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Bi-Musical Moves

In Luis Humberto Crosthwaite and Little Joe Hernández

Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, with his given and family names facing off on two sides of the border between Tijuana and San Diego, wrote a haunting novel called *El gran preténder* (1992). The book acts out an unstable difference between Spanish and English cultural tags and begins to do a double-take from the title on, appropriating the name of a 1956 hit song by The Platters to announce a mostly Spanish performance. The novel plays its love scenes, fight scenes, betrayals and reconciliations all in the key of oldies that Anglos have almost forgotten. It celebrates a crossover legacy in music and movement, together with a love for vintage American cars that by now amounts to a naturalized style, *la vrais chose* for *cholos*. While Anglo tourists and social climbers from Mexico City pass through the novel's pages to show off superficial taste that favors the latest models of European cars and pop tunes, *cholos* stay the course. Dignified, they dig deep into the classics.

But look at the title. Classic here means that the oldies music holds up to manipulation, the way that American cars can stay cool as they ride low and hot under new management. An interfering accent marks the otherwise English "Pretender," assimilating the word for Spanish language readers who can keep a crisp English emphasis on the second "e." The assimilated accent on the second syllable is made visible, lest an unmarked version naturally stress the last syllable and sound like the Spanish verb for longing and pursuit. No longer English after adding a foreign accent, and not yet Spanish because the word still points to a liar in English, *preténder* is out of place both here and there, unless you read it from Tijuana's doubly-crossed borderland. This kind of diacritical adjustment and interference, customizing two "natural" languages in order to naturalize a particular pride of interstitial place, had also announced a book of poems from the far side of Anglo-Spanish America.

AmeRican (1985) was written on the East Coast by Nuyorican Tato Laviera. Notice the extra capital letter to signal Rican as the core of the imperial identity, and the super-scripted accent mark on the "i." These touches are equally superfluous for both English and Spanish but

central to Laviera's *AmeRican* performance of a modern and melancholic identity. The Spanglish title is a *mot juste*. It proclaims Laviera's bi-national love of country. Are two loves too many? Not if you ask Tato, or Luis Humberto, or other brilliant border bards and chroniclers. The family resemblance between them, from East Coast to West, might be simply heartwarming, an uncanny homecoming to a shared identity no matter where Spanish speakers stand in North America, if it were not for the sensitive issue of surnames. Literary texts and popular music can let the question float; they can play with identities instead of wrestling down English interference and Spanish alternatives. The only non-negotiable requirement for art is that the friction from potentially awkward extra pieces makes sparks of aesthetic pleasure. The test is whether you keep reading or keep dancing while the add-ons irritate conventions and tease them open.

Literature and music offer breaks from relentless labeling. But everywhere else it seems that people need to know if, for example, the family name "Latino" includes tejanos and boricuas. Or maybe "Hispanic" sounds better to keep ties trans-Atlantic. And does the name "Mexican" trump competing patronyms when national be-longing matters more than ethnic solidarity? In an article on Mexican immigration to the United States, David Gutiérrez tracks the ways that the process puts stress on ethnicity making it both important and impossible to fix. He tries to shore up labels that break down into a complex taxonomy, even for a group that may seem united or even homogeneous from a distance: "I use the terms 'Mexican' to refer to citizens of the Republic of Mexico (regardless of their ethnic background and/or primary language preference); 'Mexican national' to describe citizens of Mexico physically present in the United States; 'Mexican American' to refer to United States-born or naturalized American citizens of Mexican descent (however distant that descent may be); 'Chicano' to refer to Mexican Americans who use this term as a self-referent; and 'ethnic Mexican' as an overarching descriptor of the combined population of Mexican origin or Mexican descent living on both sides of the current border between the United States and Mexico (that is, regardless of their formal nationality)."¹

Then Gutiérrez adds with self-deflating exasperation, "I hope the text makes clear just how crude and arbitrary I consider each of these terms to be." He doesn't have to say how confusing they are or how the people he describes may resent or reject the category to which he assigns them. Gutiérrez cannot do better, and neither can we. Ethnic identity distinctions are like the

categories in Jorge Luis Borges's fictional Chinese Encyclopedia. The tome organizes animals by the scribe's style of brushstroke or by belonging to the emperor, among other capricious and overlapping associations. The terms of analysis can seem disconcertingly arbitrary. Likewise, ethnic labels unravel and overlap through use, suggesting that any attempt to fix them will miss the point of individual and collective particularities.²

Crosthwaite doesn't define *cholo*. He performs it as a particular style. His title is an opening move for a book about performance, playing roles; that is, about fulfilling and in some ways faking them. The choice of title is telling because there are plenty of oldies to choose from. "The Platters," a famous group of five African American singers who made "The Great Pretender" popular, produced lots of other hits including an unforgettable "Only You" and a lasting version of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." What's more, The Platters are not the only oldies artists in the *cholo* jukebox. But Crosthwaite's hero dances only to them. Social dancing is probably the most significant way of performing identity in Spanish/Anglo border cultures, as we'll note again with reference to the lasting appeal of Texan band-leader Little Joe Hernández. Deciding to dance, on page 17 of Crosthwaite's novel, el Saico (read Psycho) quotes the lyrics of the lead song in English and identifies himself, again after a first reference on the first page, as The Great Pretender: "Oh-oh, yes I'm the great pretender; Pretending that I'm doing well; My need is such, I pretend too much; I'm lonely, but no one can tell."³ Will the book develop this denial of attachments? They certainly hover and haunt the main characters. And social dancing around denial takes center stage once we learn that the protagonist's father remains a mystery. Manly and manic, el Saico's father had been decorated for fighting bravely in the American army. Then the army's racism brought him to a murderous rage and rampage with an obscure ending.

Perhaps there's an anxiety of Anglo influence that handicaps appropriation of Anglo sources to fuel denial about cultural debts. Crosthwaite takes in American oldies and classic cars while pretending to simply celebrate their continuing charm in the face of philistine fads from Anglo-land. We think he does perform the collective anxiety as he adds a new flourish of ownership. The double-take shows through intentional traces of translation error that contaminate Anglo classics with more meaning than the originals had carried. The English language title role doesn't entirely undo, for instance, the unaccented Spanish verb *pretender*.

This still available unmarked pronunciation pulls the title beyond play-acting towards the verb for competition and courtship. Certainly el Saico rehearses the ambivalence between (English) posing and (Spanish) pursuit as he earns his new name: he punishes disrespect like crazy (a reprise of his father's story and a secular riff on the way Jacob earned the name Israel after wrestling down an angel). The mild-mannered mechanic becomes el Saico once he lets loose on a bully who had misread the hero's decorous restraint as cowardice. The newly named protagonist takes on the character of *preténder* to play the doubled role of lover (in the Spanish sense) and liar (in the English sense) as he charms a series of barely legal barrio girls while his wife, la China remains his irreplaceable "esposa, su guaifa" ["wife-a"]. The catalogue of homey epithets for her goes on poetically, ironically, with that mixture of affection and affliction that Crosthwaite captures from the sound on the street, or that he helps to make up: for el Saico, la China is "su morra, su nicho, su queso, su allá voy, su de aquí soy, su torta, su estribo, su tierna melcocha, su media naranja, su castigo, su misión en la tierra, su rancho, su ajúa, su acá, su bien terrenal su gestión, su obra, su casa grande, su cobija eléctrica, su cachorra al sol, su requinto tristón, su rolita oldi, su mejilla sudada, su cementerio, su beibi. . ."4

From the title on then, the novel intimately couples English and Spanish to produce a particular place and cast of characters. They share a repertory of music and words made up of mid-century songs in English and a register of Spanish language laced in local touches of Romany, Nahuatl, and border-spawned *caló*. For outside readers, the performance is uncanny in the strict sense of the term: strangely familiar though markedly foreign no matter which side you're on. The book beckons toward intimacy and also warns about getting too close.⁵ Even from the inside, social distances are drawn among characters on a cautious map of allegiances and mobility. Part of Crosthwaite's show is to refine and to re-frame the taxonomy of identities as a choreography of roles and movements. For example, el Saico and el Rigo shared the same stage, but they didn't dare to get close enough to stand in one another's space: "no era homeboy pero era raza, no era clicica pero era de por ahí."⁶

Surely Crosthwaite programmed the double-take for outsiders to feel both near and far away on both sides of the border. It's uncanny for his readers, unless we imagine that the author was pitching the book to Tijuana alone, as if it counted on its own autonomous space with an autochthonous readership that could satisfy a great novelist's desire to go public. But

Crosthwaite sets a broader net, counting on cultural tourists whom he can cajole and chasten. He twists English and Spanish out of shape, and sets our hearts to throb with familiar but almost forgotten oldies. It's the music that plays out the tension between the familiar and the foreign. Music performs the particular bi-cultural tone of *El gran preténder*, because even though it announces an American classic, the gesture of naming a book for a musical classic shows a family resemblance to a whole generation of Latin American novels named for lasting popular songs: *De donde son los cantantes* (1967) by Cuban Severo Sarduy; *Sólo cenizas hallarás (bolero)* (1981) by Dominican Pedro Vergés, *Arráncame la vida* (1985) by Mexican Ángeles Mastreta, among many others.⁷

Music may be the most audible performer of ethno-linguistic particularity and preference, which is why Mark Slobin expressed surprise twenty years ago when he observed that ethnomusicologists had paid so little attention to sociolinguistics, which he regarded as a “sister discipline. Slobin noted that twenty years earlier the sociolinguist Dell Hymes had encouraged the use of musical terminology as “a great resource for exploration of speech styles” and “methods from sociolinguistics might stimulate our discussion of music in culture.”⁸ A shift of focus from words to music offers some relief from the confines of linguistic identity labels without giving up an ambition to describe linguistic differences. Like linguistic tags, identity labels such as Chicano, Hispanic, Latino, Mexican-American, are notoriously unstable and even perfidious, while musical styles speak volumes about self-assigned identities.

Tell us your musical preference and you've told us a great deal about your background, social networks, and ambitions. People move to particular combinations of music that have more or less identifiable places and dates of birth. And then they move to others, or to variations, maybe with appropriations that sample and recycle other people's abandoned bounty. In sociological terms, music can function like a spoken language, bonding groups of people together and distinguishing them from other groups, perhaps by excluding outsiders. Norma Mendoza-Denton (2008:14) illustrates the point when she writes about a house party in the San Francisco Bay Area.⁹ The fourteen year old hostess was an immigrant from the Mexican city of Puebla and identified herself as a *fresa* (roughly equivalent to preppy). She “was playing Rock en Español, but accepting requests for techno and a little bit of house music. Rancheras, banda, and especially cumbias with their tropical rhythms were totally out of the question.” Mendoza-

Denton notes that although *banda* was by far the most popular music among Latinas at the girl's high school, the hostess denied even having heard it except once in a movie. For her, that style conjured unwanted associations with rural Mexico and with poor people living in U.S. barrios.

As an alternative to ethnic labeling, it's probably a lot less dangerous and just as significant, intellectually and politically, to describe people by the music they move to. In fact, it's dance, even more than sound, that constructs group preferences.¹⁰ A better analogy than music to spoken language would be the combination of music and dance. Sublette described dancing as "an intense listening state," arguing that the European academy has erred in giving more respect and attention to "abstract music for listening or contemplation" than to dance-oriented styles.¹¹ But dancing is more than listening, even intense listening; it is active participation in a social interaction. For many people who attend musical events, the production of sound is far less important than the social dancing experience. This has become increasingly obvious over the course of the past century, as "live" music has steadily declined in popularity in all but a few cultures, while social dancing has remained as popular as ever.¹² Social dancing, like language, assumes that everyone in a community is often expected to participate — some skillfully, some clumsily, but all with a basic knowledge of the local vernacular or of various local vernaculars. Music might be thought of in such interactions as the sonic aspect of dance or the aspect that can be most easily isolated and commercialized, rather than as a distinct activity. (Male musicians in many musical cultures commonly say that they took up instruments because they felt inadequate as dancers and wanted another way to take part in social events— meaning contact with women.)¹³

Thinking of music as a sonic component of social (danceable) interactions rather than as a thing in itself not only deepens the analogy to spoken language; it also admits our preference for sociolinguistics over a structural linguistic approach as we think about borderland literature and bi-musical moves. Sapir (1958:16) suggested that spoken language functions as "a socializer beyond its literal use as a means of communication...in the establishment of rapport between the members of a physical group, such as a house party," noting the "caressing or reassuring quality of speech in general, even where no one has anything of moment to communicate."¹⁴ The analogy to music and dance is easy here, and later sociolinguists have similarly stressed the error of reducing language simply to strings of words or sounds.¹⁵

We can tell the difference between *norteño* polka and Texan *jaitón* (high tone) better than we can decide whether someone is Mexican or Chicano (it is a simple matter of instrumentation: a small group dominated by an accordion vs. a larger orchestra with a horn section). The distinction between “*fresa*” and the contrasting “*naco*” can be performative or in the case of *naco* probably a slur, rather than an essentialist tag. Chosen or not, such performative or judgmental categories acknowledge the possibility of change. They also take into account the unstoppable variation of sounds and taste that keep music alive enough to sell new records and to call a crowd back to a dance floor. By contrast, essentialist categories lock down differences as if they could capture cultural particularity in a snapshot that defies time. Particularity signaled by descriptors such as *fresa*, *naco*, and *cholo* is an effect of mixing and re-mixing elements of style.

This performative acknowledgment of cultural identity knows it’s on the move. However telling the taste in music, tastes change over time; they can cross over or poach elements from competing options. Whatever seems or sounds beautiful in a particular time and place can lose its charm in other settings and through sheer exhaustion. Unlike the stable classical values associated with the true and the good, the value of beauty is precarious. That’s why the practice and appreciation of art allows for change and becomes so precious for the dynamic cultures of modernity. Art, as a synecdoche of modernity, practically demands change and so it drives innovation as well as personal agency. This simple but far-reaching point summarizes the position that Friedrich Schiller promoted while political modernity was getting off to difficult start, during the French Revolution.¹⁶ He became the theorist of art-making as basic to citizenship, insisting that free societies are works in progress rather than stable structures. Modern life is unstable, he argued against those who defended ideal abstractions (such as Reason which had run amok in the French Revolution) and timeless classical art.

For Schiller and company, modernity means the continuing processes of wresting new forms from stale cultural elements that can stay stuck and create conflict. At least when viewed with centuries of hindsight, the classic culture of Greek antiquity seems to have been able to count on continuity between nature and art. But in Schiller’s frenzied world, citizens need to work continuously to make connections. Moderns co-create new societies; and new works of art help to negotiate temporary truces between conflicting elements. The truces are sublimely unstable and honor the dynamic of world-making more than they revere any product. Much as he

admired the ageless equilibrium of ancient Greek art, Schiller noted that its very perfection forfeits the freedom to stray from an ideal, so he prefers the tortuous and obsolescent historicity of contemporary arts (*Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) Letter XVI). New experiments trump the timeless enchantment of classic art along with Kant's flat baseline of training taste as civic education. The very success of the ancients is a constraint on creativity and therefore an obstacle to freedom (Letter XVI). Schiller develops this comparison in *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1801), a manifesto for modernity's difficult freedom.¹⁷ Oscillation, doubt, failure, and fleeting accomplishments are grander than god-given perfection.¹⁸ Schiller's preference for instability is a taste for freedom.

Little Joe Hernández knows how this works. An icon of Texan music, he also understands that Texan music means more than one stable thing. Joe's lasting appeal and star status follow from his talent for periodically re-mixing musical styles to match the changing taste of his public. It is a sizable public. Unlike the reception of novels -- which can't count on a critical mass of local consumers -- popular music can play to a broad audience of culturally particular areas, as long as people pick up on the beat and dance. Little Joe's combinations of beats and melodies participate in what we can call a bi-musicality that has parallels in bi-lingualism. Though the term was coined to identify and to promote a kind of musical scholarship that included first-hand knowledge of playing music, we borrow bi-musicality to mean a range of performances that combine styles associated with two musical cultures.

The concept of bi-musicality was coined in 1960 for an article titled "The Challenge of 'Bi-Musicality,'" written by Mantle Hood, founder of the first department of ethnomusicology in the United States. Hood noted that Western musicologists had typically "limited their interest in non-Western music to passive observation, working with informants and museum studies."¹⁹ Few had considered it necessary to learn to play the styles they studied, much less to become master practitioners of those styles, and Hood suggested that this had limited their understanding of the musical cultures they were researching but not rehearsing. Hood's admonition was timely and helped to transform his field, but it also suggests the limits of his analogy. It is difficult for a scholar to seriously study a living language without learning to speak it, but even within Western academic music studies no one expects a scholar of opera to be able to sing Puccini. Both inside and outside academia the most common relationship to music is not as a player but as a listener.

There's a good technical reason for staying receptive; it's that virtuosity requires rather narrow specialization. A flamenco *maestro* accompanying a young guitar virtuoso explained that no serious teacher of that music could be a player, since the time and effort required to master virtuosic instrumental technique was too much of a distraction.²⁰ The observation may seem odd to outsiders, but it acknowledges the fact that flamenco performers traditionally specialized in particular *palos* (roughly translatable as rhythmic patterns), while aficionados were expected to be knowledgeable about the whole field.

Little Joe's bi-musical moves created an uncanny language that his Texan public found familiar simultaneously as an evocation of Mexican tradition and of middle class modernity. It's the kind of magic that Crosthwaite makes too, with his high brow training by Latin America's best narrative stylists and his down home dealing with a non-literary, sometimes musical, sometimes desperate register to explore love, death, addiction, friendship.²¹ These competing registers of language that give good novels the dynamic tension to represent real world relationships have long been a focus for literary criticism which, since Bakhtin, has described the tension as dialogic. At least one scholar of popular music on the borderland takes advantage of Bakhtin's terminology to explore "*music, culture, and the dialectic of conflict*." This is the subtitle for Manuel H. Peña's book on *The Mexican American* orquesta (1999). Peña writes that Little Joe y La Familia, whose work inspired many New Mexico artists, made a breakthrough in 1972 with a recording of "Las Nubes." The song "represents one of the most remarkable efforts at code-switching, or compound bimusicality." He quotes the bandleader saying, "If it's ranchera, then it should have the ranchera feeling. If it's jazz, it should feel like jazz. But when you go from the jazz feel to the ranchera, everything can blend if you ease it in...for me to blend all these things together *es una capirotada, una ensalada de música* [a dish mixing bread, cheese, raisins, and egg, a musical salad]. It's only because that's all in my head and in my heart—because I live it." This experience matches sociolinguistic claims that smooth code-switching is, as Myers-Scotton writes, a linguistic assertion "that the speaker is a multi-faceted personality, as if the speaker were saying, 'not only am I X, but I am also Y'."²²

The public convened by Little Joe Hernández recognized themselves in the musical mode of "more than." They were generally working class Texans who came to dance, and who enjoyed both Mexican and U.S. styles. Though resentful of over-assimilated peers who considered

themselves “too good” for accordion polkas, they did not want to limit themselves to an old-fashioned, specifically Mexican sound, and welcomed music that expressed the complexity and modernity of their lives. Hernández created a style that simultaneously resonated with this crowd’s family heritage, contemporary experience, and future aspirations. Some of his choices might be misinterpreted by outsiders as succumbing to a cultural hegemony they resisted, but he stole the dominant culture’s thunder by appropriating elite orchestral instrumentation to accompany familiar *ranchera* polkas, sung in nasal Mexican style and punctuated with the exuberant *gritos* of a rural dance hall.

It took Little Joe a while to come to this sound. He started out in the early 1960s with a rock ‘n’ roll band that recorded surf instrumentals, English-language dance songs and ballads, and Spanish-language polkas and waltzes. In this period he was generally considered less successful than Sunny Ozuna, who led a similar band called the Sunliners and cracked the national Top Twenty in 1963 with the doo-wop flavored “Talk to Me.” But in the early 1970s, inspired by the Chicano power movement, Hernández grew long hair and a beard, renamed his band La Familia, and recorded a 1972 album titled *Para la Gente*, heralding a new sound that became known as the *onda chicana*. That title, like the new group name, suggested a reorientation toward “roots,” but the music was not a return to older Mexican or border styles or to what most people might have considered “roots music.” The album’s two biggest hits, “Qué culpa tengo?” and “Las nubes,” were both familiar *ranchera* songs, but reframed by hip arrangements using soul-jazz horns, electric guitar, and the string section of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. The bi- or multi-cultural agility of Hernández’s approach earned him a privileged status as a lasting star and ministering angel who communicates between heavenly sentiments and earthly expressions, just as the clouds (*las nubes*) link one world to another. His public was already familiar with both the English language and Spanish language musical elements; but relatively few musicians or bands were capable of performing expertly in both Anglo and Mexican regional styles. Like the diglossia of the Middle Ages that distinguished the unschooled congregations of Catholic Europe from the priests who knew more Latin and as much vernacular, bi-musicality can mean an appreciated and rare musical expertise that identifies leaders as they toggle between competing traditions. Or it can mean the privileged practice of sampling freely from equally familiar sources.

To Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, Peña adds the sociolinguistic categories of compound and coordinate bilingualism. These categories, developed by sociolinguists including Fishman (1972), separate the bilingualism of people who learn two languages in a single environment such as a bilingual home (compound bilingualism) from that of people who learn two languages in separate environments such as home and school (coordinate bilingualism).²³ Peña makes a parallel between Mexican American speech and music, arguing that just as Mexican Americans first spoke Spanish at home and English only with outsiders, then in later generations became bilingual among themselves (and then tended to become English-dominant with only "vestigial" Spanish), Mexican American music evolved from a period when players alternated between Mexican and Anglo styles to a fused *ranchera* and big band style, the "compound bimusicality" of the Chicano *orquestas*.

The compound/coordinate binary may be analytically useful in some situations, but it was arguably prompted less by objective observation than by a priori value judgments. Fishman writes (118) that "the labels coordinate and compound identify the extremes of a continuum of neurological organization and psychological functioning, although for the sake of simplicity they are usually treated as if they pertained to a dichotomy," and notes a "culture-bound suspicion that [coordinate bilingualism] is not only 'truer' but also inherently 'healthier'." Some academics felt compelled to reconcile the fact that what they regarded as a sign of education and intelligence—the ability to speak several languages—was often more common among lower class laborers than among themselves; so they discerned a division between the healthy, sophisticated grasp of two distinct systems and the mixed speech of uneducated people who were bilingual but could not keep their systems discrete. Peña, along with sociolinguists such as Poplack and Romaine, take an opposite but equally value-driven stance. Seeking to elevate perceptions of working-class immigrants, they argue that compound bilinguals have a better integration of their two language systems than do coordinate bilinguals, involving simultaneous "native" control as manifested in smooth intrasentential code-switching.²⁴ The observation of control highlights the choices involved in switching to create desired effects, rather than simply reproducing standard and predictable composite expressions.

Is Little Joe Hernández a coordinate bi-musical composer, since he clearly distinguishes between jazz/rock and *ranchera*? Or is he a compound bi-musician, since he combines the

sources into a single, sometimes jarring, recognizable style? Like Crosswaithe's mix of naming sources and erasing or subsuming them – the novelist's knack for appropriation without footnotes – Hernández delivers analytically equivocal performances in his music and in his musings. But the equivocation suggested by keeping jazz/rock and *rancheras* distinct while also fusing them may point more toward the frustrated ambitions of analysis than to the success of performance. Little Joe's spectacular and consistent success helps to demonstrate the rigidity of some sociolinguistic categories. Perhaps the categories themselves are not mistaken, but only the assumption that each label maps onto particular expressions or speakers. The descriptors can achieve more power if they are acknowledged as simultaneous options or perspectives for the same speakers, multiple strategies of bi-cultural performers. Again, it makes more sense to name a repertoire of speech styles than to label speakers as members of one or another group.

The observation of stylistic variety in the same speakers has a history in studies of linguistic code-switching. Ana Celia Zentella (1997:66) wrote that parents often explicitly discourage their bilingual children from switching, urging them to speak each language “correctly,” though routinely switching in their own speech.²⁵ Mendoza-Denton (2008:61-2) similarly found that many bilingual adolescents insisted that they spoke one language by preference, regarding it as “their” language, and the other only situationally, but in practice they alternated casually and unconsciously between English and Spanish. In fact, Hernández's music fits Peña's description of border bilingualism, as a part fits into the whole. Just as working-class border bilinguals rarely speak and write either Spanish or English with what would be regarded as full or correct mastery in Spain or England, Hernández is not known for his mastery of *ranchera* and still less for any facility as a jazz performer. His genius is in shaping musical fusions. Hernández and New Mexico groups like Cuarenta y Cinco may not be expert performers of the source styles they combine and have at times endured disparagement by performers and fans of earlier or “purer” *ranchera* and Anglo styles. What they carved out was a unique niche, a border-crossing practice between different groups, to please people who enjoyed Anglo rock and country music while continuing to be moved by *ranchera*.

In linguistics, speech styles involving unrepentant or unself-conscious sampling have been called pidgins—or “broken”—and in later evolutions creoles, all terms heavy with value judgments. Hymes wrote that pidgins and creoles “are marginal, in the circumstances of their

origin, and in the attitudes towards them on the part of those who speak one of the languages from which they derive... [and] have been considered, not creative adaptations, but degenerations; not systems in their own right, but deviations from other systems... explained... by inherent ignorance, indolence, and inferiority.”²⁶ Of course Modern English evolved this same way; and jazz developed by mixing African and European musical traditions. The shift from a pidgin or “trade language” status to calling it a creole comes when a new generation acquires what had been a utilitarian compromise between two languages as its native language. (Swahili, for example, evolved from a pidgin that enabled Arabic speakers and speakers of African languages to communicate with one another into a creole that is the principle or sole language of many East Africans.) New Mexico music and Hernández’s *onda chicana*, to the extent they are regarded as their own genres, evolved in a somewhat similar process and can be considered musical creoles.

But many bands working in these mixed styles continue to advertise themselves as bi- or poli-musical, in the sense of commanding multiple disparate styles. Cuarenta y Cinco writes on their Myspace page (<http://www.myspace.com/micuaarentaycinco>), that they have “had much success by the blend of *rancheras*, *cumbias*, *balses*, *boleros*, country/western, oldies and modern rock they perform. The ability of the band to go from hard core *rancheras* to country to rock and back again is what makes them one of New Mexicos [sic] best known variety bands.” As with the complex and often confusing interplay of language use and identity, the interplay of musical style and marketing can encourage such contradictions, making it useful to be known as playing “New Mexico music” by radio stations that specialize in that style, but as a versatile “variety band” for bars that have a mixed clientele of fans of Buddy Holly, Merle Haggard, and Los Tigres del Norte. Cuarenta y Cinco’s music can be framed either way, since their records consist mostly of *ranchera* standards, but always include a couple of English-language country and rock songs that demonstrate their command of those genres. So much for their coordinated bi-musicality. But their *rancheras* also show compound bi-musicality through a style that owes as much to Southwestern surf guitar as to anything played in Mexico.

One incentive to frame the competing and simultaneously available styles as bi- or poly-musicality is that the performances and permutations resonate with questions of ethnic belonging without fixing people to ethnic identities. When Cuarenta y Cinco uses the semi-literate Spanish

word “bals” rather than the more standard “vals,” or the English/German “waltz,” they mark a musical debt, as does Crosthwaite, but also a particular appropriation in an otherwise standard English paragraph. *Ranchera* records and sheet music maintain the custom of marking dance rhythms alongside the title of each song and *vals*, like *cumbia* or *bolero*, is a common Mexican designation. The spelling adjustment may indicate that the writer has little or no school experience of Spanish. But maybe it signals a style of music or a style of dance that isn’t quite Mexican. The community of dancers may regard Mexican *valeses* and Anglo waltzes as different experiences, or they may simply think of the dance rhythm in $\frac{3}{4}$ time as vals in Mexican terms and also a country and western song.

Bakhtin warns against too easily trusting our ability to assign a word or phrase—or, by extension, a musical style or approach—to a particular source, given the reality of “double-accented, double-styled...*hybrid constructions*. (1981:304-5)” He notes that an apparently straightforward phrase, spoken by a single speaker, may contain “mixed within it two speech manners, two styles, two ‘languages,’ two semantic and axiological belief systems.” Thus a “vals” can be simultaneously German, Texan, and Mexican, whether one is talking about the word or the music. However anxious the cultural style may feel, and however much it borrows source material and naturalized forms, there’s hardly any personalist anxiety of artistic influence here, in the sense that Harold Bloom made popular.²⁷ This is a paradoxical autonomy and authority because it poaches freely from competing traditions and because the sampling counts on “foreign” not fatherly sources. De-territorialized, unhinged from home legacies and adaptable for the signature moves of bi-cultural artists, the source materials lose some gravitas in their demotion to mere elements of new and changing styles.

To what style, then, does the great *preténder* belong? Look at the title again, and decide if it’s wise to risk assigning a label, or if it’s wiser to simply enjoy the slippery performance. Like Little Joe Hernández, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite calls attention to posing and to embodying style with an expanded repertoire of appropriated impersonations.

¹ David Gutiérrez, “Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the ‘Third Space’: The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in ‘Greater Mexico,’” *Journal of American History* 86 (2) (September 1999): 481-517. (1999:481-2fn)

² Jorge Luis Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," Translated from the Spanish 'El idioma analítico de John Wilkins' by Lilia Graciela Vázquez; edited by Jan Frederik Solem with assistance from Bjørn Are Davidsen and Rolf Andersen. A translation by Ruth L. C. Simms can be found in Jorge Luis Borges, *Other inquisitions 1937-1952* (University of Texas Press, 1993)

³ Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, *El gran preténder* (Fondo editorial tierra adentro, 1992); p.17.

[THE PLATTERS - THE GREAT PRETENDER LYRICS](http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-great-pretender-lyrics-the-platters.html#ixzz21PItHaVK) <http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-great-pretender-lyrics-the-platters.html#ixzz21PItHaVK> Copied from MetroLyrics.com

⁴ Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, p.19.

⁵ See Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution when Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Harvard UP 1999).

⁶ Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, p.45

⁷ In Mexico, rock 'n' roll gets special play in, for example, José Agustín *El rock de la cárcel* (1984) ("Jailhouse Rock" was a huge hit for "Los Teen Tops") and Elmer Mendoza's *Cada respiro que tomas* (1992)

⁸ Mark Slobin. *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West*. Hannover, CT: Wesleyan, 1993. p.85.

⁹ Norma Mendoza-Denton, *Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008) p.14.

¹⁰ In this paper we concentrate on Texas-Mexican dance music, which is largely used to define an in-group, exclusive community. Other styles may be used to define explicitly and exuberantly mixed communities, such as the New York salsa clubs discussed in Doris Sommer, "Dancehall Democracy: Social Space as Social Agency" (*ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, Fall 2007).

¹¹ Ned Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music: From the first Drums to the Mambo*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004) p.57.

¹² Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music*. (New York: Oxford, 2009).

¹³ Elijah Wald makes this statement based on personal experience working as a musician and interviewing many musicians in the US, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

¹⁴ Edward Sapir, "Language" [1933]. In Sapir, *Selected Writings in Language, Culture and Personality*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1958) p.16.

¹⁵ Among the most cited sociolinguists on this issue is Roy Harris, "On Redefining Linguistics." In Hayley G. Davis and Talbot J. Taylor, *Rethinking Linguistics*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003 p. 45.)

¹⁶ For a fuller discussion of Schiller's aesthetics, see Doris Sommer "Schiller and Company: Or how Habermas incites us to Play" *New Literary History*, Volume 40, Number 1, Winter 2009, pp. 85-103 and "Playdrive in the Hard-Drive" in *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency in Art and Interpretation* (forthcoming, Duke University Press)

¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies, 1997).

¹⁸ Friedrich Schiller, *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1801)

http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/schiller_essays/naive_sentimental-1.html Hannah Arendt would import Schiller's distinction between naïve and sentimental greatness to America, where she contrasted the beautiful innocence of Melville's Billy Budd with tormented Captain Vere, whose duty to the collective good compels him to condemn angelic Billy. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 78-79.

¹⁹ Mantle Hood. The Challenge of "Bi-Musicality," *Ethnomusicology* 4(2), (1960) 55

²⁰ Elijah Wald, *Global Minstrels: Voices of World Music* (New York: Routledge, 2007); p.178.

²¹ Jeffrey N. Lamb, "Cholo Identity: A Look at "El Gran Preténder," *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe* Vol. 27, No. 1 (JANUARY-APRIL 2003), pp. 26-33. Published by: [Bilingual Press / Editorial Bilingüe](#)

²² Carol Myers-Scotton, "Code-Switching as Indexical of Social Negotiations." In Monica Heller (ed.), *Codeswitching*. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988.) p.170.

²³ Joshua Fishman, Joshua A. *Language in Sociocultural Change*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1972).

²⁴ Shana Poplack, "Sometimes I'll Start a Sentence in Spanish *y Termino en Español*: Toward a Typology of Code-Switching." Centro Working Papers, No. 4. City Univ. of New York, NY Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos [sic] 1979; and Suzanne Romaine. *Bilingualism*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

²⁵ Ana Celia Zentella, *Growing up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997. p.66.

²⁶ Ronald Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 p. 53.

²⁷ Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1973)