

SHAPING *MÉXICO LINDO*: RADIO, MUSIC, AND GENDER
IN GREATER MEXICO, 1923-1946

By

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ABSTRACT

SHAPING *MÉXICO LINDO*: RADIO, GENDER AND MUSIC IN GREATER MEXICO, 1923-1946

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This dissertation studies the early history of radio in Mexico by analyzing the complex ways in which border stations, Mexico City national networks and the Mexican government interacted and competed over the Mexican audience in the United States between 1923 and 1946.

Following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the government implemented an extensive reconstruction project which sought to unify Mexico and transform its people through cultural and educational reform. Radio, along with rhetoric, art and educational policy were enlisted by the government to inculcate literacy, nationalism, notions of citizenship, sobriety, hygiene and hard work. My research shows that as early as 1923 commercial and official stations in Mexico targeted the Mexican population in the rural areas of the nation and in the United States through powerful transmitters. To station owners, the airwaves were intended to project the true national folklore of Mexico, display the best manifestations of Mexican culture through music, and, through advertisements and songs, create consumers.

The study of radio in Great Mexico proves that the U.S.-Mexico border region had not accounted for a border since the 1920s due to the absence of legislation banning these transmissions and the power of radio to send signals across great distances. This dissertation argues that the interests of the Mexican government concerning its radio industry went beyond the national boundaries of Mexico. Situating radio within the industrialization, urbanization and mass communications technological innovations of the twentieth century redefines the role of

mass media and industry growth and development within Mexico. What is more, by mid-century the results were unforeseen: the government's plan failed to materialize and singers and artists migrating back and forth between Mexico and the United States along the circuit provided by radio realized they had to leave Mexico in order to become true cultural ambassadors.

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Dedication

To my parents: J. Ascención Robles Flores, whose stories of life in Mexico City during the 1940s inspired me to take this journey and tell a story and to my mother, Connie Robles, whose enthusiasm for life will always keep me looking up.

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Introduction

Radio was a force aimed to unify and shape Mexican communities in post-revolutionary Mexico. It was an excellent educator, training listeners how to love, laugh, sing, forget, dream, cry, and, by the middle of the twentieth century, become first-rate consumers. Radio transmissions crossed geographic terrain with ease and thus had an advantage over other cultural forms like theater or film connecting communities in Mexico to the U.S. Southwest. In the United States, radio gave Mexican audiences the opportunity to feel connected to other members of the *Patria*, or Motherland, wherever they were located; in Mexico, it taught and reminded the population that the nation was growing, modernizing and that the future was promising.

The arrival of radio to Mexico in 1923 coincided with important national events; most notably the post-revolutionary cultural project of the Mexican government which claimed art, music, folklore and other objects as part of the official discourse. “Revolutionary educational policy sought to inculcate literacy, nationalism, notions of citizenship, sobriety, hygiene, and hard work,” writes Alan Knight, “Art, rhetoric, and (by the 1930s) radio were enlisted for the same purpose.”¹ In the post-revolutionary decades, the government used various forms of media- film, radio, and later, television- to instill principles of nationalism and bring the people of Mexico together under the ideology of the ruling political party. Broadcasting was eagerly embraced by the state because it simplified existing forms of communication and for its potential to reach the most dispersed *pueblos* in the interior of Mexico. Political leaders were fortunate

¹ Alan Knight, “Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 74: 3 (Aug, 1994): 395-96.

that radio was part of a new mass media technology that came to maturity at the exact moment that the government and commercial interests were looking for an efficient means of reaching the Mexican people.²

A number of events influenced the growth of the radio industry during the first half of the twentieth century including: the post-revolutionary national project, the global economic crisis, the forced and volunteer deportation of Mexicans in the United States during the 1930s, World War II, and the rise of consumerism in both Mexico and the United States. Between 1923 and 1945, moreover, the Mexican radio industry grew exponentially as indicated by archival records from the *Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas* (Ministry of Communications and Public Works), or SCOP, the government body responsible for mass communications. SCOP offices did not begin to keep track of commercial radio until the 1930, when 31 stations were in operation in Mexico. A decade later, the country was home to 126 stations, 34 in Mexico City and 92 scattered in urban centers throughout the nation.³ By the 1940s the radio was no longer a “luxury” item in a Mexican household, as it had been in the 1920s; it was as indispensable as a gas stove or a sewing machine. In 1943, an estimated two million radio receivers were in operation in Mexico, giving way to over 14 million listeners “who look for kind distractions in the transmissions.”⁴

This dissertation is a history of radio in Greater Mexico between 1923, when commercial

² Elizabeth Joy Hayes, *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture, and Nationalism in Mexico, 1920-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), xi.

³ *Boletín Radiofónico*, October 1963, p. 83.

⁴ *Radiolandia*, April 16, 1943.

stations arrived in Mexico, to 1946, at the end of the administration of Manuel Ávila Camacho, when the radio industry was centralized, censored and part of the nation's growing industries.⁵ This dissertation situates the transnational capabilities of radio within an era of Mexican history of rapid population, urban, industrial and economic growth. I analyze government records, official bulletins, correspondence between listeners and radio stations, newspapers, popular periodicals, music and personal archives in order to explain how, from the moment they went on the air, Mexican commercial and official radio stations were international businesses interested in sustaining a dialogue with Mexicans abroad. Since 1923, for instance, two of the first privately-owned radio stations in Mexico City, CYL and CYB, boasted that their transmissions were powerful enough to be heard in the U.S. Southwest, Central America, and Cuba.⁶

Literature Review

The twenty-first century is known as an era of permeable borders and transnational identities, a time dictated by the interests of multinational corporations where the internet enjoys unmatched and unforeseen power. What the study of radio in Greater Mexico during the first half of the twentieth century uncovers is that some geographic areas have not accounted for a border in decades. Thanks to the power of radio to send signals across a large territorial span, the region has disregarded the political boundaries since the 1920s, when the first radio stations appeared in central and northern Mexico. This dissertation disentangles the phenomenon of

⁵ Within Chicana/o History, the term "Greater Mexico" applies to the predominantly Mexican or Mexican-American parts of the United States from the U.S.-Mexico border to Chicago. See, José Eduardo Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States and the Erotics of Culture* (New York: Beacon Press, 1999) and Americo Paredes, *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970). Generally, this area is studied vis-à-vis the United States; here, it is understood as one region.

⁶ *El Universal*, September 18, 1923.

transnational broadcasting by Mexican radio stations by drawing on literature from four bodies of work: Mexican History, Mass Media Studies, Chicana/o History and Gender Studies.

In Mexico, the post-revolutionary era was imbued with meanings of redemption and lofty aspirations, such as attaining social equality and offering education to all citizens. Over the last two decades, scholars have noted that many of the goals meant to take place after the overthrow of the Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) regime failed to materialize; what occurred instead, they contend, was the consolidation of a political party and a turn towards an authoritarian system of rule, among other things.⁷

For years, much of the work of the post-revolutionary government project saw the overwhelming power of the government as omnipresent and omnipotent. In recent decades, historians began to realize that this period included, not a cultural program that was passed down from the government to the people, but one in which a significant amount of negotiation took place between these two forces. In fact, scholars identified multiple sites of struggle on the local, regional and national level.⁸ Regarding mass media, in particular, some have challenged the

⁷ The literature on the post-revolutionary era is extensive, ranging from studies on *Cardenismo* (the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas from 1934-1940) to gender, protest, religion and social issues the nation confronted following the war. For the consolidation of the political party, see Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

⁸ Post-revisionist scholarship, which emerged in the 1990s, is a vast field. For a brief overview see, Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, *Everyday forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); William H. Beezley, Cheryl English Martin and William E. French, eds. *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994); Jeffrey W. Rubin, *Decentering the Regime: Ethnicity, Radicalism, and Democracy in Juchitán, Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" *Journal of Latin American Studies* Vol. 26, No. 1 (Feb., 1994), pp. 73-107; Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants,*

belief that it was an obedient servant of the political party.⁹ This dissertation contends that while invigorating nationalism may have been one of the aims of mass media policy as expressed by the close link between private businessmen and the government, by no means was it the only one. Instead, radio entrepreneurs and businessmen, who were interested in the monetary rewards of the enterprise, worked with the law to ensure their stations would prosper.

Mexican mass media legislation favored the interests of Mexican entrepreneurs over the U.S. border radio investors who disregarded the restrictions set in place by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). They attained concessions through *prestanombres*, (nominal owners or trustees) by the Mexican Ministry of Communications and offered English-language programming that was entertaining and highly profitable, yet many times unlawful. In turn, Mexican commercial stations earned generous profits advertising in Spanish and English for businesses from New York City, to Chicago, to Houston and Texas.

In Mexico, scholars have pursued the links between nationalism and cultural policy with greater success. Seminal works by Ricardo Pérez Montfort, for instance, play an important part highlighting the centrality and cultural importance of radio, within the context of the formation

and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

⁹ Recently, Historian Andrew Paxman has challenged the notion that nationalism was the principle aim of mass media policy. Paxman claims that while nationalism played a central role, policy was also driven by two other principles: the desire to contain the masses and the need to unite the people of Mexico under the same political party. Additionally, he attributes two financial aspects, the actions of private business men and industrial economics, as vital to the trajectory of mass media policy in the post-revolutionary era. See, Andrew Paxman, "Cooling to Cinema and Warming to Television: State Mass Media Policy, 1940-1960," paper presented at the conference "Authoritarianism & Resistance in Mexico, 1940-1955," Michigan State University, East Lansing, 1-2 March 2009, 17.

of national music and folklore in Mexican society following the revolution.¹⁰ Mexican cultural policy is also explored in works such as *Red, White and Green*, by Michael Miller, which attempts to bring together modernization and culture in Mexico by studying the way art, cinema, ballet and music were taken up by the Mexican government to promote unity during the Manuel Ávila Camacho administration (1940-1946).¹¹ The formation of the nation state included radio, however, and existing monographs of the cultural history of Mexico tend to disregard this important aspect of the nation-wide cultural project.

Within mass communications, the seminal English-language work on radio in Mexico is, *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture, and Nationalism in Mexico, 1920-1950*, by media scholar Elizabeth Joy Hayes. Her monograph explores the effective way the government regulated radio programming by keeping politics and religion out of broadcasting and the ways in which radio served as an effective medium to transmit messages from the cities to the hinterlands of the nation.¹² While Hayes convincingly illustrates the importance of radio to the national project, she leaves many unanswered questions regarding the relationship between mass media and the government beyond Mexico's political borders, such as: how did political leaders use radio to reach a public outside of Mexico? Or, how was mass media integrated into the post-

¹⁰ Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Estampas De Nacionalismo Popular Mexicano: Ensayos Sobre Cultura Popular Y Nacionalismo*. (México, D.F: CIESAS, 1994.) and *Expresiones Populares y Estereotipos Culturales en México. Siglos XIX y XX. Diez Ensayos* (México, DF: Casa Chata, 2007).

¹¹ Michael Nelson Miller, *Red, White and Green: The Maturing of Mexicanidad, 1940-1946* (El Paso: University of Texas at El Paso, Texas Western Press, 1998).

¹² Elizabeth Joy Hayes, *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture, and Nationalism in Mexico, 1920-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

revolutionary national economy? Taking into account that alongside petroleum, automobile and aeronautical production radio was considered an important part of the national economy for its production value, the number of people it employed, and that entrepreneurs along the U.S.-Mexico border were benefitting from using radio communications to meet the consumer demands of Mexican immigrants in the United States, it is important to explore these questions further. By 1944, for example, Mexico was home to 911 radio stations and, according to the Ministry of Communications and Public Works, an estimated fifteen million pesos had been invested in their establishment.¹³

Other studies within mass communications have focused on the “Golden Age,” (1920s-1950s) of radio,¹⁴ or have invoked theory, in particular that of Benedict Anderson, to demonstrate that nations are in fact communities that are socially constructed and imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Anderson’s work, on the influence of print technology on nationalism, challenged scholars to think of ways that communication transfers to millions of people across great distances with the help of the mass media.¹⁵ In response, cultural critics within Latin America have noted the centralizing and nation-building

¹³ *Radiolandia*, September 22, 1944.

¹⁴ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, (eds.) *The Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Books, 1991).

role of the media and nationalism more broadly.¹⁶ However, to date, most examples within the mass communications field that touch upon radio stations in Mexico heard in the United States, center around the “Border Radio” phenomenon, popularized by Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford in a book by the same title.¹⁷

“Border Radio,” is a blanket term used to describe powerful and influential U.S. radio stations set up in Northern Mexico between the 1930s and the 1960s. These stations disregarded the restrictions set in place by the FCC, attained permission and licensing from the Mexican government, and established single-station networks whose extraordinary power allowed their programs to be heard all over the United States.

The border radio interpretation maintains that Mexico granted U.S. entrepreneurs permission to establish high-frequency radio stations on the Mexican side of the border in order to circumvent U.S. laws prohibiting them from using the stations for non-sanctioned activities such as selling medical treatments or offering horoscope readings over the air. The Mexican government welcomed the opportunity “to tweak American broadcasting establishment and the Yankee imperialists who had established hegemony over the North American airwaves,” as

¹⁶ See, Néstor García-Canclini, *Transforming Modernity: Popular culture in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); Jesús Martín Barbero, *Communication, culture and hegemony: From the media to mediations*. (London: Sage Publications, 1993); Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Estampas De Nacionalismo Popular Mexicano: Ensayos Sobre Cultura Popular Y Nacionalismo* (México, DF: CIESAS, 1994).

¹⁷ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio: Quacks, yodelers, pitchmen, psychics, and other amazing broadcasters of the American airwaves* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1987).

argued by Jim Fowler and Bill Crawford.¹⁸ However true this may have been, this narrative disregards the concessions the Mexican government gave to Mexican entrepreneurs who wanted to use the stations to “be heard among the population in Southern California, where millions of Mexicans exist,” as requested by a Mexican entrepreneur in the 1930s.¹⁹ As border blasters emerged and gained influence over the U.S. airwaves in the middle of the twentieth century, the Mexican government relished making a stand in the international field of mass communications by allowing its own entrepreneurs to build stations for international use. In turn, dozens of Mexican businessmen capitalized on the government’s project and crafted a consumer-based international commercial radio industry.

Historians of Mexico have explored the many angles of state formation following the Mexican Revolution. Those who focus on the cultural project explain its wide range of manifestations across Mexico.²⁰ This dissertation explores the complex relationship between nationalism and media in Mexico and proposes that it is a more complex picture, as transmissions from central and northern Mexico crossed political borders to nurture and cultivate

¹⁸ Ibid, 205.

¹⁹ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Fondo Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (SCOP), Expediente 22/131.6 (722)/23.2.

²⁰ For some examples of nationalism within the context of Mexican post-revolutionary cultural project see, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Exists from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in the Mexican National Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Julio Moreno, *Yankee Don’t Go Home!: Mexican Nationalism, American Business Culture, and the Shaping of Modern Mexico, 1920-1950* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999). Radio, in particular, is explored in the essay by Elizabeth Joy Hayes, “National Imaginings on the Air: Radio in Mexico, 1920-1950,” in Mary Kay Vaughan and Steven E. Lewis. Eds. *The Eagle and the Virgin: National and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.)

a particular brand of Mexican nationalism outside of the nation's borders.

For instance, the Northeast and Northwest regions of Mexico followed their own path of development, different to the ones taken by commercial radio stations in Mexico City. When the commercial radio industry expanded in the 1930s in the Northeastern states of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, Sonora, Chihuahua and Nuevo León, conflicts arose between station owners in Mexico City and those in the rest of the country. The story of entrepreneurs in border radio contradicts the official histories of Mexico which favor the centralizing power of the government where Mexico City is the center of all political, economic and cultural activity. Mexican historians such as Fátima Fernández Christlieb, who studied radio pioneers across several states in northern Mexico, argue that the history of other post-revolutionary institutions and cultural manifestations like mass media reveals other centralities outside of the capital.²¹

In addition, this dissertation attempts to reconfigure the study of Mexican cultural history, which has either tended to focus attention on U.S.-Mexico relations,²² or placed a dividing line in the year 1940, following the Cárdenas administration.²³

In Mexico, the body of work examining the birth and role of the radio industry explores a

²¹ Fátima Fernández Christlieb, *La radio mexicana: centro y regiones* (México, DF: J. Pablos Editor, 1991), 29-30.

²² See, Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore, (eds.) *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) and Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1910-1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

²³ Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, (eds.), *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

number of topics ranging from the history of the founders and pioneers, to the way radio followed the official discourse of the post-revolutionary state.²⁴ International transmissions, these scholars maintain, were created primarily to sustain commercial links with the United States. For the most part, Mexican scholarship has not taken into account the estimated one million Mexicans who had migrated to the United States by 1930. They tuned in to Mexican radio stations regularly and wrote letters to Mexico City indicating their enjoyment of the programs, criticizing the music being played or asking for the government to send musical groups north. This dissertation compliments Mexican scholarship on the early history of radio, but expands the picture by demonstrating that there were other focal points, such as the Northeast and Northwest, which played an influential role in the development of the national radio industry.

Chicana/o scholarship has provided ample evidence of the strategies employed by the Mexican community living in the United States to sustain close ties with each other and their heritage nation during the first half of the twentieth century. The establishment of Mutual Aid Organizations, Consulate offices, holiday parades, “Patriotic Committees,” and other grass roots organizations which celebrated national holidays, for example, have been explored by a number

²⁴ This scholarship is extensive. For a general overview, see Jorge Mejía Prieto, *Historia De La Radio Y La Televisión En México* (Colección México vivo; México: O. Colmenares, 1972); Fernando Mejía Barquera, *La Industria De La Radio y La Televisión y La Política Del Estado Mexicano* (México, DF: Fundación Manuel Buendía, 1989); Gabriel Sosa Plata, *Las mil y una radios: una historia, un análisis actual de la radiodifusión Mexicana* (México; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997); Ángel Miquel, *Disolvencias: literatura, cine y radio en México (1900-1950)* (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005); Fátima Fernández Christlieb, *La Radio Mexicana: Centro y Regiones* (México, DF: J. Pablos Editor, 1991); Juan Leyva, *Política educativa y comunicación social: la radio en México, 1940-1946* (México, DF: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1992); Pavel Granados, *XEW: 70 Años en el aire* (México, DF: Editorial Clío, 2000).

of scholars. Specifically, these studies mention the importance of music, radio and other forms of entertainment in the formation and sustainment of the U.S. born Mexican and Chicana/o communities of the United States.²⁵ More recently, scholars who study the history of media among the Mexican and Chicana/o population in the United States have used the term “Spanish-language media” to describe films, radio programs, and theater that was displayed in the United States to a Mexican and Chicana/o audience in the better part of the twentieth century.²⁶

As singers, actors, composers and performers in the United States, Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexicans also contributed to the field of the mass communications industries, in particular radio. Roberto Avant-Mier recently claimed that the “border blasters” of the 1930s were “the first mass medium that was truly multicultural,” since they featured music of poor and working class whites, African Americans and Latinos. But in fact, as this dissertation illuminates, other forms of media were diverse, such as English-language radio stations in the U.S. Southwest where Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexicans sung in “block programming” on a regular basis since the late 1920s. Through these Spanish-language time

²⁵ See, Vicki L. Ruíz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Lisbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Anthony F. Macias, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

²⁶ See Colin Gunckel, “‘A Theater Worthy of Our Race’: The Exhibition and Reception of Spanish Language Film in Los Angeles, 1911-1942,” (PhD Dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, 2009) and Dolores Inés Casillas, “‘Sounds of Belonging: A Cultural History of Spanish-Language Radio in the United States, 1922-2004,” (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006).

slots, Mexican entrepreneurs, broadcasters, radio singers, and musicians altered the face of U.S. commercial radio by offering Mexican music to an immigrant population and helping local businesses prosper by advertising their products over the air.²⁷

For the most part, the work within Chicano, Mexican-American and Latino Studies tends to focus on the geographic region within the boundaries of the United States. In addition, the literature within Chicano studies fails to consider the efforts that the Mexican government, funneled by its Ministries, Institutions and Consulate Offices, made to reach the immigrant population living in the United States through mass media, including radio broadcasting. Radio transmissions accelerated the link Mexican immigrants in the United States had with Mexico. By calling to attention the influence that radio stations along the U.S.-Mexico border had in helping sustain an overseas audience of listeners and showing how the Mexican Consulate worked alongside commercial radio, this dissertation challenges the understanding of the Southwest borderlands and speaks to a range of issues of great significance to the Chicana/o community and identity formation, including language, music and gender roles.

Lastly, this dissertation draws from studies of Women and Gender in Latin America. To date, the literature that explores the intersection of gender and mass media is limited.²⁸ In spite of this oversight, however, the medium offers invaluable insight into changing gender relations in the twentieth century. Because radio blurs “boundaries of public and private separating the

²⁷ Roberto Avant-Mier, “Heard it on the X: Border Radio as Public Discourse and the Latino Legacy in Popular Music” in Michael C.Keith, ed., *Radio Cultures: the Sound Medium in American Life* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 50.

²⁸ For a history of women, gender and radio in the United States, see, Donna Halper, “Speaking for themselves: How Radio Brought Women into the Public Sphere” in *Radio Cultures: the Sound Medium in American Life* Michael C.Keith, ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

voice from the seen body,” as historian Christine Ehrick argues, “[it] is a technology with profound gender implications, one in which we can hear the challenges, reaffirmations and contradictions of the gendered soundscape in the first half of the twentieth century.”²⁹

Over the course of radio’s development, women in Mexico were caught in a contradiction that pulled them in two directions: between the modern, post-revolutionary project that created new spaces and opened up new opportunities for them, and the undeniable fact that they were working for an anti-feminist industry and often stopped working when they got married or had children. Radio, which was not a static object but a force that molded people’s behaviors, attitudes and ideas, had conflicting effects on gender relations.

Early on, the radio industry welcomed the participation of people from all ages. In radio, men, women and children found an array of new possibilities as workers, singers, artistic directors, actors, composers, etc. Moreover, radio broadcasting appeared when movements fighting for equal rights and gender relations were beginning in nations across Latin America. In Mexico, it emerged when the new political order, the post-revolutionary government, promised to bring profound social changes in class and gender relations. During this time, politicians, intellectuals and artists were optimistic about the future and attempted to construct a new society based on shared revolutionary values.

At the same time, radio reinforced gender norms and behaviors in Mexico. Given its direct connection to the state, Mexican radio broadcasting carried patriarchal overtones. At times, the message of the government, via radio airwaves, became the paternal voice of

²⁹ Christine Ehrick, “Savage Dissonance: Gender, Voice, and Women’s Radio Speech in Argentina, 1930-1945” in David Suisman and Susan Strasser, eds., *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

inclusion, calling for every Mexican to “*Hacer labor pro-Patria*” roughly translated as “engage in patriotic work” in his or her daily life. For those who lived in the United States, this included returning to the homeland and investing in the nation’s future.

Moreover, many of the myths concerning Mexican national identity, the models outlining the behavior of men and women or the importance of familial unity were born in the studios of commercial stations in Mexico during the 1920s, and advanced with the full consent of the government in the subsequent decades. In particular, the radio industry appropriated and replicated the model of the *Gran Familia Mexicana* (Great Mexican Family), crafted by the government. Recently, historian Ann Blum has explored the meaning and usage of the “Great Mexican Family” metaphor. The symbol is understood to signify an agreement in which disparate revolutionary leaders were co-opted by the *Partido Institucional Revolucionario* (Revolutionary Institutionalized Party), or PRI, and placed into the pantheon of heroes in the 1920s. “The family metaphor,” according to Blum “naturalized gender relations premised on biological reproduction and then projected them onto the nation at large. The family ideal – productive and protective fathers, nurturing mothers, and healthy children- offered the paternalistic state powerful justifications for its authority over its fractious constituents.”³⁰

The activity of the most influential commercial station in Mexico, XEW, offers the best illustration of this phenomenon. According to Mexican scholar Jorge Mejia Prieto, before XEW, impresarios had one of three objectives for new stations: to be used for technical experiments, for the diffusion of culture and education, and, to a lesser extent, for profit. Mejia Prieto concludes that during the early 1930s, with the exception of Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, who was the first

³⁰ Ann S. Blum, *Domestic Economies: Family, Work, and Welfare in Mexico City, 1884-1943* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), xxvi-xxvii.

man to think of radio as a business in Mexico, radio station owners either lacked the capital or the vision to fulfill this role. Additionally, he argues, when Azcárraga inaugurated the station on September 18, 1930, his objective was not cultural, scientific or artistic but simply economic; to “unify the ‘great Mexican family,’ create an extraordinary labor source and establish a colossal factory of idols.”³¹ In order to not fall out of favor with the government, radio stations across Mexico appropriated the family model put forth by the state and used it for their own profit.

During the decades following the Mexican Revolution, women negotiated social spaces characterized by contradictions. Mexican scholars, Julia Tuñón and Carmen Ramos Escandón, for instance, argue that after the Revolution there was a stark contradiction in the messages women received from the government, private media, and that which they were seeing on a daily basis in the urban centers of Mexico.³² At work, in the factories and shops, for instance, many created their own space-based conceptions of female virtues.³³ Within radio, which was a professional industry by 1930, women were given the opportunity to perform and sing in public; but simultaneously, they were also used by the conservative government as symbols of dignity, abnegation, moral strength, and nationalist purity.

This dissertation illustrates the way commercial stations transmitted “gendered programming,” which replicated the gendered stereotypes of Mexican men (strong and virile)

³¹ Mejía Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México*, 38.

³² Carmen Ramos Escandón, *Presencia y transparencia. La mujer en la historia de México* (México, DF: El Colegio de México, 1987) and Julia Tuñón, *Mujeres en México: una historia olvidada* (México, DF: Planeta, 1987).

³³ Susie S. Porter, *Working women in Mexico City: public discourses and material conditions, 1879-1931* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), xix.

and women (soft and virtuous). What is more, because radio was a site where gender was negotiated, renegotiated and contested, it demonstrates how Mexican women, who used the exposure given to them by radio, toured the United States and effectively created spaces where they exerted their place and value within society.

Chapter Outline

Each chapter of the dissertation is organized thematically around the various factors, circumstances, methods and by-products of the creation of an international radio audience between 1923 and 1946. In the first decades of the twentieth century, a distinction arose between legitimate and “popular” forms of entertainment in many countries in the Western Hemisphere. At that time, the members of the cultural elite defined “popular” forms of entertainment as those that were frequented by large masses and that lacked artistic value.³⁴

In Mexico, cultural authority and transmission had been in the hands of the upper classes since the sixteenth century. This sector of society believed that it was important to maintain a high sense of morality and culture in the entertainment industries. However, after the arrival of new technology in the twentieth century, the arbiters of culture became people who had not previously been involved in intellectual or cultural production, such as businessmen, radio station owners, operators and artistic directors. In Mexico, as people began to purchase their own radio sets for personal use in the 1920s, “popular” forms of entertainment became the most frequented. Chapter one explains the circumstances in which radio broadcasting arrived in Mexico and the way artistic and literary groups appropriated the medium as well as the drastic changes that radio created for the urban population of Mexico. The importance that early radio

³⁴ For more on this see, Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

broadcasting stations placed on music and culture, in fact, allowed the industry to develop with a transnational vision and take messages across the border into the United States.

During the 1920s, when Mexico was following broad policies of economic reconstruction, free enterprise, and capitalistic development, along with dealing with the internal crisis brought about by the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929), President Plutarco Elías Calles relied on radio as a mouthpiece for his policies both at home and abroad. Radio stations in Mexico City transmitted the government's official message through music, conferences and cultural programs. Through state-sponsored radio stations affiliated with new institutions like the *Secretaria de Educacion Publica*, or SEP, the Ministry of Public Education, the radio industry was able to take the message of the government across international borders. Chapter two explains the way this was carried out by SEP station XFX, which was one of the first stations to monitor its international transmissions and successfully send messages into the United States. More than any government-sponsored station, XFX set an example to other stations by diffusing culture to all social classes in Mexico and, more importantly, communicating with Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexicans abroad.

The development of the radio industry was influenced by a range of people in the private sector including engineers, inventors, wealthy entrepreneurs and businessmen. This was the generation who came of age during the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) whose lives were transformed by the arrival of modern equipment and technology emerging in the early to mid-twentieth century such as the telegraph, automobiles, airplanes, and, of course, radio. Generally, these businessmen were not part of the intellectual or ruling classes in Mexico; instead, they invested in the nascent industry purely out of curiosity or commercial and financial reasons. These men, and some women, were part of a growing entrepreneurial class emerging in Mexico

at this time. One, which, some argue, had little or no political ties. In the North, they used mass communications legislation to create consumers across the border which furthered the “Americanization” of Mexican immigrants and, at the same time, spurred the growth of Mexican small businesses in the United States.

Chapter three explains how, between 1930 and 1950, Mexican trans-border entrepreneurs building radio stations along the US-Mexico border influenced the formation of an overseas radio audience in two ways. First, they followed the principles and goals of the government’s post-revolutionary project by using the law to their advantage. Since the growth of the nation followed a capitalist path, stations were able to woo local and international businesses to advertise their products over their stations. Second, they were culturally attentive to the needs of their listeners. Not only did they see the potential of the overseas market but they regularly made reference to this audience in their programming through auditions and contests.

One of the reasons why radio was an effective tool in nation formation is that it is a medium allowing a mass-mediated message to be experienced by listeners in different locations. The common space where these messages were received has no set territory, allowing transmissions from Mexico City to be easily heard in Los Angeles and San Antonio, the two cities with the largest concentration of Mexican immigrants during the first half of the twentieth century. Chapter four studies the Mexican immigrant and U.S. born Mexican communities in these two cities and explains the way they sustained the tradition of listening to Mexican music in their daily lives.

Within the span of two decades, for Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexicans in the United States, Mexican music served both as a link to become reacquainted with their past and a

bridge that exposed them to new music styles. As Chapter four suggests, some of them, such as the *bolero* and the *canción ranchera*, were favored over classical music and *corridos* in radio station programming for three reasons. First, they focused on the struggles and experiences of the individual, instead of the community. Second, the lyrics of *rancheras* and *boleros* lacked a specific geographic setting, other than the countryside and the urban center, respectively. Thus, Mexican listeners from Monterrey to San Francisco were able to listen to a song and share the same experience. And lastly, for the most part, these songs did not glorify the nation's history and Revolutionary past. Commercial radio stations and record companies in the United States capitalized on these features and, thus, made these types of musical genres influential in the creation of the overseas radio audience.

Music was a powerful cultural force stitching together ideas of *México Lindo* (Beautiful Mexico) for immigrants and their U.S. born progeny. On the U.S. side of the border, as Mexican communities defined themselves as "*México de Afuera*" (Mexico outside of Mexico), they used the radio, their consulate offices and local Spanish-language newspapers to stay connected with Mexico. This chapter proposes that the Mexican immigrant community in Los Angeles and San Antonio helped sustain the Mexican overseas radio audience because it pursued capitalist interests. Consulates facilitated cultural activities, newspapers advertised for local Mexican businesses, and radio stations promoted Spanish-language and Mexican records for the population to purchase.

Chapter five studies some of the careers of men and women in the radio industry during the 1930s and 1940s. In particular, it looks at music and gender, and the way radio created new spaces for men and women while simultaneously reinforcing existing norms and behaviors. Music serves as a useful avenue for this study because it unified people of different ages, classes,

locations and backgrounds along with shaping Mexican masculinity and affecting the role of women in society. For example, it allowed men to express sentiments that domesticated machismo and tenderized their hearts and allowed fearless singers like Lucha Reyes to be a national icon; however, through the misogynistic lyrics of Agustín Lara's boleros, it also relegated the importance of women in Mexico.

The theater- and later, radio- stage was a revolving door of singers, artists, musicals, theatrical companies and music. It was also the principal platform where Mexicans in the United States witnessed accurate and up-to-date displays of Mexican drama, art and music. In Mexico, the theater was the cocoon of popular culture and folklore. As Carlos Monsiváis noted, between 1910 and 1950 what was considered “‘popular’ is drawn from the theater, cabarets and parties, the passion of serenades and by the ‘other life’ promoted by cinema and radio.”³⁵ Since the Colonial Era, theater in Mexico relied on the direct participation of actors and audience, which included all classes of society. The theater was also a thriving industry in the U.S. Southwest before the arrival of commercial radio. In the mid nineteenth century, when 1.2 million square miles of Mexico's territory was relinquished to the United States after the Mexican-American War, some cultural aspects of the Mexican population living in those areas were unchanged; theater, in particular, was one of them.

Chapter six explains how, thanks to the circuits established by the theater industry, Mexican singers and actresses were able to leave Mexico and tour the United States with ease. In the 1930s and 1940s, when the government considered the tours and exposés of artists

³⁵ Carlos Monsiváis, “Yo soy humilde cancionero (de la música popular en México)” in Aurelio Tello, ed., *La música en México Panorama del siglo XX* (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y Las Artes, 2010), 197.

“cultural” acts, Mexican immigrants benefitted from their closeness to the recording studio. With the proper uniform and a musical selection that included *rancheras*, radio assisted in the formation of not just an international radio audience, but also of true “transnational” artists and singers. For instance, in the late 1940s, influential duets, such as *Los Alegres de Terán*, performed in border cities like Reynosa, appealing to *Bracero* workers in the U.S. Southwest who had been hired in significant numbers after the Second World War. Thus, as the chapter argues, the post-revolutionary government’s cultural project to use Mexican singers to solidify the bonds between the two nations was fragmented; by mid-century, it was Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexicans in the United States, like Pedro J. González and Lydia Mendoza, who truly fulfilled the government’s cultural mission on their own terms.

Finally, the dissertation explains the state in which the radio industry found itself in by the 1940s as a result of censorship, international legislation and agreements and national chain networks. The trajectory of Mexico’s radio history took a drastic turn in 1941 with the creation of *Radio Programas de México* (Mexican Radio Programs) or RPM, the country’s first national network based in Mexico City. Network programming consolidated all the artistic, commercial and cultural activities of the country. In return, the influence of border stations slowly began to wane, as, in order to succeed, they had to connect with Mexico City either through the telephone during a live broadcast or wait for a recorded program to arrive through the mail. Moreover, networks led to the decline in trans-border broadcasting because their strong frequency power allowed them to fulfill the objective of reaching the audience in the United States. As a result, the symbiotic relationship between the government and the private sector continued.

Chapter I

The Birth of “*La Nueva Maravilla*”: Radio arrives in Mexico

“La palpitación del minuto ahora sí es cierto que se recoge, como el agua en el cuenco de las manos.”

“It is certain that the palpitation of the moment can be gathered, like water in the palm of your hands.”

-Lic. Alejandro Quijano, 1923

On September 27, 1921, at the *Teatro Ideal* in downtown Mexico City, an eleven-year-old girl, María de los Angeles Gómez, sang during one of the country’s first live radio broadcasts. Two technicians: her father, Adolfo Enrique Gómez Fernández, a military doctor, and her uncle, Pedro Gómez Fernández, a dentist, assembled transmission equipment that had been donated by the owner of the theater for the program. “You may ask yourself what a doctor and a dentist were doing with electronic equipment,” María recalled, “The answer is simple. During those days men were in love with science and technology.”¹

Not yet a teenager, Gómez had never performed before a live audience or sung into a microphone; at the time, the nation’s capital was still familiarizing itself with electricity. “Do not begin to think that I was a great singer,” she admitted, “my father had me studying music and, since I was his only daughter, he included me in that memorable transmission.” The program, in which acclaimed singer José Mojica interpreted *Vorrei*, by Paolo Posti, also included

¹ María de los Angeles Gómez Camacho quoted in José Felipe Gálvez Cancino, “Los Felices del Alba, (la primera década de la radiodifusión mexicana),” (Tesis de licenciatura, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, UNAM, 1975), 235-41.

Tango Negro, sung by Gómez. This was “one of the couplets that Maria Tubau would sing, a famous singer during that time, which I, at the age of eleven, profoundly admired.” Over the course of the next five months, on Saturday and Sunday evenings from 8:00 to 9:00 p.m. the “station of Dr. Gómez,” as it was known throughout the city, broadcast musical concerts until it went off the air when the family relocated to Saltillo, Coahuila.²

On that same night in late September, another notable event in the history of radio in Mexico took place. While the tenor José Mojica enthralled the theater audience with his majestic voice, one kilometer east of the *Teatro Ideal*, the Mexican government publically inaugurated its radio equipment which consisted of two machines: a transmitter, used to send information, and a receiver, used to listen to aural messages. In that program, in which the government partnered with the newspaper *Excelsior*, technicians, journalists and government bureaucrats took turns passing around a set of headphones to hear news bulletins and greetings received in the Legislative Palace from a second radio “station” in the Chapultepec Castle, 6.5 kilometers south of downtown Mexico City.³

The unveiling of the government’s radio machinery was a transformational event for the urban population. Months earlier, engineers working for President Alvaro Obregón had installed the equipment and through its public inauguration, the administration proved that it was capable of applying modern methods of communication in everyday activities. Furthermore, the live transmission at the *Teatro Ideal* and the public ceremony were significant moments in the trajectory of mass media development in Mexico and the relationship between the government

² Ibid, 235-41.

³ *Excelsior*. 28 de septiembre 1921. “Dos estaciones de telefonía inalámbrica. Ayer fueron inauguradas en la Exposición Internacional establecida en el Gran Palacio Legislativo.” P. 1, 3.

and the Mexican people. Not only were they visible signs that modernity had arrived to the nation's capital, but in a scientific sense, the broadcasts were proof that Mexico was capable of using technology to do something unthinkable at the time: carry messages from one location of the city to another without the use of a telegraph or a telephone wire. For the remainder of the decade, the capital city's population enthusiastically embraced the new and powerful tool that altered their cultural practices, leisure activities, and the spatial order of their city.

This chapter explains the environment in which radio arrived to Mexico, its initial growth, its link with art and culture, and the way the industry evolved from the 1920s to the early 1940s. The close relationship radio had with culture, music and the collaboration between the government and the private sector facilitated the creation of an overseas audience. Two features found in the early history of radio: songs and international transmission, distinguished the Mexican radio industry from other businesses and industries in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Early History of Radio in Mexico

The discovery of electromagnetic waves in 1887 by the German physicist, Henry Hertz, made the invention of radio possible. At the time, industrial growth was taking Europe towards a new era regarding communications and transportation. Within this context of industrial and technological expansion, Guglielmo Marconi created the first radio in 1895. However, development costs prohibited the industry from growing until the early twentieth century when communications grew exponentially, shrinking distances between markers and time between order and delivery.

Following the First World War countries in the Western Hemisphere adopted strict guidelines regarding the use and development of mass communications. In Mexico, the

infrastructure needed for the growth of railroads, telegraph lines, and roads was built in the late nineteenth century. Under the direction of President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910), the government stimulated economic growth according to broad capitalist principles. This included importing radio equipment from Europe, but keeping it within the control of the government and the military. During the Mexican Revolution, troops relied on telegraph operators to exchange information through *radiotelefonía* and *radiotelegrafía*; the former sending Morse Code signals through telegraph lines and the latter transmitting voices or words through what we recognize today as the telephone. In the years of fighting, telegraph workers labored alongside the army or in military camps, providing generals with dispatches containing vital information and, at times, joining the rank and file officers.⁴

In the early twentieth century, mass communications methods were constantly evolving and the radio apparatuses that emerged after 1921 surpassed the technology of the day and brought together two pre-existing instruments: the telegraph and the telephone. As a result, amateur radio stations sprung up throughout Mexico. In Monterrey, for example, one the first radio transmissions on record took place on October 9, 1921 by an electrical engineer named Constantino de Tárnava Jr. who built and operated a private radio station in his home that he called “TND,”⁵ or Tárnava Norte Dame.⁶

⁴ The use of radio during the Mexican Revolution is a topic yet to be explored. For a brief overview see, Friedrich Katz, *La guerra secreta en México* (México, DF: Ediciones Era, 1981) and Roberto Ornelas Herrera, “Radio y Cotidianidad en México (1900-1930)” in Aurelio de los Reyes, ed., *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México*. Tomo V. Volumen 1. Siglo XX. Campo y Ciudad. (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005).

⁵ Jorge Mejía Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México* (México, DF: Colección México Vivo, 1972), 14-15.

In the official records and the press, the two forms of communication: *radiotelefonía* and *radiotelegrafía*, were called *Telefonía sin hilos* (wireless telephony) or at times, T.S.H. This acronym was useful in the appropriation and fusion of technology with art by artistic and literary circles in Mexico during the 1920s, most notably by the *Estridentistas*.⁷ Of interest is that the use of the word, “radio” was not used during the ‘20s, ‘30s or even ‘40s. Instead, radio-telegraphy, radio-telephony, radio-communication and, more commonly, *radio-difusión* were the most frequent ways to describe what we call today as radio: the act of transmitting aural messages destined to be received, or “picked up” by a receiver.

Radio and the Avant-Garde

“*Estridentismo* and radio are bosom brothers. They belong to the vanguard!” wrote the editor of *El Universal Ilustrado* Arqueles Vela in 1923.⁸ Outside of his job in the magazine, Vela, along with Manuel Maples Arce, was a founding member of the *Estridentistas*. In the 1920s avant-garde groups like the *Estridentistas* took the cultural project of the government to heart and combined it with international futurist ideals. For example, in late December of 1921, three months after the government showcased their radio equipment, next to posters announcing upcoming bull fights, operas and plays, the walls of Mexico City’s downtown streets were

⁶ Some sources claim that De Tárnava attended Norte Dame University during the 1910s and acquired the skills and equipment from the United States before arriving in Mexico to construct his station.

⁷ For example, during the inaugural transmission of X.E.W. on September 18, 1930, the avant-garde poet Manuel Maples Arce read an abstract and futuristic poem titled, “T.S.H.”

⁸ *El Universal Ilustrado* 5 de abril de 1923. “El estridentismo es hermano de leche de la Radiofonía. ¡Son cosas de vanguardia!” p. 11.

plastered with a manifesto titled, “*Actual Número 1.*” The author of this document was Manuel Maples Arce, the same man who would open CYL’s inaugural program with a poem about radio two years later. In the document, Maples Arce made a call to Mexican intellectuals “to make up an artistic society that draws on the need to testify to the dizzy transformation of the world.”⁹

In Mexico City, *Estridentista* poets like Arce set in motion a new artistic and cultural era that was linked to the arrival of modernity and machinery, such as cameras, sewing machines and radios. Their cultural production, according to art historian Tatiana Flores “called for an embrace of modernity by celebrating the city and technology.”¹⁰ Still, their attitudes and approach concerning the effects of technological progress upon Mexican society is lost in the historical documents concerning mass media.¹¹ Even so, it requires examination as radio was an integral part of the post-revolutionary government’s cultural program. Additionally, it relates to the artistic revitalization of Mexico after the Revolution which called to renew Mexican arts and literature.

Estridentistas were part of a new generation of artists in Mexico who fought to impose a new literary form that was different from the Spanish and European trends that Mexican

⁹ Julio Mario Schneider, *Estridentismo: La Vanguardia Literaria en México*. (México, D.F.: Coordinación de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999), xxxix.

¹⁰ Tatiana Flores, “Strategic Modernists: Women Artists in Post-Revolutionary Mexico” *Woman’s Art Journal* (Fall/Winter 2008): 12.

¹¹ The majority of the studies on this group focus on art and literature. The most recent from Tatiana Flores: “Estridentismo in Mexico City: Dialogues Between Mexican Avant-Garde Art and Literature, 1921-1924” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2003). Additionally, Julio Mario Schneider offers the most comprehensive history of the group in, *El estridentismo o una literatura de la estrategia* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1997).

intellectuals had emulated during the previous decades. In the 1920s vanguard poets and artists in Mexico also formed a movement called *Contemporaneos*, who were polar opposites of the *Estridentistas* as they hung on to the traditions of the past instead of embracing modern life and its new advancements.¹² Despite their distinctive viewpoints, these two groups led the country's literary production in the first half of the twentieth century. *Estridentistas*, for instance, pretended to be cosmopolitan and were aware of global issues and universal concerns. Their desire was to become one with the rhythms of the city; street cars, trains, elevators, illuminated signs, throngs of people in the city streets and car horns all became part of their identity, part of urban life. In their work, they incorporated bright lights, airplanes, and sounds. Particularly through poems and literature the avant-garde artists demonstrated their particular interest in radio.

For instance, *Estridentistas* called upon the weekly cultural magazine, *El Universal Ilustrado*, created by Félix F. Palavicini, founder of the newspaper, *El Universal*, as a platform in which to popularize their ideas. In fact, the newspaper's support of the *Estridentistas* and their beliefs in new technology was so sincere that on April 5, 1923 they dedicated their entire number to radio. "Radio announces to the world a new life," said the special number "next to it the other inventions: the telephone, phonograph and telegraph, fade and become pale."¹³ The publication avoided technical jargon, scientific phrases and descriptions and focused on the positive ways radio was changing everyday life in Mexico. In addition, the pages of the special issue dedicated

¹² Ángel Miquel, *Disolvencias: Literatura, cine y radio en México (1900-1950)*. (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005), 180.

¹³ *El Universal Ilustrado* 5 de abril 1923.

to radio reflect how these innovative poets and visual artists interpreted the fusion of art and technology. In fact, the idea of mixing radio with *Estridentista* interpretations was remarkable given that at the time of its publication, Mexico City's flagship stations, CYL and CYB, were about to have their inaugural broadcasts.

Aside from literature, the visual arts were integral to the development of *Estridentismo* and, as Flores argues, art becomes a useful paradigm to read modernist visual production.¹⁴ Outside of art, however, other publications, such as magazines and newspapers, are also helpful tools in the study of modernity and cultural production. *Antena*, for instance, was a magazine dedicated entirely to radio, art and culture in Mexico during the 1920s. Appearing on the city's newsstands for the first time in July of 1924 the goal of the publication was not to provide technical or scientific information but "since the first mission of radio is to entertain, from this point of view we can talk about everything that relates to this admirable and innovative discovery."¹⁵ Aside from printing *Estridentista* poems and propaganda, the magazine also published theater reviews and criticized those stations in Mexico which were not broadcasting cultural concerts.

At the time that *Estridentistas* were fusing art with technology and culture, the entire country was moving towards a form of post-revolutionary nationalism. This era is regarded as a time of renewal within Mexican art as it led to the rise of the mural movement, graphic arts, photography and art education. Outside of Vela and Maples Arce, other poets, singers and visual

¹⁴ Tatiana Flores, "Strategic Modernists: Women Artists in Post-Revolutionary Mexico" *Woman's Art Journal* (Fall/Winter 2008): 13.

¹⁵ *Antena-I* julio 1924.

artists who came of age after the Mexican Revolution played a significant role in the cultural production of the nation after the 1920s. The goal of many of these artists was to explore the purpose of art in post-revolutionary society. Some even espoused the cultural project of the Revolution and brought significant changes in the relationship between the state and the population.¹⁶

Was radio art or science? The combination of having an avant-garde group such as the *Estridentistas* adopt the new technological apparatus and the groups close relationship with the editors of *El Universal Ilustrado*, allowed radio to be presented to the public as complicated science with artistic potential. In the pages of the press from 1923 to 1925, for example, when listeners were constructing their home receivers and listening with headphones, radio appeared as a scientific invention. For instance, in an article from *El Universal Ilustrado* in 1925 titled, “*Misterios de la radiofonía*” radio was presented as a scientific mystery next to electricity and the human body.¹⁷ After all, engineers such as Constantino de Tárnava were the ones responsible for bringing the invention to Mexico. However, avant-garde groups like the *Estridentistas* were taking apart the complications of the apparatus, adding their own cultural and modern approach and decreasing the machinery’s obscurities.

An overlap between *Estridentismo* and radio is apparent. For instance, Maples Arce’s strategy of mass dissemination, by placing his manifesto on the city’s public walls, was not unlike one of the principle features of radio which was to transcend space. Both radio and

¹⁶ On the relationship between the cultural project of the post-revolutionary government and society see Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, eds. *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*. 8 de enero 1925. “Misterios de la radiofonía” p. 4.

Estridentismo contested the use of public space and challenged people to fuse culture with technology. Yet to what extent the avant-garde movement influenced the direction radio in Mexico is less clear. On one hand, by 1927 this new generation of poets was accompanied by a new generation of musicians, who, by the end of the decade, were using radio as a tool of musical culture. After all, music was an artistic manifestation and an integral feature of radio broadcasting since 1921. On the other hand, however, as Julio Schneider notes “*Estridentismo*, was essentially a poetic movement.”¹⁸ Regardless of its proximity to radio specifically the innovative impulse it created bled into the renewal of other art forms in Mexico during the 1920s such as paint, sculpture, engraving, photography, and music.

Reaching “*El Otro Lado*” (The Other Side)

Beginning in 1922, President Plutarco Elías Calles put forth a mission to use government-owned radio stations for overseas transmissions. “One of our project’s greatest aspirations,” he wrote, “is for every Mexican to occupy the place that corresponds him and that he deserves...365 days of the year represent 365 different [radio] programs.”¹⁹ The following year, government-operated Mexican radio stations began to use short and long wave radio transmissions to broadcast concerts and conferences to listeners overseas. Initially, radio broadcasting from Mexico City to the United States was made possible through short wave radio waves and powerful transmitters. When the radio spectrum was designed in the 1920s it consisted of short, long and medium wavelengths. In the early years, stations used long wavelengths and their

¹⁸ Julio Mario Schneider, *Estridentismo: La Vanguardia Literaria en México*. (México, D.F.: Coordinación de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999), xl.

¹⁹ Fideicomiso Archivo de Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (Hereafter FAPEC), Fondo Plutarco Elías Calles, Expediente 18, Inv. 63.

transmissions were heard only within close distances. In order to send messages across greater distances, radio transmitters relied on short wavelengths which were possible and common in the early 1930s as there was minimal interference from other stations.

In the second half of the 1920s, short wave broadcasting was an innovative wireless communication method that connected Mexico with audiences across the globe. For example, station XEIDG, operated by a federal High School in the state of Veracruz, claimed to have received 150 reports from different cities around the globe and the interior of Mexico.²⁰ Other stations reported similar stories, such as privately funded station, XEB, *El Buen Tono*, the first commercial station to implement short wave transmissions in Mexico, which allegedly received listener reports from the North Pole.²¹ During the late '20s and early '30s audiences across North America did not have difficulty "tuning in" to short wave broadcasts as they were fewer in number compared to long wave transmissions, used powerful transmitters. Additionally, international legislation was not impeding any station from using the same wavelength as another. At times, as in the case of Mexican state-sponsored broadcasts overseas, they were also advertised and promoted weeks beforehand through the Spanish-language press or by Mexican Consulate officials.

In particular, Calles viewed mass media as a way to lure those who had migrated to the United States back to Mexico and hoped they were not planning on settling in the U.S. permanently. He longed for Mexican immigrants to "take advantage of their temporary stay in

²⁰ Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (Hereafter AGN, SCOP), Expediente 22/131.6 (726.1)/26.

²¹ Mejía Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México*, 34.

that nation, acquire capital and knowledge, so that they return to the Motherland full of energy and skills to work for its progress and happiness.”²² Notwithstanding Calles’ pronouncement for the return of Mexicans from the United States, XFX’s messages and programming for communities abroad show no indication of supporting, proclaiming or endorsing such a mission.

Mexican politicians also called upon radio to keep the spiritual conscience of Mexicans free from the foreign influence of the United States. To be sure, since the beginning of the twentieth century the Mexican population who lived in the northern states of Coahuila and Sonora, which border the U.S. states of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, were frequently exposed to the growing culture of consumerism in the United States. The Mexican government, which had entrusted their ministries to use radio and musical transmissions to counteract the influence of the U.S. media upon Mexican citizens, initiated broadcasts for their defense. On some occasions, these orders were taken to heart by citizens in Northern Mexico. On February 8, 1930, for instance, the principal of the “*Escuela Tipo*,” a Federal School in the border city of Nogales, Sonora, requested a radio receiver and a cinema (viewer) from the Ministry’s headquarters in Mexico City. He reasoned that due to the proximity of the city to the United States “all of the radio concerts that are heard in Nogales are from that country and they transform themselves into avenues of an unnoticed spiritual conquest.” This conquest held negative and “definite results;” therefore, “a good receiver in which to listen to the concerts and conferences transmitted by the Mexican stations,” would supply a competitive fix.²³

²² Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Presidentes, Fondo Obregón-Calles (Hereafter AGN, OC), Expediente 429-S-14.

²³ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (Hereafter AHSEP), Expediente 4.18.

When they were launched in the early 1920s, commercial stations CYL and CYB, for instance, intended for their transmissions to reach other countries. In September of 1923 CYL increased its power to 500 watts and was proud that its broadcasts would reach the U.S.

Southwest, Central America and Cuba.²⁴ At the time, only another station in all of Mexico had the same power, CYB. On Friday April 11, 1924 CYL transmitted an important message abroad from Presidential candidate Plutarco Elias Calles; marking the first time a political figure took to the microphone in Mexico.²⁵ The broadcast, in fact, was intended to reach the United States, as Calles' speech was translated into English.

The 1920s: Setting Limits to Radio Communications in Mexico

The 1920s was an important decade for the urban and rural population of Mexico. At the time “people were interested in the scientific advancements of the day and in having fun, they wanted to forget about the armed conflict,” as Jorge Mejía Prieto explains.²⁶ In the urban centers of the country during the evenings or weekends, people of all backgrounds and ages attended the theater, a vaudeville show, or, before 1929, viewed a silent film. The theater, especially the *Teatro de Revista* or music revue, combined music with satire and was an essential source of entertainment for the urban population and in the live radio programs of the time, the singers behind the microphones were said to “give themselves to the art out of pure love for

²⁴ *El Universal* 18 de septiembre 1923.

²⁵ *El Demócrata* 12 de abril 1924.

²⁶ Mejía Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México*, 24.

it.”²⁷

The 1920s were critical because radio concessions in Mexico, which had previously been solely in the hands of the government and the military, became available to the private sector for the first time. Small business owners and investors, who were allowed to own and operate radio stations after 1923, were thrilled by the possibility of reaching the large sector of illiterate and dispersed people in Mexico through the use of radio transmissions.²⁸ Amateurs continued to own and operate stations in their own homes while the commercial sector grew exponentially.

During the first decade of the radio industry, Mexico was embarking upon a modern era in which progress meant importing the model of industrial capitalism of the United States. In fact, Mexican scholars who study the history of radio highlight that in the early 1920s Mexico lacked a defined purpose for radio. Possible ideas included entertainment, education, using the airwaves for weather alerts and forecasts or using the equipment to converse with prisoners in jail. The one thing all parties were in agreement over was that radio was an attractive business venture for entrepreneurs wanting to sell imported radio receivers from the United States and the equipment needed to construct amateur radio stations at home.²⁹ The model they adopted, additionally, resembled the one adopted in the United States, not Great Britain or other industrialized nations.

²⁷ *El Universal*, August 16, 1924.

²⁸ Fernando Curiel, *La telaraña magnética y otros estudios radiofónicos* (México, DF: Ediciones Coyoacán S.A. de C.V., 1996), 297.

²⁹ Mejía Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México*, and Cristina Romo, *Ondas, canales y mensajes: un perfil de la radio en México* (Guadalajara, Jalisco, México: ITESO, 1991), 13.

The political climate in Mexico was still tumultuous in the late 1920s and early 1930s and for private cultural industries it was a sink or swim environment. In the first years following the Revolution, private cultural industries had a difficult time keep their doors open, or, in the case of radio, their on-air programs. In Mexico City, a radio station affiliated with *El Mundo* a newspaper with political leanings, appeared and left within a couple of months.³⁰

In other instances, these early experiments with radio stations were fruitful, as in the case of Raúl Azcárraga and his small shop “*La Casa del Radio*” (The House of Radio). In 1921 Azcárraga saw the arrival of radio broadcasting in Mexico as an opportunity to make money and opened a shop in downtown Mexico City. This store/garage specialized in selling wires, antennas and light bulbs, necessary instruments to properly assembly a radio receiver. In the spring of 1923, Azcárraga asked the local newspaper, *El Universal*, to partner with him and launch a commercial radio station in the capital city. He agreed to provide the equipment, an RCA transmitter he had imported from the United States, if the newspaper company would handle the details and content of the broadcasts. *El Universal* responded by designating its weekly cultural magazine, *El Universal Ilustrado*, to join forces with the entrepreneur. The result was the birth of one of the first commercial radio stations in Mexico City: CYL, or *El Universal Ilustrado-La Casa del Radio*.³¹

Partnering with newspapers was an excellent idea, and other industries in the country noticed the benefits of making a partnership with radio. Another commercial station in the early

³⁰ Ángel, Miquel, “Dos efímeras empresas de los años veinte: el periódico *El Mundo* y su estación de radio.” In *Miradas recurrentes I. La ciudad de México en los siglos XIX y XX*, edited by María del Carmen Collado, 457-469. (México, DF: Instituto Mora, 2004), 457-467.

³¹ Mejía Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México*, 26.

history of radio funded by a businessman, a foreign tobacco manufacturer, was CYB- *El Buen Tono*. Centrally located in downtown Mexico City, CYB boasts of being the first commercial station to go on the air in Mexico City on the night of September 15, 1923.³² From the outset, CYB-*El Buen Tono* was placed in high regard by the public for transmitting quality radio concerts intended to reach the entire North American continent.³³ “When in Mexico the *nueva maravilla* (new marvel) began,” noted *El Universal*, “it was ‘*El Buen Tono*’ the first house which had a powerful transmitting station.”³⁴ By broadcasting musical programs that included symphonies and orchestra bands, guitar and piano recitals, and later *ranchera* music and *boleros*, privately funded commercial stations like CYB and CYL established themselves as reputable cultural industries in Mexico.

The music played over the two most prominent privately-owned radio stations, CYB *El Buen Tono*, and CYL *El Universal Ilustrado*, consisted of foreign and national pieces. Evening programs would play “a recorded American fox-trot” followed by “a piano solo of Mexican music.” On November 30, 1923, for example, CYB broadcast a program in which Eduardo Gómez sang the Spanish song “*Mi Querida*” (My loved one) which he successfully “interpreted with deep emotion.”³⁵ At the time, concerts were advertised days in advance by the press and performed by small musical groups, such as the Jazz band “Lone Star,” which was on loan to

³² CYB later became XEB, which is still in operation today.

³³ *El Universal Ilustrado*. 24 de mayo de 1923.

³⁴ *El Universal Ilustrado* junio 1924.

³⁵ *El Demócrata*, November 30, 1923, p. 5.

CYB from the owners of the *Cine Majestic* for their radio transmissions. Other times, stations played xylophones, tangos and marimbas, sounds which the majority of the North American audience was not accustomed to hearing over the air. Concerts, in particular, were appealing to both national and international audiences. By featuring *Orchestas Típicas*, who used brass instruments such as the trumpet, Mexican radio stations exposed different genres of music to radio listeners who had limited knowledge of the sounds of Latin American music. For example, after one concert a listener from the United States remarked “The music sounded as though some of the instruments were different than the ones used by most orchestras.”³⁶

In the 1920s music served as a “magic claw,” and public plazas throughout Mexico were filled to the brim with the people anxiously waiting to hear a live musical concert or a radio transmission.³⁷ By extending the opportunity to own and operate radio stations in Mexico to amateurs, businessmen and state and local governments, the government led the way for the creation of a new social phenomenon, radio “performances” or “concerts.” These elaborate programs did not resemble the broadcasts of amateur recreational stations in Mexico City, which invited professional or novice singers to stand in front of a microphone and sing several pieces. In contrast, the new radio concerts included dance, recitals, and music and were modeled after a performance in a theater, a vaudeville play, or a movie house in Mexico during the 1920s.

The collaboration between the private sector and the government during the early years of the radio industry is most noticeable in the creation of a national mass communications policy. In the early 1920s, the novelty of radio sparked an unprecedented interest by people who were

³⁶ AHSEP, Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

³⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*, January 13, 1938, p. 44-45.

avidly building amateur or personal stations in their homes and places of work.

The Mexican government leaned on the enthusiasm and talent of individuals in the private sector as it made its decision regarding the expansion and policies of radio. In 1922 and 1923, a number of groups approached the government with ideas about the path Mexico needed to take regarding mass communications. Men were anxious to participate in the creation of a Mexican radio policy and groups such as ““*Compañía Radio-México, S.A.*,” for example, noted that the lives of people of rural Mexico, in particular, would benefit thanks to radio broadcasting. “If we pay attention to the development of culture among the *pueblo mexicano* (people of Mexico),” they wrote, “we will find that the installation of wire-less radiotelephony will be of invaluable worth, since inhabitants of distant places will be able to rejoice in shows such as operas, operettas, concerts, conferences, etc., which at the moment are completely unknown.”³⁸

Another group, the “*Liga Central Mexicana de Radio*,” or “Central Mexican Radio League,” believed the airwaves would project the true national folklore of Mexico and display the best manifestations of Mexican culture. The group, which was formed by ambitious men from a wide array of backgrounds and socioeconomic positions, constructed amateur radio sets and frequently “picked up” radio signals from Mexico and North America. The League met regularly in downtown Mexico City to discuss radio’s significance and future in Mexican society and believed that it was important to instruct the general public about the topic.³⁹ Concerning the law, they were the first to determine a schedule for radio transmissions and presented a

³⁸ FAPEC, Fondo Plutarco Elías Calles, Expediente. 18 Inv. 63.

³⁹ Mejía Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México*, 26.

program with their ideas to President Álvaro Obregón on May 9, 1923.⁴⁰ The interest of these and other businessmen and entrepreneurs generated positive results for both parties. The government asked the *Liga* to draft a proposal for the nation's mass communications legislation and during August of 1923 a radio division was aggregated to the *Dirección General de Telégrafos*, the Telegraph Department. From that point forward, the government committed to adopt legislation concerning radio operations.⁴¹

In 1923, President Alvaro Obregón declared that all communication through radio, whether official, private, or public, fell under the surveillance of the *Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas* (Ministry of Communications and Public Works), or SCOP.⁴² The Ministry relied on the Telegraph Department to handle the technical side of new and existing radio stations, such as assigning the frequencies and determining which wavelengths a station could operate on, as well as being responsible for the paperwork, laws and permits needed to construct new stations. A handful of Ministries operated official radio stations in the 1920s and 1930s including the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Labor, the Ministry of War and Navy, the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the Ministry of Public Education, which was the most prominent.

While formal legislation was being drafted, the Minister of Communications and Public

⁴⁰ AGN, OC, Expediente 711-R-27.

⁴¹ Fernando Mejía Barquera. *La Industria De La Radio Y La Televisión Y La Política Del Estado Mexicano* (México, DF: Fundación Manuel Buendía, 1989), 29.

⁴² AGN, OC, Minuta, 18 de enero de 1923. Acuerdo Presidencial: Código Telegráfico y Telégrafos Nacionales Reglamento General. Capítulo II. Artículo 26.

Works signed a contract with the President concerning the parameters of operating privately owned radio stations. The arrangement, signed in 1923, included three stipulations: radio stations had to be under the direction of Mexican born or naturalized owners and operators; SCOP would be vigilant of their construction and transmissions; and, lastly, station owners were obligated to pay an annual tax of \$200 pesos. Concerning the programming of new stations, *El Universal* noted that they had to include “nothing against the laws of the country, public order or good morals.”⁴³

The first national legislation concerning radio communications was created with the signing of the *Ley de Comunicaciones Eléctricas* (Electric Communications Law) on April 26, 1926. The law gave the government the power to assume control of all radio activity in the case of war or in national emergencies. It indicated that the nation’s air space, where the terrestrial waves used for radio transmissions pass through, was government property. The Federal government, who authorized the Ministry of Communication and Public Works to grant permits, was also responsible for the social function of radio and intervened in strict censorship over the airwaves. This law gave SCOP the ability to designate the stations that would be used for cultural, commercial, experimental or official use. Concerning the latter, the law indicated that the government could operate official stations to transmit whatever messages it desired. The public, on the other hand, could obtain concessions and exploit the natural resources of the nation, the airwaves.⁴⁴ Six years later, when commercial radio was on the rise and commercial stations were springing up throughout the nation, the *Ley de Vías Generales de Comunicación*

⁴³ *El Universal*, June 9, 1923.

⁴⁴ *Diario Oficial*, 26 de abril de 1926. “Ley de Comunicaciones Eléctricas.”

clearly defined the technical aspects of mass communications.⁴⁵

With the direct involvement of the private sector, the growth of the radio industry followed the principles of capitalism; in contrast to the post-revolutionary cultural project, as other Ministries and Departments were doing. In the creation of the national radio industry, the government implemented a capitalist plan for the development of a nationwide industry and thus effectively sponsored its own model of free enterprise. According to Fernando Mejía Barquera, in the communications sector the Mexican government promoted a brand of democracy where “diversity” was found, not in the content of the material being transmitted over the air, but in the number of companies allowed to exist. One way that the government sustained its ability to use the air waves as avenues for propaganda, moreover, was by willingly allowing the private sector to establish its own radio stations that operated as small private companies. In the end, this partnership gave way to a symbiotic relationship between business members and political leaders.⁴⁶

Along with being included in the post-revolutionary economic plan, radio was part of another trend taking place between 1923 and 1947, a shift in the awareness of private and public space. In the 1940s, writes Enrique Florescano, the proliferation of literature in Mexico was “interrupted by the radio, cinema and television which produced a *pueblo* trapped by sounds, pictures and words.”⁴⁷ Once radio was introduced to the people of Mexico, the awareness and

⁴⁵ Cristina Romo, *Ondas, canales y mensajes: un perfil de la radio en México* (Guadalajara, Jalisco, México: ITESO, 1991), 77.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴⁷ Enrique Florescano, ed. *El Patrimonio Cultural De México. Sección de obras de historia*

management of space was transformed.

Before 1921, the only way to bring music inside the home was through phonographs, victrolas or records. Radio surpassed these forms of home entertainment and offered not only classical music and conferences to Mexican families, but, in the 1930s and 1940s, also popular and folkloric music, radio-dramas, national and international news and annual government celebrations and rituals. Radio had the ability to trespass public and private barriers because it is “a phenomenon of unprecedented penetration, it surrounds public and private spaces, enters living rooms in homes, in the same way that it wanders through the shop windows of the central avenues, it penetrates the dining room, the bedrooms, the parks, the corners.”⁴⁸ Upon its arrival, radio took messages and music from public places to private ones, and vice versa. Broadcasts had the ability to travel from radio studios to the kitchen, living room or bedroom, more intimate secret places and, in the public realm, they traveled from studios to street corners, central meeting places, dance halls and auditoriums. When it was first introduced to Mexican homes in the 1920s “the radio was placed in the center of the living room, like a magic box that had the power to gather the family with truly stellar auditions.”⁴⁹

Thanks to radio, for example, new activities for the urban population emerged in Mexico City, some of which were sponsored by private organizations like the Central Mexican Radio League. The society was influential in the advancement of radio in Mexico during the 1920s by

(México, DF: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993), 295.

⁴⁸ Roberto Ornelas Herrera, “Radio y Cotidianidad en México (1900-1930)” in Aurelio de los Reyes, ed., *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México*. Tomo V. Volumen 1. Siglo XX. Campo y Ciudad. (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005), 154.

⁴⁹ Mejía Prieto. *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México*, 49.

exposing the medium to Mexico City's public through fairs, expositions and festivals. From June 16 to the 23, 1923, the "*Gran Feria de Radio*" (Great Radio Fair) took place at the Great Mining Palace located in downtown Mexico City. The event was organized by members of the League and the National Engineering School and was presided over by President Obregón and the Minister of Communications and Public Works. The advertisements for the event promised visitors live musical concerts which were to be "picked up" from stations in the United States and from other parts of Mexico, along with dances, and live conferences about the latest advancements in radio technology to date. In the central patio and corridors of the Palace they organized carnivals, contests and on Sunday, June 18, the newspaper promised that those in attendance "could follow, round by round, the boxing match held in the *El Toreo* plaza the Argentine champion [Jim] Firpo fight the American [Jim] Hibbard."⁵⁰

Speakers were placed in the ballroom of the Ministry of the National School of Engineers, adjacent to the Palace, and for the first time those in attendance could dance to music coming from the airwaves. Additionally, a *cantina*, tea room, restaurant and soft-drink and ice cream carts were available for those who desired refreshments. Because using electricity was still a new phenomenon for city residents in the early 1920s, the League was careful in ensuring that radio, a new apparatus that could be turned on quite easily, would be explained in simple terms so that it could get the attention of a large number of people. In order to do so, the League gave amateurs and audience members in general, the opportunity to watch a short film about the

⁵⁰ *El Universal*, June 15, 1923, p. 8.

construction of home radio receivers.⁵¹

In this unprecedented social and scientific event, radio invaded the public space: the ballroom, the halls of the Palace, the corridors of the Ministry; in general, two buildings previously relegated for other activities. The hundreds of people who gathered for the inaugural ceremony despite the summer rain “surrendered themselves to the wholesome amusement of listening to concerts, conferences and talks from other locations.”⁵² Thus, to the urban population, radio transformed the awareness and meaning of space and their association with buildings normally used for government services. Moreover, through the event, the League was also interested in reaching a national and international market, including the thousands of Mexican immigrants in the United States. With the proceeds from the fair they planned to construct an experimental radio station of their own, with high frequency power and “who’s greatest purpose will consist in spreading, in this country and outside of it, Mexican culture in all its manifestations.”⁵³

The 1930s: Radio becomes a Professional Industry

Since the 1920s, the government had an influential position in the national radio industry, not just as a producer but also as a legislator and regulator. Through laws created in 1931 and 1932 strict control was placed on the content of broadcasts.⁵⁴ Stipulations included declaring

⁵¹ *Excélsior*, May 9, 1923, p. 1.

⁵² *El Universal*, June 17, 1923, p. 1.

⁵³ *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 24, 1923, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Diario Oficial*, 31 de agosto de 1931, “Ley sobre Vías Generales de Comunicación y Medios

that stations could not be located on the U.S. side of the border, requiring all stations to broadcast in Spanish, mandating owners to transmit all government messages free of charge, and most importantly, abstaining from religion and “prohibiting Mexicans from engaging in political discourse over the airwaves.”⁵⁵ In fact, these two areas, politics and religion, which had been kept out of Mexican radio broadcasting since the 1920s, were notable features which remained outside of radio broadcasting for the majority of the twentieth century.

As the decade progressed, the law concerning the musical programming of radio stations became more explicit. In the mid-1930s the government ensured that commercial stations followed their cultural project by instilling legislation that regulated the percentage of Mexican music each station was required to play on a daily basis. The proportion of time devoted to this genre, in fact, fluctuated during the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, in the early ‘30s XFX devoted ¼ of their twelve day schedule to Mexican music. By 1936, Article 24 of the *Reglamento de las estaciones radioeléctricas comerciales, culturales y de aficionados* (Bylaws for Commercial, Cultural and Amateur Radio electric Stations), stated that “every program must contain at least 25% traditional Mexican music.”⁵⁶ Six years later, when the legislation was revised under the administration of Manuel Avila Camacho, the law did not amend the percentage of Mexican music each station had to play, but instead included a decree concerning

de Transporte,” and *Diario Oficial*, 8 de Julio 1933, “Ley de Impuestos a las estaciones radiodifusoras.”

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Joy Hayes, *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture and Nationalism in Mexico, 1920-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000). 39.

⁵⁶ *Diario Oficial*, 30 de diciembre 1936. “Reglamento de las estaciones radioeléctricas comerciales, culturales y de aficionados.”

playing records over the air.⁵⁷

The '30s were also important for the professional development of the industry. By the end of the decade Mexico was carving its place in the international mass communications sector and after 1930 new commercial radio stations were springing up throughout Mexico such as XEW, "*La voz de América Latina desde México*," "The voice of Latin America from Mexico," which inaugurated its legendary programming on September 18, 1930 from the *Teatro Olimpia* in downtown Mexico City. XEW is regarded as one of Mexico's foremost radio stations. Mexican scholar Jorge Mejia Prieto writes that the success of the station was the result of the vision of its founder, Emilio Azcárraga, who focused solely on the commercial aspect of radio and by selling radio advertisements, filled an important void within Mexican industry and commerce.⁵⁸ The competition between commercial and government-owned stations became noticeable after XEW was on the air.

The inauguration of XEW, in particular, contributed both to the legitimacy of the industry and to the rural-to-urban migration taking place in the nation during the twentieth century. After 1930, "musicians and singers from every region in Mexico began to arrive in the DF [federal district]."⁵⁹ Some, like *Los Gavilanes del Sur*, left the tranquility of their village in Guerrero, picked up their guitars and "came to the city, to get drunk on lights, noise and the longings of

⁵⁷ *Diario Oficial*, 20 de mayo 1942. "Reglamento de las estaciones radiodifusoras comerciales culturales, de experimentación científica y de aficionados."

⁵⁸ Mejia Prieto, *Historia De La Radio Y La Televisión En México*, 39.

⁵⁹ Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Historia de la música popular Mexicana* (México, DF: Editorial Océano, 2008), 71.

success.”⁶⁰ Acclaimed singer, Pedro Vargas, for instance, left his home in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato after finishing grade school at the age of thirteen because he did not want to be a *campesino* like his father. “I had a fervent desire to be somebody in life. That was my obsession,” he recalled. Years later, Vargas became one of the most popular singers in Mexico, having had a personal relationship with every President in Mexico since the 1920s and travelling the globe, singing over the radio and recording *boleros*, *rancheras* and other Mexican popular music.⁶¹

In order not to fall out of favor with the government, new stations followed the main principles of the state’s reconstruction project and focused on diffusing culture, education and patriotism. Following a directive of the Mexican government, for instance, in 1931 Carlos G. Blake, the Minister of Communications, ordered for all radio stations to play only national music.⁶²

The Ministry of Communications and Public Works considered music, “art which speaks deeply about the soul of the *pueblo*,” and during the ‘30s the government enacted a number of laws to ensure that stations displayed their loyalty to the post-revolutionary government by

⁶⁰ *El Universal Ilustrado*, February 18, 1937.

⁶¹ José Ramón Garmabella, *Pedro Vargas: Una vez nada más* (México, DF: Ediciones de Comunicación, 1985), 28.

⁶² AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (725.1)/149. Letter from C. Carlos G. Blake to Narciso Bassols, C. Secretario de Educación 13 enero 1931.

playing Mexican music.⁶³ The first way to ensure that this took place was by demanding all radio stations to “utilize only the services of artists, employees and Mexican laborers;” a law enacted in January of 1931.⁶⁴ In 1933 the government demanded that radio stations not transmit musical or literary compositions that did not have the previous authorization of the *Sociedad de Autores y Compositores Mexicanos* (Society of Mexican Composers and Authors), a group that was responsible for the royalties of individual musical numbers.⁶⁵

After new sound technology was implemented within commercial mass entertainment, theaters were transformed from places for live theatrical performances to spaces where one could visit to take part in the screening of a film, a comedy sketch or a live radio program. These programs borrowed the essential aspects of *Teatro de Revista*: live audiences, recognizable characters, satire, parody, drama and music. However, live radio programs could not rely on audience interaction like the popular theater, as on many occasions audience members had to remain silent since they were transmitted to the near and distant public through the ether.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the radio studios of stations XEW, XEB, or XEQ, among others, were spaces where the urban population visited to witness a live musical performance by their favorite singer, actor or composer. Men and women from different social backgrounds could walk the streets of Mexico City, enter a radio studio, and come face to face with the people behind the voices they heard daily through their home receivers. One option was to visit XEW’s

⁶³ AHSEP, Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

⁶⁴ *Diario Oficial*, 30 de diciembre 1936. “Reglamento de las estaciones radioeléctricas comerciales, culturales y de aficionados.”

⁶⁵ *Diario Oficial*, 8 de julio 1933. “Ley de impuestos a las Estaciones Radiodifusoras.”

legendary studio on *Avenida Ayuntamiento*, several blocks from *Avenida San Juan de Letrán*.⁶⁶

In accordance with its motto, “The Voice of Latin America from Mexico,” by 1935, XEW was a successful and celebrated radio station in the Americas. Additionally, the station was conscious of the influence that their location in Mexico City had on the population living in the adjacent area.

Live radio programs also created new opportunities for the public. As soon as they stepped inside the studios, radio listeners became audience members. This experience was new, exhilarating and unforgettable. For some, it was disheartening to see that the voice of the “invisible artist” actually belonged to an ordinary person. Yet to others, young women especially, seeing a famous male artist in person or listening to his voice over the air sparked unprecedented and sometimes hysterical behavior. This occurred, for instance, when the composer-poet, Agustín Lara, took the stage in the capital city throughout the 1930s.

“Minutes before 10 p.m., there is not one romantic young woman...restless and adventurous young man, or a single lady...who does not tune in their radio to the hour of Agustín Lara,” wrote a radio critic. At 10 p.m. every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings during the 1930s, Mexico City radio station XEW transmitted “*La Hora Íntima de Agustín Lara*,” (The Intimate Hour of Agustín Lara), a live radio program in which the composer sat before his piano for several hours. Drawing from his vast repertoire of romantic and evocative songs, he dedicated special numbers to audience members and radio listeners, who “faint when

⁶⁶ *Avenida San Juan de Letrán* (today Eje Lázaro Cárdenas) was the principle thoroughfare for cultural and artistic activity in Mexico City during the 1930s and 1940s. Until 1937 when the Ministry of Communications and Public Works ordered radio stations to leave the city center, all radio activity was concentrated along the avenues surrounding the *Centro Histórico*, the historic downtown district.

they hear the hollow voice of Agustín when he exclaims, ‘This song of mine, like a bouquet of roses, I place before the diminutive feet of the beautiful Josefina Garza of Monterrey!’”⁶⁷ A live program such as Lara’s, as one commentator observed, also served an important social function in Mexico. They were a “Good thing for fathers and jealous husbands, because with ‘*La Hora Íntima de Agustín Lara*’ transmitting at the most important time in the night, they avoid the cost of going to the cinema or other distractions that are possibly more dangerous.”⁶⁸

At first, live radio programs were successful because they combined already known artistic talent, theater actors, with a space for the discovery of new values and stars. The public did not have to purchase tickets, as with the theater; instead they had to wait in line before programs for free passes. Commercial radio stations, during the 1930s and 1940s, thrived thanks to live radio programs. These stations, in fact, effectively created two listening audiences: one at home and the other in the studio.

As a new space for the entertainment of the masses, the studio was pivotal during the professional development of the radio industry. Through a studio, stations imparted wholesome entertainment, culture and commercial propaganda. In the ‘30s and ‘40s, whenever a station built or remodeled their studio, the pages of the local press included a number of photographs of state of the art auditoriums with elaborate curtains, a shiny grand piano and a microphone in the center of an empty stage.

Studios were focal points which brought the public together and exposed them to new

⁶⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*, February 22, 1934.

⁶⁸ *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 15, 1932.

talent. For instance, in January of 1931, in an advertisement for commercial station, XEB *El Buen Tono*, Professor Rosendo Arnaiz, the man responsible for the transmission, “Radio-Gimnasia,” a program which broadcast via remote control from an athletic club three times a week, argued “we have the absolute conviction that there isn’t a radio operator or engineer, that has not passed through the experimental laboratories of our station. A large number of the great artists that we have today were known because of our microphones, which allowed them to be known, both among our public and the public overseas.” Prof. Arnaiz credited the place where this took place; “today our studio is available to the public, and in it night after night more than 500 people who are lovers of good music gather.”⁶⁹

Building state-of-the art and impressive studios was one of the many phases of radio’s progress in Mexico. In 1934, in order to commemorate its 11 anniversary celebration, XEB inaugurated a new studio. In a public address, Bernardo de San Cristóbal, the general manager, noted that he was proud of the special moment and believed the new studio was “a medium, to take to your homes, with greater purity, our sponsored programs, as well as a kind and cozy corner for the Mexican artists who will visit it.”⁷⁰ As studios were modernized, live radio programs continued to evolve and in the second half of the 1930s, studios and theaters were fused into one. The most salient example is the *Teatro Alameda*, constructed in 1936 by media mogul Emilio Azcárraga as a space for the convergence of film, radio, theater and, eventually, television. “A city inside of a movie house,” were the words used to describe this building that

⁶⁹ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ramo Gobernación, Fondo Propiedad Artística y Literaria (PAL), Caja 523, Expediente 7280.

⁷⁰ VEA, November 9, 1934.

was centrally located by the Alameda Park in Mexico City.⁷¹

The 1940s:

In the early 1940s composers were writing songs on a weekly basis, live radio programs were in style, and contests, most notably the “*Hora de aficionados*” (Amateur Hour), captured the attention and imagination of the public. The era of creative, unmonitored transmissions, however, was short lived. In the following decade the nation’s economy, cultural programs, and internal politics were in flux when the country transitioned from the government of Cárdenas to that of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946). Under Camacho, Mexico experienced a War-induced economic boom and the nation’s ties with the United States, in particular, grew stronger. Radio programming was affected by these new trends; particularly through censorship imposed by the government who, through SCOP, had a systematic monitoring system and kept watch over the content of radio station programming.⁷² Placing restrictions on transmissions, in fact, was one of the most effective ways official stations were able to compete for audiences with commercial border stations.

In the 1940s radio continued to be exhibited in the public sphere. Radio took center stage in 1943 during the *Feria del Libro y Exposición Nacional de Periodismo* and again during

⁷¹ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ramo Presidentes, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (LCR), Expediente 415.13/7.

⁷² For an excellent evaluation of how radio in Mexico steered away from political or religious news and information during the post-revolutionary era see Elizabeth Joy Hayes, *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture and Nationalism in Mexico, 1920-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

October of 1944 at the *Ferias del Libro, del Radio y de la Cinematografía*.⁷³ In June of 1944, when the organizers of the Fair began to plan the event, they asserted that “radio will have its own pavilion, with its theater-studios, in which first class programs will emerge from; exposition halls, where you will be able to admire the technical progress, the perfections reached in radio technology.” The event planners wanted to ensure radio would have an “independent personality” outside of other cultural and commercial manifestations being displayed in the fair. In part, this was because “in this country radio is the book and the newspaper of millions of people.” The fair displayed the three most important forms of media in Mexico at the time: cinema, radio and books, and, as in previous years, took place thanks to the collaboration of the government and the business sector.

Arturo Garcia Formeti, spokesman for the event, noted that the radio exhibit, in particular, was anticipated to be grand. A theater-studio was being constructed in the *Monumento a la Revolución* (Mexican Revolutionary Monument), where live radio transmissions would take place fifteen hours a day. In addition, the Mexican Symphony, National Opera and various theaters had promised to make appearances and play live music over the radio. In fact, the October 15 broadcast of *La Hora Nacional*, a weekly concurrent national radio broadcast, was dedicated to the fair.⁷⁴ Thus, the objective continued to be to use radio to project nationalism and reach audiences in the United States through powerful broadcasting signals.

The government, through the *Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas* (Ministry of Communications and Public Works), or SCOP, desired to display radio’s advancements to the

⁷³ *Radiolandia*, April 20 and 22, 1943, May 7, 11 and 21, 1943 and *¡Oiga!*, June 24, 1944.

⁷⁴ *Radiolandia*, September 15, 1944.

public and cooperated with the *Cámara Nacional de la Industria de la Radiodifusión*, the successor of the *Liga Central Mexicana de Radio*, to carry this out. This independent organization was responsible for the organization of the industry and is credited to its rapid professionalization in the 1930s when they offered free information on legal, commercial, and technical issues to commercial radio station owners.⁷⁵

By the following decade, Mexican film stars made special appearances in live radio programs. Audiences filled the studios in order to see their favorite movie star. The weekly program sponsored by *Cerveza Monterrey* and broadcast through XEW, on Tuesdays at 9:45 p.m. in 1944, for instance, was lauded for its high artistic quality and because film stars such as María Félix, Pedro Armendáriz and Sara García made guest appearances.⁷⁶

Studios only continued to get more sophisticated as the years progressed. In 1942, the new studio under construction for XEW had a seating capacity for over 4,000 people and was said to be “identical” to the Columbia Broadcasting Systems (CBS) studio in Radio City, New York.⁷⁷ The station spent over half a million pesos constructing this studio, in fact, and during the inauguration in the summer of 1942, the Mexican National Anthem was played along with one of Agustín Lara’s *boleros*, “*Cada Noche un Amor*” (Each Night a New Lover).⁷⁸

Scholars argue that the mechanical reproduction of cultural forms such as music during

⁷⁵ *Radiolandia*, September 3, 1943.

⁷⁶ *¡Oiga!*, April 1, 1944.

⁷⁷ *Radiolandia*, June 20, 1942.

⁷⁸ *Radiolandia*, June 22, 1942.

the twentieth century reconfigured the understanding of space and time.⁷⁹ In Mexico, as the radio industry grew and professionalized during the 1930s and 1940s and permanently changed the use and perception of private and public sphere. Within the span of two decades, the urban masses of Mexico transitioned from attending the *Teatro de Revista* (Musical Revue), to staying at home and listening to popular and suggestive programs hosted by musicians and composers, such as “*La Hora Íntima de Agustín Lara*” (The Intimate Hour of Agustín Lara). In fact, through live radio programs, which were in vogue after the mid-1930s, the daily routines of radio audiences in the United States and Mexico were transformed. Conducting a radio program before a live studio audience exhilarated listeners who could “hear even the breathing of the speakers” and marveled at “the applause of the visible audience.”⁸⁰

Conclusion

The United States witnessed the arrival of radio broadcasting several months before Mexico had its first transmissions. In the nation’s largest cities, radio stations played Mexican and other Spanish-language music beginning in 1921.⁸¹ Mexican radio stations had been “picked up” by listeners since then; allowing many to choose between musical radio transmissions heard in the United States coming from Mexican stations, and Spanish-language

⁷⁹ This is an extensive debate. See, Walter Benjamin, Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, and E. F. N. Jephcott, *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁸⁰ AHSEP, Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

⁸¹ For more on this topic see Dolores Inés Casillas, “Sounds of Belonging: A Cultural History of Spanish-Language Radio in the United States, 1922-2004,” (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006).

broadcasts emitted over English-language radio stations. But the English-speaking audience was not the population the government was interested in reaching. In order to reach them, the government used one of its own institutions, the *Secretaría de Educacion Pública*, and its station XFX, to do so.

Chapter II

From “*La Hora del Hogar*” to “*La Hora Nacional*”:

Nation-Building and Official Radio Broadcasting in Mexico

“No ya desde el Bravo hasta el Suchiate, sino de un polo a otro, a través de toda la Tierra, podemos escuchar la voz de nuestros semejantes como antes podíamos recibir su correspondencia o como más tarde pudimos telegrafiarles o hablarles por teléfono.”

“Not only from the Rio Grande to the Suchiate River, but from one pole to the other, throughout the world, we can hear the voice of those that are like us, in the way we would receive their letters, or later send them telegraphs or speak to them over the telephone.”

-Salvador Novo, *Ensayos*

Life for the urban and rural population of Mexico in the 1920s was in a state of transition. “The people were interested in the scientific advancements of the day and in having fun, they wanted to forget about the armed conflict,” explains Jorge Mejía Prieto.¹ During the evenings or weekends in the country’s cities people of all backgrounds and ages attended the theater, a vaudeville show, or, before 1929, viewed a silent film. The theater, especially the *Teatro de Revista*, or music revue, combined music with satire and was an essential source of entertainment for the urban population. During the 1920s “some preferred the piano at home...others, generally less demanding and certainly less cultured, preferred- and could pay- the spaces that *Teatro de Revista* opened for the public enjoyment of music, for the affirmation and

¹ Jorge Mejía Prieto. *Historia De La Radio Y La Televisión En México*. (Colección México vivo; México: O. Colmenares, 1972), 24.

confirmation of the identity of the masses.”²

When radio arrived, high quality entertainment could be enjoyed in the comfort of one's home. “We are in a splendid era,” noted Ruben Campos in 1928, “in which the Ministry [of Public Education] and two other newspaper companies offer free music to the world.”³ Campos was referring to official station CZE, and to CYB and CYL, the first three radio stations in operation in Mexico City which offered nightly concerts and conferences on a frequent basis in the 1920s.

Aside from bringing music inside the home, radio receivers connected listeners with the cultural activity of their city. Using electricity was still a new phenomenon for city residents in the early 1920s and radio, an apparatus that could be turned on quite easily, simplified life. For those who did not have the means to purchase a radio, they could walk the city streets and listen to live broadcasts, as it was reported that small businesses would place radio receivers in front of open windows for the passersby to hear.⁴

The Mexico City press played a vital role in the history of radio by instructing the population how to listen to the new apparatus. Shortly after it was introduced, radio was taken on by artistic and literary groups in Mexico; to some, it was even considered an art form. For instance, radio was an important part of the work of an avant-garde artistic movement in Mexico

² *El País de las Tandas Teatro de Revista 1900-1940*. (México D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, 1984), 93.

³ Rubén M. Campos, *El folklore y la música Mexicana. Investigación acerca de la cultura musical en México (1525-1925)* (México, DF: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1928), 154.

⁴ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaria de Educación Pública (hereafter AHSEP) 4.18 9475/4. #25. NECESIDAD DE ADQUIRIR LA ESTACION.

called *Estridentismo*, which drew from European futurism and called for an embrace of modernity by celebrating the city and new technology during the mid 1920s. This group of intellectuals and artists took the attributes of the changing city, -elevators, automobiles, telephones, the telegraph and radio-, used them to write poetry and to familiarize a wider public with emerging art and cultural forms. In the 1920s, the Mexico City press legitimized radio's culture role in Mexico and the enthusiastic support the apparatus received from newspapers like *El Universal Ilustrado* and avant-garde groups like the *Estridentistas* helped underscore its importance within Mexican society.

At the same time, radio emerged as an integral part of the post-revolutionary cultural project spearheaded by the Mexican government. Under the banner of nationalism, after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) a vast reconstruction project was implemented in the country that focused on education, public health, agrarianism, and anticlericalism. This chapter explains the birth of XFX, the station operated by the Ministry of Public Education, their mission to target and reach Mexican listeners in the United States and the way they used gender-based programming to advance the ideals of the Mexican government. Lastly, the chapter describes how, by the 1940s, this station was engulfed with another government agency, the DAPP (the Autonomous Press and Publicity Department) and continued to use radio programming to transmit Mexican culture, values and music both at home and overseas.

The Ministry of Public Education and XFX

Following the Revolution, new institutions created by the central government appeared in Mexico. In the eyes of political leaders, rebuilding the country after the decade-long conflict meant creating organizations that would legitimize the state and help advance the nationwide

cultural and educational program. One of these was the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Ministry of Public Education), or SEP, established in June of 1921 by President Álvaro Obregón. The man behind the Ministry's early projects was José Vasconcelos, who headed the department from 1921-1924. Vasconcelos was the first government official to defend the traditions of the people and worked to situate folkloric art, music and dance in their proper place within the post-revolutionary society.

In 1923, the SEP responded to the call of the government to impart education to the masses and made a commitment to adopt radio, construct rural schools and develop technological training. As Public Education Minister, Vasconcelos eagerly supported the SEP's efforts to acquire the technology necessary to build a modern radio station, envisioning its role as a tool for the "civil and cultural neo-evangelization" of the illiterate and dispersed population of Mexico.⁵ New institutions like the SEP were instructed to use radio communications for a number of purposes including making contact with Mexico's rural population, teaching the urban working class technical skills, indoctrinating all citizens with ideas of nationalism, and, above all, carrying out work that was pro-*Patria*, or "for the betterment of the motherland."⁶

In 1924, Obregón's successor, Plutarco Elías Calles, authorized the SEP to purchase a radio transmitter from the United States. Officially inaugurated on November 30, 1924, the

⁵ Fernando Curiel, *La telaraña magnética y otros estudios radiofónicos* (México, DF: Ediciones Coyoacán S.A. de C.V.), 306.

⁶ Elizabeth Joy Hayes, *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture, and Nationalism in Mexico, 1920-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), xiii.

station was assigned CZE (later XFX) as its call letters.⁷ XFX was at the center of the urban transformation brought about by radio in Mexico City after 1923. At the time, radio stations required large antennas which became problematic for the radio stations inaugurated in downtown Mexico City, an area with limited vertical space. In order to accommodate the towers the Ministry had to place them inside of the copulas of the *Templo de Encarnacion* and *Templo de Sana Catalina de Sena*, churches close to the Ministry's main building downtown.⁸

Taking into account that the majority of the Mexican population was illiterate, the government recognized that reaching them through print media was not the most efficient way to impart its political and cultural projects. Under the direction of the state, many official radio stations during the '20s, '30s and '40s made use of public spaces, such as schools, to impart their wisdom and ideals to the general population. In urban centers, the SEP noted that their station "has the advantage of being assisted by a number of businesses who put speakers where the public can hear them from the street." XFX was proud that those who did not have the means to purchase a radio receiver could be a part of a "circle of listeners," a group of citizens who congregated in their homes or in public places to hear the radio.⁹

In 1926, faithful listeners of the station, like J.R. Padilla noted "I have made a special effort to listen them in my living space, placing a Loud speaker in a place where the public can

⁷ In compliance with the National Radio Congress taking place in Washington, D.C. in 1927, in September 1928 the station was assigned the signals, XFX. By 1936 the station broadcast as XEXM, long wave and XEXA short wave.

⁸ *El Universal* 21 de junio 1924.

⁹ AHSEP, Expediente 4.18 9475/4.

listen, noting that the transmissions are heard with positive delight and interest, especially by the popular classes, which are, undoubtedly, the ones who benefit the most from these programs.”¹⁰

Padilla was a considerate listener who brought music and conferences to his neighbors in Mexico City. Like him, countless others were enthusiastic about the visible changes taking place in Mexico, thanks to radio; as a result, they purchased radio sets, records and attended performances where they could hear and see the production of a live radio program.

XFX's programming intended to reach all social classes in Mexico and advanced ideas over the proper behavior of men, women and children. Initially, XFX was on the air only several hours a day and their broadcasts included hour-long conferences on hygiene, history, geography, and horticulture. By the mid 1920s the station increased their broadcasting hours from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. and incorporated news and information bulletins by the Ministry of Public Health, talks on Philately and other hobbies, and artistic concerts sponsored by the Ministry of War and the Navy or the National Conservatory of Music and Declamation.

In the first decade after the Revolution, the station was successful as a purveyor of education and Mexican cultural nationalism, giving it national and international prestige. The station's goal was sending messages, conferences, and information from the Ministry's main office building, located in downtown Mexico City, to listeners in the city, the surrounding states, and abroad, to be the most powerful station in Mexico and a “magnificent means of Mexican propaganda, making known through the entire orbit our industrial developments, our true

¹⁰ Boletín de la Secretaría de Educación Pública. Tomo V, número 10. Octubre 1926. p. 175.

intellectual state and our general status.”¹¹

One of the station’s noteworthy social functions was their collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health, who used XFX to broadcast conferences and lectures ranging from nutrition, to diseases, to proper sanitation. In particular, their efforts in spreading the government’s anti-alcohol campaign, which relied on film and radio transmissions throughout rural Mexico, generated favorable outcomes. One listener, C. Alfonso Ramírez, drafted a letter to the station on September 29, 1927 admitting that “Before I was acquainted with a radio apparatus, I would dedicate my spare time to immoderate partying, which many times affected my health.”¹² The testimony of Mr. Ramírez, who had changed his daily drinking habits thanks to the lectures, is proof of the way the Ministry assisted the government in their plans to eradicate drunkenness in Mexico.¹³

XFX Overseas Missions

Beyond focusing on improving the health and wellbeing of the nation’s people, XFX’s mission included broadcasting internationally and reaching people “on the other side” of the U.S.-Mexico border. The official mission statement of the station included “taking cultural

¹¹ *El Demócrata*, September 27, 1924.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ On the Mexican government’s temperance campaigns see Gretchen Pierce, “Sobering the Revolution: Mexico’s Anti-Alcohol Campaigns and the Process of State-Building, 1910-1940” (PhD Dissertation, University of Arizona, 2008) and “Parades, Epistles, and Prohibitive Legislation: Mexico’s National Anti-Alcohol Campaign and the Process of State Building, 1934-1940” *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 23:2 (Spring 2009). A unique approach on Mexico’s relationship with alcohol see, Tim Mitchell, *Intoxicated Identities: Alcohol’s Power in Mexican History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

messages to the most remote corners of our country, and past its borders to take the live voice of our speakers and announcers...to the cultured Canadian, North American and Central American cities.”¹⁴ The station’s radio department, the *Obra de Extension Educativa por Radio* (Educational and Extension Labor of Radio) was responsible for carefully observing radio transmissions heard by listeners overseas.

From the moment it went on the air in 1924, the station monitored its “labor abroad,” responded to letters from listeners and kept annual records of the number of handwritten and telephone testimonies sent to the Ministry’s office in Mexico City. In the late 1920s, during her tenure as station manager and director, Maria Luisa Ross corresponded with audiences across the globe, ensuring that both foreigners and Mexicans alike knew about the work being carried out in Mexico through the SEP’s radio department. Letters received from abroad by XFX provide a unique opportunity to examine the reception and popularity of their programming in the United States and the Americas.

The majority of correspondence came from audiences overseas, especially from the United States. In 1925 the office of radio education reported that in the previous twelve months they had received over 26,000 pieces of correspondence from listeners in the Western Hemisphere and calculated that the range of the station exceeded 12,000 kilometers.¹⁵ By 1929, 14% of the station’s listening audience was located overseas.¹⁶ In the radio office’s December

¹⁴ *Boletín de la SEP*, Tomo IV, no. 2 (1925): 63.

¹⁵ AHSEP, Caja 4, Expediente 41.8. 9475/15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

1927 report, Ross noted that “Especially in the United States, listening to our music and conferences has awakened an interest to know us better. The radio department frequently receives requests for pamphlets, magazines, photographs, in general, all kinds of publications that can illustrate our way of life, our customs and the evolution of our national spirit.”¹⁷

Numberless listeners, ranging from Radio Club Members, Mexican citizens, European immigrants, housewives, and teenagers living in the United States and parts of Canada frequently “picked up” radio broadcasts from Mexico City between 1924 and 1931. Some responded by drafting letters to verify their reception of a radio broadcast, complain about the sound quality in the music being played, offer ideas for better programming, request that the operator play a special musical number for them, or comment on the artistic talent displayed over the radio. Letters to Mexico City even arrived from countries in Europe, like a report from Jean Maurier of Replattes, Switzerland, who wrote to XFX in 1926 stating he had been able to listen to the station with great clarity and admitted he hoped to tune in on a regular basis.¹⁸

Both English and Spanish-speaking listeners frequently commented on the music played over XFX’s transmissions. Music allowed the station to establish lines of communication both Mexican immigrants and a curious Anglo audience. The high quality of music broadcast over the air, in fact, set the station apart from other official short-wave operations. For instance, on March 13, 1931, Margaret Williams sent a letter from her home in Brooklyn, New York to XFX offices in Mexico City. “Dear Señor,” she wrote, “if I could only reach out my hands and grasp yours, and express my heartfelt thanks for the great pleasure I experienced tonight, listening to

¹⁷ *Boletín de la SEP*, Tomo VI, no. 12 (1927): 308.

¹⁸ *El Universal*, February 16, 1926.

the program you sent out!” The night before, Williams had used a short-wave receiver to listen to a concert given by Mexico’s National Symphonic Orchestra. “It is easy to tell that you people sing from love of music, not for fame or money,” she continued, “After months of listening to jazz and so called ‘crooners’ it was a never to be forgotten treat to listen to your lovely Spanish and Mexican string music and choral singing.”¹⁹

As a powerful agent of culture, music had been used since the nineteenth century by government leaders to promote ideas of nationalism. In the 1920s and 1930s, the government resurrected the practice and turned to music to help diffuse the cultural politics of the post-revolutionary state. During the 1920s, the *canción mexicana*, for instance, was “a fundamental component of the feelings and imaginary nationalisms that inhabited the official cultural discourse.”²⁰

Mexican composers had looked to the popular and rural classes for musical inspiration since before the Revolution. Afterwards, as some scholars argue, the government co-opted popular forms of expression and that which was considered “popular” became “Mexican.”²¹ In turn, during the 1920s, a large number of composers, piano players and musicians who had been trained in Europe in the early twentieth century responded to the call of the government, were inspired to work in Mexico, and used the available resources to make national art and music. Under the direction of José Vasconcelos and the SEP, folklorists and composers like Manuel M.

¹⁹ AHSEP, Expediente A-4/235.3(73), Folio 267-268.

²⁰ Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Expresiones Populares y Estereotipos Culturales en México. Siglos XIX y XX. Diez Ensayos* (México, DF: CIESAS y Casa Chata, 2007), 97-98.

²¹ Ibid.

Ponce embarked upon collecting musical traditions of Mexican countryside in order to disseminate it to Mexican children. The *canCIÓN mexicana* emerged within this context as a portable and succinct expression of cultural nationalism. The *canCIÓN mexicana*, which is synonymous with the *canCIÓN popular*, in a similar way to murals and poetry, reflected the people of Mexico in an accurate and commanding way.²²

Many of the achievements of the Educational and Extension Labor of Radio office at the time were the result of the work of its director, Maria Luisa Ross. Journalist, author, and life-long advocate for women's rights, Ross' background and concern with the lack of education and culture in Mexico's schools and manifested her through innovative projects and years of service.²³ In particular, Ross was behind a struggle taking place in the late 1920s and early 1930s between commercial and official stations over audience members. For instance, the station was "official," meaning it was forbidden from selling air time to private businesses for advertising. However, during the '20s it operated with a high degree of autonomy, in part because it was owned by the government and also because the station was launched years prior to the signing of the 1926 mass media law, the first legislation defining the role of commercial

²² For a general overview of the history of Mexican music see, Juan S. Garrido, *Historia De La Música Popular En México, 1896-1973* (México, DF: Editorial Extemporáneos, 1974.); Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano: ensayos sobre cultura popular y nacionalismo* (México, DF: CIESAS, 1994) and *Expresiones Populares y Estereotipos Culturales en México. Siglos XIX y XX. Diez Ensayos* (México, DF: CIESAS y Casa Chata, 2007); Claes af Geijerstam, *Popular music in Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976); Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Historia de la música popular mexicana* (México, DF: Editorial Océano, 2008).

²³ Rosalía Velázquez Estrada, "La Radiodifusión Mexicana Durante los Gobiernos de Álvaro Obregón y Plutarco E. Calles," (Tesis de licenciatura, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM, 1980), 170-171.

and official stations in Mexico.

Since its birth, the station focused on the acquisition of radio receivers to be distributed to rural schools and teachers throughout Mexico. In 1928, Ross proposed a campaign to exchange air time for radio-receivers with local businesses.²⁴ Consequently, between 1928 and 1932, in between programs and during commercial breaks, XFX aired commercial advertisements for local businesses such as, “*El Palacio de Hierro*,” “*Al Puerto de Veracruz*,” and “*Casa Armida*,” high-end clothing and department stores in Mexico, along with “The University Society” and “*AGFA Fábricas*,” a school organization and a fabric store, respectively. Collaborating with private businesses assisted the progress of the station. In 1929 the office reported that “Colgate, Palmolive & Peet, Inc.” had donated more than \$5,000.00 pesos in powerful radio apparatuses to the station.²⁵ The project was also successful in helping the station acquire a large number of receivers for the Ministry’s rural education program.

Radio and Nationalism Abroad

The audience XFX was also concerned with reaching were Mexican immigrants in the United States. One method used to engage this Mexican market in the United States was organizing special transmissions for them in the form of classical and chamber music concerts. Following a directive of the Mexican government, in 1931 Carlos G. Blake, the Minister of Communications, directed XFX to play only national music; meaning that instead of concerts featuring international composers interspersed with national ones, the station privileged music

²⁴ AHSEP, Expediente 4.18 9474/15.

²⁵ Ibid.

written and performed by Mexican composers and singers.²⁶ Thus, during Mexican holidays, like the Independence Day celebration in September, XFX used the radio airwaves to transmit nationalistic music and, of course, the national anthem. The celebration of Mexican Independence begins on the evening of September 15. Known as “*El Grito*,” it is customary for the President to give a speech and reproduce the battle cry for Independence by Father Miguel Hidalgo on September 15, 1810. Mexican immigrant J. Piña Pastor, who listened to the September 15, 1929 broadcast from his home in Brownsville, Texas, wrote a letter to XFX declaring: “In agreement with the request you made in your transmission of the ‘*Grito*’ ceremony some moments ago, I would like to express that I heard it with pure perfection. The ringing of the Cathedral bells was a bit weak but everything else very clear.”²⁷

Correspondence sent to the radio office in Mexico City also reveals that the broadcasts nurtured feelings of patriotism, especially within an elite group of Mexican immigrants. At times, programs to the U.S.-Mexican audience were carried out in conjunction with commercial stations, such as the broadcast of November 20, 1931, when XFX partnered with commercial stations XEW, and XET of Monterrey and transmitted the Presidential address and a concert throughout Mexico and parts of the United States. That night, under the direction of acclaimed composer Carlos Chávez, the Mexican National Symphony gave a concert at the Arbeu Theater in downtown Mexico City. The concert, and the radio broadcasts that accompanied it, were a success. “A true work of art,” wrote A.C. Laurel from Laredo, Texas, “it gives great pleasure

²⁶ Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo: Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (Hereafter AGN SCOP), Expediente 22/131.6 (725.1)/149.

²⁷ AHSEP, Expediente 4.18 9474/15.

and satisfaction to us Mexicans living outside of the homeland that our country can count on such a great orchestra as the National Symphonic Orchestra. I can assure you without fear of being mistaken, that neither the Philharmonic of New York nor the Philadelphia Symphony can supersede it and I have listened to them perform the same numbers.”²⁸

During their temporary or permanent stay in the United States, cultured Mexican immigrants could tune in to live concerts from Mexico City and praise the advancements of the post-revolutionary government’s cultural project. A listener in Brownsville, Texas, for instance, reiterated the fact that Mexican citizens, even when they lived abroad, were aware of the cultural missions of the government and were taking advantage of the opportunity to hear the broadcasts with their friends and family members. In his letter, thanking Carlos Chávez and the singer Hortensia Valladares for their great artistic work, Mr. Robles continued, “I do not want to end this letter without also sending warm and enthusiastic congratulations to Mr. Narciso Bassols, Secretary of Public Education, for the support and enthusiasm he displays in favor of national art, making possible concerts like the one from last night, since their diffusion will make us worthy of good judgment and appreciation abroad, since a people who have artistic manifestations like the one heard last night, are forced to be admired and respected.”²⁹ Thanks to the station’s ability to reach the United States, the music broadcast over the air not only gave the station international prestige but it also united and lifted the spirits of Mexican citizens abroad. However, the station was mandated by the government to serve other institutions and broadcast their bulletins, the speeches of the President and important announcements.

²⁸ AHSEP, Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

²⁹ Ibid.

Radio: A Microphone for the Government

In 1930, as XFX grew in importance, new commercial radio stations also appeared in Mexico City, declaring that spreading the government's cultural propaganda was their first priority and, consequently, posing an even more serious threat to the future of the official station. In the Ministry's quarterly bulletin Ross noted that "one of the greatest difficulties we have encountered...have been the excessively low rates which commercial radio stations charge for advertisements."³⁰ The station juggled between broadcasting news bulletins from various government Ministries and continuing its educational work, leaving Ross and other managers in a difficult position.

By the mid '30s, the government used radio alongside its own cultural project to form a "musical nationalism" designed to incorporate all citizens into a shared national culture.³¹ XFX used music as their principle weapon in their struggle against commercial stations. Since the early 1920s, the station had been noted for its high quality musical performances, and during the next decade they were an important source for classical music in Mexico. When the internationally renowned Mexican mezzo soprano Fanny Anitua returned to Mexico from her tour in Italy in 1927, for instance, she donated three records of Mexican songs to the Ministry of Public Education which were used in the music lessons of the National Conservatory and for the

³⁰ *Boletín de la SEP*, Tomo VII, no. 5 (1928): 176.

³¹ Hayes, *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture, and Nationalism in Mexico, 1920-1950*, 245, 255.

activity of the radio office.³²

Live radio concerts were other ways the station competed with the commercial sector. In 1930, XFX's programming sought to counteract the jazz music being played over commercial stations by offering nationalistic and artistic programs that featured classical and Mexican folkloric music.³³ However, the majority of the music that was broadcast over XFX was classical and chamber music, not the popular music being sung in the villages or rural Mexico. While this style of programming had an audience at home and abroad, the generational gap between the urban populations was growing and the majority of commercial stations in Mexico had abandoned classical music by the early '30s. In fact, commercial radio broadcasting, more in line with the evolution of popular music, new rhythms and recent developments, had a better understanding of the changes in the market.

Music may not have been the best strategy to reach the majority of the population, but through its powerful short wave transmitter, XFX played a key role broadcasting national rituals of the post-revolutionary government. Assisted by engineers and technicians, in 1928 the Ministry of Public Education installed a series of speakers on government buildings throughout Mexico City, such as the National Cathedral's main towers, at the exit of the National Palace, and in the chambers of Congress.³⁴ The purpose was threefold: to offer those who did not own radio receivers the opportunity to hear important events, such as the inaugural speeches of

³² Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Sobre la Universidad y la Educación (IISUE), Fondo D.A., Caja 16, Expediente 395, 33 Fs. Fo. 7147-7179.

³³ *Boletín de la SEP*, Tomo IX, no. 5 (1930): 105-106.

³⁴ *Excélsior*, September 1, 1928.

Presidents, to be a part of the daily political life of the nation, and to turn radio-listening into a civic-patriotic activity taking place in public and symbolically relevant social spaces.

The speakers were used the following year during the government's commemoration of Mexican Independence Day. Nation-wide public holidays, in fact, created opportunities for the State to reach both a local and an international audience. Audiences across Mexico and in the United States took interest in this Independence Day transmission. According to the official report, the 1929 broadcast "took all of the listeners located in different parts of the country or in foreign soil, a temporary glimpse of the joy of the people, which culminated at the moment when the President rung the historic bell and announced the independence of Mexico."³⁵

For Mexican political leaders, the radio was a modern and efficient way to communicate with the nation's dispersed people who had crossed the northern border and were located in the United States. Some, like President Calles, considered XFX the best station in Mexico City in the 1920s and lauded its priority in spreading cultural propaganda within Mexico and abroad. The station's transmissions, he proclaimed, "are heard in North and Central America as well as Cuba, even having received some correspondence from South America."³⁶

Concerts and songs were the primary means by which government stations diffused patriotic sentiments and, after 1930, Presidents took up the microphone to give speeches aimed at unifying the nation. Keeping sight of the overseas population, for example, in the 1930s

³⁵ *Boletín de la SEP*, Tomo VIII, no. 8 (1929): 131.

³⁶ *Presidentes Ante la Nación: Informes, Manifiestos y Documentos de 1821-1966*. Tomo III "El Gral. Plutarco Elías Calles, al abrir las sesiones ordinarias el Congreso, el 1º de septiembre de 1925," p. 703.

President Pascual Ortiz Rubio used the radio on a regular basis. On February 25, 1931 from his residence in the Chapultepec Castle Ortiz Rubio addressed the nation and outlined the main points of his cabinet's plan. "The Government of the Republic hopes to compel all Mexicans," he said, "those residing within and outside of the country, to cooperate in their labor, with their efforts, with their honorable attitude and even while sacrificing their passions, to the wellbeing and development of our *Patria*."³⁷

Radio and the Family

To many Mexican families, the technological advancements of the early twentieth century -electricity, telegraph, radio- created a "revolution in the home."³⁸ The arrival of radio in Mexico brought alterations to the city's landscape and created changes in familial gender dynamics by bringing music and entertainment inside of the house, the space designated for the administration of the wife and mother. As with all new innovations, after radio arrived in the home the public was anxious to see how their life would change.

The majority of Mexico City's population embraced the apparatus; however, some were afraid and others skeptical and cynical about its effects on family life. In 1923, journalist L.G. Varela wrote an article about the novelty of radio in Mexico. He noted "it is no longer the tavern, nor the friend, nor the *cantina*, which keeps a man from his home. Neither the love of his woman or his children has been able to do what the station *El Buen Tono* has. From his work,

³⁷ *El Universal*, February 25, 1931.

³⁸ José Felipe Gálvez Cancino, "Los Felices del Alba, (la primera década de la radiodifusión mexicana)," (Tesis de licenciatura, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, UNAM, 1975), 33.

the man runs home on the nights in which *El Buen Tono* transmits concerts.”³⁹ Varela remarked that since the advent of radio, men no longer needed to make excuses for not wanting to go home or put their responsibilities to the side, but instead could go home and listen to the good quality of commercial station’s CYB’s transmissions.

A look at transmissions by XFX’s radio office reveals that its mission mirrored the attitudes of the state, especially concerning the role of men and women in society. Established in 1924, the radio department was separated into four sectors: educational, cultural, artistic and informative. The largest division was the one headed by the cultural office which was responsible for broadcasting concerts offered by the National Conservatory, remote control conferences from the National University, which relied on telephone lines and a radio transmitter, and classical and popular musical programs.⁴⁰

Through educational broadcasting, however, the SEP created a pattern whereby radio stations targeted individual members of the family, giving them suggestions as to what their place within post-revolutionary society would be. Through programs about child rearing and psychology, the organization of the home, etiquette, health and hygiene, and proper dinner conversation for instance, women were able to learn important post-revolutionary principles. Mothers, in fact, were in charge of teaching, children were to be obedient to their parents, and all members of the family were important citizens of a growing nation. XFX’s transmissions not only directly mirrored the intentions of the government but also served as an outline for commercial stations in the following decades. By the mid-twentieth century, commercial

³⁹ *El Demócrata*, November 30, 1923, p. 12.

⁴⁰ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (725.1)/149.

stations like XEW transmitted programs like, *Marimbas and Maracas*, “at the time that the ‘*muchachas*’ would accompany the ‘*señoras*’ to the San Juan market for the groceries.”⁴¹

Reasserting patriarchal authority in the household while projecting the family hierarchies was in the best interest of the nationalist agenda and values. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, XFX’s programming the station specifically targeted women as important audience members and it offered “gender-based radio programming,” where state-sponsored attitudes concerning proper behavior and roles in society were promoted through special lectures and broadcasts.

During the post-revolutionary decades, the school and the home were the principal agencies for the socialization of the Mexican people. The home, according to policymakers, was the basic social unit; the arena where the ideological formation took place. Through the Ministry of Public Education it had been possible for the government to administer control of schools and education. However, the home was a much more impenetrable terrain. In turn, one of the strategies used to ensure women were being indoctrinated with official government ideas was to educate the women of the urban and rural areas through radio programming.

Reaching women, who spent the majority of their time at home, was a principal objective of XFX during the 1920s and early 1930s. The Ministry believed it was necessary for women to be integrated into society because, along with teachers, she was responsible for educating the new generation of Mexican children. Additionally, the government aspired to spread its cultural project to all people of Mexico, and radio, in the hands of XFX, was a way to reach the Mexican female population scattered throughout the nation and in the U.S. Southwest. As Alan Knight

⁴¹ In this context, *muchachas* refers to maids or servants and *Señoras* to their employers, the women of the household in which they worked.

notes, “radio was considered especially important not only because listeners did not need to be literate but also because it was accessible to rural women.”⁴²

During its first decade on the air, XFX also produced family based radio programming; transmissions where the proper roles of men, women and children were advanced in the form of special programs and lectures. Since 1924, for example, XFX had targeted children by broadcasting stories in the early morning hours before they went to school.⁴³ These hours remained set apart for children’s broadcasting during the following decades, aiding mothers as they made breakfast and began their daily chores.

When XFX reorganized its programming in 1930 it separated its radio audience into four groups: children, housewives and urban and rural workers. The radio office created special programs for each sector with the firm belief that extending a cultural education was the number one priority. Their programming included musical transmissions which were under the cultural section of the programming, but which were of high importance in the socialization of many Mexicans. Next to education, according to the SEP, it was important for radio stations to offer quality artistic talent that would infuse a regard for culture and art. However, merging patriarchal hierarchies with the new nationalist identity, in fact, constituted a priority in XFX’s social mission.⁴⁴ In fact, there was a strong link between domestic life and radio. Advertisements for radio during the early 1920s, for instance, showed how a woman could perform household

⁴² Alan Knight, “Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 74: 3 (Aug, 1994): 395.

⁴³ VEA, November 23, 1934.

⁴⁴ AHSEP, Caja 4, Expediente 9475/9.

chores such as ironing or sewing while listening to the radio with a headphone at the same time.

Radio was a functional tool to individual members of the family. Mexican women, for example, could share the privilege of a life out of doors without ever having to leave their home. In the '20s, commercial radio stations conducted remote control broadcasting from theaters and some even broadcast live concerts in music halls and auditoriums. With live music at home, women were no longer pressed for time or money to attend the theater. At home, they could be entertained all day as radio stations would broadcast concerts from cabarets or theaters in the late evenings, with dramas or conferences in the afternoons, mixed with a potpourri of musical selections throughout the day.

One of the projects born under XFX specifically targeting the Mexican female audience was a broadcast titled "*La Hora del Hogar*" (The Hour of the Home). The first of its kind seen in Mexico, this show offered women advice on how to manage their home, learn about domestic hygiene, daily food prices, fashion and even some world news. To the station, the goal of broadcasting specifically to women went beyond education; it consisted in "contributing in a useful manner, to moralization and good customs, to perfecting family life."⁴⁵ This genre of programming began in 1927 and continued through to the next decade. Immediately, women became avid listeners of programming that was intended to suit their needs. During a report made by the Ministry in 1929, for example, housewives accounted for owning the most radio receivers.⁴⁶ According to historian Ageeth Sluis, in fact, this sector benefitted most from the

⁴⁵ *El Universal*, March 6, 1927, p. 10.

⁴⁶ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (725.1)149.

educational programming of XFX.⁴⁷

The tradition of using radio to advance proper female behavior established by XFX set new trends for commercial radio stations in the following decades. Specifically, through the *Radionovela*, a day-time radio drama, stations promoted the proper female behavior to a wide audience across Mexico. For instance, one of the most popular *Radionovelas* in Mexico City was *Anita de Montemar* which began to air in the spring of 1941. The drama, whose success helped launch a new era in live radio transmissions, featured the day to day activities and challenges of an honorable Mexican woman. To Mexican female audiences, radio magazine *Radiolandia* noted, “*Anita de Montemar* should be an example of a courageous, unselfish, noble, Christian woman.”⁴⁸

La Hora Nacional

The inauguration of XEFO “*Radio Nacional*” (National Radio), the official station operated by the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, (National Revolutionary Party), or PNR, in 1931, brought a decline in the use of XFX’s microphones by government leaders or in national rituals. Initially, the station collaborated with the weekly magazine *El Universal Ilustrado* to broadcast concerts every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday nights at 8:00 p.m.⁴⁹ As the 1930s progressed, and the power of the central government was consolidated, political leaders turned to

⁴⁷ Ageeth Sluis, “Revolution and the Rhetoric of Representation: Gender Construction in Mexican Radio and Cinema, 1920-1940,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Wyoming, 1997), 41.

⁴⁸ *Radiolandia*, June 20, 1942.

⁴⁹ *El Universal Ilustrado*, December 31, 1936.

this station to help them indoctrinate the people of Mexico on the ideologies of the PNR and used the station as a tool in the incorporation of the proletariat as new citizens of Mexico. As Propaganda and Culture Secretary for the PNR Manuel Jasso noted “by installing its radio station the PNR is offering the most effective technique of diffusion to date which is a service to its revolutionary ideology.”⁵⁰ In the coming decades, the party’s platform coincided with the function of the radio station: to extend culture through art, music and literature, to instill solidarity within the people of Mexico, to reach a domestic and international audience and, most importantly, to have daily and continuous contact with the public.

On December 31, 1936 the laws of all the Federal Ministries and Departments were revised and the *Departamento Autónomo de Publicidad y Propaganda* (Autonomous Press and Publicity Department) or DAPP, was created. This new office consolidated all pre-existing communications offices and the control of XFX transitioned from the authority of SCOP, to the Department of the Interior. The department, which was designed to offer a unified offering of government news and publicity both at home and abroad, propelled official radio to export Mexican culture and arts, specifically through the weekly broadcast of *La Hora Nacional*, a one-hour weekly program featuring music, drama, history, and government reports created in 1937 which is still transmitted in Mexico today. By law, every commercial station was mandated to form a special network every Sunday evening whose goal for the entire nation and an overseas listening audience was to be attuned to the message of the state. Journalist Ramón Beteta noted that from the outset the broadcast served two purposes: to entrench relations between Mexicans at home “and so that those who are located abroad will not forget their country.” Thanks to *La*

⁵⁰ Manuel Jasso, Secretario de Propaganda y Cultura del Partido quoted in, Jorge Mejia Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México*, 55-56.

Hora Nacional, “Without a doubt! Our compatriots will cry with excitement knowing we have reached out to them and, despite their distance from the Motherland, love them.”⁵¹

By the late 1930s, it seemed that the government was losing its battle with commercial stations for the Mexican immigrant market in the United States because of class and musical differences within the audience. Then, during the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas, changes were made to the structure of the cabinet, directly affecting mass communications and radio in particular. The government had been behind the establishment of national radio regulations since the 1920s and, after the establishment of the DAPP in 1936, was able to impose a form of programming that served its interests. Over the next decades, through official radio broadcasts like *La Hora Nacional*, they used radio to present a concerted effort of government news and policy both in Mexico and overseas.

Aside from transmitting music, high-quality programs, information and conferences, the DAPP was created with the intention that one government body would coordinate all government propaganda and publicity. At the time, the nation lacked this resource and the DAPP pledged to organize all government information so that its doctrine could be made known to the public. Following the move, the SEP did not cease their broadcasting activities at home or abroad; instead, their office was absorbed by the DAPP which amplified the range of their transmissions in 1937 when it acquired a new and even more powerful station.⁵² Intended to broadcast to the world the social and economic developments of Mexico, this official station was

⁵¹ Ramón Beteta, quoted in Renfro Cole Norris, “A History of *La Hora Nacional*: Government Broadcasting via Privately Owned Radio Stations in Mexico” (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1963), 191-192.

⁵² AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6-(725.1)/149.

designed to reach foreign countries in fulfillment of the statutes established by the Regional Radio Congress of Havana, Cuba in 1938.⁵³

The transmissions of the new DAPP station, whose call letters were XEKA short wave and XEDP long wave, were very similar to those of XFX before the merge: daily news bulletins, agricultural instruction, public health information, statistics and information for the betterment of the general public, useful data from the Treasury Department, and most importantly, music and concerts. Live radio programs sponsored by the DAPP included popular music, chamber and assembly hall concerts, artistic concerts, and a selection of recorded music played over commercial stations. Weekly radio concerts had been part of official radio programming since the early 1930s when the Ministry of Foreign Relations began to transmit a concert every Sunday night through the government's central short wave station in the Chapultepec Castle.⁵⁴

After 1937, the DAPP appropriated the idea and modified the structure of the programs so that their objective included showcasing both Mexico's national and foreign policy which was carried out through *La Hora Nacional*. The goal was to use music to take national and international listeners to the highest artistic and intellectual talent Mexico had to offer. "The radio concerts of DAPP," said the press "will reach the interior of the country as well as the most remote places of the world." The government imparted greater importance to the broadcasts by demanding that all commercial stations in the nation transmit or re-transmit the programs.⁵⁵

⁵³ *La Prensa*, January 31, 1938, p. 5.

⁵⁴ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (725.1)/62.

⁵⁵ To date, not much has been written about "*La Hora Nacional*." For a good overview see, Renfro Cole Norris, "A History of *La Hora Nacional*: Government Broadcasting via Privately

Listening to the programs was, as a newspaper announcement indicated, “The civic duty of every good Mexican,” and programs were intended to strengthen this responsibility.

Keeping in line with the mission of XFX, the new station used music and speeches to contact Mexican immigrants living in the United States in order to promote their unity and offer them some feeling about being Mexican. For instance, in the inaugural broadcast on July 25, 1937, director Agustín Arroyo Ch. made an appeal to Mexicans abroad to remember their homeland. He noted,

It is our duty to make of Mexico an institution-universally strong and morally indestructible. May these words reach also our countrymen abroad with the request that they rededicate themselves to their Motherland: that their souls be strengthened by the memory of it; and that regardless of the place where they are now, that they join with our teachers, soldiers, workers, and all these men who are striving toward the conquest of a better future for the land that saw them at birth.⁵⁶

As it grew, the station continued to include themes which the immigrant population could relate to. In the summer of 1938 the DAPP organized a series of conferences and concerts dedicated to Mexican immigrants in the United States. Titled, “The expropriation of the goods of the petroleum companies that operated in Mexico,” the lectures were intended to inform listeners in the United States about the petroleum nationalization of Mexico under Cárdenas.⁵⁷

The office hoped that the intended audience, which included the English-speaking public and Mexican residents in the United States, in addition to the Mexican and foreign audience all over the world, could learn about the social and economic developments of Mexico during one of the

Owned Radio Stations in Mexico,” (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1963).

⁵⁶ Agustín Arroyo, quoted in Renfro Cole Norris, “A History of *La Hora Nacional*: Government Broadcasting via Privately Owned Radio Stations in Mexico,” 44.

⁵⁷ *La Prensa*, June 30, 1938, p. 5.

most significant moments for post-revolutionary nationalism.

In 1939, the DAPP offices closed and the program was transferred to the Ministry of Interior, *Gobernación*. *La Hora Nacional*, in turn, became part of an office called *Radio Gobernación*. The programming's objective continued to be the same, transmitting useful information about the economic and cultural activities of the nation. What changed was that instead of creating a new government station to distribute the program to the rest of the nation, President Manuel Ávila Camacho asked media mogul Emilio Azcárraga, head of XEW, to produce the program. Thus, the weekly government-sponsored program became under commercial supervision, a classic example of the "cordial relationship" between private and public mass media sector during the twentieth century, as Elizabeth Hayes notes.⁵⁸

Radio Gobernación was responsible for the production of *La Hora Nacional* until 1959. The program continued to appeal to the international audiences and oftentimes dedicated a program to another country, a branch of government or a group of people, or a current nation-wide project or event, such as the census or vaccination campaigns. On September of 1941, for instance, the program was dedicated especially to *México de Afuera* (Mexico outside of Mexico). That night, the broadcast featured the first performance by the Mexican National Marine Band over the radio.⁵⁹

The long-term success of *La Hora Nacional* in promoting national unity is debated. In 1938, concerning the effectiveness of the DAPP, Emilio Azcárraga said, "The pueblo...will not

⁵⁸ Hayes, *Radio Nation*, 78-79.

⁵⁹ Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Presidentes, Fondo Manuel Ávila Camacho (Hereafter AGN, MAC), Expediente 162/2.

become educated through radio, because they regard radio only as entertainment.”⁶⁰ Yet, by 1945, over 60 stations throughout Mexico linked with the XEDP and the station became one of the most trusted mouthpieces of the government. Some argue, however, that due to the combination of official bulletins and classical and orchestra music, the transmissions appealed only to the upper classes with government ties. Many listeners throughout Mexico would either shut off their receivers or turn them to another station that was not following the command of the government. Yet, artistically, the programming was superior then most commercial stations at the time because its government sponsorship allowed the directors to acquire noteworthy artistic directors and special musical guests including acclaimed director Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, composer Alfonso Esparza Oteo, and singers Pedro Vargas, Chela Campos and Lucha Reyes.

As the Cárdenas era came to an end by 1940, the direction of Mexico shifted to the leadership of his successor, Manuel Ávila Camacho. The Camacho administration is noted for its turn to the “right,” or towards a more conservative program; however, in general, the 1940s was also an era when Mexico pursued a path of industrialization. The nation benefitted from an economic boom brought about after joining the Allied forces in the Second World War, which resulted in vast economic prosperity. Mass communications, a useful tool during war, was used to rally the nation and remained under strict control of the government. Thus, during the 1940s, the radio industry answered more directly to the demands of the government.

Patriotism was growing across the country during this time, a trend that desired to turn everything that was art, culture and ideas into clearly “Mexican” objects. While the growing film industry glorified Mexico’s rural countryside and the *patria chica*, radio was called upon to

⁶⁰ *La Prensa*, May 1, 1938, p. 8.

diffuse the songs that accompanied, and sometimes preceded, the pictures on the screen. At the same time, the industry was forced to edit the content of their programming and music. The rapid turn to adopt a moral high ground in the national radio industry was so severe, for instance, that in 1942 the Ministry of Communications and Public Works prohibited XEW from transmitting a program that included the blowing of kisses over the air in one of their live radio programs in order to “follow behavior, rectitude and morality norms.”⁶¹

Ensuring that radio stations follow proper morals was not just a government concern. Individuals and families throughout Mexico were in tune with the changes taking places within mass media and, at times, took on the role of inspectors. Some, like Narciso Bassols, voiced their opinions on the way the government was using its power within the radio industry. In early December of 1942, the government had shut down the live broadcast of a meeting organized by the *Sindicato Industrial de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares* over official station XEFO. Bassols, who held an office in the station, disputed the actions to President Camacho. “Recently, you expressed that your government will respect, on a broad scale, freedom of expression,” he wrote, “We cannot believe that the President of the Republic is in agreement that a rally in protest of the high cost of living, is a rally against the government.”⁶²

Another sector of the listening audience did, in fact, see eye to eye with the need to adopt rigorous guidelines over the airwaves. In the fall of 1942, Mexico City residents Juan Villegas and María Paz de Ramírez sent a letter to Camacho concerning a radio broadcast they had heard the night of August 23 over XEW. The drama told the story of a Mexican woman who took

⁶¹ *Radiolandia*, June 20, 1942, p. 11.

⁶² AGN, MAC, Expediente 710.1/101.86.

revenge on her alcoholic husband by having an affair with another man. When she confessed what had transpired, he did not believe her. Angry, she ran to her in-laws for help, who advised her to deny the incident, return home and ask forgiveness from her husband. After he forgave her for “lying,” the drama ended. Through the airwaves, Villegas and Paz de Ramírez wrote, the drama had entered their homes “abusing the respect we had placed on XEW.” In addition, because the play regarded the “morality of Mexican society in general” they demanded that the President intervene and punish the station for the loose morals promoted in the broadcast.⁶³

Other radio listeners across Mexico shared the opinion that radio programming needed to set a good, and morally upright, example to Mexican families. In an article for the magazine *Radiolandia*, Eduardo Correa Jr. commented that “as the best friend of the home...the radio needs to be a model of decency and neatness.”⁶⁴ The desire to intervene on this matter was so great that in 1943 a “Mexican League of Decency” was established in Mexico City which dedicated itself to printing a weekly magazine in which they gave reviews on entertainment like the cinema and live shows like radio and theater productions throughout the city. The League took on the task of evaluating whether or not these events “tend to the decency and neatness of language” and considered themselves responsible for correcting “many of the vices that exist today” in the industry.⁶⁵

Conclusion

⁶³ AGN, MAC, Caja 555, Expediente 512.32/43.

⁶⁴ *Radiolandia*, August 10, 1942.

⁶⁵ *Radiolandia*, June 25, 1943.

During the post-revolutionary era, the Mexican government benefitted from the international reach of new technology. Radio broadcasting, in particular, played an influential role and was adopted as a viable tool used to implement the cultural project. Since the mid 1920s, XFX helped the government form a “national space” by broadcasting government rituals, conferences, music, etc. across great distances. More importantly, the station also brought together culture, art and music and set a blueprint for Mexican commercial radio programming by seeking the foreign audience and relying on gender-specific transmissions. With advanced communications methods like radio, the government also took the project across Mexico and into the United States where Mexican immigrants were making their homes during the first half of the twentieth century.

But by the mid-1930s, the weakness in the official radio system was evident. The official sector could not compete with commercial radio, because, even though government-owned stations accounted for 15% of all total stations in 1937, they did not operate as a network, their programming was not uniform and their coverage did not reach a wide segment of the population as commercial stations did. Consequently, as Renfro Cole Norris explains, “when the federal government wished to reach the general public on a national scale, it turned to the stations with the larger audience- the commercial stations.”⁶⁶ Official radio stations in Mexico City aimed for an audience of listeners in the United States and used government legislation, censorship and gender-specific programming to fight for this audience; in northern Mexico, entrepreneurs established stations along the border during the 1930s and 1940s to carry out the same objective.

⁶⁶ Renfro Cole Norris, “A History of *La Hora Nacional*,” 26-27.

Chapter III

Creating Listeners though the Air: Mexican Border Radio Entrepreneurs and their Overseas Audience, 1930-1950

“Today, through the radio my voice can reach all the people in the United States from the Embassy office. One hundred years ago communication between the North American and the Mexican capital took more than one month. Today the two countries are literally face to face.”

-U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Dwight W. Morrow, 1930.¹

During the first half of the twentieth century, radio stations in Mexico relied on a faithful listening audience across the United States. In the 1930s and 1940s, devout listeners from California, Arizona, Texas, New York and New Jersey stayed awake late at night or rose in the early morning when signals could be easily intercepted and tuned in to Mexican radio stations. In San Antonio, this audience included Mexican immigrants like Mr. Martinez who was determined to hear Mexican music and “used to get up about three o’clock in the morning and make some coffee, smoke cigarettes and listen to...the radio.”²

By the 1930s, Mexican stations along the U.S.-Mexico border, like XEP of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, had established “a permanent spiritual connection with the Mexicans who either live or are traveling through the U.S. South” and worked with the Mexican government to carry out their marketing plans, which included reaching the Mexican immigrant and U.S. born

¹ *La Prensa*, September 27, 1930, p. 3, 10.

² Chris Strachwitz, and James Nicolopoulos, *Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), 76-78.

population in the United States.³ Archival records from the *Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas* (the Ministry of Communications and Public Works), or SCOP, the government institution responsible for mass communications operations, reveal the intent and motivation entrepreneurs had in building radio stations along the Mexican border with the United States. Correspondence between SCOP offices and XEXP of Matamoros, Tamaulipas, for example, indicates the need some stations had to be “heard primarily *allende el Bravo* [on the other side of the Rio Grande], as there is a great number of Mexicans who are anxious to hear the voice of their *Patria* [Motherland], but because of the distance and interference from the American stations, cannot find it.”⁴

This chapter describes the establishment of radio stations in the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León and the Baja California territories by border radio entrepreneurs during the 1930s and 1940s. First, it shows how mass media legislation helped their stations by protecting them from foreign influence and allowing them to advertise in both Spanish and English and, second, it explains how owners prospered because their stations grew at the same time that the Northwestern and Northeastern regions of Mexico were being integrated into the national economy. In the 1930s and 1940s border radio station owners were successful entrepreneurs by creating business plans and strategies that catered to the Mexican population living in the United States.

The Mexican radio industry expanded in the late 1920s and early 1930s thanks to the

³ *Radiolandia*, April 22, 1943.

⁴ Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo: Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (hereafter AGN, SCOP) Expediente 22/131.6 (721.1)/14.

influence of a number of people in the private sector including engineers, inventors, wealthy entrepreneurs and businessmen. These men were members of the generation who came of age during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and whose lives were transformed by the arrival of electricity, modern equipment and technology such as the telegraph, telephone, automobiles, airplanes and, of course, radio. They were also part of a growing entrepreneurial class in Mexico, one which, some argue, had an apolitical stance.⁵ In radio broadcasting, these businessmen were not part of the intellectual class of Mexico; instead, they took interest in the new industry out of curiosity or because of the financial profits that could be made through radio.

These men were entrepreneurs like Fernando Parra Briseño, who requested in 1935 that SCOP assign him one of the unoccupied frequency channels in Mexico so that he could build a radio station in Tijuana to “be heard among the population in Southern California, where millions of Mexicans exist.”⁶ By the 1940s this group of entrepreneurs also included women like Rosa de Múzquiz, who desired to build a 750 watt commercial radio station in the city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas during the 1930s. Múzquiz pleaded with the government in Mexico City that her station be “declared ‘Regional Station,’ since it intends to cover the banks of the

⁵ There were some businessmen, who did not have direct political affiliation, and triumphed in the privately funded cultural industries. This is a trend that goes back to the mid-1920s and 1930, when, as radio was being introduced in Mexico, a number of radio stations appeared alongside newspapers like *El Herald de México*, *El Universal* and *Excélsior*. See, Ángel Miquel, “Dos efímeras empresas de los años veinte: el periódico *El Mundo* y su estación de radio.” in María del Carmen Collado, ed., *Miradas recurrentes I. La ciudad de México en los siglos XIX y XX*. (México, DF: Instituto Mora, 2004), 468.

⁶ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6(722)/23.2.

Río Bravo covering approximately 100 kilometers, with day and night services.”⁷ As they established their stations, Briseño and other entrepreneurs invested in radio by purchasing equipment from the United States, transporting it to Mexico and selling “air time” to businesses in the United States, many of which were owned by Mexican immigrants or U.S. born Mexicans.

In the following decades, radio broadcasting development was dictated by the close relationship between Mexican entrepreneurs, transnational capital and the Mexican state’s efforts to regulate communications and promote economic development. Both the government and border radio entrepreneurs took into consideration the impact that the estimated one million citizens who migrated to the United States during the first three decades of the twentieth century had upon the nation’s economic, political and cultural climate.⁸ Mexican entrepreneurs, however, stand at the center of this process, dictating the path radio needed to proceed, securing foreign finance and technology to flow into Mexico and ensuring that the government did not underwrite their authority.⁹

Radio Broadcasting to the United States

Radio broadcasts from Mexico to the United States after the late 1920s were

⁷ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (721.1)/12.

⁸ The literature on the migration of Mexicans to the United States is extensive. For a look at the Chicano Studies perspective on the factors contributing to this exodus see, Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

⁹ John Sinclair, “Dependent development and broadcasting: ‘the Mexican formula,’” *Media, Culture and Society* Vol. 8 (1986): 99.

separated into three categories: trans-border programming, transnational broadcasts and international broadcasts. Trans-border programming was the practice of carrying out radio broadcasts especially for Mexican audiences by radio stations along or close to the U.S.-Mexico border, whereas transnational broadcasts were those originating in Mexico from high-powered or short-wave radio stations, thus having enough power to be heard in the United States. Transnational broadcasts were commonplace until the 1940s when international legislation limited the act of sending signals across international borders by the use of high-powered stations. International broadcasts, finally, were less frequent and usually accompanied an important public or political event, such as “Pan-American Day,” on April 14, 1931 when Mexico celebrated the establishment of the Pan-American Union and coordinated with the governments of the United States and other countries in the Caribbean to re-transmit a program with a special radio messages by the Mexican President, Pascual Ortiz Rubio.¹⁰

By the mid 1930s, radio transmissions from Mexico to the United States also came from so called “border blasters,” a term popularized by Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford.¹¹ “Border Radio,” is a blanket term used to describe powerful and influential U.S. radio stations set up in Northern Mexico between the 1930s and the 1950s. These stations disregarded the restrictions set in place by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), attained permission and licensing from the Mexican government, and established single-station networks whose

¹⁰ *Excelsior*, April 15, 1931.

¹¹ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio: Quacks, yodelers, pitchmen, psychics, and other amazing broadcasters of the American airwaves* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1987).

extraordinary power allowed their programs to be heard all over the United States.¹²

Border Entrepreneurs and the Law

Among the long list of changes to the political and social structure of Mexico, the Mexican Revolution also produced a stable entrepreneurial class. In the radio industry, men like Carlos Kennedy, who was “fanatic for everything related to radio,” combined their enthusiasm with basic capitalist principles and believed that private enterprise was the best way to achieve economic success.¹³ Along the U.S.-Mexico border, this progress came about thanks to laws created by the Mexican government allowing radio station owners to fulfill the needs of Mexican audiences in the United States. An analysis of mass media legislation during the 1930 reveals a look at the way border radio entrepreneurs worked with the government to advance their own marketing structures, which included the needs and interests of Mexicans living abroad. Legislation passed in 1926, 1931, 1933 and 1936, in particular, gave entrepreneurs the chance to build stations, and assisted in the expansion of commercial radio during the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1926, before the first mass media law was established in Mexico, the President Alvaro Obregón, and the Minister of Communications and Public Works, signed a contract establishing the parameters of radio broadcasting. In this agreement, it was

¹² For more on the topic of “Border Radio” see, Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio*, José Luis Ortiz Garza, *Una radio entre dos reinos: la increíble historia de la radiodifusora mexicana más potente del mundo de los años 30* (Mexico: DF: Javier Vergara, 1997); Roberto Avant-Mier, “Heard it on the X: border radio as public discourse and the Latino legacy in popular music” in Michael C. Keith, ed., *Radio Cultures: the Sound Medium in American Life* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 47-64.

¹³ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6(722)/5

mentioned that in order to acquire a permit for a new or existing station the applicant needed to prove to be Mexican born or a naturalized citizen, noting that “without this requirement a permit will not be granted.”¹⁴ Thus, the intent of the government was to build a national industry run by Mexican citizens, using Mexican equipment and without foreign influence.

In Mexico City, where a large portion of the radio stations were located, this stipulation was less problematic; however, along the U.S.-Mexico border foreigners, at time, were stuck in frustrating and disadvantageous positions. For instance, in 1932, Norm Baker, a United States entrepreneur from Iowa, invested a quarter of a million dollars building a 150,000 watt radio station in the border town of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. The following year, on August 14, 1933, Baker wrote a letter to the Minister of Communications and Public Works in Mexico City requesting permission to take a telephone wire from his station, XENT, across the U.S.-Mexico border and transmit radio programs from a studio in Laredo, Texas, less than two miles away.

“Remote control” broadcasts, as this form of transmissions were called, had been taking place in Mexico since 1923 but in accordance with a 1931 law, remote control transmissions could not take place in foreign soil. Nevertheless, Baker argued that he should be allowed to take the cable across the border because his station would provide for the Mexican government a valuable line of communication that would ultimately promote tourism to Mexico. Additionally, Baker confessed that there were already stations in the border cities of Villa Acuña and Piedras Negras that were operating by

¹⁴ Ibid.

remote control from studios in the United States. There was even “a small station” in Nuevo Laredo, he admitted, that had been operating from a hotel in Laredo, Texas.¹⁵

Baker’s insistence, both to broadcast in the United States and his fervent desire to cooperate with the Mexican government, placed him within a small group of U.S. businessmen in Mexico during the twentieth century. Since 1931, when his own radio station in Muscatine, Iowa was banned by the FCC, Baker was determined to defy the U.S. government and build the most powerful and popular commercial station in North America. On several occasions he requested to increase the power of his station to 750,000 watts in order to surpass all existing stations in the continent. Yet unlike other “border blasters,” he extended his services to Mexico by offering free air time to the Ministries of Education and Foreign Relations and even considered himself a close friend of Mexican President Plutarco Elías Calles, whom he had met in 1926.

Nevertheless, the law passed by the Mexican government and Baker’s narrow vision of “border radio,” one that considered using transmissions only to contact English-language listeners, prevented him from carrying out his plan. To him, stations located along the U.S.-Mexico border would be effective only if they offered ten to fifteen minute English or Spanish-language programs, not translated transmissions. Baker, however, failed to consider the one million Mexicans who migrated to the United States during the first three decades of the twentieth century, most of whom had eager ears for national Mexican music. His myopia thus failed to take into account the cultural and transnational dimension of radio broadcasting.

¹⁵ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (721.1)/17.

By 1931, the government signed the *Ley de Vías Generales de Comunicación*, a mass media legislation clearly defining the parameters of all mass communications operations in Mexico. Even though radio stations in Nuevo Laredo or Tijuana were far away from the capital city, SCOP ensured stations were monitored once a year by government assessors. In their reports, SCOP inspectors wrote information concerning the daily programming and extra-curricular activity of radio stations. For instance, in October 1931 the assessor of station XER of Villa Acuna, Coahuila wrote: “I have carefully observed the services of said station...all of their English announcements are first read in Spanish, and in all of their concerts they play national music.”¹⁶ This effective monitoring can be interpreted either as a success in the power of the state to control its Ministries or in the concern it had over the information that was coming in and out of the country through the ether.

Commercial radio was not a profitable business until the late 1930s thanks to advertising, which allowed border radio entrepreneurs the ability to reach the Spanish-speaking foreign audience by selling air time to U.S. advertising companies. In a law passed in 1933, the government made room for bilingual advertising agencies in all commercial radio operations. Article 26 of the legislation deemed that transmissions had to be in Spanish. According to the decree “the official language is Spanish, all commercial oral transmissions need to use it...When this type of transmissions desire to be made in a language other than Spanish, authorization is needed from the Ministry.” However, the law noted that if the broadcasts were “solely commercial announcements” they were allowed to be translated, only if the English message

¹⁶ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 525/16 Datos sobre la estación de Villa Acuna, Coah. Octubre 1931. Sin nombre.

followed the Spanish one.¹⁷ Three years later, when the regulation was amended, it stated that stations could only advertise in foreign languages for 50% of their total daily air time.¹⁸

The consumers across the United States border were distinctly Mexican, and Mexican entrepreneurs in border stations patronized businesses in the United States headed by fellow Mexican citizens or second-generation U.S. born Mexicans. Station XEAW of Reynosa, Tamaulipas, for instance, broadcast a program under the direction of Arnaldo Ramirez, a McAllen native who formed an ad agency in the beginning of World War II with his boss at a local furniture store. Once a day during the 1930s, Ramirez crossed the Texas border to host his program in the Reynosa studios. The program gained wide popularity and was on air for four hours a day in the late 1930s; allowing the owners of XEAW to amass large profit by leasing blocks of air time.¹⁹

Advertising for businesses in the United States allowed commercial radio stations to make considerable profits. At times, they also led to competition between station owners and protests by the local community along the border. In 1935, for instance, Leopoldo Allende, a radio announcer from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, set out to launch a new station in the city that would play records and broadcast live radio programs from local cabarets. The Spanish-language press in San Antonio, Texas, which covered news and events along the border, noted that it was not necessary for Ciudad Juárez to have a

¹⁷ *Diario Oficial*, 8 de Julio 1933. “Ley de Impuestos a las estaciones radiodifusoras.”

¹⁸ *Diario Oficial*, 30 de diciembre 1936. “Reglamento de las estaciones radioeléctricas comerciales, culturales y de aficionados.”

¹⁹ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio*, 219.

third radio station and criticized radio owners and businessmen, claiming that “they are concerned with getting ahead whichever way possible as long as they are making money through advertising.”²⁰ In response, residents of the border city made plans to address the Ministry of Communications and Public Works headquarters in Mexico City, asking that they assign the same frequency to all local stations so that they would have to take turns in their transmissions, as opposed to taking up all the room on the radio spectrum.

Many times, U.S. born Mexican business owners took advantage of being able to broadcast in both English and Spanish by paying only for Spanish-language air time. In 1944 in a trimester report for XEFV of Ciudad Juárez, for example, only one of the twelve South Texas businesses including *Franklin’s Tienda de Ropa, Las Norteñas Abarrotes, Teatro Colon*, Myrtle Auto Wrecking, Co., Bustamante Garage, La Prisiense, Jesús Herrera Garage, Bob’s Shop for Man, Academia Munoz, Layva’s Garage, Fruteria Helguera and Clark’s Tienda de Ropa, paid for Spanish and English-language advertisements. The other stations averaged between ten to fifteen minutes of air time per day.²¹

By the late 1930s, as commercial radio was becoming more profitable, stations across the Northeast and Northwest were required to list all of the advertisements from foreign businesses in their quarterly reports. Advertisements were crucial to the success of stations and allowed some of them to broadcast almost 24 hours a day. By 1943, for example, one station boasted that for four consecutive years it had been transmitting

²⁰ *La Prensa*, January 18, 1935, p. 5.

²¹ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (721.4)/1.

sixteen hours a day with paid advertisements.²² SCOP files in Mexico City, furthermore, contain evidence indicating business ads from cities across the United States. For instance, Rosario Beach station XERB received advertising monies from Mercury Insurance Company of San Antonio, Everlasting Baby Shoes Co. of Topeka, Camera Man and American Schools of Chicago, Nacor State Life Building of Indianapolis, and The American Poultry Journal of New York City, among others.²³ The laws passed favored Mexican entrepreneurs like Carlos de la Sierra, owner of a Tijuana station who noted that “the only way to exist as a commercial station is through Los Angeles, Cal. With more than one million inhabitants this city is practically the focal point of all business in the western region of the United States...in order for a station to survive, it is essential that it obtain advertisements from that city.”²⁴

Hence, in the 1930s, while Baker and other U.S. entrepreneurs set their sights on using high-powered radio stations in Mexico to circumvent U.S. law, Mexican border radio owners prospered by working with the Mexican mass media legislation which demanded that they play Mexican national music, coveted by their audience of Mexican immigrants in the United States and also by allowing them to sell advertisements to U.S. businesses. The laws passed during the 1930s, then, allowed border stations to not only to sell music and advertising, but also to create consumers.

²² *Radiolandia*, March 20, 1943, p. 9.

²³ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6(722)/8.

²⁴ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6(722)/22.

Building Northern Mexico

With the law on their side, Mexican radio entrepreneurs set about building stations along the border during the 1930s and 1940s. The most profound growth of the northern border was the direct result of the attention given to the area by post-revolutionary administrations, in particular by President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). The border, a unique place of exchange, distribution, adjacency and confluence, expanded during this time and created a distinct cultural space. By transmitting live or recorded music along with commercials for Mexican ethnic businesses from California to Chicago, border radio stations provided entertainment based on *norteño* music, nationalist culture and immigrant experiences. In the 1930s and 1940s these Mexican stations, in fact, introduced the U.S. born Mexican generation to Tejana singers like Lydia Mendoza and Mexican immigrant composers and radio announcers like Pedro J. González.

Simultaneously, the border also put a strain on the operations of border radio stations and improvisation became common in radio station programming during the 1930s and 1940s. At the time, limited distribution of U.S. labels in Latin America led some station managers to cross the border, purchase Spanish-language records by Vocalion, Blue Bird, RCA or other labels, return to their studios in Mexico, and play them on the air. Oftentimes, during a live broadcast, radio announcers of stations like XENT of Villa Acuña, Coahuila, would ask “Lydia Mendoza, which song are you going to sing?” and then proceed to play a record by the legendary Mexican folk singer.²⁵

The growth of border radio stations like XENT also coincided with the integration of the Northwest and the Northeast into the national economy, a second process in the trajectory of

²⁵ Chris Strachwitz and James Nicolopoulos, *Lydia Mendoza*, 129-131.

radio development in Mexico that aided the marketing plans of border radio entrepreneurs.

During the Mexican Revolution, industrial, economic and agricultural labor prospered in the U.S. Southwest, propelling migration from central and northern Mexico. The Southwest was an attractive region to Mexican agricultural workers who were lured to cross the border by higher wages, greater opportunities to prosper and, in some instances, to escape the havoc brought on by violence and bloodshed of the political and religious events affecting the nation.

In the United States, the infrastructure, economy and population of states like California, Arizona and Texas expanded rapidly during the 1920s thanks to cheap labor and an unlimited supply of workers. But by the end of the decade, the world-wide economic crisis directed the federal government to restrict the entry of groups of foreigners, which included Mexicans. In turn, many who were either prohibited from crossing the border or failed to do so remained in the region, separating the two nations and immediately straining the limited natural resources-mostly water-and social services.

In Northern Mexico, economic growth was stimulated by agricultural, mining and railroad construction which transformed unpopulated territories into important commercial sites by the mid-nineteenth century. However, Northern Mexico has distinct regional characteristics and cannot be conceived as one area, given that in the West, the region was desolate and home to only a handful of urban centers by the 1920s, while in the Central North and the Northeast, cities in the states of Chihuahua, Tamaulipas and Nuevo León were established in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁶

²⁶ See, Thomas Benjamin and William McNellie, eds., *Other Mexicos: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1876-1911* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984) and Andrew Grant Wood, ed. *On the Border: Society and Culture Between the United States and Mexico*

The rate of development in this area was slow, however, and by the mid-nineteenth century there was a stark visible difference between the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico: the former was integrated into the national economy as an up and coming region and the latter scarcely connected to the rest of the nation. This, scholars argue, forced the local population to adopt the ways of life, commerce and consumption practices of the United States.²⁷

Attempts by the Mexican government to spur growth along the border directly affected the growth of the radio industry, mostly clearly seen in the convergence between the government's cultural educational programs and radio. Radio broadcasting, next to aviation and the telephone, were symbols of the potential in Mexico's technological and educational fields. In 1931, the ruling political party in Mexico, the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (National Revolutionary Party), or PNR, implemented a program including agrarian reform, nationalism programs, anticlericalism and socialist education. With the help of radio, the project to jumpstart the educational system yielded favorable results. This was, according to Alan Knight, an "education that would impart scientific knowledge, practical skills, class consciousness, and international solidarity."²⁸

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, in the United States the

(Landham: Roman and Littlefield, 2003).

²⁷ Eliseo Mendoza Berrueto, "Historia de los programas federales para el desarrollo económico de la frontera norte" in Ojeda, Mario, ed., *Administración del desarrollo de la frontera norte* (México, DF: El Colegio de México, 1982), 39-84.

²⁸ Alan Knight, "Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 74: 3 (Aug, 1994): 419.

combining forces of repatriation and migration resulted in an increase in the number of inhabitants along the U.S.-Mexico border. The arrival of families to the area put a strain on existing resources ranging from public services to schools. According to statistics for the 1935 school year, for example, more than 2,000 children, from six to twelve years of age, were unable to enroll in public schools in the state of Chihuahua.

Schools were important for the post-revolutionary cultural project because primary education was a cornerstone of the government's political and cultural mission. In response, the government, through the Ministry of Public Education, or SEP, sponsored a number of education projects in the northern states. As in previous decades, they used education to advance nationalism and hoped that through proper schooling, parents would avoid migrating to the United States and hold fast to their national heritage and culture. The collaboration between the State and the SEP led teachers like the regional director of Chihuahua to request for the SEP to construct "four new modern schools in order to lift the regional and cultural prestige of this region, which only had cantinas and cabarets to show tourists until a short while ago."²⁹

To the government, building schools in the northern territories served two purposes: educate the population and deter families from crossing the border and enroll their children in schools in the United States. Political leaders, who stood behind the SEP's projects, joined the cause in building schools to stop emigration into the United States. In his annual address to Congress on September 1, 1931, President Pascual Ortiz Rubio declared that "six new secondary schools were created, one in the southern

²⁹ *La Prensa*, August 5, 1935, p. 2.

territory of Baja California and the others in the principal cities in the north of the country. With this measure we hope to decrease the emigration of young men and women who previously had to end their studies or continue them in nearby populations, in the United States.”³⁰

During the 1920s, radio corresponded with the post-revolutionary government’s project because it signified that technological modernity had arrived in Mexico. Radio, additionally, also converged with education because it came from science, and scientific thought was a fundamental part of socialist education. Knight notes “Socialist education- whose very objective was the inculcation of a rational and exact concept of the universe and social life- involved talks expounding, for example, the ‘scientific explanation of miracles’ or the scientific basis of natural phenomena.”³¹ And while radio stations did not directly contribute to the construction of new schools, they disseminated important information about education and were influential in the development of the region.

Radio along the Northeastern Border

Following the Revolution, the government sponsored an irrigation system which facilitated agricultural development in the areas below the Rio Grande. Consequently, from the late 1930s through the 1960s the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León and Coahuila reaped the benefits of a so-called “cotton boom.” Water, a principal factor in determining the location of economic activities, was an integral component of this

³⁰ *Presidentes Ante la Nación: Informes, Manifiestos y Documentos de 1821-1966*. Tomo III. “El. Ing. Pascual Ortiz Rubio, al abrir las sesiones ordinarias el Congreso, el 1º de septiembre de 1931,” p. 1077.

³¹ Alan Knight, “Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940,” 419.

expansion. Under Cárdenas, the government offered *ejido* land that was *enmontada* (thickly covered), and turned over to be cultivated for cotton and other crops.

Large scale redistribution affected the states of Coahuila, Sonora and the Baja California territory and in 1935, over 181,000 people worked in communal agriculture throughout northern Mexico. Two years later, the Cárdenas administration distributed almost 25,000 hectares of land to peasant families.³² Government investment in the area led directly to migration from the interior of the country to the state of Tamaulipas where men worked as day laborers, seasonal agricultural workers, or to tried to land a contract as *Braceros* in the pre and post-World War II era.³³

A substantial number of commercial stations appeared during the '30s and '40s along the Northeastern half of the U.S.-Mexico border. Since the nineteenth century, Northeast Mexico included markets oriented towards consumers in the United States in large cities in the states of Chihuahua and Nuevo León, such as Ciudad Juárez and Monterrey. In the 1930s, after the onset of new communications technology such as commercial radio, tourists, technicians, and entertainers settled in the towns along the Rio Grande and brought permanent changes to the local economies. The quick rate at which mass communication technology grew in cities like Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, for instance, allowed the state to be the driving force behind commercial activity and a regional nucleus in the radio industry by the 1940s.

³² David E. Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century: A History of Economic and Social Transformation* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 80-81.

³³ Francisco Ramos Aguirre, *Los Alegres de Terán Vida y Canciones* (México, DF: Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes, 2003), 67.

The arrival of stations in the Northeast was also on par with the advent of commercial radio stations nation-wide. In 1931, the same year that Mexico City's legendary station, XEW, "*La Voz de América Latina desde México*," (The Voice of Latin America from Mexico) was founded, two stations, XET of Monterrey and XEJ of Ciudad Juárez, also went on the air for the first time. These two states, Nuevo León and Chihuahua, were also home to pioneers in Mexican radio broadcasting.

Chihuahua was home to one of the first stations to extend its transmissions across the Mexican border with the United States. After their inaugural transmission the night of December 14, 1923, station XICE, owned and operated by the state government broadcast concerts, instructive lectures, conferences and bilingual news.³⁴ The station was permitted to air the broadcasts in Spanish and in English because at the time the Mexican government had not enacted mass media legislation concerning the parameters and use of commercial radio.

Unknowingly, the state of Chihuahua spearheaded a practice that would continue until the end of the century. In fact, oftentimes employers sought bilingual broadcasters when they realized these men and women had an easier time pronouncing English-language ads over the air during commercial breaks. Jesus Soltero Lozoya, an announcer known as *El Gallito Madrugador* (The Early Rooster), for instance, worked in station XELO of Chihuahua during the 1940s and confessed he had gotten his job because he was bilingual. Lozoya learned to speak English in the early 1920s when he moved to Los Angeles with his family to work in the agricultural fields. By 1927 his family returned to

³⁴ *El Universal*, December 13, 1923.

Chihuahua, but he continued to be influenced by U.S. culture, especially sports. After his dream of becoming a professional baseball player in the United States was shattered by an injury, he approached the owner of XELO and asked for a job as a sports broadcaster in the station. The owner willingly accepted the proposition and the career of *El Gallito Madrugador*, one of Chihuahua's legendary sports announcers, was born.

Dozens of other bilingual broadcasters like Lozoya contributed to the prosperity of border stations in the first half of the twentieth century. Not only did they have an easier time pronouncing names, calling plays or reading commercials, but they established a relationship with Mexicans who had lived in the United States since the early decades of the twentieth century by incorporating slangs and popular culture references their audiences could relate to. Lozoya was proud that XELO was “the teacher of the air for thousands of compatriots living in the United States” who maintained unified thanks to Spanish language transmissions and Mexican music aside from offering a regional multi-lingual programming.³⁵ Since the early 1920s, the radio industry counted on other regional nuclei other than Mexico City such as the North and the South, each of which had a peculiar relation with the political center (i.e. Mexico City). Thus, depending on their location, as Fernández Christlieb contends, radio businessmen and broadcasters used strategic language in their programming.³⁶

Radio entrepreneurs along the border coveted Mexican audiences on both sides of

³⁵ Marcos Aldana Aguirre, *El gallito madrugador: la vida de Jesús Soltero Lozoya* (México: Ciudad Juárez, 2001), 95.

³⁶ Fátima Fernández Christlieb, *La Radio Mexicana: Centro Y Regiones* (México, DF: J. Pablos Editor, 1991), 13, 19.

the U.S.-Mexico border. On some occasions, stations in Mexico fought with English-language stations in the United States over the Spanish-speaking Mexican audience. In the 1930s, station XEJ of Ciudad Juárez, battled with two stations in El Paso over control of the airwaves spanning across the two neighboring cities. In the fall of 1930 the stations on the U.S. side of the border claimed they had lost a large number of their Spanish and English-language audience due to the “Mexican characteristics” of XEJ’s programs. This allegation, which was followed by a threat, led the manager of the Ciudad Juárez station to plead with the Minister of SCOP in Mexico City to intervene on his behalf so that he could continue to broadcast to the Mexican population in Texas.³⁷ In the following decades, similar series of events took place in other locations across the region where the political border, or the Rio Grande, stood between a U.S. and a Mexican city.

Tamaulipas was another Northeastern state where commercial stations flourished in noteworthy numbers. As in Chihuahua, impresarios in Tamaulipas launched stations with the intention of having markets in Mexico and across the U.S.-Mexico border. Radio stations, at times, had established a relationship with Mexican immigrant communities in the United States. During the 1940s, for example, business owners in Pearsall, Texas, an agricultural community one hundred miles north of Nuevo Laredo in the South Texas Valley, sponsored a live radio program on Friday nights over station XEDF of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. “The Radio Hour of Pearsall, Texas,” as it was called, featured performances by piano and guitar players, notable singers, *Ranchera* trios

³⁷ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 525/21.

and touring groups from Mexico City like *Los Tres Vaqueros* (The Three Cowboys), who offered a live concert during the inaugural show in the spring of 1939.³⁸

Music is the one of the principal features of radio programming, and, after advertising, was one of the strategies used by border radio entrepreneurs to lure an audience. Nationalism, by means of popular and traditional music and songs, became an important feature of all radio broadcasting during the '30s and the northern stations did their part in guaranteeing that Mexican citizens, no matter their location, would not be without Mexican music.³⁹ The *boleros* and *canciones rancheras* of the 1930s were implemented in the programming because they appealed to first-generation Mexican immigrants who were familiar with these sounds and relished the opportunity to tune in their radios and hear familiar songs from their childhood or past.⁴⁰

Implementing music generated favorable results and Mexicans in both countries displayed enthusiasm for music. For example, in September of 1935, station XEFE hosted a singing contest which was included in the Independence Day festivities of the city. In the stipulations for the event, the station noted that the prize money, \$50 in cash, was to be given to the contestant who sang the best traditional Mexican song, and that contestants could be from either of the two "Laredos": Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas or

³⁸ *La Prensa*, December 4, 1939, p. 5.

³⁹ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (721.1)/15.

⁴⁰ *La Prensa*, January 8, 1940, p. 8

Laredo, Texas.⁴¹

Being one of the first stations to build its towers on the banks of the Rio Grande, XEFE was a respected and truly transnational station. In the following decade, the station continued to be noted for its transmission of popular and folkloric music and proudly announced that their listening audience was in both Tamaulipas and South Texas. In 1943 it transmitted a special “patriotic” musical program featuring local artists titled “*México de la Frontera*” (Mexico of the Border).⁴² By the following year, station owner and manager, Rafael Tijerina Carranza boasted of having this national and international audience “practically controlled.”⁴³

During the cotton boom hundreds of people from central Mexico migrated to the cities of Reynosa and Matamoros, in particular. Among the newly arrived were repatriated Mexican citizens from the United States and young adults, mostly men, who saw the growth of the cities and the convergence of people in new locations as a possibility to begin a new life or a career, whichever came first. In particular, the emergence of a substantial number of commercial radio stations in the Northeast and Northwest during the 1930s drew young men and women from rural areas with dreams of bright careers or becoming big stars. Within this group were a number of musicians who played the guitar or accordion for the exhausted laborers in the *cantinas* at night. Eugenio Ábrego, one of the members of *Los Alegres de Terán*, and forerunner of *norteña* music

⁴¹ *La Prensa*, September 11, 1935, p. 5.

⁴² *Radiolandia*, March 20, 1943 p. 9.

⁴³ *Radiolandia*, September 22, 1944.

moved to the border city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas at the age of seventeen. He wanted to test his luck as an accordion player at the *Salon Chapultepec* before landing a job at a local radio station. Ábrego, who had grown up listening to radio, attending weekly dances and watching the train pass by, realized that radio was one of the avenues for becoming a star.⁴⁴

Musical groups responded to the economic boom of the region by moving closer to the cities along the border and relied on radio to diffuse their music and familiarize the public with their sound. The trajectory followed by musical groups from Northeast Mexico, like *Los Alegres de Terán*, for instance, highlights the interplay between the results of government projects, commercial radio stations and international radio listeners. The duet, *Los Alegres de Terán*, pioneers in the *norteño* genre, was comprised of Eugenio Ábrego and Tomás Ortiz, both from the state of Tamaulipas. Their career began in the 1940s when the guitar and accordion player moved to Reynosa to sing and perform in cabarets and radio stations. Their music, facilitated by radio stations along the border, brought social unity and gave life to the migratory patterns of Mexicans in Northeastern Mexico for decades.⁴⁵ Radio station entrepreneurs in Northeast Mexico, then, employed a wide range of broadcasters who used their background to appeal to Mexican audiences in Mexico and the United States. Additionally, with the help of music, these stations were able to reach listeners eager to hear Mexican music.

In other parts of Mexico, teenagers left the rural pueblos and headed to the cities along

⁴⁴ Francisco Ramos Aguirre, *Los Alegres de Terán Vida y Canciones* (México, DF: Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes, 2003).

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 67.

the U.S.-Mexico border. In particular, the emergence of a substantial number of commercial radio stations in the Northeast and Northwest during the 1930s drew young men and women from rural areas with dreams of bright careers or becoming big stars. Eugenio Ábrego, one of the members of *Los Alegres de Terán*, and forerunner of *norteña* music moved to the border city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas at the age of seventeen. He wanted to test his luck as an accordion player at the *Salon Chapultepec* before landing a job at a local radio station. Ábrego, who had grown up listening to radio, attending weekly dances and watching the train pass by, realized that radio was one of the avenues for becoming a star.⁴⁶

Radio in Northwest Mexico

In the Northwest, Mexican entrepreneurs also targeted fellow compatriots on the U.S. side of the border, especially in Southern California, and built stations to cater to their consumer interests. The integration of the Baja California peninsula into the national economy took place decades later than in the Northeast. What is today *Baja California Norte* was not an official state of Mexico until January of 1952.⁴⁷ Since the late nineteenth century the region was home to a strong itinerant market that included ranchers, investors, miners and railroad workers. In the 1930s when the commercial radio industry was booming, the government authorized individuals

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The State in the southern half of the peninsula, *Baja California Sur*, was not incorporated into the Mexican Republic until 1974. See, David E. Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century: A History of Economic and Social Transformation* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 120.

to own and establish stations in that territory.⁴⁸

In the spring of 1935, while stations in Ciudad Juárez and Reynosa were busy broadcasting concerts and special programs sponsored by the Mexican business community in Texas, in the western half of the border, President Lázaro Cárdenas announced the colonization of the Baja California territory. The factors that led to the development of this area included reduced demographic density, relative distance from the production centers of the nation, a lack of paths of communication with the interior of the country and insufficient local production of consumer needs; in general, an overall lack in development. In 1939, four years after introducing the colonization plan, Cárdenas signed a decree establishing *Zonas Libres* (Free Zones) in the northern and southern territories. The objective for creating these “Free Zones” was to stimulate much needed industrialization, instill social and economic growth in the region and integrate the economy of the Northwest with that of the rest of the nation.⁴⁹

The attention placed on strengthening the border was a small part of Cárdenas’s national economic and political program, which focused on land reform and eventually led to the expropriation of millions of hectares and the creation of *ejidos*. The government considered the development and fortification of the northern frontier a critical step in thwarting U.S. expansionism from traveling south into Mexico.

⁴⁸ Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.

⁴⁹ Mario Ojeda, ed., *Administración del desarrollo de la frontera norte* (México, DF: El Colegio de México, 1982), vii, 47-48.

Since the mid-1920s, when alcohol distribution centers and recreational establishments were founded during Prohibition (1920-1933), a strong U.S. presence had been visible. The Great Depression brought a slump in the clientele of these businesses and the Mexican government, in turn, was hopeful that the local economy would be fortified and that the businesses which proliferated with the backing of U.S. dollars would disappear.

Despite the plans of the government, attempts to spur large-scale economic growth along the border were in vain. In fact, there was uneven and incomplete development in the area until the 1960s when the Mexican government established the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) in order to stimulate the manufacturing sector and provide employment for workers. At that time, considerable industrialization began with the arrival of *maquilas* or *maquiladoras* to the region.⁵⁰ However, the investment in the urbanization and industrial growth of the border attracted a handful of entrepreneurs who, as in the Northeast, launched radio stations with the intention of accessing the Mexican population in the United States. In the 1930s, as they catered to the Mexican market overseas, Northwest border radio stations also took entertainment, news and valuable information to the Mexican people living in the Baja California territory at a time when newspapers or even paved roads, were scarce.

In the Baja California peninsula, U.S. entrepreneurs were not able to build powerful stations to reach the United States as they had done along the Rio Grande Valley; in part, this was due to the difference in terrain of Texas and the Great Plains in

⁵⁰ David E. Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century*.

the East, and the Rocky Mountain states in the West. Overall, Mexican-owned border stations prospered in this area as a result of two features unique to radio stations in the Northwest: their closeness to the cultural and artistic production of Southern California and the interest given to the development of the region by U.S. entrepreneurs during Prohibition who converted Baja into a “playground” for the Hollywood elite.

Radio stations in Baja California had one advantage over stations along the Rio Grande during the ‘30s and ‘40s, their proximity to the bright lights and glamour of Hollywood. In the 1920s, the restrictions created during Prohibition made Mexico and the Caribbean attractive locations for U.S. pleasure seekers and entrepreneurs who established night-clubs, restaurants and lavish resorts and lured visitors from the entire state of California. In the Mexican northern border, U.S. businessmen financed gambling, prostitution, horse racing, boxing, and other illicit activities. A large part of this activity was concentrated in the *Agua Caliente Hotel and Casino* which was located outside of the Tijuana city limits and offered horse racing, golf, drinking, gambling and bathing in a modern spa.⁵¹

The opening and closing of the *Agua Caliente Hotel and Casino*, in fact, reflects the close relationship between the government’s plans for industrializing the region and the establishment of the commercial radio industry in the Northwest. The operator at the time, Ricardo Vázquez de Lara, remarked that he desired for the station to be heard in states in the Pacific Northwest such as Washington, Oregon and even Canada. “Places

⁵¹ For more on the Agua Caliente resort see, Paul J. Vanderwood, *Satan's Playground: Mobsters and Movie Stars at America's Greatest Gaming Resort* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

that yield a greater number of tourists.” As early as 1931, the owners of the Casino realized the advantages that a radio station would offer them to advertise the services of the resort and constructed a new station, XEBC. During the 1930s, the station served an important role for the casino and was used to announce sweepstake winners, horse race results and at times even interviews from Hollywood actors. Even after temporary closure in the ‘30s, it was deemed necessary for the station to remain open because its mission was in line with the economic recuperation plan by Cárdenas for Baja California. According to Congressman Ramón V. Santoyo, “the operation of XEBC is considered an essential means of propaganda for the success of this new work plan.” In effect, the government allowed the station to broadcast commercial propaganda, conferences and speeches in English with the stipulation that “the transmission is made in Spanish first, in a complete and accurate manner, and immediately after in a foreign language.”⁵²

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, as places like the *Agua Caliente* were gaining popularity, Mexican entrepreneurs saw the benefits of building stations catering to the late night entertainment industries. Some, such as XEAE, which began broadcasting in 1932 with the slogan, “The Voice of the Californias,” changed their programming in order to respond to the needs of their international audience. On July 16, 1933, owner and manager Adolfo Labastida Jr. sent a telegram to the Ministry of Communications and Public Works office in Mexico City requesting permission to broadcast from local night clubs through the use of a portable short wave transmitter. “The commercial establishments of Tijuana are composed primarily of cabarets or attraction centers for

⁵² AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (722)/15.

foreign tourists and they play music all day, with very good Mexican orchestras,” Labastida declared, “they wish to transmit their concerts through our station with interjections from commercial advertisements.”⁵³

The station, which was authorized to use the apparatus several months later, thrived thanks to the remote control transmissions from cabarets and night clubs in the area. These broadcasts were made possible when commercial and official radio stations made arrangements with the telephone company to broadcast live radio programs from dance halls, cabarets, government chambers, and public plazas. Labastida was an ambitious businessman, and aside from pursuing the idea of broadcasting live in night clubs he also copied the broadcasting model in the United States of dedicating special songs and numbers to radio listeners. He noted that the practice was “very common in the radio stations of the United States and much liked among the radio listeners of this region which we intend to please.”⁵⁴

The studios of stations in urban centers like Tijuana and Ensenada were stopovers for actors and performers before crossing the border to act in a movie, make a record or fulfill a contract in a noteworthy theater. On other occasions, border radio stations were places where local aspiring artists visited while they were trying to initiate their singing or acting career. For example, in the early 1930s when he was attending the *Instituto Técnico Industrial de Tijuana*, a vocational school established in the former *Agua Caliente Hotel and Casino* compound outside of Tijuana, singer and composer Fernando

⁵³ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6 (722)/16.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

“Freddy” Quiñones escaped the premises after hours to go sing at the local cabaret, “*El Tecolote*.” Quiñones, whose dream was to work and record in Los Angeles, realized that singing over the radio would take him one step closer to Hollywood. “I would escape at night to go sing during an amateur contest transmitted over radio station XEAC,” he recalled. Later in his life, the singer used the experience he gained at the radio station when he was the lead singer in Mercedes Gallegos’ Latino orchestra in San Francisco.⁵⁵

One hundred miles east of Tijuana, the city of Mexicali was also home to a handful of radio stations in the early 1930s. The first commercial radio station in the city, XEAO, was initiated in 1932 by Luis Castro López, an engineer who designed the transmitter using recycled World War I radio parts he purchased in Calexico and Los Angeles. López, a native of Los Mochis, Sinaloa, had studied in Los Angeles before arriving in Mexicali in 1930 to work as a technician dedicated to making radios. XEAO’s listeners came from cities across Southern California like Coachella, Indio, Brawley and some across the border in Yuma, Arizona. López nicknamed the station “*La Voz de Mexicali al servicio del agricultor*” (The Voice of Mexicali at the service of the farmer), because the majority of listeners were agricultural workers who played a direct role in the prosperity of the station. “Farmers really enjoyed this,” he recalled, “they would come and bring me money...so that I could pay the electricity bill, the rent and buy records.” López noted that the station served a social function to the farm worker community because at times people would come and ask for a special program or

⁵⁵ Victor Alejandro Espinoza Valle, *La Vida Misma: Fernando Freddy Quiñones, un trovador fronterizo* (Guadalajara, Jalisco: Centro Universitario de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Universidad de Guadalajara, 2008), 29.

to broadcast a fundraiser for a community member in need.⁵⁶

The close proximity to Southern California, along with the direct investment made in mass communications by U.S. businessmen, gave the first generation of Mexican border radio entrepreneurs the opportunity to continue taking music and special programs across the airwaves and into the homes of the Mexican immigrant and U.S. born Mexican communities across the U.S. Southwest. The infrastructure development and overall attention given to Northwestern Mexico by U.S. interests during Prohibition gave Mexican entrepreneurs easier access to Mexican markets in Southern California, who were their target audience and an integral component in the future of their businesses.

Conclusion

In the post-revolutionary decades, the people living in the region from Baja California to Tamaulipas had to survive and learn how to gain a livelihood in a world that was quickly becoming urban and industrial. Instead of strictly following the mandates of the government, the border region followed the imperatives of the capitalist market. Mexican radio entrepreneurs in the northern border with the United States, who were part of this population, were involved in the creation of a consumer market in the United States. Advertisement records most accurately show how these radio entrepreneurs saw the border: as non-existent. Thanks to the power of radio to send signals across the border, border radio station owners relied on the overseas audiences, not simply of Anglo consumers, but of Mexican immigrants and their children for their stations to prosper. They drafted their own business plans and came up with strategies to

⁵⁶ Manuel Ortiz Marín and Miguel Antonio Meza Estrada, *Testimonios de la radio en Mexicali* (Mexicali, BC: Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 1994), 8,11.

ensure that Mexicans in the United States would never be left without the voice of the government, which came through the commercial airwaves. In turn, they need to be considered as important components in the post-revolutionary growth of the nation.

Chapter IV

Crafting an Audience: Music, Mass Media and Radio in “*México de Afuera*”

“En efecto, los mexicanos que han cruzado las fronteras, con sólo respirar el ambiente de su patria, con sólo la convivencia natural dentro de la historia nuestra, quedan exentos de contaminaciones extrañas.”

“In effect, the Mexicans who have crossed the border, simply by breathing the air of their motherland, by the natural socializing with our history, become exempt from foreign contaminations.”

-*La Prensa*, 1934

During the 1930s, from his home in Santa Catalina Island, California, José Guerrero tuned in to *La Hora Nacional* (The National Hour) from Mexico City station XEDP. Broadcast live on Sundays from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m., the government-sponsored program featured noteworthy speeches by dignitaries and heads of state, official news bulletins and musical numbers performed by local and internationally renowned bands and orchestras. In 1937, Guerrero, who was also a composer, corresponded with Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas about the possibility of airing one of his music pieces in the program. “Let me know the date the band will play my march,” he wrote, “to see if I can tune in to *la Hora Nacional*.”¹

Radio listeners like Guerrero, who were part of the *México Lindo* generation, or recent arrivals to the U.S., occasionally tuned in to live radio programs from stations across the U.S.-Mexico border or Mexico City during the 1930s and 1940s.² Radio listening provided a

¹ Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Presidentes, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (Hereafter AGN, LCR), Caja 102, Expediente 135.2/146.

² For the *México Lindo* generation, see Francisco Arturo Rosales, *¡Pobre Raza!: Violence,*

simultaneous experience for Mexicans in Mexico and in the United States. Music, through radio airwaves, brought social unity to their communities and gave life to their migration patterns. Through music, they could sustain the use of Spanish at home or they could connect with their past; being nostalgic when they heard “songs from the days gone by.”³

This chapter focuses on the practice of radio listening by the Mexican population in the two cities with the largest concentration of Mexicans in the first half of the twentieth century: Los Angeles, California and San Antonio, Texas. Specifically, it explains how these communities sustained the practice of radio listening and honoring and remembering Mexico through music thanks to the Spanish-language press, the Mexican Consulate and local English-language radio stations, which broadcast segments of airtime in Spanish. With the help of grass-roots organizations, Mexican government representatives and local newspapers, the U.S. Mexican population, by the 1940s, were more than just a radio listening community. The advertising power generated by the press also encouraged the population to be consumers. Thus, inconsequently, radio unleashed the buying power and potential of the Mexican population in the United States.

Background

Post World War I immigration legislation in the United States limited the flow of European immigrants into the country and led to a shortage of labor in the U.S. South and

Justice and Mobilization among México Lindo Immigrants, 1900-1939 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

³ *La Prensa*, January 8, 1940, p. 8. For the way Mexican communities in the U.S. Southwest listened to both Mexican radio stations and English-language radio for pleasure and to maintain the use of their Spanish language see, Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez and Emilio Zamora, *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

Midwest. In the 1920s, restrictions on Asian labor were also significant, as Japanese and Filipinos, in particular, worked in agriculture in the West. In turn, the agriculture and business sectors recruited Mexican workers and their families in states like California, Texas and Illinois to work in the fields, railroads, steel or in another of the nation's growing industries.

Leaving their native land for the United States was possible for many Mexican workers who had fallen into economic hardship in the wake of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), a decade of fighting resulting in a substantial population loss, homelessness and devastation of land. Yet the Revolution was not the only culprit for migration and hardship. Between 1926 and 1930, Mexico was affected by the Cristero War, a time when members of the Catholic Church were persecuted by the government throughout the country. This event also resulted in massive migration northward as thousands of families escaped the oppression and moved to the United States.⁴ By 1930, more than one million Mexicans had migrated to the United States as a result of violence in Mexico and labor shortages in the U.S. South and Midwest.⁵

The 1930s, furthermore, was a tumultuous decade for Mexican immigrants in the United States. The economic instability created by the Great Depression led to the exodus of thousands

⁵ For more on the Chicano Studies perspective on the factors contributing to the exodus of Mexicans to the United States see, Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

of Mexicans, U.S. and Mexican citizens alike, back to Mexico.⁶ Many returned to Mexico voluntarily, while some were forced to leave the United States by federal government immigration raids. In Southern California, for instance, during a five month period in 1931, approximately one-third of the Mexican population of Los Angeles voluntarily and involuntarily left the city.⁷

The Mexican Communities of San Antonio and Los Angeles

In Texas, San Antonio was home to a large Mexican population dating back to the nineteenth century. By 1850, Mexicans accounted for 46% of the city's population. The greatest advantage that San Antonio had, which other cities of Mexican heritage at the time did not, was the proximity by rail to the central and eastern United States and the direct connection to central Mexico. Thus, in the late nineteenth century, city residents could maintain contact with urban centers in northern Mexico such as Monterrey, an important mining city which achieved regional dominance as a trading center for most of northeastern Mexico, as well as growing U.S. cities like Chicago and St. Louis. San Antonio's modern transportation system sustained the interests of a thriving community of Mexican immigrants, many of whom were entrepreneurs, wealthy businessmen or, during the Revolution, political exiles who longed to return to Mexico once the

⁶ On colonization of Mexico's border and repatriation efforts: José Angel Hernández's forthcoming book, "Lost Mexico: Militarization, Migration & Mexican American Colonization in the Nineteenth Century."

⁷ Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 136.

conflict was over.⁸

In the early twentieth century, San Antonio was vital to the formation of an international radio market. A number of record companies built studios in the city and it was there that the first full-time Spanish-language radio station was founded in 1946. Station KCOR, owned and operated by Raoul Cortéz, a Mexican entrepreneur, filled an important social and cultural gap within the Mexican community in the state of Texas.⁹

Cities in the U.S. Southwest like San Antonio were mandatory stops for performers traveling overseas; there, singers like Pedro Vargas, Agustín Lara and *Toña la Negra* could count on the favorable treatment by the Mexican and U.S. born Mexican audience. Since the late nineteenth century, the combination of the theater circuits, which paved the way for the tours of radio performers, and the railroad line, which connected the interior of Mexico to the United States, had allowed the city to be home to a vital Mexican presence manifested in art, music and food. Understandably, during their tour in Los Angeles and San Antonio, *Las Hermanas Águila* noted that they felt a sense of joy “hugging the Mexicans that live over there.”¹⁰

In California, Los Angeles had a Mexican population of close to 5,000 people in 1900.

⁸ For more on the history of Mexicans in San Antonio see: Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American middle class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991); Daniel D. Arreola, “The Mexican American Cultural Capital” *Geographical Review* 77:1, (Jan, 1987): 21.

⁹ In 1947, Cortéz requested permission to have his station re-transmit *La Hora Nacional* each Sunday from Mexico City. For more on the legacy of the Cortéz family see the website created by his nephew <http://www.sintv.org/sintv/biography3.html>

¹⁰ *Radiolandia*, March 20, 1943.

Persuaded by jobs in industry and agriculture, Mexicans migrated there at a rapid rate during the first three decades of the twentieth century. By 1930, approximately 150,000 persons of Mexican birth or heritage had settled into the city's expanding neighborhoods, converting the sprawling Southern California city into the largest Mexican community outside of Mexico City.¹¹ At the time, small businesses in East Los Angeles included a "number of dental and medical services, department and grocery stores, and restaurants, while nickelodeons, dance halls, burlesque houses, brothels, saloons and other 'bawdy entertainments' provided a range of entertainment to the heterogeneous population of laborers residing downtown."¹²

Mexican immigrants of the city and the surrounding valley were exposed to the latest musical, cultural and artistic productions of Mexico. Mexican groups, in fact, traveled there before highways and railroads made the trip from Mexico City to Los Angeles possible. Celebrated singer Pedro Vargas recalled that in 1928, when he embarked upon his first international tour to the United States with the *Orquesta del Maestro Miguel Lerdo de Tejada*, the group took the train from Mexico City to Tijuana and from there "crossed the border by foot and boarded a train from San Diego to Los Angeles."¹³ In addition, Los Angeles helped sustain

¹¹ For more on the history of Mexicans in California see, Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Matt Garcia, *A World of its Own: Race, Labor and Citrus in the making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹² Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 19.

¹³ José Ramón Garmabella, *Pedro Vargas: Una vez nada más* (México, DF: Ediciones de

the Mexican post-revolutionary art movement of the 1920s and 1930s by offering a place for Mexican painters and artists to present their work. Along with a group of artists including Maria Bonilla and Luís Martínez, for example, in 1926 Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo) exhibited his artwork in the city, noting that the California city had the potential to be converted into a “first class artistic center.”¹⁴

Moreover, Los Angeles was important in sustaining an overseas radio market because, inherently, it attracted a large number of people drawn to Hollywood to work in the film, radio, and theater industries. Mexican elite and middle class members, who labored alongside their Anglo counterparts and had control over Spanish-language entertainment of the city, aimed at using mass media to reinforce a Mexican national identity.¹⁵ Theaters in East Los Angeles were converted from English to Spanish-language venues in the early 1920s when large movie palaces were created near Hollywood. And as the Mexican population tripled during that decade, the city became a manpower pool for Hispanic theater. From the late 1910s to the 1930s, as Nicolás Kanellos notes, Los Angeles supported five major Spanish language theaters with approximately fifteen others hosting performances on an irregular basis.¹⁶

As Mexican communities consolidated and grew in number during the 1930s in

Comunicación, 1985), 55.

¹⁴ *El Universal Ilustrado*, January 7, 1926.

¹⁵ Colin Gunckel, “The war of the accents: Spanish language Hollywood films in Mexican Los Angeles” *Film History* Volume 20 (2008): 325.

¹⁶ Nicolás Kanellos, *A History of Hispanic Theater in the United States: Origins to 1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 21.

Los Angeles, San Antonio and other cities in the U.S., generational differences emerged between Mexican immigrants and their offspring, U.S born Mexicans. The first, sometimes called “Mexican nationals,” often saw their status in the U.S. as temporary. Some members of this group displayed their loyalty to their country of birth by retaining their Mexican citizenship and made plans to return to Mexico in the future. While they assimilated to life in the United States, many held on to their religious, familial and cultural traditions along with a vast repertoire of *canciones* and *corridos* they had learned in their childhood.

The second group, U.S. born Mexicans, was the first generation of Mexican children born in the United States. This generation had a different understanding of their past, history and also had a different relationship with the mass media than their parents, as they came of age at the same time that film and radio emerged as important mediums. U.S. born Mexicans were influenced by movies and the recording industry and also tuned in to radio for music, news, and dramas, both in Spanish and English. Growing in number and influence during the late 1920s through the middle of the twentieth century, second-generation Mexicans were a disparate group including *Pachucos* and *Pochos*.

A *Pocho* was a Mexican man or woman born outside of Mexico who had migrated to the U.S. at an early age and had been partially, yet not completely, integrated into mainstream U.S. society. *Pochos* found an identity deeply rooted along the U.S.-Mexico border. In many ways, their sense of nationalism was defined as being “in between.” The complexity of the *Pocho* is a fascinating topic of interest to both Mexican and U.S. born scholars, since the word is also a derogatory term referring to a Mexican in the United States who has denounced his native cultural traits or is unable to speak

Spanish, for instance. *Pachuco*, on the other hand, is a term given to Mexican-American youth living in the U.S. Southwest and along the U.S.-Mexico border. This group used cultural expressions, such as music, to resist national and international marginalization.¹⁷ During the first half of the twentieth century both *Pachuchos* and *Pochos* introduced a new way of talking, dressing and acting in the United States with deep symbolic connotations; in many ways, however, their essential characteristics are reduced to dress and vocabulary.¹⁸

Mexican Music

Since the nineteenth century, music played an important role in Mexican communities and homes. It was not uncommon for families to congregate around a piano, harmonica or other musical instrument during evenings or special occasions. On some occasions, Mexican immigrants sent letters to political leaders and musical groups in Mexico requesting that they send Mexican orchestras, bands and artists to pay them a visit. Music was also part of the oral tradition of the Mexican community. A number of Mexican female singers, such as Maria Padilla and Lydia Mendoza, recalled that Mexican folkloric songs and ballads were passed down from their parents to them at home. In fact, Padilla admitted that at times her father would pay

¹⁷ Anthony Macías, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

¹⁸ *Pachuchos* came to the attention of the general public during the Zoot Suit riots in Southern California. On the riots see Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Margarita Aragón, *Brown Youth, black fashion and a white riot* (London: University of London, 2007); Laura L. Cummings, *Pachucas and Pachucos in Tucson: Situated Border Lives* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009). For a view on *la pachuca* see Catherine S. Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

her and her sisters a peso or two to sing a couple of songs when they had company over or during special events.¹⁹

Despite living in a foreign country, Mexican immigrants maintained strong ties to the musical culture of Mexico. In cities throughout the United States they listened to radio transmissions from Mexican radio stations in the Northeast and Northwest border, and in the 1930s programs from Mexico City. In 1935, for example, Mexican agricultural workers from the Yakima Valley in the state of Washington sent a letter to the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations requesting that XECR, the radio station operated by the Ministry of Foreign Relations, re-transmit their Sunday evening concerts through their local station. The Ministry of Communications and Public Works granted them permission to do so, considering it an honor to have Mexican music diffused through English-language radio stations.²⁰

In the United States, radio exposed Mexican immigrants to new music genres and songs. Growing up in Southern California during the 1930s, for instance, Hank Cervantes recalled after his family had “acquired a thumbnail-shaped radio...we began hearing songs like “*Guadalajara*,” “*Estrellita*,” “*Siete Leguas*,” “*Cielito Lindo*,” “*Adiós, Mariquita Linda*,” popular hits in Mexico at the time.²¹ “Mexican stations,” as Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez suggests,

¹⁹ Interview with Maria Padilla, March 15, 2009, conducted by the author.

²⁰ Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (Hereafter AGN, SCOP), Expediente 22/131.6(725.1)/62.

²¹ Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez, “‘Embracing the ether’ The use of radio by the Latino World War II Generation” in Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez and Emilio Zamora, eds., *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). Regarded as the “Father of Mexican Music,” Manuel M. Ponce’s song “*Estrellita*”

introduced the U.S. born Mexican generation to singers like Lydia Mendoza and countless other Mexican and U.S. born Mexican stars.²²

Mexican music, especially if it was played by orchestras and bands, reiterated patriotic feelings for Mexican immigrants. To many members of the community national identity was manifested when, in song, you remembered and honored Mexico. Throughout the twentieth century, the Mexican community in the United States was overjoyed when artists, performers and musicians visited their cities. The Mexican Police Band, led by Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, toured the United States during the 1930s and stopped in major cities throughout the U.S. Southwest and Northeast. After their visit to San Antonio, Mexican citizen, Josefa C. Valdez, communicated with President Cárdenas about their audition. In her letter, she personally thanked him for sending the Band to San Antonio. It had been the music, Valdez noted, that allowed her to feel closer to Mexico, the country that she longed to return to.²³

Arranging the auditions of Mexican bands and orchestras, in fact, were important duties for certain members. On February 24, 1928, Pedro S. Espinosa, secretary of the Mexican Chamber of Commerce of Los Angeles, penned a letter to President Lázaro Cárdenas requesting for the Mexican government to send its Police Band to Los Angeles. "It is our wish that our Motherland be represented in these acts which depart themselves from commercialism to achieve

(Little Star), was a popular hit world-wide translated into English, French and Italian by 1933. The song, according to a critic, "has been so deeply planted in the Mexican soul, that wherever it is sung, surely there is a heart of ours there, or in that instant the name of Mexico vibrates," *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 16, 1933, p. 31, 47.

²² Ibid.

²³ AGN, LCR, Expediente 135.2/146.

patriotic traits, since the high prestige of our Motherland is involved,” he wrote. The Chamber noted that in previous years the exposition of Mexican products had drawn more than 40,000 people per day, and having the band play would not only honor the government of Cárdenas, but would be a sign of the culture and progress of Mexico to foreigners and Mexicans alike. Requests such as these display the high quality entertainment sought for the event, as well as their allegiance to the government in power.

Thus, in the 1930s and 1940s, Mexican immigrants and farm workers in the Texas or California valley, many of whom were from rural Mexico, were overjoyed to hear songs from their upbringing. This music, which told stories of longing to return to Mexico and glorified the land of their birth, also became part of their daily life. In the stores of downtown Los Angeles or San Antonio, Mexican sheet music and Spanish-language records were readily available to the Mexican communities; their distribution, in fact, was made possible by local businesses and the press. Thanks to the sponsorship of small businesses, a Mexican man or woman walking the city’s streets also had the opportunity to hear popular music. While conducting field research for her Master’s Degree at the University of Southern California during the early 1930s, Nellie Foster observed that “In the United States men stand in front of music stores where phonograph records of *corridos* are heard over a loud speaker; they congregate in barber shops, pool rooms, and other masculine gathering places, and in Los Angeles listen to the wandering musicians in Olvera Street.”²⁴

Listening to music and consuming music are not one in the same; and, as their Anglo

²⁴ Nellie Foster, “The Corrido: A Mexican Culture Trait Persisting in Southern California,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Southern California, 1939), 22.

counterparts, the Mexican immigrant population in the United States was influenced by the growing consumer culture of the early twentieth century. In urban centers many embraced mass consumption practices on a daily basis, at times even settling down and purchasing homes. Owning property in cities like Los Angeles, in fact, allowed Mexican immigrants to become, “more integrated in the American consumer economy,” as George J. Sánchez notes.²⁵ To many of those in the second generation, the ethic of consumerism, explains historian Vicki Ruiz “became inextricably linked to making it in America.”²⁶

Throughout the United States, mass media- newspapers, magazines, and advertisements- persuaded men and women to purchase radio sets long before Spanish-language radio stations appeared in Texas or California. In his 1928 study on women and industry, Paul Taylor observed:

Another interesting case was that of a mother and daughter who both worked because they wished to have a better home. In this case it was not a desire for a different dwelling and neighborhood, but for improvement of the place in which they already lived. They were very anxious to get some new furniture and a radio. They seemed to think that a radio was the most desirable thing in the world. The mother was anxious to have these things so that her daughter would continue to be happy at home- so that she might bring her friends home to dance.²⁷

²⁵ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 205.

²⁶ Vicki L. Ruiz, *From out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54; Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985).

²⁷ Paul S. Taylor, “Women in Industry,” field notes for *Mexican Labor in the United States*, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Box 1 P. 3.

Using the radio for entertainment or personal enjoyment made owning one a valuable item. In the U.S. Southwest, the majority of Mexican immigrants reaped the benefits of urban and cosmopolitan lives before their counterparts in northern Mexico. The relative high price of radio receivers did not inhibit some families from purchasing their own set, as was the case for many families in Mexico during the 1920s.

Radios and Radio Listening by Mexican Immigrants and U.S. Born Mexicans

By the mid-1930s radios were becoming common household items in Mexican communities across the United States. Radio transmission in Spanish, over “block programming” in English-language stations, served an important cultural function within the community and helped create a unified listening audience. “Block programming,” was initiated during the 1930s by Mexican businessmen and was a segment of air time purchased by a Mexican entrepreneur who was responsible for the Spanish-language advertisements and programming of the time under contract. Given the revenue that could be gained through advertising, “block programming” became popular not just in Texas, but in radio stations throughout the nation.

Mexican-led radio programs were broadcast over U.S. stations at dawn or in the evenings and weekends. As Nellie Foster observed in California during the early 1930s, “Radio programs for the Spanish-speaking working class are scheduled for the early morning hours, when the pocho or Chicano can listen while his wife is preparing breakfast and putting up his lunch. This takes a couple of hours in those homes where tacos are still prepared in the old Mexican way.”²⁸ Radio stations like WOAI of San Antonio, for instance, invited notable Mexican singers like

²⁸ Nellie Foster, “The Corrido: A Mexican Culture Trait Persisting in Southern California,” 22.

Chucho Monge to give live auditions on the air. In 1937, when Monge visited the station's Spanish-language hour, "the radio listeners of the Mexican colony," noted the press, "thoroughly enjoyed his compositions and interpretations."²⁹

In the late '20s and early '30s, classical music was the most common style of music played during Spanish-language radio slots. But by mid 1930s, the musical content of Mexican-led radio programs shifted from purely classical music to featuring a combination of *corridos* and *musica ranchera*, music more aptly tied to the migratory trends of Mexican immigrants during the first half of the twentieth century. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, *corridos* had a particular appeal to the population because of their direct relation to the Mexican Revolution. This was a time when people from different regions of the country interacted and the population was exposed to a wide range of musical styles. Thus, because the *corrido* related stories about heroes and battles of the Revolution, it became the poetry of the people, of a community that was separated geographically from their native land.³⁰

The radio industry, which grew on par with cinema, was important to the Mexican communities of the United States, many of which relied on Spanish-language "block programming" on a daily basis. By 1930, the Mexican immigrant population in San Antonio and Los Angeles, in particular, was urban and more cosmopolitan than most of Mexico, with the exception of Mexico City. Not only were Mexicans in the United States introduced modern

²⁹ *La Prensa*, March 22, 1937.

³⁰ On *corridos* see, Vicente T. Mendoza, *El Corrido Mexicano* (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992); Rubén M. Campos, *El folklore y la música Mexicana. Investigación acerca de la cultura musical en México (1525-1925)* (México, DF: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1928.) For a Chicana/feminist perspective see Maria Herrera Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

technologies into their homes, such as telephones, radios, and phonographs, but they were also first rate consumers who oftentimes took radios and records on their return trips to Mexico, as Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio observed.³¹

Group listening was a common practice in many Mexican communities across the United States. During the 1920s, in the Mexican community of La Habra, California, for example, “A particular special broadcast would bring a living room full of people.” And despite the fact that radio was contested by the popularity of the cinema in the 1930s, “as the years went by, the radio became a favorite form of family entertainment.”³²

However, group listening was not the only way Mexican immigrants heard the voice of the *Patria*. In the late 1920s and 1930s, those whose socioeconomic status allowed them to purchase a short wave radio receiver frequently tuned in to transmission from Mexico City. This group of elite and cultured Mexican immigrants was familiar with Mexican composers such as Manuel M. Ponce and Silvestre Revueltas and included radio listeners like Bernardo Toro, who tuned in to a concert over station XFX from Mexico City on November 20, 1931, from his home in New Orleans, Louisiana. Enthusiastic about his listening experience, Toro wrote to XFX: “a group of friends, gathered at the modern and well-known Mexican restaurant ‘Chapultepec’ on St. Carlos avenue of this city, had the indescribable pleasure of listening through the radio the very important concert transmitted by the symphonic orchestra under the direction of

³¹ Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 229.

³² Gilbert G. González, *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Villages in a Southern California County, 1900-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 71, 92.

Chávez.”³³

In their correspondence to XFX, some members of the upper classes, moreover, expressed their opinion about the way Mexico was being represented abroad through the mass media, in particular through radio. Some of the letters received during the late 1920s and early 1930s indicate that Mexicans were more concerned with the way the nation was being perceived abroad than the quality or content of some government-sponsored radio concerts. For example, on the night of April 14, 1931, Mexico and the United States celebrated the establishment of the Pan-American Union by transmitting a special radio program. That night, Manuel Alonso, a Mexican citizen living in Texas believed he would have the opportunity to hear the Mexican Police Band play the National Anthem, but, after listening to an *Orquesta Típica* (an orchestra composed primarily of stringed instruments) play the music of the anthem with the accompaniment of a women’s chorus, he wrote the following message,

Undoubtedly, the orchestra is artistically qualified to perform in banquets, fairs, bullfights, regional dances, etc. However, when you are faced with an extraordinary opportunity to show the American people that there are good musical bands in Mexico, it would have been best to play the anthem without voices and by a military band, that way; Mexico’s true worth would have been displayed. Now, after showing to all of the American people the type of music obfuscated by the voices, now these people must be thinking that in Mexico we lack musicians and that marimbas, mandolins, and guitars are part of the musical accompaniment for our most important holidays.³⁴

Apparently, Mr. Alonso was concerned with Mexico’s reputation and believed that

³³ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (Hereafter AHSEP), Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

³⁴ AHSEP, Caja 8, Exp. A-4/253.3 (73), Fo. 291.

military bands, more than female voices, gave more accurate representations of Mexican music. His letter also reveals the concern and, to an extent, embarrassment over the fact that women, and non-traditional, folkloric musical instruments, like marimbas, were used under the category of “Mexican national music.”

Spanish-language broadcasts over English-language radio stations depended on local newspapers to divulge information concerning their air time, as to who would be participating, etc. In Los Angeles and San Antonio during the ‘30s and ‘40s radio listeners frequently called radio stations requesting and dedicating special songs and musical numbers for friends and loved ones. Soon after their first audition, for example, the singer Maria Padilla recalled that members of the local Mexican community called KMTR asking that *Las Hermanas Padilla* appear on the program more frequently. Had it not been for the public’s desire to hear the young girls over their radio receivers, their careers might have been short lived. Within a year, she and her sister recorded albums with major record labels such as Blue Bird, Columbia and Vocallion, and within two years they took up artistic tours throughout California, Mexico and South America. Decades later, Maria rightfully admitted, “We were an instant hit.”³⁵

Sustaining a radio audience in the United States was made possible thanks to Spanish-language newspapers and U.S. commercial radio stations. English-language station owners were aware that the Spanish-speaking population of their cities used the radio to tune in to transmissions from Mexico. Mexican radio stars gave performances on English-language stations in San Antonio, like WOAI, which boasted of being the station that transmitted the

³⁵ *La Opinión*, January 28, 1939.

oldest Mexican radio program in Texas, hosted by Prof. Eduardo Martínez.³⁶ As these events became more frequent during the '30s, they included Mexican and local radio singers and artists such as the acclaimed radio group, “*Los Caballeros*,” who appeared during a benefit concert given by Mexican radio station XEW’s stars Emilio Tuero and Rafael Romero in October 1935.³⁷

La Prensa and La Opinión

Across the U.S. Southwest, Spanish-language newspapers were avenues that taught people how to listen to the radio as well as tools that closed the gap in the distance between Mexico and the United States. In particular, Ignacio E. Lozano’s newspapers, *La Prensa* of San Antonio, Texas, established in 1913, and *La Opinión*, of Los Angeles, established in 1926, were the two largest Spanish-language newspapers in circulation in the U.S. Southwest during the first half of the twentieth century. Since its establishment in the early years of the Mexican Revolution, for instance, daily issues of *La Prensa* had circulated throughout the state of Texas. Local businesses and companies took advantage of this long-standing publication and placed ads for their services. The newspaper served both the English-language business owners and the Mexican government. For example, when English-language radio stations like KRGV began to broadcast Mexican programs from cities as distant as Weslaco, 250 miles from San Antonio, they advertised their programming in *La Prensa*. In the 1930s, some of their transmissions featured diplomats and government representatives such as the Consul of McAllen, Dr. Bernardo Chávez V. and the Mexican Consul of Texas, Santiago Suárez, who sent a warm greeting to the

³⁶ *La Prensa*, April 22, 1937, p. 4.

³⁷ *La Prensa*, October 20, 1935, p. 3.

Mexican residents of the Texas valley during a special radio program when they commemorated the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution on November 20, 1936.³⁸ In Los Angeles, as Francine Medeiros notes, Lozano began *La Opinión* “as a newspaper in political exile whose objective was to effect change in the homeland so that thousands of compatriots could return and others would not be forced to emigrate.”³⁹

For decades, Lozano’s newspapers put forth a consistent view concerning the importance of the Mexican Revolution to the Mexican community abroad; however, his political stance towards Mexico and the actions of post-revolutionary leaders shifted between the 1920s and the 1940s. Over time a greater attention was placed on nurturing the interests of the Mexican immigrant communities in the United States. For instance, on the night of September 16, 1930, in honor of the fourth anniversary of *La Opinión*, Lozano gave a speech over Los Angeles radio station KMTR while his wife and other Mexican singers, such as the acclaimed composer Guty Cárdenas, sang special Mexican musical numbers.⁴⁰ The speech given by Lozano, as well as other speeches on Mexican holidays, reinforced the longing for the *Patria* (Motherland) felt by Mexicans living in the United States and stressed the importance of imparting nationalistic values and lessons to the children of immigrants. More importantly, they also reiterated that although they were distant, their efforts were no less important or valuable for exalting the Mexican nation. Editorials, articles and reviews published in both of these circulars reveal the

³⁸ *La Prensa*, April 2, 1936, p. 5; *La Prensa*, November 20, 1936, p. 4.

³⁹ Francine Medeiros “La Opinión, A Mexican Exile Newspaper: A Content Analysis of its First Years, 1926-1929” *Aztlán* 11.1 (Spring 1980): 78.

⁴⁰ *La Prensa*, September 19, 1930, p. 1, 5.

importance of Spanish-language press to the configuration of the Spanish-speaking Mexican radio audience.

Newspapers and magazines published throughout the United States, as Nicolás Kanellos argues “protected the language, culture and rights of an ethnic minority within a larger culture that was in the best times unconcerned with the Hispanic ethnic enclaves and in the worst of times openly hostile.”⁴¹ A publication such as *La Prensa*, wrote a Mexican Consulate Official in 1925, “is the largest circulated newspaper within the Mexican *colonia* of San Antonio in the United States.”⁴² Newspapers not only offered local and national information, advertisements and entertainment news, but they also printed articles and editorials on the current state of Mexican government affairs. Thus; they served the dual role of orienting Mexican immigrants in a foreign land and sustaining their cultural heritage.

Correspondence from readers confirms these attitudes. Personal letters sent to the offices of the papers demonstrate the importance Lozano’s publications had in fostering a sense of community and patriotism, not only in the U.S. Southwest but also in Mexico. Oftentimes, *La Prensa* published anecdotes from letters sent to Lozano around February 14, the day the newspaper commemorated its anniversary. One note, written by Pedro S. Rodríguez in 1935, noted that “this newspaper, which in the United States is a spokesman for Mexican public opinion, and the sure indicator that guides our people which are scattered throughout this great

⁴¹ Nicolás Kanellos, “A Brief History of Hispanic Periodicals in the United States” in Nicolas Kanellos and Helvetia Martell, eds., *Hispanic Periodicals in the United States, Origins to 1960: A Brief History and Comprehensive Bibliography* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2000), 5.

⁴² Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo: Obregón-Calles (Hereafter AGN, OC), Expediente 818-J-16.

nation. LA PRENSA, which is the paper that I eagerly read every day, has become an indispensable need for me, as well as a friend and inseparable companion.”⁴³

Letters continued in the following years. During their 25 anniversary, best wishes were sent to Lozano from readers in cities around the United States such as Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and New Orleans. Readers applauded Lozano for carrying out positive cultural and patriotic work through his paper. One in particular, Hilario E. Vázquez of St. David, Arizona, had subscribed to the newspaper for more than twenty years. He noted, “There are many reasons why LA PRENSA has prospered, but to me, the most salient is that it has defended the rights of our Motherland and increased our name abroad...I am 77 years old. I arrived in the United States in 1885 and I am a Mexican citizen.” Correspondence from the commemoration also arrived in San Antonio from Mexico, such as the letter written by Eulalio Velásquez of Querétaro who wrote, “It is my wish that LA PRENSA reach a long life, being at all times, as it has been until today, an unsurpassable spokesman for the children of Mexico who, because of the inevitable decree of destiny, live *allende el Río Grande* (on the other side of the Rio Grande), remembering every hour, every instant, with pure affection, their beloved land.”⁴⁴

Ignacio E. Lozano was an important figure within the Mexican population of the U.S. Southwest who took on multiple roles as newspaper editor, entrepreneur, cultural advocate, and by the 1940s, “defender of Mexico.” He was behind the establishment of a series of grass roots movements and organizations in Texas and California. In 1934, for instance, he helped found “Permanent Patriotic Committees” in cities throughout the country in order to promote holidays

⁴³ *La Prensa*, February 20, 1935, p. 8.

⁴⁴ *La Prensa*, February 13, 1938, p. 8.

and events that were held in suitable locations. This initiative came in the aftermath of an incident in Brawley, California, when, after canceling their local celebration, one member of the community shouted the midnight cry of “Viva Mexico” during Mexican Independence Day at his place of work, the local liquor store.⁴⁵

In San Antonio, one of Lozano’s greatest achievements was founding the “*Beneficiencia Mexicana*,” a Mexican welfare society that sponsored the construction of a medical office, the “*Clínica Mexicana de San Antonio*.”⁴⁶ The clinic was founded in the early 1930s with the help of local businessmen and generous community members. Every year during *Día de la Raza* celebrations on October 12, they organized a benefit concert featuring invited singers, actors, and government representatives from Mexico, such as Juan Arvizu, Toña la Negra, María Conesa, and *Las Hermanas Águila*, along with local artists and musicians. Acclaimed singer Juan Arvizu, who had participated in one of these fundraisers during the early 1930s, applauded Lozano for his labor and believed “that all Mexican artists should cooperate with Mr. Lozano, in order that the institution mentioned, continues forward and prospers, to the benefit of the multitude of compatriots who lack the resources to request medical attention.”⁴⁷ Lozano maintained, and rightly so, that offering Mexicans with limited resources the opportunity to receive medical attention at a low cost would benefit the San Antonio’s Mexican population.

Along with a number of first-generation Mexican immigrants, Lozano believed that it

⁴⁵ *La Prensa*, September 18, 1934, p. 3.

⁴⁶ *La Prensa*, October 14, 1934, pp. 1, 3, 8.

⁴⁷ *La Prensa*, November 13, 1934, p. 8.

was important to prolong the cultural traditions of his childhood such as celebrating national holidays and honoring the homeland through festivals, outdoor events and cultural activities. An editorial written on September 11, 1930, in *La Prensa*, for instance, included what he called “the doctrine of order and patriotism.” In it, Lozano stressed the need for Mexican citizens not to forget their nationality and to be aware of the laws in their state of residence so as to not tarnish the reputation of the Mexican community.⁴⁸ One reader noted that, “If we know the history of our Mexico, if our children have learned to love the country of their parents, it is because 25 years ago, in my house and my brothers’ house, we have read LA PRENSA...Who has doubted that with LA PRENSA, we have learned to love Mexico more?”⁴⁹

As the community increased in size, newspapers made use of the creativity of their readers and their affection for Mexican music. In 1937, for example, *La Prensa* and *La Opinión* held a contest for the lyrics to a “*México de Afuera* Hymn.” The editors envisioned this song to be a pseudo national anthem that could be intoned during special occasions and would unite the Mexican community. According to the stipulations, “The verses...need to speak of the longings and feelings of Mexicans who live outside of the Motherland and carry out *labor mexicanista* abroad.”⁵⁰ The paper exhorted those living in the U.S. who had deep roots in Mexico and labored to perpetuate their loyalty to their offspring. In contests such as this, Lozano’s papers emphasized that it did not matter where you were located, just as long as you celebrated, remembered, and perpetuated the patriotic feelings abroad.

⁴⁸ *La Prensa*, September 11, 1930, p. 3.

⁴⁹ *La Prensa*, February 13, 1938, p. 1-2.

⁵⁰ *La Prensa*, October 18, 1937, p. 3.

While Lozano was an important cultural advocate who consistently honored Mexico's glorious past and promising future, his political stance towards the country of his birth fluctuated during the post-revolutionary years. In fact, his loudest admonitions came during the Cristero War. During the 1920s, the content of the articles published in *La Prensa*, wrote A. Martinez, "deviates the judgment of the Mexican residents." Martinez, who had previous experience in the newspaper industry, was living in Detroit, Michigan and desired to start up a newspaper in order to counteract the misinformation being published by Lozano's San Antonio newspaper.⁵¹

Given its history and growing Mexican population, San Antonio was at the center of attacks by Mexican immigrants who opposed Lozano. "The city of San Antonio is the meeting point of all the enemies of the government and peace in Mexico," wrote Jorge Kathain in 1925. Kathain, who wanted to uphold Mexico's good character in the city, asked the Mexican government for \$2,000 to cover the start up costs of a Spanish-language newspaper.⁵² The government, which could not fund the project, responded instead by using other forms of media such as the radio to counteract the misinformation being circulated in the city.

Mexican immigrants found other ways to combat Lozano and show their support to the government. In the mid-1920s, many who had escaped during the Revolution and continued to look to Mexico in the years following the conflict, rose up in support of the claims made by former political leader Adolfo de la Huerta, who was speaking against the Calles regime. In 1924, the Vice-consul of Mexico stationed in St. Louis, Missouri, Rómulo Vargas, for example, wrote to President Calles informing him that *La Prensa* had published an article about a banquet

⁵¹ AGN, OC, Expediente 121-R-S-6.

⁵² AGN, OC, Expediente 805-K-7.

attended by 150 San Antonio Mexican-American businessmen in which Huerta spoke “falsehoods and intentional machinations” against the Mexican government. “I don’t see,” De la Huerta had said, “why instead of imitating the constructive administration of the United States of America, [Mexico] follows the politics of Soviet Russia.”⁵³

Lozano’s ideology towards Mexico and the Mexican community in the United States was made clear during the 1930s, a difficult era when deportation campaigns by the U.S. government forced thousands to return to Mexico. Lozano was not in favor of repatriation because he believed that the Mexicans who lived in the U.S. for an extended period of time became accustomed to a higher living standard and noted that once they returned to Mexico many felt uncomfortable. Instead, he campaigned for the Mexican government to invest in ensuring that Mexicans in the U.S. felt that their government cared if they maintained their nationality or that they be allowed to vote.

Each time a new *sexenio* (six-year presidential term) or transfer of power took place in Mexico, Lozano published his opinions concerning the state of the Mexican government and his thoughts on its future. During the transfer of power in Mexico from Emilio Portes Gil to Pascual Ortiz Rubio in 1930, he explicitly expressed his opinion on the direction Mexico was taking in the pages of his newspapers. “The country wants something more serious, more tangible, more consistent than simple promises” he wrote, “they want the assurance that the Mexican Revolution will truly enter a new period under the upcoming administration.”⁵⁴ The promises made by the new leader were in vain and by 1933 Lozano’s view on the government was even

⁵³ AGN, OC, Expediente 101-R2-H-8.

⁵⁴ *La Prensa*, January 14, 1930.

more disparaging. On Saturday, July 29, for instance, he wrote “tendentious attacks” against the Mexican government; in particular, he criticized the use of government funds to pay for a railroad trip taken by Calles from the Northern Mexican border to Mexico City. Calles, who was no longer President by 1933, influenced the administration of Abelardo L. Rodríguez, exercising “privileges without justification” as Lozano wrote.⁵⁵ Mexican Consul of Dallas, Raul Domínguez, wrote to Calles to inform him of the article, also penned a letter to Lozano condemning the actions of the paper for not concerning themselves with the wellbeing of the Mexican community of San Antonio. Domínguez pleaded with Lozano to work with the Consulate and engage in *Labor Pro-Patria*, as the nation was undergoing a vast reconstruction project.⁵⁶

At heart, Lozano viewed himself and the Mexican community in the United States as part of “the Mexican nation,” and thus believed that newspapers in Mexico should publish more information concerning the problems which Mexicans who lived in the United States faced. His reasoning was that by 1934, the sheer number of Mexicans in the United States exceeded that of some states in Mexico. The Mexican government was making a mistake by not focusing on their needs, he noted, leaving some members of the community with a sense of “abandonment.” When Mexicans in Mexico were aware of the issues that Mexican immigrants confronted on a daily basis, Lozano maintained, a greater concern for the federal government would be raised

⁵⁵ *La Prensa*, July 29, 1933.

⁵⁶ Fideicomiso Archivo de Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPEC), Expediente 14. Inventario 570. Legajo 1/16.

concerning the future and importance of Mexico's reconstruction.⁵⁷

In 1934, after Lázaro Cárdenas became President of Mexico, Lozano's vision for his newspapers shifted and he adopted a more positive outlook concerning the relationship between the Motherland and its population in the United States. During Cárdenas's term in office, Lozano was an avid advocate of the rights of the Mexican population in the U.S. In turn, the Mexican press rightfully depicted him as "defender and Patriarch of *México de Afuera*." In an interview for the Mexican magazine *Hoy*, where he was questioned about the allegiance of the Mexican population in the U.S. towards Mexico, Lozano responded "I continue to believe that the Mexicans of the U.S. South maintain a love for the Motherland...the Mexicans maintain, for generations, their nationality...They don't lose the hope that they will someday return to the Motherland."⁵⁸

Until Cárdenas's administration, the Mexican government's policy towards Mexicans in the U.S. had been inconsistent. Cárdenas labored to have an open dialogue between the needs and desires of Mexican expatriates and their home country and received support from many former soldiers and leaders of the Mexican Revolution to carry this out. One man in particular, Jesús M. González, demonstrated that patriotism to Mexico was alive among the Mexican community living in the United States. González wrote to the President in January 1938 from his home in Los Angeles to tell him about the patriotic duties he had been carrying out since his days as a young soldier fighting against Porfirio Díaz and later in the Constitutionalist Army during the Mexican Revolution. He noted that he had taken a stand against fascism, the actions

⁵⁷ *La Prensa*, August 4, 1934.

⁵⁸ *La Prensa*, January 28, 1940, p. 1-2.

of former President Plutarco Elías Calles, and he had written a pamphlet about repatriation and colonization, “these two important Mexican problems.” Additionally, he had joined the “*Comité Nacional Revolucionario y Fraternidad Amigos del Campesino*” and would soon take up a radio program with funding from the organization.⁵⁹

As the Cárdenas *sexenio* progressed, Lozano continued to support his projects. In 1936, *La Prensa* printed a special message given by Cárdenas to *México de Afuera* in which he urged Mexicans to keep their nationality at all costs and to be assured that their “present government cares for them.”⁶⁰ Mexicans living in the United States believed it was important to keep not just their nationality, but also the characteristics of their race, as they were unlike the Anglo Americans. The coverage of the speech by the Spanish-language press indicates that many interpreted this address as a personal conversation between them and the President. Hearing the head of state reassure their place within the Mexican community was comforting, especially since previous administrations had been ambivalent, if not silent, about their policy towards the Mexican community living abroad.

In fact, Cárdenas’ views on repatriation and his overall attitude on the need to encourage Mexicans abroad, as opposed to ignoring or discounting them, gave him favor among the Mexican-American population in the United States during the late ‘30s. On Memorial Day in 1938, for example, he used the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (National Revolutionary Party), or PNR’s radio station, XEFO, and gave a speech in English to the Mexican community of San Antonio, Texas. This broadcast, which originated in Mexico City, was re-transmitted for those

⁵⁹ AGN, LCR, Expediente 512.3/16.

⁶⁰ *La Prensa*, January 23, 1936, p. 3

who did not have the opportunity to hear it by Mexican stations in Monterrey and Tamaulipas.⁶¹ Despite the fact that its primary purpose was to extend cordial greetings to the other country, *La Prensa* indicated that this speech, along with the one of the previous year, had strong political significance. Radio was utilized by Mexican government leaders to send a greeting to the Mexican population in the United States. By and large, transmissions such as these served as reminders that their government was aware of their current situation and was concerned with their return migration.

Spanish-language newspapers also played a large role in preserving and sustaining Mexican music, patriotism and to a lesser extent, the Spanish broadcasts of English-language radio stations. During their Spanish-language “block programming,” radio stations also hosted live radio programs from theaters across the U.S. Southwest during the ‘30s. In 1934, for example, San Antonio’s *Teatro Nacional* began a daily broadcast called, *La Hora Anáhuac*. This program was transmitted over station KABC and was sponsored by “Dávila Glass Works” whose manager, José Dávila Jr., was in support of the use of radio to diffuse Mexican culture and art.⁶² *La Hora Anáhuac* aired for more than a decade and was a popular radio program that attracted high quality Mexican singers. In 1935 when Mexican artists Ana María Fernández, Pedro Vargas and Raulito gave a performance in the Municipal Auditorium in San Antonio, for instance, they visited KABC and gave a special audition dedicated to the Mexican community of

⁶¹ *La Prensa*, May 29, 1938, p. 1.

⁶² *La Prensa*, May 10, 1936, p. 5.

the city.⁶³ Until the 1950s, Spanish-language broadcasts over English-language radio helped preserve Mexican music within the older generation of Mexican immigrants in the United States.

Through the Spanish-language press, the Mexican community learned everything there was to know about local English-language and Mexican radio stations: their broadcasting hours, what music they would play, if a Mexican singer or artist was going to appear live on the program, or if a special Consulate member or head of state was going to give a speech during a holiday or special event. In 1938, when the “*Casa Mexicana de Musica Tomas Acuña*” of San Antonio, Texas advertised the latest model of Philco Radios, for instance, their ad read: “Listen to the programs from Mexico City with a PHILCO Radio!”⁶⁴ Lozano’s newspapers assisted the formation of a consumer culture of Mexican products by Mexican immigrants and their children in the United States. Following the Second World War, for example, Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexicans living in the United States were avid patrons of *mariachi* records and movies. Jesús Jáuregui notes that in the 1940s “Our *paisanos* were regular consumers of the representations of Lucha Reyes, Tito Guizar and Jorge Negrete.”⁶⁵

Lozano’s close circle of friends and business partners included Mexican entrepreneurs and radio station owners in Northern Mexico. In fact, the bond he had with the Mexican radio scene was apparent during the 1930s when the programming and activities of Mexican radio stations were announced in the pages of *La Prensa* or in *La Opinión*. His newspapers partnered

⁶³ *La Prensa*, September 29, 1935, p. 6.

⁶⁴ *La Prensa*, August 31, 1936.

⁶⁵ Jesús Jáuregui, *El mariachi: símbolo musical de México* (México, DF: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2007), 378.

with Mexican radio stations in their efforts to reach Mexican citizens and “transport them back to Mexico” through music.

Radio stations located in Monterrey, Nuevo León, such as XET, advertised their programming in *La Prensa*. Nicknamed *El Pregonero del Norte* (The proclaimer/announcer of the north), XET boasted that they were the favorite among Mexican residents in the United States. The station’s advertisements read: “Are you Mexican? Do you like Mexican music? The most listened station. The news of greatest concern. The most entertaining programs are diffused daily in northern Mexico by XET.”⁶⁶ From 1937 to 1938, *La Prensa* sponsored a radio program over the station once a week. The “Radio program of ‘*La Prensa*,’” featured Mexican singers and bands, orchestras, duets and trios which sang traditional and popular music. The advertisements for the program read, “XET the favorite station among Mexican residents of the United States...You could ‘Transport yourself to your homeland’ by ‘listening to XET.’”⁶⁷

La Prensa frequently announced live concerts aired from radio stations in the Northeastern states of Chihuahua and Tamaulipas. XEMU of Piedras Negras, Coahuila, for example, featured a concert twice a month in which the students of an acclaimed piano instructor, Esperanza Delgado, debuted.⁶⁸ In 1940, to commemorate their third anniversary, XEMU, along with the *Club Recreativo* “Piedras Negras,” hosted a grand ball in honor of the people who supported the station living in the state of Coahuila and Texas. Months earlier, the

⁶⁶ *La Prensa*, July 4, 1937, p. 2; *La Prensa*, September 23, 1937.

⁶⁷ *La Prensa*, July 4, 1937, p. 2.

⁶⁸ *La Prensa*, December 17, 1939, p. 4.

station had organized a *concurso de simpatía* (beauty pageant) among its listeners and the winner, Miss Azalia Acuña of San Antonio, Texas, was selected as the queen of the festivity.⁶⁹ Interestingly enough, all but one of the members of the “royal party,” Otilia Domínguez, who was from Hondo, Coahuila, was from cities in southern Texas.

The Spanish-language press helped Mexican citizens stay tuned to Mexican programming and assisted Mexican radio station owners in fulfilling their goal of broadcasting into the United States. At times, these papers also saved new commercial radio stations from going under. On August 2, 1935, for instance, Carlos M. Kennedy, the owner and operator of station XEAN of Ensenada, wrote to the Ministry of Communications and Public Works in Mexico City requesting to increase the power of his station so that he could have enough advertisements from the United States and the surrounding Northwestern states like Sonora and Chihuahua. He noted that only local businesses were using his station, since it was not beneficial for foreign companies due to the short reach of his station. In addition, the station did not broadcast live music, since it could not afford to pay the artists wages and used phonographic records during its programming instead.⁷⁰ Three months later, Kennedy wrote to the Minister of Communications and Public Works again noting that he had read in *La Opinión*, of Los Angeles, that a commercial radio station in Hermosillo, Sonora had been authorized to transmit with 1000 watts and was assigned the same frequency as his station, XEAN. Kennedy wrote that listeners had informed him that during the tests that XEBA had done, they had been unable to hear his station.

The Buying Power of the Mexican Community

⁶⁹ *La Prensa*, March 24, 1940, p. 5.

⁷⁰ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 22/131.6(722)/5.

As the second-generation came of age during the '30s and '40s and participated in the Second World War, some retained the practices of their parents of listening to Mexican radio stations. Men serving in the U.S. Army or Navy, for instance, would listen to Mexican radio stations in the middle of the night while stationed in places as far North as Dutch Harbor, Alaska. This generation, which navigated two cultures and languages “used radio to live within that reality.”⁷¹

Second-generation Mexican women, either as *Pachucas* or *Pochas*, had an ambiguous relationship with mass media. In the form of Hollywood movies, dime novels and romance magazines mass media entered their daily lives and led many of them to fantasize and covet the lifestyles promoted in these publications. Thus, as Vicki Ruiz notes, during the 1930s the media became an “agent of Americanization” influencing the way these women navigated between the U.S. mainstream society and Mexican cultural values.⁷²

Radio, which was an important tool and resource, oftentimes influenced the acculturation of Mexican women. Aside from motivating people to purchase a home radio receiver, the growing consumer culture of the first half of the twentieth century also

⁷¹ Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez, “‘Embracing the ether’ The use of radio by the Latino World War II Generation” in Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez and Emilio Zamora, eds., *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 22.

⁷² Vicki L. Ruiz, “Star Struck’: Acculturation, Adolescence and the Mexican American Woman, 1920-1950” in Elliot West and Paula Petrik, eds., *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 2.

caused rifts between young women and their mothers.⁷³ Women were in the center of familial conflicts within Mexican homes in the United States. In Southern California, first-generation parents became concerned with the effects cinema had on their young daughters as they began to frequent the cinema more and more in the 1930s and 1940s. In response, many parents desired to exercise control over the lives of their daughters, especially when they wanted to be in public un-chaperoned.⁷⁴ Young women battled against men like Zeferino Ramirez, for instance, who would not let his daughters attend an English-language or Mexican theater, as he considered what took place in those establishments as “immoral.” Instead, he wanted his five children to attain the best education possible and not be artists but industrial workers. A muleteer from Zacatecas, Mexico, Zeferino believed his daughters “need to learn to work in order to sustain themselves as if they didn’t have any money and were never going to get married.”⁷⁵

As consumers, Mexican immigrant women in the United States also maintained close ties with Mexican music through the mass media. In particular, Americanization campaigns took into consideration the role of mass media in the assimilation of Mexican

⁷³ Vicki L. Ruiz, “Star Struck’: Acculturation, Adolescence and the Mexican American Woman, 1920-1950’” in Elliot West and Paula Petrik, eds., *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 2.

⁷⁴ Vicki L. Ruiz has written on this topic see, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and “Star Struck’: Acculturation, Adolescence and the Mexican American Woman, 1920-1950’” in Elliot West and Paula Petrik, eds., *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 61-80.

⁷⁵ Manuel Gamio, Notes gathered for his book, *Mexican Immigration to the United States* Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Reel 1.

immigrants and worked hard at changing the cultural practices of Mexican immigrants. To begin with, one of the challenges reformers faced was getting Mexican women out of the house. In their opinion, it was important for women to leave and attend English-language classes, as language was the gateway to an “American way of life.” Yet when women stopped attending the classes for a number of reasons, reformers blamed the patriarchal Mexican culture and the traditional and antiquarian ways of Mexican men. One factor which was overlooked as a cause for the drop in attendance, which could have contributed to the resistance in “assimilation,” was that at home women had radios, records and music.

Mexican women might have been isolated from English-language culture, but they were entertained nonetheless. In the late 1920s, Maria Dolores de Aguilar, of San Antonio, Texas, for instance, would “only go to the theater when Mexican vaudeville shows are in town,” which traveled throughout the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico occasionally. Admitting that she enjoyed “Mexican music,” the most, Aguilar noted that at home “in my phonograph I always have Mexican songs.”⁷⁶ Regardless of their gender or class status, the Mexican immigrant generation faithfully listened to Mexican radio stations during the 1940s and through the 1950s when their children were being influenced by rhythm and blues and rock ‘n’ roll.

The Mexican Consulate

The physical movement of people, whether by necessity or not, is accompanied by the

⁷⁶ Manuel Gamio, Notes gathered for his book, *Mexican Immigration to the United States* Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Reel 1.

movement of their customs, traditions, foods, and other cultural manifestations like their music. Mexican communities also made use of the Mexican Consulate which made it possible for Mexican immigrants to listen to Mexican bands and singers or to tune in to Mexican radio programming. In their posts as diplomatic agents, Consuls were linked to the larger events taking place within the post-revolutionary Mexican national theater. Moreover, the cultural activities sponsored by the Consulate require further investigation, as they reflected the government's policy towards its former residents. Correspondence between the Mexican immigrant population, Consulate offices and the Ministry of Foreign Relations proves not only that the overseas population was attune to radio; but, that they took interest in the content of the messages that official and commercial stations were projecting.

Since the nineteenth century, Mexican Consulate offices in the United States had served as institutions entrusted to defend the rights of Mexicans abroad and preserve their cultural integrity. In Los Angeles, for instance, during the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican Consulates gave aid to repatriated Mexicans, helped organize agricultural unions for better wages and working conditions, and assisted the establishment of the *Comité de Beneficiencia Mexicana* (The Mexican Welfare Society) which gave aid, shelter, medical care and assistance to those in need.

In Mexican communities throughout the nation, Consulates also served a cultural function and were also behind the establishment of a range of activities and events including the sponsorship of baseball clubs, church organizations, and mutual aid societies which promoted the construction of *México de Afuera* (Mexico Outside of Mexico). During the world-wide economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s, in particular, Consular activities reflected the interests, needs, and aspirations of not just Mexican immigrants, but U.S. born Mexicans as

well.⁷⁷

In the United States, Mexican Consulate offices spearheaded a number of educational efforts such as building schools, libraries, and focusing on teaching the Spanish language and Mexican History. Some argue that these were failed projects in the attempt to control the process of the acculturation of Mexicans in the United States.⁷⁸ Yet in doing so, they fostered cultural activities which Mexican immigrants in the U.S. had consistently looked to Mexico for, such as concerts and music. With the help of mass communications, they made the post-revolutionary government's cultural project advance within the Mexican communities of the United States. Both Mexican and English-language radio stations, in fact, were included in the activities used to strengthen a sense of national identity among those living beyond the geographical borders of Mexico.

In particular, a number of first generation Mexican immigrants in the United States longed to perpetuate the traditions of their upbringing and extend the true meaning of *Patria* (Motherland), to their children. After all, oftentimes some of them were called *Pochos*. Music,

⁷⁷ Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 7-66. For more on this topic see, Francisco E. Balderrama, *In Defense of La Raza: The Mexican Consulate and the Mexican Community, 1929-1936* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982); George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 108-125. For an analysis on the work of the consulate in the late nineteenth century through the Mexican Revolution see, Juan Gómez-Quinones, "Piedras Contra la Luna, México en Aztlán y Aztlán en México: Chicano-Mexican Relations and the Mexican Consulates, 1900-1920" in James W. Wilkie, Michael C. Meyer, and Edna Monzón de Wilkie eds., *Contemporary Mexico: Papers of the Fourth International Congress of Mexican History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

⁷⁸ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 109.

in effect, was an avenue to make this connection and Mexican communities leaned on grass-roots organizations to honor and remember the homeland through music. Organizations affiliated with the Consulate, in particular, dominated the public life of the Mexican community during the 1920s. In the 1920s, for example, it was custom practice for local groups, such as the “*Union Mutualista*” (Mutual Aid Society), to sponsor *Veladas Musicales*, evening gatherings in which a variety of songs were sung by members of the community.

The support of the Consulate was displayed when Mexican bands toured cities in Texas and California, which often took place during a Mexican holiday. As extensions of the government, the Consulates were there to ensure that the principles and ideals of the Mexican Revolution were making headway in the United States. This was evident in patriotic festivals in the United States organized by the Consulate offices. At times, Consulate workers in Northern Mexico crossed the border into the United States to attend important holidays or patriotic festivals organized by the Mexican immigrant community in Texas or California. After attending a Mexican Police Band concert on December 5, 1935, in Laredo, Texas, for instance, Daniel X. Duarte, migration delegate of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, wrote the following report: “This is the best way for those who are away to remember with enthusiasm the Motherland and to see that the Revolution has not disregarded any sector as it has progressed forward.”⁷⁹

In some instances, these were memorable gatherings. In May of 1925, for instance, Arturo M. Elias, who worked for the Mexican Consulate in Houston, Texas, reported that when the Mexican Police Band, led by acclaimed musical composer Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, played during a local congress the performance drew a crowd of more than 10,000 people. Elias noted

⁷⁹ AGN, LCR, Expediente 135.2/146.

that after the concert hundreds of Mexicans walked in unison from the auditorium to the *Houston Post* offices, where the band performed several numbers that were broadcast over the radio. During their two week tour in Texas, the group gave concerts in prestigious hotels and theaters in San Antonio and Laredo.⁸⁰

Emerging forms of technology aided the community's gatherings. In some instances, Mutual Aid Societies and Consulate offices relied on radio to demonstrate their commitment to Mexico; as in November 1925 during the III Congress of the Representatives for the Blue Cross Brigades and the Honorific Commissions of Texas and Oklahoma. On that occasion, a radio transmitter was placed in the auditorium so that the speeches and Mexican music would be heard in the surrounding area.⁸¹

Mexican Consulate Officials were attentive to the efforts of the government in having the Mexican community hear music and state-sponsored bulletins. In December of 1926, the Mexican Consulate office in Tucson wrote to the radio department and informed them that in order to take full advantage of the Mexican propaganda that the Ministry of Public Education delivered through XFX in the state of Arizona, the station needed to broadcast between 480 and 500 meters. This frequency change, in their opinion, would allow Arizonians to listen to XFX without any interference from local stations in the United States. The Ministry realized that changing its frequency to serve the needs of one state would mean that other areas would not be able to listen to their station, and responded by transmitting special musical concerts dedicated to

⁸⁰ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ramo Gobernación, Fondo Dirección General de Gobierno (DGG), Expediente 205-H-22.

⁸¹ AGN, OC, Expediente 429-S-14.

specific regions of the United States. In addition, the radio office asked Consul Officials to indicate the days that local stations were off the air in order to dedicate a special concert of “pro-Mexico propaganda.”⁸²

In fact, during the 1930s, Consulate Officials tuned in and collaborated with Mexican radio stations on a frequent basis. On December 4, 1930, for example, in partnership with commercial station XEW, XFX sponsored a concert given by Mexico City High School students. This broadcast was dedicated to Mexican teachers and students living on the border between Mexico and the United States and the Mexican communities of the U.S. Southwest. Weeks prior to the event, Consulate offices in California, Arizona, and Texas informed their communities of this special broadcast, whose goal was in line with the mission of the SEP: using music to connect Mexican students and their families in both locations.⁸³

Because Spanish-language radio stations did not exist in the United States during the 1930s, at times the Consulate members crossed the U.S. border into Mexico to make a live appearance in a Mexican commercial radio station. Such was the case for the Consul of Laredo, Texas who traveled to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas on November, 1937 when station XENT transmitted a series of music concerts dedicated to President Lázaro Cárdenas and the Mexican Army. The transmission was conducted in an effort to bridge the relationship between Mexican soldiers and workers and was rebroadcast over local stations in the surrounding area. In addition to the music selection, which included bands, orchestras and the appearance of popular singing duet “*Las Hermanitas Herrera*,” the Consul of Laredo gave a speech in English and Spanish

⁸² *Boletín de la SEP*, Tomo VI, no. 1 (1927): 153.

⁸³ AHSEP Exp. A-4/253.3 (73).

during this concert.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The 1930s proved to be a crucial time in the configuration of Spanish-language radio broadcasting in the United States and, more importantly, in the formation of a community of listeners, a network of *radioescuchas* who relied on Mexican songs, cultural programs and live performances to create a sense of community based on a multilayered set of messages advanced by the Mexican consulates, the Spanish-language music industry, the cultural policies of commercial radio stations and Spanish-language newspapers in the United States.

The presence of grass-roots organizations like Mutual Aid societies, Spanish-language newspapers and “block programming” over local radio stations underpinned the unity of the Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American population and aided the development of the social activities of Mexican communities in Los Angeles and San Antonio. Moreover, an unintended consequence of radio broadcasting was the revelation of the buying power of Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexicans.

⁸⁴ *La Prensa*, November 2, 1937, p. 5.

Chapter V

From Michoacán to the Million Dollar: Men, Women and Music in the Transnational Radio Industry

The artistic careers of Maria and Margarita Padilla, the members of the Mexican singing duet, *Las Hermanas Padilla*, began on a summer afternoon in 1936 at a park in Pico Rivera, California. One day, as Maria recalled, “they set up stands [in the park] and we were walking around barefoot by a small lake there...then, they announced over a microphone that there was going to be a singing contest and my brother asked, ‘Why don’t you enter?’” Terrified, Maria said the suggestion immediately brought tears to her eyes. However, since she was familiar with the *corridos* and Mexican songs that her two older sisters, Margarita and Rita, frequently sung at home, she agreed to participate and sang the ballad “*El Caballo Bayo*” alongside Margarita. Hours later, the teenaged sisters went home with the first place prize.¹

The events that transpired that Sunday afternoon were common among Mexican communities throughout the United States. Since the nineteenth century, families from California to Texas spent evenings and weekends outdoors at picnics, celebrations and festivals featuring food vendors, artistic contests, popular dances, and athletic competitions. At nights, in the local or tent theater, they attended film screenings, live musical performances or local variety acts where comedy sketches were frequently displayed. What made that particular day memorable for the Padilla family was that Ramón B. Arnáiz, a radio announcer and president of

¹ Interview with Maria Padilla, March 15, 2009, conducted by the author.

the local chapter of the “*Beneficiencia Mexicana*,” a Mexican welfare society, was walking around in the crowd at the exact moment that Maria and Margarita were singing. Taking note of the girls’ innate talent, Arnáiz approached their father to ask if his daughters could perform in the Spanish-language radio program he hosted over local English-language radio station KMTR. Mr. Padilla hesitated, realizing that having his daughters pursue career as “artists” might tarnish the reputation of the Catholic family, but he agreed nonetheless. Weeks later, Maria and Margarita debuted in KMTR singing the Mexican ballads and songs they had learned from their mother at home. Within a year, she and her sister recorded albums with major record labels such as Blue Bird, Columbia and Vocallion; shortly after, the two Mexican-born singers took up artistic tours throughout California, Mexico and South America.²

Las Hermanas Padilla’s success story is a microcosm of what took place to dozens of aspiring singers, actors, and performers within Mexican communities of the United States during the twentieth century. Maria and Margarita quickly rose to stardom because of the importance of Mexican music to the Mexican immigrant and U.S. born Mexican population, the persistence and vision of entrepreneurs such as Mr. Arnáiz, and thanks to mass media instruments like radio that diffused their music. This chapter analyzes some of the careers of men and women in the radio industry including composers, interpreters and actresses. The radio industry, which became professionalized in the 1930s, created new spaces and opportunities for men and women. In radio, men could assert their masculinity as broadcasters or through singing, performing and moving the audience with patriotic songs while women were at a crossroads about the perception

² A similar situation took place in Texas with the guitarist and singer Lydia Mendoza who was “discovered” by Manuel J. Cortéz, a pioneer of Mexican-American radio broadcasting in the 1930s. For more on this see, Chris Strachwitz, and James Nicolopoulos, *Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), 76-78.

by the upright Catholic society if their work was considered “decent” or “indecent.” On one hand, they had to fight against the negative stereotypes associated with artists, such as loose morality and extravagant lifestyles, and on the other, there were new spaces open for them thanks to radio which they could pursue. Thus, radio created new spaces offering men and women the opportunity to step outside of pre-determined gender roles.

The Mexican Radio Industry in the 1930s

The professionalization of the radio industry during the 1930s was possible thanks to a number of skilled workers including commentators, artistic directors, composers, actors, singers, telephone operators, technicians and engineers. Some of these positions, such as artistic directors, emerged as the industry expanded; others, such as telephone operators, were pre-existing jobs for which workers generally did not have to make any adjustments when they transitioned into working for the radio. Before commercial radio appeared in the ‘30s, workers in this sector were admired for their valor and passion for the radio. In August 1924, for instance, station CYL, *El Universal Ilustrado-La Casa del Radio* received a number of compliments by the press for their live radio programs, which at the time included symphonic concerts, piano recitals and orchestras. The editor noted that even though the executors and singers were all amateurs, they “give themselves to the art out of pure love for it.”³

In the 1930s and 1940s, radio was a growing industry offering a range of new job opportunities for men and women. During the professionalization of the industry, numberless aspiring singers and actors traveled to Mexico City to seek fortune and fame in a radio station. Once in the capital, those who were fortunate enough to sign a contract with a radio station

³ *El Universal*, August 16, 1924.

became part of a new and promising industry. In the 1920s, women in Mexico were entering the workforce in greater numbers and were influenced by modernity and the technological developments of the times, such as the typewriter at their place of work or the radio at home. Had it not been for the rapid growth of radio in the following decade, the singers, musicians and broadcasters with whom the public was well acquainted would not have existed. Instead of the singer known as *La Torcasita*, wrote the editor of *Radiolandia*, “we would have a more or less useful stenographer, which, as such, would not earn more than two or three pesos a day.”⁴

The radio project extended outside of the capital city and by the 1930s, radio stations in the provinces were flourishing. Commercial stations in the states of Sonora, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León and Veracruz recruited a large number of singers and artists and sent them to Mexico City if they wanted to test their luck making records or gain a contract with a large commercial station. By 1930, radio was part of daily life for a large percentage of Mexico’s rural population, like José Sánchez, who was operating an experimental station in his village of Mineral del Monte, Hidalgo. In 1934, Sánchez wrote a letter to the Minister of Communications and Public Works in Mexico City requesting that he be allowed to change the frequency of his station in order to satisfy the curiosity that radio had brought to his town. “The concerts have been accepted by society and the general public of this city,” he wrote. The broadcasts, however, had awakened great enthusiasm within a “great number of youth and young women (*señoritas*) who are fans of singing and music, who ask me to continue to lend them my station and have more transmissions.”⁵

⁴ *Radiolandia*, March 10, 1943.

⁵ Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas

In some instances, the careers of some singers began in stations in the provinces. For example, the artistic careers of Paz and Esperanza Águila, or *Las Hermanas Águila*, began in their home state of Jalisco. In 1934, the sisters befriended a man who worked for station XED of Guadalajara. “One day he invited us to play football,” Esperanza recalled, “but first we had to accompany him to his [radio] program. His duty was to play the piano for one hour. It was easy for him to ask us to sing so we did.” Even though the sisters had never sung into a microphone or appeared in a radio station before, they enjoyed the experience. Their friend, on the other hand, received a warning from the station’s owner. “Two days later he was reprimanded. They accused him of playing records instead of appearing in his program. When it became clear that we weren’t ‘records’ they invited us to sing again,” she said.⁶ Within a month, *Las Hermanas Águila* traveled to Mexico City where they became very successful artists singing for various commercial radio stations, recording albums with major labels and touring North and South America.

The Performance Industries and Women

In Mexico, women had been drawn to the life of the theater and pursued careers as singers, dancers and performers since the nineteenth century. This path went “against the conventional prejudices and lies of the female world, which directly aim to keep her as a ‘servant’, and ‘dependent’ upon others.” Early pioneers were women like Celia Padilla, who had thrown “herself into the theater, to gain a defined personality and ‘independence.’” Mexican

(Hereafter AGN, SCOP), Expediente 22/131.6 (724.6)/1

⁶ Bertha Zacatecas, *Vidas en el aire. Pioneros de la radio en México* (México, DF: Editorial Diana, 1996), 33-34.

women working in the theater, like Padilla, established the path for vaudeville actors and radio singers years later.⁷

For women, the radio industry opened up new possibilities. Working in radio physically placed them in a new and unique position, the stage or studio. In Mexico's provinces and across the border into the United States, women toured with *Teatro de Revista* companies, singing and acting in radio studios, night clubs and theaters during the 1930s and 1940s. Because transmissions were heard all over the nation and in cities like San Antonio and Los Angeles, their voices had the capacity to reach private places: homes, bedrooms, living rooms, cabarets, night clubs and other unknown spaces where "decent" women were not physically allowed to enter.

In fact, the advent of mass media of press and radio during the early twentieth century represented a permanent intrusion into the domestic space which broke down the distinctions between public and private spheres. As scholars have pointed out, the new mass means of communications like radio, in particular, were able to reach an audience of women on a daily basis; allowing governments, businesses and commercial stations access to an entirely new audience.⁸ In Mexico, women responded either by staying at home glued to their receivers as they listened to the voice of the crooner "make love" to them through soft romantic music or, by finding ways to travel to the cities and begin a career in the budding industry.⁹ In most cases,

⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*, December 17, 1925.

⁸ Victoria De Grazia, *How fascism ruled women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁹ Elizabeth Joy Hayes, *Radio Nation: Communication, Popular Culture, and Nationalism in*

the women who arrived in Mexico City from the surrounding states to work in a radio station had little or no experience behind a microphone. Such was the story of the singer, “Guadalupe la Chinaca,” who moved to the capital because she was escaping familial obligations in her native state of Oaxaca.¹⁰

As middle-class women entered the labor force in Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s as teachers, secretaries, and office clerks, a segment of them got into radio and took jobs as singers, actresses, operators and programmers. Working in radio had advantages that the theater and cinema lacked, like the privacy of singing in a studio. Yet, in the radio industry, women had to overcome the same barriers which other working women in Mexico had to endure; namely, the beliefs around traditional sex and gender roles in society that confined them to the home and made public life disreputable. There was an indisputable level of control by the government, which put an end to programs with “immoral” content. In the 1940s, censorship was commonplace in the entertainment and mass media sector. In radio programs like *Radionovelas* -the antecedents to the Mexican soap opera- “we were not allowed to use certain words like divorce, cancer, and others,” noted Rita Rey a radio actress at the time. In order to not receive reproach by the government, radio stations managers told actors and actresses they had to keep certain morals and, at times, “controlled our personal lives,” as Emma Telmo, one of the most celebrated radio actresses in Mexico City during the 1940s, admitted.¹¹

Mexico, 1920-1950 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 23.

¹⁰ Bertha Zacatecas, *Vidas en el aire*, 46.

¹¹ Bertha Zacatecas, *Vidas en el aire*, 189. For more on the morality campaigns of this era see, Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political*

Radio offered women employment and an opportunity to leave their home. Many of them began their careers in radio when the industry was still forming and salaries were not given to all employees. In the mid-1930s, when she was only thirteen years old, for example, Raquel Moreno began singing and acting in one of Mexico City's commercial radio stations for several years without pay. As the radio industry grew and the opportunities to go abroad opened up, the performer landed a contract to travel to the United States. There she took a job singing Mexican and Latin American folkloric songs for the CBS short wave radio station in New York City. Given her previous position as a non-paid employee, it was understandable that in the mid-1940s her foremost goal included to "live, travel, have fun and above all make money."¹²

Some began their careers very young, like the radio actress and singer, Manolita Arriola, who was discovered in 1931 at the age of twelve by the artistic director of XEW while attending a live radio program with her mother. At the time, the station transmitted from a studio above the *Cine Olimpia* in downtown Mexico City. "You had to climb a lot of stairs," Arriola recalled, "I was sitting taking a break when Pedro de Lille walked by and asked me if I sang. They needed a girl for a radio program. He gave me an audition and I passed."¹³

For women with a background in theater, radio opened up new career opportunities. By the 1930s, it became possible for singers to alternate between working in the radio and the theater. The rise to fame of Maria Antonieta Peregrino, otherwise known as *Toña la Negra* (Toña the dark skinned woman), is another example of this case. Toña, who had brilliant success

History of Comic Books in Mexico (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

¹² ¡Oiga!, May 13, 1944.

¹³ Ibid., 33-34.

in both the radio and the theater industry, began her artistic career in 1932 during a contest of *jarocho* music, or music from the state of Veracruz, the home of the singer. According to the story, Agustín Lara attended this competition and, after hearing the performance of Peregrino, advised her to accompany him to Mexico City where she could develop her talent as a singer. Once in the capital, she debuted in the *Teatro Esperanza Iris* and on radio station XEW.¹⁴

Toña was admired so much by the public that the following year she was on tour with burlesque plays written and composed by Lara. Shortly after her first tour, *El Universal Ilustrado* interviewed the emerging star and asked her about her future plans. She answered “learn much, since, I don’t want to only dedicate myself to *sones* and tropical songs, I want to be a singer to the fullest.”¹⁵ Because the ambition of many women at the time was to be a *vedette*, a soloist combination of singer, dancer and actress, it was possible for a singer to have ambitions to be successful in both theater and radio.

One of the multiple ways a radio star was born in Mexico during the 1930s, according to the nation’s leading newspapers, was to have an “artistic godfather.” For women, these tended to be older men who were composers and sometimes artistic directors and took them to the radio studio for auditions. An example was Rosa del Rio, who tried out for the prestigious commercial station XEQ thanks to an interview with her “artistic godfather,” the composer Manuel

¹⁴ *El País de las Tandas. Teatro de Revista 1900-1940*. (México DF: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, 1984), 130.

¹⁵ *El Universal Ilustrado*, February 23, 1933, p. 16.

Rentería, arranged for her.¹⁶

After 1930, when commercial radio stations began to thrive throughout the nation, a large number of women were drawn to radio, seeking employment as singers, actresses, interpreters or even telephone operators. Yet, the unfamiliarity that the general public had with the new industry led some, particularly well-to-do conservative families, to associate radio singers and actors with burlesque and vaudeville actors, or even cabaret dancers. In turn, before standing in front of the microphones for the first time, let alone touring abroad, aspiring radio singers faced opposition from their families over their line of work.

The first barrier Mexican women pursuing a career in radio had to overcome was the concept that women could not sing in public. Often, families held conservative beliefs about women singing outdoors, especially the generation of parents whose children came of age after the Mexican Revolution. Tejano music star Lydia Mendoza, for instance, remembers that her mother frequently sang at home when she was a small child. “If she were to have had the chance, she would have made a big career for herself as a great singer because she had an exceptionally pretty voice,” recalled Mendoza, “But her family would never have allowed her to sing in public, only at home.”¹⁷ Those who chose to sing and act in radio stations, then, challenged the expectations about female behavior in public that was set in place by some Mexican families.

Another way a family interfered with the careers of women in radio was by questioning

¹⁶ *Radiolandia*, April 15, 1942.

¹⁷ Chris Strachwitz and James Nicolopoulos, *Lydia Mendoza*, 11.

the respectability of their jobs as radio singers. In the summer of 1936, before they became *Las Hermanas Padilla*, Maria and Margarita were young girls attending a festival at a park in Southern California. Instead of approaching them directly, Maria noted that the radio announcer, Ramón Arnaiz, asked their father if she and her sister could appear on his Spanish-language radio program in Los Angeles. Initially, Mr. Padilla was apprehensive about his daughters becoming “artists,” and the negative connotation this had for a strong Catholic family who had fled Mexico during the Cristero Rebellion, a time when the Mexican government turned against the Catholic Church. Yet, to the delight of his daughters, he eventually gave in to the idea.¹⁸

In Mexico City, parents of talented female singers responded in a similar way to the idea of having a daughter become an “artist.” Radio actress Amparo Montes recalled that, after her first audition for station XEQ in 1941, she received offers to sing in various cabarets throughout Mexico City. “As if my dad would let me sing in a place like that,” Montes noted, “During those times even singing over the radio was a tremendous thing for parents.”¹⁹

Mr. Montes’ or Mr. Padilla’s concerns for their daughters were not unwarranted. During the first half of the twentieth century having a single daughter work in the theater was not an honorable career to many “decent” Mexican families. Working for a radio station could be a more respectable career than the theater, but not completely free of scrutiny. To the older generation, working in radio took women to “dishonorable” places. In Mexico, the oppressive climate of the 1940s, which was strengthened by Catholicism, viewed women who worked in the entertainment business as “lost women.” Women in radio were grouped together with ballerinas,

¹⁸ Interview with Maria Padilla, March 15, 2009, conducted by the author.

¹⁹ Bertha Zacatecas, *Vidas en el aire*, 165.

cabaret singers and *rumberas*, those who “embody femininity with a negative sign.”²⁰

Additionally, an obstacle women faced was the concept that after marriage and children, working in radio was no longer needed. Since many women in Mexico began singing in radio in their teens or early ‘20s most were single when they began their careers. But years later after they made a name for themselves, women who worked in radio had to ascribe to the expectations placed on other women, such as leaving or suspending work to have children in order to protect the marriage and continue to adhere to the duties of the house. This was valued more importantly than a job. Those who returned to work after childbirth or divorce confronted the criticism of the public and, at times, even their family.

This was true in Mexico and within the Mexican immigrant community of the United States. Lydia Mendoza recalled that after she was married and had her first daughter, her friends and family told her husband, “that I was married now, and that I had to dedicate myself to him and to my home, to my little girl.” Lydia, desiring to continue to sing and tour the United States, wrestled against ideas that “going around singing wasn’t the proper life for a respectable married woman.” Concerning her husband, she said “They put it into his head like that, that he shouldn’t permit contracts and the he shouldn’t allow me to perform in public.”²¹ In the 1930s, as the level of professionalization increased in radio with the surge in commercial radio stations, women were sought specifically for different tasks: singers, actresses, secretaries, and, most importantly, interpreters.

²⁰ Elsa Muniz, “Del micrófono al aire, trayectorias de quimeras: Lupita García (1930-1950)” in Lucia Melgar-Palacios, ed., *Persistencia y Cambio: acercamientos a la historia de las mujeres en México* (México, DF: El Colegio de México, 2008), 245.

²¹ Chris Strachwitz, and James Nicolopoulos, *Lydia Mendoza*, 101.

Interpreters

Within the Mexican commercial radio industry, one of the most coveted positions for women was that of an interpreter. In the 1930s and 1940s, while radio composers like Mario Talavera and Agustín Lara wrote *boleros*, station managers and artistic directors sought male and female voices that truly carried the emotions of their songs. Being a radio singer and an interpreter were not one in the same, as the latter implied that among dozens of prospects, one person was the only suitable voice of a composer. Therefore, given his contentious and romantic lyrics that made him a popular figure in Mexico's music scene, it was not surprising that throughout the nation women of all ages dreamed of being one of Agustín Lara's interpreters.

Since the early '30s, Lara had worked with a handful of male and female interpreters. If this position became open, auditions were held in the studios of radio stations in Mexico City. In 1942 during one of these try-outs, hundreds of women lined up in front of XEW's station on Ayuntamiento Street. In the crowd was Alma Graciela, a 15 year-old girl who had left school because she "listened over 'W' that Lara was looking for an interpreter." Once her parents found out she had gone to the audition they reproached her and advised her to pursue another career. Unwilling to let go of her teenage dream, Graciela insisted on being part of the industry; a year later she was singing before the microphones of XEB, earning a meager salary.²²

Graciela was successful as a radio singer, but not lucky enough to have been chosen as the coveted interpreter of Agustín Lara. Those who were, like Aurora Muñoz, usually had prior experience as singers and entertainers. Muñoz was a Mexican singer who had spent more than a decade in the United States where she had landed a record contract for "Decca" and had

²² *Radiolandia*, April 16, 1943, p. 6.

experience in the theater, radio, and even cinema. In 1944, then, when Lara invited her to interpret some of his latest compositions in Mexico City, she accepted. “Imagine, I was so happy,” she said, “I was always a great admirer of Agustín Lara’s music and I never thought I would get to be one of his interpreters.”²³

Women’s appearances in public places of entertainment as spectators created a reaction by the public. Between 1920 and 1940, movie houses in Mexico were places where morality was in question, the threat of violence was at hand, and at the same time, young men could display their masculine behavior. Female moviegoers in the urban centers who frequented this new space did not find much support at the movie theaters for a variety of embodied identities. For them, going to the movies meant affiliating themselves with a single vision of femininity: the modern girl, also known as the flapper, the *chica moderna* and the *pelona*.²⁴

Broadcasters and Commentators

For men, the new space etched out by the commercial radio industry became a place for them to define their masculinity. During the amateur radio era of the early 1920s, men viewed their engagement in radio as feminine activities that were permissible for men, such as chatting and eavesdropping.²⁵ In Mexico, the *Liga Central Mexicana de Radio*, whose membership

²³ ¡Oiga!, June 17, 1944.

²⁴ For more on the *Chica moderna* see, Joanne Herschfield, *Imagining la chica moderna: women, nation, and visual culture in Mexico, 1917-1936* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

²⁵ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American imagination, from Amos ‘n’ Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York City: Times Books, 1999), 50.

exceeded more than 300 people in 1923, was a place for these gendered actions to be exercised. Working for the radio as a broadcaster was legitimized in several ways, but the government fused the cultural project with professionalism through the examination conducted by the Ministry of Communications and Public Works, SCOP. Male broadcasters joined radio from a number of places. Some had multiple jobs, like “baritone-boxer” Manuel Flores, who split his time between working as an announcer for XEB and the ring.²⁶ But generally, they took their jobs with professionalism and seriousness. As the industry grew and men continued to be the engineers, artistic directors and general managers it maintained this gendered division of labor.

When women took jobs as broadcasters they exerted their sense of importance within society. Radio broadcasters were the first to play a vital role in commercial radio because they targeted specific sectors of society, like women, as audience members. The anonymity of radio gave radio reporters like Margarita de Silva an opportunity to comment on current events. In 1943, *Radiolandia* reported it had recently added to its staff de Silva, a prestigious commentator in Mexico City who “with her efforts and critical capabilities converted commentating into a profession.”²⁷

In the 1920s, when women first approached the microphone as broadcasters they were respected. Government-sponsored station XFX, in particular, selected a number of women to be part of their gender-specific programming which targeted the middle-class urban population during the late 1920s and 1930s. These commentators were professionals –doctors, nurses, and teachers-who were serving a specific purpose for the station, which was to transmit education

²⁶ VEA, November 23, 1934.

²⁷ *Radiolandia*, January 30, 1943, p. 7.

through the air. For instance, one of XFX's broadcasters, Professor E.Q. del Pozo, was said to "awaken brains, the one who opens hearts to a life of love and *sentimientos*, the one who shapes the habits and who molds characters for good and for bad."²⁸

By the following decade, as commercial radio stations implemented live radio programs and a higher caliber of music, radio programming began to be more complex, and the number of male and female commentators increased. Educational programs for women quickly became aural "advice" columns where women answered correspondence from listeners and gave timely suggestions. Carmen Madrigal, for example, was a woman whose daily program, "Woman to Woman Club," transmitted over station XEFO, was said to have a vast number of female "members" in the late 1930s.²⁹ Another program led by "Carmina," who also had an advice column on the pages of *Vea* magazine, had a following of over 17,000 women. Faithful listeners could request official membership cards from the radio station and communicate with the host and broadcasters as well. One such audience member, Emilia Raudón de Aldana, wrote to Carmina on July 7, 1934, "I have been listening to the talks that you, successfully, address to housewives, to modest women who suffer the daily struggles of their environment."³⁰

Mexican gender codes gave men more freedom than women and as commentators like Carmina were acquiring faithful listeners, they were also being criticized in the pages of the newspaper. For instance, regarding the usefulness of Carmina's program, Raul Pérez observed

²⁸ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (Hereafter AHSEP), Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

²⁹ *Radio Directorio de México*, 1937.

³⁰ *Mujeres y deportes*, July 14, 1934, p. 11.

“the only thing that I am in agreement in and which I thank her, is that her advice to married women is always that they need to be sweet and affectionate to their poor husbands. Thanks Carmina!”³¹ Evidently, insulting the voice or presence of women in radio was separate from agreeing with the message of the programs that gave housewives advice.

Composers

In the 1930s, during the heyday of the *bolero*, Mexican radio composers were considered passionate and overly romantic. They “always talk about love” noted singer Esperanza Águila. “I have not come across one optimistic song, they are always passionate wailings,” she expressed.³² Female composers displayed similar qualities. In her music, composer and lyricist María Grever, was said to display “her soul, the sentimental romantic soul of the true Hispanic American woman, who feels when she doesn’t cry and doesn’t cry when she feels.”³³

In order to be successful in the growing competitive industry, composers had to constantly produce new music. By 1942, Agustín Lara, for example, was a prolific composer who drew from the vast coffin of feelings and emotions. Labeled “the singer of vices,” the style of music Lara was composing, its *cursilería* “revolved around sexuality.”³⁴ Lara’s rapid rise to fame, according to others, was due to “his morose and sexually stimulating lyrics, which cannot

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Radiolandia*, March 20, 1943.

³³ *La Prensa*, March 26, 1939.

³⁴ *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 15, 1932.

bring anything cultural or edifying to the people.”³⁵

In fact, some believed that Lara knew that in order to be popular he had to appeal strictly to the female population. Lara made money conquering hearts and smiles. “This was his greatest victory,” wrote a critic in 1932, “that to succeed and gain popularity quickly, all he had to do was convert himself into the singer of women, and since he already knew the souls of many downtrodden and tormented women, he put in verse the vulgar details of the great human sorrow and began to be a poet more than a musician.” The Mexican female audience and the composer, “understood each other and his songs became the complaint of the delusional and the sinful vibrant desire of the innocent virgins,” he wrote.³⁶

Along with their male counterparts, women also became successful radio composers during the 1930s and 1940s. “The weaker sex has given to composing,” noted one critic, “women have abandoned their domestic duties to dedicate themselves to compasses and semitones.” Some even achieved international recognition, such as the composer Julia Elena whose song “*Espejismo*” (Mirage) was recorded in New York City by Afro-Cuban singer Miguel Valdes. In the mid-1940s, Elena had been offered a record contract with Southern Music Company and toured the United States.³⁷ Another noteworthy Mexican female composer of the early twentieth century was Consuelo Velázquez, whose 1941 bolero “*Bésame Mucho*” (Kiss me

³⁵ *La Prensa*, July 4, 1937, p. 2.

³⁶ *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 9, 1932.

³⁷ *Radiolandia*, August 1, 1946.

a lot) received global attention.³⁸ During that time Velázquez traveled back and forth between Mexico and the United States making special auditions and recording some of her other numbers.

Radio transformed Mexican music into a product that was not only worthy of export but also profitable for composers. Within the group of composers who worked overseas, one of the most notable people to attain international recognition was María Grever, who benefitted from the exposure that both Mexican and U.S. radio stations gave her music. Grever, who considered herself Mexican, lived most of her life in New York City, teaching and composing during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1938, her song “Ti Pi Tin,” in fact, was awarded the most popular song of the year by the American Society of Authors and Composers. As in Mexico, the composers in the United States leaned on records and radio to diffuse their music. Spanish-language newspaper, *La Prensa*, noted that not only was Grever “glorifying even more the name of Mexico, of the Motherland” but her song was selling a large number of records and was popular in the radio show, “Hit Parade,” broadcast by NBC radio.³⁹

At times, composers were blamed for producing song lyrics which aroused people’s feelings and made them behave in certain ways. In the spring of 1937, for instance, Ernesto Cortázar, who wrote the lyrics to “*Tu ya no soplas*” (You don’t cut it anymore) was caught in a bind when this song reportedly caused suicides and duels between lovers. The song was compared to Agustín Lara’s *cursi* music, which moved the people of Mexico to do unthinkable

³⁸ The song, which is translated into “Kiss me much” was one of Jimmy Dorsey’s top hits in the late 1940s. It was also popularized by Plácido Domingo during the 1980s and has received other notable attention over the years.

³⁹ *La Prensa*, April 2, 1938; *La Prensa*, July 18, 1938.

things and, as X. Campos Ponce eluded, was even closely linked to the lower classes.⁴⁰

According to the critics, the song had been so degrading to women that certain radio stations in northern Mexico banned them from their programming due to the controversy of the lyrics.⁴¹ As in other arenas in society, women were caught in a paradox when it came to their role within mass media, either as singers or as subjects of popular songs. For example, while *boleros* helped preserve women as objects of desire, in public theaters and movie houses singers like Lucha Reyes performed a mélange of *ranchera* songs and modern ballads with titles such as, “*La tequilera*” (The Tequila Drinker) and “*Yo me muero donde quiera*” (I will die where I feel like it).

Music and the Voice

Mexican music was recognizable over airwaves across the globe. Since the 1910s composers took their work and exposed the world to Mexican music in orchestra halls and auditoriums in Europe and North America. The composer Manuel M. Ponce’s song, “*Estrellita*,” was played in auditoriums in the United States while Alfonso Esparza Oteo’s music, “*Un Viejo Amor*,” was translated into four languages. Juventino Rosas was another musician whose waltz, “*Sobre las olas*,” is one of the most famous Latin American pieces in the world. Archival data proves that this was, in fact, a recognizable number. From his home in Cincinnati, Ohio, Rudolph Kuré wrote a letter to Mexican radio station XFX on March 1, 1931 confirming that he had used his short wave receiver to tune in to a program where “A Spanish

⁴⁰ *La Prensa*, July 4, 1937, p. 2.

⁴¹ *La Prensa*, July 3, 1937, p. 4.

tenor sang the beautiful Mexican waltz entitled ‘over the waves.’”⁴²

At this time, the distribution of other forms of Mexican art spilled over to U.S. mainstream society. Since the late 1920s the Anglo-American audience was exposed to Mexican paintings, music, theater and to a lesser extent, cinema. Writing from his post as foreign correspondent in New York City during 1930, Mexican journalist Luis Sepúlveda noted that “today the *Canción Mexicana* is a staple in North American life. At all hours radio stations, bands, orchestras and concert halls play the songs of Mexico.”⁴³

The *canción mexicana* coincided with the massive rural to urban migration process taking place in Mexico during the first three decades of the twentieth century. This music was “the genuine product of the *pueblo*, born in the modest dwelling places of the poor. It is simple, painful like the life of a laborer, filled with hope like the dawn.” Because of its close connection with the rural and uneducated classes, in effect, Mexican popular music was scorned by the upper class members of society. Only a portion of the middle class and a few “*fifis*” (dandies) were said to be sympathizers of this style.⁴⁴

During the 1930s, new distinguishable urban sounds appeared in Mexico; in particular, a style of music labeled *cursi* (genteel or tacky) emerged in the cities. While the *canción mexicana* had an ability to interpret the feelings of the people, this genre of music, which was

⁴² AHSEP, Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

⁴³ *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 31, 1930.

⁴⁴ Juan S. Garrido, *Historia De La Música Popular En México, 1896-1973*, México, DF: Editorial Extemporáneos, 1974. 23, 189.

more “romantic,” separated itself from Mexican popular music by abandoning the adoration of Mexico’s past and focusing on individual feelings, or *sentimientos*, through song lyrics. This shift away from nationalism and a collective identity to the ego also took place within the larger entertainment industry; specifically, in the *Teatro de Revista* (Musical Revue). At this time, songs, theater and film became sentimental, “*Revista* moves towards intimacy, music abandons collective causes and installs itself completely in the heart.”⁴⁵

Since the early twentieth century, Mexican composers such as Miguel Lerdo de Tejada had incorporated romantic themes in music, yet the major difference between this and earlier trends was the introduction of Cuban themes and melodies, most importantly the *bolero*. Imported from Cuba in the late nineteenth century, the *bolero* circulated the Yucatán Peninsula and the state of Veracruz before arriving in Mexico City and was popularized by the arrival of Agustín Lara to the stages and studios of the nation’s capital in 1928. Lara presented the *bolero* “in a very personal way,” through song lyrics that gave reference to deep expressions of love, loss, regret and passion.⁴⁶

Aside from being more individualistic and less patriotic, compared with the *canción mexicana*, the *bolero* also was important to the overseas Mexican audience because its lyrics lacked a specific setting and were spoken directly to the roles of men and women in society. Generally, *boleros* were straightforward and included feelings of loss, regret and desire. Songs followed the model of Mexican popular music, but the lyrics were more directly, stating “Let me

⁴⁵ *El País de las Tandas. Teatro de Revista 1900-1940* (México DF: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, 1984), 112.

⁴⁶ Juan S. Garrido, *Historia De La Música Popular En México, 1896-1973*, 65.

seduce her,” as opposed to, “Seduce her, sir.”⁴⁷ Because they adopted this different method and their music spoke of emotions that men and women were not supposed to feel, at first, this genre, and its producers, was not included within the canon of “popular” music by the fathers of Mexican music such as Manuel M. Ponce. In fact, in the late 1930s, Ponce considered the lyrics of *boleros* to come from “degenerates” since the rhythms and words followed those themes. Additionally, they were escape valves for many housewives, he noted.⁴⁸

For much of the 1930s and 1940s the emotions expressed in *boleros* did not respond to the expression of the *pueblo*, like traditional Mexican popular music, but instead came from the personal experiences of the composers. In general, composers who were labeled *cursi* and wrote *boleros* were true to a “sentimental spirit” and took refuge in personal feelings, as opposed to interpreting an authentic popular sentiment, which those who labored towards producing national music did. Lara, in particular, because he did not choose to sing about Mexican landscapes and the spirit of the people, was labeled as *cursi* and anti-nationalist. Common themes in his songs were love, jealousy, and resentment because “In his good songs Lara responds to a deep sentimental spirit. His success emanates from that, because our *pueblo es todo sentimiento* (the Mexican people are all feelings).”⁴⁹ Yet his popularity was unforeseen and by the early 1930s became a national symbol of romanticism and disillusion. Lara’s song lyrics, according to Mary Kay Vaughan and Marco Velázquez, also spoke to the modern urban Mexican woman and “helped to shape her, to liberate her body from the corset and confessional.” And while Lara

⁴⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 7, 1932, p. 30, 41.

⁴⁸ *La Prensa*, March 15, 1936, p. 3, 8.

⁴⁹ *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 15, 1932.

challenged women to think about their own sensuality and made pleasure a socially tolerable subject, his music nonetheless followed the ancient misogynistic tradition.⁵⁰

Mexican immigrants blended musical genres and accepted both older styles and emerging ones like the *bolero*. The Mexican community in the United States was not involved when debates between *cursi* (genteel) music and national patriotic music were circulating in the press during the 1940s. Yet the popularity of *boleros* did not decrease in the urban centers, or in the United States, where Mexican immigrants took a particular liking to Lara and welcomed him during a tour in the spring of 1932.⁵¹ However, one style of music was favored by Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexico over the others: the *ranchera*.

When it arrived in the urban centers of Mexico, “The *Ranchera* became an artificial product, viewed as “country style” by the city people.”⁵² In addition, there was purity in the countryside that the urban centers did not share. “Music belongs to the countryside,” wrote Francisco Davalos, “from the city are the songs of the scoundrel: in them there is mention of jail, of vices, of the mother who kneels before her son while begging for forgiveness.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Mary Kay Vaughan and Marco Velázquez, “*Mestizaje* and Musical Nationalism in Mexico,” in *The eagle and the virgin: nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* edited by Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, 243-255 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 109.

⁵¹ Archivo Histórico Diplomático Genaro Estrada (AHGE), Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), Expediente IV-376-48.

⁵² Claes af Geijerstam, *Popular music in Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976) 68-69.

⁵³ *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 12, 1925.

Ranchera music moved people. In keeping with the “sentimental mythology” of Mexican literature and music, men cried and wailed and women like the legendary Lucha Reyes, moved audiences to tears. Despite the fact that many of the songs mention loss of love, betrayal and loneliness, Carlos Monsiváis argued that their distress came from work because, in reality, most of the time their personal relationships were going well. This genre prevailed, in essence, because it validated passionate feelings and because the possibility of pain was more appealing than thoughts of happiness.⁵⁴

Additionally, the *ranchera* served a social function by providing emotional escapes for the rural masses that were moving into the urban centers during the 1940s and 1950s, including Mexican immigrants who were settling in the U.S. Southwest. Displaced from their homeland, to them, *ranchera* “expressed the longing for a mythical countryside devoid of exploitation, want, conflict, and sin, populated by kindhearted hacienda owners, gallant macho lovers, fully clothed virgins, and happy peons,” situations, people, and scenes they were familiar with.⁵⁵

Boleros and *rancheras*, in fact, helped normalize pre-established gender codes. Yet, as Mary Kay Vaughan and Mario Velázquez note, “Both conquered Mexico through the new mass media, creating languages of popular culture that had little to do with the central government but

⁵⁴ Carlos Monsiváis, “Yo soy humilde cancionero (de la música popular en México)” in Aurelio Tello, ed., *La música en México Panorama del siglo XX* (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y Las Artes, 2010), 234.

⁵⁵ Mary Kay Vaughan and Marco Velázquez, “*Mestizaje* and Musical Nationalism in Mexico,” 110.

much to do with the centralization of the recording, radio, and film industries.”⁵⁶ By broadcasting musical programs, which at first included symphonies and orchestra bands, guitar and piano recitals and later individual *ranchera* and *corrido* singers, privately funded commercial radio stations established themselves as reputable and popular avenues of cultural production by the 1930s.

Women’s Voices and Nationalism

Women were hired also because of the impact made from their voice. Some believed that “In order to succeed in the radio, the actor needs, then, a special education, a special feeling, which is completely concentrated in the voice.”⁵⁷ To the budding radio industry of the early 1930s, it generally did not matter if an artist knew how to handle herself or himself on the stage, it was just important that he or she possess a great voice. For example, when she arrived in the theater during the early 1930s, Toña la Negra did not know any theory concerning stage blocking or body positioning on stage. What she did own, however, was a “warm, delicious, well-toned voice which caresses the ear when she interprets Agustín Lara or when she sings the melancholic Cuban songs.” Another artist, Rita Montaner, on the other hand, was considered a theater actress from head to toe. “In Toña the song is the most important, in Rita it is one of her features,” said one review. These two women could not be compared, as one danced, spoke and sang with a peculiar style [Montaner] while the other [Toña] sang “deliciously.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid. 108.

⁵⁷ *Radiolandia*, May 21, 1942.

⁵⁸ *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 23, 1933, p. 29.

Some women's voices over the radio became powerful forces to be reckoned with. Lydia Mendoza, for instance, was a powerful female singer given that she included the female perspective and sexual themes in her songs, a feature that departed from the widely held stereotypes concerning the "traditional" working-class notions of women's "virginity" and "chastity."⁵⁹

Lucha Reyes was another Mexican singer who used the *canción ranchera* and sang "from the depths of her throat in a style never before heard in Mexico." Reyes was influential in promoting the *Mujer Mexicana Bravía*, the female counterpart to the aggressive, lively and upfront male *ranchera* singer. In her performances, which included songs featuring overt sexual innuendos, role playing, alcohol consumption, and intense passion, she challenged ideas concerning Mexican women in a rapidly changing society, as well as the role of female singers.⁶⁰

Additionally, in certain places female voices even disrupted the order of society, as historian Christine Ehrick recently noted. In Latin America "while some heard the possibility of greater gender equality, for others a woman's voice on the radio was the sound of all that was negative or threatening about modernity: disorder, immorality, and the breakdown of the

⁵⁹ Yolanda Broyles-González, "Ranchera Music(s) and the Legendary Lydia Mendoza: Performing Social Location and Relations" in Norma E. Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramírez, eds., *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 183.

⁶⁰ Mary Kay Vaughan and Marco Velázquez, "*Mestizaje* and Musical Nationalism in Mexico," 112.

traditional family.”⁶¹ For a woman becoming a Mexican singer, performing and touring the country, then, required permission or compromises. Both in the United States and in Mexico, women were subject to the same sexual, racial and class discriminations. Mostly, they were familiar with the inferiority complex that every woman in a patriarchal society must endure in which sex roles are established by birth and women’s potential, as opposed to men, did not even exist.

As interpreters, women were successful because music was full of *sentimientos* and they were the carriers and interpreters of patriotic and carnal feelings. To sing was to “interpret songs with all the feelings, with the beauty and the sweet romanticism that the authors have inserted in them.” But, in particular, a female singer, “puts all of the sentimental and evocative soul of a woman” in her music.⁶² The musical group, *Las Soldaderas*, for instance, interpreted Mexican popular music such as *corridos*, *sones* and *huapangos* and “know how to set fire to the red flame of nationalism in the *ánimo* (spirit) of the public.”⁶³

The commentary on the musical performance of the duet *Las Hermanas Águila*, illustrates how women could help promote nationalism. During the *Fiesta de la Raza* in San Antonio in October of 1934, *Las Hermanas Águila* gave a concert as part of a fundraiser for the *Beneficiencia Mexicana*. The last name of the sisters, which is “Eagle” in English according to

⁶¹ Christine Ehrick, “Savage Dissonance: Gender, Voice, and Women’s Radio Speech in Argentina, 1930-1945” in David Suisman and Susan Strasser, eds., *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 70.

⁶² *Radiolandia*, April 14, 1944.

⁶³ *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 11, 1937, p. 6.

the report “is symbolic. Because they are ‘eagles’ in the way they ascend to the native sky, to that sky where you can hear the most beautiful melodies, and the one that all of us who have a plated heart for that which is ours and open for anything that is Mexican feel transported to so that we can receive a message from our absent Mother.”⁶⁴

In Mexico, there was a belief that women were not fit to sing certain genres of songs, one of which was the Afro-Caribbean rhythms. Marga Llergo, who was contracted by the cigar company, “*El Águila*,” and toured Mexico during the 1930s, became a celebrated “tropical singer” during the following decade. Llergo began singing *boleros* and then transitioned to Afro music because she was trained by a composer of that genre. When asked if this created any conflicts within her personal life, she answered, “at first my family was opposed because they believed this was a style that an unmarried woman could interpret, but realizing that I wasn’t going to change my mind they conceded.”⁶⁵ Together, both the clothing and nationalistic music were unwritten, but important, prerequisites which contributed to the standardization of the overseas experience of dozens of men and women who left Mexico and toured the United States.

Proper Images of Mexico

In their pursuit as singers, men and women incorporated two things: the proper attire and a repertoire that mirrored the vision of the state. Given that most men and women performers would perform live, either on the radio or during a concert or festival, it was important to be dressed in clothing that displayed and represented Mexico, if they were to go abroad. During the

⁶⁴ *La Prensa*, October 14, 1934, p. 1, 3, 8.

⁶⁵ *¡Oiga!*, June 24, 1944.

twentieth century, one costume stood out among the rest: the *China Poblana* and the *Charro*. Dancing the *Jarabe Tapatío*, the *Charro* and the *China Poblana* were the central figures in the quintessential image of Mexico.

Created in the late 1920s, this emblem had the essential features for projecting folklore: a man and a woman wearing costumes dancing to regional music. The dance the couple was engaged in, the *Jarabe Tapatío*, was part of the traditional *fiestas populares*, or popular festivals, originating in the state of Jalisco. This dance became an official symbol of Mexico in the early 1920s when, to commemorate the centennial of the Mexican independence, painter Adolfo Best Maugard and musician Manuel Castro Padilla organized for 300 couples to dance the *Jarabe* before President Álvaro Obregón and Minister of Public Education, José Vasconcelos.⁶⁶ The *Jarabe*, however, was not the distinguishing feature of the image, it was the costumes of the *Charro* and *China*. The *Charro* wore a wide-brim hat, boots, and country-western attire while the *China* was dressed in a long full skirt, embroidered top with ribbons and braids in her hair.

This stereotype was created in the years following the Mexican Revolution, when the government was preoccupied with guarding and redefining economic, political and cultural national interests. At the time, a group of intellectuals and artists began to search for “*lo mexicano*” and agreed that the country needed to have its cultural representation in “popular” artistic manifestations. The strategy was to extract features of Mexico’s countryside, bring them to Mexico City and re-configure them as “national” symbols.

The *China*’s origin dates back to the early nineteenth century when she first appeared as

⁶⁶ Frances Toor, “El jarabe antiguo y moderno,” in *Mexican Folkways*, Vol VI, Number 1, Mexico, D.F.. 1930.

the “typical Mexican woman” in Mexican literature. She was a *mestiza* woman, which novelists, chroniclers and poets described as “proud, seductive, sometimes flirty, attractive, small-footed, a good dancer of *jarabes*, and always ‘very Mexican.’” After the turn of the century, post cards featuring *Chinas* from different regions of Mexico were distributed among foreign audiences and, by the 1930s, the national consensus was that the costume of the *China* represented “Mexican women par excellence.”⁶⁷ Poets and composers continued to give the *China* homage during the first and even second half of the twentieth century, always singling out her costume as the feature that set her apart as “very Mexican.”

The *Charro* emerged as a Mexican national symbol during the 1920s when folklorists, musicians and authors were commissioned by the government to travel the countryside and extract data for manuscripts about Mexican traditions and culture. According to Ricardo Pérez Montfort, intellectuals, artists and foreign observers were responsible for creating and diffusing regional characters like the *Charro* or the *Norteño* or *Jarocho*, etc. The work of three authors in particular, Rubén M. Campos, Higinio Vázquez de Santa Ana and Fernando Ramírez de Aguilar, (alias Jacobo Dalevuelta), contributed to the consolidation of a national stereotype centered around the *Charro*. In 1931, Dalevuelta wrote, “I propose the *Charro* as a national symbol, as a Mexican popular symbol, to be seen inside and outside of our *patrio solar*.”⁶⁸ With the help of leaflets, books and magazines by the men and women in charge of Post-Revolutionary education, along with a group of artists, journalists and intellectuals, these stereotypes gained consensus in

⁶⁷ Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Expresiones Populares y Estereotipos Culturales en México. Siglos XIX y XX. Diez Ensayos* (Mexico, DF: Casa Chata, 2007), 127, 142-43.

⁶⁸ Jacobo Dalevuelta, *El charro-símbolo* (México, DF: Ediciones Particular, 1932), 15.

the aristocratic, as well as the popular, press, the theaters, radio, and the emerging film industry of the 20s and 30s.⁶⁹

Mexican mass media, including commercial radio, synthesized regional and national stereotypes like the *Charro* and *China Poblana* into products that could be exported and help define true Mexican folklore. In turn, throughout Mexico, singers and performers began to dress as *Charros* and *Chinas*. For example, in the fall of 1935 the folkloric group, “*Los Chinacos*,” led by the composer and singer Pedro Galindo, traveled to Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua for a “nationalistic fair.” Before their departure, Galindo expressed that the governor of Chihuahua had given them a set of three *Charro* costumes in black, white, chocolate brown, and “since the fair is very ‘nationalistic’ a three-piece suit that is red, white and green,” the colors of the Mexican flag.⁷⁰

As images, the *China poblana* and the *Charro* became powerful national symbols and equally important export items. As one observer noted in 1925, “The success of the *revistas* here and abroad is in their aesthetic element, in the colorful costumes of our *Chinas* and our *Charros*.”⁷¹ When singing duets like “Laura y Ray” traveled to the United States a decade later, they also dressed as *Charros* and *Chinas*. With the help of their attire, the duet was considered “ambassadors of our song, who have made, thanks to their effort, that the *Charro* costume and the polychrome of the *China Poblana* is known and liked in New York, and in Los Angeles, in

⁶⁹ Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Expresiones Populares y Estereotipos Culturales en México*, 59.

⁷⁰ *El Universal Ilustrado*, September 12, 1935.

⁷¹ *El Universal Ilustrado*, December 17, 1925, pp. 32-33, 58.

Atlanta and Detroit.”⁷²

In fact, clothing separated Mexican singers and performers from other Latin American performers when they toured abroad. During her visit to Cuba during the 1940s, singer “Rosalinda” recalled that on her Saint’s Day, the President of Cuba’s commercial radio station RHC, Amado Trinidad Velasco, hosted a party in her honor at the Montmartre Cabaret and asked her to come dressed as a *China Poblana*.⁷³ Clothing became synonymous with being a Mexican woman artist in the United States as well. According to a journalist, the night that Matilde Sánchez, nicknamed “*La Torcasita*” (The Pigeon), was discovered in a cabaret in Los Angeles, she “was wrapped in the aura of a regional Mexican costume.” The dark skinned, brown hair and brown eyed young woman came to be a representative of folkloric Mexican music who sang *ranchera* songs in Los Angeles during the early 1940s.⁷⁴

U.S. born singers and Mexican musical groups followed the example of their Mexican compatriots. This was especially true in orchestras, who appeared in the U.S. Southwest in the 1930s. In 1936, for instance, when the *Orquesta Típica de El Paso* was about to embark on a tour, the newspaper noted that “they all dress in the typical Mexican *charro* garb, covered by beautiful *sarapes* from Saltillo.”⁷⁵ Low-brow entertainers like the sketch comedy group, Netty and Jesús Rodríguez, also dressed as *Charro* and *China*. As *La Prensa* noted “the singers have

⁷² *Radiolandia*, August 28, 1945.

⁷³ *Radiolandia*, April 7, 1944, p. 7.

⁷⁴ *Radiolandia*, February 20, 1943.

⁷⁵ *La Prensa*, February 5, 1937.

always been well liked, as much for the quality in the art they cultivate as with the wardrobe that they use in their attractive and diverse performances.”⁷⁶

As images, the *Charro* and *China* also appeared in the radio industry, as singers and performers wore their costumes when they toured and sang in live radio programs in the United States. During the 1930s, for instance, the government sponsored *Orquesta Típica de Miguel Lerdo de Tejada* traveled to the United States to give performances in New York City and Washington D.C., stopping in San Antonio on their way to the Northeast. The company, which consisted of one hundred musicians, singers and dancers, performed before more than 3,000 spectators in San Antonio in the spring of 1936. The Spanish-language press, who advertised the performance noted, “Just the ensemble, as a show, is worth seeing, because all the members that are part of the *Orquesta Típica* come, this time, dressed with authentic *Charro* costumes and the singers and dancers with astounding *China Poblana* costumes.” This “combined with the instruments and to the combination of lights made in the Auditorium, produced one of the most pleasing impressions upon the public.” From the moment the curtain rose, “there was only *musica popular*, and the songs, were especially *huapangos* and *rancheras*, which delighted the great mass gathered in the vast locale which displayed their enthusiasm with constant clapping and exclamations.”⁷⁷

Film also celebrated the presence of the singing *Charro* accompanied by his band of mariachis as principal features of “Mexicanness.” This was why, in 1942, after the singing trio “Los Rancheros” signed a radio contract overseas, Mexico City entertainment magazine

⁷⁶ *La Prensa*, December 13, 1936, p. 6.

⁷⁷ *La Prensa*, November 22, 1935, p. 5; *La Prensa*, November 24, 1935, p. 6, 8.

interpreted this triumph as “more evidence that ‘*ranchera*’ music is a symbol of Mexico.”⁷⁸

After 1941, Trios became popular because they were “ductile” and could perform in a number of settings including serenades, outdoor festivals or *mañanitas*, a custom where one is serenaded with the traditional Birthday song.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The growth of the radio industry made use of the participation of women from Mexico and Mexican immigrants in the United States. When women took up jobs in commercial radio they maintained their sense of honor and respectability because the transmissions took place in an enclosed space, not in the public. When men joined the radio industry they asserted their masculinity as broadcasters or through singing, performing and moving the audience. The new spaces created by the radio industry, then, offered men and women the opportunity to step outside of pre-determined gender roles.

⁷⁸ *Radiolandia*, May 21, 1942.

⁷⁹ Jesús Jáuregui, *El mariachi: símbolo musical de México* (México, DF: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2007), 137.

Chapter VI

Cultural Ambassadors of the Air:

The International Careers of Radio Singers

“Gracias a Esperanza Iris, el mundo supo que si teníamos terribles ‘Panchos Villa’, siniestra personalidad que llegó a ser una alegoría mexicana en el extranjero, teníamos también mujeres hermosas, inteligentes y artistas.”

“Thanks to Esperanza Iris, the world knew that if we had dreadful ‘Pancho Villas,’ sinister personality who became an allegory of Mexico overseas, we also had beautiful, intelligent female artists.”

-José Joaquín Gamboa, 1925

“Without a doubt,” wrote a newspaper critic in 1945, “Mexican artists understand that it is necessary to leave the Motherland in order to truly accomplish success.” During the 1930s and 1940s, for Mexican singers and performers, making guest appearances on U.S. radio stations like NBC or CBS in New York City, performing before U.S. born Mexican crowds in Los Angeles or San Antonio, or recording with the “RCA Victor” or “Bluebird” label in the United States guaranteed their success upon a return trip to Mexico. In fact, touring the United States was considered the “best passport in the overnight transformation of a shining star.”¹

With this in mind and tired of “diffusing her beautiful and exquisite voice only through the radio air waves,” in the spring of 1935, Mexican singer *Toña la Negra* recruited a group of actors, singers, dancers, artists, musicians and comedians to form a theater company and tour the

¹ *La Prensa*, August 23, 1936, p. 2-3.

United States. After crossing the border, the ensemble made a stop in San Antonio, Texas where they drew spectators from the entire state and towns along the border. *Toña* was a familiar voice in the city; for months, Mexican immigrants tuned in their radios to “hear her many nights through Mexican radio stations.” Following her sold-out performance, the company traveled to cities throughout the U.S. Southwest, enthraling her audiences with Mexican *boleros* composed by Agustín Lara and appearing before English-language radio stations in their Spanish-language “block programming.”²

This chapter follows the path of Mexican singers and performers like *Toña* from Mexico to the United States by highlighting the factors that aided their tours: the theater, radio and record contracts. In the 1930s and 1940s, Mexican singers and performers faced an indisputable fact: the economic potential of the U.S. Mexican communities was not only impossible to ignore but had actually become one of the most important defining elements of a successful career as both a “cultural ambassador” and an “international artist” in the music world. The artistic trajectories of Lydia Mendoza, Pedro J. Gonzalez, *Toña la Negra* and Lucha Reyes, for instance, all crucial performers in the international radio markets that stretched from Mexico City to New York City, and from South Texas to California in the West Coast, exemplify this process. While embracing the nationalistic aspirations of portraying a positive image of Mexico abroad, a permanent feature of the Mexican revolutionary government’s policy in the United States, Mexican artists also adopted as their own an extremely utilitarian vision of the Mexican markets in the U.S. as sources of significant revenue, international prestige and the ultimate stage to achieve artistic recognition and stardom status. Thus, by the 1940s the audience of border radio stations could

² *La Prensa*, March 3, 1935, p. 3 and *La Prensa*, March 11, 1935, p. 8.

“hear the voice of Mexico” and, as a community, “applauded and admired all of the artists who have crossed the border.”³

Background: The Links between Theater and Radio

Following the Mexican Revolution, the reconstruction project of the government focused on transforming society through broad programs and missions carried out, including cultural and agricultural reform. In particular, the nation’s leaders diligently worked at making an imprint on the international cultural scene by sending singers and performers north to the United States. The first musical ensemble on record to cross Mexico’s northern border on tour was a military band led by José Encarnación Payén, who traveled to an exposition in New Orleans in 1885.⁴ In the early twentieth century, the government sponsored the overseas trips of a number of theater actresses and concert singers; including Esperanza Iris, Mexico’s foremost “cultural ambassador” and Fanny Anitua, a mezzo-soprano who was regarded as “Mexico’s spiritual ambassador” during her tour of Europe in 1923.⁵

The formation of an overseas Mexican audience during the first half of the twentieth century would not have been possible without the theater. The radio broadcasting that emerged

³ *Radiolandia*, April 22, 1943.

⁴ Rubén M. Campos, *El folklore y la música Mexicana. Investigación acerca de la cultura musical en México (1525-1925)* (México, DF: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1928), 202.

⁵ *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 7, 1923. Through the Ministry of Public Education, the government funded the tours of artists in the 1920s. In late March 1922, for example, Isabel Zenteno sent a letter to President Alvaro Obregón hoping that her life as an artist would be funded by the government. See, Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ramo Gobernación, Fondo Dirección General de Gobierno (DGG), Expediente 805-Z-13.

in the 1930s and 1940s benefitted from previous networks of entrepreneurs, venues and audiences -established mostly in Texas and California- by Spanish-language popular theater, which regularly featured caravans and troupes of Mexican performers. Since the early nineteenth century, Mexican professional theater troupes visited inland cities in northern Mexico, in what is today Arizona and in port cities of California. By the turn of the century, “Laredo-San Antonio-El Paso in Texas became the heart of an itinerary for troupes coming up from interior Mexico to tour along the border.”⁶ In the following decades, these locations were on the touring schedule of Mexican acclaimed stage actors such as Virginia Fábregas and Manuel Soto. In fact, the actress and her company, which was regarded as a “legitimate” representation of Mexican theater overseas, frequently visited the U.S. Southwest during the 1930s.⁷

The origins of theater in Mexico date back to the Colonial Era when Spaniards brought troupes to the New World after colonization. In the following centuries, elaborate buildings modeled after European theaters were constructed in major cities throughout the empire. During Mexico’s rule by Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910), the interest for European theater and music was sustained, as the leader desired to emulate all aspects of foreign art and culture. Spanish theater was the most revered style of drama in Mexico. In the weekly performances of the *Teatro Principal*, during the 19 and early twentieth century, Spanish entertainment by Spanish impresarios featured Spanish actors, singers, composers and dancers.⁸ Until the turn of the

⁶ Nicolás Kanellos, “An Overview of Hispanic Theater in the United States” in Nicolás Kanellos, ed., *Hispanic Theater in the United States* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1984), 7-8.

⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*, September 5, 1929.

⁸ *El País de las Tandas. Teatro de Revista 1900-1940* (México DF: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, 1984), 18.

twentieth century, Spanish-language theater in Mexico, and also in the United States, followed a Spanish model with the predominant form being *Zarzuela* or Spanish operetta. Aside from this form of “legitimate” theater, other outdoor entertainment included *Teatro de Revista* and *carpa*; the former, a short one-act burlesque containing music and comedy pieces and the latter, a tent theater.

In the United States, theaters disseminated Mexican music to the Mexican communities. In cities across the Southwest, Spanish-language theater had been one of the principle forms of cultural entertainment since the 1890s.⁹ When Spanish-language professional theater flourished in the first decades of the following century, these cities became important focal points that attracted artists and audiences from the surrounding regions, including northern Mexico. The Mexican upper class and elite members of the communities believed that one of the best ways to preserve true Mexican culture in the changing twentieth century world, in fact, was through legitimate theater. Attending the theater was an important social activity and before the arrival of sound to the cinema, theaters helped preserve the Spanish language, Mexican music and, during the 1920s and 1930s, promoted new musical genres.

During the Mexican Revolution, the theater industry suffered the expected losses that come about during an internal war: threats from political figures, actors and playwrights leaving

⁹ The Chicana and Chicano scholars who have written about the social life of Mexican families throughout the United States highlight the significant role of theater during the first half of the twentieth century include Lisbeth Haas, Nicolás Kanellos, and Elizabeth Ramírez. See, Lisbeth Haas, *Conquest and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Nicolás Kanellos, *A History of Hispanic Theater in the United States: Origins to 1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Elizabeth C. Ramírez, *Footlights across the border: a history of Spanish-language professional theatre on the Texas stage* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).

the stage for the battlefield, and near or complete bankruptcy due to the lack of funds. Despite these setbacks, the industry maintained a close relationship with the general population. By 1920, no rupture had been made in the attitudes and interests of the population to theater; instead, the people were drawn to it even more. The events of the Revolution actually inspired playwrights and authors. In the 1940s, film director and screenwriter Juan Bustillo Oro, for example, incorporated the experiences he had encountered during the conflict into movies such as “*México de Mis Recuerdos*” (Mexico of my Memories).

By 1920, politics and theater united on the stage for the first time. These two themes had not been features of theater before the Mexican Revolution, inhibiting those who did not read books, magazines or newspapers -the majority of Mexico’s population- from knowing the day to day political events of the country. However, once it became acceptable to mock government leaders and authority figures, theater received a large impulse. Until the rise to power of Plutarco Elías Calles in 1924, in fact, a large number of political debates were in the hands of the press and the city’s *Teatro de Revista* companies.¹⁰

Thanks to playwrights like José F. Elizondo, whose book, *La vida en broma*, was standard reading during the 1920s, theater moved away from its Spanish roots and acquired Mexican themes. *Zarzuela* was quickly replaced by the *Teatro de Revista* as the essential source of entertainment for the urban population. While “some preferred the piano at home” during the 1920s, “others, generally less demanding and certainly less cultured, preferred- and could pay- the spaces that *Teatro de Revista* opened for the public enjoyment of music, for the affirmation

¹⁰ *El País de las Tandas. Teatro de Revista 1900-1940*, 35-37, 41.

and confirmation of the identity of the masses.”¹¹

There are four reasons why *Revista* was such a widespread form in entertainment in Mexico during the first half of the twentieth century. First, it was a popular show because the public did not attend simply to enjoy the performance as spectators, but intervened directly and indirectly in the event. In the capital city’s main theaters, “the plays succeeded or failed simply by the reaction of the public, not because of art or publicity.” And second, the topics and themes of the plays always touched upon real events; at times they were controversial and were written by journalists and playwrights who spent hours on the streets, cafes and cantinas.

In fact, the 1920s and 1930s was the “Bohemian” era of *Teatro de Revista*. After their performances, the cast, crew, audience, intellectuals and journalists gathered in the city’s cafes, restaurants, cabarets or bars until the early morning hours. This was a time when actors, like Roberto Soto, made a living critiquing the customs and habits of the Mexican people. When Soto took the stage, “the public would turn up in the auditorium of the *Principal* to laugh at their own vices and defects.”¹²

The third reason why *Revista* shows attracted the urban masses of Mexico was because the stages were filled with popular archetypes who reflected the people and the issues of living day-to-day in the city. Musical theater was an exclusively urban show “in which the provincial references served only to reaffirm the new character, the project, of a society that longed to be modern, cosmopolitan, and up to date.” And lastly, *Revista* was frequented on a regular basis

¹¹ Ibid., 93.

¹² *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 5, 1931.

because the stage was a space for new ideas concerning behavior and fashion. This was not an imposed fashion from the upper classes but one that was necessary and desired; one that elevated Mexico to the likeness of Paris or New York.¹³

Despite its stronghold in society, musical theater did not maintain its place as the number one source of entertainment in the 1930s, and *Revista* began to decline in the middle of the decade. This downfall was the result of the co-option and use of the medium by the services of the government, especially during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). Subsequently, this form of entertainment lost its appeal because the new generation of political leaders did not attend the theater, and political debates took place in other locations. After *Revista's* decline, *carpas* continued to be frequently visited by the urban population due to the low cost of ticket prices. Admission to most *carpas* cost between 15 and 30 cents and lasted for about twenty minutes. Despite the short length of their performances, they continued to capture the interests of the general population.

Radio intersected the theatrical traditions of Mexico by serving as a launching place for new artists during the 1930s. "In Mexico there has traditionally existed a narrow relationship between song and stage," notes Yolanda Moreno Rivas, and because music was the major cornerstone of *Teatro de Revista*, theater assisted the process of professional development for radio.¹⁴ This exchange was mutual. In the 1920s, when a large portion of the radio

¹³ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla in, *El País de las Tandas Teatro de Revista 1900-1940* (México DF: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas, 1984), 9-10.

¹⁴ Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Historia de la música popular Mexicana* (México, DF: Editorial Océano, 2008), 56.

transmissions in Mexico were symphonic and orchestra concerts, radio stations in Mexico City looked to the *Teatro de Revista* for their *cancioneras* (singers) and *tiples cómicas* (comical sopranos) and contracted them to sing on stages and in radio studios. Chelo Tovar, for example, began her career as an actress with a traveling theater company in 1931 and performed in the *Teatro Regis* of Monterrey, Nuevo León. Years later, she landed a job for XEW in Mexico City, contracted as an “exclusive artist” for a brand of medicinal products named *Productos Picot*.¹⁵

Revista’s demise coincided with the rise in commercial radio; in particular, the arrival of XEW, “*La Voz de América Latina desde México*” (The Voice of Latin America from Mexico) in mid-September of 1930. Live radio programs along with national cinema, which was becoming a profitable industry at the same time, began to be avidly visited by the urban popular masses. These were suitable substitutions for *Revista* because both mediums catered to the general population and reflected the ills of society. In response to the increase in radio-listeners and movie-goers, musical theater adopted more romantic themes and was transformed into *Teatro de Variedades*, a genre of theater which was similar to *Revista* in that it was a play centered on a script and contained many musical selections.

The competition between theater and radio, however, was futile. In many of the urban centers of Mexico during the 1930s, the theater industry suffered, and musical theater, which projected the popular base of an emerging national culture during the 1920s, was replaced by the cinema, radio, and eventually television. After this time, theaters became “spaces where you submissively receive the eco of radio hits, a stopover for those who are preparing their ascension

¹⁵ *La Prensa*, October 13, 1937, p. 5.

to the technological limelight.”¹⁶ Yet, despite the decline of *Revista*, radio maintained the most salient part of popular forms of entertainment, the ability to serve as a mirror and reflect society in its programming. The radio industry, which was relying on live radio programs after the mid-1930s, transformed into a place for the display of new artists or new melodies eagerly waiting to be consumed by the public.

Touring Abroad

After 1930, a musical exchange took place between nations in North and South America and the Caribbean. Bands and orchestras from Cuba and Venezuela, for example, toured Mexico for a season while Mexican orchestras, singers and performers traveled to Spanish-speaking countries in the region. Overseas, the performances of the singers and actors emphasized themes of internationalism and true “Mexicannes” or *Mexicanidad*.

Cultural exchanges between Mexico and the U.S. date back to the nineteenth century, after Mexico lost less than half of its territory to the United States in the years following the Mexican-American War and the people living in that territory became U.S. citizens almost overnight. At the turn of the century, as urban centers were modernizing during the Porfiriato (1876-1910), the nation avidly pursued a cosmopolitan way of life. The subsequent presence of jazz bands, musical influences like foxtrots, U.S. films and other forms of entertainment arriving in Mexico during the 1920s, led many to see the presence of U.S. culture as intrusive and detrimental to Mexican values. Some, however, argued that the exchange between the two countries was not just coming from the United States and traveling to Mexico, but was mutual, as “The two Americas interpenetrate minute by minute, and hour by hour.” Those who adopted this

¹⁶ *El País de las Tandas. Teatro de Revista 1900-1940*, 111.

perspective, the Mexican government included, pinpointed that Mexico was proud that while the United States exported the items of its “practical” civilization, such as tractors and films, the nations of Latin America shared “bananas, coffee, parrots and songs” with their northern neighbor.¹⁷

Music and cultural artifacts, in particular, were items avidly embraced by the Mexican government for trade and export. Mexican songs were diplomatic instruments and disseminated to two groups in the United States: U.S. born Mexican and Mexican immigrant communities and English-speaking Anglo audiences. Since the early 1920s, the latter was exposed to multiple representations of Mexico in the form of Broadway musicals, murals, art exhibits and vaudeville plays. As a Mexican observer in Texas noted, “Night after night through the air one can hear concerts and drama pieces based on music and customs of our current time or previous eras.”¹⁸ Mexico continued to use music as one of its most popular exports in the following decades. Before World War II concluded Mexican music was being sung by “soldiers of the United Nations, the citizens of Europe, America, etc., who project to the four winds Mexican songs.” The nation, in fact, believed it was “at the head of the countries who export popular music” and desired to continue this trend after the war concluded.¹⁹

Spreading positive images of Mexico in the United States was necessary because the English-language press was spreading negative images of its southern neighbor. The Mexican

¹⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 31, 1930.

¹⁸ *La Prensa*, February 16, 1930.

¹⁹ *¡Oiga!*, September 2, 1944.

government could not depend on Mexican actors to do their part in showcasing the best attributes of Mexico, as not everyone who took the stages was extending the government's project.

Overseas, a number of Mexican actors and singers followed personal desires and disregarded how their actions might tarnish Mexico's image. "Many people of the United States have a peculiar idea of Mexicans," wrote a U.S. radio listener from New Jersey to Mexican radio station XFX., "Speak of Mexicans or Mexico and immediately people think of Indians or bandits."²⁰

Other than the press, theaters in the United States distributed Mexican art and cultural forms. In the theater, as Helen Delpar notes, "many of these portrayals were superficial and perpetuated traditional stereotypes."²¹

In fact, some critics argued that accomplished performers like dancer and actress Lupe Vélez were responsible for disgracing the name of Mexico in the United States. Mexican women, in particular, were usually suitable carriers of patriotic feelings. In the United States, Mexican music and artists were accepted through songs over the radio, art exhibits, cinema and theater under a racialized and gendered understanding. In 1932, Vélez starred in a drama titled "Hot-Cha" which played in New York City at the Ziegfeld Theater for several months. The play was set in "Old Mexico" and featured a bull fighter, who was accompanied by Mexican "señoritas," one of which was played by the actress. Mexican theater critic Rafael Fuentes Jr., who traveled to New York City especially to review her performance, was not impressed with the plot which he believed denigrated Mexicans. Fuentes criticized Vélez for taking part in this

²⁰ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (Hereafter AHSEP), Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

²¹ Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1910-1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 165.

performance and noted, “Lupe joins the farce,” like other Mexican actors in the United States, “They love ‘their Mexico’ very much but they don’t pass up an opportunity to ridicule it.”²² In the 1930s and 1940s, Vélez and several other stars like Dolores del Río became what José Limón has called “ethnic intellectuals,” who “though rooted in their native communities, nevertheless engage the world and bring that experience back to bear on their communities of origin and their struggles.”²³

The image of Mexico was also misrepresented in other sectors of the entertainment industry, most notably film. In the screen, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, the villain of the movie, according to a critic “was always personified by a Mexican with a big mustache, wide sombrero, and gun to his belt.”²⁴ Understandably, when Mexican actors traveled to Hollywood in the 1920s they came face to face with this negative stereotype. Ramon Navarro, one of the Mexican actors who “triumphed in Los Angeles” in the early 1920s, confronted several misconceptions concerning his ethnic background. The actor noted that in Hollywood there was a lack of understanding and careful study of Mexican issues. He expressed that the perception was that “in Mexico Mexicans are dirty, shiftless, vagrant Indians clothed in feathers.” The lack of familiarity with culture south of the border was another reason why actors like Navarro were consistently confused for being Spanish instead of Mexican. One interviewer, after making this clarification for her Los Angeles readers, noted “So, then, we need to discard

²² *El Universal Ilustrado*, June 9, 1932, p. 26.

²³ José E. Limón, ‘José Limón, the Devil and the Dance’ in Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo, eds., *A Companion to Latina/o Studies* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2007), 99.

²⁴ *La Prensa*, February 16, 1930, p. 3.

the idea we have that in Mexico everyone is a ‘greaser’ dressed in chaps with large sombrero, like those we see in the movies.”²⁵

In Mexico, the public was aware that in the United States there was a misunderstanding of the “true” nature of Mexican culture. In turn, a group of intellectuals and artists believed it was urgent to expose the factual and pure manifestations of Mexican art, culture and music to U.S. audiences, who were being shown a distorted view of the nation through the press, cinema and the theater. “They ignore us and they confuse us,” noted painter and film director, Adolfo Best Maugard, in 1925. After visiting the United States, Maugard believed that Mexico urgently needed “propaganda supported not with what we lack, but with what we have: our tradition and our art. The civilization of the future is being generated in America, the one that the United States will impose upon the world, and Mexico needs to compliment this force with the grace of its spirit.”²⁶ Mexican immigrants living in the United States shared these sentiments.

“Something more eloquent and effective is needed to counteract the anti-Mexican propaganda,” wrote Rosa García Peña in 1931, “Now that there is peace in Mexico we need to make ourselves known, because our spiritual culture is superior to that of our ill-intentioned neighbors.”²⁷

Turning to radio to counteract the negative image being circulated in the United States concerning Mexico proved to be the most cost-effective plan for the government. “Its use,” critics believed, “will dispel the many doubts that still exist abroad concerning the true

²⁵ *El Universal Ilustrado*, May 3, 1923.

²⁶ *El Universal Ilustrado*, April 23, 1925.

²⁷ AHSEP, Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

personality of the Mexican people.” Additionally, radio broadcasting had already proven to be beneficial during overseas tours, such as the one conducted by the *Orquesta Típica* when they traveled to South America in 1940. During that journey, the group made a stop in Chile where they offered radio programs in which “Mexican vernacular music reached to all places: jails, social clubs, worker’s meetings, public plazas, schools, universities, sanatoriums, etc.”²⁸

The Mexican government also counted on U.S. citizens who wanted to change the negative image of Mexico abroad. By calling on the radio, some of them formulated elaborate plans on how to influence the perception of Mexico. Men like Paul Moyle, for instance, had observed “a definite lack of understanding on the part of many citizens of the United States towards the Republic of Mexico and its people.” In response, Moyle, General Manager of radio station WTSB in Lumberton, North Carolina, organized a plan in which he intended to “record a series of programs of fifteen minutes in duration, featuring native Mexican talent, music, drama, history, points of interest, etc.” Turning to radio continued during the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas when, in 1938, he set out to build a powerful official radio station in which to diffuse “throughout the world the economic and social work Mexico is undertaking, as well as its music, its songs and its vernacular poetry.”²⁹

The Government Impulse

Mass media was a suitable instrument in diffusing positive images of Mexico, yet another

²⁸ Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Presidentes, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas del Rio (Hereafter AGN, LCR), Expediente 570/31.

²⁹ Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Presidentes, Fondo Manuel Ávila Camacho (Hereafter AGN, MAC), Caja 445, Expediente 512.32/14.

strong force influencing men and women to take trips abroad was the government's command to spread Mexican folklore and extend the post-revolutionary cultural project beyond the nation's borders. In the 1920s, Mexico's leaders sought to develop a national sense of identity which led to the implementation of nation-wide economic, political and cultural reconstruction programs. "For several years Mexico has concerned itself with its propaganda abroad," noted an observer in 1925, "this is a very practical action that will yield excellent results."³⁰ Radio, it was believed, was a suitable way to transform the psyche of the Mexican people at home and overseas. The territorial span covered by radio broadcasts and the endless possibility of transmissions persuaded the government to look to the industry for reasons beyond implementing educational policy, but as an agent that spread Mexican culture and folklore in the United States and by sustaining an audience of radio listeners. In turn, government ministries like the *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores* (Ministry of Foreign Relations), collaborated with Consulate offices in cities through the United States to ensure true Mexican folklore was disseminated abroad and used radio to help carry out this task.

Mexican orchestras and classical music composers and performers were the first to present Mexican musical styles to English-speaking audiences in cities across the country such as New York and Los Angeles. Musical groups were well equipped and included different genres in their repertoire so as to entertain all audiences in the U.S. In 1919, when Miguel Lerdo de Tejada and his *Orquesta Típica de Policía* toured the United States, he recruited *Los Hermanos Gómez*, a group of brothers whose expertise was playing the *marimba*. The group, which later went on to perform in U.S. and Mexican radio stations had the capability of

³⁰ *El Universal Ilustrado*, November 5, 1925.

interpreting any song, from the most “fundamental and folkloric *canción mexicana*, to the strongest concert pieces.”³¹

On many occasions the tours of trios, orchestras and classical music performers were sponsored by the government. At times, politicians even offered to pay the costs of an international trip. In 1925, for instance, when he served as governor of the state of Tamaulipas, Mexican President Emilio Portes Gil extended economic and moral support to the musical ensemble by the name of *Los Trovadores Tamaultipecos*. With the financial help of Portes Gil, the group traveled to New York City where they performed in Broadway and other theaters in the area before returning to Mexico in 1928.³²

This practice, which began earlier in the century, continued through the following decades. At times, performers asked government officials for financial assistance. In March of 1932, for example, Agustín Lara and his theater troupe found themselves in San Antonio with a small amount of money. Lara made his way to the offices of the Mexican consul, Eduardo Hernández Cházaro, to request financial assistance. Since his company was “on a cultural tour *haciendo labor pro-Patria*” (conducting work for the Motherland) the government did not hesitate to intervene.³³

In other instances, singers leaned on the support of government before embarking on their

³¹ *El Universal Ilustrado*, January 16, 1936.

³² *El Universal Ilustrado*, December 26, 1929; Juan S. Garrido, *Historia De La Música Popular En México, 1896-1973* (México, DF: Editorial Extemporáneos, 1974), 63.

³³ Archivo Histórico Diplomático Genaro Estrada (AHGE), Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), Expediente IV-376-48.

overseas trip. In the spring of 1940, Lara asked President Cárdenas for the finances to pay for a trip to the United States.³⁴ That same year, actress and singer Lupe Rivas Cacho communicated with Cárdenas that she had “contracted noteworthy artistic talents to make a tour in the United States.” “Kindly let me know the date,” wrote Rivas Cacho, “as I count on your generous help.”³⁵

The Mexican government invested in the overseas trips of performers and took interest in seeing who was complying with the post-revolutionary government’s cultural project. In part, this was because the state viewed international singers as “Good Will Ambassadors.” This was the case with Miguel Lerdo de Tejada’s orchestra who, in 1935, during a tour in the United States, were noted to have “skillfully fulfilled their mission.”³⁶ Others, like composer and director Carlos Chávez, were also considered faithful government servants. In 1936, Chávez traveled to New York City and signed a contract with CBS to direct six concerts of the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall.³⁷ Eight years later, when he returned to the United States on tour with his orchestra, Chávez was praised for traveling and interpreting the Mexican national ideology abroad.³⁸

Thus, in the 1930s and 1940s, Mexican singers and performers traveling abroad were led

³⁴ AGN, LCR, Expediente 111/1646.

³⁵ AGN, LCR, Expediente 415.1/12.

³⁶ AGN, LCR, Caja 102, Expediente 135.2/146.

³⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*, January 21, 1937.

³⁸ AGN, MAC, Caja 964, Expediente 568.3/22.

by two forces: their desire to be successful and the need for the government to spread positive images of the nation throughout the United States. By traveling out of the country and making money, Mexican musicians and singers successfully capitalized on the nationalistic project of the government; meanwhile, the media categorized their performances as “patriotic.” Newspaper articles noted that artists toured in order to exalt the name of Mexico, when in reality there were riches to be gained from these trips. For example, when the singing duet of *Los Hermanos Gómez* decided to tour the United States, Mexico City’s leading newspapers noted that “they went out into the world in search of glory, money and art;” at the same time, in their performances “they have exalted the name of their birthplace and of Mexico in all of the places they have performed.”³⁹

Mexican-American singers and artists were astute and realized that thanks to the exposure they were receiving from radio and the local Spanish-language newspaper, they could embark on tours in Northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. In 1935, for example, Roberto and José Cavazos who formed the duet, “*Los Hermanos Cavazos*,” traveled from their hometown of McAllen, Texas to San Antonio to promote their fox-trot titled, “*Llegaste*” (You Came). According to *La Prensa*, the group was scheduled to appear in local radio stations and prior to their arrival in San Antonio, they had promoted their song in station KRGB of Weslaco, Texas and in Mexican radio station XEAW of Reynosa, Tamaulipas.⁴⁰ By the mid-1930s, second-generation Mexican entrepreneurs took advantage of this feature and turned to U.S. commercial stations to showcase their talents and advertise for local businesses. Small business owners at

³⁹ *El Universal Ilustrado*, January 16, 1936.

⁴⁰ *La Prensa*, August 11, 1935, p. 5.

local English-language radio stations were traveling to the Mexican *colonias* and neighborhoods to recruit singers for their Spanish-language programs, as in the case of Mr. Ramón Arnáiz, who discovered *Las Hermanas Padilla* at a park in Los Angeles. The aim was to make Mexican immigrants and their children first rate consumers like their Anglo counterparts.

Taking an international tour was a high point in the life of a singer. After working many years for commercial station XEW in Mexico City, Luis Roldán attained a contract and went on an extensive tour throughout central Mexico, north to the states of Tamaulipas and Coahuila, crossed the U.S. border into Laredo, Texas, then to San Antonio, Texas, Los Angeles and finally New York.⁴¹ Mexican radio singers and actors like Rolán, who toured the U.S. Southwest during holidays or for local fundraisers and benefits, did more than earn a decent salary or help extend the government's cultural project overseas, they also helped jumpstart and sustain the careers of U.S. born Mexican and Chicana/o artists and musicians.

In effect, Mexican singers paved the way for U.S. born Mexican artists and performers to prosper in two ways. First, since Mexicans continuously exposed Mexican immigrants and U.S. born Mexican artists to new forms of music, they were able to bring together older and newer genres and serve the diverse crowds gathered at the auditoriums and theaters in the United States. Thus, when they presented themselves before sold-out crowds in California or New York, they became both international and transnational performers. Second, thanks to the proximity they had with the recording industry, Mexican immigrants became recording artists sooner, allowing them to expose their name and music earlier than their counterparts in Mexico who, at least until the 1940s, had to cross the border to make a record.

⁴¹ *El Universal Ilustrado*, March 17, 1938.

For the most part, the Mexican press was concerned more with the places the singers traveled- Havana, New York City or San Francisco- than the actual audiences who they were performing before- mostly Mexican and U.S. born Mexican immigrants. In effect, Mexican “international” performers were born not in shows at renowned auditoriums, but singing before their fellow countrymen in local theaters. During the first half of the twentieth century, Los Angeles, California was a recruitment center for Mexican theater troupes and radio singers. When he was forming his touring company, “Los Pachucos Review,” in the spring of 1944, it was there that Mexican impresario, Joaquin Gonzalez, first heard Aurora Muñoz sing. By the time Gonzalez hired her, Muñoz had six years of experience singing and acting on stages and night clubs in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City. In fact, her career began during an amateur radio contest at a “Latino Theater” in Los Angeles in 1938. Yet, despite having the artistic tours under her belt, touring Mexico was not the same as performing before Anglo and U.S. born Mexican crowds in the United States. “You have no idea how afraid I was to come to my homeland,” she confessed. Muñoz was fearful of the Mexican audience’s response to her, but her reluctance ceased when she received a personal invitation from the acclaimed singer and composer, Agustín Lara, to be one of his infamous “interpreters.”⁴² Shortly after arriving in Mexico City later that year, she received a number of film and theater offers and was instantly declared the “New Radio Figure” by Mexico City magazine *Radiolandia*.⁴³

Clothing, Patriotism and The *Canción Ranchera*

In the 1940s Mexican singers who took up the circuit from Mexico City to Monterrey, El

⁴² *¡Oiga!*, June 17, 1944.

⁴³ *Radiolandia*, May 19, 1944; *Radiolandia*, May 26, 1944.

Paso, San Antonio, New York or Los Angeles, captivated their crowd by singing *rancheras* such as “*Pelea de Gallos*” (The Cock Fight) and “*Arriba el Norte*” (Long Live the North), two songs which radio singer “Alejandra” admitted were frequently requested by her audiences during her 1946 trip.⁴⁴ Mexican immigrants had an affinity for this music at the time; *ranchera*, in fact, had a longer lasting presence in the United States than in Mexico and was the preferable “export” genre of music.

While the *bolero* made its way into the urban centers of Mexico during the 1930s, the *canción ranchera* also became a new song genre. Derivative of the *canción mexicana*, historians have noted that it existed in the nineteenth century, but began to be called *ranchera* (literally, “of the ranch”) during the 1920s when, in the midst of post-revolutionary national assertions, songs, in order to be truly Mexican “had to invoke the rural world.”⁴⁵ This scenery was familiar to Mexican immigrants, many of whom had migrated from rural Mexico to the North or into the United States. The emergence of songs such as “*Allá en el Rancho Grande*,” during the 1930s, introduced a new trend of Mexican music which coincided with the growing national film industry. Thus, standardized forms of popular music like the *ranchera* were designed to attract audiences on a national and international level. This was useful for this genre because it became integrated with the *Mariachi*, the interpreter of the *canción ranchera* who traveled the world and became a national symbol of Mexico during the 1940s.

By mid-century, the *canción ranchera* was the most popular musical style among Mexicans in the United States. *Ranchera* music was particularly appealing because it

⁴⁴ *Radiolandia*, September 21, 1946.

⁴⁵ Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Expresiones Populares y Estereotipos Culturales en México*, 105.

“negotiated the transition to urban life” for countless migrants leaving their rural upbringing and heading North to the United States in search of prosperity.⁴⁶ Thus, when singers Pedro J. González, Maria Padilla or the troubadour Freddy Quiñones sang this music, their popularity increased. They were also in vogue because they focused on the individual and his or her life experiences, trials and dreams.

The state turned to one specific representation of Mexico, the *ranchera* and the *Mariachi*, as the best Mexican export. In part, this was to rectify the misuse of certain Mexican songs. The government and the intellectual elite did not see eye to eye on this issue. Rejecting the idea that there was little value in sending artists and singers as “cultural ambassadors” to the United States, one critic asked “Why send a Mexican singer to represent Mexico, with Mexican music, over there where they sing *La Cucaracha* like the ‘blues?’”⁴⁷ But by 1930, *Mariachis* were effective, some argued, because they sing “as though they were crying; these popular singers and are so sincere and are so possessed, that it appears as though they are making art, because art is all sincerity and expression.”⁴⁸ Through the radio and the cinema, *Mariachis* effectively “popularized the soul of the Mexican people overseas” which is why, by the mid-1940s, Mexico invested more attention on these spokesmen of Mexican culture. In addition, because they were singing *rancheras*, songs that told stories and individualized experiences of being Mexican, they

⁴⁶ Mary Kay Vaughan and Marco Velázquez, “*Mestizaje* and Musical Nationalism in Mexico” in Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, eds., *The eagle and the virgin: nation and cultural revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 111.

⁴⁷ *El Universal Ilustrado*, October 1, 1936.

⁴⁸ *El Universal Ilustrado*, November 21, 1929.

were able to connect with audiences no matter where they performed.⁴⁹

For Mexican immigrants in the United States, listening to this music was also a way to re-affirm their patriotism. Freddy Quiñones, a Mexican troubadour for example, recalled he “felt more Mexican than ever,” after witnessing Tito Guizar sing the classic *ranchera*, “*Allá en el Rancho Grande*” at the Memorial Opera House in San Francisco in the 1940s. Guizar, who was considered “ambassador of Mexican and Latin American music in the entire world,” inspired Quiñones to give himself wholeheartedly to his singing career in the United States.⁵⁰

By the 1940s, there was a clear distinction between the music being produced and consumed in Mexico City and the music being exported abroad. At home, Mexicans enjoyed more *boleros* than their immigrant compatriots in the United States, who had a stronger liking for *ranchera* music. Published record sales confirm these statements. For example, according to XEW, between 1939 and 1942, the songs requested the most by the public had been *boleros*.⁵¹ Between March and December of 1942, 63 out of 100 compositions were *boleros* and out of the top ten “Peerless” record sales between March and December of 1945 more than 50% were *boleros*.⁵²

This was not the case in the United States. Record companies published their number-

⁴⁹ *Radiolandia*, February 18, 1944.

⁵⁰ Victor Alejandro Espinoza Valle, *La Vida Misma: Fernando Freddy Quiñones, un trovador fronterizo*. (Guadalajara, Jalisco: Centro Universitario de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Universidad de Guadalajara, 2008), 52.

⁵¹ *Radiolandia*, January 10, 1943.

⁵² *Radiolandia*, May 4, 1945; *Radiolandia*, August 14, 1945; *Radiolandia*, November 16, 1945.

one hits and recordings and in August of 1944 PHAM noted that not only was Mexican music very popular in the CBS radio programs of New York City, but that the “Victor” records recorded in Mexico in highest demand in the United States were “*Así se quiere en Jalisco*” (This is how you love in Jalisco) and “*Yo soy puro mexicano*” (I am a pure-blooded Mexican), both *canciones rancheras* recorded by Jorge Negrete.⁵³ Since the late 1920s, the Mexican and U.S. born Mexican community had a liking for music that was not classical and overly romantic. In urban centers like Los Angeles and San Antonio, for instance, “*Corridos* are sung in Mexican theaters and over the radio on programs for the ‘*pueblo*.’”⁵⁴

The *canción ranchera* was popular among the Mexican populations of the United States for a number of reasons. First, for those who migrated away from Mexico to the United States it served the important function of “underpinning the dynamic of nostalgia and memories of the countryside.” Far away from their native land, *ranchera* music gave the people yearnings to return to that which they had lost.

Second, this style of music was popular among the immigrant population as it was “the first genre created fundamentally for commercial exploitation.”⁵⁵ For example, after arriving in the cities, *ranchera* became urban, and its byproduct, the *bolero ranchero*, was popularized by the voices of singers like Lucha Reyes and Jorge Negrete who exposed this genre of music to the public through films, radio and live performances during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The two

⁵³ *Radiolandia*, August 11, 1944.

⁵⁴ Nellie Foster, “The Corrido: A Mexican Culture Trait Persisting in Southern California,” 22.

⁵⁵ Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Historia de la música popular mexicana* (México, DF: Editorial Océano, 2008), 198.

genres, the *bolero* and the *canción ranchera*, gave record companies the ability to single out the consumer and appeal to him or her on an individual basis. In particular, record companies become successful because they did not follow the nation-building model of the state, which aimed to make the country identify with certain common features, including history, music and traditions; instead, they saw the radio listener in his simplest human state, as a consumer.

The third reason *ranchera* flourished is that, as the U.S. born Mexican community came to define itself by mid-century, they began to demand and produce this style of music on a more frequent basis. The Mexican and U.S. born Mexican community wanted composers to “sing this life of ours here, with all of its sufferings and triumphs.”⁵⁶ By the 1940s, some Mexican broadcasters like Pedro J. González were not concerned with exposing their music to the larger Anglo world, but instead, served a small audience of fellow compatriots. González promoted issues affecting the U.S. born Mexican population in his daily radio broadcasts and composed songs such as “*El Lavaplatos*” (The dishwasher), which U.S. born Mexicans and their parents could directly relate to. In addition, the style of music that was played over the radio into the United States, mainly *corridos* and the *canción ranchera*, were big hits among the Mexican immigrant population. A radio listener from California noted that “*ranchera* songs would make us forget even for a moment the hardship and worries of work.”⁵⁷

The Importance of Records

One aspect assisting the careers of Mexican artists and singers were records; a

⁵⁶ *La Prensa*, May 28, 1934, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Box 1 Folder 9. Pedro J. Gonzalez Papers, 60, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles.

record contract in the United States, in fact, was an important feature for molding an international performer. During the first half of the twentieth century, the U.S. recording industry came to be a major player in the diffusion of Mexican music to Mexican immigrant communities and U.S. born Mexicans, to the formation of an overseas audience and to the establishment of the careers of Mexican singers and artists. Mexican began making records in the late 1920s; thus, prior to that time, most of the music played over Mexican radio stations that was not live came from records imported from the United States, Argentina, Cuba or France. After 1930, radio transmissions began to include live and recorded Mexican music on a more frequent basis. And by the following decade, the two most prominent musical genres, *boleros* and the *canción ranchera*, competed for air time. From the outset, the national and international audience, which took great “pleasure in hearing Mexican stations,” also purchased records.⁵⁸

Even though U.S. record companies had a foothold in Mexico since the 1930s, singers were forced to travel to the United States to produce a record because Mexico did not have the advanced technological capabilities for its own record production until the years following the Second World War.⁵⁹ In the late 1920s, a number of singers and groups like the *Trovadores Tamaultipecos*, *El Charro Gil y sus Caporales* and Pepe Guizar had crossed the U.S.-Mexico border solely because they had a contract with record companies like “Columbia” or “Decca.”⁶⁰ Receiving a record deal was beneficial

⁵⁸ AHSEP, Expediente A-4/235.3(73).

⁵⁹ AHGE, SRE, Expediente IV-245-11.

⁶⁰ *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 13, 1939; *La Prensa*, February 15, 1937; *Radiolandia*, May 4,

for singers because if they signed a contract in the United States they were likely to tour California, Texas, perhaps even New York, depending on where the records were produced. Other groups in Mexico, like *Los Alegres de Terán*, also used the record industry as a springboard for their careers in Northern Mexico and the United States. The duet gained exposure after their records, produced in San Antonio by Falcon records, were distributed on a large scale during the early 1940s. The popularity of this group, in fact, corresponded with the growth of the commercial radio and record industries.⁶¹

Records were material proof that artists had “made it” in the United States. In 1930, singer, composer, and actor Guty Cárdenas landed multiple recording and acting contracts in New York City and Los Angeles, securing his stay in the United States for an entire year. Records were also ways to earn money. “I spent many years in poverty,” noted composer Lorenzo Barcelata, “but now thanks to phonographic records and the cinema, I have earned a lot of money.”⁶² In addition, records popularized the music of Mexican groups in the United States before they arrived in Mexico. *Los Trovadores Tamaultepecos*, for example, recorded *corridos*, *huapangos*, *sones* and even *boleros* for Columbia Records in 1929. These records, critics argued, were demonstrations of their

1945.

⁶¹ Francisco Ramos Aguirre, *Los Alegres de Terán Vida y Canciones* (Mexico, DF: Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes, 2003), 33.

⁶² *La Prensa*, October 9, 1937.

art, inspiration and genuine effort and were distributed in the United States.⁶³

Record companies began recording Spanish-language music in the United States during the 1920s. Companies dispatched units throughout the nation to acquire music for the nascent Spanish-language recording industry, known at the time as “Ethnic” music. Record companies had been aware of the U.S. immigrant audience since the early 1920s when companies like Columbia Records made Spanish-language records featuring classical and concert singers like Esperanza Iris, Pilar Arcos, and Maria Conesa. The distribution of these records among the Mexican immigrant population is difficult to measure. Chris Strachwitz argues that the audience for these records was small, given that they were expensive and therefore only appealed to the upper classes.⁶⁴ Evidence dating back to the 1920s, however, suggests that Spanish-language songs were diffused through records and the radio in public places such as businesses, theaters and even street corners. Therefore, even though an individual family might not be able to purchase a record by Maria Conesa, for example, there were opportunities to listen to her songs in public places like Olvera Street in East Los Angeles nonetheless.

As the Spanish-language industry was established, at times company representatives also set up recording facilities in local hotels, like in Texas, where Mexican musicians performed their repertory, including accordion instruments that had

⁶³ *El Universal Ilustrado*, September 12, 1929.

⁶⁴ Chris Strachwitz, and James Nicolopulos, *Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography*, ix.

been part of a cantina musical tradition.⁶⁵ Another strategy used by the recording industry was to hire men who would listen to stations from Mexico and then bring singers across the border to record albums. While singing for radio station XEP in the state of Chihuahua, for example, Adelina Garcia's voice was heard by the record company, Columbia, in the United States, who hired her to travel overseas and record for them.⁶⁶

Mexican composers and singers took advantage of the rapid rise in record manufacturing in the United States during the 1930s, and whenever possible, recorded songs shortly after they were written. For example, before traveling back to Mexico, Maria Alma recorded her first song, "*Noche de mar*," in Los Angeles weeks after it was written.⁶⁷ Record contracts also aided the exposure Mexican singers received over U.S. English-language radio stations. Singer and composer Tito Guizar who, "without saying anything, packed his guitar and his personal items and went to New York" in 1929 was helped both by the growing record and radio industry of the city at the time. Upon arrival, Tito signed a seven year contract with CBS and by the mid-1930s his voice was known throughout the United States and Mexico. Guizar even hosted his own show called "*Tito y su guitarra*" (Tito and his guitar).⁶⁸

When Mexican singers had a touring or recording contract in the United States,

⁶⁵ Jorge Reina Schement and Ricardo Flores, "The Origins of Spanish-Language Radio: The Case of San Antonio, Texas," *Journalism History* 4, No. 2 (1977): 56-58, 61.

⁶⁶ *Radiolandia*, September 18, 1945.

⁶⁷ *Radiolandia*, August 4, 1944, p. 11.

⁶⁸ *La Prensa*, August 21, 1938, p. 2.

they would sometimes extend their trip and appear in radio stations along the Mexico-U.S. artistic circuit. For example, in 1937 when Pepe Guizar was traveling to San Antonio to record for “Decca” he made a stop in Monterrey, Mexico to sing over station XET and then in San Antonio where he appeared at the local radio station KABC’s Spanish-language radio program, “*La Hora Anáhuac*.”⁶⁹

The expeditions of Mexican singers in the United States also benefitted the careers of U.S. born Mexican singers and Mexican immigrants living abroad. In effect, the journeys paved the way for the establishment of a generation of U.S. born Mexican singers who, during the ‘30s and ‘40s, began their careers singing in radio programs hosted by Mexican entrepreneurs and musicians. This group benefitted from the tours of Mexican singers in two ways. First, the continuous exposure of new music genres from Mexico allowed U.S. born Mexican singers and performers to combine newer and older forms of music; thus, they were able to entertain the diverse audiences gathered in the theaters and public auditoriums of Los Angeles and San Antonio. Second, because of their physical location in the United States, U.S. born Mexican singers had easier access to the record industry. More records meant greater exposure and consequently, their voice and music became available to the general public before that of Mexican singers. On the stages and in studios of San Antonio, New York and Los Angeles, then, U.S. born Mexican singers and performers lived out the post-revolutionary government and commercial radio’s goal to reach the Mexican population in the United States, cultivate a faithful audience, and instill notions of patriotism among them.

⁶⁹ *La Prensa*, February 15, 1937, p. 2.

A handful of Mexican performers who had settled in the U.S. and worked hard at sustaining their careers during the late 1920s and 1930s were successful. However, the fate that U.S. born Mexicans encountered during the Great Depression when voluntary and forced repatriation dislocated thousands, also affected Mexican artists and singers. At that time, in many of the cities across the United States, the cultural and artistic production of the people was put on hold. As a result, Mexican artists living in the United States were left with three choices: return to Mexico, move to New York City and work in Vaudeville Theater or take meager jobs working for churches, charity organizations or the English-language commercial radio industry. The economic and political events of the 1930s may have caused a setback in the careers of Mexican singers and performers, yet for U.S. born Mexicans, a new time opened up for them to grow, perfect their talent, record music, and get their name out.

Despite the economic climate in the nation, the cultural production of the Mexican community in the U.S. was thriving, especially that relating to music. In Texas, the career of Lydia Mendoza, for instance, flourished during this time. In San Antonio and Los Angeles, U.S. born Mexican men and women produced records, organized festivals and concerts, or complimented holiday events by singing patriotic songs. San Antonio, in fact, had been the place where a number of Mexican singers and artists began their careers. Before traveling to her native Mexico, it was on the stages of the *Teatro Zaragoza* that Maria Alma began her career. Alma, who was both a composer and singer, had recorded for Victor and signed a contract to sing for XEW upon her arrival in

Mexico City in the early 1940s.⁷⁰

Since San Antonio was home to a number of auditoriums and theaters, Mexican immigrants had ample opportunity to develop their careers. Thus, it was possible for different musical genres to come together under the same roof. For example, the comic sketch couple, Netty and Jesús Rodríguez, who were experts at performing, *variedades* or “ensembles of popular variety acts,” traveled throughout Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and California. In December of 1936, Netty and Jesús joined the acclaimed Miguel Lerdo de Tejada orchestra, along with composer Agustín Lara, singer Margarita Cueto and other Mexican artists on their tour of South Texas.⁷¹ The convergence between the musical genres demonstrates the fusion of musical and artistic styles: Netty and Jesús’ numbers appealed to the working-classes while Lerdo de Tejada’s orchestra was known as a culturally elitist group. The duets performances also resonated with the population because they embodied archetypal characters mentioned in the *corridos* of the Revolution, such as the *Adelita* and the faithful soldier who gives his life for the rebel cause.⁷²

Records homogenized Mexican music and they appealed to the consumer in new ways. In Mexico, they made live radio and live music extinct because artists sang songs

⁷⁰ *Radiolandia*, August 25, 1942, p. 3.

⁷¹ *La Prensa*, December 13, 1936, p. 6.

⁷² Carlos Monsiváis, “Yo soy humilde cancionero (De la música popular en México)” in Aurelio Tello, ed., *La música en México Panorama del siglo XX* (México, DF: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y Las Artes, 2010), 208.

until they were “perfect,” recorded them, and radio stations distributed them throughout the country, and then they were played simultaneously through chain transmissions by the late 1940s. Records expedited the process for an artist to sign a long-term contract and popularized Mexican music on a larger scale. After witnessing the performances of Tito Guizar in San Francisco during the mid-1940s, singer Freddy Quiñones acknowledged that Guizar had “paved the way for those of us who are interpreters of the Mexican and Latin American folklore, allowing our songs, which contain the timeless musical feeling of Mexico, to be heard in the entire world.”⁷³

Record contracts gave artists the first steps towards stardom and preserved Mexican traditional and folkloric music. With the help of Felipe Valdéz Leal and Nicho Acosto, for example, Pedro J. Gonzalez and “*Los Madrugadores*” recorded with Victor and Columbia records in the late 1920s.⁷⁴ In San Antonio, singer Esperanza Espino was contracted with RCA records while she appeared with Netty and Jesús Rodríguez’s theater company in San Antonio’s *Teatro Nacional* in 1938. Espino was an “exclusive artists” whose records, according to the paper, “were in high demand.”⁷⁵ Countless other groups, such as *Las Hermanitas Vazquez* and *Las Hermanitas Vidaurri* also had contracts

⁷³ Victor Alejandro Espinoza Valle, *La Vida Misma: Fernando Freddy Quiñones, un trovador fronterizo* (Guadalajara, Jalisco: Centro Universitario de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Universidad de Guadalajara, 2008), 52.

⁷⁴ Box 3 Folder 16. CONFEDERACION DE VETERANOS REVOLUCIONARIOS DE LA DIVISION DEL NORTE. San Ysidro, California. Enero 21 de 1978. Sr. M. Claudio Estrada. San Felipe 143 Mexico, D.F. Pedro J. Gonzalez Papers, 60, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁷⁵ *La Prensa*, March 20, 1938, p. 5.

with record labels. When Juanita V. de Montalvo and Amelia Vázquez traveled to San Antonio from Laredo, Texas in 1938, for example, they did so to record with RCA Victor.⁷⁶ *Las Hermanitas Vidaurri*, in addition, who often toured with Jesús and Netty Rodríguez in theaters and radio stations along with the U.S. border, had recorded with the Blue Bird record label.⁷⁷

Fulfilling the Post-Revolutionary Cultural Mandate

In the mid-‘30s some members of the Mexican immigrant community in the United States self-identified as *México de Afuera* (Mexico Outside of Mexico) and walked around with nostalgia for the Motherland, for the land of their upbringing. These feelings were expressed through declamation, poems, and of course, music. One important aspect of this music was suffering, pain, and articulating the tribulations of living in the United States. In order to convey these sentiments, the community had to produce their own male and female artists and composers. In particular, the compositions of Pedro J. González appealed to the U.S. born Mexican community because he wrote about Mexican issues, real life events at home, and mixed this was with popular music genres like the *ranchera*. Gonzalez was also influential because he saw himself as a spokesman for the plight Mexican immigrants encountered in the United States. As he had been “the (first) Mexican radio announcer who spoke clearly and courageously with Reason and Justice for our humble Latino race, true owner of our Latin American Continent.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *La Prensa*, April 7, 1938, p. 8.

⁷⁷ *La Prensa*, October 10, 1939, p. 1-2.

⁷⁸ [Box 1 Folder 9] 3. Pedro J. Gonzalez Papers, 60, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA,

As the years went on, Mexican artists who chose to stay in the United States and cater to the immigrant and second-generation audience found that mixing older and new music genres was a sure way to be successful. Netty Rodríguez's performances, for example, were filled with enthusiasm and patriotism. According to the press "She is the folkloric artist of '*México de Afuera*' because she knows how to interpret the feelings of the Mexicans here and in her songs and her dialogues she has incorporated our unique elements."⁷⁹

Similarly, on the stages of cities throughout the United States, interpreters of the *canCIÓN ranchera*, like Lydia Mendoza, became closely identified with the actual songs they sung. To the public, they were idolized for their ability to articulate the feelings and expressions through poetic imagery that centered in the rural countryside. According to Yolanda Broyles-González one of the reasons that interpreters like Mendoza enjoyed such rich careers was in their ability to "articulate the sensibilities and experiences of the people."⁸⁰ Mexican immigrants who chose to remain abroad had the ability to connect with the different Mexican generations because many learned the skills to incorporate *corridos* with the *canCIÓN ranchera* and *boleros* in their performances.

At times, Mexican composers and radio announcers also found prosperous careers in the United States by appealing strictly to the Mexican and U.S. born Mexican audience. Comfortable with their social position in the United States, the Mexican population demanded

University of California, Los Angeles.

⁷⁹ *La Prensa*, July 23, 1939, p. 2-3.

⁸⁰ Yolanda Broyles-González, "Ranchera Music(s) and the Legendary Lydia Mendoza: Performing Social Location and Relations," 183.

that their artists blend the traditions of Mexican music and, at the same time, incorporate local features that would legitimize the community outside of the *Patria*. Cástulo Ortiz, for instance, was a composer and poet who had migrated to Texas from Northern Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. After spending fifteen years in the United States, Ortiz had not written a song specifically for *México de Afuera* (Mexico Outside of Mexico) but focused instead on classical pieces which the press, along with the greater immigrant community, considered a waste of his talent. In fact, *La Prensa* exhorted him to, “return his inspiration to the place where surely he placed his heart and his mind a long time ago: to our cotton pickers, our factory and sawmill workers, our street vendors, our women...to our hopes and our longings as humans who, consciously or unconsciously, need to give a new color to the American civilization by connecting the two dominant cultures and races of the continent.”⁸¹

Yet Mexican composers who launched careers in the United States prospered for a number of reasons. First, they wrote about issues with which Mexican nationals could identify and second, they wrote music that vividly expressed the hardships of living in the United States as immigrants and second-class citizens. No other composer followed this model better than Pedro J. González, whose popularity, in the eyes of some, rivaled that of Mexican singers and film stars Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete. His compositions covered a range of themes such as: unrequited love, religious pleas, political changes and tragedies affecting the local population.⁸²

González was a Mexican radio announcer, musician and composer who had been a

⁸¹ *La Prensa*, May 28, 1934, p. 4.

⁸² Box 10 A. “a las ocho me mataré.” Por Joaquin Aguilar Robles. Tijuana, Baja California, Enero de 1969. Pedro J. Gonzalez Papers, 60, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles.

telegraph operator during the Mexican Revolution and migrated to Southern California in the early 1920s. There, he took a variety of jobs before landing a position in the L.A. radio station KMPC in 1926. Shortly after, Gonzalez helped create “*Los Madrugadores*” (The Early Risers), a name referring to a recording group, as well as his program, which aired daily from four to six in the morning over station KELW in Burbank, California for several years.

The first way Gonzalez connected with his compatriots in the United States was by writing about Mexico’s history and people. For example, the lyrics of his song “*Himno Vasconcelista*,” which was an homage to Mexican politician and Public Education Minister, José Vasconcelos, read: “I am a *vasconcelista* who comes here// To remember the Motherland where I was born// And now that we are gathered together we find ourselves// In a hospitable land for Mexicans// United we will show with great pleasure// That we will continue to honor the Motherland which witnessed our birth.”⁸³

In Los Angeles, Gonzalez and *Los Madrugadores* also sang nostalgic and humorous tunes which his audience could relate to, many times because they had been features of Hispanic Theater productions. His personal archive contains lists of his most faithful listeners; men and women from Northern California to Baja California who tuned in to this Mexican radio announcer on a frequent basis and whom the composer kept in contact with after he retired from radio. Correspondence between him and Mexican and U.S. audience indicates the success he had in advocating for the concerns of the Mexican people and in furthering working-class music for the enjoyment of the day. Letters from fans such as Matias Michel, a Mexican farm laborer

⁸³ Box 3 Folder 9 Song lyrics 1929-34 HIMNO VASCONCELOS por Pedro J. Gonzalez. Pedro J. Gonzalez Papers, 60, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles.

who had listened to the radio program during the '30s and '40s, read: "It is great to remember those times when 'Los Madrugadores' not only delighted us with your songs but also reminded us what time we had to wake up and prepare our lunches for work. The truth is, those days are gone but your name alone brings us Mexicans great memories of what life was all about for the Latino population at the time."⁸⁴

The one feature allowing Mexican performers who stayed in the United States the ability to succeed over their counterparts was the first-hand knowledge of the local population, their habits, their trials, and their longings. Many achieved stardom because their careers began in the locations where Mexican singers would not perform on their overseas tours. For example, when she began her career as a singer, Lydia Mendoza sang at the Plaza del Zacate in San Antonio. "There were a lot of groups in the Plaza, but they were all men," recalled Mendoza. "We were women; we were the only women singers: my mother, my sister and I. We were also the only group that was a family... No groups from Mexico came to play in the Plaza, either; it was just the Trios from around San Antonio and South Texas; strictly local groups. Of women, nobody! Just us, we were the only family and the only women there."⁸⁵ Mendoza noted that when Mexican groups, such as *Los Trovadores Tamaultipecos* or *Las Hermanas Águila*, visited the United States they sang in theaters. Mexican artists spent the majority of their time in Mexico City and then left to other countries like Cuba or the United States.

Pedro J. González was admired by many and regarded as an important hero and leader in

⁸⁴ Box 1 Folder 9. Pedro J. Gonzalez Papers, 60, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁸⁵ Chris Strachwitz, and James Nicolopulos, *Lydia Mendoza*, 58-59.

California's Mexican community. In fact, because he had been regarded as a menace and served a prison sentence for a crime he did not commit, in the eyes of Mexican immigrants and their families, he was a hero who suffered on behalf of countless others. In the 1930s, as Stephen Loza writes "the authorities in Los Angeles perceived him as a threat because of his outspokenness during his radio broadcasts."⁸⁶ In 1934, Gonzalez was wrongfully accused of rape and sent to San Quentin to serve a sentence for a crime of which he was later acquitted. After being released from prison, González was deported to Mexico and took up a job for radio station XEAN of Tijuana. The shame and suffering from his wrongful sentence gave him an outlook on the treatment of Mexicans in the mid-1930s in California. Years later, he wrote "they couldn't look favorably on the discovery of the (first) Mexican radio announcer who spoke clearly and courageously with Reason and Justice for our humble Latino race, true owner of our Latin American Continent."⁸⁷

In contrast, not all Mexican performers who traveled abroad demonstrated understanding of the environment in which they were traveling to. During the fall of 1943, for instance, the *Cuarteto Metropolitano* left Mexico for a tour in Texas. Yet what they did not realize, which one of Mexico's leading newspapers was quick to note, was that "it was time of the harvest and the people were in the cotton fields."⁸⁸ Consequently, their tour was a failure and they were forced to return to Mexico.

⁸⁶ Steven Loza, *Barrio Rhythm: Mexican American music in Los Angeles* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 35.

⁸⁷ Box 1 Folder 9. Pedro J. Gonzalez Papers, 60, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁸⁸ *Radiolandia*, September 3, 1943.

Conclusion

In the 1930s and 1940s, as U.S. born Mexican singers traveled throughout the country they made use of the radio to familiarize the public with their music. Some profitted from record contracts with major labels. Others were succeeding simply because musicians were singing about the struggles and features of life of Mexicans in the United States, and responded to local circumstances. As the years progressed, U.S. born Mexican music, as its own genre, drastically advanced. Both men and women, like Pedro J. Gonzalez, Maria Padilla, Lydia Mendoza and Netty Rodríguez, benefitted from knowing their audience and the local circumstances. Furthermore, this style of music and radio they made reaffirms what Américo Paredes has stated concerning the folklore and music created in the United States by Mexicans: “These songs should have resonance in all U.S. born Mexicans, for they are part of the history of all Mexicans in the United States. They record an important aspect of the Mexican-American’s long struggle to preserve his identity and affirm his rights as a human being.”⁸⁹

Through radio programming, live performances and music recording the historical significance of Mexican markets for the music industry reached a completely different status by the early 1940s. From being stops considered merely for an extra income in the 1910s and 1920s, these markets had become by the dawn of World War II the arenas where stardom, international status and hyper-Mexican nationalism could be achieved, displayed and celebrated. Mexican artists performed and recorded in the United States on regular basis, not only to satisfy the insatiable appetite in Mexican communities for ethnic music, but also to consolidate their artistic trajectories as international stars, high representatives of Mexican culture and

⁸⁹ Américo Paredes, *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), xviii.

ambassadors of the Mexican revolutionary government abroad.

The cultural mandate given to all Mexican citizens after the revolution was fulfilled in the United States by U.S. born Mexican and Mexican immigrants like Lydia Mendoza and Pedro J. González. In the stages and studios across the United States, they connected with the local population through music that exalted Mexico and included songs on the Mexican experience in the United States. Thus, as record companies and commercial radio stations appealed to Mexican consumers to buy music or tune in to more programs produced, not in Mexico, but in the United States the post-revolutionary project overseas failed.

Epilogue

The End of an Era: Censorship, Television and Single-Network Chains

La televisión pronto llegará /Yo te cantaré y tú me verás... vísteme bien mujer, vísteme bien/ Ya no hace falta tener buena voz/ Sólo hay que andar figurín.

The television soon will come/ I will sing before you and you will see me...dress me well dear, dress me well/There is no need to have a good voice /You only have to look nice.

-Lyrics for “*La Televisión*,” 1947

In Mexico, during the first half of the twentieth century, radio brought together transnational culture, nationalism and consumerism. Additionally, along with spurring national and international commercial relations, it fulfilled many functions to the post-revolutionary state, including diffusing art, knowledge, music and culture. To the government, radio transmissions were efficient avenues to convey the message of the national reconstruction project, both within the country and across the border into the United States.

In the 1930s, commercial and official stations responded to the goals of the revolutionary elite which, among other things, included agrarian reform, secular education and the consolidation of a new political party, the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (National Revolutionary Party), or PNR. As the nation’s economy and industry grew, along the U.S.-Mexico border a group of entrepreneurs built radio stations and created a listening audience of Mexican nationals and immigrants. These stations were considered “business cards in order to know Mexico ‘from the inside’” and grew

drastically during the late 30's and early '40s.¹

In the United States, Mexican immigrants used Mexican music, mass media and entertainment prior to the advent of the national reconstruction project of the government. By 1940 the radio industry was completely transformed as a result of censorship, chain broadcasting and international legislation. In fact, a competition ensued between the government and commercial radio stations along the border over the Mexican immigrant and U.S. born Mexican audience. In that decade, Mexico embarked upon a period of World War II related richness which brought a number of changes to the nation's industry, politics and entertainment. Mass media, in particular, underwent stricter restrictions under the administration of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946), who was concerned with the perceived effects of mass media content upon education, health, family values, public morality and national culture. Using mass media to invigorate nationalism and build patriotism did not lead to positive effects for the government on the other side of the border. Consequently, the industry saw a decline in trans-border programming, a rise in record playing and an overall standardization of programs, as they were recorded in Mexico City and shipped to the provinces for retransmission. The Mexican people continued to tune in to radio on a daily basis before, and after, the arrival of television at mid-century but the industry was not the same as it had been in the previous eras.

Censorship

Government control of the radio industry intensified in the mid-1930s under the Cárdenas

¹ *Radiolandia*, March 20, 1943, p. 9.

administration, which ushered in a nation-wide project of broad agrarian and labor reform. Part of his radical program included an overhaul of the nation's economic system which, naturally, touched upon the role of mass communications in Mexico. Cárdenas realized the importance of maintaining a firm control over the media and strongly believed that the propaganda power, as well as the revenue-generating power, of radio should be kept under strict control of the government. In turn, he moved to enforce the existing Mexican broadcasting legislation beginning in 1934, when all commercial stations were ordered to transmit news bulletins.² Two years later, amendments to the law indicated that ten out of every sixty minutes of air time had to contain government propaganda.³ Tighter control was exercised again in 1937 with the creation of *La Hora Nacional* which mandated for commercial stations from the Yucatan peninsula, to central Mexico, to the northern border in cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, to play the weekly broadcast.

Prohibiting commercial stations from broadcasting any political information, in the 1930s the government merged politics with radio programming by inaugurating an "official" radio station, XEFO. In the late '30s and 1940s the station became an organ of the PNR, which transmitted classical music in their daily programming in an effort to bring "high culture" to the audience. Despite efforts to modernize the station by constructing a new studio for the station in 1935, the state's efforts to create a "National Radio" were not generating positive results. As one critic whose penname was *El Caballero Pálido* (The Pale Horse) noted in 1935:

² Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (Hereafter AGN, SCOP), Expediente 22/131.6 (725.1)/155.

³ *Diario Oficial*, 30 de diciembre 1936. "Reglamento de las estaciones radioeléctricas comerciales, culturales y de aficionados."

Radio experts want to know, how much fun do the working and laboring masses have listening to operas, rhapsodies, sonatas, etc, all the time? And the *Huapangos*, *corridos*, *sones*, and Revolution episodes, and all of that music and popular literature, which is of real importance to the people, when will that be transmitted? In the year 2000? For the hundreds of peasants that hear [XE]FO every day it is 100 times more interesting, musically, Tata Nacho than Beethoven.⁴

In the 1930s, the duty of the federal government, who dispensed licenses for new stations, was to both protect and patrol the social function of radio in Mexico. In the following decades the State's role in the radio industry became twofold: it took on the role of both overseer and broadcaster. Through a number of inspectors, the Ministry of Communications and Public Works monitored the broadcasts of all commercial and official stations. For instance, on September 30, 1931, the Communications Minister received a report on the activity of station XEN, owned and operated by *Cerveceria Modelo* in Mexico City. The inspector, whose reports were signed only with his initials, noted that in accordance with the law stating that stations could broadcast informational conferences to the general public, XEN was broadcasting a program called "*Hora Impulsora de las Actividades Nacionales*" (The Propelling Hour of National Activities). In the program, prominent Mexican businessmen were commenting on the recent 1% government tax increase and its effects in the nation. However, according to the inspector, since September 27 the speakers had become highly critical of the government's actions. Calling them "scientific stupidities," the orators attacked the current administration and leadership noting that "it was time that they leave the Cadillac and return to the earth from which they came; that it is time for them to visit the factories and take note, so that they understand the

⁴ *El Universal Ilustrado*, November 14, 1935, p. 10.

work that it takes to make one peso.”⁵ While discontent was common within labor force during this time, the 1926 law stated that any direct attack on the government would not be tolerated. Punishment to XEN, who had blatantly violated the law, came in the form of a fine.

Restrictions on broadcasting extended outside of Mexico City’s radio stations. The Ministry of Communications placed inspectors in the North, who worked diligently ensuring that stations did not diverge from their intended path. In their reports, SCOP inspectors noted all information concerning the daily programming and extra-curricular activity of radio stations. For instance, in October 1931, the assessor of station XER of Villa Acuña, Coahuila wrote, “I have carefully observed the services of said station...all of their English announcements are first read in Spanish, and in all of their concerts they play national music.”⁶

When they noted suspicious or unlawful behavior, inspectors included the subversive acts in their statements. Such was the case of the account sent by Francisco Aguilar, an inspector of the first zone, to the Communications Minister on September 21, 1933 about stations XEAE and XEFD, both of Tijuana, whom he accused of transmitting propaganda from psychologists who sold horoscopes, gave advice, and answered questions on the air from radio listeners. In addition, XEAE and XEFD were also dedicating songs and musical selections to friends and loved ones, at times giving personal messages and saying the recipients’ full names over the air. Aguilar noted that this activity was in direct violation of Article 78 of the 1926 Electric Communications Law which stated that “the hidden or open transmission of personal, political,

⁵ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 525/20.

⁶ AGN, SCOP, Expediente 525/16.

or religious affairs are prohibited.”⁷

At times, their job responsibilities included monitoring the broadcasts of stations in the United States, especially if they were located along the border. In the fall of 1940, Gustavo Pérez Aldama, who was stationed in the border state of Coahuila, reported that for months he had observed subversive radio transmissions from San Antonio, Texas which spoke about rebel groups in Mexico who were plotting to organize an attack against the government. This matter, which was brought to the attention of both the Minister of Communications and Foreign Relations, demonstrates the interest the Mexican government had in ensuring that messages against Mexico, or her government, were not diffused through the airwaves.⁸

Following Cárdenas, Manuel Ávila Camacho used the influence of his brother, who was Minister of Communications and Public Works at the time, to imposed strict censorship guidelines over the content of radio transmissions. The control over mass media was so extensive during the Camacho administration that record companies found themselves apologizing for the content of their productions. In particular, the themes and lyrics of *boleros* caused generational conflicts and public debates. The growing conservative population of the 1940s considered many of the lyrics offensive to God and salacious and frequently protested. In response to heated accusations in June of 1945, for instance, record company *Promotora Hispano-Americana de Mexico* (PHAM) printed a public apology for the lyrics in one of Agustín Lara’s *boleros*, “*Palabras de Mujer*” (The Words of Women). In a written statement Lara noted

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ramo Gobernación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (IPS), Caja 442.

that he wanted to make public “1: That God is witness of my Catholic faith and He knows that I did not have any desire to offend him in my song and 2: The world is a witness of my respect for ladies, before whom I bow with all reverence.”⁹

Chain Broadcasting

In the mid-1940s, the Mexican government’s cultural program was replaced by an accelerated pursuit of capitalism and a cosmopolitan way of life, as advances in technology, mass communications and transportation opened the world up to the people of Mexico. At this time, for instance, Mexican radio listeners tuned in to the musical night life of the United States easily. Over station XEW they heard concerts by New York City’s National Symphonic Orchestra in Carnegie Hall or tuned in to NBC’s nightly programs featuring “Latin American” music, a blend of Afro-Cuban, Mexican and Argentine popular songs and tangos. In addition, after Mexico joined the allied powers during the Second World War, Mexican stations transmitted war propaganda, programs and news briefs, many times directly from the British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC.

As these forces transformed Mexican society, the interests of national networks, or “chain programming,” as it was called in Mexico, began to overshadow the work of commercial stations along the U.S-Mexico border. In fact, commercial advertisements and networks, both introduced in 1941, were fundamental in the direction that the radio industry took during the remainder of the twentieth century. Together, the consolidation of a national broadcasting system in Mexico City, along with regional and international broadcasting agreements, led to the drop in trans-border broadcasting from commercial stations by the mid 1940s.

⁹ *Radiolandia*, June 22, 1945.

The efforts by border stations to sustain a Mexican overseas audience were frustrated after the arrival of networks for a number of reasons. Chain programming connected radio stations in different locations in Mexico and offered similar programming, either through the telephone or through recorded programs made in Mexico City, and distributed to these regional stations through the mail. This process began in 1941 with the creation of *Radio Programas de México* (Mexican Radio Programs) or RPM, the country's first national network based in Mexico City. Despite Emilio Azcárraga's statement that the purpose of the network was to "intensify the artistic exchange between Mexico and its neighboring countries," the reality was that through RPM the links between capitalists in Mexico and the United States only grew stronger.¹⁰

A large portion of Mexico's media history during the twentieth century centers on Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, a media mogul and visionary who is credited for establishing Mexico's most influential commercial radio station, XEW. He was also the founding father of the largest media conglomerate in the nation, *Televisa*, as well as a financial backer of the RPM project. Azcárraga emulated the U.S. model of radio, dreaming that the stations under his control would one day be as influential as the NBC or CBS networks in the United States.¹¹ In addition, he held an international vision for the Mexican radio industry. In 1930, when XEW first went on the air, it was intended to be "the driving force of Mexican culture and art beyond the nation's borders." In the following decades, XEW exceeded this goal and was admired and coveted both

¹⁰ *¡Oiga!*, June 3, 1944.

¹¹ Jorge Mejía Prieto, *Historia de la radio y la televisión en México* (México, DF: Colección México Vivo, 1972), 38.

for its technical advancements and for its commercial power.¹² In fact, as the station professionalized, so too did the artistic life of the nation.¹³

Azcárraga may have been the financial overseers of RPM, but the network was the brainchild of Clemente Serna Martínez, a radio engineer from the state of Monterrey who formed the organization in 1941 with twelve radio stations. Serna Martínez, who sold advertisements for a radio station in Nuevo León, recalled that when he traveled South to Mexico City, during the 1930s, businessmen in the capital did not believe that their announcements would be aired over stations in the North. He recalled that after thinking of possible solutions, “in two paragraphs I drafted a plan to establish an organization that would give advertisers nation-wide reach.”¹⁴ At the time, diffusing advertisements through a national network filled an important void within Mexican industry and commerce. Within one year, RPM included more than 100 stations, changing the future of advertising in Mexico forever.

For the radio stations along the U.S.-Mexico border, however, the appearance of RPM was threatening; it was a new way for the political center, Mexico City, to exert its control over states in the North. “The radio stations in the provinces wanted nothing to do with us,” Serna Martínez admitted.¹⁵ In addition, RPM adopted a similar mission of commercial stations along

¹² *Radiolandia*, September 22, 1944.

¹³ *¡Oiga!*, September 23, 1944.

¹⁴ Bertha Zacatecas, *Vidas en el aire. Pioneros de la radio en México* (México, DF: Editorial Diana, 1996), 203.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

the U.S.-Mexico border: using the airwaves to create Mexican consumers in the United States. RPM, in fact, wanted to make radio in Mexico the “message of progress which is sent across the borders and continents daily.”¹⁶

Radio Programas de México was not the only network to appear in Mexico City in the 1940s, or to have ambitions to reach audiences in the United States. In the spring of 1944, station XEQ inaugurated its own network, *La Cadena Azul*, The Blue Network, which brought together fifteen stations in nine different states and whose motto was to “take throughout our territory and outside of our borders the expression of our feelings, through our music and our folklore.”¹⁷ In fact, the Mexican press reported that in the United States, XEQ was “one of the most listened to Mexican radio programs.”¹⁸ During the remainder of the decade and into the late twentieth century, Mexican commercial networks continued to enthrall their Spanish-speaking audiences in the United States with high-quality programs.

In addition, the arrival of commercial networks prolonged the symbiotic relationship between the government and the private mass communications sector. Since the 1920s, the government had enjoyed a close relationship with Mexico’s “media bosses,” which included Azcárraga and others in the newspaper and film industries. Before 1940, the state used their own resources to diffuse nationalism, such as persuading its citizens to listen to state-sponsored radio broadcasts like *La Hora Nacional* (The National Hour), a weekly concert which, by law, every

¹⁶ *¡Oiga!*, June 3, 1944.

¹⁷ *¡Oiga!*, April 1, 1944.

¹⁸ *Radiolandia*, May 21, 1943.

commercial station had to retransmit every Sunday night. But, by the middle of the twentieth century, as Stephen Niblo argues, the Mexican government learned that it was better to have an indirect relationship with mass communications than to attempt to stand behind the project of cultural nationalism.¹⁹ The arrival of RPM and other networks, then, was both an economic and political force allowing large radio stations the ability to retain political control over smaller stations and “dictate” the growth of the industry.²⁰

In the late 1940s, as power shifted towards the capital city thanks to networks like RPM and *La Cadena Azul*, television appeared on the horizon as the new form of entertainment and the U.S. rose to a position as a regional leader in radio broadcasting, stations along the U.S.-Mexico border offering trans-border programming were forced to give up their ability to target the overseas audience of Mexican listeners. However, the work that Mexican commercial radio began in the early decades of the twentieth century, the creation of an avid consumer market of Mexican music in the United States, is a phenomenon still in existence today.

International Conferences

Aside from national networks and censorship, another factor determining the decline in trans-border and transnational broadcasts was a series of regional and international agreements that the Mexican government made with the United States and other countries in North America.

¹⁹ Stephen R. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 355.

²⁰ Fernando Mejía Barquera, *La industria de la radio y la televisión y la política del estado mexicano* (México, DF: Fundación Manuel Buendía, 1989), 130.

As early as 1921, individuals throughout Mexico had unrestricted access to the airwaves; on a regular basis, many of them experimented with radio broadcasting in their homes, businesses, or in public places. Proud of its progress in the field of mass communications, the Mexican post-revolutionary government participated and complied with intercontinental agreements. Mexican representatives attended conferences and conventions early on, such as the International Telecommunications Conference held in Washington, D.C. in 1929, where it was determined that Mexico would be assigned the call letters, XE and XF for its radio stations.

In the early 1930s, as the Mexican radio industry professionalized, Azcárraga and other media entrepreneurs realized that there was an unequal distribution of channels in the electromagnetic spectrum in North America and that, in fact, the majority of them were being utilized by the United States. Regardless of the law, many Mexican stations used the channels assigned to Canada or the United States, which was not problematic until the arrival of the “border blasters” stations in the early 1930s. After high-powered Mexican radio stations broadcast to both English and Spanish-language audiences in Villa Acuña or Ciudad Juárez, for example, the U.S. government took interest in Mexican radio broadcasting for the first time. In particular, the government was committed to shutting down the stations under the direction of FCC evaders like Dr. Brinkley, whose XER station advertised a surgical procedure where male genitalia was replaced by goat glands as a male impotence remedy over the air.²¹

In effect, the high-powered transmissions of the “border blasters” led to a number of disagreements between the United States and Mexico over broadcast frequency allocations. In a

²¹ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio: Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 203.

series of meetings over the course of the next two decades, a power struggle was manifested between the neighboring countries. In the 1933 North and Central American Regional Conference held in Mexico City, the United States first expressed its desire to reduce the frequency of the border radio stations. The basis for the request was that the two nations disagreed on the definition of the role of radio broadcasting. In Mexico, the government and the private media sector believed that “radio transmissions are national and international services;” noting that “especially along the border, which is a zone of cooperation, it is inevitable to use radio to broadcast, not just in one country but in the neighboring one as well.” The United States, on the other hand, maintained that “a broadcasting station was to serve the interests of the population within the country and is not for an international service.” The U.S. envoy to the Conference, Mr. Sykes, in addition, noted that “we could not consider border stations as being needs of Mexico.”²²

The Mexican government did not surrender immediately. The representative at the Conference, Anselmo Mena, reported that as the countries were drafting formal legislation, the United States expressed that as a way to reduce the influence of border stations, they wanted Mexico to ban stations from broadcasting in short wave frequencies, that is, across great distances. In response, the Mexican delegation noted that its stations along the border were fully complying with international law and were important to the nation for a number of reasons. “They constituted an industry of national interests; they extended Mexican propaganda abroad,” and most importantly, “because they are a point of contact with the Mexican people of the

²² Archivo Histórico Diplomático Genaro Estrada (AHGE), Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), Expediente III-300-26.

United States.”²³ No formal legislation was passed in 1933 regarding the purpose of “border blasters,” but for the first time, radio stations whose sole mission was to target the Mexican audience abroad were placed in the spotlight.

The United States vocalized their position again four years later in Havana, Cuba at the First Inter-American Radio Conference. There, the U.S. delegation persuaded Mexico to agree to a reallocation of radio frequencies in North America in a provision that included, if not prohibiting them altogether, reducing the number of stations along the border.²⁴ Mexico continued to participate in conferences held in Washington D.C. and Rio de Janeiro in 1944 and 1945, respectively, stations along the border that were operated, not by U.S. outlaws, but by Mexican entrepreneurs, were at the losing end.

Conclusion

Radio stations stitched together Mexican communities in the United States by providing a complex and well developed set of services, from live performances to block programming and a vital recording industry, that enhanced ideal visions of the Mexican family, the Mexican nation and the Mexican people abroad. Between 1920 and 1950 the music-performance media business catering to Mexicans in the United States evolved into a full fledged entertainment industry, solely capable of propelling Mexican performers to the status of cultural ambassadors, to feature them in the most important venues in places such as New York City, Los Angeles and San Antonio, and to make them into international stars with generous revenue from live performances and record sales. The unique ways in which these markets combined Mexican

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio*, 224-225.

nationalism, mass consumption, patriarchal values and transnational networks, to satisfy the entertainment demands of Mexican families in the United States, illustrate the vitality and inventiveness of entrepreneurs, broadcasters, artists and audiences in *México de Afuera*.

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SCOP	Ramo Gobernación, Fondo Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas
IPS	Ramo Gobernación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales
LC	Ramo Presidencial, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas del Río
MAC	Ramo Presidencial, Fondo Manuel Ávila Camacho
MAV	Ramo Presidencial, Fondo Miguel Alemán Valdés
OC	Ramo Presidencial, Fondo Álvaro Obregón-Plutarco Elías Calles
POR	Ramo Presidencial, Fondo Pascual Ortiz Rubio
AHSEP	Archivo Histórico de la Secretaria de Educación Publica
Fideicomiso	Archivo de Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca
HM	Hemeroteca Nacional de México, UNAM
ISSUE	Instituto de Investigaciones Sobre la Universidad y la Educación, UNAM
SRE	Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada

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