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California Sueños

California is a tragic country—like Palestine, like every promised land. Its short history is a fever-chart of migrations—the land rush, the gold rush, the oil rush, the movie rush, the Okie fruit-picking rush, the wartime rush to the aircraft factories—followed, in each instance, by counter migrations of the disappointed and unsuccessful, moving sorrowfully homeward.

—Christopher Isherwood, “Los Angeles”

In 1967 Los Tijuana Five, a band best known for their Beatles mop-tops and live Revolución Avenue recreations of the entire *Rubber Soul* album, took on the California dream. On their first full-length album for the US label Pickwick Records, the band recorded a cover of the Mamas and the Papas’ “California Dreamin’,” one of the great pop manifestos of mythic Upper California sunshine. Written by John Phillips after leaving LA for a particularly rough and frigid New York winter, the song casts California as its own cinematic fantasy, full of perfect beaches and warm evening winds, a promised land without tragedy. But instead of merely translating the song into Spanish, Los Tijuana Five use it to play with the politics of their location. When “California Dreamin’” becomes “Sueños de California,” they are singing *from* California about a longing for California. It’s just that their California is Baja California, not the California north of the line. They change the original refrain “California dreamin’” into a possessive that happens to rhyme with the English lyric: “California mía,” my California. The California they miss, the illusion they create through their longing, is not the same one that Phillips built behind the frost on his New York City windows. Their California isn’t LA; it’s Tijuana. Their California is *their* California.

Ever since a war-birthing border split the two Californias in the nineteenth century, the idea of California—its sunshine myths and romances as much as its noir realities—has been a prime subject of musical interpretation for Mexican artists across the California-Mexico borderlands. While Los Tijuana Five dreamed their California from

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their home south of the borderline, critiques of California myths and harsh, dramatic accounts of California realities have dominated the Mexican migrant music made and consumed on both sides of the border.

The migrant experience in California has been at the very heart of *norteño* music since the beginning of the twentieth century, from Los Hermanos Bañuelos' dishwasher tale of failed Hollywood hope in "El Lavaplatos" in 1929 to Carlos y José's wishful thinking in the 1980s in "Me Voy a California" ("I'm going to California, I'm going to harvest money") through song after song on contemporary Spanish-language radio. It can be heard in the music of Los Tucanes de Tijuana (once Tijuana-based, now in San Diego), El Chapo de Sinaloa (from Sinaloa, but now calling the Inland Empire home), Los Razos (from Michoacán, now living in Oxnard), and Jenni Rivera (born and raised in Playa Larga, a.k.a. Long Beach). For that matter, the entire body of work of Sinaloa-born, Northern California-based Los Tigres del Norte—the reigning musical titans of Greater Mexico—could easily be read as a collective study of the political, cultural, and affective impacts of Mexican migrancy in California and belongs in Literature of California anthologies and on California Studies syllabi, right next to *Ramona*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, and *City of Quartz*. The Mexican scholar Gustavo López Castro has written extensively about *norteño* music and other musical styles of migrant Mexico as forming a decades-spanning "songbook of migrancy," a dynamic, living archive of everyday migrant life, of cross-border feelings and emotions that create communities of sentiment between Mexico and the US. Or to borrow from Roberto Tejada's important work on Mexican photography, *norteño* music has created not a "shared image environment" but a "shared sonic environment" between the US and Mexico.

Nowhere is this more the case than in the current popular music of California. Music made by migrant Mexicans for migrant Mexicans—arguably the most commercially popular and culturally galvanizing music in the state—has been a key source of migrant articulations of longings and feelings for Mexico and for a better, more just life in the US. It is also, as Catherine Ragland and Hermann Herlinghaus have persuasively argued, a key site for shaping everyday vernacular reactions to the asymmetries, dislocations, and violence of economic globalization.

Don Cheto, one of the top Spanish-language radio DJs in Los Angeles (he hosts the morning show on the massively popular station La Que Buena), has built his entire career on the belief that Mexican migrant music—and its stories of immigration, identity negotiation, and daily economic struggle—is *the* music of Southern California, the music that most clearly and powerfully speaks to his millions of listeners, be they migrants from Jalisco and Michoacán or the US born sons and daughters of migrants from Zacatecas, Sinaloa, and Sonora. A character created by Juan Carlos Razo, a thirty-year-old immigrant from Michoacán, Don Cheto is a seventy-year-old immigrant *vetterano* who wears a *campesino* hat and a big gray moustache and, between the latest *banda* and *norteño* hits, dispenses wisdom and advice about immigrant life in LA. When Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids LA factories, plants, and warehouses, he sings "Ice, Ice, Baby," putting an agitpop immigrant spin on Vanilla Ice's late-eighties hip-hop hit. Earlier this year he released "La Crisis"—first on the radio, then on YouTube, and only later on iTunes—a comical song about the impact of the global recession on family life in LA that takes shots at both President Obama and Mexican President Felipe Calderón. Don Cheto has become the unofficial poster boy of Mexican



Los Tigres del Norte performing in 2008

migrant music and a leading cultural mouthpiece and media icon for LA's massive (and thriving) Mexican music industry. This industry is a formal and informal commercial network of record distributors, multinational record companies, homegrown indie labels, swap-meet vendors, neighborhood record shops, corner grocery stores, nightclubs, clothing stores, and weekend *jaripeos*, *rodeos*, and *bailes* that stretches from Westside beaches to South LA, from Orange County and East LA to the eastern suburbs of the Inland Empire and beyond.

That is the California we're welcomed into on "California," the single released earlier this year by the Michoacán-born, South LA-raised hip-hop duo Akwid. It's a classic "welcome to California" song, but their hook is "Bienvenidos a California," and while it's still a land where "all of your dreams become reality," their California is "the land of my people . . . California, Mexico . . . the land of the sorcerer

wetback." Akwid's migrant remapping of California is on the same album as "Esto Es Pa' Mis Paisas," a song dedicated to Mexican migrants, or *paisas* (slang for *paisanos*), who shave their heads, wear cowboy boots, listen to *banda* music, and take pride in their working-class *rancholo* (or rancho-meets-cholo) lifestyle. "I can't hide who I am," they rap over slow West Coast funk, "These clothes I'm wearing? I bought them at the swap meet." Like Los Tijuana Five's "Sueños de California," Akwid's song is a cover, but instead of a California myth makeover they do a Chicano makeover. "Esto Es Pa' Mis Paisas" is based on "La Raza," the influential nineties Chicano hip-hop anthem by the East LA-born rapper Kid Frost, which was itself based on "Viva Tirado," a low-and-slow 1969 cruising instrumental from the seventies Mexican-American funk and soul band El Chicano. (True to California-Mexico form, El Chicano's "Viva Tirado" was itself a cover; the song was originally penned by

the African-American jazz composer Gerald Wilson, who originally wrote it in 1962 as an homage to the Mexican bullfighter José Ramón Tirado.)

Frost's original call for "Aztec warrior" brown pride was based in East LA; Akwid shift the focus to South LA, Southgate, and Bell, areas that since the 1980s have become hubs for newly arrived Mexican migrant populations. Instead of Chicano pride, Akwid preach Michoacán pride and *paisa* pride, musical formulations of identity that are as rooted in the urban geographies of LA as they are in the binational migrant labor networks that have historically connected LA to Mexico through a shifting series of loops and circuits. (According to one 2008 study by the Pew Hispanic Center, 36 percent of LA immigrants are Mexican and of the one million undocumented in LA county, 60 percent are of Mexican origin.)

Akwid weren't always rapping in Spanish about being *paisas*. Originally called Juvenile Style, they were an English-language rap duo whose heaviest influences—2nd II None, King Tee, DJ Quik—were born directly from their 1980s upbringing in largely African-American neighborhoods across South LA. But in the 1990s Akwid, like so much of Mexican California, got *banda* fever. Due in large part to rising immigration numbers, the music of *banda sinaloense* became a central part of California's radio soundscape, producing what George Lipsitz has called "a new cultural moment, one that challenges traditional categories of citizenship and culture on both sides of the border." The 1992 murder of Sinaloa's leading *corrido* superstar Chalino Sánchez—a former Coachella farmworker who had become a migrant icon throughout Southern California—further cemented the relationship between migrants and the rural, working-class music of the Mexico they had left behind. In the Los Angeles of Akwid's childhood, it produced what the journalist Sam Quiñones famously dubbed "the Sinaloization of LA." Mexicans who had previously looked to gangsta rap as a mirror of urban outrage now looked to *corridos* and *banda*; closets full of Raiders jerseys

suddenly shared hangar space with cowboy hats, belt buckles, and boots.

Since the 1990s in the US the commercial genres *banda* and *norteño* have been subsumed under the rubric of "regional Mexican." The category has rapidly become one of the most commercially and culturally vital genres in US popular music. For this is not just a California story, of course, but a national one as well: the more Mexicanized the map of the US grows, the more regional Mexican music becomes the genre with which to reckon. Regional Mexican is currently the top-selling Latin music in the US, responsible for over 70 percent of all Latin music sales and outselling pop and tropical by significant margins. It is the official music of the geography that Los Tigres del Norte called, back in 1986, *el otro México*, the other Mexico, the Mexico that lives and thrives beyond Mexico's territorial national borders and within the spaces of the United States.

Los Tigres reimaged the US as part of a new map of Mexico (or, to borrow Roger Bartra's formulation, a new map of "post-Mexico"). That they charted *el otro México* not in the press or in their liner notes but over accordions and snare drums in a song of that title is a reminder of just how central Mexican migrant music has been to articulations and explorations of social and political identity in the US. Regional Mexican music in California is not simply the soundtrack to Mexican migrant life, but, to borrow terminology from Thomas Turino, it is "music as social life" grounded and shaped by "the politics of participation." "The other Mexico that we have constructed here on this ground that has been our national territory," Los Tigres sang, "is the effort of all our fellow Mexicans and Latin Americans who have known how to improve themselves." The "other California" that has for so long been a key part of the "other Mexico" has likewise been its own republic of song, its own binational audio territory, where migrant songs blasting over car radios and cell phones continue to reveal, perhaps more than any other contemporary art form, all the tragedy and all the promise of the California yet to come. **B**