

# Gracias a Dios que los Bailes Me Han Ayudado

## Exploring the Baile Economy and Symbolic Networking among Mexican Sonidos in Chicagoland

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**ABSTRACT:** *Sonidero is a subculture centered around immigrant Mexican sonidos (sound men) who possess powerful DJ sound equipment. Working in Latina/o nightlife spaces that are popular with Mexican immigrants, sonidos typically curate bailes (dances) with Latin American soundscapes, including cumbia and salsa rhythms, that are accompanied by saludos (shout-outs). Scholars have focused on sonidero as a form of transnational cultural practice, but few have examined the informal economy of labor, earnings, and expenses associated with sonidero spaces and the sonido's role. This essay looks at Mexican sonidos' participation in the baile economy in Chicagoland following the Great Recession, when sonidos supplemented their low-wage jobs in the formal sector by working in sonidero dances on weekends. I introduce the concept of symbolic networking to analyze how Chicagoland Mexican sonidos strategically use collaboration, as well as competition, with other sonidos to realize both material and social benefits. In this way they transform sonidero bailes into leisure and labor spaces as a means to confront economic uncertainties associated with neoliberal restructuring in both Mexico and the United States.*

The *sonidero baile* (sonidero dance) ended at two in the morning in a southern Wisconsin town near the Illinois border. Sonido El Mero Bueno, his brother and partner (whose nickname is Donkey), and I immediately began to load equipment back into the truck.<sup>1</sup> Afterward, the nightclub owner paid El Mero Bueno for the night's performance. I stayed away from this exchange out of respect, but when I approached El Mero Bueno to let him know we were ready to leave, he gave me a crisp twenty-dollar bill. I strongly resisted accepting the compensation. I had attended the

baile to research sonidero subculture and Mexican *sonidos*, or sound men, based in Chicagoland, the greater Chicago metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup> It was never my intention to financially benefit from the experience. El Mero Bueno's agreement to participate in my study was reward enough for me. Besides, that night's pay in total was just one hundred dollars due to a low turnout—nowhere near enough money for El Mero Bueno and Donkey to cover their travel expenses, including gas, food, and beverages purchased during the show. El Mero Bueno, however, happily insisted I take a share of the night's earnings. He explained to a nightclub worker who witnessed our exchange, and my reluctance, why he felt compelled to give me a share: "Él tiene que pagar su tren." I needed the money, he said, because I had to purchase my train ticket home in the morning.

My relationship with my key informant, sonido El Mero Bueno, and with sonidero in general, was altered by this exchange. I could no longer view myself as a detached observer once I accepted money at the baile and became part of his crew. The shift in perspective was obvious. The incident highlights how money mediates social relations and community building among people involved with sonidero in Chicagoland. The monetary exchange, witnessed by the worker, also afforded sonido El Mero Bueno symbolic currency. His action could be viewed as noble in the eyes of sonidero participants and industry employees. The circulation of money attached to sonidero subculture encouraged me to study how Mexican immigrants in Chicagoland use sonidero dances to creatively merge work and play. For example, El Mero Bueno often referred to *tocando* (performing) as "work," while he called his habit of attending sonidero bailes simply to enjoy himself *cotorreo*.<sup>3</sup>

I contend that immigrant Mexican *sonidos* and the Mexican immigrants who frequent weekend sonidero dances engage in what I call the *baile economy*. Sonidero bailes are popular with Mexican and other Latina/o immigrants, both those with and those without legal status. In this study I pay particular attention to nightlife spaces that are occupied primarily by undocumented adult Mexican immigrants. By focusing on the economy of the dance and highlighting the importance of monetary incentives, we gain knowledge of how micro- and macroeconomic structures affect sonidero

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social spaces. While manual work and especially service sector employment remains significant for Midwestern Mexican immigrants, informal work linked to the nightlife helped alleviate financial burdens for those affected by the “Great Recession” that began in late 2007.

The foundation of the baile economy consists of business deals by sonidos with other sonidos, generating hard cash. The baile economy also embraces those who, for example, attend the dances, own the clubs, and sell food, drink, and merchandise. But monetary exchange is just one aspect of the baile economy. Human interactions also have a role. Although most of the deals between sonidos lead to (or arise from) friendships, they may also lead to friction. I use the term *symbolic networking* to refer to the complex social relationships between sonidos that heavily influence the baile economy, focusing on the created and circulated symbolism of comradery among sonidos within this economy. As a working concept, symbolic networking can help us understand how sonidos utilize their social relationships within sonidero spaces to generate an intangible currency with tangible benefits.

I argue that Mexican sonidos strategically formulate a baile economy and symbolic networks within Chicagoland sonidero dances to transform these nightlife venues into leisure and labor spaces for Mexican immigrant participants facing economic uncertainties. Within this context, I explore how Chicagoland sonidos rely on the baile economy to secure additional income not available to them in their day jobs and how the baile economy extends into the Mexican immigrant community.

## The Sonidero Scene

Sonidero is a subculture that forms around Mexican sonidos, who perform with elaborate sound systems, playing popular cumbias and Latin American rhythms as they simultaneously deliver *saludos* (shout-outs and dedications) during the performance. *Sonido* loosely translates as “sound,” but it is a complex term in the sonidero world. The performers, who are predominantly men, identify interchangeably as sonidos and sonideros. Yet sonidero also identifies the broader subculture consisting of the dances and the social worlds created from this cultural phenomenon. In hope of avoiding confusion, I will use *sonido* to refer to the performer and *sonidero* to refer to the dances and associated social scene.

The sonidero subculture materializes in dance spaces across Mexico and the United States. According to Dick Hebdige, subculture is “the expressive

forms and rituals of subordinate groups” (1979, 2). Hebdige argued that subcultures adopt and negotiate styles to challenge official discourses of culture within a particular historical context. Over time, US Latina/o youth have engaged in numerous subcultures with ties to music, ranging from punk to various forms of Mexican regional music genres. The Latina/o subcultures generated within music scenes often employ various styles and meanings to articulate how music resonates with their collective identities. For example, US Latina/o communities use music to identify with quotidian immigrant struggles such as confronting anti-immigrant sentiments in US society and fearing deportation due to lack of legal immigrant status (Chávez 2017; Lipsitz 2006; Zavella 2012).

In the complicated social world of sonidero, sonidos and other participants defy the Mexican nation-state and common understandings of Mexican culture when they curate a unique style emphasizing a hemispheric affinity, one embracing South America, the Caribbean, and the United States. Along with Mexican cultural codes, broader Latin American cultural sensibilities, especially from Colombia and Cuba, are routinely visible in sonidero subculture. Sonidos take great pride in the fact that their subculture’s origins are traced to Mexico City. However, participants in this subculture redefine what is understood as Mexican as they merge their national identities with strong appreciations for Colombian cumbia and cultural symbols from Latin America. Pioneer sonidos in the 1960s and 1970s traveled regularly to Colombia in search of cumbia recordings, especially by artists who recorded on the Discos Fuentes record label. Contemporary sonidos continue to invoke hemispheric sensibilities, similar to those of the pioneer sonidos, when they decorate their sound equipment with images of Che Guevara and conga drums. They often insert Colombian, Cuban, and even Puerto Rican flags along with Mexican flags into their official sonido logos.

The pan-Latin American outlook adopted by sonidero participants is accompanied by the negotiation of another complicated cultural process: the rejection of Mexican regional music. Sonidero participants enjoying Caribbean and South American aesthetics simultaneously disassociate from the northern rural Mexican *vaquero* aesthetic found in *música norteña* (Castro 2001; Chew Sánchez 2006). Popular Mexican groups like Los Tigres del Norte and Banda El Recodo are absent from sonidero bailes. Audience participants do not wear *vaquero* clothing to the dances. The adoption of a broad Latin American identity by Mexican sonidero enthusiasts contests ideas of nation, citizenship, and belonging in a Mexican context. Their embrace of cumbia is a clear example of how Mexicans engage in

a hemispheric process when they merge South American and Caribbean aesthetics with a specific Mexico City and/or southern Mexican identity, dismissing northern vaquero musical subject formations.

Cumbia's origins are found in Colombia's La Costa, its northern Caribbean coast. Leonardo D'Amico claims that cumbia is "the artistic and cultural product of the rural and artisan classes, who reveal a tricultural Afro-Indo-Hispanic heritage, although the African component is dominant" (2013, 31). Cumbia's popularity eventually expanded beyond La Costa and beyond Colombia's borders. Marginalized peoples throughout the Americas embraced the genre as early as the late 1950s–early 1960s (Fernández L'Hoeste 2007). Mexicans joined many other Latin Americans in adopting cumbia, placing it in the category of *música tropical* along with rumba and mambo (Stigberg 1985; Wade 2000). Colombian groups, including La Sonora Dinamita, also aided in popularizing cumbia throughout Mexico during the 1980s. The group became so popular in Mexico that its leader, Lucho Argain, eventually moved the band from Colombia to Mexico in order to capitalize on demand.

Mexican musicians reinterpreted cumbia, leading to multiple sub-genres. Electronic instruments paved the way for numerous Mexican musicians to experiment with cumbia. For example, Mexican bands like Nuevo Leon's Grupo Pegasso produced successful cumbia numbers using electronic organs and keyboards instead of the traditional accordion found in Colombian cumbia. Bands also reduced the number of members as a result of newer musical technology (Arboleda 2007). These experimentations had significant musical ramifications for cumbia, giving Mexican musicians the opportunity to create hybrid cumbia sounds that merge Mexican and Colombian soundscapes. El Gran Silencio popularized their Monterrey-based "chuntaro style" when they refashioned cumbia and vallenato, another Colombian musical genre, with elements of hip-hop on their *Chuntaro Radio Poder* (2000) album. Prior to El Gran Silencio's commercial success, their music mostly resonated with disenfranchised Monterrey youth identifying as "Cholombianos."

The Mexican sonidero subculture has had its own impact on cumbia. A distinct subgenre known as *cumbia sonidera* has taken shape in the sonidero world. One notable characteristic of *cumbia sonidera* is the presence of *sonido-esque* saludos in the songs. Cumbia sonidera groups often employ a separate vocalist, similar to a hype man, to deliver saludos throughout the performance in a voice that usually is heavily altered using a vocal processor that produces special effects. Cumbia sonidera bands enjoy performing for

audiences in Mexico and the United States. The subgenre has also been embraced by larger media forces like radio hosts, record companies, and video jockeys on Spanish-language television. Large music conglomerates use cumbia sonidera to maximize sales of compact discs at big-box stores. The subgenre itself maintains a complex presence in sonidero because some sonidos reject the naming of the subgenre, claiming this style of music is simply cumbia. Nonetheless, it is a recent example of how cumbia has experienced significant alterations since sonidos introduced the genre to Mexico City residents in the late 1960s.

Mexican sonidos occupy the center of attention within sonidero. Cathy Ragland (2003) describes the sound man, whom she calls a sonidero, as a Mexican DJ with an enormous sound system who plays popular cumbias while delivering nostalgic shout-outs. The sonidero is responsible for engineering the sound, controlling the music selection, and creating a particular social space. Generally the individual sonidero does not act alone, but brings to the baile a team of *chavos*, young men who assist with running DJ lights, collecting saludos from the dancers, setting up steel truss structures, and wiring *bocinas* (speakers).<sup>4</sup> Sonidos often have to invest significant amounts of money to create their own sound system, as a basic setup can run anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000. This includes DJ speakers, subwoofers, amplifiers, mixers, road cases, DJ headphones, club lights, fog machines, special effect machines, and music CDs.

Mexican sonidos, as I have found in my research, explicitly claim to be different from DJs.<sup>5</sup> A sonidero whom I will call Ambiente Nuevo succinctly defined the difference between the DJ and the sonidero, explaining, “Somos sonideros, no somos DJs. No mixteamos. Dejamos la canción correr y mandamos saludos.” (We are sonideros [sonidos], not DJs. We do not mix. We play songs in their entirety and send shout-outs).<sup>6</sup> His distinction between a sonidero and a DJ highlights the importance of technique. Sonidos rely on the same electronic equipment used by DJs, including Pioneer CDJ decks and DJ software like Serato. However, Ambiente Nuevo claims that sonidos’ use of the equipment and their performing styles set them apart from traditional DJs. “No mixteamos”—we do not mix—implies that sonidos do not perform popular DJ scratching techniques, which are closely associated with African American soundscapes like hip-hop. Sonidos also refrain from blending or beat matching, an approach employed by DJs in various genres including disco, dubstep, and many Latin American music styles. Rather than working to perfect popular DJ skills, sonidos devote most of their attention to the saludo and to providing their audiences with the latest

cumbias. For example, to enrich the delivery of saludos, sonidos typically distort their voices with special effects processors like the Yamaha SPX90.

According to Helena Simonett (2008), the sonidero subculture has a rich history that dates back to the late twentieth century. She claims that the sonidero subculture originally grew popular in Mexico City in the late 1960s. Today, it is in Mexico City and surrounding cities like Ciudad Neza where sonidero festivals draw crowds in the thousands. These festivals tend to occur in large public spaces like those in the popular Mexico City barrio of Tepito. Sonidos play música tropical at sonidero events. According to Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste, música tropical can refer to "Latin American music not associated with Mexico" (2007, 340). Cumbia and salsa are the preferred genres of música tropical danced at sonidero bailes (Ragland 2003; Simonett 2008). Other forms of música tropical played by sonidos include guarachas and gaitas. Sonidos also include contemporary Caribbean sounds like bachata in their playlists.

Mexican migrants in the United States replicate the sonidero bailes originally found in Mexico City. For the most part, people who enjoy sonidero are from the states of Mexico and Puebla. Ragland's study of sonidero dances in New York argues that the sonidos and Mexican dance participants construct transnational social spaces through the baile event. Ragland emphasizes the importance of the sonido's role as the messenger of saludos delivered over the microphone, stating that his "most important job is reading the dedications and salutations given to him by the young dancers" (2000, 8). Her research examines how the performance of the dedications constructs transnational spaces: "The sonidero takes them [the dancers] from Queens to Oaxaca, from Puebla to Patterson" (8). More recent studies also focus on the transnational spatiality found in sonidero subculture. Josh Kun claims that sonidos and sonidero participants create a "*transfrontera* audio communicational event" because baile participants and audiences viewing the spectacle online are in effect socializing together in real time (2015, 536). Alexandra Lippman (2018) argues that sonidos use their vocal and sonic sonidero performances to formulate cross-border auditory archives across the US-Mexico border, both in actual bailes and in cyberspace.

Chicagoland sonidos create transnational spaces through the saludos by reading dancers' messages from pieces of paper, text messages, or Facebook live message boards. Sonidos also use the saludo to *vacilar* (banter) with other sonidos or certain audience participants. Sonidos and dancers alike utilize the saludo to claim local Chicagoland identities. One example

occurred during a baile I attended in October 2010. A sonido proclaimed, “Ya llegamos a Elgin” (We’ve come to Elgin), referring to the band’s arrival in the town that hosted the dance but also to the emergence of a Mexican immigrant community there (Elginito Blog 2011).<sup>7</sup> The sonidos in my study also employed saludos and other verbal expressions to forge transnational communities linking the Chicago metropolitan area with Mexico City, Ciudad Neza, and even Puebla.

My four years of ethnographic research with Chicagoland sonidos date back to summer 2009. I spent many weekends in nightclubs, speaking with sonidos about music and migration and helping them load and unload sound equipment. This particular essay focuses on undocumented Mexican sonidos ranging from twenty-one to fifty years of age. My informants all found themselves immersed in the vast immigrant labor circuit across Chicagoland, which includes the city of Chicago and its suburbs, the outer fringes of which touch three states (Illinois, Wisconsin, and Indiana). When I began attending bailes in Chicago, I hoped to contain my research within the city limits, but my informants pushed me to broaden my intellectual scope to include the surrounding suburbs for a number of reasons. First, my informants themselves lived in suburbs outside of Chicago. They had purchased homes, sent their children to school, and worked in areas like Melrose Park and Cicero (Koval 2010; Peña 2008; Sledge 2011). Second, I attended just as many bailes in towns like Bolingbrook as I did within the actual city of Chicago. The car became a significant location for my research in addition to the bailes. Car rides allowed for one-on-one interactions with my key informants, resulting in formal and informal interviews. The sonidos in this study prided themselves on attaining work in bailes across Chicagoland, relying on their sonidero skills and their mobile sound systems. This multisited ethnography mirrors their mobility because a great deal of the research for this essay was produced en route to the bailes.<sup>8</sup>

## **Mexicans in Neoliberal Mexico and Neoliberal Chicago**

Mexican sonidos and dance participants clearly engage in transnational and hemispheric cultural processes with saludos and Latin American soundscapes, including cumbia. At the same time, Mexican immigrants participate in transnational processes outside the bailes, in their everyday lives. Immigrants creatively merge their lives with those of loved ones on both sides of the Mexico-US border through a constant flow of goods, money, social media interactions, and travel, forming cohesive, complex



social worlds (Christiansen 2015; Guarnizo and Smith 1998). Moreover, Mexican migrants in Chicagoland find themselves immersed in transnational divisions of labor due to neoliberal restructuring of Mexico's and Chicago's economies (Harvey 2007). The Mexican population of Chicago and its suburbs performs labor connected to a global economy that relies on transnational flows of goods, people, and capital. This section briefly discusses the changing nature of the economies of Mexico and Chicago as they incorporated into larger neoliberal processes and the resulting alienation of Chicagoland Mexicans during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Since the middle of the last century, economic restructuring in Mexico has been a driver of migration northward. The failures of the Mexican Miracle, an industrial expansion program, and later of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) caused two late twentieth-century economic downturns that displaced many Mexican workers (Gutiérrez 2004; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). NAFTA was launched in 1994 during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The trade agreement integrated Mexico, the United States, and Canada into a single free-trade zone at a time when Mexico was seeking new ways to expand its industries after devastating peso devaluations in the 1980s. Mexican officials also believed their country would benefit from a consumer culture similar to those of developed countries. According to Jorge Casteñeda, NAFTA indeed ushered in a "Walmart effect" throughout Mexico, allowing working-class Mexicans to purchase consumer goods once reserved for the middle to upper classes (2014, 135). But NAFTA also destabilized Mexican industries because it failed to significantly increase labor opportunities in manufacturing. Maquiladora plants, for example, only created an estimated 700,000 jobs between 1994 and 2013 (138). The economy of rural Mexico meanwhile eroded as the importation of subsidized US-grown corn, for example, depressed the market for Mexican corn. This competition resulted in over two million growers losing their livelihoods, leaving many with no choice but to enter the migrant stream (Gálvez 2018; Nisivaco 2017). The trade agreement was sold to the American and Mexican publics as a solution to curb immigration from Mexico to the United States. But as it turned out, working-class Mexicans responded to NAFTA's failures with legal and clandestine migrations northward in hopes of securing stable employment.

What they found instead was low-wage employment and anti-immigrant hostilities from US citizens and immigration officials. Resettling in the United States, Mexican immigrants in the NAFTA era were economically

disadvantaged by politically driven market factors, including low wages, unsafe working conditions, and minimal, if any, workers' rights. As a result of neoliberal restructuring, Mexicans have become economically alienated on both sides of the border (Rivera-Batiz 1986), including in Chicago and its surrounding area.

Mexican communities in Chicagoland developed over the course of a century due to historical and contemporary economic factors, including the 1910 Mexican Revolution, the emergence of major steel and railroad industries in the Midwest, the Bracero Program, and NAFTA (Fernández-Kelly and Massey 2007; Galarza 1964; Rosales 1976). Initially, Mexican immigrants found employment on farms, in factories, and on construction sites (Millard and Chapa 2004). Labor shortages accelerated Mexican immigration to Chicago and other Midwestern cities, including Detroit, St. Paul, Kansas City, and Gary (García 1996; Valdés 1991, 2000; Vargas 1999).

While Mexican immigration continues to supply a steady flow of cheap labor, today's immigrants are entering a very different labor market than the one that earlier immigrants found. Since the 1980s, cities across the United States have experienced economic downturns due to deindustrialization and neoliberal labor arrangements (Avila 2004; Bluestone and Harrison 1984). Chicago, for example, went through intense deindustrialization during the 1980s. It entered a "retro-deindustrialization phase," with another wave of manufacturing job losses occurring in the twenty-first century (Doussard, Peck, and Theodore 2009). The hollowing out of Chicago's manufacturing industries has been accompanied by the restructuring of labor relations in unskilled employment sectors.

Many Chicago industries now opt to hire day laborers instead of employing a steady labor force. Chicago employers have thus embraced the neoliberal practice of triangular employment relationships with day workers, or what Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (2001) call contingent labor. Temp agencies or hiring centers, located primarily in poor Latina/o and African American neighborhoods, become the intermediary between employers and day laborers. The temp agencies provide a contingent and expendable supply of workers, making their profit from wage deductions off workers' paychecks as a sort of finder's fee. Employers using the agencies offer low wages and at the same time rid themselves of the burden of providing workers with employee rights and benefits such as paid vacation or sick time, injury compensation, and job security. Employers can thus maximize profits and minimize risks, while immigrant Latina/o and African

American workers remain on the fringes of the city's economy, where they experience low wages, job insecurity, and minimal workers' rights.

Since the early 1990s, consistent with the city's deindustrialization cycles and new employment patterns, Latina/o families in Chicago and its suburbs have experienced severe downward mobility in the city's restructured economy (Betancur, Cordova, and de los Angeles Torres 1993). Immigration raids in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, have also contributed to labor alienation for many Latino families throughout Chicagoland. Elvira Arellano, for example, made national headlines when she sought sanctuary in a Chicago church after refusing to surrender to immigration authorities for deportation (Escalona 2007). Arellano was arrested by immigration officials in a 2002 raid at Chicago O'Hare airport as she worked on a cleaning crew. She became a national immigrant advocate when she denounced her deportation order and fought for immigration reform. Arellano is a perfect example of how Chicago's undocumented Latina/o laborers find themselves simultaneously vulnerable to the city's restructured economy and at risk of deportation.

A key factor in the changing fortunes of Chicagoland Mexicans has been the shift of employment into the insecure, poorly paid service sector. According to John J. Betancur, Teresa Cordova, and Maria de los Angeles Torres, "As manufacturing opportunities decreased, many Latinos have been absorbed into low-paying jobs as busboys and dishwashers in restaurants, as maids and cleaners in hotels, as security guards, messengers, maintenance workers, gardeners, and similar low-end jobs in the service industry" (1993, 127). Mexicans and other Latina/o immigrant groups currently dominate service sector employment in Chicago.

El Mero Bueno and Donkey labor in the Chicagoland service sector. The brothers are immigrants from Oaxaca, Mexico. With them in Illinois are their wives, children, various siblings, and extended family. Donkey works two fast-food jobs to support his family. Sonido El Mero Bueno is a UPS driver, delivering packages, and thus faring better in the local economy than his siblings. El Mero Bueno takes pride in his job: his Facebook photos display him in uniform, happily standing next to his UPS truck. The brothers obviously hold the labor skill sets that Chicagoland industries desire of Mexican immigrants, and the labor they perform is consistent with the literature on Mexican immigrants in the Chicago area. Neither brother works in manufacturing; they both hold jobs providing services for others. The brothers, however, command different salaries, with El Mero Bueno earning more as a driver for UPS.

Beginning in 2007, the Great Recession intensified the economic uncertainties for Latina/o communities in the United States. The Bureau of Labor Statistics documents that overall national unemployment peaked at 10 percent in October 2009. However, US Hispanic and Latino unemployment reached 12.8 percent in the same month, surpassing the national rate. Latina/o communities also confronted higher housing costs and expensive food. According to the Pew Research Center, following the housing market collapse between 2006 and 2008, Hispanics lost 66 percent of their wealth compared to only 16 percent for whites (Kochhar, Fry, and Taylor 2011). A significant number of Latino families forfeited their homes due to foreclosure in Chicago and neighboring suburbs like Cicero and Melrose Park (Feliciano 2010).

The 2008 financial meltdown deepened poverty and widened the economic gap in Chicago's Mexican neighborhoods and throughout the Chicagoland area. The uneven loss of wealth and wages forced many Mexicans, especially undocumented Mexicans, to seek a living in various informal economies, in which income is produced without the involvement of state-regulated employers (Sassen 1994, 2289). According to Rebeca Raijman (2001), many Mexican immigrants in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood rely on the informal economy rather than the formal sector due to their precarious immigration status and lower levels of education. While many immigrants derive their primary livelihood from the informal economy, others turn to informal activities to supplement household incomes from formal-sector jobs. In the informal economy built by Mexican immigrants in the Chicago area, these activities include child care, street vending, and makeshift auto repair shops, among many other types of work. Chicagoland sonidos have creatively fashioned their own informal economy within sonidero dance spaces.

### **The Baile Economy: Mixing Culture and Money**

Many subcultures, independent from sonidero, generate their own grassroots economies, with little to no backing from corporations. In these contexts, the exchange of money often mediates social relations and cultural dynamics (Fernandez 2002; Howkins 2001; Kelley 1997). Various punk scenes have long been recognized for their do-it-yourself (DIY) approach, where participants finance their own shows and pull sound equipment together for nightly events. José Limón (1994) observes in his classic ethnography *Dancing with the Devil* how Tejano patrons in a South Texas conjunto baile

engage with nightlife economies when they purchase clothing for the dance, alcoholic beverages during the dance, and food after the dance.<sup>9</sup> This circulation of money can have positive impacts on working-class people's lives. Robin Kelley reminds us that people of color turn "play" into money because the "pursuit of leisure, pleasure, and creative expression is *labor*" (Kelley 1997, 45, italics in original).

The baile economy benefits not only the sonidos but also others who are involved in the Chicagoland sonidero scene. Sonidero allows Mexican immigrants in Chicagoland to participate in the baile economy through the steady exchange of money among a number of parties in addition to sonidos and their crews: audience participants, club owners and club employees, music performers. In this way the baile economy encompasses the indirect as well as the direct benefits and costs associated with the nightlife spaces.

Chicagoland Mexican sonidos immerse themselves in the baile economy in order to earn extra cash on the weekends. This strategy became very useful for many sonidos during the Great Recession, giving them opportunities to earn much-needed supplemental income during those difficult years. According to Blake Sisk and Katherine M. Donato (2018), Mexican immigrant male laborers experienced higher levels of underemployment than US-born men, including whites, blacks, and Latinos, during the Great Recession. They argue that Mexican immigrant male workers were more likely than their native-born counterparts to retain employment but earned less income due to reductions in the number of working hours in any given week. El Mero Bueno reinforced this point when he stated, "Gracias a dios que los bailes me han ayudado." (Thank God that the dances have helped me out.) For El Mero Bueno, performing at bailes brought in extra money during a period when UPS temporarily reduced his weekly work hours from forty to thirty.

When El Mero Bueno became a working sonido within the local baile economy, earnings from his sonidero performances added to his overall household income. Many individuals in the service sector share El Mero Bueno's commitment to busy weekends at bailes. Bartenders, wait staff, and others rely on these dances to generate badly needed income. For this economy to function, however, immigrant patrons must be willing to spend disposable income from their day jobs. Nightclub owners and dance promoters (sonido and promoter are often the same person) depend on paying customers entering the dance hall in order to make a profit. Bartenders rely on patrons to purchase alcohol and to leave tips.

Sonidos can expand their opportunities in the local baile economy by utilizing their skills to secure paid private gigs, such as performances at weddings and quinceañeras. Immigrant Latina/o families may hire a sonido for a private event if they have enjoyed a weekend sonidero performance at a club. Sonidos earn anywhere from \$600 to \$2,000 for private parties, depending on the amount of sound equipment required, the number of hired chavos needed to assist, and the amount of time spent preparing for the party. My first experience conducting research with El Mero Bueno occurred when he “worked” his neighbor’s wedding in Cicero, Illinois. The neighbors hired El Mero Bueno to DJ the wedding because they knew he was a working sonido. The bride and groom were both of Puerto Rican descent and did not attend sonidero dances. Therefore, El Mero Bueno gave orders to Donkey to privilege Nuyorican salsa, R&B, and various contemporary pop songs and to avoid playing cumbias. There were no sonidero-style saludos during the wedding, either. El Mero Bueno performed strictly wedding-related DJ duties that evening, including serving as the master of ceremonies and playing music for the first dance. Luckily for El Mero Bueno, working his neighbor’s wedding brought him a nice-size payment to supplement earnings from his delivery job.

According to El Mero Bueno, he became a working sonido because several friends encouraged him after they saw his home stereo equipment. He then thought it would be a good idea to organize *un equipo de sonido* (a mobile sound system). He began performing at clubs on weekends and eventually took on paid gigs at sonidero dances. As his reputation grew within the Chicagoland sonidero scene, his clientele expanded and he continued amassing sound equipment (fig. 1). El Mero Bueno mentioned on many occasions that he would spend all his money to buy DJ equipment or speakers: “A veces no tengo ni para una hamburguesa [sometimes I don’t even have money to buy a hamburger], but fuck it.” He constantly told me that he wanted more speakers and aimed at buying a small trailer to transport his equipment.<sup>10</sup> He aspires to outshine other sonidos by acquiring the best equipment. His DJ rack mixer, for example, reads “limited edition” at the top. I pressed El Mero Bueno to reveal whether his sound equipment was indeed limited edition. He responded, “Yo lo armé así güey.” (I built it like that, dude.)<sup>11</sup> That is, he placed a “limited edition” placard on his mixer to make other sonidos believe his equipment was an exclusive line, boosting his reputation among sonidero fans.

The logic behind accumulating state-of-the-art sound equipment is clearly competitive—to outperform other sonidos. Typically, the sonido



*Figure 1. Sonido El Mero Bueno working his massive sound system during a sonidero performance with the aid of his chavos. Image courtesy of El Mero Bueno.*

with the better-sounding DJ gear has a stronger stage presence. El Mero Bueno was typical of many sonidos who also had the desire to obtain large quantities of speakers and amplifiers. Those who hold a vast collection of DJ gear garner respect in the sonidero world because they have the capacity to put on larger dances or even replicate the outdoor dances that take place in Mexico. Sonidos who own the minimum amount of sound equipment and have smaller networks have to rely on individuals with more respected reputations and lots of equipment to get paid performances. The size of the dance or the number of performances a sonido receives is directly linked to how much sound equipment he owns.

Patrons attending sonidero events engage in the subculture's baile economy when they spend their hard-earned wages at dances. They pay entry fees and, once inside the club, purchase alcoholic beverages and food

at inflated prices. Mexican immigrant patrons with extra disposable income may pay for VIP services. On some occasions, immigrant women sell flowers to couples. Recorded media items, including the sonidero performance on CD or DVD, sell for as high as \$20. Individuals can easily spend anywhere from \$50 to \$500 a night at a sonidero baile. This money finds its way to the pockets of club owners, promoters, sonidos, musicians, wait staff, and security guards. Surplus funds remaining after everyone gets their share belong to the promoter. According to Cathy Ragland (2003), sonidos promote their own dances to maximize their earnings.

The baile economy also extends beyond the transactions that take place within sonidero social spaces. As referenced earlier, Hebdige (1979) stresses that adherents of subcultures negotiate style in order to formulate their identities against oppressive regimes. Cultural items related to clothing and physical appearance add an important component to the baile economy of sonidero subcultures across Mexico and the United States. Sonidos develop a sense of belonging by purchasing and wearing jackets and T-shirts with their logo or stage name, and their chavos wear the same T-shirts and jackets when assisting at bailes. *Clubs de baile* (dance groups) may attend dances together wearing matching T-shirts or color-coded outfits that they purchased with their own money.

Ethnic studies scholars have argued that people of color in the United States utilize clothing and a neatly groomed external appearance to confront racial discrimination in their daily lives (Chambers 2006; Peñaloza 1994, 44). Latina/o immigrants also exhibit a sense of fashion and show respectability in nightlife spaces. Martha Chew Sánchez (2006) describes how Mexican immigrant patrons who are engaged in the nortehña music scene spend large amounts of money on their vaquero outfits.<sup>12</sup> The importance of fashion became clear to me during my fieldwork on the night of the Wisconsin dance. I arrived at El Mero Bueno's home around six o'clock that evening. I broke bread with his family, and we began preparations for the night's event. But before loading the truck with DJ equipment, we first had to attend to our personal appearance. El Mero Bueno insisted that I freshen up for the dance. I had a change of clothes with me. El Mero Bueno pointed to a bedroom dresser and said, "Mira allí está la plancha para que planches tu ropa y ahí puedes agarrar perfume." (There's an iron for you to press your clothes, and help yourself to some cologne.) I wanted to be less of a burden, so I claimed my clothes did not need ironing. He responded, "No manches! Plancha tu ropa." (Don't screw around! Iron your clothes.) El Mero Bueno constantly emphasized



that I needed to look my best when I accompanied him to a baile (he once pointed out that I needed a haircut after a dance). His stage presence was dependent on his entire team (including me) arriving neatly dressed. This meant wearing clean clothing with no wrinkles, respectable shoes, and a men's cologne. In the sonidero scene, sonidos are socially judged by their colleagues on everything from the size of their sound system to their material belongings. If a sonido or one of his chavos appears to be *muy tirado* (poorly dressed), then the sonido is viewed as having a poor stage presentation. Therefore, El Mero Bueno instructed me to iron my clothes so I would not compromise his stage presence.

Social interactions also influence the baile economy found in sonidero dances. In the following section, interactions among sonidos are analyzed through a consideration of symbolic networking. Symbolic networking maps out the social and symbolic worlds generated in the baile economy of the Chicagoland sonidero scene and allows the alliances and hierarchies formed among sonidos to be contextualized. My analysis shows how personal relationships carry symbolism in sonidero circles and can influence a sonido's position within the local baile economy.

## Symbolic Networks and Chicagoland Sonidos

In the fall of 2010, sonido El Mero Bueno invited me to accompany him to a baile in a Central Illinois college town. On this particular morning, the Amtrak train left me a block away from El Mero Bueno's suburban home, which was about thirty minutes outside Chicago. He invited me into his home upon my arrival to eat and watch movies with his family while we waited for sonido Ambiente Nuevo, who was to collaborate with El Mero Bueno for this particular dance. These two sonidos have shared performances on numerous occasions, and they were going to pull together their equipment for this baile. Ambiente Nuevo brought his midsize trailer (about ten feet high) for all the equipment. Once everyone had reached El Mero Bueno's home, the chavos began loading Ambiente Nuevo's trailer with enormous speakers and subwoofers. I stayed inside with El Mero Bueno's brother-in-law because no one had informed me about Ambiente Nuevo's arrival. Shortly after, I went to inquire whether El Mero Bueno needed me. Immediately, Ambiente Nuevo said jokingly, "Oh mi chavo, no sabía que aquí estabas. Ven a ayudarnos." (What's up my son, I had no clue you were here. Come and help us.)<sup>13</sup> The statement was a request for assistance but also a sarcastic implication to get my lazy self to work.

The banter continued as we loaded equipment into the trailer. Ambiente Nuevo provided the trailer, lights, and steel truss structure while El Mero Bueno supplied most of the speakers. Once we arrived at the hall, both El Mero Bueno's and Ambiente Nuevo's teams began wiring speakers and adjusting lights. Each person had something different to gain from this trip. The sonidos were going to perform and get paid. Donkey brought his girlfriend and her friend, who sought to enjoy the evening's entertainment. Another young man joined us because he liked building sonidero stages and setting up the sound system; he later became one of El Mero Bueno's *chavos*. The partnership between the two sonidos also benefited the crews that accompanied them that night, including me. We were fed, and some of us even danced with each other and with those in attendance. El Mero Bueno and Ambiente Nuevo were paid after the completion of the dance. They eventually split the night's earnings between them, also cutting in Donkey and a third sonido from Indiana. More important, the local participants took notice of the equipment and the significant number of people that the two Chicago sonidos brought to the baile. Sonidos El Mero Bueno and Ambiente Nuevo left a positive impression on the central Illinois crowd, resulting in more invitations later on.

This scenario expands our understanding of networks and benefits in the sonidero world. As shown in the previous section on the baile economy, monetary and cultural items directly mediate relationships among working sonidos at the dances. In this section I argue that symbolism and social interactions also influence working relationships between Chicagoland's Mexican sonidos. Symbolic networking, which is the process by which individuals compete and collaborate within social networks for material and reputational benefits, can help us understand the local hierarchies of power that arise within social networks. The concept of symbolic networking builds on a long-standing body of research on social capital, the mutual benefits and resources that accrue to people immersed in social organizations like community institutions and informal networks (Putnam 2000; Warren, Thompson, and Saegert 2001). I employ symbolic networking to show that social interactions affect how sonidos are perceived and perceive each other within sonidero circles.

Symbolic networks materialize in multiple forms. There were many occasions on which El Mero Bueno teamed up with other sonidos to secure performances. El Mero Bueno also rents out his speakers or amplifiers to other guys, which brings him extra income. On a larger scale, Chicago sonidos also create what Roger Rouse (1991) described as transnational

*migrant circuits* when they collaborate with sonidos in other US cities to organize tours, inviting prominent sonidos from Mexico to perform. A complex web of friendships and business partnerships assists sonidos in making transnational arrangements across the US-Mexico border. The sonido networks created locally, nationally, and transnationally speak directly to the sort of symbolic networking created within this popular subculture.

The symbolic networking among sonidos also includes family and friends who do not participate directly in the cultural scene. The morning after the Wisconsin baile, while we were hanging out at El Mero Bueno's home, he took out CDs to upload onto his computer. He stated, "Estos CDs me los trajeron de México." (These CDs were brought to me from Mexico.)<sup>14</sup> He continued to upload the music while explaining that he relied on receiving the latest cumbia and salsa songs from sonidos based in Mexico. The Mexico-based sonidos did not deliver the music themselves; rather, they sent the CDs north with family members and friends of El Mero Bueno who had traveled to Mexico and were returning to the States. He assured me that more music was on its way with the help of his contacts. What is telling in this scenario, more than the acquisition of the music, is that El Mero Bueno acquired these items through his social networks. His words, "estos CDs me los trajeron de México," highlight the existence of his exclusive transnational network, one not accessed by all Chicagoland sonidos.

Several scholars writing on Mexicans in the Midwest have stressed the importance of social groups. The historical literature discusses how Mexicans who settled in Chicago and other Midwestern cities during the first half of the twentieth century formed civic and sports organizations and joined mutual aid societies to assist their Mexican compatriots during financial downturns (Arredondo 2008; García 1996; Innis-Jiménez 2013). Anthropologist Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz (2011) has shown that Mexican immigrants living in a Chicagoland suburb rely on social networks in order to gain employment. These studies demonstrate how Mexican immigrants, alienated by US labor markets and society, create their own social capital. My focus on Chicagoland sonidos emphasizes that social but also symbolic currency is at stake. Sonidos have to show to their public that they do not act alone. They generally consider each other to be *compas* (buddies) and colleagues, although tensions can arise among sonidos due to personal feuds or unfair business deals. A perfect example of fusing friendship with business partnership is the alliance between El Mero Bueno and Ambiente Nuevo. The two sonidos always look to each

other for support, and they make their collaboration widely known to others (fig. 2). They perform at each other's bailes and attend each other's family parties. Afterward, they may post photos of their outings on social media for others to view.

Sonidos frequently rent, loan, and borrow sound equipment to enhance their symbolic networks. Sonido Ambiente Nuevo explained that “la mayoría renta,” meaning that the majority of sonidos rent sound equipment for their performances. This can cost from \$250 to \$400, so a



*Figure 2. Sonidos Ambiente Nuevo (left) and El Mero Bueno (right) pose for a friendly photo in the cabina (DJ booth). The image reflects their continual collaboration and friendship. Image courtesy of El Mero Bueno.*

portion of each evening's revenue often goes to pay for rented equipment.<sup>15</sup> However, a *sonido* will often rent from another *sonido*, one who owns an extensive collection of expensive DJ equipment, instead of relying on DJ stores for equipment rentals. While informal equipment rentals between *sonidos* provide extra income, in some cases the compensation is not monetary but symbolic, reputational, or affective. This type of mutual assistance can extend or deepen a *sonido*'s symbolic network, as the following anecdote shows.

During a conversation over breakfast, El Mero Bueno shared a story of a night when one of his *sonido* buddies desperately needed a critical speaker wire to begin a performance. There were other *sonidos* in attendance at the dance, with extra speaker cables, but no one came forward to help his friend. El Mero Bueno retold his telephone conversation with his friend that night: "¿Oyes güey, que no hay chavos allí que te pueden ayudar?" (Hey dude, is there no one there that can help you?)<sup>16</sup> The young man replied, "No güey. Todos se están burlando de mí y no me quieren echar la mano." (No dude. Everyone is ridiculing me and no one will lend me a hand.) El Mero Bueno drove over to the dance to rescue his buddy, infuriated that other *sonidos* chose to make fun of his friend rather than help him.

El Mero Bueno's friend was not welcomed by the other *sonidos* performing that night, but El Mero Bueno showed those *sonidos* that his friend was not alone. El Mero Bueno's actions were symbolic because he showed the ridiculing *sonidos* that the alienated performer had his own network of *sonidos* to rely on for help. In this case El Mero Bueno loaned his equipment without demanding any monetary compensation. He wanted to help his friend, but at the same time he strengthened his own symbolic network by proving himself a dominant player in the local *sonidero* scene and an ally to others. El Mero Bueno benefitted from actions that showed him at the center of a mutually supportive network of friends. Competing Chicagoland *sonidos*, according to El Mero Bueno, often felt threatened by him because many pioneering Mexico City-based *sonidos* chose to work with him when they performed in Chicago. The competing *sonidos*, he suggested, dislike him because they believe his Oaxaca origins and the fact that he came into his *sonido* persona in Chicagoland, not Mexico City, qualify him as less authentic in Chicagoland *sonidero* subculture. Regardless of the competing interests within this subculture, *sonidos* recognize each other, even if sometimes in negative light, and recognize the influence that each man commands in the scene.

Symbolic networks work on multiple levels. Sonidos use symbolic networks to demonstrate that they have colleagues and friends to call on in times of need. These networks also allow individuals to prove they are significant players, as in the case of El Mero Bueno, whom others can rely on for help. A sonido's symbolic network also demonstrates how much power he wields in the sonidero social scene. A sonido's influence is often determined by the number of chavos in his network and how he centers himself as the prominent actor within their particular group. Sonidos also expand their symbolic networks by affiliating themselves with *clubs de baile*.

Symbolic networks are formed mainly from alliances, but they also sometimes demonstrate the tensions between feuding sonidos and their groups. My own position at the bailes was dictated by my affiliation with El Mero Bueno. I, too, relied on a symbolic network while doing research. One night I talked to a sonido in hope of asking for his business card. He immediately asked me if I was associated with El Mero Bueno. I said yes, because I had accompanied El Mero Bueno to many dances; I had become part of El Mero Bueno's symbolic network and was not an isolated figure in the sonidero world. My association with El Mero Bueno enabled me to meet other sonidos that night due to the influence he wields among other sonidos. I would have been viewed as an outsider and not trusted by many sonidos if I had not publicly aligned myself with El Mero Bueno.

These experiences highlight how networks have material results, such as loans of equipment, but symbolic ones as well, because they construct alliances and loyalties among Chicagoland sonidos. In this context, for instance, the politics of renting versus borrowing is important. If a sonido rents sound equipment from another sonido, it indicates that their relationship is strictly business. The owner of the sound equipment can capitalize on the acquaintance by turning it into a business transaction. If a sonido borrows equipment, on the other hand, it means he has the owner's trust and respect. The equipment owner treats the borrowing sonido as someone who deserves his full collaboration and, by extension, membership in his symbolic network. This section has shown how sonidero networks are organic, offering a variety of positive (and sometimes counterproductive) outcomes for individuals in the Chicagoland sonidero scene. Of particular interest are those exchanges that do not directly involve money but instead yield benefits linked to friendship, solidarity, reputation, and respect.

## Conclusion

The day after the Wisconsin dance, *sonido El Mero Bueno* and I had a long discussion about *sonidos* getting “work,” referring to hired performances at *sonidero* *bailes* and *quinceañeras*. He mentioned that many *sonidos* were lazy and had poor stage presentations. By contrast, he described himself as a busy *sonido* who supplemented his UPS job with lots of work on the weekends, thanks to his professional qualities and his state-of-the-art sound equipment. My conversation with *sonido El Mero Bueno* that morning reaffirmed for me the importance of theorizing the *baile* economy that has developed in Chicagoland *sonidero* social spaces.

Undocumented Mexican immigrants residing in Chicagoland, many displaced from Mexico as a result of economic restructuring, faced a new set of hardships in the US Midwest. During the Great Recession, these immigrants found ways to creatively earn income in the informal economy as a means of dealing with low wages and high levels of home foreclosures. Mexican *sonidos*, and Chicagoland Mexican immigrants more broadly, immersed themselves in a unique subculture where labor meets leisure. These dances became sites where Mexicans could work to secure much-needed income. In the *baile* economy, financial gains enjoyed by *sonidos* are clearly linked to their collaborations with other *sonidos*. The social capital literature stresses the positive outcomes from social networks. Symbolic networking expands on this concept with an examination of how positive collaborations and competing interests develop together in social spaces. A focus on symbolic networking illuminates the complicated relationships that develop among Chicagoland *sonidos*. In the end, my research subjects taught me how to creatively mix leisure with labor. Thanks to them, I was able to meld my scholarly interest in popular music with an analysis of the local economy surrounding *sonidero* *bailes*.

## Notes

The essay's title derives from my ethnographic fieldwork. It is independent from the published prayer with a similar title (see *Lupita La Cigarrita* 2012). An earlier version of this essay was published in my doctoral dissertation (Aguilar 2014).

1. I assign pseudonyms to my informants in order to protect their identities, as several of them lack legal documentation to reside in the United States.
2. Josh Kun (2015, 534) first introduced the description of *sonidos* as sound men.

3. The term *cotorreo* is commonly used by Mexicans to refer colloquially to a fun time, though it can have other meanings as well.
4. *Chavo(s)* is a colloquial Mexican term of endearment for young men. I use it throughout the essay to refer to a sonido's crew. El Mero Bueno's chavos assist with running lights, wiring speakers, and building the steel truss structures at sonidero bailes.
5. Field note, June 26, 2009.
6. Conversation with Ambiente Nuevo, July 2013.
7. Field note, October 11, 2010.
8. El Mero Bueno and I drove more than one hundred miles to dances on several occasions. I used time spent traveling to ask questions.
9. Conjunto music is Tex-Mex polka, originating in the US-Mexico border region, played with an accordion and bajo sexto.
10. Sonido El Mero Bueno has recently acquired his desired trailer.
11. Conversation with El Mero Bueno, fall 2010.
12. Vaquero boots alone can cost from \$300 to \$2,000.
13. Field note, October, 2011.
14. Conversation with El Mero Bueno, June 26, 2009.
15. Conversation with Ambiente Nuevo, July 2013.
16. Conversation with El Mero Bueno, July 2009.

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