

# *La Mexicana: The Corner Grocery as a Transnational Space in Illinois*

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## Abstract

*Studies on the impact of Mexican culture in the United States have traditionally focused on the Southwest and more recently on the Southeastern states. This article takes a close look at the creation of a transnational social space in a Midwestern town in Illinois that I call by the pseudonym of Prairie View where immigration has had a strong impact on local demographics from the mid 1990s to the present. In the form of ethnographic notes, the article describes the transnational products and complex ethnic identities that come together in a corner grocery during the first months of a new wave of immigration. And it briefly explains more recent changes brought about by settlers from the Mexican state of Veracruz to this mid-sized Illinois city.*

## Introduction

Mexico's *La Jornada* newspaper anticipated the return of 50,000 Veracruzanos to coastal and mountain towns like Yecuaotla, Landero y Coss, Yanga, Cuitláhuac and Carrillo Puerto for the winter holidays of 2005–2006. Correspondent Andrés Morales (November 15, 2005) reported that most of the sojourners would arrive from North Carolina, Texas, and California, but the article failed to mention a significant group who might visit from the northern reaches of Illinois. After a decade of settlement and hard work in Chicago suburbs and beyond, the *Jarochos* as Veracruz natives are called in Mexico, had changed the face of a neighborhood and altered the demographics of a small city. By 2002, immigrants, settlers and locals had opened a community center with nonprofit status where three years later, residents are taking English-as-a-second-language (ESL) courses, practicing folkloric Mexican dances, working in a computer laboratory funded by county agencies and major corporations, and painting a mural under the mentorship of university graduate students. Unlike the many Mexican newcomers to the Midwest who have been recruited to rural poultry plants and other industries (Millard and Chapa 2004), the Veracruzanos followed the path of a migrant family who sought a tranquil place to open a business beyond metropolitan Chicago.

## A Sense of Place Away from Home

For recent immigrants, building community and creating a so-called sense of place can be a

slow process, but in a small town just outside the “edge city” sprawl of Chicago’s suburbs, this process was accelerated in the mid-1990s by the establishment of a Mexican grocery store named *La Tienda Jarocha* by its owners. This small marketplace, like other immigrant places in the Chicago region, became what anthropologist Nicholas DeGenova terms a

spatial conjuncture of social relations ... constituted through the everyday social relations and meaningful practices that comprise the intersection of a transnational labor migration, capitalist enterprises, and the U.S. nation-state (DeGenova 2005:112).

The new family business created a transnational space: *un espacio*, a new social space in a heartland town, where nothing like it had existed before. Here, the aromas, textures, and colors of *la comida*, the food, are saturated with *recuerdos*, memories aroused by food, and the transnational marketing of food products stimulated by memory and desire for a faraway place.

Mexican settlers and sojourners have come to the Midwest’s “Northern Borderlands” (Valdés 1989) since early in the twentieth century to work in the sugar beet fields, on the railroads, in manufacturing, or in the service sector (Elizondo 1989; Valdés 1989, 2000). But the late arrivals to out-state Illinois I speak about have migrated from tropical Veracruz in a new trend. From Crystal Lake and Palatine in Chicago’s northwest suburbs to a mid-sized town that I refer to as *Prairie View*, 60 miles west of Chicago, the *Jarochos* are further diversifying the process that Robert Aponte terms “the browning of the Midwest” (Aponte and Siles 1994).

This immigration from Veracruz to Illinois has not simply joined the already-existing Latino communities in the heartland. Rather, as a new phenomenon, it contributes to what anthropologist Roger Rouse (1991:14) calls “transnational migrant circuits” mapped by the border-crossing practices of recent immigrants and by a “continuous circulation of people, money, goods, and information.” I argue that this new immigration is producing not only ethnic diversity, but also new social spaces. This occurs, in part, through the circulation of food and memory—*los recuerdos de la comida*—a circulation only partially commodified, since it is interlaced with reciprocal relations. To posit “circuits” and “circulation” is to suggest that movement does not flow in one direction, but rather that cultural practices and products constantly change over space and time to create the profound “transcultural changes” first noted by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz Herrera. Transcultural change transverses cultural territories as people, goods, and memories actively intervene to alter practices in geographically distant social spaces (Ortiz 1947).

As an ethnographic observer, I interacted with several of the new immigrant families to Prairie View (a fictionalized name for this city which had 35,000 people in 1990 and nearly 40,000 today). Having carried out my dissertation research for two years in Papantla, Veracruz, in the 1980s, my knowledge of the regional geography, cultural practices, foods, and modes of joking surprised the new arrivals, and I quickly became their local informant and part of their support network. My observations of the grocery store in its first months of existence are intended to show how new social spaces are created, spaces that reminded me of the years that my son and I had lived among the *Jarocho*s. *Jarocho*s provide a much warmer welcome to newcomers than most Illinois natives provide for strangers from the South. Thus, the following account is written in the ethnographic present although it describes a small family business which has since changed hands, and recently moved across the street to a larger building. Today, the new owners have expanded the grocery to include a small café that offers Veracruzano cooking for a well-established community.

Both commodities and reciprocity flow

through the grocery store that everyone calls *La Mexicana*, a small corner store near Prairie View’s industrial zone. The owner, José Luis Santes, claims to be the first person to arrive in Chicago hinterlands from Veracruz in the early 1980s, pioneering a new immigration circuit that has extended outward from his family-run business back to Veracruz, as family and neighbors return “home” for short vacations or extended stays. Before the recent settlement to this “edge city” town in the mid-1990s, a decade of immigration had brought over 1,000 *Veracruzanos* to the northwest Chicago suburbs. Seeking a less “racist” community to set up a new business, Santes moved west from the suburbs to transform a small Mexican grocery in this predominantly white city from a dark, understocked, and nearly empty space, into an expanding enterprise that seems to constantly create its own clientele.

### **Ethnic Identities of Veracruzanos**

Who are the Veracruzanos in Illinois? Back home in central Veracruz they may be either *Jarocho*s or *Totonacos*, depending on whether their families are *mestizo* (identifying with a national Mexican culture) or *indígena* (belonging to an indigenous Totonac-speaking community). Generally the regional elite, who call themselves “*Criollos*” (Creoles) do not participate in this working-class immigrant circuit. *Jarocho*s was formerly a derogatory term for racially mixed inhabitants of the Veracruz lowlands, who were described as wanton and “lazy” by 19th century European travelers (Siemens 1990). In the United States, *Jarocho* cultural practices are best known through their lively regional music featuring harp and strings, with an accompanying folkloric dance by women in diaphanous white dresses, balancing lighted candles on their heads. *Totonaco* derives from a Nahuatl (Aztec) name for the “people of the hotlands” who lived in *Totonacápan*, a region extending from the cool eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental to the tropical rainforests along the Gulf of Mexico, now the north-central region of Veracruz state (Garcia Martinez 1987).

Four hundred years of European writing on the tropics described this home region of the *Jarocho*s and *Totonacos* as “a bountiful and exuberant nature” where food was available for the

taking: fruits to be picked, wildlife to be hunted, fish to be netted, vanilla, spices, and medicinal herbs, honey from the wild bees. A 19th-century Belgian traveler described the *Jarocho*s in the same terms used by 16th-century friars observing the indigenous Totonacs: "Should we then wonder ... that the natives enjoy the banquet thus prepared for them, and deem it folly to care for the future?" (Sartorius cited in Siemens 1990:152)

In the 20th century, the *Jarocho* identity moved from margin to center as a marker of popular Veracruzian *mestizo* cultural identity, but people identifying as Totonacs through their location in rural spaces, their language, dance forms, clothing, and other practices, remained on the margins. The Gulf Coast brand of *mestizaje*, like the national one, excludes the indigenous subject, assuming their eventual assimilation into an assumed mainstream. However, the speakers of ancient Totonac resist assimilation, as Latinos in the United States similarly resist a cultural blending into the Anglo mainstream (Villanueva 1996). During two years of field study in the Totonac region, I never heard Totonac speakers refer to themselves as *Veracruzanos* or *Jarocho*s and seldom as *Mexicanos*. To a Totonac speaker from the Gulf Coast, a *Mexicano* is a Nahuatl-speaker from the highlands, a *Serrano* from the *Sierra Madre Oriental* mountain range who speaks the *Mexicano* language, the language of the Aztec or *Mexica* people who conquered the Totonac city-states in the early 1400s. Totonac speakers use the word *lubbán* to refer to outsiders, to strangers, including other indigenous groups, so even the *Jarocho*s of Veracruz State are outsiders whose culture is a mixture of indigenous, African, and European, who play *sones* on a harp, and wear crisp linen *guayabera* shirts, but they are "not us."

At the small corner store in northern Illinois, bilingual customers speaking Totonac and Spanish are crossing complex borders of identity and practice—as immigrants to this new land, they now describe themselves, first of all, as being from Veracruz. Separated from their indigenous communities, they are engulfed by that 500-year-old enculturation process called *Mestizaje* that began when Cortez first landed on Totonac shores in 1519. Ironically, the earnings of these indigenous people here *en el norte*, in the north,

will result in remittances to families back home. These are funds that will sustain rural villages and a local material culture besieged by the neo-liberal socioeconomic changes inscribed in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that marked the end of the post-revolutionary Agrarian Reform Program in Mexico.

Mario Perez describes the impulse to emigrate from tropical Gulf Coast and mountain towns of Veracruz to places like Illinois:

Migration is an idea, a labor alternative that has been transmitted from person to person, from pueblo to pueblo, across close and distant communities: the American Dream that invades more and more Veracruzanos who wish to try their luck in the United States. Nothing keeps them back; they are prepared to risk all and suffer the social and economic costs that migration implies (Pérez Monterosas 1999, my translation).

Although the official name of the grocery store owned by a descendent of the Totonac is *Tienda Jarocho*, most customers refer to it merely as *La Mexicana*. No one from the Spanish-speaking community calls the store *Los Milagros*, the name proclaimed from the front window. It is only the local *Gringos* who mistakenly accept the large plastic sign with bright yellow letters and a green cactus that reads "*Los Milagros*" as a true reflection of the store's name. Everyone else knows that this was the earlier name of the store when it was owned by the Mexican evangelicals who sold it to the Catholic *Jarocho*s a couple of years before.

"Where are you from?" "Veracruz." The state is remembered as the point of origin that is distinct from the homelands of earlier settlers, not Jalisco or Durango. Questioned further, people name their municipality, and when I mention that I lived in Veracruz, they explain how their village fits into the state's geography and economy. A substantial number of newcomers come from the same municipality as the store's owner José Luis Santes, *Misantla*. And even from the smaller township of *Yecuantla* further into the forested hills; more specifically from the outlying hamlet of that town, *San Cristóbal*. Given that nearly the entire male population of this

hamlet has spent time living and working in the Chicago suburb of Crystal Lake, the immigrants jokingly rename the prosperous northwest suburb *Cristóbal Lake*.

Totonac roots are deep in the Veracruz homeland of José Luis Santes. The town of *Misantla* was part of the Totonac Federation in 1519, tributaries to the Aztec empire. Meaning “the place of the deer” in Nahuatl, the Totonac told the Spaniards that it was named by the Aztec overlord *Mizanteuctli* or “Lord Deer” (Ramirez Lavoignet 1962:13, 16). Located on a small plateau in forested hill country, in the 19th-century Misantla was a major producer of vanilla, and later of coffee. Hidden among the hills several miles beyond Misantla, the village of Yecuatla has enjoyed an excellent climate for vanilla and coffee growing. Named for the confluence of three rivers that meet below the village center, Yecuatla means “a snake with three heads.”

Studies of out-migration carried out in the late 1980s verify José Luis Santes’ claim that he was among the first people to leave the central Veracruz region for the United States. In a study of eight towns in the highlands, researchers Odile Hoffman, Bertha Portilla, and Elsa Almeida found that Misantla was the only town in the coffee-producing region that had sent its residents abroad seeking work during a time of economic crisis in the coffee industry. They report that 12 people had left the town over the past five years (Perez 1999).

### Transnational Origins and Material Culture

The transnational character of the Mexican grocery store of Mr. Santes is not only embedded in the flow of its people and their money, but also in the way that material culture occupies its interior spaces. What is most *veracruzano* about the store is the abundant array of foods displayed on its shelves. One imaginatively returns to a tropical space by walking into the store, just by sniffing the mixed aroma of fresh *tamales*, *chicarrones*, *hierbas medicinales*, ripe fruit and *pan dulce*. Well-stocked shelves, bins, and refrigerators promise future meals of black beans, green *tomatillo*, *pipian y chile* sauce, ripe *platanos con crema*, candied *camotes* or a *parillada* with *arrachera* marinated in fresh lime juice, grilled atop *mesquit* charcoal, accompanied by a cold *agua de guanabana*

or a *Jarritos* soda.

Upon closer examination, product labels reveal commodity flows that circle back upon themselves. For example, there are cleaning agents like *Maestro Limpiador* depicting a Yul Brenner character on the label translated southward for Mexican consumers, but now returning to the north in Spanglish. Alongside, bottles of liquid, a slightly different yellow-green shade, the same logo, but in English as *Mr. Clean*. The Mexican variety costs nearly a dollar more.

Across the aisle food labels are just as likely to say *Hecho en EEUU* (Made in USA) as *Made in Mexico*. On a high shelf, the imported Gamesca brand cookies include *Ricanelas—galletas integrales* (graham crackers in English). Below, Adelita, Inc.’s *Jalapeños Nachos / Nachos Jalapeños* as round green slices to adorn a Chicano-Mex favorite, packed in Los Angeles, of course. These bottled nacho-makings brought to mind a food fad I encountered in Papantla, Veracruz, the center of Totonacapan, two summers before. Local teenagers pass weekend evenings strolling around the plaza munching on *Nachos Americanos* in cardboard holders, the familiar toasted chips bathed in yellow cheese sauce squirted from a steel spout with jalapeño slices, catsup and mustard on top. So far the *Jarochos* have not brought this trans-cultural treat back to the so-called Northern Borderlands.

Regional specialties on the *Tienda*’s shelves demonstrate the global reach of *salsa*. One specialty label for the *El Yucateco* brand promises an *Original Mayan Recipe* and calls the brownish mixture *Salsa kutbil-ik de chile habanero*. The Yucatecan *XXXtra Hot Sauce* label provides both an 800-number and e-mail address, which is *salsa@yucatan.com.mx*.

Chiles are displayed in many forms, from dried black *anchos* to a three-ounce can of pickled red peppers. On the bottom shelf, three kilos of *jalapeños en escabeche* from the *Empacadora del Golfo* in Veracruz sits next to a six-pound Bush Brothers “gen-u-ine” *pozole blanco*, made in Knoxville, Tennessee where it used to be called *hominy*. For Caribeños who prefer milder flavors, Goya *Azafrán* packets are on hand to accompany rice, and canned *gandules verdes* arrive from three different ports—*Condal* from Peru, *La Criolla* from Ecuador, or *La Preferida* imported *green pigeon peas*

packed in Chicago. Chicago, too, is the distribution point to all the Latino grocery across northern Illinois, and a manufacturing center for fresh tortillas, baked goods, and the *velas* (candles) *de San Martín* sold at *Tienda Veracruzana*. The same Chicago factory produces *Santería* rainbow powders, and *Chango-Santa Bárbara* candles sold in urban *botánicas* or health stores.

Transcultural signs link local people and newcomers to the faraway production zones made visible in the everyday spaces of this corner grocery. Since José Luis Santes acquired the building consisting of two floors of apartments and a ground-level store space, the sale of Mexican-manufactured dry goods has done so well that he built a new room to display household goods and popular clothing, such as tortilla presses, flat metal *comales* for heating tortillas, acrylic and cotton plaid blankets, cowboy boots, and a circular rack of brown suede and leather-patch jackets. Ubiquitous t-shirts, baseball caps, and decals evoke memories of other places by such insignias as *Durango*, *Veracruz*, *Guanajuato*, or *Sonora*. There are revolving wheels of compact discs (CDs) and cassette tapes in the aisles, and behind the cashier's counter one finds salty chile *paletas*, spiced tamarind paste, or a *lotería* game for less than a dollar, even a few medicines in the familiar cardboard boxes of a Mexican *farmacia*.

In the background, a radio plays the calypso song *Matilda* with Spanish lyrics and a Caribbean *Banda* beat; on television (TV), a Pedro Infante movie featuring *mariachi* and *ranchera* songs. *Telemundo* TV became available on local cable for the first time in the Spring of 1996. Before then, not one Spanish-language program was transmitted this far from Chicago, and when I had called the cable company to ask when they would begin broadcasting *Telemundo* or *Univision* a couple of years back, a polite voice answered that "there's just no audience for *those* channels here." But that was *before* they noticed the changing demographics.

*Tienda Jarocha* sells the means of communication with the homeland. *La Tarjeta Telefónica* plastic cards precoded for 10 or 25 dollars worth of calls, and a toll phone outside the door, an international money-order service to send earnings south without going to Western Union, which no longer exists as a company. The com-

munity bulletin board announces a *baile* (dance) with a live *conjunto* (band) that will perform at a local nightclub usually dedicated to Anglo rock. Notices are tacked up for jobs, church services, or English classes.

### Portrait of an Extended Family

The three-story building housing the corner store is home to the Santes' extended family members who traveled north from Veracruz only recently. Back home in Yecuaotla, a junior high school teacher on his Christmas break, recalls his two-year stint in Prairie View working at a fast food place. He is thinking about returning. While watching a news broadcast, transmitted through the huge parabolic antenna on the roof, the young teacher comments on how the Mexican government cut off Spanish-language news broadcasts transmitted from the United States. This was so because, he said, "They told the truth about what's going on in this country, and they don't want us to hear it."

Standing in a doorway out of the rain near Yecuaotla's small central plaza, another youth who had lived in Chicago for several years said he returned because the gang violence was getting too serious in his *La Villita* neighborhood. *La Villita* centers on bustling 26th Street, the commercial heart of Mexican Chicago, formerly known as "Little Village," an enclave of Bohemian immigrants. This return-migrant youth's short-cropped hair and earring looked somewhat out of place on the cobbled-stoned streets of Yecuaotla. However, many other children and youth show off their Chicago colors and Reeboks during this Christmas season in Misantla, Yecuaotla, and surrounding villages.

The youngest resident in Mr. Santes' building, is a distant nephew, born in Illinois early in 1996 to Micaela, a woman with long black hair who arrived from a distant hamlet outside Yecuaotla, which she described as a two-hour walk up into the mountains where no vehicles could reach. She believed that she had received surgery to prevent further pregnancies in a Mexican clinic. And Micaela never imagined as she ran across the desert beyond Nogales, feeling more terrified than ever before in her life, that she would bear a child across the border, *en el otro lado* (on the other side). Her family of four lives

temporarily in one room behind the store, a space organized in the Veracruz manner, with a large bed, baby blankets shading the window, a wash basin and table utensils in one corner by the portable electric stove, the bathroom area cordoned off by plastic sheets and a lace curtain, and the color TV broadcasting a boxing match in English, watched by her husband and his cousin who were relaxing before their bicycle ride to restaurant jobs that Sunday afternoon when I happened to stop by. Micaela cooks chicken tamales for her husband's relative, Mr. Santes, who is allergic to pork. She uses vegetable oil instead of the traditional rendered pork lard back home or the store-bought *manteca* (lard)—adding tomato and freshly ground dried chiles, the tiny hot ones that grow wild in the *milpas* (fields) of Totonacapan, called *chile pequin*.

Around the dinner table, they all agreed that what they miss most about *Misantla* and *Tecuautila* is the fresh cold water running down the mountains, "so pure you can drink it right out of the stream." But the market for coffee fell, the *Tratado de Libre Comercio* [North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA] is destroying the local economy, and one *kilo* of meat costs at least one and a half days work, when you can find work at all. "It's easier here, it's not so beautiful, but it's much easier to live."

When I traveled back to Veracruz with the Santes family to visit their extended families in the Misantla and Yecuautila region, Mr. Santes proudly pointed to the white cement houses dotting the landscape beyond each turn in the rough dirt road. He said that

these were all built with money sent by relatives working back in Illinois. Before, this town was dying. Coffee prices dropped and there was no work. Now there are new houses, but hardly anyone lives here year-round.

The remittances from Prairie View become part of a larger flow of international cash transactions that villagers across rural Mexico receive for basic living expenses, tragic emergencies, and family investment from relatives in metropolitan Chicago (DeGenova 2005: 129–32).

We visit the kitchen of Jose's sister's small cement house, where the fragrant smell of cook-

ing arises from clay pots on the Totonac-style hearth, built of adobe and covered with a smooth clay finish, raised to waist-level above the dirt floor. Aromas of chile sauce, black beans with *epazote* herb, and toasting tortillas fill the space. In the summertime, one can purchase a fresh bundle of *epazote* herb in northern Illinois by looking for a store in an old Finnish-built neighborhood that seems to be named *Los Milagros*, but isn't.

Jose Luis Santes does not plan to live up north all his life; he looks forward to retirement back home near Misantla. After fifteen years, he still feels connected to his home region, but to his fully bilingual kids, Mexico is just a place to visit on summer and winter vacations. Micaela's family returned to Veracruz, purchasing a cement house along the muddy streets of a *colonia* in the state capital of Xalapa. However, her teenage son stayed behind, finding Illinois a more exciting place than provincial Mexico.

### ***La Mexicana: Changes since 2000***

The story of Veracruz immigrants later took a tragic turn when 14 farmers from the coffee-growing township of Atzalan, Veracruz, died in the Arizona desert in 2001. By then, the trickle of Veracruzanos crossing the border had become a flood.

Between 1995 and 2000, some 800,000 people left Veracruz. Pérez Monterosas reports that Veracruz has been steadily climbing the ladder in the list of the states that contribute to the migrant population in the United States. In 1992 Veracruz was in 30th place, by 1997 it had risen to 27th, in 2000 it held 14th, and by 2002 it had become the fourth-largest sending state in the nation (Hernández Navarro 2004).

Census Bureau and school district figures demonstrate that the portion of this population flow which has reached northern Illinois changed the local demographic makeup. From 1,300 Latino residents in 1990, the 2000 Census counted about 3,500 Latinos, nearly 10 percent of the town's population. School district figures indicate that Latino children make up nearly 15 percent of the kindergarten to grade twelve (K-12) enrollment, and at the elementary school

nearest *La Mexicana* store and the new community center, Latino children comprise a third of the school enrollment in 2005. This demographic change so far outside Chicago reinforces DeGenova's arguments that the one million people of Mexican descent living in metropolitan Chicago, approximately half within the city and half in the suburbs, constitute a *Mexican Chicago* unbounded by the traditional geographies of city lines or nation-states (DeGenova 2005:119–120).

Residents of small towns surrounding Prairie View now have access to a bilingual newspaper, *El Periódico Lo Nuestro*, whose mission is to "unite the Latino community" and provide a voice. In print and online, the newspaper is published in Spanish and English in order to "help bridge the gap between Latinos and non-Latinos living in the region by recognizing the contributions and culture that Latin residents bring to their communities" (*Lo Nuestro Bilingual News* 2005). The newspaper carried a story about *La Mexicana* grocery store's relocation to a larger building that had been vacant for nearly a decade across the street. They reported that after owning the business for three years, the family wanted to serve customers better:

The new location provides ample parking, which was limited in their old location. The large kitchen and dining area allows the family to provide Veracruz style Mexican cuisine on a daily basis. Daily breakfast and lunch specials are available for dine in or carry out services. Soon they will also offer butcher shop services (*Lo Nuestro Bilingual News* 2005).

In addition to a larger store, the new community center will expand the spaces and services available to local residents, where master's students from the nearby university are collaborating with local children and youth to create a colorful mural in the sturdy white wooden building constructed over a century ago by Finnish immigrants. Members of local churches, community college, and university have reached out to the growing Mexican community since the 1990s, although anti-immigrant sentiment is not entirely absent (Villanueva 2002).

Before long, the empty storefront with a neon sign announcing *Los Milagros* will probably

be converted into another family business to serve the busy neighborhood. But the transnational cultural space that José Luis Santes attempted to re-name *La Jarocho* but that remained *La Mexicana* by popular demand has created a spatial conjuncture of transnational social relations, the likes of which continue to produce new social spaces in countless places across the heartland. ○

## Notes

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