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***#QuédateEnCasa y Huapango!* Diasporic Community and Musical Wellbeing in Streamed Live Performances of Son Huasteco music**

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Abstract

This article is an examination of the varied ways in which online music performances and gatherings via YouTube livestreams served as foundational affective spaces in the son huasteco community's response to the coronavirus crisis. Son huasteco is a folk music tradition from the Huasteca, a geo-cultural region spanning the intersection of six states in central Mexico. *Huapango* is the term used to describe the style's musical repertory as well as the communal and competitive events at which it is performed. Through interviews and the analysis of audio, video, and chatroom text, this study describes and theorizes the emergent social infrastructure of the *cyber-Huasteca* and the live-streamed virtual huapangos around which this technologically-mediated community is oriented. This study demonstrates how these virtual spaces played an important role in the maintenance of emotional and social wellbeing at a time of collective duress, while also serving as a platform for discussion, information-sharing, and norm-setting in the face of a global health crisis.

Focusing on the early pandemic period between March and August, 2020, this study examines both highly-organized digital huapango events as well as more quotidian nightly livestreams where the chat function serves as a community forum. These regularized events have sustained Huastecan musical culture while traditional huapangos became untenable due to social distancing, and have opened new avenues for transnational participation across the diaspora. This study further reveals how the digital infrastructure created before the pandemic to fulfill the emotional wellbeing needs of the diaspora readily scaled to meet the challenges of the coronavirus moment and the needs for connection among the wider *huapanguero* community. This trajectory is highlighted through a close study of YouTube channel GavBroadcast and its development into a popular epicenter of digital huapango culture. Drawing from the literature on music and wellbeing, DIY archiving, participatory media platforms, and music, affect, and diaspora, this study contextualizes observations of a novel and emergent digital habitat within larger phenomena at the nexus of pandemic, technology, society, and culture.

1. Introduction

In August 2020, in the sixth month of the coronavirus pandemic, Elena Huerta¹ welcomed others to ‘come and dance’ (‘pasen a zapatear’) at a virtual huapango, an online livestream of Mexican folk music (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAi-ND2yi7I> Accessed 13 August 2020). The content being streamed at this gathering, as in numerous other events branded with the ‘#QuédateEnCasa’ (stay home) hashtag, featured various trios of musicians - a violinist backed by two players of guitar-like instruments featuring ornate mother-of-pearl inlays. This virtual huapango, a queued series of music videos originally recorded by a DIY (do-it-yourself) community archivist, presented a series of contrasts: flashy, pristine cowboy hats above sweat-soiled work shirts, street musicians followed by polished festival performances, schoolboys backing up wizened old violinists, all female bands, and the occasional cumbia or ranchera rearranged for the trio format. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this event was the palpable sense of closeness among a large group of viewers who, in spite of remaining individually quarantined and sheltered-in-place, inexplicably found a way to maintain a sense of togetherness.

As had become the pandemic era standard, over the course of this evening several hundred people from Mexico, the U.S., Costa Rica, Spain, and other locales tuned in for music, mutual support and conviviality, ‘virtual hugs,’ and shouts of excitement (stylized as ‘aaaajjuuuuuuu’ and ‘juuupa!!!’). There were invitations to drink beer, pulque, and mezcal, and no small amount of teasing, jokes, and flirting. By midnight Mexico City time, three hours into the regularized twelve hour broadcast, 486 watchers remained subsumed in the constant stream of music, dance, and fellowship. As the songs changed every few minutes, people asked others to dance (‘Alright Florentino, let’s dance this piece, thanks!’). People joked around with ‘hand washing’ and ‘coughing into elbow’ emojis. There were colloquial ‘shout outs’ to people, towns of origin, and places of current habitation, and an overall easing into the communitarian familiarity of the huapango itself. People noted who was present and who ‘did not arrive’. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAi-ND2yi7I> Accessed 13 August 2020] Virtual huapangos such as the one described served to maintain cohesion across a diaspora fractured by distance and threatened by a global health crisis, rendering another night in self-isolation more bearable through the promise of cyber-social connection. Similar live huapango broadcasts have occurred almost nightly on multiple channels during the pandemic as a core community response to the multiple economic, social, and health crises wrought by the coronavirus.

This article examines the creative ways the Son Huasteco community quickly and creatively utilized participatory broadcasting and social media platforms to create digital spaces for cultural engagement and collective wellbeing in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic. Son Huasteco is a folk music tradition with Iberian and indigenous roots endemic to the Huasteca, a geo-cultural region in central Mexico. This article presents the discernible impact of music on wellbeing by theorizing the growth of the ‘Cyber-Huasteca’ as a timely mechanism for dealing with the emotional, social, and artistic needs of a community in diaspora during a crisis. This trajectory of digital community and wellbeing is highlighted through a study of YouTube channel GaVBroadcast and its development into a popular epicenter of digital huapango culture through nightly livestreams as well as structured events like the ‘Encuentro Virtual de Tríos Huastecos’ (Virtual Gathering of Huasteco Trios or EVTH), a virtual gathering and competition of Huastecan trios created in response to the pandemic. These emergent phenomena have sustained Huastecan musical culture at a time during which traditional huapangos are untenable due to social distancing and have opened new avenues for transnational participation across the diaspora. This article draws upon six months of participant-observation in #QuédateEnCasa events as well as remote interviews with pivotal content creators and community members to demonstrate how the Cyber-Huasteca’s digital infrastructure served as a mechanism for facilitating cultural connectedness and community wellbeing among a transnational affinity group during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ All names in the YouTube chat sessions described are utilized following the established approaches to ethical online ethnography for diasporic and other communities as discussed in Patterson (2018). Spelling, capitalization, and textual idiosyncrasies in quotations have been preserved from the original.

The coronavirus pandemic required people to stay at home, but a stroke of creativity was required to make staying home appealing and even rewarding and to transform casual digital spaces into reliable nodes of cultural solidarity and mutual support. #QuedateEnCasa, as a both marketing hashtag and signifier, began to be used by digital content creators to label virtual huapango events in the early, unnerving moments of the coronavirus pandemic. Staying at home was transformed into an enterprise that was both health preserving and culture supporting. Online events branded with #QuedateEnCasa fuse social, cultural, and symbolic capital into an enactment of ritualized wellbeing, as online spaces have been shown to serve as welcome spaces of asylum for social experience (DeNora, 2013). #QuedateEnCasa livestreams reveal that the social pull is immediate and, for the content moderators, musicians, and many of the regular livestream attendees, all-encompassing and deeply rewarding. Huapangos in the Cyber-Huasteca resonate with individuals in the diaspora who, in spite of their physical separation from their communities of origin, are empowered by the internet to participate in virtual spaces that replicate the cultural objects and gestures of home. Participants often spend hours every day engaged within these digital spaces, listening to the music and connecting with others. In addition, these spaces have served as powerful incubators for new sets of norms that link social distancing and sanitary precautions to cultural products, all under the banner of community wellbeing.

In many significant ways, the digital cultural infrastructure of the Son Huasteco diaspora has been preparing for the coronavirus pandemic in ways that proved to be remarkably clairvoyant, appealing, and resilient since mid-March, 2020. Before Covid, the Huastecan diaspora was already well served by a robust socio-technological infrastructure of DIY activists and archivists, enthusiasts, and entrepreneurs. By instrumentalizing participatory media platforms such as YouTube, these content creators built a functional and accessible space to foster communal wellbeing and human interaction on the basis of a shared affinity and cultural reaffirmation. This unique digital infrastructure, initially created before the pandemic to meet the emotional wellbeing of the Son Huasteco diaspora, readily scaled to meet the challenges of the coronavirus moment and the needs for connection among the wider huapanguero community.

2. Para Hablar de la Huasteca: Defining the Huapango and its Homeland

'Huapango is my passion,' Ana Lilia Cayetano exclaimed, capturing a typical feeling in a Cyber-Huasteca event called 'Ahora escuchemos Huapangos!' ('Now, let's listen to Huapangos!') (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8GilnoYAn8>, accessed 23 August 2020). This study focuses on the cultural affinity group defined by such identification with Son Huasteco and the huapango.

Son Huasteco is almost always played in a trio format, featuring a violin, a small lute called a jarana, and a bass lute called a quinta huapanguera. In between expressive violin passages, the musicians exchange verses, which are frequently articulated in a yodel-like falsetto. Stanzas are either drawn from a historical canon of couplets or situationally improvised while remaining topical to the theme of the particular *son* being played. This spontaneous poetry, known as *trova*, has evolved to accommodate versecraft in various local indigenous languages as well as in Spanish. Another core facet of the Son Huasteco is its zapateado, a type of partnered percussive dance executed atop a raised wooden platform (*tarima*) that both responds to and underlies the trio's live performance. The term huapango is alternatively used to describe the son huasteco repertory as well as the event at which it is executed.

The Huasteca region, which lays claim to segments of at least six states without constituting a demographic or geographical majority within any, has frequently been bounded more by the extent of its cultural affinity in musical, culinary, ritualistic, and linguistic realms than by its geography or by any one specific political or social hegemon. Perhaps the most befitting, if still nebulous, definition of the Huasteca is 'a multiethnic system whose heterogeneity is its defining feature', which earns its 'seal of identity' through being 'identified as the land of the son, the huapango, and the zacahuil (an enormous tamale endemic to the region), by its own inhabitants' (Bonilla Burgos, 2013, 90-91).

Huapangos are the communal gatherings at which people gather to participate in Huastecan culture. Typically organized in commemoration of a noteworthy community event such as a wedding, birthday, or religious feast day, huapangos range from celebrations held in private residences to massive, semi-commercialized festivals with international draw. The cyber-Huasteca recreates these axial events on a digital platform. While the chatroom can never fully replace the tarima, the spaces of virtual huapango of the Huastecan community nonetheless serve community needs for closeness and mutual aid. The social value placed on such spaces is necessarily amplified in moments of isolation, crisis, and collective anxiety.

The content of the Cyber-Huasteca's chatrooms during the covid era signal this social function in particular ways through 'narratives of belonging in digital diasporic contexts' which 'are highly condensed discourse structures that encode speakers' attitude toward place and the diasporic experience.' This discourse covers the diasporic situation that arises from self-positioning and 'nostalgia for the homeland to idealizations' of the culture (Heyd, 2016, 288). As hundreds of people gather nightly for digital broadcasts, the chats become closer and more intimate, more coherently discursively framed with earlier chats, resulting in a discernible matrix of embedded community, identity, and wellbeing connections that grow richer over time.

The cyber-Huasteca relies upon the existing participatory culture fundamentals of huapangos. Virtual huapangos of the covid era recapitulate the 'cultural politics of representations of place, space and landscape' (Rose, 2016, 36) found in traditional events. There is a large literature on diaspora and authenticity examining how the seemingly eternal and traditional are in fact quite fluid and fungible in practice (Bryce, Murdy and Alexander, 2017; Scully, 2013). Yeh argues that 'in the USA staged performances of 'traditional culture' are fraught spaces of encounter of different habitus.' (Yeh, 2016, 659). Fosler-Lussier observes that 'in the postcolonial world people's experiences are neither 'all modern 'or' all traditional': most lives encompass some combination of the two... The many people who live in that 'in between 'or mixed state use music to define and express the complexity of their situations.' (2020, 205). The virtual huapangos manage to elide some of this fraughtness in their fostering of communal space for cultural celebration and wellbeing during the pandemic. Tradition, especially related to musical traditions and regional cultures reimagined through digital networks, has been severed from place (Brinkerhoff, 2009). 'Virtual community has the potential of not only linking people but also bonding them and creating emotional ties' (Hiller and Franz, 2004, 731). Music making and consumption help to reinforce a sense of identity, generate both individual and group sense of agency, allows for difficult subjects to be culturally adjudicated, and generate feelings of pride, pleasure, and, crucially, connection.

3. Virtual Huapango, Wellbeing, and Digital Diaspora

On August 23, 2020, eight hours into a Sunday evening huapango broadcast, Jose Osorio, a very frequent participant, wrote in the chat, 'Keep dancing huapangos ... they are an anti-covid remedy!' ('sigan bailando huapangos....son remedio anti covid!'). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8GilnoYAn8>, accessed 23 August 2020). Indeed, #QuedateEnCasa huapangos are fundamentally designed in novel and highly calibrated ways to address the needs of community wellbeing. Virtual huapangos are framed as emotionally liberatory spaces in which staying safe from the virus and being socially responsible also provide emotionally resonant experience. The cyber-Huasteca provides a new mediated experience via the participatory culture of YouTube similar to what Marino termed the 'transconnective habitus, a connective and connected transnational everyday reality' fostered by new communication technologies. (Marino, 2019, 789). This approach, which focuses on digital connectivity overall, can readily be applied to the virtual huapango and Huasteca diaspora in the time of covid as it has to other contexts (Nedelcu, 2012; Diminescu, 2008). Music is especially important for social coherence and wellbeing in diaspora communities, where it 'can function as a sort of social 'glue' connecting diasporic communities widely dispersed around the globe' and particularly the ways it 'make[s] the experience of diasporic belonging one that is deeply pleasurable in itself and socially reassuring' (Salomon, 2015, 205-6).

It is worth noting that these digital and transnational connections are dependent upon access to communication technologies that are widespread, but far from ubiquitous. Certainly the deep connections being forged in the cyber-Huasteca could be contrasted on local scales with the development of feelings of marginalization or exclusion among individuals without access to, or the means of obtaining, virtual connectivity. This interesting juxtaposition in access and experience certainly could inform a new comparative study based on future digital and traditional ethnographic fieldwork.

Music has a particularly strong impact on the wellbeing of diasporic communities. It enhances community connections through shared experience and ‘avenues for participants to express and consolidate their own cultural identity’ (Kreutz, 2014; Millar and Warwick, 2019, 76; Weston and Lenette, 2016). As the extensive literature on music and wellbeing demonstrates, both music listening and music making correlate very highly with direct and positive physiological and psychological health benefits (Hallam, et al, 2012; Morinville, Miranda, and Gaudreau, 2013; Vastfjall, Juslin, and Hartig, 2012). This includes music- and dance-related enhancements to overall emotional health including feelings of happiness, mood elevation, stress reduction, strengthened interpersonal relationships and connections, and other positive outcomes reflected in individual and group wellbeing (Saarikallio, 2010; Koch, et al, 2014; Weinberg and Joseph, 2017; MacDonald et al. 2012). Music experiences in a festival setting have pronounced impact on wellbeing (Packer and Ballantyne, 2011). Many of these wellbeing outcomes have been well documented with quantitative measures, but work remains to be done in evaluating wellbeing with qualitative measures as well. As Weinberg and Joseph argue, it is the social connectivity of music that yields the most measurable positive outcome of wellbeing. ‘The emotional regulation feature of music may be best understood through the social connections it facilitates. The communal interaction and social medium may offer people a sense of purpose and belonging’ (Weinberg and Joseph, 2017, 265).

Cyber-Huastecan spaces demonstrate the social and wellbeing values of communication technology in diaspora. Recent works has explored migrant use of a variety of new communication technologies to respond to the challenges of maintaining meaningful transnational connections (Madianou and Miller, 2012). These new means can be constructed in ‘transconnective space’ for diasporic communities (Marino, 2019, 788). These transconnective spaces are precisely where the huapango becomes as an embodiment and enactment of Huasteca culture.

4. Cultural and Commercial Spatiality of YouTube as Site and Space

YouTube is the premier digital space for participatory cultural production and its role in producing engagement and fostering wellbeing in musical communities among musicians, enthusiasts, and dancers. Its outsized role during the covid era is profound and only beginning to be understood. YouTube is of immense and growing importance to participatory and global DIY culture and particularly to documentation of singular musical events and traditions. YouTube ‘creates spaces for engagement and community-formation’ with ‘spillover into other sites of everyday culture, meaning, identity, and practice.’ This ‘participatory turn’ has consequently transformed ‘the relationship between the individual and a global, culturally diverse idea of community’ (Burgess and Green, 2018, 80, 125). Scholars of the connections between virtual communities and online communities built around social media platforms have stressed connections to the textures of existing communities. ‘What the Internet does not do is create a community if there are no pre-existing common interests’ (Waldron, 2012, 91). This thrusts the locus of analysis on the connections between the flourishing real and virtual communities, or what can be considered ‘overlapping and integrated communities of practice’ (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009; Waldron, 2012).

Through enabling real-time interactions among viewers, promoters, and performers, Cyber-Huasteca livestreams have exhibited three unique characteristics that define their central role in sustaining music, culture, and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, live-streaming allows for individuals who identify with Huastecan culture to engage with fellow participants regardless of their

distance from the site of production. Second, social media transmissions challenge the assumed power differentials between active producer and spectatorial consumer to create new, dynamic ecosystems of power and consumption. Third, social media broadcasting allows for expressions of cultural identity, musical participation, and mutual aid to be tethered to specific initiatives, such as information-sharing and fundraising. These are standard functions of a self-supporting community in diaspora rendered especially essential in periods of crisis.

YouTube has functioned ‘as an unfiltered, bottom-up cultural archive.’ (Burgess and Green, 2018, 137). Many of these DIY efforts start as fan culture but as they transform into profitable enterprise even as the organizers develop significant cultural cache- [,] DIY archivists become ‘arbiters of taste,’...[and] organize the process of valuation and determine who shall have influence within the field and who will not.’ (Gracy, 2007; Arriaga and Levina, 2014). Posting, watching, and commenting on YouTube videos explicitly ‘signal a commitment to the maintenance of social relationships.’ (Lingel and Naaman, 2011). The platform’s role in facilitating and influencing diasporic cultural developments has been extensively studied. For example, YouTube videos evoke embodied nostalgia and affective belonging in Moroccan-Dutch youth (Leurs, 2015) and Hmong musician-activists instrumentalize YouTube to facilitate offline community making in diaspora (Ó Briain, 2015). In this way, YouTube’s ability to socially consolidate diasporas generates a recreative and relatively osmotic space. Its modes of cultural production not only self-reproduce, but also catalyze new possibilities for in-person engagement.

The already intricate connections between real and virtual participatory social media worlds have been rendered significantly more complex in a diaspora in a time of pandemic-induced isolation. The diaspora poses a unique set of constraints and character to the community, spanning time and space and border and including a sense of deterritorialization which in fact intensifies the pursuit of cultural markers and connectivity. Others have considered the cadences and meanings of these identity and culture sustaining transnational music making events (Chavez, 2017). The Covid moment has exposed a need for a linked but re-theorized approach to studying transnational musicking. The unprecedented experience of sheltering in place during a social media-saturated era has fostered emergent virtual forms of community gathering. It has also produced an existential threat to the musicians who ordinarily have sustained cultures in physical spaces – dances in the place of origin and regular reenactment of diasporic culture in physical huapangos. It is this search for connection, and for work, in an evermore connected world that lends such power to the virtual communities of the cyber-Huasteca.

5. GaVBroadcast and the Formation of Cyber-Huasteca Prior to Covid

When Gabino ‘Gabo’ Vera uploaded the first video to his account ‘GaVBroadcast’ in January of 2007, YouTube was still far from achieving the cultural and economic influence that it holds today, and the channel was a side project. Vera was raised in Santa Maria Ixcatepec, a town in the Huasteca Baja region of Veracruz, and describes himself as ‘a lover of music since early childhood.’ In 2000, Vera moved to Mexico City to study engineering at the Instituto Politécnico Nacional in Mexico City, where he specialized in communications technology. By the time he began uploading videos to YouTube, Vera was working for Huawei Mexico as a telecommunications engineer. He began recording Son Huasteco musicians, starting with a group of elders, Los Hermanos Gabriel. ‘I also filmed the children in their families, who now are grown and have their own trio, called Los Yolpakis. Initially, it was all very local content, just me recording my friends.’ (Interview, 19 June 2020).

Over the following several years, Vera continued to film and upload content on an irregular schedule, sharing videos of musicians he encountered either locally or while traveling for work. ‘In those years I was working a lot, and uploading when I felt like it, and most was honestly of very low quality. But I was always happy to record groups, and when I went back to the Huasteca every few months I would arrange little tours.’ Vera continued living and working in Mexico City, and while his YouTube presence remained sparse, he stayed in contact with various trios from his home region. ‘I used to announce to my friends that I would be making my rounds, and people would invite me to film their trios.’ (Interview, 19 June 2020).

This effort uploading videos paid off by 2013, when GaVBroadcast reached YouTube's requirements for monetization. YouTube monetization entails the insertion of advertisements before or alongside user-generated videos, for which the content creator is compensated based on view counts. After deciding to monetize, GaVBroadcast's output and viewer base entered into a phase of even more rapid growth. Over the ensuing few years, Vera became an increasingly recognizable figure at events throughout the Huasteca and was increasingly contacted by groups who wanted to be filmed. 'My original intention was just to have this channel as a personal project, but there came a point when I realized that it meant a lot to so many people,' Vera recalls. 'After monetizing, and realizing that it had taken off, hearing people's positive feedback and noticing my views increasing, I realized that this had become something bigger than what I had expected.' (Interview, 19 June 2020).

By 2017, Vera felt that he had sufficient revenue from GaVBroadcast to wholly dedicate himself to the channel. He left a position at Televisa to become a full-time social media content creator. During this era, Vera released what would become GaVBroadcast's most viewed content. As of July 2020, the channel's three most watched videos - 'Trio Eco Potosino - El Querreque' (6.2 million views), 'Francesa bailando el Son Solito en Xilitla SLP' (6.1 million views), and 'Zapateando el Querreque en el Metro de la Ciudad de Mexico' (5.2 million views) - were all uploaded in late 2017. The content of these three videos sheds light on Vera's inclusive vision for the channel. It is noteworthy that two of the three videos were recorded outside of the geographical Huasteca (the first in San Luis Potosi City and the third in Mexico City), and that the one video recorded in the Huasteca (the third, in Xilitla, San Luis Potosi) explicitly featured an ethnocultural outsider. This was the 'French woman,'⁷ as she is described, embodying a quintessentially Huastecan role - the 'zapateadora' - in a town with deep-seeded Huastecan identity. This open attitude would come to foreshadow the role that participants in diaspora would eventually play in the wider digital community facilitated by GaVBroadcast and other cyber-Huasteca sites. A large number of the videos are of Son Huasteco trios playing in zocalo squares in small towns, markets, and in other public spaces in the Huasteca region. The inclusion of performances in vernacular settings evokes the emotional wellbeing produced by street musicians who 'produce a sense of that place, bringing with it a familiarity and sense of belonging.' (Simpson, 2016, 161).

At the same time, Vera began experimenting with what would become his most successful and dynamic format: the livestream. YouTube began experimenting with streaming as early as 2008, but most of these initial broadcasts exclusively featured professional producers with mass followings. By 2013, YouTube began to expand streaming capabilities to user-generated content creators, and within four years streaming had been fully integrated into YouTube's desktop and mobile platforms. GaVBroadcast's first three live streams were transmitted in late 2017; all are shorter than 20 minutes and are candid transmissions of outdoor performances. Upon earning his 100,000th subscriber, Vera transmitted the first in what would become a series of live-in-studio performances. The two and a half-hour long transmission from 25 October 2018 features Trio Los Hidalguenses from Pachuca, Hidalgo, and was transmitted simultaneously on YouTube and Facebook Live. In this first transmission, the audio-video quality is noticeably low-resolution, but the trio, who are in high demand at events across the Huasteca, presented naturally and charismatically in front of the camera. In this transmission, the burgeoning importance of the chat function embedded in streaming platforms became clear. Starting a pattern which continues into the covid era, Vera acknowledged viewers across the Huasteca diaspora who were actively participating in the chat after the trio performed their first selection: 'Beginning with those who write us in YouTube, to Georgina Zuniga, who is in the United States; to Javier Martinez, from Odessa, Texas,' he summarized. 'On Facebook, there is a lone wolf who says 'I like the Huapangos,' Hever Hasan (sic), regards from Lukfin, Texas. Juan Fernandez, from Monterrey, and Manu Perez, who is also watching on YouTube.' The trio's jarana player exclaimed in response 'Wow! Well, greetings to all of you folks, and what a pleasure to accompany you all on this beautiful afternoon.' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20AtIrpXjA&t=255s>, accessed 25 July 2020).

During the year before the pandemic, regular livestreams would become a defining characteristic of both GaVBroadcast and other popular Huasteca-oriented YouTube Channels like QuerrequeFilms, which boasts over 75,000 subscribers as of August 2020, and Yo Soy Coxcatlan (<https://www.youtube.com/user/yosoycoxcatlan>, accessed 30 August 2020), which began live-streaming walkthroughs of popular markets in the Aquismon region of San Luis Potosi in the midst of the pandemic. Already acutely aware of the connective potentialities of the livestream, Vera was already ideally positioned to benefit from the format's newfound centrality as a site of cultural production and social connection in the coming pandemic. In 2019, he traveled extensively throughout the Huasteca to record and transmit performances by trios and regional wind bands. Vera played an important educational role by acculturating performers into the digital space who had limited prior experience with being recorded and broadcasted online. 'I only record trios who ask me, but everybody reacts to the camera differently. Some adapt quickly and are quite natural, while others seem less comfortable at first. It helps to encourage them from behind the camera, to give them some of the feedback that they're getting in the chat.' Another aspect of his involvement is as intermediary between the trios and the global audience he commands via YouTube by encouraging the groups to act natural and feel at ease. 'Like, if a close friend or relative is watching, or if someone from another trio sends a supportive comment, sometimes getting that kind of [affirmative] response helps to animate the musicians.' (Interview, 2 July 2020).

In addition to assisting musicians in navigating the novel mechanics of digital performativity, Vera also trains them in the technical aspects of recording and promoting their own content. This ranges from showing groups how to create and manage a YouTube channel of their own [.] to teaching trios in geographically-remote areas how to record and transmit quality content in the absence of adequate equipment or telecommunications infrastructure:

A lot of these musicians live up in the mountains in tiny towns where there is no broadband, no wi-fi, and cellular data is 2G at best. Many want to record promotional videos on their own, but they have limited access [to equipment and internet]. So I try to teach them how to use a cell phone camera to record a video of passable quality, which includes making sure that you have a good lighting angle, even if you're using natural light, and that you make sure that the built-in microphone is facing the trio and protected from the wind. (Interview, 2 July 2020).

Vera, like most Huastecan content creators, often includes musicians' contact information, typically a phone number, so that they can be contacted by viewers who may be interested in hiring a local group. In this way, the network being sewn is economically as well as socially beneficial to music-makers.

In January of 2019, GaVBroadcast began experimenting with yet another livestream format which came to constitute part of the crucial infrastructure utilized during the pandemic, dubbed 'Tardes de Huapangos.' Rather than featuring performances in real-time, these streams simply showcase a looped reel of pre-recorded videos from the channel's history. The strength of this particular format is YouTube's built-in chat feature, which allows viewers to communicate with one another and with channel administrators while the videos streamed. By early 2020, these transmissions and chats had cultivated a dedicated, regularized following of viewers, some of whom became involved in the functional operation of the channel. The chat is facilitated, and lightly governed by, as Vera notes, 'a particular group of people, many of whom are older women, who have been consistently tuning into these evenings of huapango since the beginning. I have come to trust in them... they help me out in regulating the chat.' This group of participants helps keep the chats polite and welcoming for all current and future visitors while facilitating, and even lightly policing, the space. 'If someone is posting spam or acting out, they inform me, and we figure out ways to address the issue. Aside from that, they sometimes just use it to check in on one another, talk about their problems, and share jokes.' (Interview, 19 June 2020). The age range, gender balance and guidance in huapango chats are notable. Scholars studying YouTube comments have concluded that commentators in the examined Latin American music videos were largely (72.2%) male, and generally young (media age of 25) (Thelwall, Sud, and Vis, 2012, 626). But these broadly

observed statistics are interestingly not reflected in the GaVBroadcast chats, where women are equally represented in the conversation and often times the chat itself is run by women. YouTube comments can be, and often are, anonymous, which makes noteworthy the choices of many in the GaVBroadcast to go by their real names. This might have an impact on the gender balancing apparent in the huapango chats. The auto-regulatory nature of the chats on GaVBroadcast live streams is not only social, but technical. For example, regular attendees are quick to remind new viewers to never post more than three successive emojis in their messages and to not post links to other webpages, as these can result in YouTube's security algorithms marking their account as spam. The authors of this study attempted to contact individuals in this community of informal moderators, but were unable to secure interviews at the time of writing.

While Son Huasteco is a deeply place-based music, the virtual citizenry of the Cyber-Huasteca, as judged by the regular participant base in GaVBroadcast chatrooms, comprises a wide diaspora including individuals living in the geographical Huasteca: Huastecan emigrates to Mexico City, Monterrey, Playa del Carmen, and cities throughout the United States, and non-Huastecan participants from across Mexico, the United States, Latin America, and Europe who are curious about the music and the community it cultivates. 'Especially since quarantine began, I have been seeing lots of hits from locations outside of Mexico, whether they're Mexican citizens who had to leave home to work, or people born in the United States with Huastecan roots, or sometimes complete foreigners who just like the music.' (Interview, 19 June 2020).

Vera's core role within the wider huapango community during this time period evolved from that of content producer to community catalyst. By incubating an outlet that sustains the relationships among Huastecan cultural affiliates beyond the boundaries of the physical huapango, GaVBroadcast helped to produce a virtual Huastecan environment that has proven itself capable of weathering the most severe challenge to global human concrescence in recent memory: the COVID-19 pandemic. This virtual space both perpetuates Huastecan culture and provides opportunities for its adherents to emotionally and financially support each other in the midst of a deep recession and a global health crisis.

6. Testing the Cyber-Huasteca: Virtual Huapangos of the Covid Era

One of the earliest and most ambitious expressions of a participatory Huastecan digital space at the start of the coronavirus pandemic was the Encuentro Virtual de Tríos Huastecos hosted by GaVBroadcast. On March 18, 2020, Vera uploaded a video announcing and explaining the purpose of the EVTH:

'My friends, good afternoon, I hope you are well. As you already know, over the last few days, various huapango contests have been cancelled... Yesterday I was asking around on Facebook to see if any trios wanted to participate in some sort of online confrontation. It won't be a *contest* because we don't have a panel, but we figure that we'll judge by the number of likes received on social media, like YouTube and Facebook... Its purpose is to showcase new talents in Huastecan music and to promote the participants, and also to help us so that our time spent at home might be more enjoyable... we are all doing the right thing by staying at home, so let's enjoy some huapangos.' (<https://youtu.be/KfouaVH5a3I>, accessed 23 August 2021)

The concept was straightforward: trios would record their performances and submit them to GaVBroadcast, who would upload and tag videos with 'EVTH.' At the outset, three age classes were established, and each assigned a specific son of representative difficulty that would serve as the benchmark of their performance. Similarly, each age class had a time window during which to submit their performances to GaVBroadcast for upload. Cash awards were promised to the winners of each age class. 'Initially, I expected maybe twenty trios to participate,' Vera states. 'By the end of the submission window, in early April, 77 trios had submitted videos. It was a really surprising response.' (Interview, June 19, 2020). Vera's decision to actively pursue digital alternatives at this early stage of the pandemic

demonstrates an acute foresight of coming changes to the social landscape. For comparison, Mexico's Ministry of Culture launched its digital arts initiative 'Contigo en la Distancia' on 25 March 2020, a week after the EVTH began accepting submissions.

Table 1. Rules for Encuentro Virtual de Tríos Huastecos

	Infantil (under 14 y/o)	Juvenil (14 - 21 y/o)	Adulto (21 + y/o)
Required son	El Caballito	El Cielito Lindo	El Fandanguito
Cash award (\$mxn)	\$2,000	\$4,000	\$6,000
# of submissions	12	30	35
Submission Window	3/20 - 3/25	3/26-3/31	4/1 - 4/6
Cutoff for likes	3/27, 1pm CST	4/2, 1pm CST	4/8, 1pm CST
Winning Trio Name - Winning Trio Hometown	Trio Las Amapolas - Tampico, Tamaulipas	Trio Estrellas Huastecas - Panuco, Veracruz	Trio Descendencia Huasteca - Coyutla, Veracruz

In the months after the EVTH, GaVBroadcast saw its greatest increase in both views and subscriptions since the channel's inception. In February of 2020, the channel gained roughly 4,000 new subscribers, and its videos were viewed approximately 2.6 million times. Three months later in May, the channel gained roughly 13,000 new subscribers and its videos reached 5.9 million views. Subscriptions to the channel ballooned, with more than forty thousand subscribers during the brief period of this study, to an eye-opening 238,000 by August 31, 2020. Vera credits the EVTH, as well as the general quarantine conditions, with this exponential surge in popularity. 'At the beginning of 2020, I was already satisfied with our growth. We had been steadily gaining subscribers since 2018,' says Vera. 'And as soon as the quarantine began in earnest, we had an explosion of traffic, which I say was largely due to the EVTH, but I think it also had to do with the changing habits of people in the Republic (of Mexico). When you are at home all of the time, two things happen: you spend more time on the computer and you consume more content, but you also grow to miss the gatherings and huapangos.' (Interview, 19 June 2020). The numbers only tell part of the story, as obvious commitment and enthusiasm from the Huastecan diaspora rapidly pushed the channel into an essential aspect of daily life. Given the immediate and enormous embrace of #QuedateEnCasa by a growing audience, it is clear that the event struck a deep need for connection during the pandemic.

The earliest use of the tag #QuedateEnCasa in conjunction with a Son Huasteco trio streaming on YouTube came early in the pandemic. On 31 March 2020, an organization called Difusión Huasteca, which is dedicated broadly to documenting and celebrating the cultural diversity of Mexico and not specifically focused on the music, featured a short covid-related son followed by a plea to stay home and remain healthy (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE52sO28nN8>, accessed 18 August 2020). Difusión Huasteca released another short didactic-oriented Son Huasteco video labeled #QuedateEnCasa on April 5, 2020 of Trío Lucero Huasteco from Tantoyuca, Veracruz, which was viewed a modest 240 times (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcJwx6DpoM>, accessed 18 August 2020).

Figure 1. *Monthly gained views and subscribers for GaVBroadcast, 11/17 - 7/20*
 Source: <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/GaVBroadcast>, accessed 31 August 2020



GaVbroadcast also slowly began to gear his broadcast to servicing the needs of wellbeing for those in quarantine across the Huasteca diaspora. On 18 April 2020, GaVbroadcast streamed ‘#QuedateEnCasa y Escucha Huapangos Huastecos,’ (‘stay home and listen to huapangos Huastecos’ which lasted two hours and had 6383 views (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYO-a_B16dk, accessed 18 August 2020). Six days later, GaVbroadcast streamed ‘#QuedateEnCasa y Escucha Huapangos Huastecos,’ which lasted 85 minutes and had 7,066 views (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nv2piW3H7E&t=45s>, accessed 18 August 2020).

Since that time, the regular #QuedateEnCasa huapangos have continued to increase in frequency and length. By the end of August, 2020, streams of queued videos occurred nightly for 12 hours on both GaVBroadcast, and Querreque Films on YouTube. It is therefore possible to be in contact with the Huastecan virtual community via music and chat for most of each day and night, forming a critical basis of community support and connection.

In August [5] 2020, QuerrequeFilms [5] ran a streaming event called ‘Huapanguitos en un domingo de cuarentena,’ or ‘dance songs for a Sunday in the quarantine.’ By midnight, it had streamed videos of groups playing Son Huasteco for a continuous 10 hours. This live stream, like that on GaVBroadcast, was a compilation of selected videos from the channel stitched into a seamless whole to create a space of fellowship and connection for the listeners. Roberto Tort exclaimed, ‘the huapangos are beautiful!!!’ (‘Bonitos los huapangos!!!’). Elena Reyes was happy to check in late at night to hear ‘another of my favorite videos, so that I go to sleep happy’. As on GaVBroadcast, this virtual performance and community space in the QuerrequeFilms chat formed an important and emotionally resonant one at this moment when people sheltered at home and all events and gatherings had been abruptly stopped. ‘Good evening Huapango family’ was a common sentiment. In the chat room, many listeners expressed longing for the beloved in-person gathering where the music is played, called *encuentros*. ‘The *encuentros* are great experiences, and soon we will return to them,’ promised Santiago Pérez Gómez, an organizer from the annual and deeply beloved Encuentro de Huapango in Amatlán, Veracruz, who had logged onto the stream to share updates regarding the popular festival’s transition to a digital format.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-73LJqZBqU>, accessed 13 August 2020). In the meantime, there were huapangos in the Cyber-Huasteca to fill the void.

#QuedateEnCasa and other huapango events on participatory streaming sites virtually recreate and evoke the sonic, spatial, and visceral placemaking found across the Huasteca both in the distinctive region itself and in its expansive diaspora in the United States. A Sunday livestream on GaVBroadcast had viewers from Puebla, Veracruz, Hidalgo, Tamaulipas, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, as well as Louisiana, Arizona, California, and North Carolina in the United States. ‘Those heels are making a great ruckus’ Tacho Mendez wrote in a live chat, commenting on the dancing. Elías Rosas, a regular, agreed. ‘very good Zapateado rhythm’. Florencia Fèlix was in and out of the huapango during the night. ‘Elías,’ he said, directed to one of the moderator, ‘I was HERE a few hours ago. VERY nice atmosphere you all have HERE,’ followed by two clapping emojis. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kqs6L3Ty6Zs>, accessed 6 September 2020).

The participatory digital community created at cyber-Huasteca huapangos by musicians, dancers, enthusiasts, and curators firmly reasserts the Huasteca itself in new spatial ways of great utility to the wellbeing of diasporic populations overall, and especially in the new covid era. At a Sunday night stream titled ‘Huapangos to end the week!’ Agustin Santos directly thanked Vera for his service to the community: ‘Greetings my friend Gabo, thank you for the opportunity you give us to listen to our Huastecan music’. Vera interjected in the conversation numerous times, greeting friends and extending gratitude. Saul Ortega thought of this livestream as a great way to start a new week, In the chat he wrote: ‘There is nothing better than starting the week with some huapangazos [sic]!’ And he thought online huapangos were not a bad option. They were possibly better, in fact, than some in person events in September since ‘during the national month, some huapangazos [sic] aren’t befitting.’ And at streamed huapangos, José Osorio pointed out, you have ‘huge huapangos and no bullets!’ Yes, agreed Catalino Santes, there were only ‘big heels and not bullets.’ As the hours flowed by in the huapango, people continued to joke, chide each other, talk of the comfort foods of home, weather, relationships, and cover a wide array of other concerns. Jorge Albert Garces M. told the chat ‘I have a craving for pemoles’. He wondered if anyone was familiar with them. Some agreed about the need to eat pemoles together with coffee. Others had never heard of them, nor knew what they were. Garces M. told the chat, pemoles ‘are like donuts but made of corn, as if they were *polvorones* (tea biscuits). They are known in the north of Veracruz and south of Tamaulipas’. The chat flowed on, seemingly no topic too small, too intimate, or too obscure. Martin Sanchez finally signed off with a wistful, ‘I was glad to greet you, raza Huasteca [my people of the Huasteca], but I have to go to sleep because tomorrow there is a lot to do.’ Others understood that demands of life. Olga Mayorgaaa, ‘Fine, but we have to consider work a blessing, friend, because there are people who don’t have it’. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kqs6L3Ty6Zs>, accessed 6 September 2020).

The #QuedateEnCasa movement deftly met the forced transformations and imperatives of the covid era by fostering a new presentational and participatory style for cyber-Huasteca. The varied, streaming 12-hour huapangos, created to serve a homebound audience seeking communion and emotional release, provoked a new style of involvement. Livestreams are ‘a cultural phenomenon interesting for its technological newness, but also because this technology carries with it implications for how we construct notions of participation, labor, authorship and agency.’ As Lingel and Naaman put it, those controlling ‘own the moment, own the documentation (Lingel and Naaman, 2011, 335). In the case of #QuedateEnCasa events and Cyber-Huasteca huapangos, the ownership was produced in the intimacies created in the fellowship arising at least as much from the non-musical aspects of life (drinking, eating, working, flirting, joking) as about the huapango proper. ‘In the YouTube universe the relation of producers, objects and recipients is re-balanced.... YouTube initializes the mediated presentation of self and everyday life in everyday life, meaning that a new ‘stage’ is established that serves as a tool to comment on what is presented on the various other ‘stage’ (of everyday life) (Jost, 2017[.], 59). Cyber-Huasteca offer a new reordering of the community of musicians, consumers, adherents, and others.

Huapango live streams during the covid pandemic allow immediacy in a community that lacks any access to an alternative. In a way, the gigless violinist, the committed fan, the devoted dancer, and the lonely quarantine shut-in are unable to look away. There were no alternatives in the shadow of the coronavirus. ‘I’ve seen these people in the chats more than I have seen my own friends and my closest friends in my neighborhood during the pandemic’ said one regular to #QuedateEnCasa (interview with Juanito S., 19 June 2020). People arrive (log in) early at the huapangos and stay late. ‘By the way...tomorrow is Monday,’ joked José Osorio at 1 a.m. in a Sunday evening huapango virtual chat, while it showed few signs of slowing. By the early morning hours, however, people began to sign off regretfully with mentions of having to be at work at 6 a.m. They promised to see each other the next day. ‘See you tomorrow - if there is a transmission around 8:00 p.m. I’ll watch.’ ‘Yes, see you tomorrow, if God wants it,’ concluded ever-present Elías Rosas. ‘Good night to all my friends in the chat’ wrote Vera. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAi-ND2yi7I> Accessed 13 August 2020].

In the cyber-Huasteca, virtual gatherings happen night after night, month after month, representing a truly transnational online community of mutual support and cultural sustenance in a moment of mass estrangement. Diasporic cultures contain embedded enthusiast communities, to be sure, but the pandemic experience emphasized the connections with place even as it enforced distance. Participants always ask where people are from, where they live now. They give recognition to their origins, shout-outs to home, and aspirational nods to where they currently live and why. ‘I’m a country boy’ (‘Soy de Rancho’) Jose Pena said at one chat. When pressed where specifically, because Rosaura Reyes Perez said ‘oh, but are you in the country (of Mexico) or not?’ Pena responded ‘Nuevo Leon, but living in Texas now’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8GilnoYAn8>, accessed 23 August 2020). A huapango on a Monday evening livestream in July 2020 provided Elías Guzman a chance for ‘dancing a huapango before going to sleep’. Elías Rosas, a channel moderator, agreed after a good four hours, ‘Well, let’s dance a moment, to remove stress, okay?’ Guzman agreed, ‘it was very good therapy, tocayo’, using an affectionate term for someone with the same name. To participant Rosa, ‘this music serves as a salve for the spirit’ (‘y sirva esta [sic] música como bálsamo para el ánimo’). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVYTtLeZn24> accessed, accessed 20 July 2020). Seven hours into a Monday night huapango a month later featured two hundred watchers heavily flirting with each other, exhorting each other to get excited with lines like ‘ala tarimaaaaaaa muchachas’ (‘get on the dance floor, girls!’). [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVYTtLeZn24>, accessed 17 August 2020].

The virtual huapangos and #QuedateEnCasa musical events are similar to the Italian familial gatherings handled over Skype that Marino explores. They are ‘used to recreate a sense of mediated co-presence among geographically separated individuals through the (re)-enactment of family rituals that were once performed in physical togetherness.’ (Marino, 2019, 789). The collective and individual search for wellbeing in the covid era has been facilitated precisely by the ‘mediated co-presence’ made possible by the virtual staging of established, beloved, familiar, meaningful, and accessible events like twelve[-]hour[-] long huapangos interwoven with constant interpersonal communication. Marino rightly places emotion at the center of ‘co-presence’ in the digital forms. ‘It is argued that this is fundamental for the wellbeing of the migrant: the family is a central node of security and stability, it represents what is ‘familiar’ and well known as opposed to the challenges of living in a new environment’ (Marino, 2019, 798). In earlier writings, Marino used the concept of ‘digital togetherness’ (Marino, 2015).

7. Conclusion

This study of Son Huasteco music community under covid contextualizes insights from several months of participant observation and in-depth interviews with a central content creator by way of the voluminous academic literature on music and wellbeing, DIY archivism, diaspora and cultural affect, and YouTube as a participatory media ecosystem. It charts how the efforts of core DIY activists and entrepreneurs to serve a community atomized in diaspora came to serve a community isolated in quarantine. This emergent digital infrastructure served to promote emotional wellbeing, maintain cultural

production, and generate revenue for artists and content creators. In the initial few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the son huasteco community embraced the virtual huapango as a singular space to find community and pursue the social cohesion and emotional support that was previously provided by in-person engagement. It is impossible to fully capture the character of these relentless twelve hour streams, with hundreds of people constantly making their presence and feelings known as the music continues. Simultaneously frivolous and significant, superficial and impactful, ephemeral and established, these events have provided a space which, while it does not replace the longing for in-person events, begins to address the need for closeness experienced by self-isolating individuals in a time of uncertain outcomes. The cyber-Huasteca clearly serves many of the emotional needs of members of a geographically fragmented *huapanguero* community, as they search for human connectivity and cultural maintenance in the shadow of the coronavirus.

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