

Juegos Nuevomexicanos: Preserving and Performing a Conflicted Identity through Children's Songs and Games

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I have lived my entire life on the Sandia Mountains of central New Mexico. Having inhabited both the cosmopolitan environment of Albuquerque and the rural East Mountain community of Sandia Park I am familiar the local customs, peoples, geography, idiosyncrasies and other aspects that we often use to define a place and it comes as no surprise that I identify myself as a New Mexican. However, this geographically oriented “New Mexican” cultural identity, an identity which may be tied to piñon trees, green chile, and norteña music on the radio, among other things, must be distinguished from the ethnic identity which John Nieto-Phillips and others define as “Nuevomexicano.”¹ For Nuevomexicanos, issues of language, race, and custom are often difficult to define, but are deeply rooted in a complex history within a long-inhabited geographical space; a history that distinguishes a personal cultural sense of “home,” from a concept of “homeland,” which serves as a significant factor of ethnic identity.

The elementary school I attended in Sandia Park was an amalgamation of students from many small communities scattered throughout the East Sandia Mountains with an ethnic demographic of almost entirely equal proportions Hispanic and Anglo. My own community was a centuries old ranch community of Nuevomexicano families, the children of whom were bilingual and identified strongly as Nuevomexicanos.

Although English was the language of instruction for all, bilingual students were generally placed with bilingual teachers and students who spoke only English, such as myself, were placed in another classroom. During a particularly memorable class activity, students from

¹ The term “Nuevomexicano” may be used as a masculine gendered term in contrast to the feminine “Nuevomexicana” which is used in reference to female persons. In this essay, I use the term “Nuevomexicano” to identify both men and women as a collective group solely in the interest of narrative fluency.

each of the classes would pass through the door which connected the two rooms with the use of a construction paper booklet with the word “pasaporte” printed on the front. By passing through this constructed border checkpoint, my classmates and I would enter the bilingual classroom where the instructor would teach us a few words in Spanish, give us a stamp on our *pasaporte*, and return us to our classroom.² This very literal border that existed in the classroom demonstrated a less material but equally real border in our community. That the bilingual children from the old ranch community whom I rode in with on the school bus where segregated upon our arrival, indicated to me that, despite being of the same place, we have very different relationships to this place, and very different identities within it.

Music was, unfortunately, sparsely included in the school curriculum. Students from all classes were occasionally gathered together to sing songs like “Old MacDonald” or “The Itsy Bitsy Spider,” and the single selection in Spanish, “De Colores,” which had no geographical ties to New Mexico specifically, but was performed to allow Spanish-speaking students an opportunity to sing in their home language and non-Spanish speaking students to use a few of the terms learned in their travels across the constructed border. The only song with any specific ties to New Mexico that was sung in class was “Albuquerque Turkey,” a song which, despite its title, does not reference any cultural or geographically significant features of Albuquerque and is performed by children throughout the United States, often as a Thanksgiving song. The lack of New Mexico-specific children’s music, or the use of music as a means of referring to New Mexican culture or identity in my own education led me to wonder whether this was a condition specific to the time or place in which I was educated, or in New Mexico in general. Are there current or historical songs performed by children in New Mexico that are culturally and

² Students would pass from the bilingual classroom into the English-only classroom as well, though I do not recall what special instruction they were given.

geographically specific? And furthermore, are there songs of cultural significance, not just for New Mexican children but for Nuevomexicano children specifically, songs which reflect New Mexico not just as home, but as homeland? To answer these questions, I sought published collections of children's music which were clearly published by local authors and intended to be performed by children in New Mexico. Here I analyze the musical forms and content, text (both lyrical text as well as other narrative text), and context of a specific collection of songs to identify musical and contextual links to factors of Nuevomexicano identity as they are defined by Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry, David Maciel, John M. Nieto Phillips, and Nancie L. González.

The collections of children's music that I present here, *The Spanish-American Song and Game Book*, published in 1942 and its 1976 republication entitled *Canciones y Juegos de Nuevo Mexico* show that its preservation of this repertoire as a pedagogical tool and signifier of Nuevomexicano culture was of great concern to their authors and contributors. Additionally, from the music, artwork, text, and context of these collections, the performance of Nuevomexicano songs and games can be linked to historical and cultural factors which permeate the discourse of Nuevomexicano identity. The editors' decisions in many ways reflect the ideals, fears, hopes, assumptions and denials of a group identity that, I argue, is not only born out of conflict, but is characterized by conflict. This conflicted identity is evident in the musical structure and forms, the sung text and themes, and the context of the publication from the dramatization of "Old World" Spanish ballads, to the appropriation of the Indita genre that performs aspects of Native American heritage and association and connections to the natural environment. The contextualization of Nuevomexicano identity in the form of songs and particularly singing games creates a scenario in which Nuevomexicano children perform and embody a history and culture as they relate to the homeland to which they are tied.

Nuevomexicano identity and the experience of that identity are, by their nature, a complex to define. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and David R. Maciel note that, “there are important variants of the Nuevomexicano experience within the state based on generational, class, gender, and regional differences.”³ The authors do, however identify several factors which contribute to a shared identity and upon which many authors agree:⁴ an identification with a place or a homeland, claiming Spanish ancestry particularly as opposed to Mexican ancestry, language, and a complex and conflicted history and association with Native American peoples.

The issue of language, particularly in regard to children, has been a historical and ongoing controversy in New Mexico. The decision to conduct all public school instruction in English (including the teaching of Spanish) was met with opposition by many Nuevomexicanos and New Mexican politicians who recognized this strict Americanization as a cultural threat for which language was only one part. On the other hand, the economic and political ramifications of adopting the English language were well understood in regards to maintaining state’s rights and for the economic success of Nuevomexicano children amongst other American children, and this in turn perpetuated significant internal conflict in addition to external political conflict.

The bilingual layout of *The Spanish-American Songbook* as well as the editors’ note that, “it is hoped that both Spanish and English versions will be sung,” emphasizes the majority favor of Nuevomexicanos for bilingual education despite the English-only agenda within public schools. The layout also equally emphasizes both language versions and does not emphasize that the songs were composed or performed originally in Spanish and that the English versions are translations. The 1976 republication of the book under the title *Canciones y Juegos de Nuevo*

³ Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and David Maciel, eds., *The Contested Homeland: A Chicano History of New Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 3.

⁴ Other authors who cite some or all of these factors in their definitions of Nuevomexicano culture include John M. Nieto-Phillips; Brenda M. Romero; Art Gómez, Joseph P. Sanchez, and Robert L.S. Spude; Nancie L. González.

Mexico places more emphasis on the Spanish version of the songs and games than the English translations. This is evidenced by the change of title as well as the arrangement of the musical selection. Whereas the 1942 edition places the Spanish and English versions of each song side-by-side, the 1976 republication includes the Spanish scores and instructions in the first half of the book and the English translations in the second half. The foregrounding of the Spanish language in the republication signals a shift in Hispanic cultural thought in the United States, and one can infer that the republication's editor might be alluding to ideals which are emphasized by the Chicano movement.⁵ This same collection then functions within two different historical contexts in order to serve similar yet distinct political and cultural agendas. The first agenda emphasizes Spanish-American heritage and aims toward a bilingual education, while the republication re-emphasizes the Spanish language and presents a revisionist attitude which eliminates the "Spanish-American" performance from the re-education of Nuevomexicano identity.

The performance of European identity, as manifested in the label, "Spanish-American", is a phenomenon most likely a direct result of the circumstances of New Mexico's struggle for statehood which began in the 19th century but which continued after 1912 and became a factor of Nuevomexicano identity rather than simply a necessary performance of identity. Facing the opposition to statehood by many politicians under the pretense that people of Mexican descent were unable to govern themselves, New Mexicans emphasized Spanish European lineage and disassociated with ties to Mexico. Rather than argue that Nuevomexicano lineage is more accurately Spanish or Mexican (not to mention that this dichotomy is a gross oversimplification

⁵ The editor does not explicitly cite the Chicano movement, but states that, "At the present time, there is an upsurge to revive the cultural traditions of the Spanish-speaking population of the southwestern region of the United States. This is due to the humanistic renaissance reflected in innovative tendencies in the field of education." (Gonzales, 13).

and denial of Genízaro and Mestizo heritage) I argue that it is perhaps most accurately defined by the presence of genealogical *contestation*.

Performance of Spanish tradition in a New Mexican context is present in *Hilitos de Oro*, a song-game from the *Song and Game Book*, from the list of songs which cite “Old World” origination, is a dramatization of a Spanish ballad. The ballad consists of six verses in which a mother presents her six daughters to the King’s messenger to be appraised in various ways.⁶ Each verse of text is sung to the same eight-measure periodic melody. The game component of the song does not comprise any goal or strategy, but is, rather, a literal dramatization of the text in which children play each of the characters and enact the scene as described.

Where the dramatization of a Spanish ballad allows the children to embody a sense of “Old World” monarchical society, song-games like *Maria Blanca*, that exists in various forms outside of New Mexico, may be altered such to enact scenarios which may hold historical and culture significance for Nuevomexicanos. The Spanish text for the song and the given English translation read:

María Blanca está encerrada
En pilares de oro y plata;
Abriremos un pilar
Para ver a María Blanca

Lovely Mary is encircled
In a cell where she must tarry,
Let us break her silver prison
And set free our lovely Mary.

The Spanish version differs here from other versions of the song found in different regions. For example, one version of the song which claims to originate in Mexico (and goes by the title *Doña Blanca*), begins with the line, “Doña Blanca está cubierta,” or “Mrs. Blanca is

⁶ Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of New Mexico, et al., *Canciones Y Juegos De Nuevo México*, xiii.

covered.”⁷ This paints a very different scenario than the *Song and Game Book*’s “María Blanca está encerrada,” which could be translated not to “encircled” as is given, but to “shut away” or “shut in.” Along these same lines, what are described in numerous Spanish versions, including this one, as “pillars of gold and silver,” are described in the English translation as a “cell” and a “prison.”

The history of the interaction of the Spanish colonists and the Native Americans is fraught with conflict, including a long history of the captivity and enslavement of Native Americans, especially women and children. The colonization and trafficking of Native peoples resulted in ethnic mixing which was denied to a great extent in the performance of Spanish-American identity. It is possible that this particular game of *María Blanca* allows Nuevomexicanos to embody the history of enslavement of Native Americans, and to free María Blanca from her prison cell. This type of dramatized embodiment of the history of captivity of the Natives appears in rituals performed elsewhere in New Mexico, such as the Indita, “La cautiva Marcelina” and a jest imitating capture experienced by Brenda M. Romero at a feast in Abiquiú, New Mexico, which she describes in her essay, “The Indita Genre of New Mexico: Gender and Cultural Identification.”⁸

The Indita genre appears in *The Spanish-American Song and Game Book* and multiple times in Roy A. Keech’s *Children Sing in New Mexico*, a collection of newly composed children’s songs published around the same time. Romero categorizes Inditas by their use of any number of a variety of factors of text and thematic features and Native American musical

⁷ Mama Lisa. “Doña Blanca.” Mas Lisa’s World. Accessed December 9, 2015.
<http://www.mamalisa.com/?t=es&p=3350&c=50>.

⁸Brenda M. Romero, “The Indita Genre of New Mexico: Gender and Cultural Identification.” In *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*, ed. Norma El Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramírez (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 65, 73-74.

references such as sung vocables and isorhythms. The New Mexican Indita, in contrast to the Mexican Indita, is often a lament, focuses on Indian topics, or references the land which is often personified by the Indita, or “young indian girl”.

Culturally, the Indita is associated with the *genízaros*, missionized non-Pueblo Indians, many of whom were former slaves or descendants of former slaves.⁹ The performance of Inditas by *genízaros* or peoples whose histories intersect or interact with *genízaro* culture allows for the expression and acknowledgement of a history that, in many cases and for many reasons, has been denied.¹⁰

The *Song and Game Book*'s Indita is called *Cañute* or *Hollow Reed*, and is described as, “a simplified version of the complicated, semi-ceremonial [Navajo] moccasin game, which was adapted by the colonists and played in the haciendas of the *ricos* (rich) and the huts of the poor.”¹¹ The editors describe the context of this game as a collaboration between colonial children and Navajo children played during the brief periods of peace time between the groups. Although the conflict between the colonists and the Indians of Northern New Mexico experienced periods of more or less volatility, it should be noted that conflict remained and that the peaceful cooperation noted by the editors reflects their hopeful ideals for future generations. This ideal of peace may be a desire to not only discontinue conflict between what are still described here as disparate groups, but to make peace also with the suppressed elements of *genízaro* heritage.

⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰ In addition to the political and economic reasons that led many Nuevomexicanos to claim Spanish-American heritage, *genízaro*'s faced other economic issues within New Mexico including land rights. For details see Malcolm Ebright, “*Genízaros*.” New Mexico Office of the State Historian. <http://newmexicohistory.org/people/genizaros>.

¹¹ Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of New Mexico et al., *Canciones Y Juegos De Nuevo México*, xiv.

The music of the *Cañute* game reflects the isorhythmic structure put forth by Romero. Each verse is concluded by a chorus labeled “Indian chant”, consisting of vocables which are sonically very similar to those performed during some versions of the Navajo moccasin game.

The Inditas found in Roy A. Keech’s *Children Sing in New Mexico* are composed by Keech, who wrote the text of the songs, and J.S. Mackay, who set the text to music. The first Indita, *An Indian Drum* is classified as an Indita merely by its use of Indian topics. Another Indita, *Pueblo Indian Children* uses the verse/chorus model in which the chorus consists of the Indian vocables, “Jai’ya, jai’ya, jai’ya, jai’ya, jai’ya”.¹² The third Indita in Keech’s collection, *Little Navajo Weaver*, uses a repeated fourth line at the end of each of the five quatrains of the text, “se sienta una indita.” This Indita tells a story of a little Indian girl weaving through a description of her actions in relation to elements of the natural environment.

The connection of the Indita to the natural environment is a characteristic described by Romero, particularly in reference to modern Inditas. The feminine Indita is often used as a metaphor for the earth or the homeland, an important factor in Nuevomexicano identity. The use of references to the natural environment of the homeland, not only in Keech’s Indita, but also in many of the songs in the *Song and Game Book* which reference native wildlife, bring the geography of the homeland into the performance of Nuevomexicano children’s music.

According to Gonzales-Berry and Maciel, the concept of homeland has allowed Nuevomexicanos to develop, “a strong sense of identity as people inhabiting a place of their own,” in spite of a long history of conflict, of performed identity versus cultural and ethnic lineage, of colonization and slavery, economic and political struggle. Perhaps though, it is the

¹²Roy A. Keech and J.S. MacKay. *Children Sing in New Mexico* (Claredon, Texas: The Clarendoess, 1941), 22-23.

homeland that provides the foundation for the conflicted identity, a fixed location that holds the tumultuous history and the unknown future of the people.

The Spanish-American Song and Game Book serves as a representation of the conflicted homeland by highlighting challenges to Nuevomexico identity through languages and education, the ideals of peace in multicultural interaction, and the performance of multiple aspects of identity – be they Spanish-American, genízaro, or otherwise. Included with the songs explained in greater detail above are others like *El Coyotito*, simple games which relate children to their environment, the homeland, where the history of conflict and the idealized future of peace takes place. By claiming a homeland as a source for identity, we allow for the experience of cultural conflicts, intricacies, and unknowns to form the kinds of complex identities embodied in the performance of the musical games. And perhaps this kind of interaction amongst children is the ultimate future hope and ideal of the editors of *The Spanish-American Song and Game Book*, who conclude their introduction, “Que rueda la bola, amigos, y la amistad en su lugar / Let the game go on, friends, with friendship ever in its place.”¹³

¹³ Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of New Mexico et al., *Canciones Y Juegos De Nuevo México*, xv.

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