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## Recovering Historical and Cultural Gems

A Review Essay on *Hispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest: A Self-Portrait of a People*

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MARTHA IDALIA CHEW SÁNCHEZ



**H**ispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest: A Self-Portrait of a People by John Donald Robb is one of the best and most thorough compilations of folk songs in New Mexico and one of the best tributes to the people of New Mexico. This classic work represents New Mexico's rural literary and musical landscapes as reflected in the nearly half-century of fieldwork that Robb so carefully undertook. Robb delightfully takes us on a voyage of seven-hundred folk songs covering extensive genres, themes, emotions, and histories. The author provides a colossal contribution to the body of scholarship and to our understanding of the main musical genres at the core of the cultural archive of nuevomexicanos' key historical moments. The reader feels the strong Iberian literary influence through the analysis of repertoire of romances, *décimas*, *alabados*, *alabanzas*, *canciones*, *trovos*, *himnos*, and *despedimientos*. Such solid imprints of Spanish culture in New Mexico date back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Quite remarkably Robb

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JOHN DONALD ROBB, *Hispanic Folk Music of New Mexico and the Southwest: A Self-Portrait of a People* (1980; repr., Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014. xxv + 891 pp. 49 halftones, appendixes, definitions, bibliography, index of titles, index of first lines, general index. \$75.00 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8263-4430-4). MARTHA IDALIA CHEW SÁNCHEZ, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Global Studies and the Caribbean and Latin American Studies Program at St. Lawrence University. Her lines of research are related to cultural identities in the U.S.-Mexico border, and the effects of globalization on human rights. Chew Sánchez is the author of *Corridos in Migrant Memory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006) and has written articles on militarization and paramilitarization in Mexico. Chew Sánchez normally teaches courses on Critical Race Theory, Border Theory, Qualitative Methods, Migration, and Cultural Studies.

understands the importance of such historical and cultural gems and had the vision to record, transcribe, and translate them during his extensive fieldwork.

This, the second edition of the classic and fundamental work on nuevomexicano music is considerably enriched by a thorough prologue written by Enrique Lamadrid, a renowned authority in ethnomusicology. Lamadrid provides an outstanding historical, social, and ethnographic analysis of Robb's fieldwork and vision. This new edition is further enhanced by the contributions of Jack Loeffler, an exceptional historian, musician, and ethnomusicologist. Loeffler reflects on Robb's life and legacy to ethnomusicologists, and particularly to New Mexican folk songs.

The photographic material flows quite organically with the lyrics of the folk songs. The songs record turning points in the history of nuevomexicanos, as well as a wide range of feelings, points of view, relationships with families, their land, and with other ethnic and racial groups. Likewise, the photographs document the protagonists, the landscapes, and the rich cultures of New Mexico, reflecting the respectful and dignified dialogue between Robb and the nuevomexicano artists and their families. The photographs give an account of the presence of nuevomexicanos that is remarkably free from exoticization, colonialism, and voyeurism. Robb's account is one that tends not to be included in the national consciousness of the United States. The representations of these artists are a testimony to the presence of nuevomexicano families who lived in New Mexico long before the land was taken over by the United States.

Robb was a mentor to many ethnomusicologists. In his generosity, he left many lines of research open for further work. He had the vision to carry out collaborative work with other outstanding ethnomusicologists, such as Vicente T. Mendoza. In fact Robb personally invited Mendoza and his wife to become familiar with the music, to help him understand and analyze the musical and literary genres he archived as Robb consistently cites Mendoza throughout this book to clarify some musical genres. Most of the translations and transcriptions of the lyrics are well done, although a few of them miss the meaning of one word and therefore the core of the theme. For instance in "El Corrido de Roosevelt," the transcription of the fifth stanza reads:

Repartió a los mexicanos,  
cerca de tres cientos mil,  
no sabiendo que algún día  
alguno le había de servir (p. 563).

This stanza refers to the previous one that references Pres. Herbert Hoover's policy of forced repatriation of Mexicans during the Great Depression. The main points of controversy of this repatriation were that about 60 percent were

U.S. citizens, but were deported due to their physical characteristics and the neighborhoods where they lived in; such deportations were carried out through raids that had the logistics of paramilitary operations. In this corrido, the meaning changes from “repartió” (distributed) to “repatrió” (repatriated).

This book illustrates the profound attachment to place of nuevomexicanos, as well as the powerful experience of displacement. Perhaps inadvertently, Robb promotes new ways of thinking about New Mexico. He takes us along the royal corridor, or Camino Real, from Mexico to Santa Fe, through songs, corridos, and other musical genres that originated in Mexico or for which Mexico served as inspiration. For instance, “La llorona” describes a woman said to haunt many parts of Mexico, weeping for her children whom she had drowned in a fit of madness. There are many versions of this song and several different stories of its origin, but many of them relate La Llorona (the weeping woman) to a mother who may have killed her children to avoid their capture during Spanish colonization. Most versions of the story differ only in the details. Robb documents the link to New Mexico and, in some cases, he even presents many versions of the same song.

Likewise, Robb recorded and preserved many *Inditas* (“little Indian” or “little girl”) ballads. *Inditas* are among the most valuable expressions of oral history, a musical form that captured the complex intercultural dynamics and negotiations between Native Americans and Mexicans in New Mexico during the Territorial period, between the 1846 military occupation by the U.S. army and the 1912 admission to statehood. *Inditas* are about making promises to saints in return for blessings and miracles. They are normally sung in Spanish, although the *estribillos*, or chorus, is in Navajo. *Inditas* are cultural expressions that emanate from political and cultural relations between various Native American cultures in New Mexico and nuevomexicanos. In this book Robb weaves these cultural expressions that promote both self-affirmation and emancipatory possibilities. Native Americans and nuevomexicanos had been living alongside one another for many centuries, co-creating spaces and cultural traditions that have gone largely unacknowledged by the state and the national consciousness. Robb brings these cultural traditions back to life. For example, the *matachines* initially represented “The Dance of the Moors and Christians”; this dance was the first masked dance introduced by the Spaniards. Although the dance steps vary among people from New Mexico to South America, the dance formations are quite similar. The most basic component of the dance is the struggle between good and evil, with good prevailing.

Robb’s work disrupts essentialist notions of the three separate and distinctive cultures of New Mexico. Such notions rely on fictions such as the idea that New Mexico is an empty land with three distinct groups living in isolation from one

another, or that racialized groups do not exist. Since the Spanish colonization and U.S. military occupation, there have been moments and markers of differentiation of citizenship that excluded racialized groups such as nuevomexicanos and Native Americans in order to control their resources, land, and labor. Notions of citizenship and inclusion/exclusion are intrinsically linked to the expansion of capitalism in the Southwest. In particular, differentiations of citizenship are usually inscribed through cultural and linguistic oppression as well as a lack of access to justice and citizenship rights. Despite these struggles, nuevomexicano culture has prevailed for centuries. The testimony of this cultural heritage is represented well in this magnificent textual and analytical work.