Listening to el Southside: Kap G’s Southern Mexicanidad

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What does the Latina/o South look and sound like when we center southern Latina/o cultural productions? Presently, studies on the Latina/o South focus on moments and places of contact between non-Latina/o southerners and Latina/o migrants beginning in the twentieth century across the US South. Labor studies have been key in highlighting the changing migration trajectories that have shaped the Latina/o South, often drawing on migrant narratives to engage questions about labor, race, ethnicity, and (il)legality. These narratives are primarily those of first-generation, Spanish-speaking Latina/o migrants who are considered early or recent arrivals to the region. However, there are few studies that offer extensive attention to either second-generation experiences or southern Latina/o cultural productions. I suggest scholars should work to identify and analyze representations of the Latina/o South by those born and/or raised in the region. Engaging contemporary cultural productions offers a means to study how Latinas/os are working within preexisting southern constructs to forge local identities. Through claiming, reproducing, and reimagining popular cultures of the South, Latinas/os are claiming and making space for themselves not as newcomers but as homegrown southerners. To illustrate how scholars may engage southern Latina/o cultural productions, I look to rapper George Ramirez—aka Kap G—who actively works to claim and make space for Latinas/os in Atlanta, Georgia.

This essay takes Kap G’s cultural productions, or his rap texts, not as a final product but as a process of creating a body of work that embodies and expresses Mex-
icanidad in southern spaces. As the first popular Mexican American rapper from Atlanta, Kap G produces rap texts that illustrate his personal, familial, and communal experiences for both Latina/o and non-Latina/o listeners. His creative labor stands at the intersection of performance, identity formation, and activism within the Latina/o South. Though in some ways different from the immigrant and labor rights organizers Sarah McNamara discusses in this forum, Kap G is doing related work in terms of creating space by and for Latina/o southerners. I argue that Kap G’s work offers a new mode of engaging (and listening to) the recent history of the Latina/o South, one that takes a migrant-centered approach narrated through a second-generation perspective.

Kap G lyrically and visually represents his southern-Mexican roots through his rap texts, which include his music, interviews, videos, mixtapes, album covers, and social media posts. In this case, Atlanta rap music offers a ready-made southern platform for Kap G to shape his own iterations of a southern Mexicanidad. Hip-hop artists such as Goodie Mob and Outkast were central to raising Atlanta up as the capital of southern rap in the 1990s. In detailing the history and development of Atlanta hip-hop, Matt Miller brings attention to the metropolitan area’s rapidly changing demographics through the growing Latina/o population, “a fact which will likely influence the city’s musical culture.” Though it is too early to say whether Kap G will influence the city’s hip-hop scene, the young rapper is actively making metro Atlanta’s (sub)urban Mexican and Latina/o youth “visible and audible” to broader audiences. To illustrate the work of representation and place making, I first offer some brief local context for Kap G’s early life in metro Atlanta. I then move on to consider three songs, “Mexico Momma Came From” (2013), “La Policia” (2014), and “Motions” (2017), in order to highlight Kap G’s identification with migrant struggles through questions of labor and (il)legality.

In 1993 Kap G’s parents, working-class Mexican migrants, moved the family from California to College Park, Georgia. This was a period when southeastern states experienced large-scale demographic shifts due to changing migration trajectories, a moment now understood as the formation of the Nuevo or Latina/o South. Latinas/os migrated to metro Atlanta beginning in the late 1970s, primarily to work in the area’s growing service, small manufacturing, and construction sectors. Between the late 1970s and early 2000s, Atlanta’s northern counties, historically shaped by white flight, saw large increases in Latina/o populations. Northern counties such as Cobb and Gwinnett have received attention from scholars previously, especially relating to mat-

3. Mexicanidad encapsulates broad social and cultural forms, practices, and representations that are indicative of “Mexicanness,” a sense of being and representing the state and Mexican people. This essay engages Mexicanidad through scholarship that attends to its transnational possibilities for Mexican identity formation within the United States. For examples, see Gutierrez, Performing Mexicanidad; and McFarland, Chican@ Hip Hop Nation.
5. Forman, Hood Comes First.
ters about migration and (il)legality. Latinas/os, however, were also moving into the city center and neighborhoods on the south side, including College Park. A predominately African American city that is home to Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson airport, College Park was an important place that shaped Kap G's upbringing and, later, his work. Kap G admits he did not consider anything particularly unique about being the only Mexican American in his group of African American friends until much later in his life, when he began to produce music. In an interview he shared that his early life “was real different. . . . Living a different lifestyle and not being around other Mexicans.” Kap G works to lyrically and visually represent this lived “difference” through the historically black expressive culture of hip-hop, in order to share his personal and familial experiences from el southside.

Transnationally informed yet locally constructed narratives about Mexican experiences in and around Atlanta animate Kap G's work. In 2016 a Remezcla documentary crew followed the young rapper's journey to perform at a music festival in Mexico City. The video was titled “Que pasa homes? — ATL Rapper Kap G Heads to Mexico City to Find His Roots.” The crew followed Kap G as he explored outdoor markets, ate at local taquerias where mariachis played music, and visited the Basilica to leave flowers for La Virgen de Guadalupe. The video's images and title suggested that Kap G was encountering his Mexican heritage in novel ways, perhaps even for the first time. Yet when he took the stage at the music festival, his performance celebrated Mexican roots established in Atlanta, Georgia. First shouting into the mic, “Mexico, que pasa homes?! Ay, soy Kap G, vengo de Atlanta, Georgia. Tengo mucho amor para Mexico.” He then opened the show with his 2013 song, “Mexico Momma Came From.” Like other Kap G songs, this piece weaves in and out of talking about money, sex, and hanging out with his friends. But throughout the song he returns to the opening line of his hook, “Mexico Momma came from, College Park I came from.”

The narrative of the music video for “Mexico Momma Came From” illustrates an Atlanta-based Mexicanidad constructed through images of Mexican culture and labor. In the video, a t-shirt with the Virgen de Guadalupe takes the place of Mexico City's Basilica; rather than mariachi, rap music plays in the kitchen of Don Chon's Mexican Buffet; instead of an outdoor market, Kap G explores the colorful stands of Plaza Fiesta, Atlanta's famous Latina/o shopping mall. This individual-level representation of Mexican places and spaces across metro Atlanta is intertwined with images of migrant labor. Kap G raps in a Mexican restaurant while cooks prepare

6. For studies and reports on Latina/o migrants in metropolitan Atlanta, see American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Foundation of Georgia, “Terror and Isolation”; Hirsch, Courtship after Marriage; and Marquardt et al., Living "Illegal."
7. Kenfe, “Pharrell Called Him ’The Future.’”
8. Herrera, “Kap G in Mexico City.”
9. Quoted in Remezcla, “Que pasa homes?.”
10. Though released in 2013, the song was later included on a 2014 mixtape. See Kap G, “Mexico Momma Came From.”
tacos in the background—“‘Migos in the kitchen, they whippin’ with the apron / You think they want to be doing that shit? / But shit they got payments”—before one of the cooks is brought front and center to show off his dance moves. The shots of kitchen labor are dispersed throughout the music video, mixing with images of Mexican candy and paltereros selling their ice cream on the street. The inclusion of varied food makes transnational connections to Mexico, while the various migrants featured in the video indicate a local labor force involved in place-making processes. “Mexico Momma Came From” was eventually added to the 2014 “Like a Mexican” mixtape, which features other tracks such as “Working Like a Mexican.” With this mixtape, Kap G sought to invoke and subvert stereotypes about Mexicans and migrant laborers, saying, “I’ll mention certain stereotypes about being Mexican, you know, cutting grass, being illegal, being deep in a car . . . we did that growing up, and there are reasons why we did this.”11 Service workers, day laborers, and food vendors around metro Atlanta take a center stage as Kap G visually and lyrically constructs his version of a southern Mexicanidad.

Kap G’s rap texts include lyrics highlighting challenges that Mexican and other Latina/o migrants encounter in daily life, especially issues related to migration, labor, and (il)legality. As a second-generation Mexican American with a high school education, Kap G does not necessarily share the experiences of first-generation and/or undocumented migrants, yet he raps about border crossings, labor exploitation, and threats of deportation. In this manner, Kap G joins other Chicano/Mexican American rappers, such as Kinto Sol, Akwid, and Chingo Bling, who draw on their experiences as either Mexican migrants or the children of migrants to articulate what sociologist Pancho McFarland calls “new millennial Mexicandid[es].”12 Along with symbolic representations of their Mexican heritage, these rappers lyrically identify with the struggles facing Mexican communities across US cities. To this Chicano hip-hop tradition, shaped and informed by globalization and changing migration patterns, Kap G contributes narratives that speak from and about Atlanta. His rap texts include celebrations of the resilience of migrants as well as depictions of the injustices migrants encounter in an increasingly anti-immigrant state. To illustrate these migrant identifications around the issue of (il)legality, I look to two songs, “La Policia” and “Motions.”

“La Policia” serves as a frustrated critique of the increased surveillance and criminalization of migrants and people of color in metro Atlanta.13 Kap G’s lines about getting stopped by the police—“And I know what you thinking, think I got no green card, . . . ‘Cause I’m Mexican yea on some young ’migo shit”—mix with the repetition of “fuck la policia” to blur the division between local police and federal immigration enforcement. In 2009 two metro Atlanta counties—Cobb and Gwinnett—signed on to the federal 287(g) program to facilitate cooperation between local and federal agencies.14 These partnerships between local authorities and Immi-

12. McFarland, Chican@ Hip Hop Nation.
14. ACLU Foundation of Georgia, “Terror and Isolation.”
gration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) increased efforts to detain and deport undocumented migrants. Minor traffic incidents, such as driving without a license, were turned into deportable offenses. Kap G captures the threat of how quickly a traffic stop can result in deportation: “Where your license, registration? My license, registration ayy / Trying to send me to the fucking immigration.” The state-level criminalization of the mobility and labor of undocumented people in Georgia was furthered in 2011 through the anti-immigrant HB 87. As Yalidy Matos argues in this forum, the anti-immigrant legislation passed in southern states between 2010 and 2011 was not a new phenomenon indicative of a “Nuevo” South but rather a post-9/11 expansion of immigration enforcement into the interior of the country. It was in this context of increased policing by county, state, and federal authorities that Kap G produced “La Policía.”

The arrest narrated in the song is expressed as a moment of racial profiling, compounded by the experiences of undocumented family members: “And my uncle he illegal, my uncle he illegal, ayy / And I can’t fuck with la migra.”15 To contribute to this conflation of local and federal authorities, the music video for “La Policía” shows police officers patting the rapper down, alongside other black and brown young men, while the phrase “La Migra” flashes over the scene. This image is a contemporary example of Matos’s discussion of the continued legacies of the region’s history of legislation that sought to limit the mobility of black bodies, prior to the expansion of anti-Latino politics. The arrest and forced pat-down of black and brown men by police-officers-turned-immigration-agents also invokes Cecilia Márquez’s argument about the limitations of the “Juan Crow” framework for studies of the Latina/o South. “La Policía” critiques the partnerships between federal and local authorities as well as the racialized dimensions of immigration enforcement. Though not undocumented himself, Kap G’s experiences of a mixed-legal-status family influence his identification with migrant struggles across mixtapes and albums. The repeated line, “fuck la policia,” echoes his outro to the 2013 song “Mexico Momma Came From,” in which he addresses his audience with a defiant “momma crossed the border, fuck la migra.”

References to Mexican, working-class, and undocumented experiences are sometimes found in songs that, at first listen, appear to have little to do with these issues. One such song is “Motions” from Kap G’s 2017 SupaJefe album.16 “Motions” takes listeners through the young rapper’s career and financial ambitions. Yet following his last line—“I made a difference so anything’s possible”—there is suddenly a new voice on the track. An older woman speaking Spanish shares her warnings about life: “No creas que la vida es fácil, la vida es difícil.” Kap G’s mother sounds weary as she slowly relays some of her struggles, primarily those of crossing the US-Mexico border and raising children as a migrant woman. Despite the high production quality of “Motions,” this final recording sample is grainy. At times the mother’s words are difficult to understand, caught between the poor recording quality and the

15. “La migra” is Spanish slang that refers to immigration enforcement.
background noise of a Spanish-language newscast. As Kap G’s mother tells her story of running from Border Patrol agents, there is a single male “huh,” a short affirmation of the listener’s attention. Here Kap G does not speak on behalf of migrants, but rather makes space for his mother to tell her own story. A slow trap beat plays over this impromptu oral history recorded in a Mexican Atlanta home, sonically intertwining the family members from different migrant generations sitting at the kitchen table. The song is a southern Latina/o cultural production that juxtaposes the individual work it takes to succeed in the music industry with the resiliency of migrants in search of a better life.

What does the Latina/o South look and sound like when we center Kap G’s rap texts? It looks like rap music videos shot across metro Atlanta, depicting scenes of Mexican labor and immigration enforcement. It sounds like intergenerational exchange, where memories of migration are shared over a trap beat. Overall, it looks and sounds like a regional construct with an identity (or rather, Latina/o identities in the plural) still very much under construction. In Kap G’s words, “Being first generation Mexican American, from Atlanta at that, means you won’t be able to figure me out or box me in.” As an audience, we are invited to watch and listen to the young rapper work through and represent intersecting identities and places. It is the work of reimagining, reproducing, and contesting ideas about Mexicanidad—and its cultural, racialized, criminalized dimensions—within a local southern context. Centering Latina/o cultural productions in our studies pushes us toward a critical engagement with the creative ways Latinas/os who were raised and/or born in the South are narrating their own individual, familial, and communal histories.

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References

17. Quoted in Estevez, “Like a Mexican.”


