



Journeying with a musical practice

Existential mobility and transnational labour

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Abstract The relationship between migratory processes and the diffusion, appropriation and hybridisation of cultural practices has been systematically documented in the scholarly literature. Within these processes there are highly mobile people whose frequent travels and short stays make them less visible as agents of cultural circulation. They often do not see themselves as migrants, nor they are classified as such by national bureaucracies. Therefore, their participation in the diffusion of cultural practices has not been fully considered. This article focuses on the ways in which journeying with a musical practice entails forms of informal transnational labour and, simultaneously, meanings of diffusion, promotion and cultivation of regional cultures that are valued by geographically dispersed communities of practitioners. This account is based on an ethnographic study on the circulation of a traditional musical practice between Mexico and the US. It specifically focuses on the case of a musician, workshop facilitator and luthier who travels several times a year between these two countries performing, teaching and selling handmade instruments. Although his journeying with a musical practice represents a way of making a living, a job, he does not perceive himself as a labour migrant, but as a teacher, performer and cultural promoter. Differing from the experiences of international migrants, this article shows how the meanings of his mobility exhibits a distinct form of existential mobility.

Keywords Mobilities; Practice; Transnational Labour; Work; Music; *Son Jarocho*; United States; Mexico.



Introduction

People often engage in various forms of mobility to earn a living. It is in these multiple flows and frictions that we encounter and produce many of the meanings associated with work. Several academic fields have focused on the figure of ‘migrants’ as central subjects of empirical analysis. Yet, the type of movement associated to what we call migration is one among many other ways of becoming mobile (Hui 2016). This is not to deny the relevance of migrants, but to argue that emphasising a sphere of migrant activity has left unnoticed other discontinuous mobilities. There are people, for instance, whose frequent travels and short stays make them less visible as mobile workers. They often do not see themselves as migrants, nor they are classified as such by national bureaucracies. Still, their involvement in processes of cultural diffusion, appropriation and hybridisation is related to their work, just as many others who cross international borders.

In focusing on the sociocultural dimensions of work and mobilities, this article examines the ways in which journeying with a musical practice entails forms of informal labour and, simultaneously, meanings of diffusion, promotion and cultivation of regional cultures. This account is based on an ethnographic study on the circulation of *son jarocho*, a traditional musical practice emerging in Mexico that is currently shared by groups of practitioners mostly in locations in Mexico and the US. It specifically focuses on the case of Pedro, a musician, workshop facilitator and luthier who travels several times a year between these two countries performing, teaching and selling handmade instruments. For him, journeying with a musical practice represents a way of making a living, a job. Still, he does not perceive himself as a labour migrant, but as a teacher, performer and cultural promoter. As many other practitioners of popular music, Pedro developed his craft by performing at regional festivities, teaching at workshops and building instruments. But he has also become part of a small number of practitioners who developed a noticeable sophistication in their musical performance and, simultaneously, became part of transnational networks of relationships that opened opportunities for performing and teaching in several locations.

The various forms of mobility that converge in his journeying resonate with the experiences of international migrants because of the extent of his travels. However, their meanings involve a distinct form of existential mobility. The following sections analyse the ways in which journeying with a cultural practice is fuelled by casual labour amid precarious conditions, a gradual commodification of a musical tradition, the cultivation of a practice that was perceived to be in risk of disappearance and the consequential efforts to sustain a regional culture through its dissemination across geographically dispersed communities of practitioners.

‘Using whatever I had at hand’

After two months of travelling, Pedro finished another teaching tour. The workshops took place in Seattle, Los Angeles, Santa Ana, San Diego, Mexico City, Guanajuato, Queretaro and Guadalajara, and he finally arrived in Xalapa to perform in a festival along with other musicians. The first time I met Pedro was at a week-long workshop in a rural town in southeast Mexico. He was teaching *jarana*, a guitar-like instrument with five double strings derived from



the baroque guitar (see Pareyón 2007, 532). During the following months, I ran into him at workshops that he gave in various cities in Mexico and the US, at some informal gatherings with other musicians, and also at a couple of *fandangos* (first in southeast Mexico, then in California). *Fandango*, the most representative event in this tradition, is a type of celebration in which music and dance are performed. Workshops and *fandangos* constitute the main spaces in which people learn and share this practice.

I was introduced to Pedro and many other practitioners at these events while conducting fieldwork in the US and Mexico. I spent half a year as a *son jarocho* apprentice, pursuing the spaces in which this practice is enacted. My gradual immersion into this musical tradition was marked by everyday activities such as travelling with practitioners to and from events, busking with them at markets, recalling festivities in casual conversations and taking part in workshops, *fandangos*, rehearsals and performances. On several occasions Pedro and I briefly talked about the revival of traditional *son jarocho*, the vicissitudes of making a living as a musician, and music making in general. Those conversations were fragmented because of the agreeable messiness that prevails at festivities and workshops. Yet, one day he found time in his busy schedule to have a more focused conversation about his activities as a professional *son jarocho* practitioner. The day of the interview I picked him up at the house in which he was hosted and we then went to have lunch. As we were sitting at a small table of a conventional *taquería* (a restaurant in which tacos are served), a large TV screen at the end of the room featured a soccer match that we ignored because our conversation went straight to the topic of music making. The meeting was in some way a continuation of the truncated conversations that we'd had before, with the only difference that this time a digital recorder was placed on the table, sitting between bowls of salsa, slices of lime and our greasy plastic plates. We were in southern California.

Pedro was hosted at the house of a group of practitioners who regularly receive visitors from other cities while they attend workshops and *fandangos*. As I entered the house earlier that day I saw tools and pieces of polished wood scattered around the living room. These wooden pieces were about to be glued together to form a new instrument – a *jarana*. Pedro usually finishes his instruments as he travels in the US. The craftwork starts in his workshop in southern Veracruz, where he cuts the main bodies from solid pieces of cedar, carves them out,¹ and makes the fretboards and tuning pegs. He then packs these pieces when they are almost finished and assembles them as he travels. This combination of activities is not casual: his main sources of income come from selling these instruments, teaching at workshops and performing with other musicians.

From the outset, the development of Pedro's craft of instrument making has been inseparable from that of teaching and performing. In the 1980s he joined a group of *son jarocho* enthusiasts who organised *fandangos* and workshops in southeast Mexico. During these years he dropped out of university because he 'didn't like the [teaching] system' and decided to dedicate

1 The body of the *jarana* and other *son jarocho* instruments is carved from one solid piece of wood. This is a technique for making stringed instruments that is embedded in a history of mobile technologies as it was used, for example, in the middle ages to make fiddles (Campbell and Campbell 2010, 302), renaissance lutes (Spring 2001, 5) and the Chinese p'i-p'a (Fletcher and Rossing 1998, 266).



his time to learning to make *son jarocho* instruments and to the workshops that he was already facilitating:

“I was teaching *zapateado* (dancing) at [a cultural centre], but my students wanted to learn to play *jarana* and after we talked to the coordinators [of the cultural centre], we had some hours of *jarana* every week too. [...] I was earning very little money and one day somebody brought a *jarana* that was broken and asked me if I could repair it. That was an opportunity, a way to have an extra income. And then I just kept on going, I learnt by spoiling instruments. I tried many different ways. I was [recently] giving a workshop on building instruments very close to the Lake Michigan, and they [the students] didn’t have enough tools. That wasn’t a problem because I learnt on my own, using different tools and we made the instruments anyway [...] When I started, I didn’t have a drill press and used a normal drill to carve out the body of the instruments. I hung that drill with a piece of wire so I could have the right distance to carve out the wood without perforating the instrument beyond that mark. But sometimes the wire broke and I perforated the body of the *jarana*. I learnt in that way, trying, looking for ways to do it using whatever I had at hand.”²

Improvising with the resources at hand has been a recurrent pattern in Pedro’s process of learning the craft of instrument making, teaching and performing. This capacity to adapt to different circumstances became a collaborative skill as these forms of improvisation took place in a community of practitioners. Teaching at workshops had a significant role in this process. The workshops at the cultural centre continued for five years until the institution lacked the resources to pay his salary. The classes were then transferred to his own house and the attendees paid a small fee. There were about twelve regular families at these workshops: at first, most of the participants were children and adolescents, although there was a rotation over the years as their parents also joined in and their children moved to larger cities to continue with their studies. This small community of practitioners reunited when the young practitioners travelled back home to attend a monthly *fandango*. During our conversation Pedro expressed how these activities were occasions that enhanced family conviviality and helped ‘to keep this culture alive, otherwise, nobody would do it’. While these workshops constituted a modest, yet constant source of income, Pedro emphasised that these workshops and *fandangos* were crucial to ‘keep this culture alive’. The recurrent enactment of these events was decisive for the emergence of meanings of authenticity and belonging to a valuable tradition that was in apparent risk of disappearance.

At the beginning, these workshops were characterised by the absence of a method to structure the sessions: they simply met to dance and play a few pieces of the traditional repertoire. But over the years these experiences were formative as Pedro gradually adopted more effective routines. Long and complex sequences of action were divided into small exercises such as simplified dance steps or strumming patterns in the *jaranas*. During these years, he and other practitioners teaching at workshops in southeast Mexico attained a series of competencies for organising and circulating tacit knowledge. For Pedro the attainment of these skills was

2 Unless stated otherwise, all the subsequent quotes are excerpts from the transcript of an interview conducted with an anonymous practitioner in California, July 30, 2013. Author’s translation.



foundational for his future journeying with the practice. Travelling to *fandangos* in southeast Mexico was also an important part of Pedro's learning and reproducing *son jarocho*. This journeying was also improvised to a certain extent since the necessary arrangements to make the trip possible were put together as the movement was conducted. In the course of the interview he recalled the unrehearsed ways in which he and other practitioners used to put information and material resources together to attend *fandangos*:

“When we were starting [making *son jarocho*], there were not many *fandangos* in the cities, very few. Once someone told me ‘there is a *fandango* in Mecayapan’. ‘Where is Mecayapan?’ [Pedro asked], ‘In the sierra, you go up entering from Cosoleacaque...’ There was neither Internet, nor mobile phones at that time, so you only knew about *fandangos* when friends told you on the street ‘hey, there’s gonna be a *fandango* there...’ I was with the others from the group and we borrowed a car from a relative, and there we go! We went in a *vochito* [Volkswagen beetle], I remember it well, a red *vochito* [...] We later asked somebody on the road ‘is this the way to Mecayapan?’; yes, it was some kilometres ahead. We then arrived at the town, but we had never been in that place before. We had met some musicians from that town in the past and but we hardly found people on the street. It was at around nine in the evening when we finally got to the house of an old *jaranero* (practitioner) we knew. ‘Hey, how are you guys doing?’, ‘We came to the *fandango*’, but there didn’t seem to be any. ‘No’, the man said, ‘the *fandango* was last night’. And we were so far away, it took us hours to get there! We couldn’t just go back immediately, so we had to stay for a bit chatting with the man. Only a bit because the next morning he was going to his farmland and we shouldn’t keep him awake.”

Pedro's description of a failed trip to attend a *fandango* recalls the necessary articulation of resources, competencies and information. As with any other form of travelling, taking part in *fandangos* requires putting together assorted elements, which in this case were gathered through face-to-face interactions as the trip was made. Far from being just a way to get to an event, regular travelling to these events shaped the dynamics of the *son jarocho* practice in at least two ways. First, it formed a sense of conviviality among practitioners, enhanced by the fact that people from various locations and age groups shared the practice. Second, the regional travelling with the practice provided resources that gradually enabled the development of representations of a practice that was felt and defended as representative of one's identity. These ways of linking with one another became the basis of particular forms of association among practitioners, which were later disseminated to geographically dispersed communities of practitioners. To explore this point it is important to address the upsurge of musical groups in the context of the recuperation of this tradition.

The paradoxical emergence of groups

In the development of his account, Pedro recurrently situated this journeying in reference to his experiences as a member of a professional *son jarocho* group. His group formed during the years in which he and other enthusiasts from southeast Mexico taught at workshops and attended



fandangos. They gradually developed proficiency at music making and became part of networks of musicians and cultural promoters that operated in various cities in Mexico. The support of these networks allowed them to break into the emergent niche market of so-called 'world music' during the last decades of the 20th century. They released two relatively successful studio recordings and performed in several local and international festivals. Their success was, in fact, embedded in a wider process through which several groups performing traditional *son jarocho* emerged from the recuperation of this practice. The upsurge of groups appears paradoxical in the first instance because contemporary practitioners establish a sharp differentiation between the folklorisation of *son jarocho* and the cultivation of a regional tradition. Distinguishing between these two musical practices has been pivotal to the contemporary mobilities of *son jarocho*. To understand it, it is necessary briefly to look at its changes throughout the past century.

During the first half of the 20th century *fandango*, the traditional celebration in which *son jarocho* is performed, became less common in southeast Mexico. This decline is linked to a series of transformations in the region, such as the intense internal migration from rural areas to emerging cities in Mexico, as well as transnational migration from Mexico to the US (Pérez 2003). Yet, this popular celebration was significantly reshaped when its music and dance were used by the Mexican state to produce nationalistic propaganda based on regional folklore. In its intention to produce an ideal of 'Mexicanity', the bureaucracy of the Mexican government took fragmented elements of the regional practices to produce stereotyped representations of the 'typically Mexican' (Pérez Montfort 1999). The music and dance performed at *fandangos* were used in film, radio and TV productions, but not before an intense process of stylisation took place. Regional music and dance in the cinema, for instance, was often represented through orchestral arrangements, resulting in a lack of coherence between the images displayed (in this case consisting of rural musicians playing guitar-like instruments) and the musical background (an orchestral arrangement) (Barahona 2013).

The development of nationalist, folklorised representations in the media created new 'niches' for the performance of *son jarocho*: musicians from rural southeast Mexico who migrated to Mexico City and the port of Veracruz could make a living out of performing *son jarocho* music. These musicians were mostly male, knew how to play *son jarocho* because that was part of the everyday life in southeast Mexico and, later, became reliant on their capacity to perform music to earn a living in urban contexts. They occasionally performed on the radio and television, but their main source of income came from performing at restaurants, bars, nightclubs and cabarets (Figuroa 2007; Cardona 2011). Serenading customers at their own table became an important part of their daily routine. The transition from practitioners engaging in the popular celebration of *fandango* to entertainers forced to play for an audience to earn a living is a crucial shift that produced a particular kind of folklorised *son jarocho*.

Since the 1930s there has been an upsurge of musical groups specialising in the performance of *son jarocho*. As this activity became a 'way of life', *son jarocho* musicians started dressing in distinctive costumes and adopted group names to attract clients. Flexible in repertoire and improvisation, capable of physically moving inside restaurants and across the city, these groups proved to be remarkably adaptable to the new circumstances of performance, navigating complex urban settings and generating a living based on the performance of this newly contextua-



lised music. A few *son jarocho* practitioners became relatively famous and frequently travelled to other countries, particularly the US (Figueroa 2007). This travelling eventually opened new opportunities for performers, as some *son jarocho* groups moved to Tijuana and Los Angeles from the second half of the 20th century (Cardona 2006). This migration constitutes a modest, but still significant, antecedent to *son jarocho* along the international border between California and Baja California.

The folklorised form of *son jarocho* became the most representative performance of southeast Mexico, depriving *fandango* of significance. Its representation in the media had a dramatic effect on the way in which the cultural practices were perceived in this region. By the mid-20th century the inhabitants of southeast Mexico had received contradictory messages: on the one hand, the experience of the *fandango* was a historical practice that had been replicated for generations; on the other, the media represented a stylised version of this musical practice that portrayed virtuosos performing on stage. Antonio García de León (1996, 30) vividly highlights this process:

“This phenomenon brought a generalised underestimation of local musicians because people thought that they didn’t know how to play properly. At the same time, the introduction of other musical genres (*danzón, mambo, chachachá, tropical, etc.*) through the groups of marimba, tropical groups and others, gained space in the realms of popular music, displacing *son jarocho*, which was the traditional dance, to a secondary level until it was almost forgotten. The majority of the groups of *soneros* [*son jarocho* musicians] stopped partaking not only at popular *fandangos*, but also at key celebrations for the community, such as burials, religious celebrations, etc.”³

In the 1970s various groups of enthusiasts of *son jarocho* engaged in a series of actions aimed to keep this practice ‘alive’, thereby starting the so-called rescue of *fandango*. They understood the tradition as being rooted in a rural region of southeast Mexico, as opposed to the stylised interpretation created by official propaganda, the media and the groups of musicians playing at restaurants.

Just like in the case of Pedro’s group, the appearance of groups of musicians performing traditional *son jarocho* on stage echoed the folklorised *son jarocho* promoted by the media and the propaganda arm of the Mexican state. This paradox, however, has to be contextualised within processes of recuperation of a practice that was perceived as endangered, otherwise it would be facile to reduce these actions and their meanings to contradictions. A turning point in the emergence of groups took place in the 1980s with the organisation of festivals of traditional *son jarocho*. *Encuentros de Jaraneros* (Festivals of *Jaraneros* – people who play *jarana*) was the name given to these events, which consisted of a series of performances by groups of musicians on stage. The *Encuentros* had the peculiarity of putting ‘authentic’ senior practitioners from rural communities in the spotlight, often accompanied by younger practitioners. In contrast to the development of *fandangos*, these festivals did not usually feature dancers or improvisation of verses (which are constitutive elements of these celebrations), but groups of musicians playing rehearsed arrangements of traditional songs. These pieces were significantly shorter

3 Author’s translation.



than the long pieces played at *fandangos*. More interestingly, however, the establishment of a clear distinction between a passive audience and active performers ironically resembled the previous folklorisation of the practice.

Son jarocho enthusiasts advanced these festivals as a way to promote the traditional culture of southeast Mexico. A major achievement was the involvement of a public radio station in Mexico City⁴ in the broadcasting and recording of the performances at the festivals, which were subsequently produced by an independent music label and distributed in the form of cassette-tapes and, later, as CDs.⁵ The transmission and distribution of these materials constituted an unprecedented incorporation of traditional *son jarocho* in the media. However, the most important point for the current analysis is that these festivals motivated the creation of groups as they were the basic form for presenting performers on stage. At this point, the question is how exactly a number of musicians who occasionally met at *fandangos* became part of groups of traditional music. Here, in addressing the phenomenon, a senior practitioner (Nieves 2009) describes how his group was created under these new circumstances:

“I went back to Aguapinole [a small town in southeast Mexico] and there was where [the group] ‘Los Panaderos’ (‘The Bakers’) was born. [...] Here you couldn’t hear that [traditional *son jarocho*], all that was lost. San Juan [Evangelista] was a noticeable town for its *fandangos* [...], very good *fandangos*. There were some ladies that organised them every week. When I came back I started hanging out with those people and then we made a little group. We started growing as a group and that was the moment in which we made ‘Los Panaderos’, because Noé [an enthusiastic promoter of the *son jarocho* practice] invited me to Minatitlán. I had never been at a *Encuentro de Jaraneros* (Festival of *Jaraneros*), and I think that was the time when they started organising them. He came and invited me. Back then I had an oven, I baked bread in Aguapinole, and he came because his parents-in-law are from there, we’ve known each other for a long time, and then he said ‘I want you to go to play in *Mina* [Minatitlán], you go with your group, I only want you to get white shoes, white pants, *guayabera* [a traditional type of shirt], white hat’. Then I said to my fellow musicians: ‘do you want to venture there and make the effort of buying those things?’ and we did it, and we went [to the festival]. He [Noé] said ‘name your group’, and I said ‘what name are we going to give it?’ ‘Don’t worry! You go and by the time you arrive there, you’ll have a name. I’m going to tell you what name your group is going to have’. And he came up with the name of ‘Los Panaderos’. Some time ago they announced us as ‘Los Panaderos de Aguapinole’, but because the thing went on and on, soon after that [the group] was divided again, but I continued, I never stopped having a group.”⁶

In this account, the senior practitioner first situates the creation of his group in relation to a tradition that ‘was lost’, and then goes on to refer to their participation in a festival and the way in which the group acquired a name. The mere fact of getting together to play was not sufficient

4 Its name is ‘Radio Educación’. This radio station still broadcasts some *son jarocho* events, such as the annual ‘Fiesta de la Candelaria’ in Tlacotalpan, Veracruz, every February 2.

5 Various performers, *Encuentro de Jaraneros*, [CD] (México: Discos Pentagrama), Volume 1-5.

6 Interview in the accompanying CD booklet in Nieves (2009). Author’s translation.



to form a group – that had already happened at *fandangos*. Rather, *son jarocho* groups became recognisable entities in the process of performing at festivals and being identified by a group's name. Their efforts at organising festivals and the creation of groups revolved around the recuperation of the traditional ways of making music by performing on stage. This seemingly contradictory situation was completely acceptable among practitioners for two main reasons. First, making *son jarocho* is a meaningful activity to the majority of practitioners; this practice means more than a mere pastime. Still, they do not make music for a living. The distinction between amateur and professional cannot be sharply made in this context because among practitioners there are no clear standards for determining what it means 'professionally' to make *son jarocho*. The more-or-less consistent understanding of what is 'proper' performance – that is, the standards of excellence of an enactment (MacIntyre 2007, 190) – is established in the case of *son jarocho* by the continuous reinforcement of basic conditions of participation. These rules and routines are made manifest during *fandangos*, workshops and on stage performances. Therefore, playing in a group was associated with being part of a tradition, while sustaining an ambiguous relationship with the idea of performing to make profit.

The second and closely related reason is that practitioners regularly differentiate between those interested in cultivating the tradition and those who have a marked interest in profiting from the practice. This difference is established through the term '*charolero*', which in its literal form refers to a person who uses a tray (*charola*). The term pejoratively alludes to the image of folklorised musicians using a tray to collect money while serenading customers at a restaurant. Yet the word is frequently applied in a figurative way, that is, in reference to a group of musicians who dismiss the community of practitioners from which they emerged after brief commercial success. There are some practitioners for whom constructing and selling instruments, teaching at workshops and performing on stage have become a way of life. Although many of their activities involve work 'for the community' (which is unpaid work), there is an ambiguous overlap between disinterested promotion of a cultural practice and the possibility of making a living out of it. This issue is a peculiar consequence of the process of recuperation of traditional *son jarocho*. Despite the emergence of a modest grass-roots market of instruments, workshops, professional recordings and performances, interpreting the activities of the enthusiasts of this tradition in terms of economic instrumentality would be misleading. Being a full-time *son jarocho* performer is not a profitable activity for the vast majority, and it has more to do with an ascetic life of self-sacrifice than the comfortable status of glamorous folk musicians.

In which category do groups such as Pedro's fall? Understood in this way, traditional *son jarocho* musicians performing on stage would not be categorised as '*charoleros*' as long as they also participate in the tradition by taking part in *fandangos*. Pedro and the other members of the group developed their craft by participating in festivals and *fandangos*, teaching at workshops and building instruments. They were legitimate members of a community of practitioners and played an important role in it. But they also were one of the small number of groups that developed a noticeable sophistication in their musical arrangements and, simultaneously, became part of networks of relationships that opened opportunities for recording and performing in various locations. In our conversation at the *taquería*, Pedro commented on this success by referring to the first time that he travelled with the group to California: 'the tour started in



Tijuana, we played at six or seven places in total, then we went to LA, Santa Ana, and from there we went all the way up to Berkeley'. As the next section illustrates, this tour marked the beginning of what would later become a constant journeying between Mexico and the US, albeit not as originally planned.

Touring the US as a workshop facilitator

By the beginning of the 2000s, Pedro and his group had already spent two decades immersed in networks of practitioners that extended across Mexico and, increasingly, the US. They also became recognised and promoted as traditional musicians in the 'world music' scene. But the outcomes of this involvement quickly faded as the group was dissolved after a number of years of performing at international festivals. Pedro formed another group soon afterwards, but:

"[...] there were few gigs for musicians in Mexico at that time. I got by because I was making instruments and, from that time on, I have had a lot of work [as an instrument maker]. But that only covers basic things, the everyday expenses, if you want to save a bit or fix something in your house, that's not enough."

A few years later, the coincidence of two events triggered his journeying as a workshop facilitator in the US. His daughter was about to turn fifteen years old, which in Mexico is typically celebrated with a costly party. Pedro could not afford such a celebration, but the situation changed when he received an unexpected invitation to teach at workshops in the US. A group of practitioners that had been running workshops for some years invited Pedro to give a series of workshops in various cities of the San Francisco Bay Area. This teaching tour represented a good opportunity to earn money given the precarious conditions of the musical market in Mexico and the advantageous exchange rate from US dollars to Mexican pesos. A seemingly typical case of Mexican migration to the US, his journey was primarily motivated by economics: his objective was to earn enough to cover the expenses of his daughter's 15th birthday party. The original plan scheduled three weeks of teaching, but practitioners in other locations organised additional workshops as soon as they heard that Pedro was teaching in California. As I confirmed while conducting fieldwork among communities of practitioners in the US, the capacity rapidly to organise workshops has been to a large extent enabled by the use of virtual social networks and the pervasiveness of the Internet that was well established by the first decade of the 21st century. Three weeks became three months as more workshops and some gigs with local musicians were added to his diary.

This demand for *son jarocho* workshops and performances was produced by the increasing popularity of this musical tradition in the US and the capacity of groups of practitioners to self organise. More generally, the development of these geographically dispersed communities is to be understood in the context of consolidation of the migratory system, gradual economic integration and political asymmetries between Mexico and the US (see Delgado Wise and Favela 2004; Castles and Delgado Wise 2008). While there has been a gradual development of *son jarocho* in California since the second half of the twentieth century (Loza 1992), it was not until the past three decades that a larger number of people assiduously practiced it in many other locations in the US. The growth of transnational/translocal communities of practitioners



coincided with Pedro's economic difficulties. 'I didn't have to get a loan for the party', he mentioned. However, these activities implied a lot of travelling across distant cities in unfamiliar territory. Prior to this experience, Pedro's practices of mobility were subject to the itineraries, arrangements and scheduling of his group. But this time the cross-border mobilities as workshop facilitator compelled him to learn to move by himself:

"At the beginning it was hard. I was used to going around with a group, for twenty years I moved everywhere with a group. And suddenly I was alone because the group finished [...] I got a mobile phone with a number from the US. Then I needed to drive, I had no choice. For instance, now that I come to California, I give a few workshops in Santa Ana and Los Angeles, and if I'm in the Bay [Area], I sometimes travel four hours, because there are places that are so far that it takes hours [to get there], because there is no [public] transport."

Pedro currently combines teaching, performing and building instruments by considering time, resources and geographical trajectories. He enlisted his habitual routes with no sign of hesitation: 'Four days here, three days there. From San Diego to Oakland: San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Ana, Santa Barbara. And then the Bay Area: Sacramento, San Francisco, Oakland, Berkley, San Jose, Watsonville and Santa Cruz'. In Texas he travels to San Antonio, Austin, El Paso and McAllen. In the Northwest he usually visits Seattle, Portland and Eugene, and on the east coast New York and Washington, D.C. Teaching at different workshops involves the articulation of means and information in the following conventional sequence: first, he gives a workshop for three days in a city, then travels to another location to borrow a car from friends. He then drives to a remote city in which a new workshop takes place. 'It ends up taking four hours to get there, then I teach a workshop for three hours and come back. Yes, I've done that once or twice in the same week'.

When he is invited to teach, the organisers normally pay his flight or bus ticket and the attendees pay a small fee, although it is difficult for the organisers to calculate how many people are attending and, consequently, to determine the amount that he would earn. 'They tell me "we pay you the ticket, although we don't know how many are coming". I tell them that there is no problem, I go anyway'. Although the price for his services as workshop facilitator and performer may fluctuate from place to place, his experience and recognition among transnational communities of practitioners allow him to get legitimately paid for these activities. These geographically dispersed groups of practitioners are not mere consumers of products and services; they are central actors in the progressive commodification of this musical tradition through their validation. Since most of them are apprentices, their legitimation of certain workshop facilitators, performers and luthiers is based on different signs of 'authenticity'. As such, coming from certain villages in southeast Mexico, being member of a family of traditional musicians and, especially, demonstrating long-term commitment with the cultivation and promotion of this practice are types of symbolic currency that play an important role when negotiating and setting the prices of performances, workshops and handmade instruments.

Yet, earning an income is only one facet in this journeying. Pedro is often hosted as a friend at practitioners' houses and participates in gatherings and impromptu celebrations. In New York, for instance, he performed with a professional group and right afterwards there was a *fandango* as many among the audience were *son jarocho* practitioners and had brought their



instruments. The transition from performers who entertain an audience to a celebration in which entertainment is produced by direct participation reconfigures the way in which practitioners interact. ‘This is like a family that grows’, he emphasised. ‘*Jaraneros* will share their place and food with others. If you have a problem some will try to assist you, which does not happen in other musical traditions.’

Pedro teaches in Spanish, although the interaction among the attendees tends to oscillate constantly between English and Spanish because most practitioners in the US are fluent in both languages. When a person is unable to understand Spanish, a practitioner nearby quietly provides rough explanations in English. Still, these verbal translations are just one type of mediation among many other forms of interaction, as the exercises are performed simultaneously by all the attendees and are based on the repetition of strumming patterns, melodic lines or dance steps.⁷ All these circumstances associated with teaching in many different locations contrast with Pedro’s previous experiences of being in a group. Travelling with the practice has challenged his habitual ways of teaching and performing:

“[...] I never boast about being a good musician, I wasn’t recognised either. I never gave interviews because I didn’t like it, I said no, the others [members of the group] did it. I didn’t speak at the microphone [at concerts] because I could sing, but talking on the microphone, no, I just couldn’t. And all the others did it, anyway. And then being alone and coming here [to teach to the US]. I had friends, but it wasn’t like having the protection of coming with a group. But I had to carry on! It was about organising gigs and then, you have to say something, don’t you, or there is an interview, well, I had to carry on. I had no choice but to do a bit of everything. I say that in the end it was all right [to dissolve the professional group] because now people know me because of myself, because of the things I’ve done, but it was a very difficult process. But now I have overcome all those issues. Now I know how to move everywhere. At first, friends helped me to organise how to get here or there, but now I go around everywhere by myself. I had to learn to move around without knowing the [English] language!”

This journeying has been a learning process in itself. Attaining a certain command of the English language, for instance, is not directly related to his craft, but has been significant in his experience of travelling. The day of the interview we left the *taquería* and walked towards a Starbucks café. ‘Latte and two packets of honey, please’, he asked in English at the counter, and as we were sitting he commented to me in Spanish: ‘now I know how to ask for my coffee, but it took me some time to know how to ask for the one I like’. We then recalled some funny stories about the frustrations and difficulties of using English as a second language, which led us to talk about my doctoral studies in Australia. Among other things I quickly mentioned a conference that I had recently attended in Canada; Pedro was suddenly excited:

“Is it hard to get a Canadian visa? I’ve been invited to [teach at] a workshop in Montreal, the Canadian guy who was at the workshop the other day invited me, he is organising a

7 Even in the case of singing verses in Spanish, practitioners who do not speak that language tend to memorise the lyrics by focusing on the sound of the words while ignoring their meaning.



workshop there, do you remember him? I was thinking about doing Montreal, Toronto, New York...”

For Pedro, journeying with the practice represents a way of making a living, a job. And yet he does not see himself as a migrant, nor he is classified as one by the bureaucracies of the US and Mexico. Moving with a practice assumes multiple forms and meanings. The day of the interview he added with a hint of pride: ‘I have already been in all the *son jarocho* communities in the US’, which was a way of expressing the joy that derives from being potentially able to move. This statement is reminiscent of Ghassan Hage’s (2005, 470-471) notion of ‘existential mobility’:

“We move physically so we can feel that we are existentially on the move again or at least moving better. I believe that the movement we call migration cannot be understood without taking into account this relationship between existential and physical movement. What’s more, such a relationship allows us to construct a whole social physics of socio-existential mobility, explaining different kinds of mobility rather than homogenizing them with one term that equates the travel of the totally-at-home-having-fun tourist and the travel of the fragile, dislocated and hesitant refugee.”

There are, indeed, various ways in which existential and physical mobility are related. While Pedro’s practices of mobility are embedded in the recuperation of traditional *son jarocho* (namely the emergence of groups, festivals and workshops), they also represent the possibility of physical movement that makes travelling with the practice a meaningful activity. Social and existential mobility are frequently related, but they are not the same phenomenon (Hage 2009, 99). The mobilities of Pedro carry meanings of discovery, education and cultivation of a practice that is worth preserving and diffusing. Simultaneously, they originate in a context of social disadvantage, chronic unemployment in Mexico and the consequential difficulties of making a living. Not surprisingly, a sense of being ‘stuck’ is common among practitioners who struggle to meet their basic economic needs by dedicating their time and efforts to make a living as professional musicians, teachers or luthiers. Pedro’s experience is unusual in terms of the extent of his travels, the expertise that he has developed as a workshop facilitator and performer, and the depth of his involvement within transnational networks of practitioners. Yet, the various forms of mobility that converge in his journeying are not unique, but certainly resonate with the experiences of other practitioners as all of them take part in various forms of mobility.

In this case, being existentially mobile entails the possibility of earning an income in a context of precariousness, contributing to the development of numerous communities of practitioners, meeting friends and having the satisfaction of being known ‘because of the things I’ve done’. This journeying may resemble in some ways the experience of other *son jarocho* practitioners as many travel long distances to attend *fandangos* and workshops. It may also echo the experience of international migrants, although the recurrence and extent of his travels is out of the ordinary. Yet, all these experiences of mobility seem to contain the excitement of ‘going somewhere’ as a common ingredient:

“I’m going here and there because it’s my job. I play on stage because it’s my job. But I also have a commitment with *fandango* and the communities. Many tell me that they want to travel as much as I do, but I tell them that I do it because it is a job, like any other job. But



wherever I go, I also try to find a *fandango* and spend time with the community because that is what satisfies me [*lo que me llena*]. That is because I learnt from there, from going to *fandangos*.”

Pedro has been able to position himself in an informal musical market, combining different activities to meet basic economic needs. The cultural capital he accumulated throughout the years is not easily exchanged for economic capital, but still his travels allow him to earn an income while being existentially mobile. In journeying with this practice, he has seen how communities of practitioners grow and change, connect across symbolic and physical borders, and learn from each other. That musical traditions are produced by the interplay of forces in motion is an assertion that resembles the act of travelling. Similarly, moving existentially relies on the consideration of forces, infrastructures and the skilful arrangement of means and competencies.

Conclusion

This article has sought to analyse the ways in which informal transnational work is entangled with the mobilities of a musical practice. This relationship has been explored through the case of a practitioner involved within transnational networks of musicians across Mexico and the US. By tracing the development of his expertise as workshop facilitator, performer and luthier, I have examined how these activities become a meaningful way of making a living by diffusing and cultivating a musical tradition across communities of practitioners. These meanings, however, need to be understood in a context of precariousness, social disadvantage, chronic unemployment and increasing labour insecurity. The excitement of becoming increasingly able to move is in constant tension with the struggle to meet basic economic needs. Far from overriding the physical and symbolic borders, asymmetries and differences between countries and regions, the journeying of this practitioner confirms them.

In considering different forms of mobility, I have also addressed the tension between the unfolding of transnational/translocal networks of relationships and narratives of valorisation and preservation of a practice that is seen as endangered. Disseminating *son jarocho* through workshops, on stage performances and *fandangos* has been the main strategy that current practitioners use to reclaim a traditional identity. The systems of meaning that structure the recuperation of this practice are at the core of these mobilities. Furthermore, the various forms of circulation, flow and physical displacement involved in these processes have provided resources for the appropriation and transformation of this practice. While journeying with this practice has been crucial in keeping ‘this culture alive’, this musical tradition is changing as it moves. These transformations are associated with the circulation of instruments and know-how across locations in the US and Mexico. Immobile infrastructures, assorted forms of telecommunication and face-to-face interaction also enable these changes. Therefore, practitioner travel is one among many other elements that make possible to keep this practice ‘on the boil’.

Finally, analysing multiple forms of mobility in relation to the unfolding of cultural practice reveals significant relationships. Although practitioners have a key role in the circulation of cultural practices, the specific mechanisms by which informal labour becomes constitutive of transnational practices is shaped by a variety of forces in motion. By interrogating practices

from a processual perspective, this paper has provided detailed accounts of how work and narratives of authenticity and belonging circulate, intertwine and produce multiple meanings. This approach shows how different types of mobility become constitutive of the dynamics of a cultural practice and imbricated in the social.

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