

WILD TONGUE

A
BORDERLANDS
MIXTAPE

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JONATHAN LEAL



Wild Tongue

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Wild Tongue

A BORDERLANDS MIXTAPE

Jonathan Leal

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DURHAM AND
LONDON
2026

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Courtesy of the artist.

FOR THE VALLEY

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The imagination, like
all things in time, is
metamorphic. It is also
rooted in a ground, a
geography.

GUY DAVENPORT *The Geography*
of the Imagination: Forty
Essays (1981)

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Alicia Garza, *BoKA GRAND3 (Study)*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist.

dear x—

* * *

back in those days of love and questions, you slid me
a mix you said would explain the world.

the disc full of shock and fire, it was a reminder
of just how out of my depth i was. how much i'd still
to see.

i lost it some time back. some years ago between
distant towns and tired eyes, stubborn hungers and
lingering confusions, burnt ends and empty pockets.
lost it somewhere, somewhen, stepping slowly along a
half-lit path home.

today, when i think of it, of you, i see our shared
world rush by as if out of a moving car: taquerías
and gas stations on highway 107, F-150s blasting cor-
ridos out of blown-out speakers, botana platters and
tiger's blood raspas, discount fireworks and sugar-
cane fields, busted kicks and caliche roads, resacas
and canals and secret back alleys. us, clad in black
under an unbroken sky.

somehow, you'd managed to fit it all in there. mothers.
fathers. sisters. brothers. families torn by power,
unified by longing; dreams and imperfections, set in
motion by sound.

i can see now that you were right back then. such
gifts really can explain it all.

short of playing your mix now, in these days of speed
and rage; short of reunion, or stillness, or the
right words for any of it: i made you a mix, too.

* * *

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a mix for open wounds

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At the edge of two nations and the center of more histories, there is a place where palm trees shoot up from roadways, where thousands of birds congregate on power lines, where the afternoon sun drenches all in thick, “heat-laden time.”¹ A place where cars blast corridos loud enough to rattle door frames, where fruit stands bring cool reprieve, where the fantasies of the state meet the realities they beget. Standing on its soil feels like swallowing the sun.

This place is the US-Mexico border region known as the Rio Grande Valley. If you listen for it, you can almost hear it, wherever you are—*rancheras* bursting from speakers cranked enough to lift neighborhoods, metal bands tattooing feedback onto eardrums, *corridos tumbados* shaking windows with stories of triumph and betrayal, *tríos románticos* serenading couples snuggled up in corner booths.

Some of us who came of age in this place grew up the children of migrant farm-working parents and had built up memories traveling the US countryside en route to crop fields, memories of stooping to pick vegetables while late-nineties pop filled the air, blaring from battery-powered radios. Some of us were born in Mexico and traversed the border on foot each day at the request of hopeful parents sending us to school. Others of us came from much farther away—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador—storied places rent by global capitalism and local destabilization. Others came from middle-class families and enjoyed the comforts of stable living arrangements. Some dealt with feuding guardians, domestic violence, and interpersonal instabilities, bouncing between couches, garages, and family rooms in relatives’ homes. Others

struggled to navigate the cruelties of generational poverty and the ills of juvenile drug use, the promise of quick money and the pain it invariably delivers. Still others built families of their own, raising newborns before graduating. For those of us growing up in the maw, as inheritors of imperial violence, the world around us rushed in hard and did so fast; with the future murky and in most scenarios foreboding, present moments were their own gifts. The now of that then was all that was guaranteed.

How does such a community come to hear itself? And how might this community's music help us not just map the bordered world but dream of a better one?

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Wild Tongue is a rough mixtape of the ephemeral present. It listens for and with borderlands Valley artists working to find and create senses of themselves through sound today. It's a mixtape on creation in a space of exception, a zone of state-sanctioned violence, a rich and ebullient homeland. Through music, it thinks through personal and communal invention vis-à-vis borderlands experiences of necro-violence, spatial dispossession, political erasure, capitalism in space, and climate catastrophe. It focuses especially on how today's indie and professional musicians are responding to increasingly dire local circumstances by building visions of the past, present, and future through sound.

My mother's and father's families have lived this South Texas and northern Mexico geography for many generations—Cadereyta, Brownsville, San Juan, Pharr, Lyford. This mix rests itself in these soils, in this region dubbed Sector 1 on the US Border Patrol map, routinely described as the resource-poorest of the United States, plundered as a hub of contemporary space frontierism. Shaped by a hard-won legacy of transformative refusal—an active production of art, theory, and criticism that repudiates imperial power in an effort to reshape the local—this mix reaches for an alternative sense of border living through a collage of sonic affirmation.

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The contemporary dynamics of this border region are propped up by centuries of land theft, bloodshed, and imperialist cruelty. Whether one goes as far back as the forced displacement and killing of Coahuiltecan

peoples in the sixteenth century, or to the martial acquisition of a huge chunk of the continent via the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, or to the creation of the US Border Patrol in 1924, or to the mass deportations of Operation Wetback in 1954, or to the establishment of Prevention Through Deterrence in 1994, or to the post-9/11 Customs Border Security Act (2002), or to the erection of more than six hundred miles of border fencing via the Secure Fence Act in 2006, or to the numerous invocations of migrant crisis and near-countless xenophobic nationalist pronouncements of Trump 1.0 through the late 2010s, or, in Texas, to the increased policing and surveillance and fortification efforts of the Abbott administrations, or to the myriad expressions of border paranoia by actors from across the political spectrum during Trump 2.0—the land arbitrarily cleaved to demark this split between nation-states has long been a space of upheaval, contestation, and pain.

The Valley's relationship to all of this history has been tumultuous and formative. Long lauded and exploited as an agricultural wonderland, known internationally for its exceptional citrus production, the region, comprising some forty-three hundred square miles, has been mythologized, sensationalized, and mobilized as a flexible symbol to stand in for either fear or opportunity. Technically a river delta, the area came to be known as the Valley—more accurately, the Magic Valley—by way of a fierce early-twentieth-century marketing campaign pitched at white, wealthy farmers to lure them from the American Midwest into local agricultural investments through stories and images of fertile soil, abundant space, and cheap, docile, endlessly replenishable Mexican labor.² That pattern—renaming from without to conquer what's within—has repeated itself constantly over time, with politicians and entrepreneurs selling fables, extracting resources, and moving on, invariably. Just over a century ago, it played out through La Matanza of 1915, a mass killing of Mexican Americans by Texas Rangers bent on preserving their visions of supremacy and enabled by their belief in social expendability. Later, through enforced segregation across the Valley, playing itself out through spatial cordoning and language policing. (My grandparents, like many, were punished for speaking Spanish in their classrooms.) Over the past decade, it's been through Elon Musk, who selected Boca Chica, a storied beach near Brownsville as well as the ancestral lands of the Carrizo/Comecrudo Tribe of Texas, as the site for his SpaceX test launch facility (better, rocket graveyard), selling the idea through tales of the first manned missions to Mars (since abandoned), renaming the

area Starbase, Texas, and justifying his choices by effectively arguing: I'm rich; this is cheap; no one's around; there's nothing there.³

The Valley is thus a borderland at once rendered invisible and hypervisible, subject to both erasure and overwriting. *This place is empty*, on the one hand; *this place must be surveilled and policed and militarized with always increasing intensity*, on the other. But it is also more than that. It is a place that has raised many of us, that has nourished our dreams and loves and lifeways and much else, and today, it is a key site birthing radically restorative visions for this planet's future.

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The Valley's musical lore is rich and varied, shaped by migration and cross-cultural contact, by transformative refusals of imperialist imperatives. Most recently, the Valley has been one of the hubs of the *música mexicana* surge; one need only look at a band like Grammy-winning Grupo Frontera, from Edinburg, to see this. (Their first record, *El Comienzo* (2023), which featured a TikTok-breaking, *Billboard* Hot 100-shifting collaboration with Bad Bunny, "Un x100to," is easily one of the most commercially successful music projects to come out of the Valley to date.) One might also look to contemporary hit producer and wunderkind Edgar Barrera—who, born and raised in the Valley, produced "Un x100to"—has worked with everyone from Madonna to Peso Pluma, Karol G to Ariana Grande, Ed Sheeran to Shakira, and credits part of his stylistic expansiveness to his first home geography. "I think that the advantage that a lot of people in the Valley have is it's enriched in culture," he told reporter Matt Wilson in 2021. "I feel like my advantage that I have with other writers and producers is that I was more exposed to all this different type of music. All this type of genres, all this type of stuff."⁴

If we travel into the past, the story of movement, contact, and transformation plays itself out repeatedly. We can hear it in the birth of early Tejano music in the 1930s, a fusion of styles and instruments that drew on sonic traditions from Mexico, Colombia, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the United States—polkas and waltzes, accordions and guitars—finding recorded form on records by Narciso Martinez, Bruno Villarreal, Lydia Mendoza, and others.⁵ We can hear it in the transformations of Tejano spurred by social change during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, in the rise of conjunto musicians like Flaco Jiménez,

experimentalists like Esteban Jordan, and *orquesta* leaders like Beto Villa, Isidro Lopez, and Oscar Martinez.⁶ We can hear it in the emergence of La Onda, a movement informed by rock 'n' roll, and the widely varying artistries of acts like Sunny and the Sunliners, Freddy Fender, Little Joe y la Familia, Tortilla Factory, and Laura Canales. We can hear it in the amplification and synthetization of the style in the 1980s, with artists like Lisa Lopez, La Mafia, and Roberto Pulido rising to great prominence. We can hear it in the eventual crossover pop explosiveness in the 1990s, explored in different ways by acts like Grupo Mazz, Emilio Navaira, the Texas Tornados, and Fandango USA; crystallized by Selena y Los Dinos; and later explored further by Intocable. The region has long been a hotbed of sonic exploration fueled by the conflicts and connections the border catalyzes.⁷

The contemporary artists I focus on in this mix, though, don't necessarily sound like what many may expect. Many of these musicians love and respect the hallmark cry of the accordion, the earthy pluck of the *bajo sexto*, the swagger and sentiment of the corridos and *rancheras* and boleros that hold dear places in regional and larger Mexican American and Latine cultural imaginations. But many of these very artists don't use these elements in their own work. Instead, they create through a wide variety of genres and traditions, slamming together unlike styles, producing music *of the border* that doesn't sound like what many imagine when they think of so-called border music.⁸ In that making is a story of cultural navigation, digital exploration, and local transformation; a story of assemblage and borrowing and juxtaposition. A story like a collage. A mixtape.

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The art of the mixtape is the art of collage. An "intellectual strategy and a literal manifestation of juxtaposed things," as Freya Gowrley puts it.⁹ A mix works when its pieces add up to a kind of poem. Maybe it's one with a throughline, maybe not. Maybe its songs transition seamlessly, the edge of one linking arms with another. Or maybe it darts from idea to idea, the notion of a coherent arc jettisoned into oblivion. The beauty of the mixtape is in its roughness, its imperfection, its incompleteness. In that texture, in its tender illegality, lives its power.

For the decades during which this practice was at its peak—before the streaming era, before the AI boom, before algorithmically curated

and practically endless playlists—one of the most attractive things about making mixtapes and burning CDs and ripping iPods was that these were subversive, youthful activities. There was a transgressiveness about it, a fear (exhilaration) that record-label authorities might burst through your door while you were in the middle of creation, and you'd be carted off for sonic gluttony. That transgressive recklessness was part of the magic; that danger, mixed with the deep care of curating a sound world that might save your life, that might teach you who you might become, that might connect you to another, if only for a moment. And while the form ultimately succumbed to an industry takeback, as well as to the ever-changing infrastructure of the internet, the spirit of it is still alive, the art of collage finding form in new places.¹⁰ And “what are our lives,” Valley-born *Los Angeles Times* journalist Fidel Martinez once told me, “if not collages of places, people, arts, and scenes?”¹¹

In what follows, I bring the juxtapositional poetics of the mixtape to the page: a transposition that feels appropriately suited to cultural mixture and resignification that describe not only borderlands creative practice but also generational experiences of recent years. The mixtape, as Kevin Young describes it, is “a collage of sound and even sense . . . and connections between songs . . . are audible, choppy, and done in real time.”¹² These choppy movements allow listeners to intuit meaning from the spaces *between* the songs, allowing creators and listeners to approach the practices of “quotation, sampling, storying, and saving the scraps of things to stitch together something altogether more powerful” as a strategy for mapping culture, for reconsidering social space and ideally alchemizing a harrowing reality into something golden. They allow us to focus on creations that race against their own unraveling, built from memories and aspirations, with ordering principles not immediately apparent without narrative supplement—a programmatic title, a series of doodles, a set of handwritten liner notes. They allow us to attune ourselves to tender assemblages, tenuous gatherings, generative collisions, and epistolary exchanges glued together by the promise of closeness.

Here, the mixtape is a method, a metaphor, a way of knowing and feeling. The mixtape is a kind of *autohistoria-teoría*, a way of writing a self relationally, evoking a place spiritually, and gathering a community sonically. The curatorial implies care and discernment, even narrative development. It strikes me as a perfect way to refute colonial belligerence and epistemic violence. Gifted sound made newly meaningful.

Every mix is incomplete, unresolved, full of as many gaps and silences as offerings and announcements. This mix is no exception. It's made up of songs and conversations, memories and histories, assembled to create feeling, not lay claim. Contrary to the patterns of our world, there can be no possession of place; desires for ownership are traces of empire.

Amid this effort, I've found myself returning to Valley-born author Gloria Anzaldúa. "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out," she wrote some forty years ago in her classic, queer Tejana odyssey, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).¹³ The book, itself a juxtapositional assemblage, was inspired by her cultural formation in the Valley and has guided countless people around the world seeking form for their experiences, audacious vocabularies for navigating the psychic and material dissonances of border living. Not without controversy when it was released, or today—many have critiqued Anzaldúa's appropriation of indigeneity in her expressions of border consciousness, her elisions of contemporary Native populations and tacit linking of indigenous life to the past—the book nonetheless remains a lodestar, especially for Valley artists, teachers, and more.¹⁴

Here, I want to extend the spirit of Anzaldúa's project, if not all its specifics, by focusing on musicians who, like her once, are navigating the pressures of life along the seam of two nations, building forms and vocabularies that feel born of their experiences. Mixing against a backdrop of sensationalist border narratives, reductive Latinx/e/a/o cultural portrayals, and punitive immigration policies, here, I focus on what music created from the geography Anzaldúa once called an "open wound" reveals about power, place, and promise in the twenty-first century.¹⁵ I want to listen for the survival and liberation strategies booming out of loudspeakers, out of laptops, in headphones and other devices—to listen for what those expressions might teach us all about the shape and texture of what's to come on this planet.

In this space of exception constructed to be a land of forced forgetting, this place of state-enforced fantasy and imperialist amnesia, artists young, old, and otherwise have long been attempting to remember and reinvent with style, to draw out and draw in, to loop, repeat, and stutter the echoes of local ancestors, and to help people groove in the process. Artists have sought to chisel out new language for their trials

and travels, for their encounters and dreams. In the process, they've helped a community become itself, again and again.

x x x x x

In this mix, I follow in a long line of writers and scholars who have theorized home, immediate and emergent geographies, place and its practice, local histories and global designs.¹⁶ Though focused on a physical borderland, a home I share with others, I don't treat this place as a fetish object, a fixed noun.¹⁷ Rather, I approach it, as Doreen Massey has put it, as a "simultaneity of stories-so-far": a liquid, constantly churning network of practices and feelings, materials and policies, arrival and departures, frayed ends and grainy impressions that is "never finished; never closed." In the context of a nativist political sphere in which fantasies of natural categories harden into brutal containments, this liquidity feels, to me, honest, intuitive, and intellectually responsive: critical, that is, of "an imagination so deeply ingrained that it is often not actively thought," a belief system built on "assumptions no longer recognized as such."¹⁸

I also build this idea of place with a sense that practical knowledge exists in the music of the contemporary borderlands, traces of everyday navigations that come to bear on everything from style and form to voice and experiment. Attuning ourselves to the worlds that organized sound indexes is a way of acknowledging, as Alex E. Chávez has put it, that "space, sound, and embodied aesthetic acts assemble themselves as performative interventions into socially informed models that organize active and present perceptions of citizenship, migration, and the nation-state." It is a way of attending to how "sound as a material practice" is "intimately tied to semiotic practices significant in recognizing how embodied aesthetics are axial to voicing one's place in the world," to "claiming space across the physical divides of nations and the cultural divides of politics."¹⁹ That is, a way of listening that seeks relation, not reduction.

This mix is thus grounded in the belief that the artists assembled in it are theorists of their own geography, that they require no one to speak for them. "They are intellectuals in their own right," as the contributors to *Ethnographic Refusals, Unruly Latinidades* put it. "They want to tell stories of love, pleasure, as well as—or perhaps beyond—struggle and pain." These pages thus refuse to reduce the artists to objects of research, refuse to partake in the kind of colonial study that funnels power back

toward self-crowned elites. Key to this mix's shape, then, are critical acts and rituals that resist detached observation and the poetics of mastery: open, ongoing dialogue and creative musical collaborations with artists; deep, careful listening; archival and counterarchival research; frequent travel home; multilingual and polyvernacular navigation; autoethnographic inquiry and memory work; and nontraditional written form. In shape, content, and method, this mix is a concerted refusal of "normative analysis" and an embrace of "residual ways of life, contemporary ways of being, and future projects of existence that desert, escape, and abandon power, underlying an always emergent, historically and materially produced constitutive outside."²⁰

The tracks on this mix (read: essays) thus toggle between the registers of formal humanistic inquiry, cultural reporting, autoethnography, and journalistic music criticism. Intercut by a steadily unfolding epistolary narrative, their story crosses through local sounds of fantasy and rebuttal, crisis and reconstitution, place-making and preservation, grief and activism, experimentation and euphoria, self-consonance and dreaming; their lengths are varied, their sources unconventional, and their narration at some moments choral, drawing at points on interviews to foreground musicians' own voices. Each can be extracted and read independently of the others,²¹ though, again, the gift of any mix is the ways its elements collide—in this case, the way they generate a sense of a geography irreducible to any one style or method, register or perspective. For what is it that's "demanded," as Édouard Glissant once put it, "when a language, one single language, would provide you with the key to progress?"²²

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The symbol of the border shapes everyone, whether they live near it or not, whether their families crossed it or not. Borders are bidirectional, after all; every wall faces both in and out.²³ This fact is one of many reasons why those who reside in the United States without geographic proximity to its southern borderlands should concern themselves with how the border shapes daily lives and communal imaginations. Amid the surfeit of ills in these already long 2020s, that concern is as much an ethical and political imperative as it is a diagnostic necessity.

As the songs and stories here emphasize, finding oneself through music in such a context involves positioning oneself early in life to

enforced boundaries and severe political designs one had no hand in creating. It involves dealing with the fact that borders are believed by many to be fixed, natural limits, hard edges between stable, timeless categories, permanent separations between unchanging communities.²⁴ It involves responding to the pervasive belief that border spaces, be they geopolitical, conceptual, linguistic, artistic, or otherwise, are inherently and definitively hazardous—zones of eternal vice, lawlessness, and corruption in need of regular policing and martial intervention. Such narratives, conjoined to nationalist mythographies, omit far more than they advance. For as much as every border marks an edge, a boundary, so too does it mark a center, a place of contact, curation, and community.

Each of the works by the border artists I listen with in these pages is a provocation, evidence of cultural inquiry, expressed through the magic of local vernaculars. I'm interested in what these vernaculars can teach us about vibrancy, audacity, and anti-imperialist courage. Part of the beauty of these artists and their stories, after all, is their clear threat to the soft power of the US nation-state and xenophobic nationalisms generally. Simply by existing as they do, when they do, and for whom they do, they undercut the narrative of the border as an empty vessel to be filled with programs and affects and symbols that extend the project of American dominance. Their work and their audiences' reciprocities and engagements explode the mythmaking that has kept the border wall under constant reconstruction in the American imagination for well more than a century.

And, while the allure of hitting it big and making it out of a local bubble is always a consideration for musicians working to earn a living in virtually any context, for many of these Valley artists, that aspiration frequently takes a backseat to simply *making* it and making it *together*.²⁵ To creating work for and with neighbors, homies, sisters, and kin in time. In this mix, I explore these ideas by listening for backbeats and distortion pedals, samplers and loop machines, accordions and synthesizers, voices and choirs. I follow conjunto balladeers, rapper alchemists, experimentalist firebrands, beat maker-theorists, conjurer DJs, singer-songwriters, scene archivists, meme engineers, and local media collectors; I listen with them to think through local histories and shock discourses, sonic place-making and preservation efforts, techno-fascism and (un)bordered futurities, as well as my own, personal connections to our shared choreographies of home and belonging. As the tracks rise and fall, each cutting hard in new directions yet building on the last,

I follow those who, under police and military surveillance, under constant threat of economic and environmental ruin, are working to practice place anew: to dance with the ghosts of *cuentistas* past, to live out of step with state-sanctioned violence, to live out of sync with narrative erasure. To create songs and stories shaped less like walls than rivers, full of bends and eddies, banks and zags, all wending toward that open gulf of salt and memory.

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when the sun sets and the songs begin

* * *

x—

thinking of your mix, i'm reminded of how much i love that moment, each day at home, when the sun relents and the day's fever breaks and the life of the world renews, little creatures emerging from hidden cracks and shadowed dens, anointing all in song. that moment when the sky shifts from blinding headlight to oil painting and you forget the environment's extremes; when shelter can be departed from, finally, and that tenderness unique to shared wandering becomes possible yet again. in that instant, the edges of all things seem to dissolve: boundaries between me, you, there, here, then, again, always, never.

how quickly, though, does crisis rush in to steal that feeling. whether through the rude awakenings of disaster or the crude boxes we're put in, we're cut anew by those hard world-edges, left bleeding by their friction. it makes me think of those conversations we'd stumble into about our parents, our grandparents, about the joy-stealing powers they reckoned with at our age. of everything beneath their warning us about what information to keep on hand, what blocks and uniforms to avoid when the sun sets and the songs begin.

* * *

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notes

00 a mix for open wounds

Previous versions of chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 have appeared in various academic and creative writing publications, though they have been reconceptualized and revised here. See Jonathan Leal, “Feedback,” *Acentos Review* (Fall 2014); “Wild Tongue: A New Record of Rio Grande Valley Expression,” *Rio Bravo: A Journal of the Borderlands* 24 (2020); “Heirloom,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 3 (September 2021); “Futuro Conjunto: A Transmedia Ballad,” *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 2 (2021): 311–26; and “Singing Apocalypse: Corridos, Catastrophe, and the Poetics of Reconstitution,” in *Latinx Literature in Transition*, Vol. 2, ed. Marissa K. López and John Alba Cutler (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

- 1 Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 6.
- 2 See Pioquinta, “5 RGV History Events You Need to Learn,” *Trucha*, August 24, 2023. See also Brannstrom and Neuman, “Inventing the ‘Magic Valley’ of South Texas”; Bowman, *Blood Oranges*; and Valerio-Jiménez, *River of Hope*.
- 3 “SpaceX Founder Comment Sparks Frustration for Boca Chica Village Residents,” *KRGV News*, February 8, 2018, <https://www.krgv.com/news/space-x-founder-s-comments-sparks-frustration-for-boca-chica-village-residents/>. For a thorough investigation of news coverage about the Rio Grande Valley (and its relationship to local lifeways), see Fleuriot, *Rhetoric and Reality on the U.S.-Mexico Border*.
- 4 See Matt Wilson, “Roma-Raised Songwriter Churns Out Hits in the Music Industry,” *McAllen (TX) Monitor*, April 29, 2021, <https://myrgv.com/life/2021/04/29/roma-raised-songwriter-churns-out-hits-in-music-industry/>.

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- 5 See Paula Mejía, “This Is Grupo Frontera,” *Fader*, April 17, 2024; and Peña, *Texas-Mexican Conjunto*.
- 6 The scholarly work on these musicians is robust, and titles of such work are mentioned throughout this book. For more on Esteban Jordan’s work in particular, see Cervantes, “Squeezebox Poetics.”
- 7 See Joe Nick Patoski, “Timeline of Tejano Music,” *Cowboys and Indians*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.cowboysindians.com/2020/03/timeline-of-tejano-music/>. See also Vela and Garza, *As I Walk Through the Valley* (documentary).
- 8 For more on these matters, see esp. Ramos, *Unbelonging*; Rodríguez, *A Kiss Across the Ocean*; Madrid, *Nor-tec Rifa!*
- 9 Gowler, *Fragmentary Forms*, 16.
- 10 As Liz Pelly puts it: “It’s tempting to want to say that streaming playlists have nothing to do with mixtapes, and that the history lies more squarely with the monotony of pop radio. The truth is messier though: what has actually crystallized is a new commercial curation logic entirely, one that professionalizes the creative and often deeply personal act of mixtape-making and drafts it into the hyper-commercial space of the modern music industry—that takes the traditions and emotional appeals of mixtapes and reshapes them to exist more like market-responsive radio playlists.” Pelly, *Mood Machine*, 30. For more on this new logic and on the contemporary music streaming ecosystem, see also Masters, *High Bias*, 133–50.
- 11 Fidel Martinez, conversation with author during “To Hear Worlds Unseen: Artistic Praxes and the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands,” event at the University of Southern California, March 22, 2024. See also Vesey, “Mixing in Feminism”; and Pelly, *Mood Machine*.
- 12 Young, *Grey Album*. See also Carson, *Being Dope*.
- 13 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*, 54.
- 14 Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands / La Frontera* is, at the very least, two things at once: On one hand, it is a radically transgressive text that, on its publication, “presented its audiences with unfamiliar generic forms as it transgressed, merged, and shifted the borders of academic and popular speech, scholarly and creative production, the conventions of masculinity, femininity, and erotic or sexual orientation”—a work that shifted disciplines and “inaugurat[ed] the border as the generative metaphor for a range of ‘hybrid’ identity configurations of the 1980s and 1990s.” Contreras, *Blood Lines*, 114. And, on the other hand, as a number of scholars have argued in recent years, it is a text that, unintentionally or otherwise, “reinforces primitivist ideals even as [it] resituates and renames them” by accepting the premise that “the indigeneity of Chicanas/os can be represented metaphorically through Aztec mythology,” a premise that, as Sheila Marie Contreras asserts, “raises questions about Chicana/os’ relationship to the

past and the present of contemporary Indigenous communities in the United States and Mexico.” Contreras, *Blood Lines*, 113.

I have no desire to abandon Anzaldúa’s book or to suggest that she was insufficiently critical. (In *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*, she revisits prior gestures in the context of a broader reappraisal: “Though Chicanas are aware that we aren’t ‘Indian’ and don’t live in a Native American culture, and though our roots are indigenous, we often do misappropriate and collude with the Anglos’ forms of misappropriation.” Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*, 53.) I want instead to acknowledge how the discourse around her work has changed in the past few decades, especially as we are now roughly forty years removed from *Borderlands / La Frontera*’s first publication. It is a sensitive place for me for many reasons. On one hand, I was raised where she was, and I often see how lasting and significant her influence has been in the Valley and beyond. It is special to have homegrown heroes. (I also studied and collaborated with one of her closest comrades, Cherrie Moraga.) And yet I have also seen how contemporary local developments, particularly around SpaceX and liquefied natural gas, have rendered contemporary indigenous voices unignorable, and the wholesale application of Aztec mythological repertoires to Chicana identity articulations unsatisfactory, for many. I have seen the ways that the contemporary discourse around borders and borderlands has, by necessity, become increasingly focused on relations, technologies, and forces that were, frankly, unimaginable forty years ago. The question becomes not one of insufficiency but rather of suturing: How do the borderlands’ organic intellectuals of today, working in various spheres, daily extend the project of liberation beyond what was imagined nearly a half century ago? How do we connect the best of Anzaldúa, and by extension the best of past radicalisms, to today’s creations without replicating the shortcomings of past perspectives on identity formation? On these fronts, see, especially, Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro*; Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given*; Schaeffer, *Unsettled Borders*; Contreras, *Blood Lines*; and Ybarra, “Indigenous to Where?”

- 15 In pursuing this project as a kind of alternative map of one segment of the US-Mexico border, I’ve been reminded of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes: “Any map of modernity’s fundamental features—growth, industrialization, articulation, urbanization, and inequality—as measured by wealth, will also map historical-geographical racisms. Such a map is the product of rounds and rounds of globalization, five centuries’ movement of people, commodities, and people *as* commodities, along with ideologies and political forms, forever commingled by terror, syncretism, truce, and sometimes love. The cumulative effects of worldwide colonialism, transatlantic slavery, Western hemisphere genocide, and postcolonial imperialism—plus ongoing opposition to these effects—appear today,

- on any adequate planetary map of the twenty-first century, as power-difference topographies (for example, North, South) unified by the ineluctable fatalities attending asymmetrical wealth transfers.” Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 113.
- 16 Mignolo, *Local Histories/ Global Designs*. For examples of cutting-edge writing on place, see Vazquez, *The Florida Room*; Chávez, “*El disco es cultura*”; Hanif, *There’s Always This Year*.
- 17 For more on destabilizing *music* as a noun, see, especially, Iyer, “Beneath Improvisation.” If, as Sandro Mezzandra and Brett Neilson suggest in *Border as Method; or, The Multiplication of Labor*, it is possible to “separate the border from the wall,” to reveal “how the regulatory functions and symbolic power of the border test the barrier between sovereignty and more flexible forms of global governance in ways that provide a prism through which to track the transformations of capital and the struggles that mount within and against them” (8), then focusing analytical efforts on the relationships between bordering, nation fantasizing, and global capitalism will, in my view, only be enhanced by grounding analysis in the lifeways of the contemporary borderlands and the artistic visions of underground, independent creators.
- 18 Massey, *for space*, 9, 17.
- 19 Chávez, “Presentness,” 234. See also Chávez, “Conversations on Sound and Power.”
- 20 Contributors’ introduction to Chávez and Pérez, *Ethnographic Refusals*, xxvii–xxix.
- 21 I’m indebted here to the conceptual guidance of a former teacher of mine, anthropologist James Clifford. See, especially, his notes on collage as a technique for “marking and crossing borders”—disciplinary (academic), discursive, and cultural—in Clifford, *Routes*, 12.
- 22 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 103.
- 23 “Walls built around political entities,” writes Wendy Brown, “cannot block out without shutting in, cannot secure without making securitization a way of life, cannot define an external ‘they’ without producing a reactionary ‘we,’ even as they also undermine the basis of that distinction. Psychically, socially, and politically, walls inevitably convert a protected way of life into hunkering and huddling.” See Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 42. For more on the increased use of bordering practices in the US heartland, see also Jean Guerrero, “How Border Policies Have Over-run America,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2025.
- 24 I’m reminded here of what Étienne Balibar wrote: “It is the characteristic feature of states of all types to represent the order they institute as eternal, though practice shows that more or less the opposite is the case.” Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” in Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, 88.

- 25 I think here of Martha Gonzalez's remarks: "At present, to be 'discovered' by a record company, agent, or manager, and to make a living in the professional music world, is the quintessential and naturalized progression of what it means to be a 'success' in Western societies' understanding of music. Western perspectives on music practice are inextricably infused with ideas of professionalization and upward economic and social mobility." Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artivistas*, 19.

01 magic // valley

- 1 As Christian Brannstrom and Matthew Neuman once explained: "In the first decade of the twentieth century land developers and boosters promoted the Lower Rio Grande of Texas as the 'Magic Valley,' a place for Anglo farmers to obtain water for irrigating vegetable and citrus crops and to exploit Hispanic labor. A railroad line between Houston and Brownsville, finished in 1904, connected a place widely considered only a few years earlier as an economically worthless and culturally backward desert. The Magic Valley idea, which we consider a place myth, . . . attracted thousands of Anglo settlers to practice irrigated agriculture in a place that quickly developed into a major horticultural and citrus-producing region sustained by impoverished and segregated Hispanic workers. The Magic Valley place-name would persist for decades, . . . even after civil rights activism and water adjudication began to erode the material basis for the place myth in the 1940s and 1950s." See Brannstrom and Neuman, "Inventing the 'Magic Valley' of South Texas," 123.
- 2 Jamie Heron and Valley Realty Company of Texas, *Valley Songs and Poems*, 1929, Lower Rio Grande Valley Curated Material, 1, 2, 6.
- 3 As Alexandra T. Vazquez elucidates in *The Florida Room*, Miami is in many ways a kindred spirit to the Valley. It even received a similar moniker for related reasons: "It was [E. V.] Blackman who originally coined the moniker 'Magic City' for Miami in *The Florida East Coast Homeseeker*, a magazine fully dedicated to the Florida East Coast Railroad from 1899 to 1914 in order to get northerners to buy, occupy, and, in so many cases, make agromonic experiments on its land." See Vazquez, *The Florida Room*, 53.
- 4 Bowman, *Blood Oranges*, 54 (quote), 210.
- 5 For more on allochroism, see Fabian, *Time and the Other*.
- 6 The Forty and Eight Quartette, "Rio Grande Valley Home" (Boling, Chatelle, Collins, and Buck, with a piano arrangement by C. B. Chase and a Spanish version by Pauline Landrum Goode), 1928, the American Legion, Sam Jackson Post no. III, Department of Texas. Still another song is "(Come With Me To) Padre Island (The Island of Enchantment—A Lover's Paradise)," with words and music by Carl Johnson and Loraine Daly

and orchestration by Carl Johnson. Published in 1953 by Deecort Hammitt in Sacramento, California, the sheet music includes performance instructions for piano, guitar, and, shocker, ukulele.

7 I would be lying if I said that spending time with these songs and historical documents wasn't emotionally taxing. This was not only due to the enduring racisms they mask behind pleasantries, but also because reading them made me reflect on my own family. These are the narratives they would have had to contend with daily; these are the marketing campaigns that erased their existence. Their traditions, their intimacies, their views of the world and hopes for the future are nowhere to be found in these brochures and the like, and the same is true for countless other families, countless other parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. I'm so appalled by these narratives that, whenever I reread them, my only recourse is to laugh, or cry, or rage, or write.

8 Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative*, 42.

9 See, especially, Peña, *Música Tejana*; and Peña, *Texas-Mexican Conjunto*. See also Ragland, *Música Norteña*.

10 Vargas, *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music*, III–12.

11 Some may understandably bristle at this assertion. How can a nonlinguistic sound “refute” something? I'm sympathetic to the argument, though from lived experience, this is precisely what it *feels* like for many.

12 See Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 57.

13 Steve Taylor, “Rioplex It Is: Business Leaders Choose New Brand Name to Market RGV, North Tamaulipas,” *Rio Grande Guardian*, June 20, 2024, <https://riograndeguardian.com/rioplex-it-is-business-leaders-choose-new-brand-name-to-market-rgv-north-tamaulipas/>.

14 See Brannstrom and Neuman, “Inventing the ‘Magic Valley’ of South Texas”; Josué Rawmirez, “Space Exed, A Forced Rebranding,” *Trucha*, January 13, 2022, <https://truchargv.com/space-exed/>; and Danielle Lopez, “The Magic of the Rio Grande Valley,” *Texas Highways*, August 20, 2024.

15 Benny Layton, local conjunto legend and one of my music teachers at Edcouch-Elsa High School in the mid-2000s, notably did a great deal for conjunto music awareness and education locally and nationally. See his and other artists' work featured on *Taquachito Nights: Conjunto Music from South Texas* (CD) (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, released 1999). For more on the global resonances of conjunto, see, especially, Bauer, *Flaco's Legacy*.

16 Debates about tradition and experimentation rage fiercely among many conjunto devotees, and I think it's clear why. The music was born amid strife and preserved by communities consistently exploited, embattled, and demonized by actors invested in the twin forces of nationalism and capitalism. It was and is a music that preserves stories, legends, histories, and dreams—tales touching every corner of human experience. It has

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long been a music that everyone from outwardly bigoted xenophobes to buttoned-up, disinterested music executives have derided as too regional, too other, not “American.” It is a music that has been fought for. Despite my own views on stylistic conservatism, today I hear in that fight a long-running counterpoint to the cultural erasures and personal indignities that have so repeatedly marked daily life at the border for so many. See John Burnett, “Conjunto Music Enjoys a Resurgence, Bridging a Divide Between Old and New Musicians,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, July 10, 2023.

- 17 See Jessica Winter, “How Donald Trump Seizes the Primal Power of Naming,” *New Yorker*, January 28, 2025; see also Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Berman Ramos, intro. Donaldo Macedo (Continuum, 2005), 90.

02 flooded

- 1 The United States sustains itself as a nation-state by continually animating the symbol of its southern border under siege. (The point, as Greg Grandin puts it, has never been “to actually build ‘the wall,’ but to constantly announce the building of the wall.”) Talking point repetition and narrative saturation—techniques used to produce truth effects by way of brute force looping—have long been central to the communications strategies of neoliberal and ultraconservative nodes of the US political spectrum. Exhaustion, exasperation, and fomented enmity dominate much public reception. See Grandin, *End of the Myth*, 267.
- 2 Toscano, *Late Fascism*, 157.
- 3 Bedour Alagraa, “The Interminable Catastrophe,” *offshoot*, March 1, 2021, <https://offshootjournal.org/the-interminable-catastrophe>. See also Enzerink and Okoth, “Contours of the Forever Crisis.”
- 4 Villarreal, *Magical/Realism*, 306.
- 5 “A feeling of being besieged by the very people whom one is actually colonizing.” Ghassan Hate, quoted in Walia, *Border and Rule*, 14. On “great replacement” rhetoric, see also Jones, *White Borders*, 5, as well as Jenny Stümer’s thorough investigation of borders and the apocalyptic imagination, “The Border Wall Imaginary at the End of the World.”
- 6 For more on ontological plasticity, see Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 35.
- 7 Josh Kun, “A Line in the Sand,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 2008.
- 8 I first learned of Hurricane Beulah from my father. As he and I made the long, hot drive across the Rio Grande Valley to visit my grandparents on their farm in Willacy County, my father would occasionally relay stories of how the hurricane had affected the region, recalling sights and sounds of torrential rain imprinted in his memory as a young boy. Later, when