

Duranguense:

*A Subcultural Representation of Lo
Mexicano in Chicago's Second
Generation*

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Introduction

In the last ten years *el Pasito Duranguense*, or the Durango step, has steadily grown in popularity among the millions of Mexican-Americans and Mexican migrants in the United States. The *pasito*, as it is informally called, is the dance accompanying the polka-inspired Mexican regional musical style called Duranguense that originated in Chicago. While Duranguense has received national awards for its popularity, it continues to have a fan base which belongs to a very unique and particular community. This subculture, as some may call it (Subcultures Reader) is comprised primarily of second-generation and recent Mexican¹ migrant youth in urban and suburban settings. It has also grown in popularity in numerous Mexican states, as bands book tours to states such as Zacatecas, Guerrero, Durango, and Michoacan.

Prior to Duranguense was the famous *Quebradita* dance craze which arose in the early 1980's. *Quebradita* literally means, "a little break", and consists of various acrobatic movements done between a male and female partner. *Quebradita* as well as other regional Mexican musical genres influenced in large part the culture of Duranguense. Both musical movements draw from a rich history of this regional music, particularly *norteña*, *banda*, and *conjunto*². Aside from *Quebradita*, there has been strong youth participation in *Quebradita*, Lowrider and Zoot Suit culture, as well as the Chicano art movement. These subcultures, in conjunction with the political atmosphere and hospitality of the United States towards migrants at the time, have resulted in varying experiences for Mexican youth.

The growing number of Mexican youth in Chicago has dealt with very different challenges than their parents, as well as a different experience than the Chicano youth

¹ Throughout this study, second generation and recent migrants will be referred to as Mexican, more specificity will be provided for those who fall outside this range.

² All forms of Mexican music under the title "Regional Mexican"

community in the southwest (Hutchinson, Simonett). My findings draw on the scant research of the Duranguense community and Mexican youth in Chicago, as they have begun to show their creation and search of place within the larger community (Greene).

The importance of observing this particular segment of youth is tied to their role in the future of America. Migration into the U.S. is not a new phenomenon however; the characteristics of the increasing second generation will affect the economic, political, and social constructions of our prospective American reality. The inhabitation of urban space can bring many challenges for youth, and can create juxtaposition between the cultural traditions of rural parents and their urbanized children.

Anthropologist Nicholas de Genova has contested the traditional ways in which we view the traditional fields of Chicano and Latin American studies. De Genova's examination of a "Mexican Chicago" reanalyzes what we know as U.S. imperialism and the notion of the U.S. nation-state which "cherishes a notion of Latin America as somehow 'out there' - a logic that dictates that Chicago could not possibly be considered to belong, in some meaningful way, to Mexico". Using this backdrop will help understand the place in which Mexican youth find themselves in Chicago.

This study delves into the importance of Duranguense as a subculture for Mexican youth living in Chicago, through the lens of a *Mexican Chicago*. In the process, this study seeks to understand the need for this popularized musical style, as well as the factors present that enabled its creation. This sheds light on the ways in which children of immigrants cope with their environment, and thus create new cultural acceptances of their combined realities. With the increase in this population, these realities can in turn have significant reverberations for the future of the U.S./Mexico socio-economic and political arena.

“Crossing Borders”: The Reinvention of Mexico, and Rural-Urban Realities

Boundaries, Divisions, and Borders

In understanding the significance of Chicago’s immigrants, their concrete living space must be taken into account. Studies have been conducted by Richard Greene regarding the urbanization of Chicago by recent immigrants. His particular focus on the late post-suburban period is particularly important in addressing the large numbers of migrant communities which have now formed in suburbs, and which Greene labels edge cities (Greene 1997, 2001).

Felix Padilla’s analysis of the formation of Spanish-speaking Latino identity in Chicago in the 1970’s is an important historical contributor to the case of Mexican Chicago. Padilla also describes the small-town origin of much of the Mexican immigrant population explaining how their rural background was an influential characteristic as they tried to incorporate themselves in the new urban setting. It is important to consider the historical relevancy of past Mexican immigrants to understand the nature of current trends, whether in inner-city or suburban ethnic enclaves.

I would like to extend De Genova’s thoughts to encompass the numerous communities that have been pushed to the outlying suburbs (Greene). The formation of Duranguense was in large part dependant on the formation of these ethnic enclaves. Traditionally, Chicago housed its core Mexican community within neighborhoods on the south side of Chicago, Pilsen, and La Villita. While De Genova sites Chicago as having decreased in the number of manufacturing jobs available, surrounding suburbs have become enriched with these industrial jobs. Conveniently, with an increase of migrants in recent years, many were either pushed to edge-cities, or northern suburbs, such as

Aurora, Melrose Park, Franklin Park, Stone Park, Addison, Cicero, and Berwyn. These suburbs are what remained of the white flight of the 80's.

Based on precedent or extended family residing in the same town, newcomers then made that their initial destination. Thus their children were able to experience an inclusive community that was in many ways similar to the rural tendencies of their parents. This closer community, along with the increasing numbers of immigrants could be a potential reason for the popularity of Duranguense, echoing a similarity with the rural condition of migrants. It is with this thought that I wish to draw upon the parallel of Duranguense in the Chicago setting from which it arose.

De Durango a Chicago

“An increasingly hostile and intransigent atmosphere for undocumented immigrants’ children does not so much deter labor migration as aim to deter (or in any event, restrict) family migration and settlement, so that most of them return to their native land.”
- (De Genova, 100)

What were the factors that gave rise to Duranguense's popularity? While de Genova observes the transnationalization of Mexican *labor* which he refers to as, “the heart of Mexican Chicago”, it is nonetheless important to observe it considering it's underlying reason for the formation of Mexican communities in Chicago (De Genova, Race, Space, 95). Labor, however, is not the only apparatus that can cross established borders.

How have Mexicans in Chicago kept their connection to their home in Durango? The Durango community has employed various means of staying in touch with their home towns in Durango. This is not to say that all children of migrants wish to associate with the Duranguense community. A shared language, social class, and common place are only some of the factors that unite this group. Many families have attempted to keep these connections by remodeling their old colonial style homes, while others have

purchased pricey parcels of land for future retirement. Whether their children, who were raised primarily in the United States will do the same is questionable.

It is here that I unfold the success for Duranguense, by delineating some of the characteristics seen in this subculture. An allegiance to Durango is first needed, one from which two dichotomies, “the city” and “the country”, and “Durango” and “Chicago”, are proliferated in numerous ways through this music. While other forms of Mexican music, such as banda, Quebradita, and nortenas have carried elements of agrarian life through them, Duranguense uses U.S. backdrops to stipulate the reality facing the hundreds of Mexicans who are continually in the process of forming their live in this. Nonetheless, bands like Montez de Durango now advocate for all of the Mexican community within the United States, fusing elements of pride, nostalgia, and excitement at the mention of Durango.

The interesting characteristic of the Durango community is that it has been around for longer, even enabling them to form clubs and “Durango” associations. While further proof is needed, many Duranguense’s do not share the same element of fear of deportation, as many have been able to gain residency or have established roots here for longer. Their children however, still live with the repercussion of the immigration backlash. Does this also make second generation youth yearn to return to their native land? Not necessarily, however, through Duranguense music, they have managed to illicit a connecting channel that goes beyond just labor, as mentioned earlier.

De Genova also makes note of the recent technologies Mexicans in Chicago have utilized to maintain connections with loved ones in Mexico. This is not the only way in which technology has served to not only inspire but transmit a sense of belonging to both divided worlds. Based off of interviews with Chicago Duranguense bands, this polka-

fused music has been around for many years, originating in the countryside of Durango.

While it was originally accordion dominated, and borrowed from German-immigrant tempos, today, Duranguense has these same beats, made *artificially*. Artificially simply refers to the technology most bands use to make synthetic sounds with the keyboard or tuba. In this sense, music serves as another form of transnational diffusion, as both Mexico and the U.S. have embraced Duranguense.

Duranguense culture goes beyond the music. You also have to dress or dance the part. While there is one step that characterizes the dance, many youth also borrow from past Quebradita dances when elaborating their dance routines or competitions. Other elements include the western “cowboy” aesthetic seen in many youth who enjoy this music. Bands as well as fans dress in traditional *guayaberas* (button-down shirts), or full-fitted western suits, with cowboy boots and matching leather belt, topped with a “taco” hat (Simonett). Males, garbed primarily in this fashion, participate in numerous social Duranguense functions within Chicago, and surrounding suburbs. Quite removed from the real Durango, but nonetheless legitimate through the lens of this Mexican Chicago.

Even the lyrics construct a notion of a Mexican Chicago. While most songs borrow from previously released singles, Duranguense bands make them unique by fusing them with the new electronic sounds of their instruments. Newer songs however, don’t fail to mention the various hamlets, villages, and ranches many of their listeners parents belong to, or visit primarily during the summer. While I have delineated some of the characteristics of what Duranguense culture entails, it cannot be posited without an explanation of de Genovas’s Mexican Chicago.

Deconstructing a “Mexican Chicago”

While Duranguense has become the name of this recent musical genre, it also literally translates to being *from Durango*. Durango is a northern state of Mexico, which in the past thirty years has had a significant amount of its rural inhabitants emigrate to the U.S., particularly Chicago, IL, gradually changing the original social structure of Durango's villages and ranches. Elderly people now dominate the villages, and during the summer months, hoards of families return from the U.S., in the hopes that their children will hold onto their Mexican "roots".

Nicholas de Genova addresses such issues concerning the migrant-labor experience of Mexicans in Chicago. De Genova's work titled, "Race, Space, and the Reinvention of Latin America in Mexican Chicago", focuses on "Mexican Chicago", a possibility in which Michael Kearney and Roger Bartra describe as "Latin America 'not ending' at the border". Similarly, Guillermo Gomez-Pena recognizes that there are "Latin Americas outside of Latin America" (De Genova, *Race Space*, 91). De Genova's understanding of a Mexican Chicago will be fundamental in exploring the ways in which Duranguense played an integral part in the formation of community for Mexicans in Chicago.

De Genova goes on to "insist upon the admission of Chicago to its proper place within Latin America". De Genova's theory contests that of traditional Latin American and Chicano Studies, disciplines possible only after the reign of U.S. imperialism, "predicat[ing] the integrity of the U.S. nation-state...and cherish[ing] a notion of Latin America as somehow 'out there'- a logic that dictates that Chicago could not possibly be considered to belong, in some meaningful way, to Mexico" (De Genova, "Race, Space", 92). Consequently, De Genova questions the Chicano movement as one that fails to

encompass the Chicago case, raising the ambiguous question of “where *lo mexicano* ends and *lo chicano* begins” (De Genova, “Race, Space”, 94).

In his book, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and “Illegality” in Mexican Chicago*, De Genova delves deeper into this argument. The relationship between Mexico and the U.S. is one with a long history of “invasion and conquest, warfare and subjugation, exploitation and oppression” (97). This is a basis for which De Genova critically debunks the established borders held by our current system based on colonialism. He thus formulates the production of boundaries contingent on the displacement of these transnational Mexican migrants, a creation of what he calls a Mexican Chicago:

“The Mexican in Mexican Chicago...pertains not to the Mexican nation-state, nor to any presumed essential Mexicaness, but rather to the particular socio-historical situation of transnational working-class migrants, originating in Mexico, for which *Mexican* (in my formulation) serves as shorthand, but through which the very meanings of *Mexican*-for these migrants themselves-come to be reconfigured”.

In my understanding, the very essence brought from the originating town, pueblo or city in Durango, Mexico, is remade by these migrants to reconcile the urbanized reality that is Chicago, thus making a Mexican Chicago.

I want to extend this further to include children of migrants. The youth participating in the “transnationalism” innate to Duranguense is but one example of the duality possessed by this generation. A generation infused with glimpses of their parent’s pre-migratory reality, raised in the concrete jungle of Chicago.

In previous research, I observed perceptions of homeland for the Durango community in Chicago. These perceptions are grounded on the importance of connecting to ones “roots”, despite imposed boundaries throughout the America’s, forced onto a migrant’s upon entrance to the host country. This paper will delve deeper into the very

creation of Duranguense as it finds itself within this reformulated concept of a Mexican Chicago.

Three fundamental points in De Genova's work deal with the imperialistic foundations of Latin American studies, from which Latin America is seen solely from the confines of America, or more properly, the United States. Latin America is seen as an outsider, a place that could never become a part of the U.S. Nation, which is where the very study of Latin America was conveniently conjured. Language becomes a second characteristic of domination, believing that everyone south of the border is not only Latin in root, but also considered an outsider, or other. The third proposition made by De Genova is the racialized boundaries starkly pointing out their differences, through a historical tendency of white supremacy.

While his proposed necessary reracialization is important in reanalyzing the politics of race and space in the transnational nature of America, this study will not delve deeply into the racial division's characteristic of Mexicans in Chicago. Additional research must be conducted to compare the varying ideas of race and class historically in both Durango and Chicago.

Concluding Thoughts

Mexicans and their children in America have in previous years reacted to societal changes and realities in a variety of ways. Different avenues have been created by this first and second generation, immersing themselves in the culture of Quebradita, Lowriders, Zoot suits, and Chicano art and associations. This study hopes to

This overview of Duranguense is a working progress towards understanding it within the context of Chicago. Future questions to explore include why some youth and not others tend to associate with the Durango community and not others, as well as

further comparisons between Quebradita and Duranguense. Another factor to consider is the media's questionable role in proliferating the Mexican "stereotype". In analyzing the historical and social implications of Duranguense, many questions come to mind. The understanding of the birth of this sub cultural representation sheds light on the situation immigrant youth face in urban settings. Why did this musical phenomenon become possible, and better yet is necessary? Left to study are also the ideas and perceptions of homeland for those youth who have just arrived, as opposed to those who were born here. Are there any dynamics or shifts even among these distinct groups? While this study will not focus much on these distinctions, this factor may be influential in other Mexican subculture communities, as well as the way in which the idea of space is formed in the minds of Mexicans in the United States, and is perhaps shifting

Immigrants and their descendents have made the U.S. their home and affect the progress of our country, bringing forth new ideas and means of integration. This can be seen by our country's concerns and recent re-evaluation of our immigration policies. This musical "revolution" whether seen as an underground or popularized phenomenon is central to the reality of Mexicans in the U.S.

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