next stage of the journey determines how we speak, what language we use depending on our comfort level and context, and how we celebrate culture. Just as movement emboldens mixing and acceptance of *mestiza/o identity*, the music of *The Town* revels in the fluidity of being and performing something new for its audiences. The nature of performance is such that permissibility is communicated through the presentation of this mix of music.

Identifying this trend in the work of artists like Los Lobos is significant because it privileges performance for its ability to alter the confines of conformity—musical or even social and political. As Moreman has argued, the dominant media system traditionally positions Latinas/os in “increasingly precarious” space, using materiality to label Latinas/os as “poor” and “uneducated” (94). Certain artists, namely Paulina Rubio as identified in Moreman’s research, have performed a version of *mestizaje* identity, but it remains distant from the material reality of the border and the realities facing those immigrants trying to cross borders. The performance of connectivity with Los Lobos’ *The Town* creates space for multiple audiences. Chicanas/os are granted space to celebrate the journey and non-Chicanas/os are granted access to see the movement of music and language.

The music in *The Town* represents a mix of genres. This fusion of genres on a single album has gained Los Lobos attention and a wide fan base. More importantly however, this fusion and performance of varied styles is a *mestizaje* that delineates the

difference between popular music and Chicana/o popular music. Accepting historical, cultural, or socio-economic difference and assuming it as a foundation for performativity is the hallmark of Los Lobos. Shorris, commenting on a broader Chicana/o musical tradition, argues that Latina/o music “plays nostalgia with the left hand, geography with the right,” essentially championing varied styles while still carving out unique space for Chicana/o audiences (404). Pérez-Torres argues that, “musical productions contest dominant power as subcultural groups resignify form in order to voice historical memory and subjectivity” (2006, 94). The musical choices made by Los Lobos in this album and in much of their work, speak to the performance of Chicana/o identities; mixing styles and experiences to meet expectations of society and yet keeping the traditions alive and flexible so that new hybrid forms can come to fruition and exist in contemporary space. Frith notes that music is powerful for identity because it is a space in which to perform identity and also because it serves as “an aesthetic practice, articulating in itself an understanding of both group relations and individuality” (110–11). Márez suggests the mix of musical styles in popular music performances helps to “valorize” difference against the maintenance of a dominating monoculture (121). Recognizing how Los Lobos alter these spaces with a *mestizaje* of musical styles lends credence to the idea that identity expression and performance contribute to a broader sense of identity.

Balko suggests that Los Lobos have embraced, escaped, and mongrelized their heritage as Mexican American artists by “marrying” their heritage with “American blues, jazz, country, and rock” (53). The songs on *The Town* speak to Balko’s assessment, which is apparent from the opening guitar riff on the album’s first track, “The Valley.” An electric sound penetrates the track from start to finish, its sorrowful wail sounding like backtracking to a traditional blues song. A repetitive percussion track, reminiscent of indigenous drumming adds a distinctive sound to the track entitled “Hold On.” By the third track, “The Road to Gila Bend,” the band is back to a sound best described as rock and roll with strong guitar play and anthemic rhythm. This presentation of distinctive sounds moves rapidly between styles and across different paces within the album’s first fifteen minutes.

The juxtaposition of distinctive Latin American sounds also plays a large role in the music of Los Lobos. The band has often incorporated *cumbias* in their musical compositions. On *The Town*, the fourth track “Chuco’s Cumbia” is a good example of the genre. *Cumbia* itself is a style with a unique history that speaks to the *mestizaje* of popular culture in Latin America. *Cumbias* originated in Colombia, where they were influenced by the African courtship dance known as *cumbe* (Wade 60). As the music became popular in Colombia it also gained cultural capital in Latin America countries such as El Salvador, Argentina, and in México.

“No Puedo Más” follows the *cumbia* style but adds more electric guitar with dominating riffs. “No Puedo Más” sounds like classic Chicana/o rock from three decades earlier made popular by such acts as Santana and War. The music, with its all-Spanish song lyrics, fits a style that epitomizes inclusion and yet maintains difference as a marker. Macías, commenting on Los Angeles-based, post-World War II Chicana/o music, suggests that a “mutual musical enculturation” between African

Americans and Chicanas/os fueled Chicano rock with its incorporation of rhythm and blues sounds over Spanish lyrics or lyrics using English-Spanish hybrid slang (186). Pérez-Torres explains, “the dynamic constructions of new musical formations—via the reinterpretation and re-presentation of traditional music or the incorporation of popular, even commercial forms—serves to deterritorialize culture” (2006, 95–96). “Luna” is the best example of how performance deterritorializes culture and place. The song sounds familiar as an example of *son jarocho*, the style of music popular in the state of Veracruz, México, but as it unfolds the band includes an electric sound that is distinctly contemporary. As with *cumbia*, *son jarocho* represents a *mestizaje* of sounds including African and Caribbean percussion and the instruments of indigenous groups. The fluidity of musical influences in this region have played out in contemporary music and in particular with Los Lobos, whose 1988 release *La Pistola y el Corazón*, included a range of traditional Mexican folksongs. For Los Lobos the music, musical styling, and instruments are about a journey from heritage and tradition to a contemporary place. The celebration of these styles suggests that it is acceptable and even important to remember the places you, or your ancestors, have come from and to celebrate, reflexively, the success and process of the journey.

The music of Los Lobos contributes to a *mestizaje* of identity, accepting parts of many cultures and reifying them in a new creation for its audiences. For Chicanas/os, having this soundtrack is important because it informs identity and allows audience members to celebrate the new fusion of styles. The fusions and celebrations of mixed styles are like life in the United States for Chicanas/os, drawn from the history(s) and traditions of another place but now made significant as Chicanas/os seek to carve out expressive space to perform contemporary identities. Frith concurs that for musicians like Los Lobos not only does the performance of the music help construct the sense of identity, “music is . . . best able to cross borders . . . across fences and walls and oceans, across classes, races, and nations” (125). Music is the best form of cultural expression to embody the journey for identity and the evolution of tradition into contemporary space.

The final element of the journey requires a discursive foundation from which to explain and connect the narrative of struggle, challenge, and success. The use of language is an important marker for Latinas/os in the United States as a performative action associated with identity. Amongst most Latinas/os in the United States, the two primary languages that are practiced and performed are Spanish and English, but realistically there is a critical *mestizaje* that is occurring in the middle space between these two languages. Vernacular expressiveness is empowered in a discursive form that merges words together or incorporates both languages in sentences. Often this is in the form of code-switching. Morales argues, the rise of Spanglish, a hybrid mix of Spanish and English, is gaining prominence because it is being celebrated more in popular culture and as such it is emerging from the shadows of practice in familial and colloquial settings. The lyrics of the songs on *The Town* illustrate the use of language and the importance of discursive choices made by the band. Bailey notes

that “lyrics contain the valuation of a song” (23); it is the best space to study performance and conceive of its role in a broader sense.

Los Lobos use English, Spanish, and Spanglish in their songs on *The Town*. I argue that this is significant for several reasons. First, the use of these discursive forms suggests the need to communicate to an audience that might have experience in each individual language but not necessarily across all three of the forms. This is a performative strategy that is invitational in nature and recognizes that one language might not be better than another for listeners. The journey has informed *mestiza/o identity* as the experience of confronting many languages and shifts between languages serve as the foundation of identity. Rigidity in social order would preclude experiencing and celebrating a multiplicity of languages and yet there is permissibility inherent in the performative decision to include a *mestizaje* of languages. It sends a signal to audiences that their own respective performance of language is valuable and they should feel comfortable in accepting the band’s decision to speak to those differences. For Chicana/o audiences this performance of language emphasizes not only pride in the ability to understand the mixed use of language but also a celebration of cultural uniqueness.

Second, the use of these varied discursive forms in one setting challenges the normative order to use only one language. It privileges the critical *mestizaje* that understands the conventional order and disregards the solitary practice of one language for a performance of many languages. In the same way that Latinas/os function in United States society, often negotiating their language performance, the band makes it clear that such negotiation does not and should not go unnoticed. The use of different musical styles, reliant on expressions in Spanish, speaks to the *mestizaje* of identity; the lines between cultural practices are crossed and explored, carrying ideas and language back and forth. Chew Sánchez suggests this type of challenge to the normative performance of language allows for a “selective embracing of particular elements of the cultural context” and speaks to the location and existence carried on by migrants in contemporary society (42).

“Chuco’s Cumbia” is an interesting example of code-switching and the incorporation of a rather specific Chicana/o slang known as *caló*. *Caló*, often associated with a lower socio-economic class of Chicanas/os, is a practice that merges Spanish with English but also manipulates phrases and replaces words. Although usually associated with the *Pachuco* (Mexican American youth subculture from the 1930s and 1940s), *caló* still appears in contemporary discourse as part of “*lo Chicano*,” the Chicana/o culture (Belgrad 254). The opening of the song, “*Vamos al dance, a panchangear*”⁵ is an example of code-switching, using dance in the sentence but incorporating *caló* when *pachanga*⁶ is turned from a noun into a more colloquial verb form *pachangear*.⁷ The song continues referring to “*los vatos de mi clanton*”⁸ incorporating *vato*⁹, a term used with frequency in *caló* slang. The last line of the first stanza of the song is, “*A tirar chancla*,”¹⁰ which is an informal *caló* expression that translates as the act of dancing. Another word in the song which speaks to an audience familiar with *caló* is “*rola*,”¹¹ as in the line “*esta rola del corazón*.”¹²

The fluidity with which the band moves between languages speaks to the *mestizaje* that exists with contemporary Latina/o identities. As newly arrived immigrants and long-term immigrants strive to understand the language of their new geographic location, even if the place is only temporary, they want to keep some of the history alive and moving forward. There is a celebration of dissonance across *The Town* as each song moves between styles and languages. In contemporary society, language is often used to ostracize and limit Latinas/os' participation in community dialogues; rarely does the language of civil society float back and forth between or mix languages. But in *The Town*, with fluidity in language across the scope of the album, both lexically and lyrically, Los Lobos perform *mestizaje* in recognition of identity, in celebration of and in support of Latinas/os. The shift between English and Spanish is smooth and even when Spanglish or *caló* is incorporated there is no schism in its usage and in the flow of the lyrics.

Conclusion

I have argued that the performance of identity in Chicana/o popular music is a performance of journey. The power of journey is found in the mixing of styles, genres, and languages that empower narratives about Chicana/o experiences. The narratives are not constrained by traditional forms but rather reflect the situations and transformations evident in contemporary Chicana/o communities. The narratives reflect movement from one place to another as a process, from one view of language to another and even from one style of music to another. So much of the Chicana/o experience is about journey, particularly the struggle of journey and the reflexivity of understanding the limitations and expectations of the journey. Moreman's essay on Paulina Rubio suggests that performance of identity is constrained by materialities of both of the performer and of the audience. In many ways I believe that my analysis of Los Lobos moves the theoretical discussion forward from this critical benchmark, for with *The Town*, the material border is a reality for the performers and their Chicana/o audience. The performance of journey is a more connected, less artificial, and lacks the "pentacle of perfection," so embedded in Rubio's music (Moreman 104). The harshness and despair of the actual immigrant journey penetrates social reality with this album as does the celebration of accomplishment and becoming in terms of identity. Recognizing that the journey is a fundamental part of Los Lobos' *The Town* goes beyond analyzing the *mestizaje* of styles and languages in the album's lyrics. Rather it is about understanding how popular culture reflects identity and informs audiences about identity. In a climate where immigration is debated and vilified, there are spaces created by artists such as Los Lobos that privilege learning and sharing narratives about journeys—both physical and psychological. The performance of connectivity is important to recognize as cultures bump into each other and define social interaction.

Adapting a framework of analysis based on the metaphor of journey is helpful to interrogate popular culture that focuses on immigration and Latina/o identities,

especially Chicana/o identities. In relation to contemporary media coverage, immigration is one of the most significant public issues linked to Chicanas/os. As a response to that issue, it is likely that artifacts will publicly emerge to counter the hegemonic tendencies of the mainstream. Artifacts such as political cartoons, films, fiction, and biography, in addition to popular music, will require a framework like *mestizaje* to understand the mixture of ideas and influences gathered to inform Chicana/o identities. The journey also offers a standpoint from which younger Chicanas/os can connect to and communicate about the performance of identity. As language skills and historical memory are lost to the process of assimilation, connections between contemporary generations of Chicanas/os and older generations are lost. Providing access to narratives of the journey can create space for connections that empower the performance of identity. These narratives can also serve to connect and create identification between Chicanas/os and newly immigrated Mexicans. Not only do they emphasize the space to share locations of origins, but they also offer the space to develop empathy for those engaged in the struggle to come to the United States and to become.

Popular music is an important dimension of culture, particularly when it allows musicians to perform aspects of identities and cultures. Shuker posits that the popular music aesthetic extends traditional forms while simultaneously working within those traditions to break them up and to subvert the conventions of those traditions. Los Lobos are a powerful example of how musicians extend tradition and challenge normative ideas of tradition and identity. The band continues to present traditional forms of rock and roll and Mexican-American folk music to audiences that are drawn to each form of music and yet their music blends and mixes the genres and languages with a fluidity that matches the *mestizaje* of the Chicana/o community. Although audiences may be required to understand this performance through the lens of Chicano masculinity, the performance of *mestizaje* through the journey, language, and style speaks to all kinds of audiences, evidenced by Los Lobos' diverse audiences of females, males, children, adults, and multicultural participants. The straddling of these styles occurs in a way that draws new audiences to their music, speaking to the audience and their identification with culture that is not homogenous and does not exist in a vacuum. In the same way that immigrants to the United States string together an identity that reflects where they came from with where they now live, the music of Los Lobos creates a foundation for performing that identity and ultimately for celebrating that identity.

Acknowledgements

In addition to Bernadette Calafell, Shane Moreman, and the anonymous reviewers, the author wishes to thank Stacey Sowards and Roberto Avant-Mier for their feedback and steadfast support on this project. This essay is dedicated to Margarita Talamantes and Eliana Berumen; from the past to the future.

Notes

- [1] Ballads popular along the United States Mexican border.
- [2] Mixed.
- [3] An open wound.
- [4] A folk/country style of music popular in México as well as with Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans.
- [5] Let's go to the dance, to party.
- [6] Party.
- [7] To party.
- [8] The dudes of my gang.
- [9] Dude.
- [10] Throw a shoe.
- [11] Song.
- [12] This song from the heart.

References

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Bailey, Alex. "The Rhetoric of Music: A Theoretical Synthesis" *Rocky Mountain Communication Review* 3 (2006): 20–35.
- Balko, Radley. "How the Wolves Survive" *Reason* 39 (2007): 53–57.
- Belgrad, Daniel. "Performing Lo Chicano" *MELUS* 29 (2004): 249–64.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. "Pro(re-)claiming Loss: A Performance Pilgrimage in Search of Malintzin Tenépal" *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25 (2005): 43–56.
- Chew, Sánchez, and Martha I. *Corridos in Migrant Memory*. Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico P, 2006.
- Connell, John, and Chris Gibson. *Soundtracks: Popular Music, Identity, and Place*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics" *Communication Monographs* 50 (1991): 179–94.
- Danton, Eric. "The Town and The City" *Performing Songwriter* 14 (2006): 38.
- De Fina, Anna. *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2003.
- Delgado, Fernando. "All Along the Border: Kid Frost and the Performance of Brown Masculinity" *Text and Performance Quarterly* 20 (2000): 388–401.
- Flores, Lisa A., and Marouf A. Hasian Jr. "Returning to Aztlán and La Raza: Political Communication and the Vernacular Construction of Chicano/a Nationalism" *International and Intercultural Annual Vol. XX: Politics, Communication and Culture*. Ed. Alberto González and Dolores V. Tanno, vol. XX. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997. 186–203.
- Fregoso, Rosa Linda. "The Representations of Cultural Identity in Zoot Suit" *Theory and Society* 22 (1993): 659–74.
- Frith, Simon. "Music and Identity" *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. London: Sage, 1996. 108–27.
- Gonzalez, Juan. *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*. New York: Viking, 2000.
- Harman, Danna. "South of the Border, Fence is No Deterrent." *Christian Science Monitor* Mar. 29, 2006: 1+.
- Holling, Michelle A., and Bernadette Marie Calafell. "Identities on Stage and Staging Identities: ChicanoBrujo Performances as Emancipatory Practices" *Text and Performance Quarterly* 27 (2007): 58–83.

- Jackson, Ronald L., II. "Cultural Contacts Theory: Toward an Understanding of Identity Negotiation" *Communication Quarterly* 50 (2002): 359–67.
- Kun, Josh. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2005.
- Lewis, George H. "La Pistola y El Corazón: Protest and Passion in Mexican-American Popular Music" *Journal of Popular Culture* 26 (1992): 51–67.
- Lipsitz, George. "Cruising Around the Historical Bloc: Postmodernism and Popular Music in East Los Angeles." *Cultural Critique* 5 (1986–1987): 157–77.
- . *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*. New York: Verso, 1997.
- . *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2007.
- Los Lobos. "Chuco's Cumbia." Los Lobos *The Town and The City*.
- . "Hold On." Los Lobos *The Town and The City*.
- . *How Will the Wolf Survive?* Slash/Warner Brothers Records, 1984.
- . "If You Were Only Here Tonight." Los Lobos *The Town and The City*.
- . *Kiko*. Slash/Warner Brothers Records, 1992.
- . "Luna." Los Lobos *The Town and The City*.
- . "No Puedo Más." Los Lobos *The Town and The City*.
- . *La pistola y el Corazón*. Slash/Warner Brothers Records, 1988.
- . "The Road to Gila Bend." Los Lobos *The Town and The City*.
- . "The Town." Los Lobos *The Town and The City*.
- . *The Town and The City*. Hollywood Records, 2006.
- . "The Valley." Los Lobos *The Town and The City*.
- Macias, Anthony. "Latinos/as and Post-World War II Popular American Music." *Musical Migrations: Transnationalism and Cultural Hybridity in Latin/o America*. Ed. Frances R. Aparicio and Cándida F. Jáquez. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 183–97.
- Madison, D. Soyini and Judith Hamera. "Introduction: Performance Studies at the Intersections." *Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*. Ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006. xi–xxv.
- Martínez, Rubén. *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail*. New York: Picador USA, 2002.
- Márez, Curtis. "Brown: The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style." *Social Text* 48 (1996): 109–32.
- Morales, Ed. *Living in Spanglish: The Search for Latino Identity in America*. New York: LA Weekly/St. Martin's P, 2002.
- Moreman, Shane T. "Hybrid Performativity, South and North of the Border: *Entre la teoría y la materialidad de hibridación*." *Latino/o Communication Studies Today*. Ed. Angharad N. Valdivia. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 91–111.
- Paredes, Américo. "With His Pistol in His Hand:" *A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1958.
- Pérez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1999.
- Pérez-Torres, Rafael. "Chicano Ethnicity, Cultural Hybridity, and the Mestizo Voice." *American Literature* 70 (1998): 153–76.
- . *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- Quill, Greg. "Los Lobos Step on the Gas." *Toronto Star* Nov. 9, 2006: K3.
- Reyes, David, and Tom Waldman. *Land of a Thousand Dances: Chicano Rock 'n' Roll from Southern California*. Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico P, 1998.
- Shorris, Earl. *Latinos: A Biography of the People*. New York: Norton, 1992.
- Shuker, Roy. *Understanding Popular Music*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Tatum, Charles. *Chicano Popular Culture: Que Hable el Pueblo*. Tucson, AZ: U of Arizona P, 2001.
- Thompson, Gabriel. *There's No José Here: Following the Hidden Lives of Mexican Immigrants*. New York: Nation Books, 2007.

Touzeau, Jeff. "Enter the Town and the City." *Pro Sound News* (2006): 90.

Valdivia, Angharad N. "Radical Hybridity: Latinas/os as the Paradigmatic Transnational Post-Subculture." *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. Ed. David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl. New York: Berg, 2003. 151–65.

Viesca, Victor Hugo. "The Battle of Los Angeles: The Cultural Politics of Chicano/a Music in the Greater Eastside" *American Quarterly* 56 (2004): 719–39.

Wade, Peter. *Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000.

Walsh, William M. "Border Crossing Deaths on Rise." *USA Today* Aug. 1, 2007: 3A.