

What Is an MC If He Can't Rap to Banda? Making Music in Nuevo L.A.

Josh Kun

I Love Mexicans

In the weeks before the California recall election wrapped production on a hot new political farce starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, the governor-to-be hit the campaign trail. He wanted to make it clear that even though he opposes his gardeners and nannies having driver's licenses, and even though he supported Proposition 187 (California's notorious 1994 anti-immigration legislation), he actually likes Mexicans. Or at least that's what he told a crowd at the Inner City Games softball tournament in Santa Fe Springs, where he was forced to appear after he was disinvited from a Mexican Independence Day parade in East L.A.

"I love Mexico," he said. "I've done four movies down there."

For Schwarzenegger, Mexicans in California do not exist. There is only "Mexico," not actual Mexico, but virtual Hollywood Mexico: a distant "down there," a Mexico that is used, but never actually seen. This is not just an Arnold problem of course: Mexicans in California have long existed at the surreal junction between cinematic imagination and brutal political reality. By going "down there" to understand Mexicans in California, Schwarzenegger was eliding their very presence, ignoring the multiple ways in which Mexican immigration continues to transform the state he now governs, and reducing Mexicans "here" to a country "down there."

This rhetorical deportation of California Mexicans was, to say the least, a bold move, considering just how obvious a cover-up it was in a state that in 2000 became the first to have a "majority minority," with whites occupying a minority position for the first time since the nineteenth century. And, as Mike Davis and many other critics have argued, the prime impetus for this demographic shift has been the "Mexicanization" of Governor Schwarzenegger's very own backyard, Southern California.¹ In the 1990 census, Los Angeles County was 37.8 percent Latino, with Mexicans comprising almost 30 percent of the total (during the 1980s, the Latino population of L.A. and Orange counties grew by 1.5 million). In the city of Los Angeles alone, one out of every three residents was Mexican.²

Mexican Radio

While Schwarzenegger was busy pretending that the Mexicanization of “up here” hadn’t happened, Mexican Los Angeles was doing its own publicity. The governor could have simply turned on the radio to hear it: the biggest urban hit of summer 2003, Akwid’s “No Hay Manera (There’s No Way).” Alongside MTV favorites like Lumidee, Wayne Wonder, Beyonce, and Sean Paul, Akwid provided the summer’s most radical song—radical because of the cultural realities it fused and performed, radical because of where you could hear it and what that told you about the changing profile of Mexican Los Angeles. “No Hay Manera” got airtime on both KPWR 105.9, one of L.A.’s leading hip-hop and R&B stations (“urban,” in industry parlance), and on La Que Buena (KBUE), one of the city’s top regional Mexican music stations (home to traditional styles such as the accordion-driven trio and quartet sounds of *norteño* and *grupero* from northern Mexico, and the larger-scale brass marches of *banda* music from the northwest).

Where KPWR’s target audience is generally thought to be primarily black and Latino (when in fact the station notes that its prime marketing target is L.A. Latinos), Que Buena’s is predominantly immigrant Mexican. Never before had a song been on rotation cycles on both stations and in both markets—U.S. “urban” and Mexican “regional” at once—but there it was, a song that immediately shot to number seven on Billboard’s specialty market Latin chart while also reaching the Top 20 on Billboard’s overall, cross-market Heatseekers’ charts. In its first three months on the shelves, Akwid’s debut album, *Proyecto Akwid*, went platinum, a significant sales achievement in both the Latino hip-hop and Mexican regional markets.

“No Hay Manera,” a song rapped in Spanish over samples of Mexican *banda* music mixed with West Coast hip-hop beats, was played first on La Que Buena, where the song’s update of traditional *banda* styles found an immediate home with the station’s listeners.³ Hearing *banda*—albeit cloaked in hip-hop—on KPWR was the bigger coup, but one that still makes sense as the Mexicanization of Southern California has led to a dramatic transformation in the demographics of the region’s radio markets. Whereas in the 1980s, Mexican and Latino radio audiences were considered specialty or niche markets better left to Mexican stations, Latinos in Southern California are now a primary and coveted segment of the city’s overall market share. This is especially true for stations like KPWR, where “urban” increasingly signifies “Latino” as much it does “black.” According to KPWR’s senior vice president Val Maki, “We target Latinos, young Latinos. In Southern California, they are the new main-

stream. Hip-hop is the global youth culture and the most popular music among young Latinos.⁴

Hip-hop may indeed be “the global youth culture,” but its singular globality depends upon multiple localities—its creation, production, and reception within local and translocal sites such as Los Angeles. Hip-hop is not just popular *among* Latinos; hip-hop is a music *of* and *by* young Latinos, music they make as well as consume, music they customize and reinvent according to their own rules and styles. Akwid’s “No Hay Manera,” with its West Coast (U.S.) rhymes and its northwest coast (Mexico) tubas and trumpets, represents the relocalization of global hip-hop culture and its recontextualization in twenty-first-century Mexican Los Angeles. The popularity of *Proyecto Akwid* spawned an instant market-driven movement: the urban regional movement, a catch-all term for artists who blend regional Mexican music with hip-hop sensibilities. In the year after Akwid’s debut, Los Angeles was flooded with “urban regional” releases from artists such as Jae-P, David Rolas, Mexiclan, and Flakiss (all signed to the Univision Music Group), and numerous Mexican regional artists—Adan Sanchez, Yolanda “La Potranquita” Perez—began incorporating hip-hop elements into their more traditional banda and norteño repertoires.⁵ “We all grew up listening to Mexican music at home and listening to hip-hop with our friends,” Akwid’s Sergio Gomez has explained. “Our music is the inevitable outcome of this fusion between these two different cultures.”⁶

As the pioneering anthem of urban regional music in Mexican Los Angeles, “No Hay Manera” is the perfect place to unpack the abstractions of “fusion” by focusing instead on what Theodor Adorno called the “congealed history” of the song—its historical layers, its union of disparate elements and epochs into a singular musical space.⁷ What congeals in “No Hay Manera” are three issues I wish to highlight in the following pages: the ongoing Mexicanization of Southeast and South Central Los Angeles in the context of economic globalization and deindustrialization, and the subsequent centrality of Mexican migrant identity to the social structures and economic circuits of contemporary Los Angeles; the ongoing transformation of Mexican migrant cultural expressions from banda and norteño forms to new urban hybrids based in genre mixing, bilingualism, and generational reinvention; and the extent to which the creation of local musical forms in Los Angeles is both the *product* of the global flows of commercial popular culture and the *producer* of them. That is, Akwid’s music responds to circuits of global culture, but as a local form it also changes what that global culture looks and sounds like.

Akwid’s music and the urban regional movement that has sprung up around it offer a new version of the flexible ethnic identities that, as George Sanchez

has argued, have long characterized Mexican American identity in Los Angeles. In his study of Chicano identity between 1900 and 1945, Sanchez argues that ethnicity “was not a fixed set of customs growing from life in Mexico, but rather a collective identity that emerged from daily experience in the U.S.”⁸ Akwid’s music at the other end of the twentieth century supports this notion, but also expands on it. As a music born of migration and globalization, it performs an ethnic identity that is indeed based on a daily experience in the United States, but one that remains influenced by and informed by a new set of customs produced within U.S.–Mexico migration—customs based not only on life in Mexico, but on life between Mexico and the United States. Instead of being heard solely within the critical context of Chicano identity formation, then, Akwid’s music forces us to listen as well for migrant identity formation—a kind of “becoming Mexican *in America*”—and how ethnicity is further transformed by the experience of urban migration.

The new migrant L.A. ethnicity that Akwid performs requires a surrendering of older models of nationalism and national identity as static entities permanently tied to fixed places on maps. In her recent critique of postcolonialism within the diasporic circuits of economic globalization, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak urges us to think of nationalism as “a moving base . . . of differences, as dangerous as it is powerful, always ahead or deferred by definitions, pro or contra, upon which it relies.”⁹ The Mexicanization of South Los Angeles is one local effect of what Spivak calls “the financialization of the globe, or globalization.” Though Spivak’s critique deals with labor—specifically that of migrant women workers—and not culture, her analysis of nationalism’s transformation within economic globalization is equally valuable when looking at cultural workers like Akwid. She sees women workers as “victims below but . . . agents above, resisting the consequences of globalization as well as redressing the cultural vicissitudes of migrancy.” One result is a new relationship with the country of origin, so that “home” is no longer simply “a repository of cultural nostalgia” but a part of “the geopolitical present.”¹⁰

What I am suggesting here is that “No Hay Manera” in particular, and Akwid’s music and that of the urban regional movement more generally, enact this very shift—from passive repository to active producer—even as it participates, via the recording industry, in the “financialization of the globe.” Mexico is not a repository of nostalgia here, but a generative, living source of knowledge and history—which is not, in any way, to write off the importance of nostalgia as a potential mode of progressive thinking. Akwid’s treatment of the Mexican past through music is more akin to what Svetlana Boym has called “reflective nostalgia,” individually based nostalgia that *reflects on na-*

tional or collective pasts instead of attempting to restore and monumentalize them in the present. Reflective musical nostalgia, then, is not about memorializing a collective past, but is an individual musician's way of using the past, through performance, to structure the present as it "cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space" without pretending to rebuild a mythical home.¹¹

Where previous models of nation and home might see the migrant experience as simply adding new ingredients to the American cultural mix via paradigms such as the melting pot, Akwid's music points us elsewhere. The music may be located and produced within the geopolitical boundaries of the United States, but the transnational movements through space and time that it contains and performs beg a reevaluation of cultural production in Los Angeles. Akwid's music should not be heard solely as producing a "new" U.S. multicultural or postethnic national identity, and therefore enabling the typically reactionary state and federal "investments" in cultural diversity that so often result.¹² Indeed, instead of adding "No Hay Manera" to discussions of U.S. national identity, the song might be better heard through the ear of the new transnational cartography that Michael Dear and Gustavo LeClerc have recently dubbed "Bajalta California," the transfrontier "global metropolis" that joins Southern California to northern Mexico, "a single, integrated system of global significance." Following Dear and LeClerc, the Mexicanization of South L.A. that Akwid is a part of is a prime factor in the emergence of this region of transnational culture, economics, and identity.¹³ By placing Akwid's South Los Angeles on the map of Bajalta California, the region's cultural products begin to be heard within new geopolitical contexts, with "No Hay Manera" as the soundtrack not to the formation of new national identities, but to the formation of new transnational, mobile ones.

I also want to offer Akwid's music as a way of understanding the transformation of Los Angeles's racial communities that does not necessarily replicate the apocalyptic tendencies of some recent L.A. urban theory that has developed in the noirish wake of Mike Davis's *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*.¹⁴ Deepak Narang Sawhney's recent anthology, for example, *Unmasking L.A.: Third World and the City*, portrays Los Angeles as "an epic tale of racial disharmony, territorial conquest, and the attempted extermination of original peoples."¹⁵ Sawhney rightly calls our attention to histories of economic apartheid, racial segregation, spatial incarceration, militaristic neighborhood policing, and reckless environmental destruction. But Akwid's "No Hay Manera"—a song produced at the juncture of Mexican immigrant and African American life in South Central L.A.—asks us to think about what

cultural practices emerge within these systems of exploitation and abuse, within these histories of disharmony.

As Roger Keil points out, accepting Los Angeles as one big metaphor for global urban distress turns the lived city into “a place without people.” He asks, “Where is the Los Angeles filled with human interaction, a place where incredibly complex social relationships . . . are reproduced daily?”¹⁶ Indeed, what relationships are heard and performed in popular music? “No Hay Manera” is a reminder that for all of L.A.’s “global urban distress,” the city is not simply a metaphor. It is a place where people respond to this distress using global and local languages, where people make culture happen by reinventing their identities in response to urban transformation and to the limits (and opportunities) of economic change within globalization. Indeed, while Akwid’s music points to cross-racial dialogue and migrant cultural production, the social reality of urban racialization and discrimination never goes away. Just weeks after the release of *Proyecto Akwid*, the Gomez brothers were denied entrance to the Saddle Ranch restaurant on Los Angeles’s Universal City Walk and roughed up by the club’s bouncers because of “how they looked.” The civil suit against the restaurant got under way just as their single began climbing the charts.

Akwid’s music also urges us to reconsider another key theme in recent Los Angeles studies: the city as a site of collective amnesia, where ethnic and racial pasts are continually buried and erased in the drive to construct new urban presents. Norman Klein has rightly argued that L.A. is a city that has historically based its presence on its desire to erase itself. For Klein, L.A. history can be read as a “history of forgetting,” in which urban development and demographic displacement create “social imaginaries” of erasure and absence, “built environments” that “contain an evacuation.”¹⁷ Yet I think it would be a mistake to accept these erasures and evacuations—for all of their urgent political and social import—as decidedly final. Indeed, popular culture and popular media within Los Angeles have historically counteracted urban amnesia. In the case of Mexican migrants, the preservation of memory in the face of erasure is a central facet of their cultural production. As I will argue below, “No Hay Manera” excavates buried memories and puts them into play within the present. The deindustrialized zone of South Central in which the song is produced may contain evacuation, but “No Hay Manera” is a good example of how expressive culture can fill those voids back up, reinserting memories of the past and even the immediate present into a social and economic landscape determined to forget them. The song demonstrates Iain Chambers’s point about the role of popular music—what he calls a “journey in sound”—in

maintaining memory and culture within the geopolitical and economic dispersals of globalization. The languages of popular music, he argues, “speak of the powers and potential of a specific cultural place where the inscription of memory and the prescriptions of the past come to be recited and resited.”¹⁸

Straight Outta Michoacan

The place of Akwid is a double place, a translocal site sustained in the movement between Mexico and the United States. Akwid’s Sergio and Francisco Gomez were born in the southern Mexican state of Michoacan and migrated in the 1980s to South Central Los Angeles, where they were raised. On the cover of *Proyecto Akwid*, they sport shaved heads and football jerseys and sit on the hood of a convertible Porsche between the two worlds they straddle: the tubas, beer, cacti, and Mexican flags of Michoacan, and the palm trees and office buildings of downtown Los Angeles. “We identify with this mix,” Sergio Gomez has said. “We were brought from Mexico at a very young age and raised in L.A. and we spoke Spanish at home. But at school it was all English. [This mix] was something that always existed in the communities.”¹⁹ The Gomez brothers left Michoacan when they were nine, and their music carries this transnational migrant route with it—L.A. hip-hop done Mexican migrant style, or what one song proclaims, “tipo Hollywoood.” They pile clapping g-funk beats and Spanish-language rhymes on top of the brassy horns of traditional Mexican regional music, especially the marching oom-pah of *banda sinaloense*. The album’s opening skit dramatizes both the transnational migrant circuitry at work and their avowed merger of traditional (a Mexican *banda de viento*) and contemporary (hip-hop MCs) musical modes. Before we even hear any music, we hear the Gomezes preparing a *banda de viento* for their new style of banda hip-hop. The tubas, trumpets, and snare drums get in tune as the Gomezes warn the musicians that what they are about to play is like nothing they have ever played before.

The Gomez brothers have not always been this committed to translating traditional Mexican regional music into new hip-hop vocabularies. Before they were Akwid, they were Juvenile Style, rapping in English over stock nineties’ West Coast beats and samples. In numerous press interviews, the duo have spoken openly about previously not wanting to, or knowing how to, mix their Mexican regional affiliations with the DJ Quik and NWA they grew up hearing in South Central. They had listened to the rough narco-corridos of Chalino Sanchez at home, but on the street, they belonged to the South Central L.A. hip-hop scene of the 1990s and were cautious about overidentifying them-

selves with their Mexican migrant roots. In the band's press release, Sergio Gomez explains it this way: "When you're young and you're growing up in an environment that is totally different than your culture, you find yourself being forced to adapt and assimilate, only to later evolve and reunite with your own roots."²⁰

"No Hay Manera" tracks that evolution and that return. I focus on this one song not only because of its cross-market popularity in 2003 and its profound impact on the birth of other "urban regional" musical projects, but because of what the song itself contains. It is built on three separate musical layers, each of which tells its own story about Mexican migration to Los Angeles and the formation of identities in Mexican Los Angeles. The first layer consists of the lyrics themselves, a series of fairly typical hip-hop boasts in which Akwid brags about the inventiveness of its style, bridging the traditional with the new. "Como un corrido," they rap, "Akwid ha regresado con un nuevo sonido (Like a corrido, Akwid's back with a new sound)." Their rapping owes as much to the vocal styles of veteran L.A. African American MCs like Snoop Dogg, DJ Quik, and Ice Cube, as it does to the Spanish and Spanglish wordplay of the nineties' Chicano hip-hop scene (groups like Delinquent Habits, Proper Dos, Frost).

The song's second layer is the sample of Banda El Recodo's "Te Lo Pido Por Favor," which structures the melodies and rhythms of Akwid's verses and the lyrics and melodies of the chorus itself (Akwid's chorus comes directly from Recodo's). Banda El Recodo is perhaps commercial banda music's most recognizable, familiar, and enduring group. Named for El Recodo, a small Sinaloa village near Mazatlan, Banda El Recodo was founded in 1954 by Don Cruz Lizarraga and is currently still run by his son German. Although Recodo was originally a typical banda de viento, Lizarraga soon transformed the group into what would become the blueprint for a commercial *banda orquesta*, complete with music stands, suits and ties, and musicians organized into rows—a hybrid of U.S. big bands and Mexican orchestras. From 1954 to the present, Recodo has evolved along with the banda genre: from viento to orquesta to the more current "technobanda" style developed in Guadalajara that incorporates synthesizers, electric guitars, electric bass, and drum sets.²¹

Banda El Recodo was a perfect choice for Akwid to sample—a banda that signifies the transformation of banda music from a music of small-town Mexico to a transnational, commercial music fused with pop and rock elements that has become the soundtrack of Mexican migration to California. Recodo remains one of the most popular banda ensembles among Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, which became, in the 1990s, banda's capital outside of Mexico.

Fueled by radio stations like KLAX (the top-rated station in L.A. in 1992), banda music spoke directly to the rising number of Mexican migrants who began arriving in South Los Angeles in the 1980s as a result of the Mexican economic crisis. This economic push only intensified in the 1990s when the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement provided even more of an impetus for people to leave Mexico for higher-paying jobs in the United States. George Lipsitz has rightly called banda a register of “the dislocation of low-wage labor” and a signal of “a new cultural moment, one that challenges traditional categories of citizenship and culture on both sides of the border.”²² But he is careful not to lose the singularity of banda in Mexican Los Angeles by calling it a new form of Mexican American or even American music. As it grew in the 1990s, banda became more and more the music of Mexicans *in* the U.S., a music that refused to choose between assimilation and ethnic isolation and instead celebrated what Lipsitz calls “a re-combinant Mexican identity inside the U.S.”²³

The third layer of Akwid’s “No Hay Manera” makes this point even more clear. The musicians do indeed choose a Banda El Recodo song to sample and rap over, but the song they choose has a history of its own—“Te Lo Pido Por Favor (I Ask You Please)” was originally written and recorded by veteran Mexican pop and mariachi star Juan Gabriel in 1986. Gabriel, a revered Mexican national icon, was like Akwid, born in Michoacan, and was also a product of the musical flows of the U.S.–Mexico border, having begun his career as a singer in the nightclubs of Ciudad Juarez (across the line from El Paso, Texas).²⁴ Yet Gabriel’s enormous popularity (and his ability to traverse the worlds of radio pop balladry and traditional mariachi) has led him to become synonymous with Mexican national music, which makes Recodo’s cover of him and Akwid’s indirect sampling of him all the more relevant for Mexican migrants in Los Angeles—a “transborder population” in Ruben Martinez’s words—who want to sustain a transnational balance between the United States and Mexico, blending patrimonies and preserving allegiances while creating new ones.²⁵

When Gabriel recorded the song in the 1980s, the South Central neighborhood where the Gomez brothers were raised was a key hub in the emergence of postindustrial L.A. It was in the midst of a demographic transformation that had begun during the early stages of deindustrialization of South Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. The accompanying white flight and displacement of manufacturing jobs opened up “rustbelt” communities like Southgate, Bell, Maywood, and Compton to new waves of Mexican immigrants taking advantage of the more relaxed immigration restrictions of the 1965 Hart Cellar Immigration Act.²⁶ As a result, through the 1970s and 1980s, the notion of

East L.A. as the exclusive capital of Mexican life in Los Angeles had been displaced by a constellation of southeastern and south central communities that Victor Valle and Rodolfo Torres have dubbed “the Greater Eastside.” The suburban, deindustrialized Greater Eastside that the Gomez brothers migrated to and grew up in would also become known, especially in music circles, as “Nuevo L.A.,” the part of the L.A. map (comprising more than a million people) most familiar to promoters and performers of Mexican regional music where Latinos make up roughly 90 percent of the population.²⁷

The migrant audiences and migrant experiences that Akwid’s music grows out of can be traced back to the key role that Southeast and South Central Los Angeles played in attracting more Mexican and Latino immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s, the very period when changes in national immigration policy helped secure the United States’ dominance in the global economic system. As Saskia Sassen has argued of this period, “The central military, political, and economic role the U.S. played in the emergence of a global economic order contributed . . . both to the creation of conditions that mobilized people into migration, whether local or international, and to the formation of links between the U.S. and other countries that subsequently were to serve as bridges for international migration.”²⁸ The rise of Mexican immigration that began in the late 1960s has led to what Mike Davis has called “the browning of L.A.’s industrial working-class” in several communities once populated by blue-collar whites and African Americans. Davis uses South Central and Southeast L.A., “Latino L.A.,” as lead examples of how Latino immigration is transforming U.S. cities in terms of economics, culture, and politics. In a dramatic and highly symbolic example, Central Avenue, the former main street of black Los Angeles, is now 75 percent Latino.²⁹

Akwid’s arrival in Los Angeles in the 1980s was part of a larger wave of general Mexican immigration dominated specifically by migrants from their home state of Michoacan, a prolific “sender” state matched in the 1970s and early 1980s only by Jalisco.³⁰ Akwid’s music, then, can also be heard as a product of the specific Michoacan sector of Mexican migration that has led to there being more than three million Michoacanos living and working in the United States who send home more than five billion dollars a year. In his study of migrants from Michoacan—specifically Purepechea Indians from the pueblo of Cheran—Ruben Martinez characterizes the Mexican migrant trail not as a one-way route of departure and arrival, typical of classic twentieth-century models of European immigration, but as a mobile loop in both space and time. “The movement is circular,” Martinez has argued. “You meet the future by moving out, render tribute to the past by coming back home to visit,

and spend your hard-earned American dollars.”³¹ Roger Rouse, in his study of migration between Alguililla, Michoacan, and Redwood City, California, has called this Michoacan-California loop a “transnational migrant circuit” that leads to an “alternative cartography of social space.”³²

This migration back and forth from Michoacan produces new formations of community, identity, and culture within a “network of settlements” organized according to movements across transnational U.S.–Mexican spaces. The result is that now to be Michoacano, to be Purepecha, is to be part of this loop of traveling ideas and circulating culture. Martinez, for example, meets Chaco, who boasts of being 100 percent Purepecha while listening to house and banda and identifying with East L.A. To be Purepecha in the age of economic globalization and transnational immigration, Martinez argues, is to be a Tupac fan, wear an NBA jersey, and watch satellite TV in your village home.

Akwid members are neither Purepecha Indians nor direct participants in the transnational migrant loops that either Rouse or Martinez examines. But their experience in South Central Los Angeles as Michoacan immigrants, the way their music is born from these circulations of ideas and culture and these negotiations between past and future, is part of a new paradigm of Mexican migrant identity in which the local and global, the regional and the urban, the traditional and the modern, are not strictly opposed. Instead, they are mutually enabling, nearly complementary, nodes within a migrant, cross-border continuum both forced and enabled by the hand of economic globalization. What Martinez writes of the migrants he meets also applies to Akwid on the northern side of the borderline: “They can participate in—indeed, be protagonists of—transnational or ‘global’ culture even as they nurture the vestiges of their roots. In this context, the regional is global and vice-versa.”³³ In songs like “No Hay Manera,” the new loop of social space produced by this regional-global nexus is not just audible, but retheorized and reimagined at the level of music within the song’s three layers of migrant sound.

The historical layers that congeal in “No Hay Manera” do not, however, tell us only about the resiting of identity in transnational movement. The song’s sampled and covered layers—its congealing of Gabriel, Recodo, and Akwid—also involve passages in time, from recent pasts to immediate presents. The song participates in what Andreas Huyssen has explored as “the current transformation of the temporal imaginary” within “the globalization of memory.”³⁴ The sample of Recodo covering Gabriel contains two of Huyssen’s “present pasts” at once, two pasts kept alive within the present time of South Central. Akwid uses musical sampling, then, as a technology of migrant memory, a digital aide-memoire that does not just preserve memory within

cultures of migration, displacement, and exile, but reanimates it by putting it into living dialogues with newly generated forms, generating “the memories needed to construct differential local futures in a global world.”³⁵

Ni De Aqui, Ni De Alla

The spatial and temporal movements of Akwid’s music are typical of most of the artists who align themselves with the urban regional banner. In different ways, they all perform themselves as moving between spatial sites and, in a temporal move of counterassimilation, between Mexican pasts in Mexico and Mexican futures in the United States. The first artist to follow Akwid in this genre, the South Central rapper Jae-P, began his *Ni De Aqui, Ni De Alla* (*Not from Here, Not from There*) album with another “present past,” as Pancho Huerta sings what at first sounds like a traditional acoustic Mexican corrido but then becomes a warning to listeners not to pirate what they are about to hear. The song is followed by the album’s title track, which details an illegal border crossing into the United States from Mexico and highlights Jae-P’s dual spatial belonging. That Jae-P chooses to rap from the point of view of an undocumented migrant when he himself was actually born in South Central only further highlights the centrality of migrant experience to the formation of identity in Nuevo L.A.

Jae-P dedicates his norteño-tinged hip-hop—“corridos just like rappin’”—to portraying a Mexican American urban experience that vacillates between the hood and the campo. On the CD’s cover, his own image is superimposed onto a collage of a Mexican flag on a hillside and a strip of downtown L.A. Inside, there is a shot of him squatting in an underground tunnel that runs from the Tijuana border checkpoint directly to L.A.’s city hall. He boasts that he listens to La Que Buena and to KPWR (where “they freak the beat”) and warns, “no desprecies mi sonido cuz it’s born in LA (don’t insult my sound . . .).” Where Akwid concentrates on the regional Mexican music it samples, language is the material Jae-P uses to build his one-tunnel, two-countries identity. He may make it in the United States, but he’ll do it with two accents on his tongue, “dos accentos en la lengua.” He tells us that while he learned to speak English (he also used to rap in it), he has no interest in assimilating. “I’m from Califas,” he boasts, “pura sangre azteca (pure Aztec blood).” When he throws a “West Coast party,” he does it Mexican style, “al estilo Mexicano.”

Switching between Spanish and English is Jae-P’s way of performing his temporal and spatial doubleness. His Spanglish fluency is not a mark of being lost between languages, but precisely the opposite, of being a master of both,

knowing the right moment when to choose one or the other. Echoing the regional-global loop of Martinez's migrants, Jae-P wants to be able to embrace hip-hop without sacrificing corridos, without assimilating into whitewashed, English-only Americanism, without having to stop being a Mexicano in Los Angeles. "You want me to change my culture," he says. "Fuck that."

Other urban regional artists follow similar formulas, combining elements of hip-hop (sampled beats, rapping) with elements of Mexican regional music. David Rolas's *Nuestra Vida* starts with Cecilia Brizuela hyping Rolas in a traditional ranchera grito style that ends with her breaking into English and issuing a common hip-hop warning: "Don't hate the playa, hate the game." Yolanda Perez's debut album of otherwise straightforward Mexican regional songs also begins with a nod to hip-hop: a bilingual argument with her father (played by La Que Buena DJ Don Cheto) about her independence carried out over hip-hop beats and done in the style of a rap duet. Cheto raps in a heavily accented Spanish; Perez switches between Spanish and English: "Y voy a tener novio [I'm going to have a boyfriend] and I don't care if you get mad!" Later in the album, Perez delivers a romantic banda song in English, singing "You'll Lose a Good Thing" as if it were an R&B ballad performed by a Mexican banda.

All of these mergers of regional Mexico and regional Mexican L.A., of hip-hop with bandas and corridos, of two accents on one tongue and two flags in one heart, could only have come out of Nuevo L.A. at the turn of the twenty-first century, a time when both hip-hop and Mexican regional music are the dueling dominant forces in urban L.A. popular culture. In 2002, Mexican regional star Pepe Aguilar became the first artist in any genre to play a series of sold-out concerts at the prestigious Kodak Theater in Hollywood. The year 2001 saw the debut of *Mex2TheMax*, a Mexican regional music video show on KJLA-LATV that reaches more than three million homes throughout Southern California. Concerts by leading regional acts like Los Tigres del Norte and Lupillo Rivera regularly sell out multiple nights, and groups like Oxnard's Los Razos sell twenty thousand copies of an album in one week with virtually no mainstream publicity from their label.

What began in Los Angeles as largely the music of swap meets, home-grown indie labels, and car trunks is now central to the growing corporatization of Mexican media in the United States. The label that markets Akwid's music is part of the Univision empire that includes USA network, TelefuturoTV network, Univision Music group, Venevision, Galavision, and most recently, the Hispanic Broadcasting Company, the largest Spanish-language radio broadcasting company in the United States.

This is all happening, of course while hip-hop remains the dominant commercial force of American popular music and a major soundtrack to life in Los Angeles. From the high school cheerleaders who appear in Akwid's videos and stage shows to their football jerseys, from the live banda ensemble they often perform with to their samples and their beats, Akwid give us a fully integrated merger of hip-hop Mexican regional identities, a new hybrid that does not ask the musicians to choose one world over the other but allows them to flow between both. Where Jae-P declares that he is "ni de aqui, ni de alla," neither from here nor there, Akwid says that it is *de aqui*; it's just that *aqui* carries *alla* with it. In "No Hay Manera," there is no *aqui* without *alla*, no corridos without hip-hop, no hip-hop without banda, no L.A. without Michoacan.

The merger of Mexican regional music and L.A. hip-hop in urban regional music does not, of course, emerge from a historical vacuum. It speaks directly to two related histories of migrant cultural production in Mexican and African American neighborhoods in Los Angeles. First, as journalist Sam Quiñones has pointed out, with the success of Mexican corrido singer Chalino Sanchez in Los Angeles in the late 1980s, the early 1990s saw a sudden rise in young L.A. Mexicanos who, otherwise immersed in the popular styles of urban culture, now wanted to play Mexican regional music. What they once considered the corny and uncool music of their parents was now cool and rebellious, thanks to the underground popularity of Sanchez's raw tales of cross-border narco life. When Sanchez was killed in 1992, his popularity escalated even further. As one L.A. Mexicano noted, "When we were small, we always wanted to fit in, so we'd listen to rap. The other kids were all listening to rap, so I guess we felt that if we listened to Spanish music we'd be beaners or something. But after Chalino died, everybody started listening to corridos. People wanted to feel more Mexican."³⁶

So kids who were hip-hop fans now also wanted to play corridos and banda, leading to the rise of the "chalinazo"—young L.A. Mexicans who fused their love for Sanchez's immigrant outlaw stance as a narco bad boy with the gangsta poses of NWA into "narcotraficante chic." What Quiñones dubs the post-Chalino "Sinaloization of L.A." led to the rise of gangsta regional/gangsta Mexicano hybridizations by Lupillo and Jenni Rivera, son and daughter of corrido singer and label owner Pedro Rivera—Long Beach twenty-somethings who started putting Stetson hats on the gangsta lean of Ice-T and fusing the iconography and attitudes of "the hood" with the iconography and attitudes of a rancho that they never lived on. But the Riveras never actually made hip-hop records. They stuck to corridos, rancheras, and banda, albeit with Lexuses on their album covers. The shift marked by Akwid and the rest of the regional

urbanites is that they actually do both—they bring corridos and banda into the hip-hop form.

It Wouldn't Be L.A. Without Mexicans

There is a final “congealed history” in Akwid’s “No Hay Manera,” that of Mexican and African American musical dialogue in Los Angeles. More specifically, Akwid’s regionalization of hip-hop reminds us that South Central and Southeast Los Angeles have long been vital spaces of exchange and coalition between black and Mexican communities. These populations often engaged in common struggles against legislative power, white supremacy, and urban renewal—even as these very forces conspire to keep them separated, divided, and more important, at war with each other. The South Central neighborhoods where Akwid grew up, which are now predominantly Latino, were once overwhelmingly African American, and the world they grew up in was based on the styles and sensibilities of African American hip-hop culture.

“It wouldn’t be L.A. without Mexicans,” Tupac Shakur rapped in 1996. “Black love, brown pride, . . . Pete Wilson tryin’ to see us all broke, . . . out for everything they owed.” The line is from Shakur’s “To Live and Die in L.A.,” a song that seems to be simply a rendering of black Los Angeles, specifically South Central Los Angeles, as “the city of angels in constant danger.” Tupac’s L.A. is a city divided by its neighborhoods, policed by “ghetto bird helicopters,” and torn apart by the crack economy’s war for drugs that turned into Darryl Gates and Nancy Reagan’s war on drugs.

His L.A. may be the home of “niggas getting’ three strikes tossed in jail,” but it’s also Nuevo L.A., Latino L.A., the L.A. of the Greater Eastside. South Central L.A. may be cemented in the public imagination as a black community by the media coverage of the 1992 uprisings (as the black home of a black riot), but it is well over half Latino. Tupac reminds us that African American cultural activism and struggle must be in chorus with Chicano resistance to nativist legislation like Proposition 187, precisely because Pete Wilson is trying to “see them *all* broke.” Blacks and Mexicans in South Central L.A. may use some different instruments, may occasionally sing in different languages, but they hear the same song.

Just to prove Tupac right, Delinquent Habits—a hip-hop trio of a “guero loco,” a Chicano, and a “Blaxican” best known for their use of Herb Alpert, mariachi, and tango records as samples—returned the favor by recognizing Tupac’s recognition of Mexican L.A. The group built its song “This Is L.A.” on a sampled loop of Tupac’s verse. The exchange that these two songs repre-

sent—in George Lipsitz’s formulation “the families of resemblance” they speak to—are of course also part of a “bloc of opposition,” a pop musical conversation that rehearses and enacts a political coalition built on shared resistance to shared systems of oppression within Los Angeles.³⁷ “We might fight each other,” Tupac sings, “but we’ll burn this bitch down if you get us pissed.” Part Los Ilegals “El Lay” (where the LAPD hunts undocumented Mexicans) and part NWA “Fuck Tha Police” (where the LAPD hunts blacks in Compton), Tupac’s burning city is still fresh from the uprisings and intimate with the national guard, a Los Angeles ready to go up in flames, be torn down and built anew, always at war.

This black and Mexican back-and-forth is perhaps best summed up by Ozomatli, a band of multiracial urban fusionists, self-professed anarchists and red diaper babies who hail from across the Greater Eastside of Nuevo L.A. In 1998, in the middle of a beat-juiced Mexican ranchera hoedown they call “La Misma Cancion,” the same old song, they asked: “What is a DJ if he can’t scratch to a ranchera?” When you are a band of Chicanos and Salvadorans and Basques and Jews and Japanese and Filipinos and blacks and whites and browns, a band synonymous with post-urban uprising Los Angeles, the answer to that question is simple. The DJ who’s been schooled on funk breakbeats or jazz bridges or Roland 808 kick patterns who can scratch to the Watts funk of Charles Wright or the South Central electro of World Class Wreckin Crew but who can’t scratch to the accordions and rural romance of a Mexican ranchera is a DJ who will become obsolete. The DJ of Nuevo L.A. is no DJ if a ranchera can’t be turned out under a stylus scratch so you can still get your groove on at a quinceñera. The same goes for any musician who can’t reshape banda around a rhyme or any hip-hop crew who can’t cut tubas from Banda El Recodo into a looped beat.

After all, the question they pose isn’t even theirs. They’re sampling too. It was first asked in the early 1980s by pioneering African American rap and electro artist Egyptian Lover. But when he asked it, it was just “What is a DJ if he can’t scratch?”—one of L.A. hip-hop’s first DJ dares. Ozomatli’s addition to it ups the ante on the DJ’s skill: it’s no longer purely just about technical ability (can you scratch?); it’s about creative selection (what can you scratch to?). For Ozomatli, the DJ can’t just know hip-hop, can’t just scratch over a James Brown “Funky Drummer” break, but must know what to do with the acoustic guitars, accordions, and simple snare steps of a ranchera or the tubas and snare rolls of a Banda El Recodo cover of Juan Gabriel. The ability of the DJ working in an African American art form to scratch over Mexican music is the ability to be a cultural cross-fader, a DJ who can cut between the cultures

he or she lives in, a DJ who understands cultural exchange and cultural collision well enough to make music out of it. After all, part of the point of the scratch is to transform (there is even a specific kind of scratch that has been labeled “the transformer scratch”), to take one musical unit, change its shape, blur its message, reduce it to skeletal percussive noise, then allow it to gather itself and reform and rediscover its code, changed and different, a new sound with new tones.

So when Akwid sample Banda El Recodo covering Juan Gabriel, they up Ozomatli’s ante and ask, “What is an MC if he can’t rap to banda?” The question is actually a challenge, a challenge to contemporary Los Angeles to listen to itself, to turn on the radio and hear through the static of disharmony and urban unrest and hear—in beats, in tubas, in rhymes, and in samples—the sound of its communities, the sound of its dialogues, the new sound of Nuevo L.A.

Notes

1. Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* (London: Verso, 2000), 2.
2. Rodolfo F. Acuna, *Anything But Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1996), 3.
3. Brass bands in northwestern Mexico have been performing “banda” music—literally “band music”—for more than a century. Born and developed in the state of Sinaloa under the influence of military marching bands, banda was initially an instrumental music limited to village brass bands playing trumpets, tubas, trombones, and drums, with no guitars and no vocalists. Over the last century, traditional banda ensembles like bandas de viento (wind bands) and bandas de orquesta (orchestra bands) gave way in the 1990s to the birth of “technobanda,” a modernized banda style that added electric guitars, bass, and synthesizer to the traditional mix. The development of banda is chronicled in detail by Helena Simonett in *Banda: Mexican Musical Life Across Borders* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).
4. Nicole Taylor, “Top Radio Stations: Ranked by Audience Share, Summer 2002,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, November 25, 2002, 1–2.
5. Yolanda Perez, *Dejenme Llorar* (Fonovisa); David Rolas, *Nuestra Vida* (Fonovisa); Jae-P, *Ni De Aqui, Ni De Alla* (Univision Music Group); Mexiclan, *Mexiclan* (Univision Music Group).
6. Mar Yvette, “Urban Legends: The Rise of Urban Regional,” *Urban Latino Magazine*, November/December 2003. <http://www.marpop.com/urbanregional.html>.
7. Robert Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
8. George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican-American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11.
9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of The Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 363.
10. *Ibid.*, 360.
11. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49–50.
12. I realize that Spivak would no doubt disapprove of my insertion of popular culture into her analysis of agency and nationalism within globalization. She critiques the cultural studies tendency to culturalize transnationalism, arguing, “To recode a change in the determination of capital as a cultural change is a scary symptom of cultural studies, especially feminist cultural studies. Everything is being made ‘cul-

tural” (Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reasoning*, 412). My aim here is not use Akwid to culturalize economic globalization as a means of diluting the political and financial urgencies of labor inequities and social injustices within processes of immigration and diaspora. Yet I do want to make a case for the enduring importance of understanding culture’s role in the forging of new identities and the performance of new communities, especially as modes of translocal articulation and social survival within globalization. Likewise, I think discussions and critiques of globalization must continue to consider culture’s relationship to economic structures of displacement and labor migration.

13. Michael Dear and Gustavo LeClerc, “The Postborder Condition: Art and Urbanism in Baja California,” in *Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Baja California*, ed. Michael Dear and Gustavo LeClerc (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.
14. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992), and *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999).
15. Deepak Narang Sawhney, “Journey Beyond the Stars: Los Angeles and Third Worlds,” in *Unmasking LA: Third World and the City*, ed. Deepak Narang Sawhney (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 2.
16. Roger Keil, “Los Angeles As Metaphor,” in *Unmasking LA*, 202.
17. Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 10.
18. Iain Chambers, “Citizenship, Language, and Modernity,” in *PMLA: Mobile Citizens, Media States* 117.1 (January 2002), 29.
19. Ramiro Burr, “New, Traditional Music Enjoying Broad Appeal,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 14, 2004. <http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/features/burr/2343330>.
20. Official press release, *Akwid: Proyecto Akwid*, Unision Music Group, 2003.
21. Simonett, *Banda*, 169.
22. George Lipsitz, “Home Is Where the Hatred Is: Work, Music, and the Transnational Economy,” in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 195.
23. *Ibid.*, 210.
24. Banda El Recodo, “Te Lo Pido Por Favor,” included on the compilation *Pa’ Que Te Enamores* (ProTel, Universal, 2000); Juan Gabriel, “Te Lo Pido Por Favor,” *Pensamientos* (RCA 1986).
25. Simonett, *Banda*, 85.
26. Victor Viesca, “Straight Out of the Barrio: Ozomatli and the Importance of Place in the Formation of Chicano/a Popular Culture in Los Angeles,” *Cultural Values* 4.4 (October 2000).
27. Victor Valle and Rodolfo Torres, *Latino Metropolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Valle and Torres, “Latinos in a Post-Industrial Order,” *Socialist Review* 93.4; and for “Nuevo L.A.,” see Simonett, *Banda*.
28. Saskia Sassen, “U.S. Immigration Policy Toward Mexico in a Global Economy,” in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, ed. David G. Guterrez (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 214.
29. Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, 39.
30. Dolores Acevedo and Thomas J. Espenshade, “Implications of the North American Free Trade Agreement for Mexican Migration into the United States,” in *Between Two Worlds*, 233.
31. Ruben Martinez, *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (New York: Picador, 2002), 25.
32. Roger Rouse, “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism,” in *Between Two Worlds*, 257.
33. Martinez, *Crossing Over*, 132.
34. Andreas Huyssen, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia,” in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 74–76.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Sam Quinones, *True Tales from Another Mexico: The Lynch Mob, the Popsicle Kings, Chalino, and the Bronx* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 24.
37. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 158.