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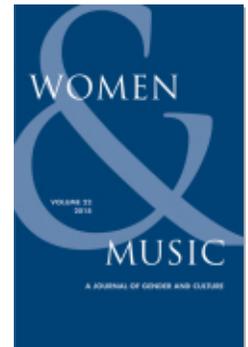
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The *J/Jota* in Jenni

Deborah R. Vargas

Jenni Rivera was to banda music as banda music was to the cultural imaginary of 1990s Los Angeles, Mexico.¹ Born Dolores Janney Rivera Saavedra on July 2, 1969, in Long Beach, California, to Pedro and Rosa—undocumented immigrants from Sonora and Jalisco, Mexico—Jenni was the eldest of six children.² As her career unfolded, Jenni was anointed by her fans and the music press alike as “la diva de la banda,” and at the time of her passing in December 2012, she was arguably one of the most powerful music icons in Mexican banda, narcocorrido, and ranchera music. In the years before her untimely death, Jenni was gaining recognition by an even wider Spanish-language viewing public through producing and appearing on the television shows *I Love Jenni* and *La Voz*, Mexico’s version of *The Voice*.

Jenni Rivera had an especially strong fan base among mexicanas across Mexico and Mexican ranchera and narcocorrido music fan bases in cities across the

1 I borrow the term “Los Angeles, Mexico,” from a billboard advertising Noticias 62, a Spanish-language news station in Los Angeles and surrounding cities aired on KRCA Clear Channel 62. The Noticias 62 billboard read “Los Angeles, Mexico, Tu Ciudad. Tu Equipo,” or “your city, your team.” In the billboard “California” is crossed out and replaced with “Mexico.” See <https://www.wnd.com/2005/04/30017/>. Los Angeles is only second to Mexico City in having the largest Mexican-descent population. The billboard was advertising the news program to this sizeable demographic but also gesturing to the significant presence of Mexican cultural production in Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, the billboard created much controversy, including then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s call for the billboard to be taken down. See <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/gov-calls-krca-tv-kill-billboard-79210/>.

2 I refer to Jenni Rivera by her first name throughout this essay to honor the intimate connection she had with her fans.

United States, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and Phoenix.³ Mexicanas seemed especially drawn to Rivera's way of openly and assertively recounting the challenges in her life conveyed in her musical and personal narratives. Songs such as "Escándalo" (Scandal), "Las traficantes" (Drug traffickers), and "Mi vida loca" (My crazy life) represented her disregard for following the rules of *mujeres decentes*, or decent women; rather, she seemed to approach her cultural work in the manner she had worked during her entire life, churning out, cranking out, and calling out. Her approach to making music conveyed struggle and an unrelenting exertion of labor that symbolized a notable Latina welfare-class immigrant tenacity. Her fans adored Jenni for the ways her journey to stardom was flawed and unrefined and for the manner in which she seemed always messy, the vernacular for a life in disorder and chaos. As the outpouring of public grief demonstrated at the time of her death, Jenni had amassed a devoted following, a fandom whose characteristics (mostly Mexican immigrant and working/welfare-class mexicanas) connected with gendered representations produced in Jenni's musical performances, especially the irreverent figures produced in songs like "La Chacalosa" and "Las Malandrinas." These two songs, in particular, emblemized a mexicana subjectivity fashioned through indecent, graceless, and brusque performances of femininity. In fact, Jenni's media representation—produced through her own life narratives in interviews as well as in song—was consistently shaped by suspect discourses.

While the 1980s and 1990s especially have been explored in terms of remarkable queer musical sound analysis—ranging from music by Prince, Madonna, and Wham, not to mention the house music that fuels queer clubs and PRIDE festivals—this essay contributes a focus on Spanish-language Mexican musical genres to such studies that overwhelmingly distinguish non-English-language music as other to the discursive construction of US pop music. Here, I consider the potential of queer cultural politics in relationship to popular music by paying particular attention to the ways neoliberalism and Mexican immigration created the context for the emergence of "la diva de la banda" and her aberrant mexi-

³ I use the term "mexicana" (with a lowercase *m*) to distinguish it from "Mexicana" with a capital *M*, which is formally understood as meaning Mexican national or Mexican citizen-subject. I use "mexicana" intentionally in order to break from the socially constructed nation-state binary between "Mexican" immigrants and Chicanas or those understood to be Mexican American. The lowercase form, "mexicana," instead recognizes those "greater Mexico" and "borderlands" subjects who defy identity constructions according to nation-state structures. Instead, "mexicana" aims to affirm acquaintance, association, and belonging as that *Mexicanidad* (or performance of Mexicanness) made possible through practices of aesthetics, vernacular, alternative genealogy, and musical engagement, among others, instead of identities produced through nation-state laws. For example, Jenni Rivera consistently called herself "mexicana" instead of Mexican American, Latina, or Chicana. For theories and uses of the terms "Greater Mexico" and "the borderlands," see, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters / Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Américo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border* (with an introduction by Richard Bauman) (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, 1993); Jose E. Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, The United States, and the Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

cana femininity. Given the twenty-year anniversary of Cathy Cohen's prominent essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" I return to Cohen's remarkable theorization of "queer" to consider non-normative mexicana gender and sexuality, made possible by Jenni's music performances, which, drawing from Cohen, we may recognize as "some of whom may fit in the category heterosexual . . . [yet] are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy."⁴ Moreover, constructions of normativity within dominant same-sex civil rights agendas have required us to think of queer sites, performances, vernaculars, and cultural politics in spaces and sites not always marked by same-sex identity categories.⁵ This essay, then, is a queer gesture to symbolically add the uncomplimentary femininities of malandrinas, indecentes, and maleducadas to Cohen's queer worlds of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens.

Rivera, whose irreverent popular cultural representation was shaped as much by song lyrics about shameless women as by personal life dramas (including verbal fights with record industry people and physical fights with family members and ex-husbands), encourages us to interrogate queer racialized gender and sexuality in relationship to the civility projects of neoliberal Latinidad during recent decades. When I consider Cohen's notion of "queer" as "the maintenance of radical potential located in an ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin," I understand Jenni Rivera's cultural labor as a critical site for exploring such queer potential in musical performance, especially given the neoliberal context of US anti-immigrant racist discourses, which too often reproduce equally troubling reaffirmations of normative Latina gender and sexuality through definitions of "family," citizen, and parent.⁶

Banda, Borders, and Backlash

During the 1980s Mexican immigration to the United States rose to the extent that Mexicans became the nation's largest immigrant group.⁷ By 1989 the city of Los Angeles had become home to the second largest population of Mexican descent in the world, behind only Mexico City.⁸ The huge influx of Mexican immigration resulted in a xenophobic backlash of state propositions targeting access to human resources. California Proposition 187 (also known as "Save Our State"), which passed in 1994, established a state-run citizenship screening system prohibiting undocumented persons from accessing health care, education, and other social

4 Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997): 442.

5 Siobhan B. Somerville, "Queer," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 187.

6 Cohen, "Punks," 438.

7 See "Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S." Pew Research Center: Hispanic Trends, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/>.

8 See "California Perspectives on American History: The Reagan Years: 1980s Mexican American Culture," <http://picturethis.museumca.org/timeline/reagan-years-1980s/mexican-american-culture/info>.

services. California Proposition 209 followed in 1996 as a response to the increasing demographic of nonwhite populations in public schools and institutions of public higher education, and it became an early sign of “anti-affirmative action” discourse by prohibiting state institutions from considering race, sex, or ethnicity as a basis for admission. Each of these propositions became models for xenophobic and anti-affirmative action policies across the country.

At the intersection of neoliberal agendas of the 1980s, anti-immigration propositions in the early 1990s, and the increase in the Mexican population across the state of California (as well as cities including Chicago, New York, and Houston) during the 1980s and 1990s was the popularity of banda music. Helena Simonette reminds us that while not a direct offshoot of military bands, early formations of banda music are historically related: “During the Mexican Revolution in the 1910s, many local musicians joined military bands. When the revolution ended, they returned to their villages, bringing with them a new musical repertoire.” Moreover, argues Simonette, “*bandas populares* or *bandas de viento* (wind bands) still play an important role throughout Mexico, particularly among indigenous groups such as the Zapotecs, Maya, Mixtec, and Nahuatl.”⁹ Moreover, banda music is not considered a refined musical form; instead, it is mostly associated with vulgar, low-class culture. It is not a pleasant or seductive music but is carried mostly by the thrashing sounds of tubas, cymbals, and the bass drum.

In the early 1990s banda music was the sound of immigrant Mexican America, especially in the southwestern United States, and it functioned to sonically express the experiences and defend the dignity of a new generation of Mexican immigrants and Chicanas/os facing particularly virulent forms of structural exploitation, abuse, and exclusion.¹⁰ During the 1990s especially, banda music was a sonic *desmadre* (or chaos) accompanying brown border crossers forced to leave places of familiarity and connection due to the devastating impact of NAFTA and other globalization projects that were destroying the natural resources and economic systems in their home regions and local communities. Banda music arguably sounded the thrashing and chaotic sounds of structural disenfranchisement, racist xenophobia, and economic disposability as experienced by working-class/immigrant mexicanas around the United States, especially in California. Jenni Rivera’s family was part of the large Mexican immigrant presence in southern California, especially the city of Long Beach, where their presence was sonically imagined through banda music. Jenni Rivera, “la diva de la banda,” became the embodiment of this tacky, *déclassé*, flamboyant, and crass musical sound.

Raymond Rocco has studied the impact of neoliberalism on marginalized populations through the notion of disposability, with particular attention to immigrant and working-class Latinas. Rocco argues that beyond the objective impact on their economic status and conditions, Latinas (especially working- and welfare-

9 Helena Simonette, *Banda: Musical Life across Borders* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 8.

10 Simonette, *Banda*, 9.

class immigrant Central Americans and mexicanas) have experienced themselves as disposable, as refuse, and as “throwaways” within the US nation-state. He also argues that “for a sector of Latino immigrants, these conditions include a configuration of related elements that have created a racialized space of disposability as a means of social and political containment.”¹¹ Conjoined with Rocco’s arguments, Arlene Dávila proposes in *Latino Spin* that for Latinos in the United States, neoliberalism has pushed the discourses of value and marketability onto racialized “difference” so that Latinos must prove their worth as civil consumers and also as cultural commodities through “corrective images” of themselves as decent deferential citizens.¹²

In the case of Latinas residing in the United States, the back-and-forth crossing of nation-state / colonial commonwealth borders results in what I call “racialized impermanence,” or a state of constant/perpetual replacement, nonbelonging, and inexistence reproduced through discourses of racialized exile, (im)migrant, and refugee. By extension, the granting of citizenship as an ideal of permanent belonging can only be bestowed on those who abide by standard, homogeneous, normative performances of respectability and decency. With this in mind, Latina queer subjects are contagions in the US nationalist imaginary, constructed as persistently suspect in need of containment or repair, as the cleansing of nonassimilable residues (embodied both as disposable waste and wasteful drains on capital) become what allow mexicanas to evolve and achieve normative citizenship through performances as hard-working, deferential, self-relying, productive subjects.

I suggest that las malandrinas (a gendered performance produced through the song “Las Malandrinas”) defied the contours of neoliberal Latina citizenship’s performances of respectability, deference, and civility.¹³ In other words, the queer gender of las malandrinas performs an aesthetics of diminishing returns, that is, acts of refusal to abide by the logics of citizenship as a return on capitalist investment. I argue that these types of refusal—to perform excessive wastefulness, for example—can be responses to what Rocco describes as the ways in which discourses of illegality are concerned with the sense of constant threat and the precarious, almost covert space of movement and existence that results from being unau-

11 Raymond Rocco, “Disposable Subjects: The Racial Normativity of Neoliberalism and Latino Immigrants,” *Latino Studies* 14, no. 1 (2016): 99–117, 100.

12 Arlene Dávila, *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 4. For more on “corrective images,” see Dávila, *Latino Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 90.

13 In this essay I make a distinction between “Las Malandrinas” in reference to the song recorded and performed by Jenni Rivera and las malandrinas (with no quotation marks and lowercased) to refer to the queer gender feminine subjects who self-identify as such or that I argue perform malandrina femininities in ways we may call out “chola” or “chonga” enacted gender. Las malandrinas becomes a way to name those subjects often viewed—according to racist US discourses—as specters of the mass onslaught of brown bodies that create anxieties over social welfare drains and criminality *and yet*, in their performances as racialized irreverent brown spectacles, also transmit sonic socialities of alternative praxis for creating other modes of collective play and fruitless downtime through bodies that neoliberal capital’s citizenship formations also work to restrain and suppress.

thorized and “illegal” as a suspect queer body within the nation’s construction of neoliberal Latina citizen-subject.¹⁴

Jenni’s proximity to “criminality” was quite consistent across her recordings of narcocorridos but also in the ways she appropriated narco (gang) vernacular when speaking about the community/kinship formations her music cultivated. Consider, for example, this impromptu interview by a pop music writer that appeared on YouTube in which Jenni Rivera explains her fan club, J-Unit. She described the group’s function as “*haciendo un gran desmadre positivo*,” or creating a positive chaos. Jenni was so close to this group of fans that when she passed away, her mother directed news media and fans to J-Unit’s site so that they could relay all the details on behalf of the family, including details about memorials.

Interviewer: Jenni los que no tienen número que se registren?

Jenni: Sí sí sepan que ya tenemos el cartel de la diva, de la banda o el cartel de Jenni Rivera, el ejército de Jenni Rivera, o J-Unit. Somos un . . . Como dicen que soy traficante, pues hice mi propio cartel . . . de fanáticos. Entonces, yo soy la jota-uno jota de Jenni. Mi mánager es jota guión ge uno y de ahí los fanáticos se fueron añadiendo—jota-dos, jota-tres—ahorita vamos como en jota-cuatro cientos. Pues, tenemos el cartel más grande de este momento. Y el cartel de nosotros, pues, no solamente defienden al artista, sí no que el cartel también hace . . . hacemos cadena de oración, hacemos donativos, ayudamos a las familias necesitadas en Twitter, hacemos un gran desmadre positive.¹⁵

Jenni ends the interview by declaring that anyone who wants to join her cartel can register through her Twitter site. In fact, this roll call, her status as “*diva de la banda*,” and neoliberal racialized projects of citizenship, which operated as conjoining systems of civility and Mexican xenophobia, assemble an important context for any queer analysis of Jenni Rivera’s musical performance of irreverent femininity. Accordingly, the sounded *j* or *jota* in Jenni is understood in this essay as signaling a potential for queer cultural politics in Jenni Rivera’s musical performances, especially the queer performances of mexicana femininity in relationship to the neoliberal projects of Latina/o citizenship.

The Spanish audible register of the letter *j* as *jota* as queer is arguably inescapable in Mexican verbal exchanges. For example, Jenni herself understands the possible meaning conveyed in the Spanish pronunciation of the letter *j* when during the interview she subtly makes clear that the *jota* in J-Unit she is sounding out is the letter *j* in Jenni rather than its “lesbian,” or queer meaning. Accordingly, my essay turns to the audible *j*, or the Spanish-pronounced *jota*, to argue for the potential queer politics in Jenni Rivera’s musical performances. I have chosen to italicize the word *jota* throughout this essay to denote the audible work it does to signify queerness. In other words, the pronunciation of the letter *j* in Spanish

14 Rocco, “Disposable Subjects,” 108.

15 <https://youtube/KhDccb7azas>.

as *jota* always has the potential to gesture queerness. Correspondingly, *jota*-Unit always had a potential for queer cultural politics that J-Unit never could.

One might say that la diva always enjoyed sounding her banda-music devotees into formation and, as in the interview above, doing a roll call of her self-identified cartel, *jota-1*, *jota-2*, *jota-3*, all the way to *jota-400*, in a sort of military formation. To be sure, while military formations are often connected to projects of empire building, resistance movements and social uprisings by disenfranchised peoples have also adopted performances such as military roll calls in representations of self-defense. Obvious examples of such militarized formations and aesthetics initiated by structurally disenfranchised communities of color include the Black Panther Party, Zapatista rebels, Young Lords, and Brown Berets.¹⁶

Rivera explained that her choice to name her fan club a cartel—the term references Mexican gangs involved in drug trafficking and responsible for countless kidnappings and murders, especially in economically vulnerable rural poor areas of Mexico—was a direct cynical response to frequent descriptions of her by the press as a *traficante*, or a person who traffics contraband, and, in the case of Jenni, that cast her gender as violating the rules of normative comportment. Such references to Rivera captured how the popular music press made sense of her gender through criminalized discourses and gender-masculine characterizations such as tough, hard-hitting, and uncompromising, similarly used to describe Chicana gang members, or *cholas*.¹⁷

Jenni's appropriation of the word "cartel" also suggests the way similar criminalized terms such as "gang" are alternatively used to name kinship formations or a close group of friends who form systems of support and survival. The word "cartel" is also increasingly used as a self-referential term to mock its meaning as the criminal element in Mexico and to instead point to the nation-state's construction of criminal versus citizen as the problem. I have often been involved in quotidian conversations about Mexican cartels, and often playful comments are made that the Mexican government and drug cartels are one and the same. Such arguments are indeed made by many journalists covering Mexican cartels over the past decades: "In Mexico the problem is in the practice as well as the strategy itself. The military can't defeat the drug cartels," stated Laura Carlsen, director of the Americas Program of the Center for International Policy, "because *it doesn't want to*. Police and military are often complicit with drug traffickers. . . . [T]he problem of corruption is not limited to individuals, it is a systemic re-purposing of state agencies by the cartels."¹⁸

16 See Beyoncé's performances of "Formation" in *Lemonade*, as well as her 2016 Super Bowl half-time performance, as a contemporary popular musical version of this. See the YouTube link of Beyoncé's performance of "Formation" in *Lemonade*, https://youtu.be/WDZJPJV_bQ. See the YouTube video of Beyoncé's performance of "Formation" during the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show at <https://youtu.be/uqGwekWZeRI>.

17 See Mare Keta Miranda, *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003); and Catherine Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

18 Jeremy Kyrt, "Why the Military Will Never Beat Mexico's Cartels," *Daily Beast*, April 2, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/why-the-military-will-never-beat-mexicos-cartels>, emphasis added.

Jenni's use of "cartel" similarly mocks the use of this term by the state in order to instill fear of criminal elements, when fear should actually be directed at nation-states' (in both Mexico and the United States) structural systems of violence on the poor/undocumented. In this way, the militancy in resistance struggles by working-class-of-color communities acknowledges a different meaning of roll calls to formation. The J-Unit roll call enables a space of gender and sexual non-conformity, especially for mexicanas, that pushes back against the neoliberal insistence on civility and decency as mechanisms of control and exploitation.

This analysis intentionally sounds the *jota* in Jenni (and, by extension, J-Unit's roll call) as those performances of queer potentiality for opposition to neoliberal mexicana constructions of gender and sexuality. Jenni Rivera's musical performance represents a queer musical archive that activates everyday possibilities of sonic disobedience to normative Mexicanidad or Latina citizenship. Here I find LaMonda Stallings's concept of transaesthetics key to the theorization of the *jota* in Jenni. Stallings's extension of Susan Stryker's "trans-ing" in her theorization of transaesthetics seeks to "critique narratives so as to expand and reinvent pleasure in accord with its denunciation of specific societal ills and to interrupt the reliance on nostalgia and respectability in order to create new political strategies." Correspondingly, Jenni Rivera's performances of unruly and irreverent feminine figures encouraged a trans-ing of banda music, that is, a "practice that takes place within, as well as across or between gendered spaces, [functioning] as an escape vector, line of flight, or pathway toward liberation."¹⁹ Stallings transes African American literature and popular culture to reveal its freaky underside, to, as she says, "funk the erotic." In a similar way, I sound the *jota* in Jenni Rivera's musical performance—with a focus in this essay on las malandrinas—as a form of transaesthetics that makes legible the underside of the underclass or the nonnormative disreputable, uncivil, and irreverent acts of mexicanas whose feminine gendered performances fail at fulfilling decent and deferential mexicana femininity.²⁰

Drawing on Rocco's arguments pertaining to neoliberalism and Latinas/os, "the very notion of 'human disposability' is fundamentally normative in nature [reflected in] spaces and activities that structure the normative boundaries that define the 'normal,' the 'legitimate,' the 'rational' and the 'legal' on the one hand, and the 'foreign,' 'strange,' 'outsider,' 'threat' and 'criminal,' or 'unruly' on the other."²¹ Accordingly, the queer gender performances of las malandrinas—and we might add a number of other nonnormative representations produced in Rivera's music, in-

19 LaMonda Horton Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 5, 8.

20 Richard Rodriguez, for example, has critiqued the central trope of the Chicano family in sustaining Chicano nationalism through iconographies such as cultural traditions and symbols that uphold homophobia and also the state, such that diversity in terms of race, gender, and sexuality are assimilated into dominant normative notions of citizenship in which queer relationships become legible only through the institution of marriage. Richard T. Rodriguez, *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicana/o Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

21 Rocco, "Disposable Subjects," 108.

cluding “la chacalosa”—cultivate a transaesthetics that fail to follow practices of civility, respectability, and decency required to repair their structural impermanence.

As Jenni Rivera’s musical power increased throughout her music career, especially among mexicanas residing in the United States and throughout Mexico who followed banda and narcocorrido music, her performance of mexicana gender and sexuality became more unabashed and discourteous of the boundaries of feminine normativity. The performance of who deserves to be treated as human, as normal, as a potential citizen, then, relies not only on normative notions of Mexicana femininity but also on those racist logics that serve to justify the disappearance (through death and gentrification) of those represented as threats to liberal middle-class ideologies of Latina citizenship, namely, the poor, darker, non-English speaking, queer genders. It is with such discourses in mind that I read the *jota* in Jenni Rivera as having sounded the brown welfare, femme, immigrant, transgender, queer worlds of mexicanidad. The *jota* in Jenni created—and creates still, as an afterlife on the internet—sonic imaginaries for and with questionable, uncontainable, pathological gendered acts, representing crises for the affirmation of the sexual desires and labor exploitations that affirm white supremacy. We therefore may consider the excessive, unproductive, and dispensable gender performance of las malandrinas as the sonic waste of Latina neoliberal citizenship.

Performing Jenni

In this essay I focus on the feminine gendered figure of las malandrinas produced by the song “Las Malandrinas” and its varied manifestations as performance, music video, and song recording not only because it became one of if not the most iconic songs in Rivera’s career but also because it exemplifies Rivera’s music as a musical archive of queer defiance. Rivera’s musical archive is shaped by an audacious disobedience to the neoliberal construction of respectable Latina citizenship. Specifically, I reflect on how performances of Rivera’s “Las Malandrinas”—the song recording, music video representation, shout-outs to concert goers by Jenni to self-identify, and the self-references of the term for Latina social clubs—animate denials, active failures, and disobedient socialities that negate neoliberal Latina citizenship that is based on the politics of grace, civility, respectability. Rivera’s malandrinas must be understood within the context of structural mechanisms aimed at the elimination, displacement, disappearance, and sanitization of brown poor/undocumented/welfare subjects, especially feminine genders, which range from the undocumented Mexican and Central American mothers who cross the US-Mexico border to clean up after the privileged and care for their children to the transvesti and transgender Latinas working the queer club on Latin Night.

My consideration of Jenni Rivera’s “Las Malandrinas” operates in conversation with what I have identified elsewhere as three racialized discourses of structural difference pertaining to nonnormative genders and sexualities: one, as lewd, obscene, offensive hypersexual undisciplined bodies; two, as darkened, suspect

citizens perpetually untrustworthy, impure, and disloyal to the state; and three, as diseased “cultures of poverty” subjects overdetermined to fail in the evolutionary project of normative womanhood.²² Jenni Rivera’s musical performance, as her life script, consistently failed to fulfill the project of normative Latina citizenship. As such, the *jota* in “Las Malandrinas” demonstrates a “queer failure” at capitalist success and a possible shift for undocumented/disenfranchised mexicanas as nonbeings, as disposable subjects of neoliberal capital, to unbeings of Latina respectability.²³

Jenni consistently embodied the irreverent femininity that in her broader work Jillian Hernandez calls “raunch aesthetics,” or “an aesthetic, performative, and vernacular practice, an explicit mode of sexual expression that transgresses norms of privacy and respectability.”²⁴ We might say that this was because Jenni never had anything to lose: she was born in structural deficit. From a young age, she learned to survive through self-made ventures in the informal economy that at one point helped her and her daughter escape an abusive husband. It makes sense to me, then, that Rivera never found much safety or support in coloring her life by staying inside the lines of respectability. She often commented in interviews that her big mouth came from years spent in silence under the confinement of an abusive husband.

Jenni grew up in a working-class bilingual immigrant barrio of Long Beach, in Los Angeles County, a community sonically convened through banda music. It is important, therefore, to appreciate the interconnectedness between Jenni’s lived experiences growing up in a mexicano barrio and the musical milieu that sounded a recognition recalcitrant of nation-state and state policies that desired to disappear and dismantle their access to health, joy, and well-being. It is also worth noting that although Jenni recognized her singing abilities around the age of fourteen, she consistently stated that she really had no interest in making music. Her goal, rather, was to be economically independent, and music merely became an accessible avenue for accomplishing this. This kind of failure at becoming an accomplished singer was her entrepreneurial approach to economic stability in her life and why many of her fans consistently commented that part of their adoration for Jenni was what I would call an immigrant-class epistemology of survival and persistence, a life that included teenage pregnancy, domestic abuse, and economic precarity. Los Angeles music journalist Fernando González stated that “Jenni’s secret to her fame was not that she had such an outstanding, gifted voice, because she didn’t, it was that she poured her life story into her songs, with all her faults,

22 I draw on this to theorize “lo sucio.” See “Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 715–26.

23 For a key theorization of queer as failure, see Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

24 Jillian Hernandez, “Carnal Teachings: Raunch Aesthetics as Queer Feminist Pedagogies in Yo! Majesty’s Hip Hop Practice,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 7.

downfalls and tragedies, including a teen pregnancy and domestic abuse. The fans made her a star because they saw themselves reflected in her.”²⁵

Jenni made music the way she approached economic survival: through the cultivation of life lessons that framed her life, equipped with savvy labor skills, having been raised in a Mexican immigrant entrepreneurial community where as a young mother she did everything from collecting cans to sell at recycling centers to hawking knockoff cassettes of music recordings at her family’s flea market stands. I argue that Jenni’s personal narratives and musical performances infused the term “la malandrina” with a gritty and DIY spirit, thereby ensuing its circulation among mexicanas as a vernacular for “hustler,” signifying the working-class communities of color practices of “hustling” or “playing” the system of life worlds really not intended for their joy and well-being.

One of Jenni’s earliest experiences in music’s informal economy was with her father, Pedro, who, after spending the majority of his life working odd jobs, realized there was a niche for selling self-produced, pirated recordings of corridos. Pedro Rivera also wrote corridos, recorded them himself (or sometimes he recorded neighbors who could sing), and sold thousands of cassettes. Eventually, Pedro started a recording company: Cintas Acuario operated through a Long Beach storefront. It was this “mom-and-pop” shop that served as Jenni’s earliest entrance into music: she organized paperwork, answered phones, and kept accounting records. Her initial engagement with music, then, was not as a formal cultural practice; instead, it symbolized more through the Mexican vernacular for work, such as “chamba” and phrases like “necesito jale” (I need a job) and “quiero cambiar” (I want to work).

In 1995 Jenni gained entry into the formal music industry when she was contracted to release her first album, titled *La Chacalosa*, which included her hit corrido by the same name, about the daughter of a narcotraficante who makes a living from drug transactions. One of Jenni’s biggest hit songs in these early years and throughout her life was “Las Malandrinas.” The song actually became Rivera’s first music video and one she coproduced. In fact, the young women who appear in the video are real fans of Jenni who showed up for an open call to those interested in being in the video.

Performing las malandrinas

In an interview Jenni described the reference “las malandrinas” as “‘bad girls, party girls’ but not bad in a negative way. I wrote it in homage to my female fans. The type of girls that go clubbing, drink lots of tequila and stand up for themselves.”²⁶ Moreover, the translation of malandrinas as “scoundrel,” “trickster,” or “villain” also fits the representation of gender misfits who participate in informal economies

²⁵ Fernando González, “Jenni Rivera’s Fame Built on Gut-Level Connection with Her Fans,” *Miami Herald*, December 11, 2012, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/12/10/3136089/jenni-riveras-fame-built-on-gut.html#storylink=cpy>.

²⁶ Introduction by Jenni Rivera to her music video of “Las Malandrinas,” <https://youtu.be/5XQVm6mepBo>.

and illegal transactions. Jenni's reference to the song as the moment when "Jenni Rivera the artist was actually born" also points to the significance of "Las Malandrinas" for Rivera's self-representation.²⁷ The song and music video became so popular that Jenni nicknamed her female fans *las malandrinas*. At concerts she would often call out to them, "Donde estan mis malandrinas?" to be met with roaring screams of approval and recognition from those who connected with this term. In the song and, by extension, the music video, *las malandrinas* are the embodiment of overabundance, promiscuity, and surplus indulgence.

"Las Malandrinas" propelled countless numbers of virtual social worlds initiated by fans such as social networking groups and numerous Facebook pages, including *las malandrinas de Jenni Rivera*, a group that described themselves as "un grupo de amigas que nos gusta andar de party" (a group of girls who love to party) and produced a number of YouTube videos of themselves singing Jenni's songs and emphasizing the criminal elements of the characters.

The music video of "Las Malandrinas," produced just after the song was released in 1999, opens with the lyrics (translated here but performed in the original in Spanish): "They call us *las malandrinas* because we make lots of noise, because we drink beer and prefer the best wine." The music video begins with the camera panning out from the marijuana leaf-tattooed arm of a young *mexicana* who, along with her friends, is stealing some cassettes and greeting others with the customary homegirl acknowledgment, "Hey, wazzup?" while a few shoplift compact discs. This group of *mexicanas* is juxtaposed with another group—referred to in the lyrics as "*las popis*," a Mexican vernacular for middle-class, light-skinned, proper, snobbish young women—who are standing at the counter asking the cashier if he has any cassettes by Mexican pop crooner Luis Miguel, to which the cashier responds (translated here), "No, but I do have Juan and Jenni Rivera." These *popis* express their dissatisfaction by responding in a judgmental tone with "no nos gusta" or "no, we don't like that."

The music video narrative characterizes two distinct performances of *mexicana* femininity: one performs a more masculine of center cool posturing with the element of criminal activity, while the other, *las popis*, represents a normative femininity, soft-spoken, well-behaved, and deferential in their inquiry about music. It is clear from the beginning of the video narrative that the trouble-making group of *mexicanas* represent *las malandrinas* of the song's title. As *las popis* exit the store there is a voice-over to the initial brass sounds of the song where a woman's voice shouts, "Un corrido para las viejas, para las malandrinas." Given the context, the term "*viejas*" here is understood as the Mexican Spanish vernacular for a woman of no morals, generally, a "whore." *Las popis* are immediately overtaken upon exiting the store by the physical force of the trouble-making cohort, tied up with rope, shoved into a car's backseat and trunk, and driven away from the parking lot. Here the criminal element—led by Jenni Rivera herself, sitting in the front seat of the car with a black cowboy hat on—identify themselves as *malandrinas* as they

²⁷ Introduction by Jenni Rivera to her music video.

drink beer and Jenni sings the lyrics “nos dicen las malandrinas porque hacemos mucho ruido, porque tomamos cerveza y nos gusta el mejor vino” (they call us las malandrinas because we create lots of chaos, because we drink beer and we enjoy the best wine).

The second stanza, “No somos como las popis que se paran mucho el cuello. Nos gusta la rancherada de nada tenemos miedo” (We are not like las popis with their popped-up collars. We prefer the “country” class life, and we are afraid of nothing), is a class critique of normative middle-class femininity and the strength disenfranchised mexicanas often exhibit at being unafraid to persist to survive and create makeshift systems of fleeting joy, which in the video is symbolized through the aesthetics of plastic red cups, fold-up tables, and the consumption of liquor from a bottle being passed around.

As the music video and song continue we understand “Las Malandrinas” as a call to the formation of disobedient and uncivil femininities—or, in terms of queer of color critique, deviant sexual citizens—here performed by brown women consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, engaging in what I read as same-sex S&M play and the unproductive labor of “kicking it,” and “hanging out” at a house pool party. Within the context of xenophobic racism directed, especially since the 1980s, at Mexican and Central American immigrants in the United States, Rivera’s malandrinas create una desmadre—or “chaotic disorder”—to the production of Latina respectability required in reaffirming a normative Latina citizen subject. In fact, Rivera’s malandrinas encourage brown feminine-presenting genders to “act out” an alternative sociality, mocking the capitalist fictions of rewards for good behavior promised by the state. Las malandrinas is a name that recognizes those defiant, unproductive, surplus mexicana femininities whose resilience requires grinding out the day by also learning when to lag behind production, because capitalist time is rapidly trying to disappear their traces.

“Las Malandrinas” in all of its varied forms—including the song performance, music video, social network groups, Jenni’s calling out, and J-Unit—embodies surplus indulgence: the sensation of liberation and satisfaction issuing not from the production of commodities or the accumulation of capital but rather from the socialities that spring up in the remains and dispossessions of capitalist culture. Think of the rented house that becomes a makeshift club on weekends or the cans and bottles gathered from the recycling bins of “good” areas of town that become a means to buy beer and red plastic cups for this very familiar pool party. The project of neoliberal Latina citizenship works to ensure that subjects of incivility and indecency should never deserve and will never own that house nor arrive to permanent places of sanctuary and gratification by the nation-state. The laughter and vulgar play among las malandrinas at the pool party inform us that they own other forms of jubilation. In fact, one might consider that las malandrinas encourage us to reflect on alternative practices, to create connections and affections that derive from unruly and rogue means of sticking with one another,

of having our bodies cohere to one another as unwavering within systems of dis-possession and neoliberal disposability.

“Las Malandrinas” sonically activates aberrant aesthetics and vernacular that refuse to perform the rules of a system that was never intended for them. In so doing they join an iconography of nonnormative femininities that exceed the confines of the normal: the queer femme single mothers, the working- and underclass Chicanas, the welfare queens, and the transvesti Latinas, among others. The song “Las Malandrinas” summons those nonbiological kinships between nasty girls, freeloaders, and troublemakers, which, according to racist US discourses especially heightened in the Trump era, are the criminals and specters of the mass onslaught of brown bodies that drain our tax dollars or fill our neighborhoods with delinquent activity. However, in their performances as racialized irreverent brown spectacles, las malandrinas refuse to be disappeared by the experiences of racialized impermanence. Likewise, they charge Latino publics and activist models to consider the collective intellectual praxis of viscous delight, dank pleasure, and nasty gratification running counter to the sterile, safe, orderly life rewarded through capitalism’s permanency, that is, the normative notion of permanency as defined by capitalism’s logics of safety, well-being, and belonging.

The representational performances of las malandrinas illuminate the racist contradictions of neoliberal Latina citizenship projects that thrive on the simultaneous necessity and disposability of brown femininities. The “sonic waste” produced in the song “Las Malandrinas” is re-sounded through the music video performances of indiscretion and excretion as by-products of capital—as in deficit—according to discourses of racist xenophobia that rely on poor, undocumented, queer brown women who are the constant site of capitalist extraction, containment, and repudiation. Las malandrinas create multisensorial modes of queer space-time as the sonic waste of production time—drinking time, puro party time, and kicking it time. As such, the queer socialities of las malandrinas stage a critique of the white supremacist spatiotemporal modalities of separation and alienation on which US citizenship thrives—along the construction of a US-Mexico border wall, in the sanctification of domestic privacy, and in the beautification of gentrified neighborhoods that prohibit public assembly, offensive smells, and loud sounds. To the contrary, las malandrinas activate public indiscretions, valueless labor, and queer foreplay, prompting fleeting and transient temporal-spatialities of socialities. As suspect genders under constant surveillance, regulation, and relentless extraction for labor, malandrinas perform their mexicana gender and sexuality in surplus. They lay claim to an abundance of capital’s leftovers in the form of promiscuous sexual relations, temporalities of debt, and transient notions of home, like the spatiotemporalities defined by transient intimacies at a pool party.

Las malandrinas expose the cruelty of neoliberalism’s efficient productivity and refuse to be embedded into the nation as normative citizens. As Hermann Herlinghaus has argued of the narcocorridos genre as a whole: “The precarious re-

flexivity of global ballads pays ethical attention to border crossers who, with their very bodies and fantasies, have made the ‘non-citizen’ of neoliberal globalization a permanent transnational figure. And there may be a point at which these corridors can teach us more about life and violence today than those moral codes or legalist claims whose pretension is to hypocritically hold violence at bay:²⁸ Accordingly, the structural violence of neoliberalism works through marketable paradigms to make Latinos into the civil, obedient, respectably preeminent regenerators of all things “American.” To paraphrase Dávila, structural “differences,” be they based on social class, race, or sexuality, become “failures” that Latinos, like las malandrinas, are forever pressed to redress.²⁹

The queer gendered performances of the jota in Jenni constructed through “Las Malandrinas” encourage critical contemplation of normalizing discourses of Latino citizenship figured through the conjoining calls by liberal LGBTQ campaigns for marriage equality and Latino immigration reform platforms organized mostly through the hetero/homonormative trope of “family.” Following my analytic of the *jota* in Jenni, I understand “Las Malandrinas” as a queer testimonio that brown queers know quite well the broken promises of the state to reward “good” and “appropriate” citizens—reinforced through performances of the tax-paying citizen, the soldier, the married mother, the home owner, and the parent consumer. There is ample research that demonstrates that even the politics of respectability will not save you from a life of debt, an inhumane health care system, or incarceration. In this way, I understand las malandrinas to charge us, especially in this moment, with considering incivility and unruliness as Latina/o/Mexicana queer political strategies.

In the music industry there is enormous pressure for women of color to steer away from scandal, rumors, or the publicity of bad behavior that might tarnish their performative womanhood. Jenni Rivera turned the performance of Latina respectability on its head. For Jenni, respectability was connected to control and containment. Rivera recalled often how her first husband physically abused her because she wanted more than to be at home cooking and cleaning—wanted more than to be cut off from friends, family, and the social worlds she craved. As a domestic abuse survivor, Rivera learned the first principle of confronting the power of abuse—and that was overcoming silence, speaking out about that which is too often censored. This is important when we comprehend Jenni Rivera’s “loud mouth” in speaking publicly about sex, marriage failures, and folks who did her wrong. Shame and silence had power over her throughout her young life, and acknowledging this requires a reconsideration of Jenni’s public displays of what were often perceived as personal failures and flaws, frequently dismissed by the media as entertainment value.

Jenni’s direct statements about her own life and equally about societal is-

²⁸ Herlinghaus, “Narcocorridos: An Ethical Reading of Musical Diegesis,” *Trans: Revista Transcultural de Música* 10 (2006): 11.

²⁹ Dávila, *Latino Inc.*, 4, 5.

sues always garnered press attention, and she utilized this popular status to speak out about a number of social and political issues and on behalf of the communities that bore the brunt of structural hostilities, those Gloria Anzaldúa once referred to as “los atravesidos,” including “the perverse, the queer, the troublesome,” and the “half-dead: in short, those who cross over and pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal.’”³⁰ As an official spokesperson for the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Jenni made public statements that included her own experiences as a victim of abuse.

On a number of occasions during interviews with the press she spoke about her appreciation of lesbian and gay fans and urged the public to fight homophobic hate crimes against LGBT communities. The Jenni Rivera Love Foundation offered social services targeting undocumented Latina immigrants. In fact, Jenni was the first among only a few major Latina celebrities to call Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070 legislation racist—a term most media personalities shied away from using. When it passed, SB 1070 was considered immigration legislation built on a system of racial profiling, turning all law enforcement officials into enforcers of federal immigration policy.³¹ Jenni was the most popular celebrity to march with protesters in the first major anti-SB 1070 rally in Phoenix in 2010. According to her press release, she called SB 1070 “a hateful law that views anyone with brown skin as ‘reasonably suspicious.’” Before her performance Jenni addressed the audience after having marched six miles with the protesters. She described herself as “una mexicana orgullosa” (a proud mexicana) and referred to SB 1070 as “discrimination, racism, and hatred.”³²

“The Radical Potential of Queer Politics (in Music)?”³³

The *jota* sounded in Jenni, through the afterlife of malandrinas, remains a powerful representation of mexicanas to disidentify with neoliberalism’s feminine performances of normative Latina citizenship.³⁴ Rivera’s gender performance still is a significant representation for mexicanas familiar with the meaning of “acting out,” to literally and figuratively renounce, even if merely for the length of a song, their representation as complacent exploited laboring subjects that simultaneously are only legible as alien threats to white supremacy. Rivera’s malandrinas, I argue, offer us a unique sonic sociality script for a radical potential of queer politics.

Jenni Rivera’s malandrinas represent mexicana gender and sexuality, which are a misfit within neoliberalism’s marketing of the Latina/o citizen as perpetually

³⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*, 25.

³¹ “Arizona’s Immigration Law: Racial Profiling at Its Worst as 10 States Explore Copycat,” *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2011, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/louis-provenzano/arizonas-immigration-law_b_567590.html.

³² See clips of her addressing the audience before her performance: <https://youtu.be/ijUE7f5SBVo> and <https://youtu.be/bmoiONyPFVQ>.

³³ My subtitle attempts to honor the question posed by Cohen in the subtitle of her essay as a way of considering musical performances and performers in response to this critical question.

³⁴ See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

dutiful and deferential. Instead, las malandrinas seek fun and immediate gratification over neoliberal fabrications of security and protection, which cannot ever fully be trusted. Malandrinas are those kin we recognize but sometimes underappreciate for the work they do to defy the normative: the ones who speak out of turn as “subordinates,” have wages with no paystubs, always have a cell phone but no contract, have a home but no house, and perform daily antics we wish we had the aplomb to replicate.

These are the mundane queer structural perversions that push against normative boundaries of civility and respectability that justify injustices of race, gender, class, and sexual/ity violence. Here, I believe las malandrinas offer us ways to consider various performances of brown queer gender defiance, such as that by the queer antics of Jennicet Gutierrez during President Obama’s welcoming remarks at the White House PRIDE celebration of 2015.³⁵ Gutierrez, standing at the back of the room, spoke out of turn and acted uncivil by loudly calling out President Obama—in her strong Spanish accent—for the abuses his immigration policies had upon transgender Latina immigrants incarcerated in detention centers. Her outburst was met with boos from the mostly white lesbian and gay White House administration and national LGBTQ organizational leaders invited to the celebration. Predictably, Jennicet became a disposable subject within the performance of LGBTQ citizenship, quickly marshaled out of the room through a side door, albeit still shouting along the way. Accordingly, the sounded *jota* in Jennicet marks a refusal to perform neoliberal Latina citizenship—as one of the few Latinas in the room—that is also key to the maintenance of empire in neoliberal homonormative LGBTQ identity projects.

When we consider Jenni Rivera’s queer as a musical platform for working-class/dominant Spanish-speaking/listening/immigrant communities within the US and Mexican nation-states, which thrive on their disposability, then we may comprehend how Jenni’s musical embodiment of las malandrinas, or *the jota* in Jenni, are a reminder of the radical possibilities we need to further cultivate. I believe that the *jota* in Jenni’s musical performances also remains a powerful sonic portal in her afterlife. Her musical performances still circulate, and las malandrinas remain in cultural rotation—whether they are the performances of *viejas*, *malcreadas*, or *jotas*—encouraging us to ponder models, platforms, and imaginaries that not only dissent to Latina politics of respectability but, in the spirit of Rivera’s irreverent femininity, boldly and creatively “call out” or “put on blast” acts of economic injustice, racist xenophobia, and gender violence as the mechanisms of disposability.

General responses to Jenni’s life often mocked her working-class, *déclassé* construction of femininity, and thus the narrative and representations of las malandrinas in the video can be troubling to some. Yet it is those modes of decent/

³⁵ Liam Stack, “Activist Removed after Heckling Obama at LGBT Event at White House,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/us/politics/activist-removed-after-heckling-obama-at-lgbt-event.html>.

appropriate citizenship, those that hide domestic abuse, exploitative labor conditions, and the oppressive system of marriage as sanctioning the state, that Jenni's malandrinas symbolize in their contradictions of gender and sexuality. Jenni Rivera once tweeted out to her fan club, the J-Unit: "Dear J-Unit: When I die remember to please make sure I am buried upside down . . . so the haters can continue to kiss my ass, love Jenni." It was this kind of unabashed naming of racist "hate" and "haters" that so many found (and still find) empowering within the realities of living with hateful legislation, abusive husbands, and homophobic violence.

Cathy Cohen subtitles her groundbreaking essay with "the radical potential of queer politics?" not as a statement but as a question. I understand this question to be an invitation for us to consider every interpretation of the question, ranging from the meaning of "queer politics," whether "queer" remains a political project, and if so, to whom and what issues does the politics of "queer" refer? I have turned to Jenni Rivera through revisiting Cohen's essay and question in order to ponder whether there is similar potential in what we consider and how we define moments we identify as something we can call queer music. Within the structural ruins of 1990s neoliberalism, Jenni Rivera emerged as a performance of nonnormative mexicana gender not through a representation of same-sex sexuality, nor through alternative/independent music production or queer coded lyrics, but rather through her exposure of a structurally messy life, discourteous feminine aesthetics, and her own perverse relationship with a commercial music industry that she entered through the informal economy of cassette music production and sales. Considering the prompt of Cohen's subtitle, I believe the radical potential in Jenni's music for defining queer politics exists not so much in the interpretation of performances of aberrant femininities she produced but for how these performances of mexicana femininity initiate further and different questions—especially based on non-English-language music—for the relationships between "radical," "queer," and "politics" in our current iterations of structural violence. Jenni Rivera may have passed on to her next life, but the roll call of las malandrinas remains in formation, and as figurative mexicana cartels sustained by positive chaos and overabundance, such queer femininities, I contend, represent unique systems and grammars that we should turn to for considering the radical potential of queer politics (in music).

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