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## **Film Review: *I'm No Longer Here (Ya no estoy aquí)***

By Jose Castro

*I'm No Longer Here (Ya no estoy aquí)*, directed by Fernando Frías de la Parra, was released on Netflix on May 27, 2020. This Mexican Spanish-language film tells the story of Ulises (played by Juan Daniel Garcia), a young man from Monterrey, Mexico who illegally emigrated to Queens, New York because he was forced to escape the violence and drug gangs that plagued his city.

Ulises and his family lived in a poor urban side of Monterey. As a teenager forced to flee his hometown in Mexico due to his unwilling involvement in the drug and gang violence taking over his city, Ulises became an outsider in New York who found friendship with a young Asian girl named Lin (played by Angelina Chen). But Ulises was stubborn, hence the name of his hometown gang, Los Terkos (stubborn). He was always in control of himself and his emotions and was always on the defensive. Stubbornness and a short temper were part of his life due to his experiences on the streets of his hometown. Ulises was a “Terko” not only by nickname but also as a man who led his gang of teens, who liked to dance to the sound of Cumbia music and dress kitsch to impress each other, away from the criminal gangs invading their hometown. In New York, Ulises still remembered his time in his home city, his friends, and his music. He refused to give up his native culture and assimilate to the culture in the United States; he rejected all kinds of unwanted changes in his life. In this film, the director presents Ulises’ story in the sorrowful social context of the struggles that young teens face in the middle of poverty and misery where the only happiness is music.

The title of the film *I'm No Longer Here (Ya no estoy aquí)* refers to the breakdown of time and space as Ulises remembered

the good times of the past spent with his friends in Monterrey, as he tried to survive in Queens. The sound of the music, Cumbia Rebajada, turns into a melancholic tone that accompanies him through the streets of the great American metropolis. With the help of a portable MP3 player, he let the rhythm of Cumbia music carry him to that place thousands of miles away full of good memories. While he was physically on the roof of a building in New York, his mind and heart were in the dusty streets of his neighborhood in Monterrey. As an immigrant forced to flee to the United States, the distance made him ignore that nothing would be the same as before and that everything would be locked in memories immersed with Cumbia music and sad remembrances of where he once found happiness next to his friends in Mexico. Those melancholic experiences are what many immigrants face when they arrive in a strange multicultural country with different traditions where they continue to yearn for their old memories from their homeland.

On the one hand, director Fernando Frías de la Parra wrote and directed this film to show the social problems in Monterrey, Mexico. Frías declared:

The essence of the film is that the slowed-down cumbias play as a parallel to this idea of not having opportunities or not having social upward mobility as a society in Mexico, where lack of opportunity is just the norm, generation after generation, and youth is punished and doesn't last long...Because you know that there is nothing better coming after that. You want to just keep dancing. You just want to hold on to that golden moment.<sup>1</sup>

Through the point of view of young teenagers in Monterrey, the audience sees how they were absorbed into the drug cartels and

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<sup>1</sup> Bilge Ebiri, "Oscar Hopeful Fernando Frías Has the Range," *Vulture*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.vulture.com/2021/03/q-and-a-oscar-hopeful-fernando-fras-on-im-no-longer-here.html>.

how they experienced the violence in Mexico during the “war against drugs.” In 2006, then-President Felipe Calderon declared a “war on drugs” shortly after taking office. It was a war against the big cartel bosses in Mexico, however, it failed because that war divided criminal groups, created new cartels, and led to increasingly violent confrontations among them, with horrendous consequences for the people in Mexico. That, coupled with the neoliberal public policies introduced to Mexico in the 1990s, resulted in an increase in poverty in the big cities due to a decrease in jobs. It was the perfect opportunity for organized crime to expand into the poor slums of Monterrey. There was an increase of drug traffickers, such as the Zetas Cartel who became the most horrific and sanguinary drug cartel in the 2000s in the City of Monterrey. These drug traffickers recruited young people in the streets to make them become drug dealers. Those cartels fought over territory in the streets, killing thousands of people. This is the social context that the director presents in this movie.

On the other hand, he also wishes to portray the struggles of immigration and the problems and difficulties outsiders and foreigners face when adapting to a new place. Ulises refused to assimilate to the urbanized and American New York City. In this multi-ethnic city, he could not communicate his unique and complex feelings of longing for home. However, he found friendship in Lin who helped him during his stay in this turbulent city. Lin approached him and made him feel special, embracing his style and love for Cumbia. Ulises wanted to show her his music and his feelings but the language barrier only frustrated him more. Financially poor and feeling alone, his only escape was his MP3 player where he could lose himself in dancing to Cumbia. When Ulises returned to Monterrey at the end of the film, he saw transcendental changes in its streets. Everything had changed, and the future had become uncertain because violence and poverty now ruled the streets. As director Fernando Frías de la Parra said:

When no upward social mobility and a lack of opportunity is the norm, youth doesn't last as long

as it should. The golden years of life get interrupted very early on in these difficult conditions. So, for me, this music comes as the voice of resistance trying to make the song last a little longer, trying to hold on to that dance, trying to squeeze every drop of meaning out of it, because, after that, the future is not so promising.<sup>2</sup>

The origin of Cumbia music is unknown. As Hector Fernandez L'Hoeste and Pablo Vila explain in their book, *Cumbia!: Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre*, the word Cumbia comes from the name of the town founded by runaway slaves in Venezuela called *Cumbe*. Some scholars believe that Cumbia came from a ritual dance initiation from Central Africa. Whatever the origin, it is agreed that Cumbia is an African, Indigenous, and Spanish-Mestizo rhythm. It is the result of the fusion of cultures and races and has managed to cross borders and unite the people of various countries. It is a rhythm of freedom and equality in Latin America.

Cumbia eventually became a traditional way of dance and folklore off the coast of Colombia where it then spread across the continent and into the marginal communities and villages where people in poverty used the simplest instruments to make music. By the 1970s, a form of Cumbia known as Vallenato was emerging and growing in popularity in the streets of Colombia; it was made with an accordion, caja (drums), and scraper called guacharaca.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the 1990s, a new way of listening to Cumbia emerged. "La Cumbia Rebajada" is a specific way of listening to Colombian Cumbia music with the RPM (revolutions per minute) speed lowered to make it last longer and to appreciate the dance,

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Marie de la Fuente, "'I'm No Longer Here' Director Fernando Frias Talks About the Mexican Film Biz," *Variety*, March 2, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/mexicos-fernando-frias-im-no-longer-here-1234912782/#respond>.

<sup>3</sup> A guacharaca is a percussion instrument usually made out of the cane-like trunk of a small palm tree.

the moment, and the sound of the music more. That is where the ecstasy of listening to the “güiro” and “guacharaca,” with the Cumbia and vallenato sound, comes from, wherever it is.<sup>4</sup> This is how Ulises and his Terkos listen to Cumbia music. In the film, with the Cumbia Rebajada, the song lasts longer which is how the idea of clinging on to a fast-expiring youth is represented. Whether in New York or Monterrey, the ecstasy of the musical vibration runs through the body and makes the listener lose the reality of time and space. When Ulises listened to his music in the big American city, the bliss of his barrio and friends began to appear in his mind.

In Mexico, Cumbia and vallenato touched the streets of the poorest *barrios* (slums) in cities like Monterrey. *Cholombiano* or *Colombiana* became a form of living for teenagers, like Ulises and his Terkos, that decided to use this music as a form of expression.<sup>5</sup> Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Pablo Vila state that:

Colombiana de Monterrey music displays a narrative of identity not just through vallenato, its most explicit narrative genre, but also through a combination of genres offering [an] alternative for multiple situations and states of mind that, together, include the possibility of claiming, “I am,” or “I can be,” all of these things, according to “what I need.”<sup>6</sup>

Ulises expressed this as a Cholombiano who lived in poverty and showed a humble state of life, friendship, and love to those close to

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<sup>4</sup> The güiro is a Latin American percussion instrument consisting of an open-ended, hollow gourd with parallel notches cut in one side. It is played by rubbing a stick or tines along the notches to produce a ratchet sound.

<sup>5</sup> *Cholombiano* or *Colombiana* was what this group of young people who became fans of Colombian music called themselves. The “Cholo/ Chicano” style of garb from the United States and their “Cholombiano” dance style created a counterculture on the northern border of Mexico.

<sup>6</sup> Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste and Pablo Vila, *Cumbia!: Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 101.

him. He fused the Colombian music and the subculture of Cholombiano with loose-fitting pants, white knee-high socks, and colorful button-front shirts or baggy basketball shorts. This became a form of counterculture for the marginal side of one of the richest cities of Latin America (Monterrey). *Ulises* represents the authenticity and originality of the marginalized in a globalized and polarized city.

This film represents the difficulties we, as immigrants, face in our native cities due to violence, poverty, and the need to emigrate in the pursuit of happiness. It is also an example of what Cumbia means to Latin people and how that music has crossed borders, creating a unique cultural identity in the Americas. Cumbia represents the folklore of a marginalized society that defies physical and cultural borders and brings happiness to those people who are proud of what they are and where they come from in any time and place. Whether in Patagonia, Argentina, or Chicago, Cumbia has broken stereotypes. Cumbia is heard in the poorest neighborhoods, at university parties, or at high-society weddings. Cumbia does not know sex or gender because it is danced by men, women, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

*I'm No Longer Here (Ya no estoy aquí)* became one of the best international films of 2020 on Netflix. It was nominated for Best Film at the Goya Awards in Spain and was the winner of the Best Film category for the Ariel Awards in Mexico. It is a social portrait of the problems of Mexican youth and the violence they face due to poverty and drug trafficking. Likewise, it highlights the challenges of immigration in the United States and the problems of adaptability in this country. It is also an ode to the counterculture of Colombian music in Mexico, its form of expression through Cumbia and vallenato, and the mixture of Chicano outfits with bright and peculiar alterations and original hairstyles which identify them from the other urban countercultural tribes of Monterrey, Mexico.

We are no longer here but while we are far away from our native town, city, or country, we will always remember our roots,

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traditions, and culture. And as Lizandro Meza says in the song “Lejanía”: “What sadness it gives me, to be so far from my land.”<sup>7</sup>

### Spanish:

Lejanía que me tiene entristecido  
En mi pecho floreció una cumbia  
De la nostalgia como una lágrima que se escapa

Ay me da, qué tristeza que me da, me da  
Me da la lejanía, ay me da  
Qué tristeza que me da, estar tan lejos de la tierra mía  
Ay me da, qué tristeza que me da, me da  
Me da la lejanía, ay me da  
Qué tristeza que me da, estar tan lejos de la tierra mía

### English:

Distance that has saddened me  
A cumbia bloomed in my chest  
Of nostalgia like a tear that escapes

Oh it gives me, what sadness it gives me, it gives me  
It gives me the distance, oh it gives me  
What sadness it gives me, to be so far from my land  
Oh it gives me, what sadness it gives me, it gives me  
It gives me the distance, oh it gives me  
What sadness it gives me, to be so far from my land.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Meza, Lizandro, and Los Hijos de la Niña Luz, “Lejanía,” track 13 on *Cumbias Colombianas*, Tumi Music, 1994, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nhW3cLF6zs>.

<sup>8</sup> Meza, Lizandro and and Los Hijos de la Niña Luz. “Lejanía,” track 13 on *Cumbias Colombianas*, Tumi Music, 1994, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nhW3cLF6zs>.



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### ***Author Bio***

Jose was born and raised in Mexico City. He obtained his first Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies in Mexico in 2006 and his second Bachelor of Science in History at California State Polytechnic University in 2018. He is currently a docent at the Workman and Temple Family Homestead Museum and is pursuing a master of arts in history at California State University, San Bernardino. His love for books and history led the retired DJ and radio producer to seek a new career as college professor and public historian to help young, underrepresented students pursue higher education. He is interested in the history of California, history of Mexico, and the history of Christianity in North America.

