

Embodied Performance Through the *Indita* Ballad of the US Southwest Borderlands

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In this study, I conduct an ethnography of embodied performance through two feminine-voiced ballads of Territorial New Mexico known as “La finada Paula Ángel” which recounts the only legal hanging of a woman in Territorial New Mexico and “La indita de Juliana Ortega,” narrating the account of a young child who was married against her will. I interview singer-songwriter Lara Manzanares, musician-ethnomusicologist Brenda M. Romero, and literary folklorist Enrique R. Lamadrid, who perform the ballads to show how embodied performance recovers, reclaims, and revitalizes histories that have been omitted from the dominant historical record. Multi-modal experiences are integrated for listening to the recordings of the ballads cited. The study reveals how embodied cultural expressions have the potential to both process and heal traumatic histories through cultural agency. How are the performers grappling with difficult borderland histories through their embodied performances? Given that many of these histories are not often learned through the public education system, how does the first-person narrative voice influence the performers’ understanding of their own histories? How are they channeling traumatic cultural memory through embodied performance?

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Introduction

In the recent editorial opinion piece entitled, “The Global Struggle for Equality for Women and Girls” author Joseph Chamie addresses the complexity to achieving women’s equality:

Achieving women’s equality requires a multi-faceted approach. This includes ensuring their basic human rights, enforcing legal protections against discrimination and violence, ensuring equal pay, education access, economic empowerment, and opportunities, promoting women in leadership roles, dismantling misogynistic stereotypes, advancing inclusive policies, supporting women-led institutions, and encouraging shared domestic responsibility.¹

In this study, I connect Chamie’s notions of women’s inequality with embodied performance through an ethnography of predominantly female-led performers. Through the embodiment and what singer-songwriter Lara Manzanares speaks to

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1. See Chamie, Joseph, ““The Global Struggle for Equality for Women and Girls,” 2026.

as “honoring the suffering” of traumatic women’s histories, this study contributes to a multi-pronged approach towards women’s equality. Through performance, it is what musician-ethnomusicologist Brenda M. Romero recognizes as an important part of processing and relating communal trauma. In this study, I show how embodied performance has the capacity to confront notions of patriarchal-induced trauma and colonization as the struggle for women equality continues on both a global and local level.

According to the United Nations, “On average, 137 women and girls were killed every day in 2024 by someone in their own family” (6). Furthermore, “Latin America is home to 14 of the 25 countries with the highest rates of femicide in the world, with Mexico being one of them” (Díaz, 2021; Datta, 2026). “Across Mexico, approximately 10 women and girls are killed every day and are forgotten, perpetuating a cycle of impunity” (Datta, 2026). Across the border from Mexico, in New Mexico eleven women disappeared in the Albuquerque area, later to be found buried at a new construction site. Chicana studies scholar Bernadine Hernández notes this disappearance is directly tied to the women being victims of gendered, racial, and sexual violence as they were all portrayed within these confines by the local police department.² The campaign, Indigenous Women Rising notes that Indigenous women within the US have had “disproportionately high rates of domestic violence and sexual assault on reservations and...limited capability...to prosecute non-native offenders” (Lorenzo, 2023). When addressing imposter (“pretendian”) syndrome in professional academic roles at the University of Colorado, Boulder; Brenda M. Romero notes that many *women* in the professoriate suffer from this condition (2025, 79). She states, “the canon has never accepted women on the same par as men” and that this condition has been long instilled in the dichotomy of suppressing women in terms of equating sounds of women and children to non-European people and the sounds of males to culture, intelligent minds, and European music (Romero 2025, 79; Ellingson 1992b, 113). Such data establishes systemic and structural vulnerabilities of women from the past to the current day, regardless of class status.

In addition to the examples mentioned above, the recovery of Mexican American women’s voices and histories is also difficult to locate in the US official history (Roybal, 5). For example, when investigating child marriage in New Mexico during the 1800s, church and state records account for a portion of reported marriages, yet the narratives and voices of such accounts are often missing, accounting for measurable proof of patriarchal pressures through erasure.³ Evident in the data, patriarchal practices of violence and women’s suppression transcend nation-states and continue in the US Southwest borderlands.

2. Hernández mentions that the local Albuquerque Police department publicly portrayed the women as non-white, from a lower social class, and as prostitutes and sex workers involved in drugs (2022:1).

3. Research shows a large disparity between marital age differences during the nineteenth century. In his seminal work, *When Jesus Came The Corn Mothers Went Away*,

In this study, I focus on performance-based practices that resist the very realities the above data quantifies. I concentrate on the relationship between embodied acts of historical trauma endured by Mexican American women in New Mexico—*nuevomexicanas*—and the ways in which these acts challenge notions of patriarchy and colonialism. In effect, I show how performance works through complicated histories of violence as a form of empowered cultural agency and as a form of healing.

The Southwest Chicana feminist borderlands scholar Gloria Anzaldúa described the border as "*una herida abierta*" (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds (25). She states,

A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.⁴

Within this interstitial space of the US Southwest borderlands sits present-day New Mexico as seen in Figure 1. Next to it in Figure 2 is a map of the Republic of Mexico prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 in which the US annexed over half of Mexico after the brutal and bloody US-Mexican War which lasted one year, nine months, and eight days (May 13, 1846 – February 2, 1848). As a result, Mexico ceded 55% of its Northern Territory including present-day California, Nevada, Utah, as well as parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. The U.S bought these territories from Mexico for \$15 million and agreed to assume \$3.25 million in debts owed by Mexico to US citizens. It also agreed to honor the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty regarding Mexican land grant contracts, however it has been estimated that four out of every five land grant holders lost their land after the US dishonored this agreement, totaling to over three million acres lost from traditional heirs.⁵ With the end of the US-Mexican War, New Mexico became a Territory of the United States and held this territorial status for over sixty years until it became a state in the Union in 1912.

Ramón Gutiérrez finds that between 1674-1848, males married predominantly younger women and girls throughout different age ranges. Males between ages 40-62 often married much younger females for greater reproduction capabilities. See Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away*, 1991: p. 278.

4. Anzaldúa, p. 25.

5. See the US General Accounting Office report at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/a157/551.html>. See also Hispano Commercial Club of Las Vegas Report housed with the University of Houston Digital History https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook_fm?smtID=3&psid=569. For a recent report on land loss after the US-Mexican War, see María Mondragón-Valdez's "Borderlands or Land of Borders: A Review of the Uplands of the San Luís Valley," *Greenfire Times*, November-December (2025: 12-14).

Figure 1. Present-day New Mexico



*Image by Google Maps

Figure 2. Mexico prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo/US-Mexican War (in yellow)



*Image by History Colorado

<https://www.historycolorado.org/media/9141>

Throughout New Mexico's colonized history as a US Territory to the present day, social injustices grew rampant with many tragic consequences faced by *nuevomexicanas*. From expressing tragic histories such as the only legal execution of a woman in Territorial New Mexico in 1861 to the enslavement of women and children in the borderlands, these are some examples in which performance-based cultural expressions serve as a means of grappling with such dire circumstances. In New Mexico, as in many other underrepresented

regions of the US Southwest borderlands; the teachings and practices of local histories, languages, and cultures are often omitted from public learning spaces and from the US official history. New Mexico was encased in what scholar Mary Luise Pratt terms as a contact zone: a “space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”⁶ Within a confluence of cultures, languages, and worldviews; oral tradition and performance art flourished as an outlet to voice social injustices.

One performance-based oral tradition known in the region is the highly poetic and stylized folk ballad known as the *indita*.⁷ Functioning as a means of memorializing those who have passed in often horrific manners, as noted by Brenda M. Romero, *indita* ballads transpose the moral economy of the community while they come to terms with such tragedies and often serve as a means of closure. Like the popular Mexican ballad form of the *corrido*, *inditas* follow a similar poetic structure. Each verse is typically four octosyllabic lines with assonant (vowel) rhyming in the second and fourth lines. Unlike the *corrido*, however, *inditas* are primarily composed in the first person, allowing performers to fully embody the protagonists. This example shows both the rhyme scheme and the first-person narrative voice:

Eran tantos **mis** trabajos
y tanto **mi** padecer,
que no **tenía** libertad
ni aun para poder comer.

My labors were so many
and so much my suffering,
that I was not at liberty
even to eat.⁸

The following are ethnographic accounts of embodied performance through two feminine-voiced *indita* ballads of Territorial New Mexico known as “La finada Paula Ángel” which recounts the only legal hanging of a woman in Territorial New Mexico and “La indita de Juliana Ortega,” narrating the account of a young child who was married against her will. I interview singer-songwriter Lara Manzanares, musician-ethnomusicologist Brenda M. Romero, and literary folklorist Enrique R. Lamadrid who perform the ballads to show how embodied performance functions as a means to recover, reclaim, and revitalize histories that have been omitted from the official historical record. Through a discussion of their embodied performances, I show how these embodied cultural expressions have the potential to help process and heal traumatic histories through cultural agency. I question, how are the performers grappling with the difficult borderland histories through their embodied

6. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*. p. 6.

7. For more information regarding the *indita* as a genre see, Romero, Brenda. “The Indita Genre of New Mexico,” 2002.

8. La indita de Juliana Ortega.

performances? Given that many of these histories are not often learned through the public education system, how does the first-person voice influence the performers' understanding of their own histories? In addition, how are their renditions and their creations of *indita* ballads changing over time through embodied performances? In effect, how are they reimagining a collective cultural memory within the New Mexico borderlands?

To answer these questions, the article proceeds as follows. I start with a literature review of US Southwest borderlands scholarship, performance theory, and ballad scholarship. Specifically, I draw on recent scholarship at the juncture of performance studies, borderlands studies (including borderlands performance), Chicana feminism, and critical Latinx pedagogies to highlight how embodied acts of transfer in the performances of "La finada Paula Ángel" and "La indita de Juliana Ortega" serve as culturally sustaining practices within the US Southwest borderlands. This is followed by a section on methodology outlining the interview questions for each participant. Each *indita*, "La finada Paula Ángel" and "La indita de Juliana Ortega," has two sections. Each section contains an introduction to the ballad, an audio component for readers to listen to the performed recordings, and interview excerpts with Manzanares, Romero, and Lamadrid. This is then followed by a discussion on cultural agency through embodied performance.

Literature Review

Central to this work are ethnographic accounts highlighting how embodied performers render resilient acts of agency, offering a path for traumatic histories and residual cultural modalities to be embraced as forms of healing.⁹ Women singers demonstrate the importance of embodied performance in which the physical body and narrative voicing function as corporeal acts of both resistance *and* empowerment. The fundamental theoretical frameworks for this study resemble Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's "theories in the flesh," in which case I inquire upon the specific ways the physical body is weaponized against oppression through mechanisms of resistance (1981).

Border Thinking and Performance Studies

With inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Walter D. Mignolo posits "border thinking" as that which "requires dwelling in the

9. Appropriate for this study, residual culture encapsulates the 'residue' or past cultural expressions which continue to occur in the present and may be seen as ways to relate to and/or resist the dominant culture. See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (1980: 40-42).

border” to experience the existential notions of a border epistemology (xv-xvi). In line with Mignolo’s *aesthetic* political project of *embodying* practices and consciousness through the senses, this ethnographic project challenges coloniality by illuminating borderlands dwellers and their embodied experiences of bringing the past to the present. It resembles what historian and performance studies scholar Katherine Johnson terms as *kinaesthetic imagination*, in which performers participate in “recreating an historical culture for [...] the present” (15). Theatre scholar Freddie Rokem notes, “...when performing histories, actors become witnesses of a past resurrected in the present” (xii, 2). Yet, in this case the performers are not only witnessing the past—they are re-living and re-creating the past through embodied performance. Historical re-enactments and social memory expressed through embodied and performance-based practices have been documented (Connerton, 1989; Roach, 1996; Rokem, 2000; Taylor, 2003; Schneider, 2011; Johnson, 2015). In addition, these practices are notable in borderlands scholarship (Rivera-Servera and Young, 2010; and Aldama, Sandoval, and García, 2012; Otero and Martínez Rivera, 2024) amongst others.

Social memory, as demonstrated in this study, is woven into corporeal acts of resistance through the first-person narrative voicing and the use of *yo*, or “I.” Validating the trauma that exists through the personal and highly intimate, performers of this study practice what borderlands scholars Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García term as “emancipatory aesthetics.”¹⁰ Liberated forms in which culture becomes performance translates to cultural agency and empowerment of borderlands dwellers. Framed within this border logic, this research is grounded in Chicana feminism. Citing Aida Hurtado,

Unlike other feminisms, Chicana feminisms have an added emphasis on Mexican and Chicana/o cultures and histories, the importance of the Spanish language, and the examination of structural variables that affect power and privilege.¹¹

The ballads used for this study are performed primarily by *nuevomexicanas*, are about *nuevomexicanas*, and are shared in the vernacular *nuevomexicana* language. Their performances function as what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor deems as an *episteme*—“a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis” (xvi). Building on Taylor’s work, I illuminate how embodied performance embraces learning and transmitting knowledge through border thinking. How are performers processing historical trauma through the ballads they re-enact? Given the highly tragic histories the ballads retell, how is the use of *yo*, or “I”

10. See Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García’s edited edition, *US Latina and Latino in the Borderlands* (2012). Additional borderlands and Latinx scholarship continue to stress the importance of emancipatory methodologies stemming from Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) and seen in Solimar Otero and Minzti Auanda Martínez-Rivera’s edited edition of *Theorizing Folklore from the Margins* (2024).

11. Hurtado, Aída. *Intersectional Chicana Feminisms: Sitios Y Lenguas*, (2020): 8.

resonating with the performers? How does it challenge notions of coloniality into one of empowerment through the body, through the voice?

Culturally Sustaining and Embodied Pedagogies

Scholars Django Paris and H. Samy Alim assert the importance of decolonizing education by *centering* underrepresented experiences, histories, languages, and communities through culturally sustaining pedagogies (2017). In this study, I center embodied performance as a culturally sustaining pedagogical framework for making the invisible visible. Exploring further, I show how this framework establishes what Chicana scholars G. Reyes et. al (2023) term as “embodied pedagogies of care” (EPC) and what interdisciplinary scholar Cassie Cobos terms as “embodied storying” by conducting ethnographies of performers (2012).¹² Collaborative relationships with the artists are prioritized in this study through EPC as “interactions, the sharing of personalized experiences, and relationship building as pedagogy” (471). “Embodied storying” furthers the desire to combat marginalization through the (re)telling of stories as the artists continually do so each time the ballads are performed (40).

Ethnographies of Performance in New Mexico

Scholarship dedicated to dramatic folk performances within New Mexico show how festival traditions reenact histories of violence and colonialism. From the mock-battle drama of the *Moros y Cristianos* which recounts battles of Islamic and Christian wars of Spain,¹³ to the ritual folk dance performances of the *danza de los Matachines*¹⁴ depicting Indigenous and Hispano syncretism, and dramatic performances of children held captive in the drama *Los Comanches*,¹⁵ each of these dramatic performances not only revisit histories of trauma through social memory, but through their embodiment, histories are relived and memorialized.

Rather than solely incorporating ethnographic observations, I focus on the corporeal acts of performance through embodiment and through the voices of the performers. This study functions as both an ethnography of performance

12. G. Reyes et al (2023) propose EPC for historically marginalized Latino students.

13. See Garcia, David F. “Moros y Cristianos: Intangible Cultural Exchange along the Camino Real.” (2007).

14. See Harris, Max. “The Return of Moctezuma: Oaxaca’s “Danza de la Pluma” and New Mexico’s “Danza de los Matachines.”” *TDR* (1988-) 41, no. 1 (1997): 106-134. See also Romero, Brenda M., and Phillip B. Gonzales. “La Danza Matachines as New Mexican Heritage.” *Expressing New Mexico: Nuevomexicano creativity, ritual, and memory* (2007): 61-84. See also Romero, Brenda Mae. *The Matachines music and dance in San Juan Pueblo and Alcalde, New Mexico: contexts and meanings*. Doctoral diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1993. See also Rodriguez, Sylvia, *The Matachines Dance: A Ritual Dance of the Indian Pueblos and Mexican/Hispano Communities*. Sunstone Press, 2009.

15. See Lamadrid, E. R. (2003). *Hermanitos Comanchitos*. UNM Press.

and performers. Performance ethnography works to show “how culture is done in the body” (Jones, 7). Extended further, I incorporate ethnographies of performers through ethnographic interviews enabling a border thinking methodology of collaboration with the performers themselves. This brief ethnography of interviews illuminates not only the embodied performances, but it also sheds light on *how* the performers blend regional and underrepresented pasts while challenging notions of coloniality and patriarchy in the present.

Methodology

The following sections introduce and contextualize the ballads, “La finada Paula Ángel” and “La indita de Juliana Ortega” followed by a discussion and review of interviews conducted with performers of the ballads, Lara Manzanares (LM), Brenda M. Romero (BMR), and Enrique R. Lamadrid. Singers have recited the ballads in professional recordings and have performed them for the public. Central questions and excerpts of the interviews are then highlighted and discussed. Questions selected are essential in connecting the reclamation of violent histories through performance as a means of processing traumatic histories through corporeal notions of cultural agency. Key questions include:

- Had you previously known about the specific protagonist prior to being asked to perform the ballad? If not, what was this learning process like?
- How did it make you feel to sing the ballad the first person? Did you feel you came to know the protagonist in some way by embodying the protagonist?
- Is it important, in your opinion, that we as *nuevomexicanas* go to these difficult places to learn these histories?
- What are your hopes for the future in terms of her story, her ballad, her performance?
- Do you believe performance can serve as a form of healing in any way?

To fully capture the collective history embedded in the ballads and their performances, this study prioritizes ethnographic interviews with an analysis of the somatic, gendered, and embodied reality of the performance itself. By analyzing both the physical and gendered mechanics of the performances, noted within each interview, this paper treats the act of singing as an embodiment of cultural memory, in which historical survival is actively corporealized. I will now introduce the first ballad, *la finada de Paula Ángel* followed by a discussion with performer and vocalist, Lara Manzanares.

Introduction to “La finada Paula Ángel”

“La finada Paula Ángel,” or The Late Paula Ángel, recounts the tragic legal hanging of a *nuevomexicana* during Territorial New Mexico in the mid-1800s. Several versions exist of what exactly happened. One version is that Ángel, affectionately known as Pablita, was perhaps around the age of nineteen years old at the time when she lured her lover Miguel Martín into meeting her.¹⁶ Ángel, upset with his unrequited love, embraced Martín for the last time and killed him. There are other versions of what transpired that day, but what is certain is that Ángel was sentenced to death by hanging after the *all-male* jury convicted her of first-degree murder on March 26, 1861, in the northern New Mexico town of Las Vegas.

As part of her sentence, Ángel remained in the local jail house for a month leading up to her execution. Former New Mexico State Historian Robert Tórréz located the original execution warrant inside the Huntington Library in California. The warrant confirmed that her execution took place one month after her sentence, validating the folklore that the trial was heavily influenced and rushed by local authorities (Tórréz, 131-140). Oral tradition notes that the Sherriff, Antonio Abad Herrera taunted Ángel each day at the jail house letting her know just how many days she had left. On the day of her execution, she was taken to a cottonwood tree outside of the town. The Sherriff hung her, yet he failed to tie her hands. She struggled to break loose while those witnessing the scene protested and demanded her to be released. The Sherriff was adamant to finish the execution as the sentence stated that she be “hung by the neck until dead” between “ten o’clock in the forenoon and four o’clock in the afternoon” (Armijo 2012: 317).¹⁷ Ángel was executed and died on April 26, 1861. Her ballad, “La finada Paula Ángel” was most likely created during her sentence or soon after her execution as a means for her family and community members to make sense of such a horrific episode.

“La finada Paula Ángel” was originally composed by Paula Ángel’s cousin, Juan Ángel and is included in Aurelio Espinosa’s *Romancero Nuevomejicano*

16. One hundred years after Ángel’s execution, her account was retold by former New Mexico district court Judge, Luis E. Armijo and published by Ernie Thwaites in the *New Mexican* in 1961. Armijo, whose grandmother witnessed the execution and had recounted the narrative to him, then transmitted the narrative to Thwaites and to Armijo’s granddaughter—former New Mexico district court Judge, Christina Armijo. Christina Armijo also worked to explain the legal dynamics in Ángel’s case, *The Territory of New Mexico versus Paula Angel*. See Armijo, M. Christina. “Territory of New Mexico vs. Paula Angel: One Woman’s Tragic Journey through Territorial Justice in 1861,” *New Mexico Law Review*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2012. See also Thwaites, Ernie. “Bizarre Frontier Hanging Recalled,” *New Mexican*. April 28, 1961. Thwaites article was later republished in Peter Hertzog’s *Legal Hangings* (Santa Fe: Press of the Territorian, 1966), p. 7-9.

17. Here, Armijo presents the court docket of Angel’s sentence.

(1915). Composed in the first person, Ángel's voice is heard throughout the ballad. She repents for her actions, warns others not to fall into the same fate as her, and offers her farewell wishes. Within a predominantly Catholic community, Ángel laments her fate to the Virgen de Guadalupe, Santo Niño de Atocha, Madre de los Dolores (the Mother of Sorrows) amongst others. The original version is extensive with thirty-eight verses. The ballad spread from community to community and became one of the best known *inditas* in New Mexico. Over time, variants of the ballad became shorter while still maintaining key features including Ángel's actions, her reason for her actions, her lament, and her *despedida* or farewell as seen in these verses from a more recent variant:

2. El Maldito me insistió
hacer tan grande avería,
el Maldito me insistió
hacer tan grande avería.

2. The Evil one insisted
that I cause such great danger,
the Evil one insisted
that I cause such great danger.

5. A muerte me sentenciaron
porque maté a Miguelito,
a muerte me sentenciaron
porque maté a Miguelito.

5. They sentenced me to death
because I killed Miguelito,
They sentenced me to death
because I killed Miguelito.

9. Adiós mis dos hermanitos
échenme la bendición,
Adiós mis dos hermanitos
échenme la bendición.

9. Good-bye my two little brothers
give me your blessing,
good-bye my two little brothers
give me your blessings.

These verses are from a variant performed by singer Julia Jaramillo and recorded in 1986. Sung *a capella* without any musical accompaniment, [readers may listen to her here](#). More recently, renowned New Mexican singer-song writer Lara Manzanares, along with New Mexico roots group, Lone Piñón, created their own rendition of "La finada Paula Ángel." Utilizing the same lyrics as Jaramillo, this rendition has the same number of verses, yet striking differences are heard through Manzanares' vocals as well as musical accompaniment with Lone Piñón. [Readers may listen to this version here](#).

Each version is performed in the first-person narrative voice with the singers mediating the ballad while embodying Paula Ángel. Yet, each version offers the listener a different experience. From the raw and intimate qualities noticed in the *a capella* version, to hopeful melodies and dancing rhythms in the second, profound changes are noticed, rendering different meanings felt somatically depending on the modality performed and embodied. Manzanares sings in the traditional New Mexican Spanish dialect as we can see with the use

of *tuvites* in the sixth verse as she laments her condition as *una hija desgraciada*¹⁸ (a disgraced and unfortunate daughter):

6. Madre mía pa' que tuvites
una hija tan desgraciada,
madre mía pa' que tuvites
una hija tan desgraciada.

6. Mother of mine, why did you have
such an unfortunate daughter,
Mother of mine, why did you have
such an unfortunate daughter.

Ethnomusicologist Jesús Ramos-Kittrell notes how metaphor in aural poetics “points to a politics of recognition in terms of the discourses of taste and feeling through which people establish claims of belonging” (72).¹⁹ Manzanares channels her claims of belonging. By utilizing the traditional New Mexican Spanish of the area, Manzanares celebrates the vernacular as she shares it and as she also belongs to it. Listeners may also claim their belonging by participating, feeling, and processing the musical narrative somatically.

Interview with Lara Manzanares

During the interview with Manzanares, key topics that resonated throughout the conversation included her connection to the protagonist, Paula Ángel; the effect of the first-person narrative voice, her metaphor for vocalizing and embodying Ángel, and how this history reverberates with the importance of processing traumatic histories through performance. Although “La finada Paula Ángel” spread amongst various communities of northern New Mexico, Manzanares’ experience of not having been exposed to Ángel’s history is not uncommon for many *nuevomexicanos* learning about the Territorial history of New Mexico. Yet, when I (abbreviation CS below) asked Manzanares (LM) about what it was like to learn about Ángel through the ballad, she had a deep connection:

CS

What was it like for the first time to learn about this woman through this ballad?

LM

It was fascinating. First of all, because it was written in her voice. It felt very personal...and very painful. In kind of a cool way, though.

18. *Desgraciada* in traditional New Mexican Spanish carried much more weight than its English translation and can be referred to as one of the most deplorable conditions possible.

19. Ramos-Kittrell explains that aural poetics was introduced by anthropologist Alex Chávez “to point to a relational process between writer and reader which renders the former visible upon aural perception by the latter” —(or which renders the writer visible by the aural perception of the reader). I extend this notion to not only the writer, but also to the performer. See Ramos-Kittrell (2024).

You know, it's like when you open up a box that's in your grandma's closet and you find all these old photos of people that you know you're related to them and you can sort of feel their presence in a way, but you've never actually laid eyes on them before. But when you see the photos, there's just this feeling in your body and your heart that's like, that's me. Connection. It's there and you're actually feeling through it for the first time in a way, but actually that's been there...It felt like she was present in a way.

"That's me." Manzanares felt a presence, Ángel's presence. She related to her and felt a profound connection that had been there, deep inside. Shantel Martinez and Kelly Medina-López's notion of 'Border Indigenous Logic' relates spectral borderland's stories as those which are submerged "deep in the bones" (8). Similarly, Manzanares exhumes a presence that had been with her all along. It was just now that it began to take shape. Similar to Reyes' notion of "embodied pedagogies of care" and Lilia Bartolomé's concept of *cariño* (2008) which carries greater weight than its literal translation of "care" to denote a personal connection with historical and cultural significance (Bernal et. al., 2006), Manzanares identifies with the findings. As she relates them to a treasure of photos found in the closet of one's grandma, great care must be taken into account so as to not tarnish or tear them, but to keep them in the best shape possible so that others can also feel that connection that has always been there. Although there is pain there, it resurfaces to take shape and to share.

"It was written in her voice." Part of the connection and presence felt by Manzanares is also due in part to the narrative voicing in the ballad. Manzanares explains:

CS

How did it feel to sing in the first person? What did you feel...what was that like?

LM

It just felt right. It just felt like something locked into place. Like there was a need.

Other times, [in] corridos...they talk about someone else. This person did [this] and that person did that. And so, for those, some of the first songs that I learned to sing were corridos, like El corrido de Juanito, [el corrido de] Rosita Álvarez, both of which are corridos about women getting shot at a dance.

And both of them are painful, but in both of those, it sets the scene and it's like you're watching a movie. It's like you're seeing the scene.

But [with] Paula Ángel [it] was like, oh, here we are.

I can feel myself saying these things...The way she recounts things in the song is...in a very intimate kind of way.

Manzanares, who has performed both *corridos* and *inditas*, relates the setting of the scene largely due to the first-person narrative voicing. Unlike solely performing,

Manzanares *embodies* Ángel largely due to first-person narrative voicing as she intimately channels Ángel's remorse and lament throughout the ballad.

When performing the ballad, Manzanares relates her vocals with the metaphor of riding a horse and shouting out the vocals. She connects this to her upbringing in a rural northern New Mexican community, where it's often common to communicate with greater intensity. In this case, Manzanares' vocal performance insinuates the urgent need for others to know Ángel's story. As though she is saying, "Listen up, this is important, you need to hear me." She states:

...it's like I'm on horseback riding side saddle, which is weird because I never ride side saddle...And being like, wow, trailed along somewhere. Because, I mean, that really resonates with [Pablita] in a way—her journey; but she didn't really have control of the outcome.

Manzanares' embodied performance takes shape as she is swept into the act of riding the horse through the wind. In "Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity," African Studies scholar Joni L. Jones writes, "if people are genuinely interested in understanding culture, they must put aspects of that culture on and into their bodies" (7). As Manzanares channels her experience into her performance, she empowers Pablita Ángel as *she* is on the horse saying, *my* story matters—I am important and *I* need to share this with you. Manzanares' embodiment of Pablita challenges the official historical record given that her story was not recorded by local newspapers of the time and given that the complete records of her court trial remain obscure. In this way, Ángel rides the horse, letting everyone know her story while further tying herself to Manzanares. After all, Manzanares mentions how she felt like she already knew Pablita, even before she was introduced to her ballad:

CS

Do you feel like you came to know...Pablita [more through the ballad]?

LM

That's the weird thing. I felt like I already knew her.

It was like, "hi." Oh, here we are. Like, this [is] going to happen.

We have to do [this] right now and we're going to do it.

Manzanares continues:

...there was sadness...and grief in the song itself and the suffering...And this... feeling of not having control. It all felt very familiar. Just based on my own experience as a human being.

Sadness...but there was also joy. Like the joy you get from singing [and] voicing that history.

...feeling really sort of intense, not necessarily me, but there's a feeling of joy and laughter and like, hey, here I am. Like you're doing a good thing by sharing it. [It] felt like she was happy, sort of. Even though the tale is so difficult.

"Joy from voicing that history." Throughout the conversation, she made it clear about how this work is both needed and necessary. It is deeply tied to recovering, confronting, voicing, and healing from traumatic histories as in the case of Paula Ángel. We discussed this at the end of our conversation:

CS

Do you think that by doing this is, can it serve as a form of healing in any way?

LM

Yes. I think that it can just by bringing attention to it. And [by] establishing an emotional connection to our antepasados.²⁰ Whether they're related by blood or not...antepasados in general. All those people. And...honoring the suffering that they went through. Without having to dwell on it too much in a way. I think allowing ourselves to really feel that emotion is a really important part of the healing instead of denying it.

A crucial element in embodying "La finada Paula Ángel" is "honoring the suffering" of Paula Ángel which is relevant to so many other forgotten and omitted women. Performers continue to recover such traumatic histories through embodied performance. Manzanares enables what Aldama, Sandoval, and García (2012) call an emancipatory aesthetics by exposing Ángel and her tragedy to others. As such, she transmits cultural agency while humanizing Ángel. Ángel is not silenced; she continues to exist with an urgency in the collective consciousness.

La indita de Juliana Ortega

Nearly ten years prior to the execution of Paula Ángel, in the year 1850, a young girl by the name of Juliana Ortega was married against her will in New Mexico. She was ten years old. Her ballad, "La indita de Juliana Ortega" was only recently recovered from the New Mexico State Collections and Archives by Senior Archivist, Samuel Sisneros. In her ballad Ortega describes her tragic situation:

*Fui desposada muy niña
sin saber mi voluntad
por mi madre fui casada
antes de cumplir la edad (2)*

*When I was a small child I was married
without me knowing and without my consent
by my father I was married off
before I was old enough. (2)*

*Eran tantos mis trabajos
y tanto mi padecer,*

*My labors were so many
and so much my suffering,*

20. Antepasados are ancestors.

*que no tenía libertad
ni aun para poder comer. (6)*

*that I was not at liberty
even to eat. (6)*

She pleads and fights for a divorce in court. Divorce is granted only on the condition that she strip her clothes off as they were not her property:

*Ya llegamos Alburquerque,
llegué a la tierra de vos,
donde tuve libertad
por la voluntad de Dios. (16)*

*We got to Alburquerque,
I arrived on your land,
where I was freed
by the will of God. (16)*

*Cuando salí de la Corte
a cien varas caminar,
me salieron acreedores
para hacerme desnudar. (17)*

*When I left the Court
walking a hundred yards,
[my husband's] creditors appeared
to strip me bare. (17)*

*La ropa que traía puesta
no era de mi propiedad,
pues me traían a favores
con toda sagacidad. (18)*

*The clothes I wore
did not belong to me,
well, in their shrewdness
they humiliated me. (18)*

She begs all mothers not to marry their children until they are old enough. Ultimately, she renounces marriage altogether:

*Y ruego a todas las madres
que vivan con caridad,
que no casen a sus niñas
antes de cumplir la edad. (25)*

*I plead to all the mothers
who have love in your hearts
do not marry off your young daughters
before womanhood (25)*

*Ya con esta me despido,
mi historia es bastante larga,
renuncio los matrimonios
por la vida tan amarga. (26)*

*With this I say farewell
my story is quite long
I renounce marriage
for the bitter life I have lived. (26)*

“La indita de Juliana Ortega” has been recently performed by Brenda M. Romero and literary folklorist Enrique R. Lamadrid with the musical tune composed by culture bearer David García and is featured in the recently released audio CD *Café y Atole* (2022). [Readers are encouraged to listen to it here.](#)

Interviews with Brenda M. Romero and Enrique R. Lamadrid

From confronting patriarchy to relating the performance of “La indita de Juliana Ortega” to familial and regional tales of child marriage, these are just some of the most compelling topics covered while interviewing Romero and

Lamadrid. From the start of the interview, Romero relates Juliana Ortega's story with her own awareness of child marriage in the region:

I was already aware of the fact that women were married off at a very young age because my grandmother was only 13 [when she married, and] my Tía [Aunt] was only 13...my Tía was married to a man much older than her. I think he was 29 when she was 13.

Romero, having been born and raised in New Mexico to a long ancestry of multi-generational *nuevomexicanos*, not only expressed her familial upbringing at the time, but also related it to the normalization of traditional gender roles:

I'm trying to think...to what extent I might have embodied her experience.

I've had other experiences...my Tía...married [a] man 29 years older than her, they stayed together.

They had 13 children. And she died before him. He lived to be 104, and she died at 79, I think.

And so, you have to expect that the women were so bound by these traditions, in a way.

With a normalization of such traditional patriarchal order, the experience of learning about Juliana Ortega was not an uncommon one. In the seminal work, *When Jesus Came The Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico (1500-1846)*, Ramón Gutiérrez finds empirical evidence for nuptial agreements, with particular focus on the eighteenth century. He states, "A young nuptial guaranteed a high level of fertility and a quick reproduction of the area's population" (274). The reproduction model functioned within the agrarian labor society of New Mexico which persisted until the twentieth century with modernization. Yet, what was most striking for Romero was the ability to fight for and achieve a divorce:

The fact that Juliana was able to get a divorce made her very interesting to me...as a person, ...as a woman, and as a performer, because I had no idea.

Romero reflects on this uncommon practice within the northern New Mexico community of Lydon where she was raised:

My Tía Candelaria, my Aunt Candy, who is really not my Tía, but she functioned as our Tía through our childhood—she got the first divorce in Lyden...she got a divorce from my Uncle Joe...In any case, the women, they would see her coming and they would, they'd do this cross thing that people do...with their fingers.

And that was the very first time that I ever learned about a woman getting a divorce. And she suffered from...she was punished by the community, by the women. Maybe many of them who had stayed in terrible relationships.

Romero's recollection of the first divorce in her community entailed a community-wide response. Customary was the role of women to subside with their spouse. When the community norm of a woman divorcing her husband occurred, a cross-like sign was made with the thumb and the index finger to warn others of this deviant behavior and to protect themselves from what may have been viewed as a sin. Women who deviated from the patriarchal norm were, in this case, branded. In other cases of deviant behavior of *nuevomexicanas*, women may have even been perceived as *brujas*, or witches.²¹ In either case, women who did not follow the cultural norm were punished, as Romero states. They were encouraged to stay married, especially if they had children:

I think that my mother got so upset with my dad once early on when they only had two kids that she went to see an attorney to get a divorce.

I once asked my mother why she didn't get a divorce. She said it was because she would have lost the children. In those days the men owned the women and the children.

So in a way....what I'm hearing is that these experiences, even though this is a very traumatic experience when we think about [Juliana Ortega]. It's also not that uncommon to relate her experience to so many others that were prevalent.

Not only was the woman subjected to ostracization from her own community for going against traditional norms, but she was also subjected to a system of patriarchal order in which the male divorcee would have custody of the children.

Community practices and norms are so deeply entrenched that dire consequences such as losing one's children are evident. Such is the case in the captivating performance art by scholar, actress and artist, Rosalía Pacheco. In her performance of the tale, *La Llorona*, Pacheco shows how the community has the ultimate power in the fate of the female protagonist, known as la Llorona. In her tale of *La Llorona* performed by Pacheco, a man goes against his father's wishes and marries a woman of a lower social class and they have two children. Once his father finds out about the situation, he orders his son to take the kids and to banish the woman from the community. As the husband tells this to his wife, she weeps and weeps without realizing that her kids, not yet taken away, fall into the river. Since she is weeping so heavily, she does not hear their cries for help. Like Romero's recounting of a possible divorce between her parents in which the father would take the children away from their mother, Pacheco also portrays the patriarchal norms that take precedent in the community. *La Llorona* continues to weep for her children throughout the years.²²

21. See Scorgia, Carmella, 2016.

22. Often, the Mexican tale of *La Llorona* is depicted as a native woman marrying a Spaniard who has an affair. Although they have children, in her rage, the woman takes the children and drowns them. The tale is often related to the Indigenous woman, *La Malinche*

In the case of “La indita de Juliana Ortega,” Romero speaks to the difference between singing the ballad as a duet with a male colleague and how the dynamic was different in comparison to singing it alone:

CS:

Through the act of singing this story in her narrative voice, did you feel like you came to know her better, or other stories similar to her?

BMR:

If I hadn't been singing with a man...I might have been able to put more feeling into the way I sang it...I might have put more emotion into [it as] if I was singing her. But a duet is more focused on singing together.

Had Romero been able to perform the piece as a solo, the emotional charge and conveyance would have affected the embodied performance. In fact, she sings another *indita* ballad, “La cautiva Marcelina” as a solo. With similar resonances, “La cautiva Marcelina” is about the abduction of Marcelina after having watched the killing of her siblings, her father, and her children. It is a tale of cross-cultural relationships most likely between Hispano and Indigenous groups at the time. Some have hypothesized her abduction by Comanches.. Narrated in the first person, she expresses her lament for all her family members and for the unwillingness and ineptitude to ever love again:

*La cautiva Marcelina
cuando llegó a los cerritos,
cuando llegó a los cerritos
volteó la cara llorando,
—Mataron a mis hijitos,
mataron a mis hijitos.*

*When Marcelina the captive
arrived at the little hills,
arrived at the little hills,
she looked back crying,
—They killed my little children,
they killed my little children.*

*Por eso ya no quiero
en el mundo más amar
De mi querida patria
me van a retirar*

*For this, in this world,
I am unable to love anymore
They are taking me away
Of my beloved homeland²³*

Readers may listen to Romero’s version of [“La cautiva Marcelina” here](#).

Notable differences between “La indita de Juliana Ortega” (JO) and “La cautiva Marcelina” (LCM) include structural components of the narrative form and musicality reflecting the emotional inflection embodied and felt through the performance. Where LCM begins the narration from the third person, JO

who was the translator and interpreter for the Spanish colonizer of Mexico, Hernán Cortés. The tale often associates her weeping as a loss of the Indigenous culture. It is often recounted as a cautionary tale for children to stay away from running water of the rivers and irrigation systems known as *acequias*.

23. Author’s translation.

begins with the first-person narrative voice creating differences in delivery *and* embodiment. Juliana's narrative voice introduces the listener to her intimate story, functioning as a musical testimonio.²⁴ The emotional intonation funnels through the narrative voicing of JO while in LCM the emotional intonation is complicated with the attractive melody, but with a horrific narrative. This emotional agency builds through the solo performance of LCM with silence and interludes allowing the listener to pause through lamenting features in the retelling. On the other hand, the emotional inflection of JO is also felt through the accompaniment of a male performer.

While interviewing the male performer, Enrique R. Lamadrid, he offered a conciliatory perspective and stated:

This is the kind of story that with a male voice in it, carries healing qualities. It does not condone male superiority so common in those days which often denoted ownership of women.

In this recording, I subordinated my role to Ms. Romero by singing harmony as she was the lead singer of the ballad. This complementary role was an act of contrition, making the healing more complete.

This is the sympathetic male voice that shares in the remorse and atonement of what happened to Juliana.

Resonant of Carl Jung's psychological archetypes of Animus, the unconscious masculine energy of a woman, and Anima, the unconscious feminine energy of a man, this accompaniment works in tandem with the goal of Individuation—a conscious awareness of a balanced whole.²⁵ Feminine and masculine are embodied as one. The conciliatory voice of a male counterpart adds an empowering message that the process and recognition of the need to heal is shared. The embodied struggle for women's and girl's rights is enacted by both genders. Echoing bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody*, she mentions, "...I believe that if [men] knew more about feminism they would no longer fear it, for they would find in feminist movement the hope of their own release from the bondage of patriarchy" (ix). Lamadrid's participation fulfills both the psychological notion of encasing both the feminine and masculine traits in one and Johnson's *kinaesthetic imagination* that recreates "an historical culture for [...] the present" (15). In this way, residual cultural forms are embodied in the present to challenge patriarchy by both woman and man.

Returning to the interview with Romero, she funnels her own experience of the marginalization of women within the confines of patriarchal order into her performances. In this way, she exercises cultural agency as having the potential to heal:

24. See Scorgia Pacheco, Carmella (2023) p. 127.

25. See Jung, C. G (1969).

CS

How is it, even though that this is so traumatic, how can your performances function as forms of healing?

BMR

Well, I think just telling the story and making these stories, you know, teaching these stories in classrooms, that it's just part of the struggle of women's equality.

"Just telling the story." Making these stories known lends itself to greater discussions surrounding these difficult histories. English studies scholar Jonathan Wilson relates the importance of bringing participants into traumatic histories to enable them to feel and to process them, and then to act (224). The act of embodying trauma illuminates collective generational trauma amongst women. It enables the struggle towards women's equality—one rooted in recognizing how women's struggles can transform into a memory and ultimately an embodiment of resilience. Author Samantha Ellis' recent memoir, *Always Carry Salt: A Memoir of Preserving Language and Culture* (2026) speaks to the importance of recognizing and sharing generational trauma of Judeo-Iraqi populations. In a recent interview with Ellis, she mentions that in transmitting historical trauma, it makes visible what has been historically erased which not only heals but also empowers those who tell the story and those who come to understand the strength of survival and resilience.²⁶ Like Paula Ángel's obscurity in the official record, Juliana Ortega's official history remains to be told. Unlike Pablita, however, Juliana Ortega's ballad did not enter the oral tradition and only recently was her ballad recovered from the archives.²⁷ Indeed, "just telling the story" is an act of making the invisible, visible.

Conclusion: Cultural Agency and Redemption

Throughout this dialogue, several common themes resonate between interviewees including the performer's subjective empowerment, community-level collective memory-work, and political challenges to hegemonic historiography, language justice, and patriarchal practices. Subjective empowerment eclipses the need and urgency both Manzanares and Romero expressed. Both agreed that more work needs to be done surrounding the education of these histories, especially given the state of women's rights in the world and the struggles that continue. Both contribute to reimagining a collective cultural history through the channeling of their experiences and their connections that are rooted in the region providing for both empowerment *and*

26. See Ellis, Samantha's interview, Ball State Public Media, NPR, The Facing Project Season 8; January 31, 2026: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6L35UIaLrQ&list=PLb294dtN1KEFOYlsAahmWagMIzw4jCfDk&t=1344s>. Accessed on August 20, 2026.

27. Thanks to Senior Archivist, Samuel Sisneros who recovered the ballad from the New Mexico State Records Center and Archives.

healing. Moreover, healing becomes complete with the conciliatory male performance as an act of contrition, exemplifying how both female and male challenge patriarchal hegemony. Such community-level collective memory work calls for revisiting trauma and transmitting their own experiences into their performances as a process of redemption. When speaking about trauma and performance protest, Diana Taylor mentions:

Its efficacy depends on its ability to provoke recognition and reaction in the here and now rather than rely on past recollection. It insists on physical presence: one can participate only by *being there*. Its only hope for survival...is that they catch on; others will continue the practice.²⁸

With the vast oral traditions of the area, New Mexico, as with many other areas in the US Southwest borderlands, continues to face political challenges with maintaining its language of Spanish as a practiced heritage language.²⁹ This is seen with strong assimilation efforts coupled with intergenerational traumatic experiences of using Spanish in public spaces³⁰ and changes to language requirements at local universities.³¹ Yet, through embodied performance in the heritage language of Spanish, performers are able to revitalize, maintain, and share the language, thus taking an active role in one's cultural agency as a culturally sustaining practice. Taylor eloquently emphasizes, "we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices" (xvi).

Ultimately, this study shows how a border thinking methodology grounded in ethnographic interviews reveals just how crucial embodied performance of historically underrepresented narratives work to both heal and empower the artists who perform them. Primarily, the intersection of cultural agency and redemption within these interviews finds its expression through corporeal acts of resistance. Paula Ángel's historical erasure was enacted through a brutal, physical execution designed to silence her body permanently. Juliana Ortega's historical erasure was only recently recovered through the narrative text that did not make it into oral tradition. Yet, through the reclamation of embodied performance, both Pablita and Juliana exist in the collective cultural memory through the narrative voicing and the use of "yo" or *I*, stating their case, making

28. See Taylor (2003: 188).

29. I define heritage language learner as one who has a personal connection with the language of their community and/or heritage.

30. See MacGregor-Mendoza, Patricia, pp. 355-367.

31. I mention in my dissertation that some universities are changing their language requirements to requiring only one semester of a language other than English. In an area where the Spanish heritage language is undergoing a shift to English and language loss is already rampant, these measures only exacerbate it, and it becomes especially detrimental to heritage language learners of the region. See Scorcia Pacheco, Carmella, *Feminine-Voiced Balladry of New Mexico* (2023: 25).

themselves known and distinguishing the performance into one of embodiment. Through this project, embodied performance of “La finada Paula Ángel” and “La indita de Juliana Ortega” is cultural agency. Performers and participants are encased within the ballad tradition that hold vital lifelines into the US Southwest borderlands of New Mexico.

Future Studies

For future study, an ethnographic analysis geared at receiving participant and audience feedback of “La finada Paula Ángel,” “La indita de Juliana Ortega,” and “La cautiva Marcelina” will be valuable to show somatic resonances. The study will invite active participants to process the musicality and textuality of the pieces sensorially which will contribute to a greater understanding of how *nuevomexicana* histories are collectively reimagined.

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