

EXPERIMENTALISMS IN PRACTICE

Music Perspectives from Latin America

EDITED BY
ANA R. ALONSO-MINUTTI
EDUARDO HERRERA
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MUSIC PERSPECTIVES FROM LATIN AMERICA

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OXFORD
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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Alonso-Minutti, Ana R., 1976- | Herrera, Eduardo, 1977- | Madrid, Alejandro L.

Title: Experimentalisms in practice : music perspectives from Latin America /
ed. by Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, Alejandro L. Madrid.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, [2018] |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017034408 | ISBN 9780190842741 (cloth) | ISBN 9780190842758 (pbk.) |
ISBN 9780190842789 (oxford scholarly online) | ISBN 9780190864699 (companion website)

Subjects: LCSH: Avant-garde (Music)—Latin America—History—20th century. |
Music—Latin America—20th century—History and criticism.

Classification: LCC ML199.5 .E96 2018 | DDC 780.98—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017034408>

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Paperback printed by WebCom, Inc., Canada

Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK WOULD have not been possible without the help and support of many friends, colleagues, students, and family. We are grateful to all the colleagues who responded to our request of trying to problematize mainstream ideas about musical experimentalism from a Latin@/Latin American perspective; their enthusiasm, commitment, and passion made this endeavor possible. The project began at the 2013 meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, where we, the editors, shared a panel with Benjamin Piekut and talked about the possibility of putting together a volume about experimental music practices in Latin America. Two years later, in 2015, Eduardo Herrera organized a workshop titled *Experimental Music in Practice: Perspectives from Latin America*, at Rutgers University. Most of the collaborators in this volume were able to get together for a meaningful scholarly exchange. The collective conversations and feedback that started during the workshop and continued well afterward were determinant in shaping the intellectual dialogues that concern this volume as well as in strengthening each of its essays. At Rutgers University we are indebted to the Mason Grass School of the Arts, the Center for Latin American Studies, the Centers for Global Advancement and International Affairs, the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion, the School of Arts and Sciences, the Office of the Dean of Douglass Residential College, the Center for Latino Arts and Culture, Critical Caribbean Studies, the Department of Art History, the Department of American Studies, and the Department of Music for their generous support. We especially wish to express our deep gratitude to Robert Livingston Aldridge, Ulla Dalum Berg, George D. Stauffer, and Camilla Stevens for believing in this project, securing funds, and working hard

in the numerous details that made the workshop at Rutgers University possible. We would also like to thank Britney Alcine, a student at Rutgers University who served as research assistant during the initial phase of this project.

Numerous individuals, colleagues, and students contributed in a wide variety of ways to the success of this project. To all of them we owe a great debt. We are especially grateful to Felicia Miyakawa for her editorial hand as the book's final manuscript was taking shape. Finally, we extend our thanks to Suzanne Ryan, Jamie Kim, and others at Oxford University Press for their interest in our project and their work in seeing it through to publication. Thanks to our anonymous reviewers for all their suggestions at various stages. Thanks to Martha Ramsey for her careful copyediting, and thanks to Norm Hirschy for help in designing and supporting the OUP website accompanying the publication of our book. We hope that the sound files, images, links, and other materials posted there will prove a useful complement to the text that follows.

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About the Companion Website

www.oup.com/us/experimentalismsinpractice

Oxford has created a password-protected website to accompany this book. The reader is encouraged to take full advantage of it. The companion website includes pictures, documents, music and video links, and relevant Internet sites that enhance the discussions in the book. The authors hope these materials will prove a useful complement to the text that follows. These website materials are signaled throughout the text with Oxford's symbol . You may access the companion website by typing in username Music3 and password Book3234.

EXPERIMENTALISMS IN PRACTICE

1

THE PRACTICES OF EXPERIMENTALISM IN LATIN@ AND LATIN AMERICAN MUSIC

An Introduction

Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid

FROM JULIÁN CARRILLO'S microtonal revolution in Mexico City and Carmen Barradas's futurist piano music in Montevideo in the 1920s to the noise rock and avant-pop performances at Plano B in Rio de Janeiro or the psychedelic sounds of Bogotá's Meridian Brothers in the 2010s, the last one hundred years have been rich with experimental music practices and conversations about experimentalism among musicians and music fans in the Americas. The eclectic styles and heterodox character of most of these practices, however, make it difficult to trace common musical trends, genealogies, or aesthetic goals. Even defining or agreeing upon a common definition of experimentalism among practitioners, fans, and critics is a complicated task. Many of these practices, although frequently in dialogue with broader transnational currents of experimentation, remain circumscribed to specific local scenes and historical moments and thus are unknown beyond reduced circles of loyal followers, with only few important exceptions. Even more, they continue to be neglected by mainstream scholars engaged with theorizing and conceptualizing musical experimentalism(s).

Since the very concept of experimentalism in music narratives has not carried a homogenous meaning, recent scholarship has stayed away from providing any confined definition. For James Saunders, for instance, "it becomes meaningless to define experimentalism in a closed way: rather a series of indicators might suggest where much of this work is located."¹ It would seem that, as Benjamin Piekut has noted in

¹ James Saunders, introduction to *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, ed. James Saunders (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 2.

his introduction to the edited volume *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, an alternative question to “What is experimental?” may be “What could experimentalism be?”² In doing so, Piekut opens a discussion on the topic in which he and his contributors prefer to use the idea of experimental music as a provisional working concept to “track variations and suggest revisions.”³ This emphasis on tracking histories or lineages also characterizes other compilations, including Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner’s *Audio Culture*, which aims to trace historical trajectories of contemporary musics in order to connect earlier practices of experimentation with more recent ones.⁴ In contrast with Cox and Warner’s emphasis on recent genealogies, we are committed to understanding music experimentalisms as a series of continuous presences that navigate fluidly in a transhistorical imaginary encounter of pasts and presents. Such an approach allows us to move beyond concerns about what experimentalism could be in order to focus on the performativity of experimentalism; in other words, we are primarily concerned with what happens when experimentalisms happen.

EXPERIMENTALISM(S)

If we consider music to be a space in which one can experience the world, then musical experimentalism is the shifting reconfiguration of the limits that porously bound that space. For any musical tradition, broadly or narrowly defined, this space is constituted by complex entanglements of understandings, perceptions, preconceptions, and ideologies, both aesthetic and ethic, happening at a specific moment in time. Experimentation happens only within these localized terms, in acts that are conceived and/or perceived as experimental by practitioners, listeners, participants, or any bearer of the tradition itself. Nevertheless, what we aim to highlight is not the result of prescriptive ontologies but the descriptions of how experimentalisms take place, in practice; how the very ontology of the term is in fact performed by those practitioners in the act of doing something they may refer to as experimental. In short, we are as interested in the performativity of musical experimentalism (what happens when experimentalisms happen) as we are in the performativity of the actions of those who may make experimental music (what happens when experimental musicians act as such).

Experimentalism has usually been associated with contextual shock; in this book we pay close attention to the politics that arise at moments of unmet expectations of

² Benjamin Piekut, “Introduction: New Questions for Experimental Music,” in *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, ed. Benjamin Piekut (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 1.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner, “Introduction: Music and the New Audio Culture,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2006), xiv–xv.

what the experimental should *sound* like. The authors in this volume take as a starting point that there is no such thing as a universal experimental sonic experience. While some may expect to hear or see a particular arrangement of sounds or practices as signs and banners of musical experimentalism—maybe certain types of dissonant harmonies, rejection of conventional uses of basic musical elements, or structures open to improvisation or audience participation—we insist that the sonic result of experimentalism is always contingent to specific music traditions and shared habits of listening, an aural habitus, so to speak. The experimental character of any musical practice lies precisely within the practice itself; that is to say, experimentalisms are performative utterances that coalesce as such when practitioners act in experimental ways within the boundaries of their particular context.⁵ In doing this we aim to move beyond sanctioned ways of listening to the experimental and into the situated tactics that allow for the experimental to be practiced and experienced as such, regardless of any universalist claims about its stylistic sonic outcome. These tactics have the potential to unite the performer, the interpreter, and the audience in a space of (or for) experimentalism. We follow Brigid Cohen's lead in not hearing experimental music simply as a "private' space of expression—or as a 'retreat' from worldly concerns and relationships." Instead, we investigate experimental music not only as "a medium of communication and bonding within the avant-garde communities"⁶ of which musicians may feel a part but also as a localized intervention that reflects upon the particular experiences of geographic, cultural, and discursive marginalization of musicians and audiences beyond mainstream metropolises. For that matter, our adoption of the plural of the term "experimentalism" points at a purposeful decentering of its usual US and Eurocentric interpretative frameworks. The case studies in this volume contribute to this by challenging discourses about Latin@s and Latin Americans that have historically marginalized them.⁷ As such, the notion of "experimentalisms" works as a performative operation of sound, soundings, music, and musicking that gives social and historical meaning to the networks it temporarily conforms and situates.

There is a tension between understandings of experimentalisms as sets of practices and as historical arrangements in constant (re)configuration. Both can lead to significant contributions in discourses about the experimental. Notwithstanding this potential tension, it is important to note that the meanings of something functioning as experimental—either in production or consumption, or even in circulation and regulation—may change from one place and moment to another, and that the frictions that could arise from the disparities of the experimental in various local contexts

⁵ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 5–6.

⁶ Brigid Cohen, "Limits of National History: Yoko Ono, Stefan Wolpe, and Dilemmas of Cosmopolitanism," *Musical Quarterly* 97, no. 2 (2014): 190.

⁷ We follow Aldama, Sandoval, and García in their use of the term "Latin@" to refer to heterogeneous peoples and cultural practices connecting social groups, ethnicities, and genders across the Americas. See Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García, "Towards a Decolonial Performativity of the US Latina and Latino Borderlands," in *Performing the U.S.-Latina and Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 4.

might not need to be resolved. The consideration of experimentalism as a set of practices might be divorced from any given historical moment, from certain institutionalizations, or from specific networks of people and technology. This volume advocates for the importance of locating a variety of experimental practices both temporally and geographically, thus avoiding generic classifications and asynchronous understandings. These associations with musical memories, with pasts, presents, and imaginary futures, invite alternative modes of listening that subvert expectations and challenge any given configuration of experimentalism as a fixed ontology. Thus, this focus on performativity as a central aspect in understanding experimentalisms connects a broad variety of musical practices and histories, from sanctioned avant-garde forms of musical expression to various types of unconventional popular music, and even to peculiar sound practices developed beyond the walls of normative musical institutions.

“EXPERIMENTALISM” AND “AVANT-GARDE”

Scholarship on musical experimentalism has often established some relation between the terms “experimental” and “avant-garde,” and most scholars constitute this relationship in reference to where these practices stand relative to a Eurocentric art music tradition. Nichols, for instance, argues that “avant-garde music can be viewed as occupying an extreme position within the tradition, while experimental music lies outside it.”⁸ Scholarship coming from the United States has privileged the United States as a natural site for experimentation, often using “avant-garde” to describe experiences that connect, to some degree, with European institutions, and in contrast to experimentalism, a shorthand for the work of US composers consciously breaking away from European traditions.⁹ Cecilia Sun argues that experimentalism was “initially a predominantly [US] American phenomenon,”¹⁰ while Kyle Gann uses the word to refer to music written by composers who, while having no aesthetic traits in common, “worked outside the mainstream of [US] American musical life.”¹¹ As is common in many other narratives, Gann naturalizes the apparent inevitability of the connection between the United States and experimentation by emphasizing that “by not providing what a composer needs to have a rewarding career, [the United States] has turned many of its best musical minds into experimentalists. Each composer here followed his own course and created his own tradition.”¹² David Nicholls uses the term “experimentalism” to refer

⁸ David Nicholls, “Avant-garde and Experimental Music,” in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 518.

⁹ A parameter often cited to outline avant-garde movements is that of originality, a concept Rosalind Krauss considers essential to avant-gardist discourses. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 157.

¹⁰ Cecilia Sun, “Experimentalism,” in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Kyle Gann, *American Music in the 20th Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 77–78.

¹² *Ibid.*

to US composers working on “new musical ideas.”¹³ He positions US experimentalism as a turning away from the emphasis on European musical education and looking to the United States as a source of novelty. These debates, when looked at attentively, expose the inefficiencies of both terms in incorporating musics outside the US and European classical music spheres. Attempts to discursively separate the term “experimentalism” from the concept of the avant-garde have led to the appropriation of the term “experimentalism” by one tradition—classical Western music—and to its association with a pantheon of figures who are presented as forefathers of experimentation, most, if not all, located in the United States in ways that exclude Latin@ and Latin American practices.¹⁴

Few texts have been more canonizing than Michael Nyman’s *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, both in regard to the formation of this hegemonic understanding of the word “experimental” connected to the Western classical music tradition and in the reifying of a US/European binary, existing around the figure of John Cage. Nyman’s goal is to “make an attempt to isolate and identify what experimental music is, and what distinguishes it from the music of such avant-garde composers as Boulez, Kagel, Xenakis, Birtwistle, Berio, Stockhausen, Bussotti, which is conceived and executed along the well-trodden but sanctified path of the post-Renaissance tradition.”¹⁵ Throughout this text, Nyman maintains that the terms “experimentalism” and “avant-garde” are “two separate ideational systems.”¹⁶ It is this terminological legacy that has led Sun to affirm that “experimental music has frequently been defined in opposition to the values and aesthetics of the modernist avant-garde.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, as Amy Beal and others insist, manifestations of experimental music on both sides of the Atlantic are marked by constant exchange, influence, and interactions happening in a complex network of factors that have less to do with a perceived musical style and more to do with a system of European patronage that made possible the flourishing of a US experimental tradition.¹⁸ Piekut’s solution is to use the terms “experimentalism” and “avant-garde” interchangeably, pointing out that “doing otherwise would naturalize a difference that has been discursively produced. Given the amount of ink devoted to establishing and maintaining this division, the best option is to sidestep it altogether.”¹⁹ We believe that the legacy of this discursive practice can

¹³ David Nicholls, *American Experimental Music 1890–1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁴ John Rockwell summarizes this view when he writes: “the best definition [of experimentalism] brings us back to the Ives-Cowell-Cage tradition: American composers operating in blissful ignorance of or defiant opposition to their European heritage.” John Rockwell, *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 97.

¹⁵ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ Sun, “Experimentalism.”

¹⁸ Amy C. Beal, *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 14. Even with this goal, however, Piekut himself at times describes experimentalism as a type of avant-garde; see,

only be unsettled by exploring untold stories of musical practices that have presented themselves or have been received as experimental, with their own understandings about its relationship—or in some situations, lack of relationship—with avant-garde movements. Instead of settling on single and inevitably flawed definitions for the terms “avant-garde” and “experimentalism,” or avoiding the issue the way Piekut proposes, we opt to acknowledge that their use is always highly localized, historically grounded, fluid, and full of inconsistencies and contradictions.

Recognizing that the existing literature has privileged certain trajectories—persistently Euro- and Anglocentric, and often favoring practices related to the classical Western music tradition—our approach echoes the words of James M. Harding and John Rouse, who question “whether the avant-garde is fundamentally and ideologically tied to a Eurocentric cultural sensibility or whether the existing histories of the avant-garde have privileged a Eurocentric framing of practices that were always already present in a variety of unacknowledged forms across the spectrum of world cultures.”²⁰ To destabilize the hegemonic process that maintains these particular framings, we use both “experimentalism” and “avant-garde” while surrounding them with specific contexts, grounded in nuances and localized histories that avoid making totalizing claims. In so doing we provide an unclear, messy picture of an experimentalism that has always been fragmented but has not been told this way.

DECENTERED EXPERIMENTALISMS

Experimentalisms flourish across the world inside and outside academic institutions, inside and outside commodification and commercialization, and inside and outside spheres that sanction mainstream distinction and cultural capital. If the scholarly discourse of avant-garde and experimental practices was once centered on Euro-American academic circuits of “contemporary art music”—which includes predominantly white male practitioners—recent scholarship has attempted to reach beyond this to articulate how experimentalisms have been engaged outside those circuits.²¹

for instance, when he writes: “like any avant-garde, experimentalism performs not simply a return to daily life but an intensification of it” (2).

²⁰ James M. Harding and John Rouse, introduction to *Not the Other Avant-garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-garde Performance*, ed. James M. Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 3.

²¹ Some of the recent works on musical experimentalisms that focus on scenes outside the Euro-American sphere include Denise Seachrist, *The Musical World of Halim El-Dabh* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2003); Lorraine Plourde, “Difficult Music: An Ethnography of Listening for the Avant-garde in Tokyo” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2009); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012): 91–119; Steven Feld, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); David Novak, *Japanese: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Thomas Burkhalter, Kay Dickinson, and Benjamin J. Harbert, eds., *The Arab Avant-garde: Music, Politics, Modernity* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013).

Notwithstanding the increasing scholarly efforts challenging the predominance of Euro-American scenes in experimental practices, there has been a pressing lack of engagement with Latin@ and Latin American musicians.²² Anglo narratives of experimental and avant-garde musics rarely mention them and often relegate them to a few incidental allusions and footnote references. In a similar vein, discourses about race, class, ethnicity, and gender still remain at the margins of mainstream experimental music narratives. As George Lewis suggests, experimentalisms in music can have many different histories, and for some time historians of experimental music “have stood at a crossroads, facing a stark choice: to grow up and recognize a multicultural, multiethnic base for experimentalism in music, with a variety of perspectives, histories, traditions, and methods, or to remain the chroniclers of an ethnically bound and ultimately limited tradition that appropriates freely, yet furtively, from other ethnic traditions, yet cannot recognize any histories as its own other than those based in whiteness.”²³ It is in the spirit of that first option that we undertake the challenge of producing new histories, ethnographies, and critical studies of experimental musics, and support the open-endedness of experimental inquiry, one with significant antecedents in jazz studies.

²² Some notable exceptions specifically framed as studies on Latin American experimental or avant-garde music and practitioners include José Maria Neves, *Música contemporânea brasileira* (São Paulo: Ricordi Brasileira, 1977); Mariano Etkin, “Reflexiones sobre la música de vanguardia en América Latina,” in *Ensayos de música latinoamericana*, ed. Zoila Gómez García (Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1982), 333–335; Zoila Gómez García, ed., *Reflexiones sobre la música de vanguardia en América Latina* (Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1985); Alcides Lanza, “Quelques musiques d’Amérique Latine: Les années 1960,” *Dérives* 47/48 (1985): 139–162; Aurelio Tello, “Les jeunes compositeurs latino-américains,” *Dérives* 47/48 (1985): 163–168; Juan Orrego-Salas, “Traditions, Experiment, and Change in Contemporary Latin America,” *Latin American Music Review* 6, no. 2 (1985): 152–165; Luiz Heitor Corrêa de Azevedo, “O compositor latino-americano e o universo sonoro deste fin de século,” *Latin American Music Review* 7, no. 2 (1986): 248–253; Mariano Etkin, “Los espacios de la música contemporánea en América Latina,” *Revista del Instituto Superior de Música, Universidad del Litoral* 1 (1989): 47–58; Carlos Palombini, “The Brazilian Group for Computer Music Research: A Proto-history,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 10 (2000): 13–20; Coriún Aharonián, “An Approach to Compositional Trends in Latin America,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 10 (2000): 3–5; Graciela Paraskevaïdis, “Eduardo Bértola,” *Revista del Instituto Superior de Música, Universidad del Litoral* 8 (2001): 12–59; Graciela Paraskevaïdis, “Jaqueline Nova en el contexto latinoamericano de su generación,” *A Contratiempo* 12 (2002): 19–27; Federico Schumacher, *Historia de la música electroacústica en Chile* (Santiago de Chile, 2005); Ricardo Dal Farra, “Un voyage du son par les fils électroacoustiques l’art et les nouvelles technologies en Amérique Latine” (Ph.D. diss., University of Quebec, 2006); Cintia Cristiá, *Xul Solar: Un músico visual* (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical, 2007); Esteban Buch, “L’avant-garde musicale à Buenos Aires: Paz contra Ginastera,” *Circuit: Musiques Contemporaines* 17, no. 2 (2007): 11–34; Omar Corrado, *Vanguardias al sur: La música de Juan Carlos Paz* (Havana: Fondo Editorial Casa de las Américas, 2010); Luis Alvarado, “Encuentro de dos mundos: Edgar Valcárcel y la nueva música en el Perú,” *Hueso Húmero* 55 (2010): 80–100; Chris Dunn, “‘Experimentar o Experimental’: Avant-Garde, Cultura Marginal, and Counterculture in Brazil, 1968–72,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 50, no. 1 (2013): 247; Omar Corrado, ed., *Estudios sobre la obra musical de Graciela Paraskevaïdis* (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical, 2014); Alejandro L. Madrid, *In Search of Julián Carrillo and Sonido 13* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²³ George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xiii.

From Lewis's writings to the work of Amiri Baraka, scholarship on experimentation and the avant-garde in jazz has foregrounded its inseparability from politics of race, class, and gender.²⁴ Lewis's work on the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians is one of the few historical accounts to challenge the centrality of whiteness in narratives about US experimental scenes. His work has been central in destabilizing the racialized location of experimentalism in the space of whiteness and exposing certain "coded qualifiers" frequently attached to the word "music," "such as 'experimental,' 'new,' 'art,' 'concert,' 'serious,' 'avant-garde,' and 'contemporary.'"²⁵ From a different perspective, Scott DeVeaux's landmark study on bebop shows the emergence of more experimental and avant-garde trends in jazz not as a sudden revolution but as the result of a gradual shift in practices and values of many musicians ultimately driven by experimentation. "The 'problems' they sought to 'solve,'" says DeVeaux, "differed from a scientist's experiments in that their ultimate goals were aesthetic. But, like a scientist, these musicians systematically applied principles inherent in the original paradigm to novel contexts."²⁶ For DeVeaux, the notion of a "historical avant-garde," as derived from the work of Peter Bürger, has a limited applicability to jazz. He finds, however, a useful distinction between "an autonomous modernism and a politically engaged avant-garde."²⁷ Much work is still needed in this direction, and as Gabriel Solis has noted, while there is a rich historiography on the 1960s avant-garde jazz scene, "theoretical and analytical studies of avant-garde jazz have been considerably less common than historical and ethnographic ones."²⁸

Ultimately, jazz historians have tended to use the terms almost as erratically as classical music historians. On the one hand jazz historiographers have frequently used the term "avant-grade" to refer to a broad set of practices, including bebop, postbop, and avant-jazz. On the other hand they have extended the label "experimental jazz" to different musical practices related to free jazz, open forms, collective improvisation, and, confusingly enough, avant-jazz once again. As Ingrid Monson points out, during the 1960s "jazz musicians struggled and debated vociferously among themselves about the politics of race within the jazz world, the economic racism of the music industry, and the newly emerging aesthetics of what has variously been called free jazz, the New Thing,

²⁴ LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010 [1968]), 205–241; Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*.

²⁵ George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 217.

²⁶ Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁸ Gabriel Solis, "Timbral Virtuosity: Pharoah Sanders, Sonic Heterogeneity, and the Jazz Avant-garde in the 1960s and 70s," *Jazz Perspectives* 9, no. 1 (2015): 3. See also Gabriel Solis, "Jazz Historiography and the Sixties Avant-garde: A Review Essay," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 131, no. 2 (2006): 331–349. For an example of jazz historiography, see Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

avant-garde jazz, freedom music, serious music, the Great Black Music, and experimentalism.”²⁹

Scholarship on avant-garde jazz collectives, led by Lewis’s detailed account of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians³⁰ and including studies of the Black Artists Group of St Louis³¹ and the Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension in Los Angeles,³² have offered important alternatives to narratives focused solely on individualities. However, as in other musical traditions, the scarcity of work on Latin jazz, or jazz musicians of Latin@ and Latin American origins and their impact and active presence in the jazz scene highlights a somewhat uncritical embrace of the biracial imagination of the United States.³³ The lack of recognition of Airto Moreira’s crucial collaboration with Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, and Weather Report is but one example.³⁴

EXPERIMENTALISMS AND COSMOPOLITANISM IN LOCAL PRACTICE

In acknowledging the simultaneous local and transnational character of experimentalisms around Latin America, we pay attention to how local practitioners have developed discourses that, while embracing a cosmopolitan character, respond to the everyday circumstances of the local actors, networks, and audiences who embrace it in the so-called periphery. If avant-gardes have been discursively constructed as a series of ruptures with history, we ask not only “which history?” but also, as do Harding and Rouse, “constructed at whose expense and based upon whose exclusion?”³⁵ We challenge linear historical narratives that reproduce colonial models of musical subordination when talking about Latin@ and Latin American music, and instead we point out the gestures of adaptation, transformation, modification, and subversion in the Latin@ and Latin American cosmopolitan experience.

Furthermore, to paraphrase what one of us has proposed elsewhere, we intend this intervention not only to question the values of such experimentalist canon but also

²⁹ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 238.

³⁰ Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*.

³¹ Benjamin Looker, *Point from Which Creation Begins: The Black Artists Group of St Louis* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2004).

³² Steven Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Horace Tapscott, *Songs of the Unsung: The Musical and Social Journey of Horace Tapscott*, ed. Steven Isoardi (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). For an earlier look at jazz collectives see Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo, 1994).

³³ A problem perhaps hinted at in Lewis’s “Improvised Music after 1950.”

³⁴ An exception is Luiz Costa-Lima Neto, “The Experimental Music of Hermeto Pascoal e Grupo (1981–93): A Musical System in the Making,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9, no. 11 (2000): 119–142. See also Jason Stanyek, “Diasporic Anthropophagy and Brazilian Experimentalism in the United States,” paper presented at symposium “Experimentalism in Practice: Perspectives from Latin America,” Rutgers University, September 25, 2015.

³⁵ Harding and Rouse, “Introduction,” 13.

to point out the racialized political contingencies that give meaning to any canonical construction.³⁶ We are not concerned with an essentialist quest for origins within experimentalism. Instead, we are interested in reaching an understanding of the transnational and transhistorical flows of experimentalisms as particular ways of experiencing and performing cosmopolitanism and significant forms of belonging in the world. In other words, we are interested in the local character of experimentalisms, in their ability to negotiate transnational imaginaries—often misconstrued as global—within the local resources available to particular practitioners. In sum, we explore experimentalisms as complex, geographically diffused transnational networks of ideas, practices, actions, products, and processes, which have marks of local distinctiveness.

Cosmopolitanism is not something that happens in opposition to the local; instead, it is part of the local. Focusing on the Latin@ and Latin American experimentalist experiences beyond the center–periphery and authenticity–imitation dichotomies privileged in teleological Eurocentric narratives not only makes this evident but also helps us to question the exceptionalism that pervades these discourses. We address these relationships using a descriptive theory of cosmopolitanism, cautious of any claims to universalism. Unlike Appiah’s cosmopolitanism, which functions as a prescriptive moral attitude,³⁷ or something that is “yet to come, something awaiting realization,”³⁸ we use the word to refer to practices and habits that are shared among widely dispersed groups in countries around the world and that form the basis for an everyday repertoire in people’s lives.³⁹ Tony Perman argues that cosmopolitanism “is an appealing tool for negotiating the delicate balance between generalizing universals and fragmented particulars. It can illuminate commonalities between groups of people from throughout the world as well as highlight the diversity of experience found in even the smallest of communities.”⁴⁰ Our descriptive cosmopolitanism signals shared experiences that create the conditions for the specific choices people make, setting the realm of possibilities that we see as choices learned through socialization. Cosmopolitanism is ultimately a tool, a shorthand for objects, ideas, and positions (and eventually for structuring properties) that are “widely diffused throughout the world and yet are specific only of certain portions of the populations within given countries.”⁴¹ The term reveals complex entanglements and clarifies transnational contacts.

³⁶ Alejandro L. Madrid, *Sounds of the Modern Nation: Music, Culture, and Ideas in Post-revolutionary Mexico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 168–169.

³⁷ See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006).

³⁸ Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Cosmopolitanisms,” in *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.

³⁹ See Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 118.

⁴⁰ Tony Perman, “Sungura in Zimbabwe and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 21, no. 3 (2012): 16.

⁴¹ Thomas Turino, *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 7.

Martin Stokes states that “to evoke ‘musical cosmopolitanism’ is to evoke a capacity of the musical imagination, and with that word ‘imagination,’ certain ideas about the powers, agencies and creativities of human beings at this point in time.”⁴² To evoke a musical cosmopolitanism in the Latin@ and Latin American experimental experience is to allow for that imagination to arise against the common misconceptions about the many ethnic communities that form these imaginary labels. Sometimes this imagination comes in the form of an artistic aspiration, other times as realities of transnational connectedness, and more often than not as sites for a postcolonial reconfiguration of creative agencies. Nowicka and Rovisco argue that “people can *actually* become more cosmopolitan in ways that are both reflexive and emotional,”⁴³ and in this, experimentation as cosmopolitan practice can be a mode of self-transformation.

SUPRANATIONAL IDENTIFICATIONS AND DECOLONIZING EXPERIMENTATION

The practices we focus on in this collection are inserted in and respond to flows of international exchange and circulation of ideas, recordings, musicians, and equipment. Often, they strategically engage mainstream stereotypes and expectations regarding Latin@s and Latin Americans in order to gain access to specific circles. However, these articulations of expectation are usually accompanied by aesthetics, discourses, or practices that often subvert the objectifying and Orientalist gaze that informs such representations. We advocate not for a geographical determinism of Latin American musics but for an understanding of Latin America as an assembly of shared experiences, attitudes, and technologies (or lack of) that is not necessarily tied to specific geography. We regard Latin America not solely as shorthand for Central and South America and parts of North America and the Caribbean but more broadly as an identification connecting groups of people at supranational levels to whom precisely the label “Latin America” makes sense. This identification is based on constellations of habits of thought and practice that are shared by many (but certainly not all) of the inhabitants of these territories, and many outside of them as well.

This understanding of Latin America is articulated through the connectivity of individuals who find themselves interested in fostering a circulation of ideas across borders. As such, we conceptualize Latin America as a strategy rather than a geography. This allows for a hemispheric gaze inclusive of the experience of the Latin American diaspora in the United States—in its asymmetrical access to technology, music, cultural capital in the form of discourses and practices about experimentalism,

⁴² Martin Stokes, “On Musical Cosmopolitanism,” *Macalester International Roundtable*, September 26, 2007, 10, <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=intlrtable>, accessed April 7, 2016.

⁴³ Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco, “Making Sense of Cosmopolitanism,” in *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*, ed. Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 6.

and in its erasure from mainstream narratives about the trajectory of such experimentalism. Experimental musicians perform the idea of Latin@ and Latin American in their everyday lives through their craft. We, as scholars, seek to engage these ideas as frames of reference and as metaphors, as fantasies and as realities, in order to subvert the Eurocentric, colonizing gaze that marks them as marginal and irrelevant experiences. The notion of Latin America as we present it in this book is thus broader than the national boundaries to which it is usually confined. Its fluid limits correspond to the people, ideas, practices, and relationships that constitute it. It is in dialogue with Latin@ identifications and experiences and emerges equally from the streets of Brooklyn, the Brazilian Northeast, the New Mexican desert, and the busy streets of Buenos Aires.

Despite its marginalization from mainstream narratives, Latin American experimentation has taken a pressing role as an anticolonial and decolonial strategy. One of the goals of decolonial studies is to find ways to speak outside the structures of thought and practice established by colonialism; experimentalism has been a notable (though neither exclusive nor continuous) space for advancing decolonizing projects. From elitist to seemingly democratizing efforts, from academic to nonacademic settings, from institutional to militant and grassroots support, experimental musical practices have often embraced their destabilizing, decentering, and countercultural roles as signs of the possible, as audiotopias where, as Josh Kun argues, the “space within and produced by a musical element . . . offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, our interest in this utopian potential of experimentalisms does not blind us to their historical connection, as cosmopolitan practices, to what Walter Dignolo calls “the emergence of the modern/colonial world.”⁴⁵ This is especially evident in the elitist discourses that informed experimental, modernist, and avant-garde approaches throughout the twentieth century, including a wide variety of Eurocentric practices—from Debussy to Paul Simon, and from Amadeo Roldán to Joan Villaperros—that appropriated non-Western musical traditions or that reified them as exotic Others. These instances reveal the complex colonizing dynamics by which Eurocentric gazes perform the exotic Other beyond their cultural borders. They also show how elite artists in non-European societies engage in practices of interior colonization within their national borders. This is especially true when these elites take the Other simply as unsuspecting source of uncritical cosmopolitan differentiation. In order to problematize these complex processes, we welcome a postnational critical discussion that allows us to engage the contradictions in Latin American musical experimentalisms as windows into the types of critical cosmopolitanism that, as Enrique Dussel would suggest, might help us “overcome the Eurocentrism of colonial Modernity through

⁴⁴ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 23.

⁴⁵ Walter D. Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism,” in Breckenridge et al., *Cosmopolitanism*, 158.

the affirmation of multiculturalism within the population of . . . national political system[s].”⁴⁶

The various essays in this collection reveal that there is nothing homogeneous about Latin@ and Latin American experimental music scenes. Instead, we are listening to complex conglomerations of exchanges between North and South and East and West that point toward the multiethnic, heterogeneous character and the postnational potential of Latin@ and Latin American cultural practices. A series of cosmopolitan imaginaries inform the alternative modernities experienced by the artists and musicians who invoke the terms *vanguardia* and *experimentalismo/música experimental* in Spanish and *música de vanguardia* and *música experimental* in Portuguese. They use *vanguardista* or *experimentalista* to discuss their practice, or to identify themselves both temporarily and more permanently.

EXPERIMENTALISMS IN PRACTICE

This book is divided into four large thematic parts. Part I, “Centers and Institutions,” offers insights into two historically important experimental music spaces that owe their almost utopian institutional existence, in one way or another, to the contradictory politics of the Cold War in the 1960s and 1970s. In chapter 2 Eduardo Herrera reveals the types of sonic and embodied practices that were being labeled as experimental during the existence of the now legendary Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales at the Di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires (1962–1971). Through studying the sounds, ideas, and attitudes that the community of creators and critics in Buenos Aires around this center were calling “experimental,” Herrera proposes a semiotic understanding of experimentalism, not as *one thing* but a *cluster of things*, a set of meaningful associations experienced as real in everyday practice. An exploration of the use of the word “experimental” in relation to the instrumental and electroacoustic music composition, improvisation, and everyday practices of composers affiliated with the center, allows Herrera to paint a rich and complex picture of the institutional settings of the *vanguardia* in Buenos Aires and the anxieties that it generated. Susan Thomas’s essay, chapter 3, considers the Grupo de Experimentación Sonora (GES), a musical collective housed from 1969 to 1978 in the Cuban film institute, in the context of the larger trajectory of postrevolutionary popular music. She challenges earlier studies that have downplayed the popular music profile of the Grupo, focusing primarily on the musicians’ work composing film scores and brushing past the role of the Grupo in the development of popular song movements, such as the *nueva trova*. Rather than viewing the Grupo years as a sort of creative tangent in the personal biographies of the artists involved, her analysis views the Grupo, including its performative practices and the sounds it produced, as a critical incubator of what would become the

⁴⁶ Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, trans. George Ciccariello-Maher (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 87.

sound of postrevolutionary Cuba. The experimental collectivist strategies employed by the Grupo became a lasting model for popular musicians; its impact is still seen in the fusion-oriented popular song movement represented by collectives such as Habana Abierta and Interactivo.

Part II, “Beyond the Limits of Hybridity,” focuses on the significance of experimental practices among popular music musicians and audiences. While the chapters in this part provide an alternative account about how to listen to experimentalisms across musical practices that have been deemed highbrow or lowbrow, they also pay attention to how experimentalisms may challenge the notion of hybridity as an analytical tool for certain Latin American aesthetic and expressive practices. In chapter 4, Dan Sharp traces the various networks of musicians, poets, filmmakers, and producers that José Paes de Lira Filho (Lirinha) encountered in the northeastern backlands of Brazil as he radically transformed regional tradition with his work with the band Cordel do Fogo Encantado. As the lead singer of Cordel, Lirinha worked to expose and reassess sedimented layers of cinematic and literary representations of the Brazilian backlands as a space of poverty, tradition, millenarianism, and rebellion. Sharp argues that experimental approaches such as Cordel’s can be transformative within their particular field of cultural production without necessarily resulting in a final product that is universally recognizable as experimentalist. The chapter outlines how poetic and musical reserves of backlands tradition were translated into networks of alternative or mutationist popular music in Brazil during the postdictatorship 1990s–2000s. In chapter 5, Joshua Tucker analyzes the transformation of Peruvian *chicha*, an adaptation of Colombian cumbia, from an unassuming working-class music to a central feature in new nationalist discourses that seek to overcome older elitist and racist models of national identification from a transnational perspective. As part of this discussion, Tucker studies the work of intellectual cosmopolitans who appeal to notions of electronic experimentation, psychedelic playfulness, and musical agency, thus resignifying *chicha* as an aesthetic solution for the intellectual shortcomings of an earlier era. *Chicha* musicians become retrospective theorists of international hybridity and nationalist *mestizaje* (mixture) whose experimentalism challenges the limits of previous identity discourses, providing aesthetic utopian alternatives. In chapter 6, Alejandro L. Madrid and Pepe Rojo propose an analysis of Mexican rock band Café Tacvba’s album *Revés/Yosoy* that does not invoke the recurring motto of hybridization and instead is based on Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of estrangement. The chapter studies the ways Café Tacvba’s sonic and stylistic experimentation in this album reverses audiences’ listening experiences and forces them to hear new fantastic possibilities in everyday sounds, thus, in agreement with Shklovsky’s theory, lengthening their aesthetic horizon. Furthermore, the authors argue that the experimentalism of Café Tacvba’s *Revés/Yosoy*, heard as estrangement, can be understood as a direct attack on the 1990s music industry, as it makes something unexpected out of the sounds that neoliberalism requires from a Mexican band in order to succeed in a music market that continues to both emphasize and tame Otherness for the benefit of global audiences. By taking into account Café Tacvba’s association with a particular geography—Ciudad

Satélite, a middle- and upper-class suburb of Mexico City—the chapter further emphasizes the centrality of locality in the signification of experimentalisms.

Part III, “Anti-Colonial Practices,” explores the ways experimentalisms may engage, reproduce, or challenge colonialist and colonizing projects. In chapter 7, Ana R. Alonso-Minutti centers on the activities of *Gatas y Vatas*, an annual experimental music festival in New Mexico that features solo performances by local practitioners. Initiated by young female Hispanic musicians as an attempt to counteract white males’ dominance of local music scenes, *Gatas y Vatas* has become a catalyst of female empowerment where participants experience liberation while defying gender norms in an all-inclusive environment. Alonso-Minutti examines the ways the practices fostered in the festival are tied to a locally perceived freedom granted by Albuquerque’s complex cultural makeup. To the “*Gatas*,” the city is a place where “everything is possible.” She argues that this sentiment of endless potential drives performers to experiment with sound, noise, technology, and the environment and to engage in activities that foster a feminist ideal rooted in a local identity, a “*burqueño* pride.” The result is a community-oriented experimental atmosphere that has reached levels of inclusion and female equality rarely seen in experimental music scenes. Chapter 8, by Susan Campos Fonseca, investigates the contradictions between independent experimental projects and those active under the aegis of Costa Rica’s academia. Her discussion engages with the Noise musical scene and the actual use of noise as sonic material in composition. Besides providing a panorama of contemporary experimental practices and projects, Campos Fonseca borrows Ray Brassier’s notion of noise as an interference between genres to study the local sound art scene. In doing so, she examines how events around these artists and their music reproduce processes of colonization within the country in relation to the appropriation and reification of indigenous music and sound practices. Her essay critically rethinks experimentalism in relation to the problematic unbalance between the cosmopolitan aspirations of certain experimental practices and the colonizing overtones they may entail.

Part IV, “Performance, Movements, and Scenes,” explores the aesthetic and political concerns of two artistic movements—the activities of a theater troupe in Mexico and the localized but peripheral activities of intermedia artists in Argentina—and two larger music scenes, in Cuba and Colombia, focusing on how ideas about experimentalism are embraced and experienced locally. These chapters explain how such processes and their resulting artistic manifestations acquired meaning at the particular historical coordinates that witnessed their development. On the basis of a combination of oral histories and archival research, Tamar Barzel (chapter 9) maps out the activities of *Atrás del Cosmos*, a free improvisation ensemble, during its residency at the theater El Galeón in the mid-1970s. Barzel looks at not only the ensemble’s significance as part of a larger experimental arts scene in Mexico City at a very heated political moment in the country’s history—right after the government-sanctioned massacres of student demonstrators in 1968 and 1971—but also the connections that made these efforts reverberate with political and artistic movements beyond the cultural boundaries of the city and the political borders of the Mexican nation-state. Rodolfo Acosta’s essay

(chapter 10) is a testimonial account by one of the decisive figures in the classical music scene of Colombia of the last twenty-five years. By mixing firsthand knowledge and insightful historical awareness, Acosta generates not only an important—and until now nonexistent—narrative about experimental musical practice in Bogotá but also a primary source in understanding how Acosta himself perceives his own role in this very story. Acosta's text exemplifies how the local and transnational are hard to separate for the practitioners themselves, illuminating his and others' intimate relationships with experimentalism and the physical act of *doing* improvisation.

In chapter 11, Marysol Quevedo focuses on postrevolutionary Cuba and composers that embraced the changing political situation by accepting administrative positions in newly formed cultural organizations. Quevedo explores how experimental music in 1960s Cuba reached wider audiences as a product of the cultural policies of the Cuban Revolution, and of the aesthetic goals of a particular set of individuals who took advantage of the new cultural institutions to promote experimental music under the banner of *vanguardia*. Taking into account composers' administrative and advisory roles in major cultural institutions, she examines two types of composition: film music, looking into Leo Brouwer's activities as music director of the Cuban Film Institute, and orchestral music, considering Juan Blanco's role as music advisor of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional. Quevedo argues that experimental music in Cuba was not aimed at an elite group of initiated avant-gardists but reflected the new political and social climate, one in which all types of music were intended to reach as wide a segment of the population as possible. Finally, Andrew Raffo Dewar's essay (chapter 12) creates a fascinating counterpoint with Herrera's chapter by examining the activist art of a parallel, noninstitutional experimental scene that existed in Buenos Aires in the peripheries of the 1960s internationalism exemplified by the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales. The Movimiento Música Más—"the movement of music plus" or the "more than music movement"—combined musical experimentation, visual art, poetic performance, and political action and carried out its activities in concert halls, plazas, and city buses, all framed by the political volatility of the military regime established in Argentina in 1966. Focusing primarily on the three founding members of Movimiento Música Más—Guillermo Gregorio, Norberto Chavarri, and Roque de Pedro—Dewar documents an artistic movement that has received very little attention in the prevailing narratives of experimental music in Argentina.

The book closes with an afterword by Benjamin Piekut that foresees ways this volume will compel scholars to question the genealogies of experimental music that they have taken for granted for decades. In presenting this idea, he provides a discussion of how a US-focused mainstream concept of American experimental music within the art music tradition was cemented in the 1950s through the work of John Cage at a moment when he established professional connections with the European avant-garde. Piekut recognizes that before this moment, composers such as Henry Cowell had thought of American experimentalism in a more hemispheric way and included the activities of composers like Carlos Chávez, Alejandro García Caturla, and Amadeo Roldán as part of their genealogies. Rather than arguing for a revisionist type of history to include Latin

Americans in these narratives about American experimental music, Piekut's goal is to show that taking into account historical and contemporary Latin@ and Latin American understandings of experimentalisms might not only help us in redefining the social and political meaning of what has been constructed as mainstream musical experimentalism but would also play a central role in critically rethinking post-World War II narratives about music.

The nature of a text like this implies absences and silences. This is not the work—and there is probably no work—where readers might find references to all the different Latin American musical experimental traditions or that covers the totality of geography that is usually understood as Latin America. Surveys—and we do not intend this volume to be a survey—might work as introductions, but in their search for idealized clarities, they hide more complex, diverse, and rich experiences, thus establishing unjustifiable canons. That would indeed defy the purpose of this book. These absences in a single text are not cause of alarm. But generalized absences in the scholarship are more troublesome, since they indicate silences created by hegemonic processes in place that, through acts of geopolitical power and usually under neocolonial logics, continue to ignore practices that occur outside the centers of economic power or to present them only as notable exceptions. The chapters in this book should not be read as cases parallel to the master narratives already in place but as proof of the conceptual problems at the core of these narratives. We invite the reader to navigate the cosmopolitan imaginaries exposed in this collection of essays. They introduce various music-making scenarios that challenge constantly invoked binaries such as popular/classical, folk/academic, lowbrow/ighbrow, local/transnational, noise/sound, improvised/composed, and work/performance. Throughout the book we attempt to provide an answer to the question of how experimentalisms are framed in Latin@ and Latin American contexts. As such, we engage experimentation not as a historical sign for the cultural phenomenon of an era but as a fluid concept that allows for the coexisting of a series of contradictions within.

Centers and Institutions

2

“THAT’S NOT SOMETHING TO SHOW IN A CONCERT”

Experimentation and Legitimacy at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos

Estudios Musicales

Eduardo Herrera

BETWEEN 1962 AND 1971, a total of fifty-four composers from all across Latin America went to Buenos Aires to study classical music composition at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (Latin American Center for Advanced Musical Studies; CLAEM), part of the Di Tella Institute.¹ The Center provided competitive two-year fellowships for graduate studies under a strong faculty of Argentine composers led by Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983) and including Gerardo Gandini (1936–2013), Francisco Kröpfl (Romania, b. 1931),² and Fernando von Reichenbach (1931–2005). Resident composers, a group that at different times included Iannis Xenakis, Aaron Copland, Olivier Messiaen, Larry Austin, Bruno Maderna, Riccardo Malipiero, and Luigi Nono, complemented the faculty. After CLAEM closed, the experience of having studied at CLAEM was invoked to confer artistic prestige in avant-garde circles.

Several trends were explored at CLAEM during the nearly ten years of its existence, including aleatoric and indeterminate operations, serialism, sound mass textures, mobile forms, and electronic and musique concrète composition. Critics and composers referred to works following these trends as “experimental.”³ I argue, however, that the kinds of practices, sounds, ideas, and attitudes that the community of creators and connoisseurs in Buenos Aires around CLAEM were calling “experimental” were a sign

¹ Although CLAEM began its activities in 1962, the first group of fellows started in 1963.

² Other sources indicate the date of birth as 1928. Kröpfl was born in the city of Timișoara, Romania, but moved to Argentina when he was still young.

³ Throughout this chapter I use quotation marks to indicate terms being examined in their discursive use.

not of *one thing* but of *a cluster of things* that included not only musical trends but also subjective positionings within the broader art world of classical music composition. Drawing from Benjamin Piekut, who examines experimentalism as a “grouping not a group,”⁴ I argue that from a semiotic standpoint the word “experimentalism” becomes an *indexical cluster*, a grouping that through repetition and redundancy becomes habitually and most strongly connected to other signs within specific groups of people.⁵

In this chapter, I demonstrate that both aesthetics and ways of being were among the *things* being associated with the word “experimental” at CLAEM. The first two sections explore two kinds of sonic practice that were often identified as experimental. The first includes all electroacoustic music and works that used tape or live electronics.⁶ The second encompasses certain instrumental compositions that were heard as rupturing familiar conventions of classical music regarding sound production, instrumental technique, the ritual of the concert, the compositional process, or music making that might be perceived—although not necessarily conceived—as aleatoric and improvisatory. Continuing to expand this cluster, the third section looks directly at CLAEM’s Grupo de Experimentación Musical and examines how improvising, relying on graphic notation, and stepping outside usual expectations for performance of classical music led to important questions regarding musicality and the relationship between experimentation and music making. The chapter concludes by showing how it was through a lived, embodied experience that experimenting as part of being avant-garde was felt as authentic, valid, and truthful. In other words, participation in the musical avant-garde meant not only composing within certain aesthetic ideals but also extending these ideals to everyday practices that directly affected the body. These four snapshots create a picture of the complex indexical cluster that was known as “experimental” at the time.

A contingent relationship between the avant-garde and experimentalism emerges throughout this chapter. While many conventional narratives on twentieth-century classical music suggest a distinct—and debatable—opposition between US *experimentalism* and European *avant-gardism*, I argue that in Buenos Aires, these categories functioned in a nested fashion. One could be a *compositor/a de vanguardia* (avant-garde

⁴ Piekut argues that to “explain what experimentalism has been, one must attend to its fabrication through a network of discourses, practices, and institutions. The formation is the result of the combined labor of scholars, composers, critics, journalists, patrons, performers, venues, and the durative effects of discourses of race, gender, nation, and class.” Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 6–7.

⁵ For Thomas Turino, the concept of indexical cluster “refers to the repeated grouping of a set of signs such that the signs become indexically tied to each other in one’s experience.” Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 197.

⁶ In this, CLAEM was not alone, as can be easily seen by looking at the names of some of the early electroacoustic music studios around the world: Studio Eksperymentalne (Polish National Radio, 1957), Laboratorio de Acústica: Taller Experimental del Sonido (Catholic University in Chile, 1957), Experimental Music Studio (University of Illinois, 1959); Experimentalstudio für Künstliche Klang und Gerauscherzeugung Laboratorium für Akustisch-Musikalische Grenzprobleme (East German Radio, RFZ, 1962). The connection between electroacoustic and experimental has never been lost in scholarship. See Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music: Technology, Music and Culture*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012).

composer) and still not engage with experimentalism, but anybody who identified with experimentation was doing so from an avant-garde position. Both terms were subject to contestation and remained relatively flexible. As Argentine musicologist Hernán Gabriel Vázquez has illustrated, Ginastera's works during his tenure at CLAEM were received within the Buenos Aires musical landscape as a *vanguardia institucionalizada* (an institutionalized avant-garde).⁷ Ginastera, reacting to the positive criticism of the US premier of his opera *Don Rodrigo* in 1966, wrote to his administrative assistant: "as you can see, everything worked well, and I have become a *vanguardista* [avant-gardist] who writes operas that good singers can sing. If there is something that makes me proud is the position that the critics give me next to Schoenberg and Berg."⁸ This particular understanding of the avant-garde was opposed both to the traditionalist-nationalist musical scene and, primarily, to a more radical avant-garde often associated to Juan Carlos Paz, pioneer of twelve-tone music in Argentina, for whom *vanguardia* meant a militant antiacademicism, antiinstitutionalism, and antinationalism; setting high standards in one's activities (what he called *autoexigencia*), being conceptually rigorous; and posing challenges to the status quo.⁹ Ginastera's association of *vanguardia* with the already deceased Schoenberg and Berg in the mid-1960s would have only added to Paz's contempt of Ginastera's views.¹⁰ Ginastera's works during the 1960s had incorporated some of the techniques of the European and US American avant-garde, and pieces such as the *Cantata para América mágica* and the operas *Don Rodrigo* and *Bomarzo* included a mix of serialized pitches and rhythms, microtonality, and aleatoric rhythms.¹¹ However, for an important faction who identified as *vanguardista* it was inaccurate to think of the avant-garde *only* as a style of composition or a set of aesthetic preferences. The avant-garde—as many composers practiced it during the years of CLAEM—was *also* a particular positioning of an artist with respect to the field of cultural production in which she or he participated. For many of these composers, the musical avant-garde was a subversive and emancipatory way to be in the world, a challenge to previous ways of music making and thinking. Through avant-garde compositions they expressed their adherence to the feeling of nonconformity with the existing limits of what was considered mainstream classical music. On another level, participating in the musical avant-garde signified the successful incorporation of their works into contemporary trends of composition. Writing avant-garde music was an indication that the composers were well-informed and up to date. A negotiation was

⁷ See Hernán Gabriel Vázquez, "Alberto Ginastera, el surgimiento del CLAEM, la producción musical de los primeros becarios y su representación en el campo musical de Buenos Aires," *Revista Argentina de Musicología* 10 (2009): 137–193.

⁸ Alberto Ginastera to Josefina Schroder, March 7, 1966, CLAEM Papers, Archives of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella. All translations from Spanish to English by the author.

⁹ For more on Paz see Omar Corrado, *Vanguardias al sur. La música de Juan Carlos Paz* (Havana: Fondo Editorial Casa de las Américas, 2010), and his *Música y modernidad en Buenos Aires (1920–1940)* (Buenos Aires: Gourmet Musical Ediciones, 2010).

¹⁰ See Esteban Buch, "L'avant-garde musicale à Buenos Aires: Paz contra Ginastera," *Circuit musiques contemporaines* 17, no. 2 (2007): 11–33.

¹¹ See Pola Suárez Urtubey, *Alberto Ginastera en 5 movimientos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Víctor Lerú, 1972).

therefore taking place between strategic professional tactics to keep one's work current and personal committed beliefs in the liberating power of the 1960s avant-garde vis-à-vis a field of cultural production. The word "experimentalism" was used as a polysemic sign that stood for multiple approaches to navigate that field, particular ways of music making, and an array of sounds that were perceived as pushing the boundaries of the more habitual soundscapes of contemporary classical music.

EXPERIMENTALISM AND ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC AT THE CENTRO
LATINOAMERICANO DE ALTOS ESTUDIOS MUSICALES

In Buenos Aires during the 1960s, the label *música experimental* (experimental music) was used interchangeably with *música electrónica* (electronic music). In general, *música electrónica* was often shorthand for all electroacoustic music, including music derived from the manipulation and processing of recorded sounds (which on occasion was also referred to as *musique concrète*), music derived from electronically generated sounds (which, confusingly enough, was sometimes called *música electrónica* as well), and music performances using live electronics or the assistance of computers.¹² The Center included an electroacoustic music studio as part of its facilities, and when it became functional in 1964, it was called Laboratorio de Música Electrónica (the Electronic Music Laboratory). It is worth noting, however, that in early mentions of the project during its planning phase it was named Laboratorio de Música Experimental (the Experimental Music Laboratory). According to Ginastera, it was being organized "so that scholarship holders can learn and practice the modern musical techniques related to electronics."¹³

The use of the word *laboratorio* was not coincidental; the whole studio was frequently referred to using metaphors originated in the scientific world, which further corroborates the idea of experimentation. This thinking-of-one-thing-in-terms-of-another led to creative work in the studio being presented as "research," not only when it involved the development of techniques or apparatus but also in reference to the composition of works. Electroacoustic composition was studied following

¹² As an example, the program for the Fifth Contemporary Music Festival organized at CLAEM (September 14–17, 1966) included two events titled "Experimental Music Concert." The first had works made at the Polish Experimental Radio Studio in Warsaw by the composers Kotoński, Dobrowolski, Schäffer, and Penderecki, followed by two works for instrument and tape created at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center: *Animus* for trombone and tape, by Jacob Druckman and *Plectros II (1966-i)*, by Alcides Lanza, for piano and tape. The last part of the concert was for compositions made at the electronic music laboratory of CLAEM: *Estudio 0*, by Ladislao Todoroff, *Syrygma I*, by Blas Emilio Atehortúa, and *Presagio de pájaros muertos* for reciter and tape, by Rafael Aponte-Ledée. The second concert consisted of electroacoustic works composed at the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM) and the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (ORTF) in France by composers Philippe Carson, François-Bernard Marche, André Boucourechliev, François Bayle, Ivo Malec, Michel Philippot, and Luc Ferrari.

¹³ Guido Di Tella and Enrique Oteiza, *Instituto Torcuato Di Tella: Memorias 1960/62* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1963), n.p.

detailed methodologies that usually involved three stages: generation, elaboration, and assembly, or montage, of materials. Most equipment was classified in correspondence to one of those stages.¹⁴

The first person put in charge of the laboratory during its first phase (1964–1966) was the engineer Horacio Raúl Bozzarello. The plan was to hire a full-time composer familiar with the machines, but that hire did not happen until 1967. Subsequently, only a small number of works were produced during the first years of the Laboratorio, among them *Intensidad y altura* (1964), by César Bolaños (Perú, 1931–2012), and *Simbiosis I* (1964), by Oscar Bazán (Argentina, 1936–2005).

The arrival of the inventive engineer Fernando von Reichenbach in 1966 and the electroacoustic music pioneer Francisco Kröpfl in 1967 marked a new more productive phase in the Laboratorio. Kröpfl taught theoretical courses on techniques of electronic music composition, while Reichenbach taught introductory courses in acoustics and electronics. Two former fellows, César Bolaños and Gabriel Brnčić (Chile, b. 1942), were added to the roster of teachers to give practical classes in the hands-on use of the Laboratorio's equipment. Throughout its duration, CLAEM hosted many visiting teachers who focused on or included significant materials on electroacoustic music composition in their classes. The first scholars to come to CLAEM who were specialists in the field were José Vicente Asuar in 1964 and Mario Davidovsky in 1965. They were followed by Iannis Xenakis in 1966, Luigi Nono in 1967, Enrique Belloc and Vladimir Ussachevsky in 1968, Eric Salzman and Larry Austin in 1969, and Pierre Schaeffer in 1970 or 1971. Many more works were composed during this second period of the Laboratorio than during the first, and several of them gained international recognition.¹⁵

The engineer Reichenbach was first and foremost an inventor; he brought a new and important facet to the experimental nature of the studio and became a crucial figure

¹⁴ For instance, a letter from 1971 explains that the equipment at CLAEM includes “electronic *sound generating equipment*, special equipment covering the different stages of *elaboration* necessary to adapt sound to musical purposes and the necessary devices and equipment for monodic and polyphonic *assembly*.” Unsigned document addressed to the Rockefeller Foundation, “Informe CLAEM, versión en inglés (enviado a la Rockefeller Foundation, fines 1970)” 1971, CLAEM Papers; italics in original.

¹⁵ Among these works are *Interpolaciones*, by César Bolaños, *Syrigma I*, by Blas Emilio Atehortúa (Colombia, b. 1933), *Presagios de pájaros muertos*, by Rafael Aponte-Ledée (Puerto Rico, b. 1938), *Combinatoria II*, by Graciela Paraskevaïdis (Argentina, 1940–2017), and *Dialexis*, by Gabriel Brnčić, all from 1966; *Memento, mortuus est!*, by Gabriel Brnčić, *Himno de tierra, amor y vida*, by Blas Emilio Atehortúa, and *Alfa-Omega*, by César Bolaños, composed in 1967; *Oposición-fusión*, by Jacqueline Nova (Belgium/Colombia, 1935–1975), *Tenebrae factae sunt*, by Luis María Serra (Argentina, 1942), *Metéora*, by Joaquín Orellana (Guatemala, b. 1930), *I-10-AIFG/Rbt-1*, by César Bolaños, and *Serie C.M. Op. 1*, by Florencio Pozadas (Bolivia, 1939–1968), from 1968; *Que*, by Coriún Aharonián (Uruguay, 1940–2017), from 1969; *Sialoecibi* (ESEPACO I) and *Canción sin palabras* (ESEPACO II): *Homenaje a las palabras no pronunciadas*, by César Bolaños, *Quodlibet VIII*, by Gabriel Brnčić, *Gravitación humana*, by Alejandro Nuñez Allauca (Peru, b. 1943), *El glotón de Pepperland*, by Ariel Martínez (Uruguay, b. 1940), *Treno por Auschwitz*, by León Biriotti (Uruguay, b. 1929), *La panadería*, by Eduardo Kusnir (Argentina, b. 1939), *Memon*, by José Ramón Maranzano (Argentina, b. 1940), *Analogías paraboloides*, by Pedro Caryevschi (Argentina, 1942–?), and *Auto-retrato sobre paisaje porteño* and *Cinta cita*, by Jorge Antunes (Brazil, b. 1942), composed in 1970; and *Dividido dos* by Mariano Etkin (Argentina, 1943–2016), and *Trombofollón* and *Cabotaje IIIa*, by Ariel Martínez, from 1971.

in an art world that fetishized technology.¹⁶ His work focused on the Laboratorio, but Reichenbach also frequently collaborated with the two other centers for the arts at the Di Tella Institute, the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual and the Centro de Artes Visuales, creating important multimedia works for audiovisual, theater, and dance events.¹⁷ Using a model unsurprisingly indebted to the sciences, Reichenbach had assistants, among them most notably Julio Manhart and Walter Guth. When he first arrived, Reichenbach took charge of remodeling the Laboratorio de Música Electrónica in order to make it more productive, efficient, and comfortable for the composers. With his genius at a creative peak, Reichenbach managed to do much more; many of his improvements to CLAEM's laboratory were considered breakthroughs in studio design at the time. For example, to streamline studio work, he reorganized all the equipment in an ergonomically efficient way, placing the composer in the middle of the machines and providing a swivel and a rotating caster chair that allowed easy access. These reorganizations permitted composers to work alone, without the previous almost mandatory need for assistants. Pursuing an optimal user experience, Reichenbach also created the *panel de interconexión centralizado* (automatic patch bay), a highly elaborate unit designed to allow fast interconnections of all the equipment in the laboratory. Furthermore, he recycled a telephone connection switchboard and reconfigured it to work with the audio signals from the studio; each connection was made by touching the input/output buttons (fig. 2.1). In this way, all the connections a composer made during a working session could be restored easily and promptly by using the visual guides of the panel. This also prevented the need to use multiple cables to connect different pieces of equipment, avoiding clutter in the studio space.

Another of Reichenbach's inventions was the *fotoprogramador del nivel sonoro* (sound level photoprogrammer) which he described for *Electronic Music Review* in 1967 as an "experimental device [that] improves the stereophonic sound reproduction . . . Six speakers are located around the auditorium. Each has its own power amplifier and the volume of each amplifier is controlled by means of two photoresistors per amplifier which connect to both outputs of a two-channel tape recorder. Flashlight bulbs with lenses illuminate the photoresistors through a transparent film . . . on which the program is prepared with segments of plastic tape. The different degrees of opacity accorded to the film determine the exact amplitude supplied to the speaker."¹⁸ Reichenbach conceived of his inventions and innovations as experimental in nature, as

¹⁶ During my interviews, multiple people referred to Reichenbach fondly as a musical *Ciro Peraloca* (*Gyro Gearloose*), the good-natured, creative, and productive inventor in the animal universe of Walt Disney.

¹⁷ The two centers also connected to the Di Tella Institute, the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual (Audiovisual Experimentation Center) and the Centro de Artes Visuales (Visual Arts Center), have received much more attention in the literature. See Andrea Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); John King, *El Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino de la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Asunto Impreso, 2007); Jorge Romero Brest, *Arte visual en el Di Tella: Aventura memorable en los años 60* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1992); and Patricia Rizzo, Oscar Terán, and Lucas Fragasso, *Instituto Di Tella: Experiencias '68* (Buenos Aires: PROA Fundación, 1998).

¹⁸ Fernando von Reichenbach, "The Sound Level Photoprogrammer," *Electronic Music Review* 4 (1967): 35.

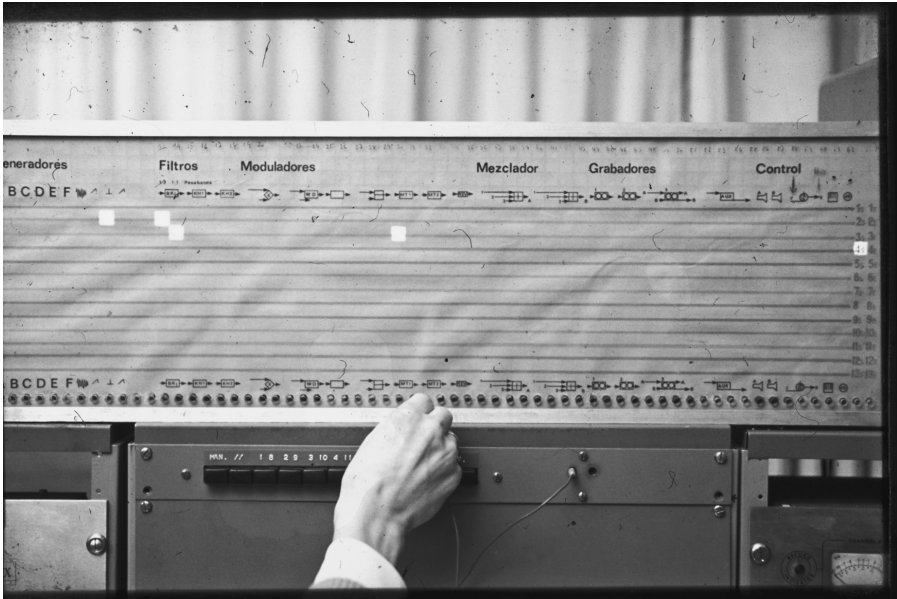


FIGURE 2.1. *Panel de interconexión centralizado (automatic patch bay).*

he points out himself in this description. His machines became a staple of the integration of artistic creation with technology and were at the center of the interdisciplinary work that flourished at CLAEM.

Multimedia collaborations between the fellows at CLAEM and artists in the Centro de Artes Visuales and the Centro de Experimentación Audiovisual—often conceived of as experimental—were not unusual even before the arrival of Reichenbach. Such was the case with Miguel Ángel Rondano, an Argentine student in the first cohort at CLAEM. In 1965, Rondano worked with several of the artists associated with the pop movement at the Centro de Artes Visuales, including Edgardo Giménez and dancer Marilú Marini, on a collaboration called *Microsucesos*, a piece that “oscillated between happening and theater” (fig. 2.2).¹⁹ The work bordered on the absurd, parodying the mass media of the time. The irreverence of the pop artists—one of the most important artistic trends during those years in Buenos Aires—was a good fit with the humor and adventurous spirit Rondano was eager to display in his music. He made the soundtracks for a series of projections by Carlos Squirru titled *La Pirámide de Saturno* and for an event titled *La muerte* featuring works by several pop artists. He was also invited to write the music for the documentary film *Cuatro pintores hoy*, and he composed the piece *Móviles (historieta electrónica, para espectáculo del Di Tella)* for a dance choreographed by Marini and Ana Kamian, in which he used a mix of recorded voice sounds and electronic sounds produced by voltage-controlled generators.

¹⁹ Jorge López Anaya, “¿Por qué es tan genial?” *La Nación*, November 5, 2000, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=184106, accessed March 19, 2017.

Another composer who frequently collaborated with Di Tella artists in other fields was the Peruvian César Bolaños. Before his scholarship at CLAEM, Bolaños had studied electronics at the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) Institute. He quickly became successful and comfortable in the electronic music studio. The reception of

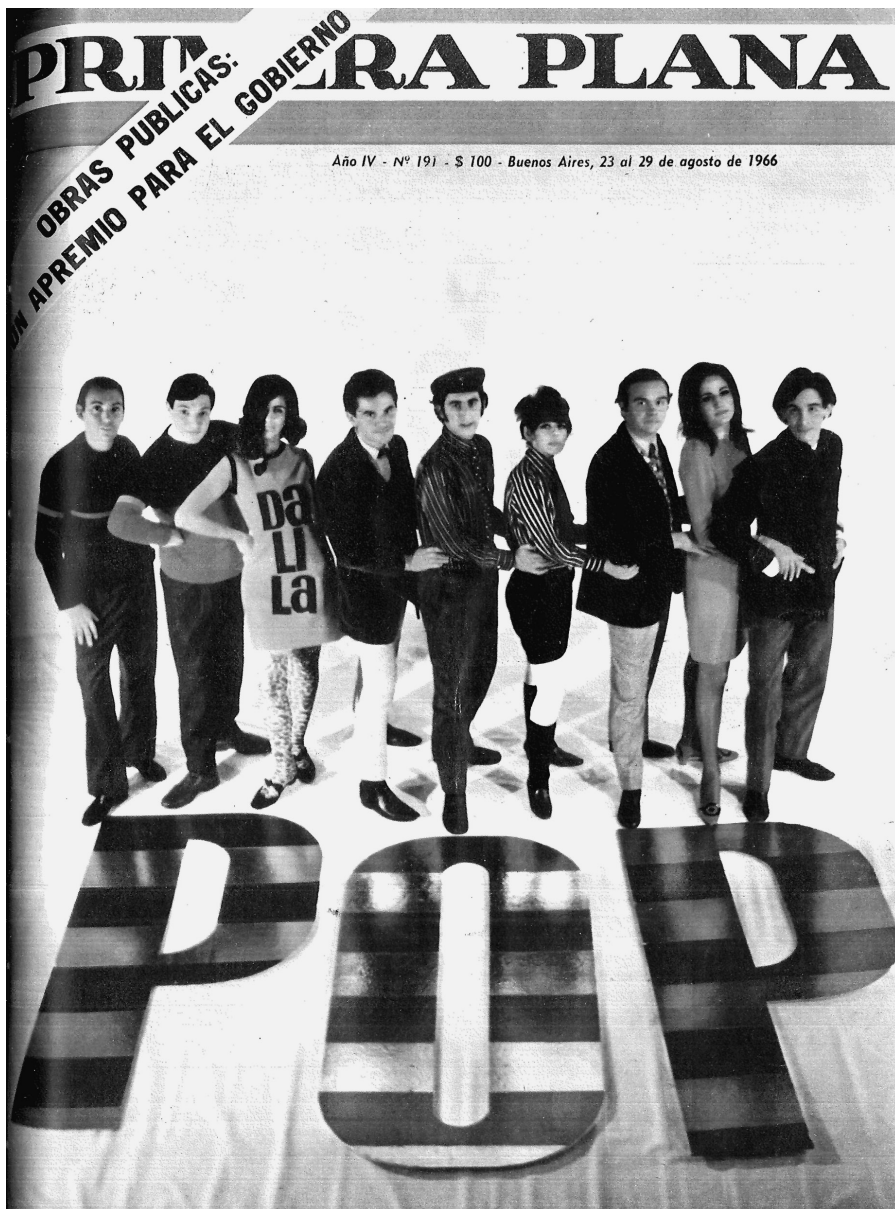


FIGURE 2.2. Miguel Ángel Rondano (second from left) together with pop artists from the Di Tella Institute featured in the popular magazine *Primera Plana*, cover page, August 23–29, 1966. Rondano was the only musician invited to the photo. At the time *Primera Plana* had around sixty thousand subscribers.

some of Bolaños's works exemplifies the relatively hostile musical environment in which experimentation was taking place. In 1970, one of the concerts at the Ninth Contemporary Music Festival, organized by CLAEM, featured Bolaños's computer-generated collaboration with mathematician Mauricio Milchberg, titled *Sialocibi (ESEPCO I)*. The newspaper *Clarín* reviewed Bolaños's piece in these terms: "The audience had a lot of fun, and the spectacle got the most applause of the night, simply because almost everyone used their eyes instead of their ears. But the lack of true ingenuity in the ideas and artisanship that surrounds this folly with pretensions of being original casts a shadow of doubt on the reflective capacities not of its authors, but of the audience that celebrated it."²⁰ While many critics agreed with the negative opinions of this particular journalist, others offered more favorable (though not necessarily enthusiastic) perspectives. Another critic reported in *Clarín* that "the biggest applause of the night was for *ESEPCO* (anagram [in Spanish] for Computer Structured Sound) To the very interesting tape one must add how well put together it is and the good continuity it has."²¹ Buenos Aires was not short on conservative music critics of electroacoustic music, so there the poor reception of Bolaños's work is not surprising.²²

In addition to student works, electroacoustic music from established European and US composers was also being programmed at CLAEM's contemporary music festivals. The first festival, organized in 1962 even before the first group of fellows had arrived, featured electroacoustic music by Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, Luc Ferrari, Michel Philippot, Iannis Xenakis, Mario Davidovsky, Henri Pousseur, and Edgard Varèse. Critic Eduardo García Belsunce offered a withering critique:

[Musique concrète] is a movement related to industrial engineering [more than to music]. A movement now exhausted, that vegetates without a future next to its ugly sister, electronic composition. *Concrète* and electronic composition has not produced in many years of experiments a single work that can be considered music and understood as art The audience that attended this concert, in larger numbers than the previous events, enjoyed an informative and valuable experience. We, who have gone through this [experience] many times, once more feel the sad feeling of having meekly obliged to be the object of a jest.²³

For García Belsunce, the "many years of experiments" had not paid off; for this reason, he dismissed electroacoustic music in its entirety as an "exhausted" movement. Enzo Valenti Ferro, an expert on opera and a harsh critic of certain contemporary

²⁰ César Bolaños citing *Clarín*, Buenos Aires, November 11, 1970, email to author, November 13, 2008.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² For a broader reception history of CLAEM see Hernán Gabriel Vázquez, "Alberto Ginastera." For this as well as a comprehensive history of CLAEM see Eduardo Herrera, "CLAEM and the Construction of Elite Art Worlds: Philanthropy, Latinamericanism and Avant-garde Music" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013).

²³ Eduardo García Belsunce, "De música contemporánea," *Buenos Aires Musical*, August 16, 1962, 1.

music, completely dismissed the value as music of the third concert of the festival dedicated to electroacoustic music, saying: “in the fourth concert the festival returned once more to music.”²⁴ The fellows at CLAEM thus found pronounced contradictions in the Buenos Aires of the 1960s: they enjoyed a safe institutional haven to explore the developments in electroacoustic music, but they also found themselves in a place where conservative critics had a strong niche and enjoyed significant presence in the media. Electroacoustic music, rapidly developing at that time, captured anxieties about technology and art that came together in an aversion to what many saw as “experimentation.”

EXPERIMENTALISM AND INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

While electroacoustic music concerts at CLAEM were being labeled “experimental,” the word was also being applied to certain works, and in some occasions to certain composers, who ruptured expected conventions of the instrumental classical music tradition. This particular association between experimentation and instrumental music was, however, increasingly unstable throughout the decade, and works that might have been deemed experimental in the mid-1960s were unlikely to be perceived as such by 1969.

The first composer at CLAEM who openly embraced the label “experimental” was Oscar Bazán (Argentina, 1936–2005). Bazán was born in Cruz del Eje, in the province of Córdoba, and thus was an outsider to Buenos Aires when he became a fellow for the 1963–1964 period. A composer of eclectic interests, Bazán was one of the first (perhaps only after Mauricio Kagel) to fully embrace many of the ideas of John Cage in Argentina. The pieces he worked on while studying at CLAEM show the breadth of his interest in the avant-garde. His *Canciones chinas* for voice, lute, celesta, and percussion (1963) is a serial composition, while *Tonos* (1964) is a composition for string quartet using quartertones. His works *Manchas* for eighteen brass instruments and nine percussion players, *Carrillón* for piano or harpsichord, and *Sonogramas* (1963) for two pianos are serial compositions with aleatoric elements, while *Simbiosis I* (1964) is an aleatoric work for organ, percussion, and tape.²⁵ After CLAEM, in 1966, Bazán partnered with Graciela Castillo, Pedro Echarte, Carlos Frepozzi, Virgilio Tosco, and Horacio Vaggione to create the Centro de Música Experimental at the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba.²⁶ With this same group, in 1966 he organized and participated in the Primeras Jornadas

²⁴ Enzo Valenti Ferro, “De música contemporánea,” *Buenos Aires Musical*, August 16, 1962, 5.

²⁵ Around 1974, Bazán designed a homemade catalog of his own works, handwritten in beautiful calligraphy. He indicated the title of each work, provided some general information, and gave a brief descriptor under the label “technique.” The descriptors he used were: *electroacoustic*, *free*, *aleatoric*, *participatory*, *musical theater*, *neotonal*, *microtonal*, *instrumental theater*, *serial*, *experience*, *ritual*, *idea*, *hypnomusic*, *gestural play*, *mixed*, *game*, *conceptual*, *twelve-tone*, and *musical action*. By 1974 he had composed sixty-nine works, twenty-six of which are thought to have been premiered.

²⁶ Córdoba’s Experimental Music Center is still an insufficiently studied example of experimentalism in practice in Argentina. See Myriam Kitroser and Marisa Restiffo, “¿Ni ruptura ni vanguardia? El Centro

Americanas de Música Experimental (First American Conference on Experimental Music). In the following decades, Bazán explored aleatorism, improvisation, electroacoustic music, and musical theater. He became best known for his work with the limits of reiteration and economy of materials, as well as for musical works in which silence became a structural element, an approach he called “austere music.”

While Bazán himself was adopting the word “experimental,” critics would also group certain instrumental works under this label even if the composers themselves were not using it. A good example can be gathered from the response to two student concerts organized in September 1965 featuring works by the second group of fellows at CLAEM.²⁷ Critic and composer Roque De Pedro, member of the Movimiento Música Más (discussed by Andrew Dewar in chapter 12), commented on the concerts in the music periodical *Tribuna Musical*. De Pedro chose to divide the pieces heard into two groups: works that have an interest in “renovation, of revolutionary tendency, and are essentially experimental” and those that “without trying to be reactionary, rather unfold within basic principles of well-recognized results.”²⁸ In the latter category, de Pedro seems to be referring to works that offer some level of regularity and predictability in rhythm and meter, that organize pitch material either through serial procedures, or that present neoclassical tendencies with an affinity to tonality and tonal centers. The works he groups as “essentially experimental” are by Enrique Rivera, Jorge Arandia Navarro, Graciela Paraskevaídis, Mariano Etkin, Rafael Aponte-Ledée, Gabriel Brnčić, Eduardo Mazzadi, and Walter Ross. What were some of the signs present in these works that de Pedro understood as “experimental?” The works of Paraskevaídis, Etkin, and Rivera share some commonalities that might point in the right direction.

Paraskevaídis’s *Parámetros* is a student piece, without the depth of her *Magma I*, the first work in her catalog, which was composed the following year. But even as a student piece, *Parámetros* is still fairly successful. The piece’s harmonic and melodic material mostly explores major and minor sevenths and seconds, often presented in large leaps. The writing is pointillistic, with simple rhythmic figures but often with a steady pulse. The instruments (four percussionists, saxophone, and piano) are grouped in different

de Música Experimental de la Escuela de Artes, Universidad Nacional De Córdoba, 1965–1970,” *Revista del Instituto de Investigación Musicológica Carlos Vega* 23 (2009): 145–176. See also Federico Sammartino, “Apunten los osciladores a Europa. Ideología, Europa y experimentación en la música cordobesa de los ’60,” in *Proceedings of the Sixth UFRJ International Symposium on Musicology and International Colloquium of the Ibero-American Institute/University of Arts (UdK), Berlin*, “Cultural Exchanges: Music between Latin America and Europe” (Rio de Janeiro: Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, forthcoming).

²⁷ The first concert had works by Atiliano Auza León (Bolivia, b. 1928) (Trio for Flute, Clarinet, and Bassoon), Gabriel Brnčić (Passacaglia for Organ), Benjamín Gutiérrez Sáenz (Costa Rica, b. 1937) (*Música para siete instrumentistas*), Miguel Letelier (Chile, 1939–2016) (Divertimento for Chamber Ensemble), Graciela Paraskevaídis (*Parámetros* for piano, saxophone, and four percussionists), and Jorge Sarmientos (Guatemala, 1931–2012) (Sextet for Piano and Wind Quintet). The second concert featured pieces by Jorge Arandia Navarro (*Cuarteto* for string quartet), Rafael Aponte Ledée (*Dialogantes* for flute and viola), Eduardo Mazzadi (Argentina, 1935–1967?) (*Poema I* for chamber ensemble), Walter Ross (United States, 1936) (*The Silent Firefly* [*Ocho canciones de la lírica japonesa*] for ensemble), Enrique Rivera (Chile, b. 1941) (Piano Sonata no. 2), and Mariano Etkin (*Entropías* for brass ensemble).

²⁸ Roque de Pedro, “Instituto Di Tella: Obras de becarios,” *Tribuna Musical* 7 (1965): 16.

ways through the multiple parts of the work, achieving very contrasting textures. The saxophone takes turns with the piano, xylophone, and vibraphone in carrying the very disjunct but energetic melodic lines, which, given their rhythmic configurations, resemble more short bursts of energy than continuous streams. As one can guess from the title, Paraskevaïdis explores how to control different musical parameters in the ensemble. The intervallic ordering is very rigorous, and although this is not strictly a twelve-tone composition, Paraskevaïdis is clearly interested in creating twelve-tone aggregates by avoiding repeating pitch classes before they all appear.

Entropías, by Mariano Etkin, is scored for brass sextet (trumpet, two horns, two trombones, and tuba). The piece is divided into two sections. The first is rhythmically active and rich in chromatic pitch material. It uses characteristic superimposition of different irrational rhythmic figures, adding movement and erraticism to the sound of the ensemble (ex. 2.1). As the section becomes increasingly fast and irregular, Etkin begins to use graphic notation to indicate pitches, giving the approximate number of seconds that each part lasts and writing this number above each phrase (ex. 2.2).

The second section, in contrast, is quite static. Small, sometimes microtonal movements replace the broader melodic lines, and the instruments come in and out, softly adding to a mass texture. The irrational rhythmic figures of the first section reappear; they are now a calmer and more subdued and occur at slower rates (ex. 2.3).

Finally, Piano Sonata no. 2, by the Chilean Enrique Rivera, alternates between four distinct types of pianistic writing; dissonance is always present, but most of the time with slower tempos, thus letting the listener dwell for longer periods on each sound complex. The last page of the score (ex. 2.4) shows a summary of the four musical behaviors Rivera uses throughout the composition. The first behavior is exemplified in the second system of this page: Rivera uses slow, crescendo melodic gestures, with large leaps and avoidance of pitch repetition, leading to a long sustained chord. The second type of gesture consists of fast, mostly atonal arpeggiations extending from one extreme of the register to the other, as seen in the last system. The third type appears in the third system, where rhythmic-free note heads are to be played in a flexible slow rhythm but in a regular alternation. Finally, the last type is brief, wide-ranged dyads followed by extended glissandos, as marked at the top of the page.

Commonalities among the three works shed some light on understandings of what “experimentation” might sound like for De Pedro. All pieces show highly chromatic pitch content, tending to emphasize tritones, seconds, and sevenths, and using disjunct motion and large leaps or glissandos notated in both conventional and graphic manners. The pieces are still driven by a desire to have structural relations between the parts and seem to show an interest in achieving cohesion by having recurring materials. Complexity and irregularity of rhythmic figures appear in the works by Etkin and Paraskevaïdis, while Rivera uses a relatively slow, evolving process emphasizing recurring gestures. What all of this points to

EXAMPLE 2.1. Mariano Etkin, *Entropias* (1965) measures 20–21. Notice the superimposition of irrational rhythmic figures such as seven sixteenth notes in the space of six, or five in the space of four.

is that, at least during the first half of the 1960s, what was being deemed “experimental” by the critics in Buenos Aires was not only works that might have been on the fringes of the classical music tradition, but music that was in one way or another, conventional or not, expanding the compositional sound palette.²⁹ I contend that it was the inclusion of sounds and gestures that were being interpreted

²⁹ David Nichols, continuing the tradition to geographically separate experimentalism from avant-garde—and to some degree perpetuating their association with the United States and Europe, respectively—argues that a distinction between them was “the extent to which they take the Eurocentric art music tradition as a reference point. Thus very generally, avant-garde music can be viewed as occupying an extreme position within the tradition, while experimental music lies outside it” (518). See David Nicholls, “Avant-garde and Experimental Music,” in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 518.

EXAMPLE 2.2. Etkin, *Entropías*, fragment of measure 37.

The image displays a musical score for a fragment of measure 37 from Etkin's *Entropías*. The score is arranged in two systems, each with six staves for different instruments: Trumpet (Tp), Cor. I, Cor. II, Tbn. I, Tbn. II, and Tuba. The notation includes various dynamic markings such as *mf*, *ff*, *f*, *ppp*, and *pp*, along with articulation and performance instructions like "LEGATO AD LIB." and "TUTTI VIA SORDINA". The score is marked with measure numbers 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16. The notation is dense and complex, reflecting the experimental nature of the music.

as indexical of noise because of their textural or timbral density, their rhythmic irregularity, their noisiness, or their lack of adherence to more conventional ways of presenting melodic material that ultimately determined this early conception of what could be labeled experimental music. And it was precisely on the common ground of expanding the sound palette that instrumental and electroacoustic compositions became grouped together as “experimental.” Combining the reiterative use of the word to refer to these compositions with the redundant sound qualities shared between them sonically grounded the idea of experimentation for those involved in the music scene and bridged otherwise quite distinct electroacoustic and instrumental works.

EXAMPLE 2.3. Etkin, *Entropias*, measures 58–61. The instruments move by quarter-tones or halftones.

BRIDGES BETWEEN ELECTROACOUSTIC AND INSTRUMENTAL EXPERIMENTALISMS

Critics interpreted several characteristics of the sound quality and organization in instrumental music as iconic signs—resemblances—of electroacoustic music, although to them this was not necessarily a good thing. For instance, Roque de Pedro, commenting on the choice of repertoire for the 1966 Contemporary Music Festival, provided his perspective on the state of the contemporary music scene as it was being presented by CLAEM:

At any time period there has been music produced that is averagely or poorly realized. In our time, it seems the proportion is greater than usual. Furthermore, the experiment for the simple pleasure of doing “something new” is more and more a tendency . . . Many composers are following the trend of the ultra avant-garde and this ends up being identified as a snobbish Dadaism . . . At the Di Tella there is almost no space for orientations closer to tradition, such as polytonality. They prefer to use musical instruments in a way that goes against their nature, as if wanting to make *musique concrète*; or they go directly to electronic and concrete music.³⁰

³⁰ Roque de Pedro, “Instituto Di Tella: V Festival de Música Contemporánea,” *Tribuna Musical* 10 (1966): 24.

EXAMPLE 2.4. Enrique Rivera, Piano Sonata no. 2 (1965). On this last page of the score one can see in each system the general contour of the four types of gestures Rivera uses throughout the piece.

11

The image shows the final page of a handwritten musical score, numbered 11 in the top right corner. The score is written on four systems of staves, each containing a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The notation is dense and expressive, with various dynamic markings and performance instructions.

- System 1:** Features a grand staff with a *pp* marking. The music consists of several vertical strokes and chords, with some notes connected by lines.
- System 2:** Includes the instruction *accelerando* and a tempo marking $\downarrow = 144$. The music shows a melodic line with a slur and a bass line with a long horizontal line.
- System 3:** Starts with the instruction *(según indicación anterior)* and a *ppp* marking. The music features long, sweeping melodic lines across both staves.
- System 4:** Includes the instruction *accelerando* and a tempo marking $\downarrow = 152$. The music is highly rhythmic and dense, with many notes and a *mf* marking. The page concludes with a double bar line and the text "SEPT. 65" and "BUENOS AIRES." written vertically.

SEPT. 65
BUENOS AIRES.

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De Pedro depicts the use of instrumental extended techniques as both against the instruments' nature and connected to the sound worlds created by electroacoustic composition. By the end of 1967, most reporters had noticed the widespread adoption of experimentation as part of composition at CLAEM. As a single example: in an article titled "Experiments Reign among the Works of the Di Tella Institute Fellows," an anonymous writer complained about the "relentless search for timbral effects, inexpressivity, and a lack of clear and precise musical objects."³¹ While unappreciative of the aesthetics, the critics were correct in noticing that experimentation had taken hold of the composers' imaginations at CLAEM. This would peak by the end of the decade, as improvisation, aleatoric procedures, and the use of graphic notation—together with a fully functioning electroacoustic studio—became staples at CLAEM.

The choice of visitors and guest professors during the last years of CLAEM show the institution's support for experimental procedures. During 1967–1970, CLAEM was host to visits from Luigi Nono, Vladimir Ussachevsky, Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, Eric Salzman, Luis de Pablo, Larry Austin, and Umberto Eco, among several others. Each in his own way addressed subjects that contributed to a broad understanding of what musical experimentation might mean; both Ussachevsky and Nono, for example, gave courses based on their experience making electroacoustic music, while Salzman and Austin discussed composing for mixed media.

A good indication of this perception of a "cluster of things" being associated with the words "experimental music" is found in the words Ginastera used to introduce a lecture-recital featuring music by the Austrian-Polish composer Roman Haubenstock-Ramati in September 1968.³² All works corresponded to Haubenstock-Ramati's seminar on new possibilities in music notation. In his opening remarks for the event, Ginastera highlighted Haubenstock-Ramati's accomplishments: "[he] uses all of the resources of our time, and participates in this renovation—can one say revolution?—that contemporary art is going through. Problems of stereo field and tape music—that is, music using electronic procedures—graphic notations, and aleatoric processes in musical composition are, in the hands of Haubenstock-Ramati, not research, but they become [elements of] a work of art."³³ Here I would argue that Ginastera strategically avoids the word "experimenting" and instead uses "research" in a way that resembles the language used to describe the Laboratorio. At the same time, his wording points at an uneasy relation between several of the composers and the legitimacy

³¹ "Reina el experimento en las obras de los becarios del Instituto Di Tella," *Clarín*, December 2, 1967. In this case, the commentary makes reference to concerts with works by Luis Arias, Blas Emilio Atehortúa, Regina Benavente, Gabriel Brnčić, César Bolaños, Oscar Cubillas, Marlene Fernandes, Jacqueline Nova, Joaquín Orellana, Mario Perusso, Florencio Pozadas, Iris Sangüesa de Ichasso, and Luis María Serra.

³² Haubenstock-Ramati was being honored during his residency at CLAEM. The concert of September 18, 1968, featured performances of *Klavierstücke* (1963–65), *Interpolation: Mobile for flutes* (1957), and *Liaisons* for vibraphone, xyloimba, and tape (1958). At the end of the concert, Haubenstock-Ramati presented and commented on recorded fragments of his opera *Amerika* (1962–64).

³³ Alberto Ginastera, introductory remarks to lecture-recital by Haubenstock-Ramati, September 18, 1968, recording, DVD 9, Archivo Sonoro Instituto Di Tella, Reichenbach family private collection, Buenos Aires.

that “experimenting” might give (or take away) from their work. For Ginastera there was more to the work of art than the experiment.

In 1969, a year after this visit, Gerardo Gandini was asked if he believed that young composers were giving excessive importance to experimental procedures. His answer resonates with Ginastera’s words: “Maybe. I would like to remind you of something that Varèse said and I find quite on target: he said that all the experimental works he did he threw away, that is, he only kept the ones that he thought were well made and ceased to be experimental. What this means is that from a specific perspective experimental music does not exist. Experimental procedures do. They only work when they stop being experimental and become music. What might happen is that the less skilled composers are the ones that exaggerate with the experimental.”³⁴

Gandini’s role and influence at CLAEM cannot be overstated. Many composers saw Gandini, not Ginastera, as their main mentor in composition during their fellowship, and even more so after 1968. That there was continuity of ideas between them is not surprising, since Gandini was one of Ginastera’s most successful students. The key tension presented here was the relationship between those things considered experimental and those considered music. It was clear that experimentation could lead to music. But the question was now formulated slightly different: can experimentation be music?

THE LATE 1960S: THE GRUPO DE EXPERIMENTACIÓN MUSICAL.

Improvisatory practices at CLAEM, and to some degree in Buenos Aires in general, grew to full strength in 1969. Before that year only a few composers at CLAEM had been really engaged with improvisation, aleatorism, or using graphic notation as primary means to generate a work. (Oscar Bazán is an example.) John Cage had made a strong impression on many composers before that date, but in most cases—with some few but significant exceptions—his influence was more philosophical than compositional. Graciela Paraskevaïdis and Mariano Etkin, for example, have told me several times their memories of excitedly receiving their copy of John Cage’s *Silence: Lectures and Writings* in the mid-1960s. The works of Cage and other New York-based composers, such as Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff, were showcased publicly at CLAEM at least by 1965 during the Fourth Contemporary Music Festival. This festival featured a concert with the works *Mobile* (1962), by Heinz Holliger, *Music of Changes IV*, by John Cage, and *Mobile for Shakespeare* (1961), by Roman Haubenstock-Ramati. Brown himself gave a course at CLAEM on advanced compositional techniques between October 19 and November 5, 1966. On October 31 he also offered a public lecture titled “Relationship between Current Music and the Other Arts.” During his visit, he made public performances of his *Available Forms II* (1962) for orchestra,

³⁴ “Los compositores argentinos: Gerardo Gandini,” *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), March 26, 1969, n.p.

and Gandini, Antonio Tauriello, and Armando Krieger offered the Argentine premiere of Brown's *Corroboree* for three pianos (1964).

The choices of visiting composers for 1969, Luis de Pablo and Eric Salzman, are perhaps the clearest indications that improvisation, open forms, graphic notation, and experimentation with the fringes of what was musical on the concert stage had become the main trend at CLAEM. De Pablo shared his ideas about aleatorism and modular compositions, while Salzman began to invest himself in his lifelong interest in creative interdisciplinary collaborations mixing art and technology.

The turning point for this increased attention to experimentation occurred somewhere around mid-1967, when Gandini returned to teach at CLAEM after studying abroad with the Italian composer Goffredo Petrassi at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome. During that period, Gandini developed an interest in improvisation groups, inspired by the Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza, founded by Franco Evangelisti, and Musica Elettronica Viva, founded in Rome the year before by Richard Teitelbaum and others.³⁵ Gandini thought he could organize something similar at CLAEM, and although he had started doing so, it was not until 1969 when a series of fortuitous events led to a formalization of a group for improvisation. That year, the composers at CLAEM learned that for the first time in its history, there was no budget for paying performers to play their most recent compositions. Determined to still have a student concert but unable to program the pieces written by each individual fellow, teachers and students decided to perform five collective improvisations that had been relatively rehearsed and had each been given a title, although without a formal composer. The new ensemble was called Grupo de Experimentación Musical.³⁶

The Grupo de Experimentación Musical, like the electronic music laboratory, acted as a playground for the discovery of novel and original sonic materials, through performances ranging from free improvisation to the interpretation of detailed graphic scores. According to Ariel Martínez and Eduardo Kusnir, two fellows at CLAEM in 1969–1970, Ginastera agreed with Gandini that it would be useful to have a space—a type of workshop—where composers could experiment with instruments, try new sounds and techniques, and have a hands-on experience with each other's music. But Ginastera was not convinced that such a workshop should be taken to the stage as an ensemble. He had a very hard time accepting the experimental and unpredictable nature of the group's improvisations. Kusnir remembered Ginastera telling

³⁵ See Amy C. Beal, "Music Is a Universal Human Right': Musica Elettronica Viva," in *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 99–120. The group was composed of Alvin Curran, Richard Teitelbaum, Frederic Rzewski, Allen Bryant, Carol Plantamura, Ivan Vandor, and Jon Phetteplace.

³⁶ Also sometimes called Grupo de Improvisación Musical, or Grupo Experimental de Improvisación. The members were Jorge Antunes, Rafael Aponte-Ledée, León Biriotti, Jorge Blarduni, Gabriel Brnčić, Pedro Caryevschi, Bruno D'Astoli, Eduardo Kusnir, Beatriz Lockhart, José Ramón Maranzano, Ariel Martínez, Antonio Mastrogiovanni, Alejandro Nuñez Allauca, and Luis Zubillaga. Gerardo Gandini coordinated the group.

them: “well, this free improvisation group is good so that you all practice among yourselves. Experiment among yourselves, but that’s not something to show in a concert.”³⁷

Responding to Ginastera’s concern, Gabriel Brnčić, a fellow and avid participant in the group, explained in written form what the group was doing. To understand what troubled Ginastera, it is useful to see how Brnčić presented his argument. Some improvisation groups, such as the one forming at CLAEM, were breaking away from a central feature of classical music performance: technical mastery developed over years leading to virtuosity. The composers would often play instruments they were familiar with as performers—although not at a professional level—as well as other instruments they were exploring for the first time. Brnčić’s text is dated December 1, 1969, and explains the goals and benefits of this group. “The creation of an ensemble for musical experimentation—that through controlled improvisation and direct contact with the sound materials provides new sources to contemporary musicians—is an active answer from avant-garde composers to some of the general problems of contemporary music The search for new sources and new materials characteristic of the avant-garde is a process that demands from oneself—and its proponents—a consciousness, a coherent *realization* that cannot be ‘accepted’ because it is experimental, but because it is representative and because it clearly *expresses an authentic evolution*.”³⁸ For Brnčić, experimentation was something avant-garde composers could do, but this was not seen as experimentation for its own sake. Instead, there was a conscious effort to find what could be used as a next step in the “evolution” of composition. In this playful space, the composers could find “realizations”—meaning sonic materials—that were an “authentic evolution,” that is, something novel and original. In other words, the eventual sound results that could come out of the group’s improvised creations would be added to the repertoire of techniques and sonorities in the composers’ vocabularies. It was a workshop to develop new ideas.

Brnčić found this to be validation enough to have these ensembles present their work on the concert stage, and he continued to make his argument by emphasizing an important similarity with more conventional ensembles: “The Grupo de Experimentación of CLAEM has a regular training schedule with sessions of improvisation that cover diverse procedures and degrees of playing.”³⁹ Requiring rehearsals where composers would explore different options underscored ties to long-standing musical practices.

Since the recent history of Western art music had not foregrounded improvisation, Brnčić felt it necessary to explain what it entailed. “This modality of musical activity [improvisation] can range from total freedom, going through diverse canonic forms,

³⁷ Eduardo Kusnir and Ariel Martínez, interview with the author, June 26, 2008. In the original: “Bueno, está bien el Grupo de Improvisación para que practiquen entre ustedes. Hagan experimentos entre ustedes, pero eso no es para presentar en concierto.”

³⁸ Gabriel Brnčić, “Grupo de Experimentación Musical del Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales,” December 1, 1969, CLAEM Papers. My emphasis.

³⁹ Ibid.

all the way to becoming a very defined score where the aleatoric is completely regulated and refers only to some parameters. Usually rhythm is the freest factor Finally, as an experimental aspect attached to this new conception of a spectacle, we complement the experiences with theatrical actions: scenery, lighting and movement.”⁴⁰ Brnčić makes it clear that there are different levels of control over improvisation. He also points out that among composers at CLAEM there was less preoccupation with the rhythmic aspects of different compositions, as many of the graphic scores they were using as guides were more focused on providing indications of textures and pitch-centered gestures. At the end of his three-page statement, Brnčić underlined one sentence as the key conclusion of his presentation: “Therefore it is possible [for the audience] to be present at the birth of a process, and conceive it as a sonic spectacle.”⁴¹ Improvisation was showing real-time composition and, given his previous arguments, was also fit to be on stage, at the concert level.

ANXIETY OVER MUSICALITY/TALENT

Soon after the Grupo de Experimentación Musical became public, local music critics started questioning the musicality of the composers as performers. Some of them said that the performers “seemed more concerned with demonstrating how these instruments should not be played than with making music.”⁴² It was the first time this had been brought up to the public eye. Ariel Martínez, a member of the group since its beginnings, started writing a new work that reflected the concern he and other composers had about the relevance and truthfulness behind these critiques. “In Buenos Aires,” Martínez recalled, “there were people who believed this was music, and there were those who didn’t. They even doubted that this was worth doing as an artistic and musical exploration. So, we had a divided field between ‘us’ who believed it worth it and ‘them’ who didn’t.”⁴³ He decided to call his new piece *Nosotros y ellos (Us and Them; 1970)*.

There was a critic who wrote that composers that did not know how to play instruments would be better off doing something else. He was criticizing our ability with our instruments. Our ability was quite varied I was not a professional flute player . . . but I was the flute player of the Orquesta Juventud Musical. I played in a symphony orchestra I was not professional because it was not my objective to be a paid player at an orchestra the rest of my life However, often [instead of playing the flute] I would play the double bass. I have never studied a string instrument, and I don’t know how to play it. But I will take any

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² J.C.G.C., “Instituto Di Tella: Festival de Música Contemporánea,” *Tribuna Musical* 20 (1971): 38.

⁴³ Ariel Martínez, interview with the author, Buenos Aires, July 9, 2008.



FIGURE 2.3. Gerardo Gandini, composer and recognized pianist, playing the double bass, c. 1969. Used by courtesy of Mary von Reichenbach.

instrument and do something and make it sound. It depends on what you have to do, for these improvisations we were playing things that did not require us to do any “tibidi tibidi tibidi” [fast sounding]. We might need to do a bwooooooooo [slow sounding] and that was it. The stupid critic was just focused on the fact that we were not great performers on the instruments.⁴⁴

In a musical tradition where virtuosic authority over one’s instrument is praised, the fact that these composers would take to the concert stage and play instruments that they did not know very well resulted in a tension that troubled not only the critics but also the composers themselves. Could the musicality of Gerardo Gandini on the piano, León Biriotti on the oboe, or Alejandro Nuñez Allauca on the accordion be translated to new instruments? (fig. 2.3). How could these works, relying so much on the individual decisions of the performer, be better played by people who did not have the technical proficiency of professionals?

According to Martínez, composers were bringing something important with them to the musical experience:

If we were to bring great performers they might not be able to play this music. They have great skill, but they don’t have any imagination because they are like

⁴⁴ Ibid.

typists. They read whatever is written and they won't come up with their own idea ever. And what was interesting about that music we were playing in the improvisation group was the fact that it was spontaneous When you don't know how to play an instrument you are not conditioned and you might actually do something more interesting . . . at least in relation to our [avant-garde] aesthetics. It was a discussion we were having at the time.⁴⁵

Spontaneity and the capacity to improvise within the stylistic expectations of the avant-garde became more important than technical skill and expertise. Yet Martínez saw the logic of the argument the critics were posing: "What was more complicated about the critic . . . is that he was somewhat right. We didn't know how to correctly play the instruments . . . [we played] some better, some worse. But that was not what mattered. But there was some truth to the criticism. So, the question was, to what extent is that which the critic is saying valid and ruining what we were trying to do?"⁴⁶ The question about the legitimacy of composers performing on instruments they had not mastered and, even further, the value of highly aleatoric and freely improvisatory pieces was a concern for many of the fellows. As noted, Ginastera himself did not feel comfortable with what the ensemble was publically performing and made an effort to point out the "work of art" that could result from experiments/research. But with hindsight it is clear that these experiences were central to the development of personal musical styles for some composers, such as Ariel Martínez, Gabriel Brnčić, Gerardo Gandini, and others.

At the same time, experimentation through improvisation had some unexpected consequences; there was a breaking of the ritual. Specifically, composers participating in live improvisation as a type of spontaneous composition replaced the tradition of virtuoso performers. New questions emerged as composers were forced to reflect on authorship as a result of collective compositions. Today, nearly all of these composers have abandoned the use of graphic notation and no longer give performers such a broad space for improvisation. But the path they traveled in the ensemble was invaluable to their careers, and CLAEM was central in providing a supportive space for such avant-garde adventures.

THE EMBODIMENT OF THE AVANT-GARDE

I believe that in the context of CLAEM, experimenting not only was related to aesthetics or sound but also was something one did from a subjective position within the avant-garde. Martínez, Kusnir, Brnčić, Etkin, and Paraskevaídis, and many other composers who studied at CLAEM and who identified themselves as or had been called "experimental" at some point, adopted and embraced the musical avant-garde because

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

it provided a desirable space for sonic production. I would argue that it is significant that many of these composers saw in Juan Carlos Paz an important referent in their embrace of the term *vanguardia*, since it already had some cultural capital attached to it in relation to the local music scene (although not necessarily directly to the avant-garde movements of the 1920s elsewhere).⁴⁷ Being a vanguardista held both the potential to challenge the previous models followed by local composers like Ginastera and the ability to open a space among cosmopolitan composers who were deemed peripheral and had gained recognition by subverting certain parameters of musical composition.

Many composers at CLAEM saw the musical avant-garde as a strong, embodied experience, capable of affecting both emotions and physical bodies. Mariano Etkin remembers that the more adventurous works could sometimes shock and generate surprising responses, even from composers inside CLAEM:

When our fellowship term was just starting, that is in early 1965, there was a reunion with all the fellows. We were going to listen to each other's music, to know each other musically. Some of us started playing our music. And one of the fellows, and this I remember perfectly, was shocked when he heard our music . . . a shock of the brutal aesthetic contrast with what he did, which was more or less post-Schubert. He felt physically sick. I remember him going to the bathroom Some of them were never able to recover when they were faced with the reality of current music; it caused them a tremendous emotional unbalance.⁴⁸

Evidently, the physical reaction remembered by Etkin was a very tangible and bodily response to the music. Etkin's recounting of the reaction also reinforced a notion that the avant-garde was somehow the correct path to be following at that time. The music clearly had the ability to shake up the status quo of Latin American conservative art music practices—exemplified perhaps in the music of Ginastera and Carlos Chávez—and even more so the almost anachronistic practices represented here as post-Schubertian, meaning, rooted in the Romantic tradition of nineteenth-century Europe.⁴⁹ The event described was an opportunity to “know each other musically,” that is, to listen and understand sonically one another's pieces and musical interests. The visceral reaction to this moment of sharing made it evident that avant-garde sound

⁴⁷ Peter Bürger refers to a classic avant-garde in *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁴⁸ Etkin, interview with the author, Buenos Aires, August 1, 2005.

⁴⁹ Several of the composers coming from larger metropolitan centers—like Buenos Aires and Santiago—pointed out to me that fellows coming from smaller towns, or even large, less cosmopolitan cities, would frequently have compositional styles that were significantly “out of date” and referred to their music using nineteenth-century terms. Although hard to generalize, a brief look at the early works of some of the composers who attended CLAEM—such as Atiliano Auza León, Oscar Cubillas, Benjamin Gutierrez, and Marco Aurelio Vanegas—shows that they had a firm grounding in the tonal, melodic, and rhythmic soundscapes of nineteenth-century central Europe, a grounding quite different from that of most of their peers at the Center.

could be heard as capable of physically affecting someone, an indexical sign that experience leads to authenticity and truthfulness.⁵⁰

After discussing aesthetics with Paraskevaídis one afternoon, I came to a better understanding of how music affected her, and how she related these aspects of authenticity and truth to her own bodily experience. I quote our interview extensively, since I believe that her answer to my question sheds important insight into the way the avant-garde was being experienced in an embodied fashion.

Eduardo Herrera: You say that there are good works and bad works, and I wonder how these words are both used to denote aesthetics and at the same time ethics. We say there are good actions and bad actions, using the same words. What is something good and something bad in music today?

Graciela Paraskevaídis: Precisely, with ethics as the starting point, you can say that bad works are also lying to you. And good ones are *truthful*; truthful in the sense that you feel the composer's intention to communicate a truth, a rupture. Truthful are works that break codes, that establish a fringe situation, that go to the edge of the cliff, that are trying something radical, that are taking risks. The second option are works that are very well done, but you know they were made the way they were because it was going to work. Because the composer knew that what they were doing was going to work. And that is very comfortable . . . And these might even be good pieces, but I am interested less in that than in the first option. That first option is for me a meeting place of ethics, of political and ethical commitment, by transmitting something risky that breaks with something before it. It might be in the structure, in the use of time, in the material . . . something that not only causes in me a speculative and theoretical reflection, but that at the same time is sensible and visceral. If those three things happen [structural, sensible, and visceral reactions], that is going to indicate that there was a true ethical, political, and aesthetical commitment. And that work has a long-lasting transcendence in me; I will want to hear it again, I will want to know it better, to share it. I think that if those three things happen here [points to her head], here [points to her heart], and here [points to her gut area], then the work is good.⁵¹

For Paraskevaídis, successful musical compositions can threaten and challenge the musical status quo by taking risks, or they may assert and preserve established musical codes. This brings back to mind de Pedro's grouping of (1) works based on their interest in "renovation, of revolutionary tendency," which he considered experimental, or (2) works that "without trying to be reactionary, rather unfold within basic principles of well-recognized results."⁵² Paraskevaídis's preference for the first type not only

⁵⁰ Following Peircean phenomenology, what we have here is an example of the reality function of indexical signs. As the sign (avant-garde music) and object (physical reaction) happen together, their connection is perceived simply as true or fact.

⁵¹ Paraskevaídis, interview with the author, Montevideo, August 19, 2008.

⁵² Roque De Pedro, "Instituto Di Tella: Obras de becarios," *Tribuna Musical* 7 (1965): 16.

corresponds both to the usual avant-garde rhetoric of rupture but also perhaps gets closer to the understandings of experimentation at the time. Real commitment to the avant-garde meant attempting new codes; it meant going “to the edge of the cliff” and not relying on tried-and-true methods, even if they had been considered avant-garde at some point in the past. Her experience of the music, which she relies on in interpreting the rupture generated by good works, passes through three places in her body: her head, absorbing the speculative and theoretical; her heart, responding to the sensitive, to feelings; and her guts, bowels, and entrails, capturing the visceral. They are fully felt in the body, and they are also expressions of truth. Paraskevaïdis values the exploration of new possibilities as sincere, and the opposite is also true: she associates works that rely on well-known procedures and compositional techniques with deception and falsehood.

Having known Paraskevaïdis for several years, I was not particularly surprised by how easy it was for her to point out an association between aesthetics and ethics. What did surprise me was the associations she made with her body; I was perhaps expecting the common binary opposition between the rational and the emotional, but instead she offered a three-part model that separated the sensible from the visceral. I was particularly attracted to her association of viscosity with her stomach, since I immediately remembered Etkin’s description of the young fellow running to the bathroom, sick from aesthetic shock. The avant-garde was experienced in direct connection through the body, at different levels, but with very real consequences. A notion of a purely intellectual relation with the avant-garde was incomplete, and that was precisely what the students criticized about Ginastera’s engagement with it. Coriún Aharonián alluded to this in an interview when he noted that Ginastera “was a conservative man with a very particular nose to appear to be more of a free-thinker than he really was.”⁵³ Etkin told me that Ginastera, “ever the opportunist,” realized “that there was a wave of avant-garde that he could not ignore if he wanted to continue to be a prestigious person. There was no way he would stay on the margins.”⁵⁴ For these students, the avant-garde was not something you did but something you were.

The stories in this section have other implications as well. Causing a physical reaction that was instinctual and visceral showed avant-garde aesthetics to be somewhat *authentic*, *valid*, and *truthful*. It was “the reality of *current* music,” as Etkin puts it, and thus it invalidated works that did not share the ultramodern musical practices. For Paraskevaïdis, when a work took risks—that is, attempted to rupture the conventional—it was experienced as *truthful*, leaving insincerity and falseness to composers following other paths.

⁵³ Silvina Luz Mansilla, “Coriún Aharonián entrevistado por Silvina Luz Mansilla en el Instituto Nacional de Musicología ‘Carlos Vega,’ Buenos Aires, el 23 de junio de 2011,” in *Conversaciones en torno al CLAEM: Entrevistas a compositores becarios del Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales*, ed. Hernán Gabriel Vázquez (Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de Musicología “Carlos Vega,” 2015), 35.

⁵⁴ Mariano Etkin, interview with the author, Buenos Aires, June 25, 2008.

CONCLUSION

This chapter only scratches the surface of the ways certain composers in Buenos Aires embraced and localized transnational ideals and values of contemporary music in the 1960s. Nevertheless, I feel comfortable generalizing that during this period and with the legitimacy offered by institutional support, the practices embraced at CLAEM that were deemed experimental and avant-garde came to occupy an institutionalized hegemonic position that ostracized other contemporary musical practices, such as the *Movimiento Música Más*, as Dewar shows in chapter 12. The vanguardistas in general, and within them experimental practices, became themselves institutionalized; to a significant degree the vanguardistas then alienated other composers in the classical music tradition who felt otherwise. The desire to be on the fringes of what was considered art became, to some extent, the mainstream. Huyssen indicates that the avant-garde in general actively opposes the “bourgeois institutionalization of the arts in order to oppose the political and cultural power structure that art historically has been used to legitimate.”⁵⁵ As much as this can partially apply to the avant-gardes of Europe and the United States, however, the situation in Latin America was different, and this preconception is turned on its head. At this particular point, it was precisely the institutionalization of the arts—sponsored by elite groups in the economic, academic, and political world—that was considered avant-garde. It is true that this might have been short-lived. With the closing of CLAEM, and with the shifting political conditions of the Southern Cone, those who kept strong interest in the avant-garde moved outside the institutionalized context the Di Tella had provided, and opened a true noninstitutionalized space for the avant-garde in the *Cursos Latinoamericanos de Música Contemporánea*.⁵⁶ But for a brief moment, the Institute Di Tella housed the vanguardia and opened its doors to experimentation.

In broader terms, this chapter emphasizes the importance of localizing the meaning of what experimentalism can be in specific contexts. What I have reduced here to four snapshots associated with the use of the word “experimental” in Buenos Aires around CLAEM during the 1960s—electroacoustic music, certain instrumental music, improvisatory and improvisatory-like spaces, and certain ways of being in the world—are

⁵⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernisms, Mass Culture, Post-modernism* (1986), 3–11, quoted in Gabriel Solis, *Monk's Music: Thelonious Monk and Jazz History in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 192.

⁵⁶ The Latin American Contemporary Music Courses were organized from 1975 to 1989 by a team that prominently included Graciela Paraskevaïdis and Coriún Aharonián. They were a series of itinerant, non-profit, noninstitutionalized, free, intensive summer music courses that were among the most important events for contemporary music in the region during their existence. Although transportation and board were covered by the organization, the teachers were often asked to participate out of their own militant commitment to spreading the avant-garde. Among the people involved in CLAEM who were later teachers in these *Cursos* were Aharonián, Bazán, Biriotti, Etkin, Fernandes, Kusnir, Maiguashca, Maranzano, Martínez, Orellana, Paraskevaïdis, and Villalpando. See Graciela Paraskevaïdis, “La presencia de compositores argentinos en los *Cursos Latinoamericanos de Música Contemporánea*,” *Revista Argentina de Musicología* 14 (2013): 33–76.

just general markers of complex and rich understandings that feed of each other and create a thick and messy narrative. As experimental music studies continue to explore the various understandings of the people and practices they discuss as dense semiotics spaces where meaning is heavily localized, the idea of a singular musical experimentalism becomes destabilized, and we instead must embrace a much more complex interaction between multiple experimentalisms.

3

EXPERIMENTAL ALTERNATIVES

Institutionalism, Avant-gardism, and Popular Music at the Margins of the Cuban Revolution

Susan Thomas

THIS CHAPTER BEGINS with midcentury experimentalism and ends with millennial altertnativity. It takes as its point of departure the Grupo de Experimentación Sonora (GES), a musical collective with shifting personnel that was housed from 1969 to 1978 within the Cuban film institute, the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC). The GES is remembered for its aesthetic fusions, use of hands-on technological experimentation, embrace of international cosmopolitanism, and clarity in its aesthetic and social politics. These qualities made the collective a role model for later musical groups and projects, especially those that emerged in the transformative decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union. I consider the impact of the GES in the context of the larger trajectory of postrevolutionary popular music by focusing on two musical collectives that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s: Habana Abierta (founded 1997) and Interactivo (founded 2001). Such a comparison leads both to a consideration of how artistic, political, and aesthetic discourses have functioned at different moments in postrevolutionary Cuba and to an investigation of how emic views of popular and art music, the avant-garde, mass mediation, and technological intervention shaped musical production and reception.

The GES emerged in a tumultuous period marked by dialectical tensions. The decade and a half following the revolution witnessed conflicts surrounding the cultural expression of nationalism versus internationalism, an increased awareness of both the promise and the threat represented by the political potential of creative work, and a resulting ambivalence as to how much the state could or should exert control over creative expression. Similar tensions reemerged during the 1990s, when the collapse

of the Soviet Union instigated a period of economic crisis, political unease, and economic realignment.¹ Curiously, the latter period also saw a remarkable reeffervescence of many of the same experimental and creative strategies that the GES had pioneered decades earlier. A comparison of a state-supported ensemble that emerged in the revolutionary ferment of the 1960s with millennial musicians who established their largely independent careers in a period of increasing capitalist expansion and transnational experience might seem unlikely. I consider, however, how these millennial musicians use, often consciously, artistic strategies similar to those used by their predecessors, including collectivism, relative autonomy from institutional structures, and experimental production practices.

Experimentalism and its close cousins, bohemianism and collectivism, have most often been described and theorized as responses to the capitalist condition.² What might we make of their appearance, then, in the heady early days of a socialist experiment? And how should we interpret their revival in another period of turbulent transition, the economic and political crisis precipitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union? If the first two decades after the revolution can be regarded as a nationally focused experiment in socialism, the decades that have followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union can be similarly read as another national experiment—albeit a forced one—with international capitalist markets and transnational flows. Yet, in spite of the different historical, economic, and political circumstances that have framed the experimental practices of musicians in the two periods, we can view the revolutionary experimentalisms of the GES, Habana Abierta, and Interactivo as practices that have, in the words of the late composer Harold Gramatges, “permitted multiple paths for the development of [national] identity.”³

EXPERIMENTAL ENGAGEMENT

In *Experimentalism Otherwise*, Benjamin Piekut describes experimentalism as “a grouping, not a group.” He cautions that in understanding experimentalist movements we

¹ See Arianna Hernández-Reguant, *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

² Authors who tie experimental practice to artists’ response to and critique of capitalism include Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); and Ronald M. Radano, *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton’s Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For discussions of bohemianism, see Sheila Whiteley, “Counter cultures and Popular Music,” in *Counter cultures and Popular Music*, ed. Jedediah Sklower and Sheila Whiteley (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 3–16; and Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004). Discussions of collectivism as a capitalist critique can be found in Nicholas Gebhardt and Tony Whyton, eds., *The Cultural Politics of Jazz Collectives: This Is Our Music* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

³ Harold Gramatges, *Presencia de la revolución en la música cubana* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1997), 19.

should seek not to determine how particular artists or works fit into a predefined list of representative traits; we should instead consider how they perform their own meanings in their unique social and historical contexts. In arguing that experimentalism should not be read as merely an adherence to musical style or even ideology, Piekut pronounces it as “mark[ing] an achievement, not an explanation.”⁴ His avoidance of generic and stylistic taxonomies is strikingly similar to the position taken by Cuban music critic Joaquín Borges-Triana. Borges-Triana uses the term “Música Cubana Alternativa” to describe an extra-institutional, independent, and generally counter-cultural movement begun in the 1990s (and of which Habana Abierta and Interactivo form a part) that he describes as an “operative category and not a specifically generic or stylistic concept.”⁵ Just as Piekut’s use of “grouping” places its emphasis on what is performed (or, as Piekut would say, what is achieved) rather than what is represented, Borges-Triana’s project is to describe the unfolding of a *phenomenon* rather than to define the characteristics of a music per se. Both scholars urge us to consider experimentalism/alternativity not in terms of what it sounds like but in terms of the politics it enacts.

Piekut’s insistence on the *achievement* of experimentalism, rather than its representation, at once liberates and frustrates. For if, as Piekut suggests, the experimental impulse can be located more in the act of doing than in the resulting product, how are we, as listeners and historians, to recognize it as experimental? Can experimentalism be heard? Can experimental music be popular? Rather than treating experimentalism as a particularly unruly cousin of the avant-garde, an upstart that upends and ignores social conventions and aesthetic codes while refusing to be easily understood or assimilated (as Michael Nyman might have it),⁶ perhaps we might view the experimental impulse in Cuban postrevolutionary popular music as one that applies its politics and sonic explorations to compel and engage, thus fomenting social change not via the small, educated elites targeted by the avant-gardes of art musics but via the public at large. The ubiquity of GES hits such as “¡Cuba Va!” and “Yolanda” as party sing-along standards for a generation of youth across the Spanish-speaking world as well as the more recent transnational popularity of collectives such as Habana Abierta and Interactivo illustrates that these are cultural products that have become “more norm than alt.”⁷

⁴ Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 6.

⁵ “El término de Música Cubana Alternativa es una expresión manejada como una categoría operativa y no como un concepto en cuanto a géneros y estilos específicos como tales.” Joaquín Borges-Triana, *Concierto cubano: La vida es un divino guión* (Barcelona: Linkgua, 2009), 11. Borges-Triana first coined the term in “Música Cuba Alternativa: Del margen al epicentro,” *Dédalo* 0 (2001): 8–9.

⁶ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷ Anonymous, review of *Weird Like Us: My Bohemian America*, by Ann Powers, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, cited in Ann Powers, *Weird Like Us: My Bohemian America* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2001), frontmatter. The nueva trova, remarkably, went from countercultural to institutionalized in only a decade, a process Robin Moore has discussed in “Transformations in Cuban Nueva Trova, 1965–1995,” *Ethnomusicology* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 1–41. Such has been this transformation that young people today are more likely to view a nueva trova star, such as Silvio Rodríguez, not as an example of an earlier counterculture but as a reactionary representative of Cuba’s institutionally sanctioned elite.

 THE GRUPO DE EXPERIMENTACIÓN SONORA AND TRANSFORMATIVE
 EXPERIMENTALISM

In 1968, ICAIC director Alfredo Guevara traveled to Brazil. There he was moved by the ideological commitment and interdisciplinary exploration of the Tropicália movement and its relationship with Brazilian experimental cinema. He sought to begin a similar movement in Cuba as part of his goal of creating an independent and revolutionary experimental cinema.⁸ In 1969 he founded the GES, placing it under the direction of composer Leo Brouwer. Along with composers Juan Elósegui and US-born Federico Smith, Brouwer aimed to provide technical training to a group of musically diverse and largely autodidactic singer-songwriters and jazz musicians who would then compose, perform, and record film scores. While the creation of film scores served as the official justification for the GES's tenure in the film institute, as early as 1971 Brouwer downplayed the role of film music in the group's "fundamental mission." In an interview with journalist Jaime Sarusky, he said: "[making] music for film is one of the things that interests us, but it was not our fundamental mission. That mission was to transform the repertory of Cuban popular music within our capabilities."⁹ Today, the GES holds near mythological status in Cuban music history, although few Cubans can point to specific recordings (beyond Rodríguez's iconic "¡Cuba va!") and even fewer can identify individual film soundtracks. The GES, along with its founding members Pablo Milanés, Silvio Rodríguez, and Noel Nicola, is instead best known for its ties to the politically-engaged song genre known as *nueva trova*, which was officially recognized by the Cuban government in 1972 with the founding of the national Movimiento de la Nueva Trova.

The "committed cosmopolitanism"¹⁰ that characterized the GES's stance and their music, and that would later inspire a younger generation of musicians, was shaped by the integrated arts movement and the progressive, countercultural politics of the Tropicália movement. The two groups shared similar ideological commitments and interdisciplinary productions; there were also many direct parallels between the musical aesthetics of Tropicalists such as Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and Tom Zé and

⁸ Mariana Martins Villaça, *Polifonia tropical: Experimentalismo e engajamento na música popular (Brasil e Cuba, 1967–1972)* (São Paulo: Humanitas, 2004), 39.

⁹ "La música para cine es uno de los renglones que nos interesa, pero no era la misión fundamental. Tal misión era transformar el repertorio de la música popular cubana dentro de nuestras posibilidades." Leo Brouwer, quoted in Jaime Sarusky, *Una leyenda de música cubana: Grupo Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2006), 10.

¹⁰ I create this term here to echo the insistence with which Cuban revolutionary discourse inserted the term *comprometido* ("committed" or "engaged") to qualify expressive acts that might not otherwise be understood as revolutionary. Examples include *arte comprometido* (committed art), *canción comprometida* (committed song), and the *intelectual comprometido* (committed intellectual) or *artista comprometido* (committed artist)—a term *nueva trova* artists frequently invoked to describe themselves. See Nicola Miller, *In the Shadow of the State: Intellectuals and the Quest for National Identity in Twentieth-Century Spanish America* (New York: Verso, 1999), 95–136; Emilio Bejel, *Escribir en Cuba: Entrevistas con escritores cubanos, 1978–1989* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: La Editorial, Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1991), 171; and Jan Fairley, "There Is No Revolution without Song': New Song in Latin America," in *Music and Protest in 1968*, ed. Beata Kutsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 119–136.

the early *trovadores* (singer-songwriters of the Movimiento de la Nueva Trova, literally “troubadours”). Both groups blended local rhythms, inflections, and timbres with international and cosmopolitan sounds, such as jazz, rock and roll, nontraditional song structures, intricate and multilayered lyrics, and a shared fascination with the Beatles.¹¹

The personnel gathered by Guevara and Brouwer to carry out this transformative and integrated arts agenda would eventually become some of the revolution’s most renowned artists, including trovadores Pablo Milanés, Silvio Rodríguez, and Noel Nicola; jazz musicians Leonardo Acosta, Eduardo Ramos, and Carlos Averhoff; composer and guitarist Sergio Vitier; and later, trovadora Sara González (the group’s only female member) and the US-born, rock-oriented Pablo Menéndez. While highly diverse in their style and aesthetic priorities, all of the GES artists can be regarded, in one way or another, as political musical misfits. They were all artists who—through their strongly committed but often unorthodox leftism, bohemian attitudes, amateur professional status, unrestrained personalities, and attraction to musical fusions with “suspect” sounds, such as English and North American rock, jazz, or blues—were marginalized by the state-run, institutional arts apparatus. Tropicália-inspired or not, the founding of the GES by Guevara in 1969 can only be viewed as a sort of “rescue operation” for iconoclastic musicians who were disenfranchised by the increasingly conservative politics of Cuba’s state-run cultural institutions, for reasons of style, politics, or personality.¹² Brouwer himself described Guevara’s decisiveness in establishing the GES as nothing short of an intervention. “The ICAIC waited for the appropriate channels to function, and when they didn’t, the ICAIC acted, in this case, with music.”¹³

Just as Guevara saw the ICAIC’s task as transforming the role of cinema into that of a tool for improving society, so too did Brouwer view the mission of the GES as transformative and pedagogical. To that end, he identified three major problems with the state of popular music in Cuba. First, he criticized popular song as being too imitative, a quality that was necessary for the capitalist mass market but could be reenvisioned in a revolutionary context free of market demands. Second, he noted the poor quality,

¹¹ The Beatles remained a lodestone for Cuban musicians through the 1980s and even into the 1990s. Their harmonies and timbres indelibly marked Superávit’s 1997 album, *Verde Melón* (Green Melon), which even includes an elegiac tribute to the band in the song, “Marylín en el cielo con diamantes” (Marilyn in the Sky with Diamonds). So strong was the Beatles’ lasting resonance with Cuba’s “Generation X” that Superávit recorded a music video that visually referenced the earlier group’s 1960s look, and members of Habana Abierta, who left the island in 1996, made a tongue-in-cheek reference to Abbey Road in a 2003 documentary recounting their prodigal return to the island in January of that year. *Habana Abierta* (documentary), dir. Arturo Soto and Jorge Perrugorria (Havana: ICAIC, 2003).

¹² At the time of the founding of the GES, Silvio Rodríguez and Leo Brouwer had both been effectively banned from their jobs at the Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión; Pablo Milanés had previously been incarcerated and released from a “reeducational” forced labor camp; the music of Milanés and of Noel Nicola had come under renewed ideological scrutiny; and institutional authorities regarded the entire nueva trova movement with increasing suspicion. See Moore, “Transformations in Cuban Nueva Trova,” 13–20.

¹³ “El ICAIC esperó a que los canales apropiados funcionaran; y como no funcionaron, el ICAIC actuó, en este caso, en la música.” Leo Brouwer, quoted in Sarusky, *Una leyenda de música cubana*, 24.

trivial topicality, and lack of originality in song lyrics and called for higher literary standards and more profound and socially engaged content. Finally, he observed that the majority of popular musicians played by ear and lacked what he called a “technical foundation.”¹⁴ In preparation for their task, to “transform the repertoire of Cuban popular music,” GES musicians took classes in solfège, theory, and composition with Federico Smith and Juan Elósegui. They also experimented with technology, working with ICAIC sound engineer Jeronimo Labrada to learn, hands-on, how to take advantage of the possibilities that the studio offered.¹⁵ The GES musicians composed and arranged their music collectively, resulting in often surprising combinations of style and sound that drew from strophic balladry, free jazz, psychedelic rock, and Vitier’s avant-garde compositional preferences, as well as stark contrasts between electronic and acoustic instrumentation. Brouwer believed that popular music could be both culturally refined and socially engaged and that the tastes of the masses could be changed to appreciate and even prefer this new popular culture. Composer and guitarist Sergio Vitier agreed with him, saying: “they like it, because it shows things as they are now. Every artistic manifestation, whether of poetry, music, song, is always social, it’s a reflection of society, whether explicitly or implicitly, whether it says it directly or not.”¹⁶

While the GES occupies a quasi-mythological place in the history of postrevolutionary Cuban music, its actual musical activities were ephemeral and its material footprint rather small. The group made few recordings; the first commercial recording was released in 1970, somewhat ironically on a US label.¹⁷ Subsequent national recordings were neither widely distributed nor promoted via radio or television, and most younger Cubans came to know the GES’s output through retrospective compilation albums released in the 1990s.¹⁸ Tamara Levitz has noted that while the group produced

¹⁴ Sarusky, *Una leyenda de música cubana*, 29.

¹⁵ It is impossible to overstate how unusual the GES’s access to and experimentation with the recording studio was in revolutionary Cuba. Recording studios remained under strict state control through most of the postrevolutionary period. They were also scarce resources. In the 1960s and 1970s, Havana had only the state recording studio, known as the EGREM (Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales), and the ICAIC studios, along with the rather limited recording technology available in the Instituto Cubano de Radiodifusión and later the Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión. Later reorganization of the EGREM allowed for the founding of new state entities, such as Bis Music (a subsidiary of Artex, founded in 1989, the state agency that controls Cuba’s music industry), and the state-supported but semiautonomous Ojalá (founded 1995) and PM Records (founded 1998), run by Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés, respectively. Since then, a number of private recording studios have sprung up. See Jan Fairley’s description of Cuba’s recording scene in “Recording the Revolution: 50 Years of Music Studios in Revolutionary Cuba,” in *The Art of Record Production: An Introductory Reader for a New Academic Field*, ed. Simon Frith and Simon Zagorski-Thomas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 247–268.

¹⁶ “Les gusta, porque dice las cosas de una forma actual. Cualquier manifestación del arte, ya sea poesía, música, canción, siempre es social, es reflejo de una sociedad, de una forma más explícita o más implícita, lo puede decir directamente o no.” Sergio Vitier, quoted in Sarusky, *Una leyenda de música cubana*, 17.

¹⁷ The record was produced by Paredon Records, a company co-owned by Pablo Menéndez’s mother, singer Barbara Dane. See Tamara Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution: Cuba’s Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC,” in *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Study*, ed. Benjamin Piekut (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 196.

¹⁸ A four-volume anthology of GES recordings was released by the EGREM in 1997.

the music for multiple films and shorts over the course of their tenure, many of these films were not well known, and the public was often not aware of the GES's participation.¹⁹ The paradox represented by the group's (self-professed) intense musical activity and productivity and their simultaneous lack of visibility can, in retrospect, be read in multiple ways. It is certainly true that difficulties between the artists and other cultural and media institutions—particularly the Instituto Cubano de Radiodifusión (ICR) and the Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión (ICRT)—contributed to today's lack of extant media testifying to the GES's activities.²⁰ At the same time, the ICAIC's intervention in providing “problematic” musicians with artistically and intellectually stimulating work (while keeping them out of the public eye) may have protected them from the worst of the cultural repression that negatively impacted artists, especially writers; the early 1970s was a dark period of institutional censorship, social repression, and blacklisting that has come to be known as the *quinquenio gris* (five-year grey period).²¹ Like their counterparts among the *tropicalistas* in Brazil, the members of the GES believed that their project of transforming popular music was part of a larger project to transform society, and they saw themselves as *artistas comprometido/as* (committed artists) making revolutionary change through their own medium. That they did so largely out of sight (if within earshot) is an example of how Cuba's most radical experiments with the New Left occurred on the margins of the revolution that had inspired them.²²

The majority of scholarship on the GES has focused on the presence of Milanés, Rodríguez, and Nicola (and to a lesser extent Sara González), framing the group as a crucible for the formation of the Movimiento de la Nueva Trova while downplaying its musical (and social) significance on other fronts. Brouwer, Elosegú, Vitier, and Smith have primarily been discussed in terms of the pedagogical support they provided to the GES's musical autodidacts (supporting their later nueva trova stardom), and there has been little examination of the GES's place in the larger history of postrevolutionary

¹⁹ Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution,” 198–200.

²⁰ The ICR and ICRT were both notoriously conservative institutions (and even today remain much more conservative than the ICAIC). Perhaps most famously, Silvio Rodríguez was fired from the ICRT in 1969. See Robin Moore, *Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Revolutionary Cuba* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 152.

²¹ The GES musicians did not emerge unscathed from the repressive tactics of state functionaries. Already in 1965, Pablo Milanés spent time in one of the infamous Unidades Militares para la Ayuda a la Producción (UMAP) camps, where homosexuals, the overtly religious, and other political undesirables were sent to be “reeducated.” In a 2015 interview, Milanés spoke openly for the first time about his experiences in the “purely Stalinist” UMAP, stating that although historians like to say that the *quinquenio gris* began in 1970, he believes that it truly started in 1965 and that there were various *quinquenios*. Mario Vincent, “La apertura cubana es un maquillaje,” interview with Pablo Milanés, *El País*, February 14, 2015, http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2015/02/13/actualidad/1423851530_536670.html, accessed August 20, 2015.

²² For more information regarding the tensions between both Latin American and international New Left ideology and the implementation of the socialist regime in Cuba, see Kepa Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals since 1959* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

avant-garde and modernist composition.²³ Little attention has been paid to their musical contributions or to the musical roles of other members whose interests were more overtly modernist and avant-garde, such as Vitier.²⁴ This unevenness continues in the histories of Cuban jazz, where the GES is noted in passing with regard to the presence of key figures such as Leonardo Acosta, Carlos Averhoff, Eduardo Ramos, Genaro Caturla, and Emiliano Salvador. These artists' presence in the GES is only treated as a tangent to a narrative of Cuban jazz history that quickly moves on to the GES's contemporary: the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna (Cuban Orchestra of Modern Music), out of which came the founders of the legendary AfroCuban jazz ensemble Irakere.²⁵ Irakere's gravitational pull on the history of postrevolutionary Cuban jazz has meant that the creative influence of the GES's jazz members (including those, like Averhoff, who later worked with Irakere), either in the realm of popular song or in the development of Cuban jazz itself, has also been neglected.

Recent work by Tamara Levitz and Mariana Martins Villaça addresses the need for more solid historiography on the GES, and both scholars push back against the simplifying narrative that views the collective merely as a forerunner to the Movimiento de la Nueva Trova. Both authors explore the meaning and impact of the GES's experimentalism by looking at its relationship to other international models (the United States and Brazil, respectively). Levitz situates the GES and its activities within the context of a revolutionary Cuba where art, society, and the avant-garde had meanings and possible political agencies quite distinct from those assumed in Western countries.²⁶ Levitz's study compares the GES and its activities to experimental composition in the United States, especially as outlined by John Cage. The comparison with Cage is attractive, given the "experimental" in the GES's title and their leadership by a composer of concert music who had studied in New York in the 1950s. However, Cage, who had little interest in popular music, is perhaps something of a red herring in trying to understand a group wholly committed precisely to the transformation of popular culture. The GES's commitment to this transformation renders their politics intrinsically different from that of Cage, especially their fervent belief in the inherent capacity of even the untrained listener to come to appreciate art, popular or otherwise. Villaça, similarly, looks abroad to uncover the origins of the GES's experimentalism. She follows the early links between the GES and the Tropicália movement and draws attention to the many points of dialogue that have linked Cuban and Brazilian popular

²³ Liliana González Moreno's work on Federico Smith fills an important gap in our understanding of the Cuban musical avant-garde in the 1960s. Liliana González Moreno, *Federico Smith: Cosmopolitismo y vanguardia* (Havana: CIDMUC, 2013).

²⁴ Levitz's analysis of the GES's music is a rare exception. Her examination of "Granma," for example, offers a reading of how the more academic stylistic leanings of a composer like Vitier merged with trova and rock. See Levitz, "Experimental Music and Revolution," 198–199.

²⁵ Exceptions to this oversimplified narrative can be found in Sarusky's interviews with musicians and in the writings of Leonardo Acosta. See Sarusky, *Una leyenda de música cubana*, and Leonardo Acosta, *Cubano Be Cubano Bop: One Hundred Years of Jazz in Cuba* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003).

²⁶ Levitz, "Experimental Music and Revolution," 184–185.

music making since the late 1960s. Her comparative analysis of the two scenes enriches our understanding of very different cultural and political circumstances behind the growth of both musical experimentalism and the countercultural cosmopolitanism that marked the Latin American New Left.

EXPERIMENTALISM AND THE REVOLUTIONARY VANGUARD

It might seem surprising that an ensemble dedicated to sonic experimentation and describing itself as representing the “avant-garde of Cuban music” was founded precisely during the repressive years of the *quinquenio gris*, especially when compared with the histories of other socialist countries. However, Levitz, Villaça, and Marysol Quevedo (author of chapter 11 here) have noted that Cuba did not embrace the Soviet-style antiformalism or socialist realism advocated by Andrei Zhdanov, referred to in Cuba as *jhdanovismo*.²⁷ Rather, avant-garde and modernist musical techniques were supported, if not favored, by state institutions.²⁸ Composers were quick to tie modernist compositions with revolutionary messages, an effort that may have helped state cultural institutions to view avant-garde artistic expression as a tool for revolution.²⁹ Dutch composer Peter Schat, who attended the 1968 Cultural Congress in Havana, noted the progressive musical atmosphere in the capital and described the relationship between the arts and politics in Cuba as intrinsically fused, noting that “the musical revolution runs in tandem with their own revolution.”³⁰ Composers were no doubt aided by the fact that the very vocabulary of revolutionary discourse was steeped in a heady infusion that blended militaristic and avant-garde rhetoric, with revolutionary leaders Fidel Castro and Che Guevara treating both military and artistic action as tools for the creation of a new society. In this context, the space between a military “*vanguardia en la lucha anticolonialista*” (vanguard in the anticolonial struggle) and an

²⁷ *Jhdanovismo*—sometimes spelled *zhdanovismo*—had a greater impact in the field of literature, where a number of high-profile conflicts broke out in the late 1960s. Such conflicts evidenced the fractured nature of state control of expression, with different institutions often promoting significantly different aesthetic politics. See Jorge Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 392–394. See also Marysol Quevedo, “Negotiating Cubanness through Art Music: Composers in Socialist Cuba, 1958–1989” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2014); Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution,” 185–201, and Villaça, *Polifonia tropical*, 54–55, 123.

²⁸ This is not to suggest that there were no political tensions surrounding musical style. Some composers, such as José Ardévol, supported a more *jhanovista*, nationalist approach, condemning those whose work had a more international sound. José Ardévol, *Música y revolución* (Havana: Ediciones Unión/UNEAC, 1966), 128.

²⁹ This stance may have been influenced by the progressive programming of the Warsaw Autumn Festival, which Brouwer himself attended in 1961. Levitz notes composers’ savvy politics in connecting avant-garde musical aesthetics with revolutionary messages early on. Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution,” 192–193.

³⁰ Peter Schat, quoted in Robert Adlington, *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59.

artistic “vanguardia ética y comprometida” (ethical and committed avant-garde) was so compressed as to be effectively irrelevant.³¹

José Quiroga defines the Cuban use of the term *vanguardia* as a curious mix of the aesthetic and the political that, while allowing for and even embracing multiple inflections, “was firmly allied to the notion of a political avant-garde.”³² The Latin American avant-garde had long been associated with what Ricardo Roque Baldovinos describes as an inherently anticolonial “charismatic nationalism,” but the Cuban Revolution heightened the political and ideological implications of avant-garde aesthetics and discourse, resulting in what Nicola Miller refers to as a “militant” vanguardism.³³ Villaça notes the blending of militant politics and more traditional nationalist tropes in the positioning of avant-garde strategies in Cuba, remarking that both “tradition and the avant-garde are combined in the Cuban bibliography.”³⁴ This is not to say that no ideological tension existed between traditionally nationalist and avant-garde approaches. The late 1960s witnessed an effort by state institutions to promote musics seen as having roots in Cuban national tradition rather than musics that drew too closely from international (i.e., European and US) trends, or what José Ardevol referred to in 1960 as being corrupted by “cosmopolitismo desfigurador” (disfiguring cosmopolitanism).³⁵

The political embrace of the avant-garde meant that even though many of the compositional strategies used by composers like Brouwer and Juan Blanco had deep ties to the United States and western Europe, the censorship apparatus of state-run cultural institutions in the late 1960s and early 1970s largely set its sights elsewhere. The targets instead were popular musics deemed to have links to cultural or political imperialism or to capitalist consumerism or to be capable of causing “desviación ideológica” (ideological deviance).³⁶ Such musics included the commercial musics of the United States and the United Kingdom, especially rock and roll. Overtly African American traditions were sometimes exempted, but jazz—with its connections to the nightclub

³¹ Compare, for example, the language of Guevara’s call to arms in Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Cuba: ¿Excepción histórica o vanguardia en la lucha anticolonialista?,” in *Obra revolucionaria* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1974), 520.

³² José Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 152.

³³ See Ricardo Roque Baldovinos, “The ‘Epic Novel’: Charismatic Nationalism and the Avant-garde in Latin America,” *Cultural Critique* 49 (Autumn 2001): 58–83; and Nicola Miller, *In the Shadow of the State*, 95–134. Miller describes three periods in the development of the intellectual avant-garde in Latin America. The first was the 1890s–1900s, which she says saw the rise of the modern intellectual, the maestro; the second was the 1920s, the era of the *intelectual de vanguardia* (vanguard intellectual); the third was the 1960s, which saw the rise of the *vanguardista militante* (militant vanguard).

³⁴ Villaça, *Polifonia tropical*, 128.

³⁵ José Ardevol, *Música y revolución*, 128. Ardevol was referring to musics that he saw as hewing too closely to western European and North American models of avant-garde composition. This dismissal by Ardevol, one of the musical figures who adhered most closely to the ideals of Soviet jhdanovismo, reflects what José Quiroga describes as party ideologues’ deep-seated aversion to cosmopolitanism and the experimental avant-garde on the grounds that it was “not virile” (i.e., homosexual). Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests*, 236 n. 1.

³⁶ It should be noted that while concert music largely escaped the strictures of socialist realism, the literary world was more strictly policed.

culture of prerevolutionary Cuba—was also suspect. Even popular musicians whose political messaging might have aligned with Cuban socialism, such as the Beatles or Bob Dylan, were unwelcome with Cuban cultural gatekeepers. Such sounds were, of course, precisely those that interested the musicians of the GES as they sought to revolutionize and transform popular music.

The hostility of cultural institutions toward “imperialist” sounds placed musicians who produced those sounds in a very difficult position. Focusing on the GES as an incubator for popular music—in particular popular music forms, such as jazz and nueva trova, that were initially disenfranchised by the state cultural apparatus—draws attention to the particular inflection of avant-garde rhetoric employed by Guevara, Brouwer, and other members of the GES (in spite of the individual discomfort expressed by some members).³⁷ While such rhetoric expressed musicians’ staunch commitment to innovation and their ideals for creating revolutionary art, it can also be seen as strategic, shielding the GES and its members from charges that its foreign-inflected music might be ideologically tainted. We can thus view labels such as “Grupo de Experimentación Sonora” or “Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna” as naming choices that simultaneously recognized the forward-thinking nature of the groups and sanitized the ideologically problematic sonorities that each group produced. Both ensembles resulted from an institutional strategy to radically deconstruct and contain two emerging countercultures: jazz and leftist bohemianism. The Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna, for example, was formed by state officials; they pulled the best players out of preexisting ensembles in order to form a sort of jazz “dream team.”³⁸ This had the impact of forming a stellar jazz orchestra capable of performing complex jazz fusions, avant-garde compositions by Brouwer and Blanco, and traditional Cuban tunes as well as international jazz standards. It also gutted Havana’s jazz scene, pulling musicians out of their autonomous, unaffiliated ensembles and placing them in a more controlled environment where repertory changes and unapproved programming were more difficult to enact. The GES, similarly, pulled “problematic” musicians into a singular grouping, and while it appears that little restriction was placed on their sonic evolution—for example, their incursions into rock and roll, or their explorations of the Beatles’ sonorities—to a very large extent their activities were kept out of sight. Barring GES artists from radio and television and limiting access to recordings of their music, officials sought to keep them creatively occupied while having minimal impact on the island’s sonic landscape or on the popular tastes of its inhabitants. History, obviously, shows that things did not turn out precisely as these functionaries expected.

The GES musicians themselves were, as Levitz has noted, ambivalent about defining their work as avant-garde.³⁹ Their discomfort was largely based on competing notions of the popular and the avant-garde and the question whether the latter could ever be

³⁷ González Moreno, *Federico Smith*, 86 n. 63.

³⁸ The Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna was the forerunner to the jazz group Irakere, founded by Armando Sequeira Romeu and Chucho Valdés in 1973. See note 25.

³⁹ Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution,” 194.

truly of the people. Yet, in spite of the discomfort of GES members Nicola, Milanés, and Menendez with identifying the GES as a “vanguardia,” Acosta, Brouwer, Vitier, and Rodríguez were more comfortable applying the term to their work. Their position reflected the views published by their literary contemporaries in the weekly cultural review *El Caimán Barbudo* to the effect that the artistic vanguard—rather than being elitist—was a key element of revolutionary cultural praxis.⁴⁰ Such discursive differences reflect Cuban artists’ multifaceted usage of “vanguardia,” “vanguard,” and “avant-garde,” selectively stress the nature of their work as belonging to the “artistic avant-garde” or to the “revolutionary vanguard,” depending on the context.

COLLECTIVISM

Piekut’s admonition that experimentalism is both “ordinary and extraordinary”⁴¹ leaves open the possibility that experimental engagement with quotidian reality might result in something culturally transformative that is, at the same time, sonically unsurprising. Listening to the recorded output of the GES, especially as a Western outsider, one is struck by the fact that—in spite of scholars’ attempts to identify experimental characteristics in the GES’s music (particularly their avoidance of stylistic continuity and their openness to timbral alternatives, subbing dumbek for congas, for example, or blending popular and academic sounds)⁴²—many of the recordings sound like relatively typical rock/folk fusions from the 1970s from any number of Western countries. In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, such sounds were potent signs of antiinstitutionalism and subversion of authority in Cuba, and the GES’s remarkable achievement was to reposition those sounds as agents of revolutionary social transformation in a way that made them difficult for institutional authorities to fully repudiate.

More than the sounds its members produced, however, the most powerful experimental attribute of the GES was its collectivism. It was also the attribute that may have had the greatest long-term artistic impact. In interviews of musicians who came of age in the 1990s, it was common for them to cite the GES as an important influence. Interestingly, these musicians didn’t speak of the GES as important because it was foundational to nueva trova. They seemed, rather, to compartmentalize their attraction to the GES as separate from their equally sincere formative fandom of nueva trova artists. In speaking of the GES, they were much more likely to link it with their exposure to other international artists, including Chico Buarque, Charly García, Earth,

⁴⁰ See Liliana Martínez Pérez, *Los hijos de Saturno: Intelectuales y revolución en Cuba* (Mexico City: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 2006), 360. It should be noted that Rodríguez’s position on his own relationship to the vanguardia evolved. Although in early interviews with Jaime Sarusky he was somewhat circumspect regarding the relationship between the avant-garde and popular culture, he later embraced the idea that the nueva trova was part of Cuba’s cultural vanguard. Rodríguez, interview with Enrique Nuñez Díaz, *Revista Opina*, December 10, 1988, cited in Villaça, *Polifonia Tropical*, 126.

⁴¹ Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 2.

⁴² See, for example, Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution,” and Moore, *Music and Revolution*.

Wind, and Fire, Kool & the Gang, and the Jacksons, referring to the GES's cosmopolitan use of rock, funk, and Brazilian rhythms and harmonies.⁴³ While they described the GES as a band that offered models for musical fusion, they did not remark on the avant-garde film scores or the extreme juxtaposition of style that Piekut describes as a “commonly cited ideological imperative”⁴⁴ of experimental practice and that Levitz highlights in her illuminating analysis of the GES's recording of “Granma.”⁴⁵ Instead, it was the presence of what to outside ears sounds “normal” for the 1970s—the use of rock and funk—that struck the younger musicians as transformative, along with the GES's collaborative collective practice. Robertico Carcassés, pianist and leader of Interactivo, has been outspoken about the GES's influence on his own music and the formation of Interactivo, saying, “what we do is an extension of what Irakere did, the ICAIC Sound Experimentation Group, and trovadores like Silvio and Pablo. The latter were unprejudiced with the music that they made at the time. In fact a song like ‘Cuba Va’ is a rock and roll mixed with funk. *What song is more Cuban than that without seeming so at the same time?*”⁴⁶ For Carcassés, the GES's transformation of Cuban popular music did not occur via musicians' exposure to the norms of concert music or avant-garde composition, but rather through their engagement with internationally mass-mediated popular music, music that, far from being mainstream, was invested with a particular political poignancy in the Cuban context.

These young musicians seemed to have been most drawn to the collective freedom and sheer volume of talent in the ICAIC studios, their imaginations caught by the creative possibilities of having Leonardo Acosta, Leo Brouwer, Carlos Averhoff, Sergio Vitier, and the greatest songwriters of a generation together in a room with a full gamut of technical resources. While recognizing the GES's aesthetic and ideological stance as important, they spoke as frequently about the collective creativity of the group and to their role as countercultural mavericks, referring to them as a species of “Beatniks *caribeños*” (Caribbean beatniks),⁴⁷ and their first model for how to be an “engaged bohemian.”⁴⁸ The group's collectivism seems to have inspired younger

⁴³ This separation of influences, grouping the GES with international groups separately from the stars of the nueva trova, occurred in multiple interviews, including those with Luis Barbería, Vanito Caballero, Julio Fowler, Raúl Torres, and Pavel Urkiza.

⁴⁴ Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 6.

⁴⁵ Levitz provides a strikingly detailed breakdown of the song, its unusual additive structure, and its combination of modernist and popular musical traits. Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution,” 198–199.

⁴⁶ “Lo que hacemos es un seguimiento de lo que hacía Irakere, el Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC, trovadores como Silvio y Pablo. Estos últimos eran desprejuiciados con la música que hacían en su momento. De hecho una canción como ‘Cuba Va’ es un rock and roll mezclado con funk. *Qué canción hay más cubana que esa y que al mismo tiempo no lo parece.*” (emphasis mine) Robertico Carcassés, quoted in Eva Silot-Bravo, “Entrevista a Robertico Carcassés,” *Cubaencuentro*, March 28, 2012, <http://www.cubaencuentro.com/entrevistas/articulos/entrevista-a-robertico-carcasses-275374>, accessed June 16, 2015.

⁴⁷ Vanito Caballero, *Interview*, June 22–13, 2003.

⁴⁸ Alexis Esquivel described the situation to me this way: “Queríamos ser bohemios, pero unos bohemios comprometidos” (We wanted to be bohemians, but politically engaged bohemians). Personal communication, Athens, GA, March 12, 2003.

musicians as much for its resonance with political ideologies of solidarity and collective labor as for the simultaneously subversive ability of creative collectivism to bypass institutional control.

Nicholas Gebhard and Tony Whyton have described collectivist strategies in the United States as enacting a potentially radical politics that always exists in tension with cultural imperatives for individualism and capitalist production.⁴⁹ In Cuba, however, rather than being a departure from convention, the emotional and behavioral aspects of collective behavior were enshrined as dominant cultural values in revolutionary life.⁵⁰ The literacy campaign, the brigades to build schools, and the collective construction of new housing projects are all well-documented Cuban achievements of revolutionary collectivism. In the arts, however, in spite of the rhetoric, collective achievements like those of the GES have really been quite rare. In spite of the rejection of individualism voiced in much political and cultural rhetoric, the institutional structures that have governed the arts and education have actually served to promote individual leaders. Examples range from the student presidents of the university students' union—the Federación Estudiantil Universitaria—to the considerable power and artistic control levied by supervisory leaders in the ICR and ICRT, and to the promotion of Milanés, Rodríguez, and Nicola as individual stars of the fledgling *Movimiento de la Nueva Trova*. Thus, while collaborative musical practices and shifting personnel are features that mark multiple productions in postrevolutionary Cuban music, including groups like Irakere, AfroCuba, and Los Van Van, the decentered collective protagonism of the GES was unprecedented and unsurpassed—until the 1990s. It was then, in another period of political and social change and renewed tension between artistic institutions and envelope-pushing artists, that the practice reappeared in earnest.

THE 1990S: A NEW TRANSITION

The singer-songwriters who emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s came of age at a time of transition and economic and political unrest. While still revolutionary in their thinking, they responded to these circumstances by turning their songs inward, voicing critiques relating to contemporary social issues, voicing generational concerns, and expressing their frustration with political stasis. The economic crisis of the 1990s brought fiscal and material shortages, as well as a tightening of restrictions on expression following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The state had neither the mind nor the means to create another Grupo de Experimentación or Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna to contain and foster the creative effervescence that was taking place. Instead, officials resorted to tried-and-true strategies to suppress artistic activities, using musicians' amateur status to

⁴⁹ Gebhardt and Whyton, *The Cultural Politics of Jazz Collectives*, 5–9.

⁵⁰ Benigno Aguirre, "The Conventionalization of Collective Behavior," in *Cuban Communism, 1958–2003*, 11th ed., ed. Irving Louis Horowitz and Jaime Suchlicki (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2003), 244.

marginalize them from institutions, keeping them from television and radio, or barring their access to performance venues.

In the face of such institutional ambivalence, this new generation of singer-songwriters—like the trovadores in the 1960s—responded by self-organizing, playing with and for each other in a variety of *peñas*, or jam sessions, around Havana. For the musicians, most of whom were autodidacts, the *peña* gatherings were “our school”; as Luis Barbería later told me, their collective pedagogy replaced the formal classes of the GES. At *peñas*, musicians not only enjoyed, critiqued, and collaborated in each others’ songs, they shared these spaces with poets, humorists, artists, and actors, creating a scene that Vanito Caballero described to me as “una gran bohemia artística” and Kelvis Ochoa later commemorated in his song “Cuando salí de La Habana.”⁵¹ In effect, the kind of integrated artistic effervescence that had inspired the founding of the GES was also manifested by this generation, who grew up influenced as much by Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso as by Michael Jackson and the Beatles.

Tensions grew between the musicians, who wanted to advance professionally, and institutional functionaries, who denied them access. It is impossible to know what would have transpired had musician Pavel Urkiza not returned to Cuba from Spain in 1995 with a contract to record a collaborative album, *Habana Oculta*, for the Spanish record label Nube Negra. In many ways, the *Habana Oculta* project can be viewed as a sort of “indie GES,” with Urkiza in the role of Brouwer. Urkiza was the perfect person for the job, notes Cuban musicologist Élsida González Portal, not only because of the musical respect others held for him but also because he had been abroad and he “understood the reality perfectly.”⁵² Like Brouwer, who had trained in the United States, Urkiza possessed both international credibility and cosmopolitan sensibility.

The musicians were invited to travel to Spain to launch the album, but this posed a problem, as they needed exit visas; as professionally unaffiliated musicians, they had no institution to sponsor them. The youth cultural organization, the Asociación Hermanos Saíz, then under the direction of Fernando Rojas (now vice minister of culture), sponsored the unaffiliated musicians, signing off on their exit visas, a move that at the time was assumed to be “definitivo” (final). Joaquín Borges-Triana described the actions of the AHS to me as both a “rescue mission” for the artists and a “releasing of pressure” for the state.⁵³ In Spain, participants in the *Habana Oculta* project, along with other members of their cohort who were not in Havana at the time of the first recording, eventually recorded two more albums with the BMG Ariola label under the name that would come to define them, *Habana Abierta*. Musically hybrid and danceable, with direct lyrics that spoke to contemporary social concerns, the music of *Habana Abierta*, which members described to

⁵¹ Vanito Caballero, personal communication, June 19, 2003. “Cuando salí de La Habana” appeared on *Habana Abierta*’s second album, *24 horas* (Madrid: BMG Ariola, 1999).

⁵² Élsida González Portal, “La creación colectiva en la música cubana (II): *Habana Abierta*,” *Cuba Contemporánea*, June 16, 2014, <http://www.cubacontemporanea.com/noticias/la-creacion-colectiva-en-la-musica-cubana-ii-habana-abierta-estoy-bailando-rockason-con-los>, accessed August 25, 2015.

⁵³ Joaquín Borges-Triana, personal communication, May 22, 2013. See also Borges-Triana’s description of the *Habana Oculta* project and artists’ emigration to Spain in *Concierto cubano*, 135–139.

me as representative of “la vanguardia popular” and “la bohemia cubana,” spread back to the island via cassette and burned CDs. Here were musicians who had left, but who were not exiles, making music that was aesthetically and rhetorically directed at a home audience. Their collective protagonism and distant location enacted a kind of transnational solidarity that reimaged Cuban citizenship for a generation who had been literally torn apart by the diasporic reality of the 1990s and early 2000s. That the countercultural possibility represented by Habana Abierta’s performance was understood by fans back on the island is illustrated by the catharsis that greeted their triumphant return in 2003, when they performed in Havana at an outdoor amphitheatre, the Salón Rosado del Tropical, in front of an ecstatic crowd estimated to number between 8,000 and 10,000.

The political transformation of Cuban citizenship modeled by Habana Abierta was made more explicit by the Interactivo collective, founded in 2001. Interactivo’s director, pianist Robertico Carcassés, openly recognizes the connections between the GES and the Interactivo project, listing the former collective as an important influence along with Irakere, Earth, Wind & Fire, and Kool and the Gang.⁵⁴ The collective protagonism seen in the GES and Habana Abierta is also present in Interactivo, with songwriters and instrumentalists representing a wide variety of musical styles cycling through the ensemble. Interactivo uses this collectivism to promote a radical transnational politics. If Habana Abierta represented the voice of Cubans demanding to be heard from outside its territorial boundaries, Interactivo has simply refused to recognize such boundaries, collaborating with artists resident on and off the island in an undeniably political performance practice. The most striking example of this occurred in a 2002 concert in Havana’s Teatro Nacional that was later broadcast on Cuban television. The concert was a tour de force of Cuba’s most virtuosic musical talent, bringing together a varied collection of singer-songwriters with Havana’s most select jazz musicians, multiple percussionists, a brass section to rival the “horns of terror” of NG la Banda, and a string orchestra. Joining them onstage were Cuban musicians living abroad: Gema Corredera, Pavel Urkiza, and Kelvis Ochoa (then residing in Spain), and Descemer Bueno (then residing in the United States). The inclusion of émigré artists on state television was unprecedented, and their audible and visible presence enacted a radical politics of citizenship and belonging that no pamphlet or forum on “repatriation” could achieve. Brazilian artist Lenine, whose album *Falange canibal* had recently won a Latin Grammy, joined the musicians onstage. Lenine’s presence, which highlighted the revolutionary charge of the performative act, reframed the performance with the same progressive and cosmopolitan vision that had undergirded the founding of the GES, and called up the radical and revolutionary social experimentalism that marked both the Tropicália movement and the origins of nueva trova.

Interactivo went on to enjoy over a decade of success and relatively strong institutional support. They produced three albums on the state Bis label, filmed a documentary, and

⁵⁴ Adnalo Hernández Rodríguez, “La fuerza de interactuar Robertico Carcassés,” *Suenacubano.com*, August 16, 2013, <http://suenacubano.com/news/5999e600065e11e3b6f03860774f33e8/la-fuerza-de-interactuar-de-robertico-carcasses/>, accessed June 25, 2015.

traveled and performed abroad frequently, adapting to the emigration of several members by maintaining the openness to transnational collective participation that had marked their earlier work. So seamless did Interactivo's transition from marginal status to state-facilitated professional ensemble appear that Geoff Baker dismissed them as political actors based on his perception of their privilege and what he saw as their cozy relationship with the state.⁵⁵ Any sense of privilege disappeared on September 12, 2013, however, when Carcassés improvised the following lines during a *montuno* breakdown in a live television broadcast honoring the five Cuban men known as the "Cinco Héroes" (Five Heroes) who were jailed in the United States on espionage charges.

Yo quiero que liberen a los cinco héroes, y que liberen a María.
 Libre acceso a la información para tener yo, mi propia opinión.
 Elegir al presidente por voto directo y no por otra vía.
 Que se acabe el bloqueo y el auto bloqueo, por favor.
 Ni militantes ni disidentes, todos cubanos con los mismos derechos.
 Si ya tengo la carta, que volá con mi carro?

I want them to free the Five Heroes, and to free María [marijuana].
 Free access to information, so that I can have my own opinion.
 To choose a president by direct vote and not any other way.
 For the blockade to end and the self-blockade as well, please.
 Neither militants nor dissidents, all of us Cubans with the same rights.
 If I already have the paperwork, what's up with my car?

By the next morning Carcassés was the poster child for the efficiency of the state censorship apparatus. In an open letter published on the Internet three days later, Carcassés described how a "Funcionario de Cultura" from the Instituto Cubano de la Música had called him in the morning after the concert to declare that he had been indefinitely "separado del sector" (separated from the sector) and could no longer perform in any capacity in any venue.⁵⁶ Members of the group could pursue individual interests but could no longer appear under the name "Interactivo." The *Havana Times* referred to Carcassés' musical protest as a "musical suicide," and many imagined that the resulting blacklisting would lead to his eventual emigration.⁵⁷ That might have been but for the intervention of Silvio Rodríguez. Rodríguez announced on his blog, *Segunda Cita*, that although he did not approve of Carcassés's behavior in that setting, he would not be observing the performance blacklist and that Carcassés would be accompanying him to perform on a series of concerts. He added that it would be unfortunate for an

⁵⁵ Geoffrey Baker, "Mala Bitza Sochal Klu: Underground, Alternative, and Commercial in Havana Hip Hop," *Popular Music* 31, no. 1 (2012): 3.

⁵⁶ "Carta abierta de Roberto Carcassés," *Diario de Cuba*, September 16, 2013, http://www.diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1379365369_5100.html, accessed August 15, 2015.

⁵⁷ "Roberto Carcassés comete 'suicidio' musical," *Havana Times*, September 15, 2013, <http://www.havana-times.org/sp/?p=90612>, accessed August 2, 2015.

event held to repudiate an act of political repression to result in another repressive act.⁵⁸ Only the politically untouchable Rodríguez could have affected such a timely and thorough rescue, bringing Carcassés and Interactivo back into the professional realm.

It is challenging to think of the music of Habana Abierta and Interactivo as “experimental” (as is also true of listening to much of the recorded output of the GES). The music is dynamic, hybrid, and varied, to be sure, but can something so danceable, so joyously and unabashedly cosmopolitan, and so easily consumable be labeled “experimental,” a term that we have come to associate with a certain difficulty of assimilation? I argue that we should, for the achievement of the recent collectives, their great experiment, is to conceive of a cosmopolitan Cuban musical practice that resounds via transnational production, performance, and consumption. The music’s very existence, its reproduction, and its dissemination are themselves experimental acts. That Cubans themselves recognize the transformative politics being enacted by transnationally situated artists is evidenced by their willingness to group together seemingly disparate stylistic musicians—such as Raúl Paz, David Torrens, Telmary Díaz, Kelvis Ochoa, and Interactivo, for their shared alternative aesthetic, while not including nationally oriented groups like Buena Fe—even though the sound of these musicians may have much in common with many transnational artists.

Although the GES, Habana Abierta, and Interactivo are ensembles that emerged from distinct political and historical contexts, each is marked by its use of a sometimes democratic, sometimes utterly chaotic collectivism. The GES’s members have described their practice as transformative,⁵⁹ and they and the later groups used their collectivism as a form of praxis to model in art what the revolution promised in the social and political realm. Brouwer has acknowledged that this process was not without its challenges, but, as he told Jaime Sarusky, “in a society in transition, one shouldn’t aspire to frozen archetypes, but rather to transformative ones. And that is what we’re making: a music that transforms.”⁶⁰ This claim for the transformative politics of collaboration is later echoed and reenacted by both Habana Abierta and Interactivo. Interactivo even sings it explicitly, in the words of rapper Telmary Díaz and the title of their 2008 recording: “*Interactuar es una fuerza*” —To interact is a force.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Silvio Rodríguez, “Puntualizando,” *Segunda Cita* (blog), September 17, 2013 <http://segundacita.blogspot.com/2013/09/puntualizando.html>, accessed August 2, 2015.

⁵⁹ Sarusky, “Una entrevista de hoy, realizada hace 33 años,” interview with Leo Brouwer, Silvio Rodríguez, Sergio Vitier, Pablo Milanés, and Octavio Cortázar, in Sarusky, *Una leyenda de música cubana*, 8–26.

⁶⁰ “En una sociedad en transformación no se puede aspirar a arquetipos congelados, sino a arquetipos transformables. Y eso es lo que estamos haciendo: una música que se transforma.” Brouwer, quoted in *ibid.*, 26.

⁶¹ Interactivo, *Interactuar es una fuerza* (Havana: Bis Music, 2009).

II

Beyond the Limits of Hybridity

4

“I GO AGAINST THE GRAIN OF YOUR MEMORY”

Iconoclastic Experiments with Traditional Sounds in Northeast Brazil

Daniel B. Sharp

THE ARTISTIC TRAJECTORY of Northeastern Brazilian poet, singer, writer, playwright, and actor José Paes de Lira, known as Lirinha, charts a longstanding attempt to reject and revise the regional folkloric framework within which audiences and critics understood his early artistic efforts. In the 1980s, before he was even a teenager, Lirinha participated in rural popular poetry recitation contests, and was celebrated at an early age as a keeper of cultural memory. By the time he became an adult in the early 2000s, however, he came to believe that being labeled as folklore distanced him from the national here and now. From this point forth, his work became more audacious, as his performances took an experimentalist turn, both as the lead singer and the creative visionary behind the nationally successful band *Cordel do Fogo Encantado* (1998–2010) and in subsequent solo performances. Lirinha drew upon avant-garde radical theater and cinema, utilizing Brechtian and Artaudian techniques to, in his words, “burn” previous accounts of his region that he considered “so badly told”—including tellings that he himself had previously made.¹ He pieced together a singular sound that flickered between regional folklore, experimental theater, and aggressive popular music that was apocalyptic in its prevailing mood. Ventriloquizing the words of popular and canonical poets and singers, Lirinha highlighted the foundational violence that shaped the region’s place in the national imaginary, which he felt had been too often disavowed or caricatured through folklorization.

¹ Lyric from the track “Profecia (ou testamento da Ira),” from *Cordel*’s self-titled first album (2000).

Lirinha and the other members of Cordel do Fogo Encantado (hereafter Cordel) considered it a significant turning point for the group when they left behind what they referred to as “the epoch of homage” and began to *produce* rather than simply *reproduce*. During the epoch of homage, Cordel was a folklore revue that selected and showcased local traditions of music, poetry, and dance that indexed the European, African, and indigenous elements of Brazilian national narratives. A couple of years after the band’s launching, they jettisoned their folkloric repertoire and transformed their art into something new: visceral performances with the ferocious intensity of punk or metal, performances that confronted past cinematic and literary representations of the Brazilian backlands as a space of poverty and violence. This shift was part of a broader effort to rethink the notion of *resgate* (cultural rescue), to which they had subscribed during the first phase of their careers. Resgate entailed “drinking from the wellspring of tradition,” as it is often phrased in the northeastern state of Pernambuco; it is a process of study and apprenticeship with (often poorer and darker-skinned) individuals marked as culture bearers. Both the supposedly “rescued” culture bearers and the “rescuing” pop innovators feel uneasy with this script. I argue here that it was this unease that impelled Lirinha’s iconoclastic experiments.

During Cordel’s first phase (1998–2000), Lirinha was still living in their hometown, Arcoverde, on the edge of the ranching country of the semiarid interior backlands. The band’s performances showcased several genres and practices associated with the region: popular poetry recitation; *samba de coco* (an Afro-Brazilian round dance and musical form); *reisado* (a Luso-Brazilian dramatic dance with roots in a colonial-era folk Catholic Christmas pageant); and *toré* (a dance form performed by the nearby indigenous group the Xukuru). After apprenticing with local poets and musicians, Lirinha began to question the way practicing cultural rescue structured relationships between culture bearers tasked—or burdened—with representing ancestral origins and the ways contemporary interpreters translated said traditions into the present. This questioning of *resgate* led the group to avant-garde, experimental, and alternative aesthetic practices, as they sought to rethink the folkloric register in sound and deed.

The northeastern backlands region, one of Brazil’s historically most poverty-stricken regions, has long been portrayed as a space of folklore, drought, millenarianism, and rebellion, where bandits roam and millenarian prophets preach the apocalypse.² Lirinha and his band sought to reassess the literary and cinematic narratives of this territory of poverty—with its emblematic images and sounds, so often ratified and reified outside the region—that were related in more economically and culturally dominant areas, such as the coastal capital of Recife and the more industrialized Southeast. In parallel with many other case studies in this volume, Cordel’s transition into this second phase was marked by their entrance into new networks of musicians, producers, and venues. As the band members became active participants in new scenes, Lirinha translated artistic reserves from the Brazilian backlands, where he possessed

² See D. M. de Albuquerque Jr., *A invenção do nordeste e outras artes* (Recife: Fundação Joaquim Nabuco Cortez Editora, 1999).

fluency, into intelligible symbols for the new networks of alternative popular music in postdictatorship Brazil in the 1990s and 2000s.

During my ethnographic research with Cordel, over twenty months total between 2004 and 2015, I came to describe them as iconoclastic and alternative, and I often heard them discussed in the context of indie or independent record production and distribution. Elsewhere I refer to them as “mutationist,”³ using the term Alexander Dent employs in his book on Brazilian country music to discuss musicians who eschew the stylistic orthodoxy of traditional duos.⁴ The members of Cordel draw on experimental techniques from revolutionary avant-garde cinema in their aim to challenge received notions of cultural heritage and memory.

Susan Thomas’s chapter in this volume clarifies the ambiguous positioning of Cordel. Like the Cuban experimentalists about which she writes, Cordel existed in a generative space in which particular moments in experimentalism, bohemianism, and collectivism converged. Cordel’s work emerged in the 1990s–2000s in dialogue with the legacies of 1960s musical and cinematic experimentalism. In fact, the Brazilian Tropicália movement and its interplay with experimental Marxist Cinema Novo inspired both the Cubans about whom Thomas writes and the northeastern Brazilian popular musicians in this case study. Thomas also guides me in her insight that experimental approaches can be transformative within their particular fields of cultural production, without necessarily resulting in a final product that is obviously audible as experimental. I join her and the rest of my colleagues in this volume in arguing that these culturally transformative approaches are worth studying in order to challenge traditional Eurocentric notions about experimentalism.

COWBOY POETRY CONTESTS AND SCIENCE FAIR FOLKLORE: LIRINHA’S EARLY NETWORKS

When Lirinha was growing up in the city of Arcoverde, Pernambuco, on the edge of the desert-like Brazilian interior northeastern backlands, he would frequently visit his father’s nearby ranch. Workers in the ranch taught him to recite backlands cowboy poetry, an oral tradition that is linked to the written tradition of small chapbooks of popular poetry called *literatura de cordel*.⁵ Lirinha showed both an aptitude for absorbing these poems by heart and an enthusiasm for declaiming them. This ear for the region’s poetry and the distinctive accent customarily used in reciting it proved important for Lirinha throughout his career, even in its more unorthodox phases. His voice,

³ Daniel B. Sharp, *Between Nostalgia and Apocalypse: Popular Music and the Staging of Brazil* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 19.

⁴ Alexander Sebastian Dent, *River of Tears: Country Music, Memory, and Modernity in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 105.

⁵ Regarding *literatura de cordel*, see Candace Slater, *Stories on a String: The Brazilian Literatura de Cordel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

with its particular pronunciation, lexicon, and timbre, came to be heard as emblematic of the northeastern backlands for a new generation of listeners.

As Lirinha entered his teenage years in the 1990s, he brought together his interests in popular poetry and theater for a performance that took place in the science fair at the high school where he studied. His teachers categorized folkloristics as a scientific endeavor, allowing him and future Cordel guitarist Clayton Barros to gather local repertoire and perform it alongside more standard science fair experiments. During the late 1990s, cultural institutions, such as the Social Service of Commerce (SESC), developed initiatives that affected the formation of his artistic vision.⁶ SESC centers had become an important incubator of cultural performances in Pernambuco and throughout Brazil. In the 1990s, the Pernambucan SESC centers had been on the lookout for promising, regionally relevant cultural programming that could be sent on tour, and Lirinha and Clayton were invited to produce and rehearse a theatrical folklore revue. They named the revue Cordel do Fogo Encantado and carried over many of the songs and poems that they had been performing when they moved to the state capital, Recife, added members, and became a band.

Longstanding tensions between celebratory notions of heritage and critical Marxist stances toward tradition simmered in Pernambuco in the postdictatorship 1990s–2000s, especially with the 2002 election to the presidency of Worker’s Party candidate Lula da Silva, who grew up down the road from Lirinha’s hometown of Arcoverde. The northeastern interior is known for catastrophic periodic droughts—natural disasters exacerbated by human mismanagement and political corruption—that have contributed to massive flows of rural-urban migration. Amid this history of intense suffering, prominent theories and practices surrounding poverty, education, religion, and politics have emerged from the region. Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), grew up in the state and tested his politicized approach to teaching literacy in the Pernambucan interior.

These critical theories helped shape notions of folklore in the region. In the early 1960s, Freire developed an adult literacy campaign in the Pernambucan interior called the Movimento de Cultura Popular. In this campaign, oral tradition—and popular culture more generally—were valued as that which the illiterate and semiliterate bring to the table as equals with their educators in the context of dialogic, egalitarian learning. Initiatives such as the Movimento de Cultura Popular reinforced the region as a repository of folklore, placing older discourses of tradition within a framework of revolutionary work toward social justice. In short: writers, artists, and activists on the Left have long identified the northeastern backlands as a place where oppressed agricultural workers rising up could spark nationwide revolutionary fervor. Lirinha’s experiments in the 2000s, during the era of Lula da Silva’s presidency, can be seen as

⁶ Social Service of Commerce (SESC) is a nonprofit institution managed privately but funded by mandatory public revenue from the commercial sectors of manufacturing, service, and tourism. SESC community centers focus both on athletics and the arts; their principal aim is to provide leisure time opportunities for workers in the commercial sector, although most events are also open to the community at large.

efforts to undermine celebratory, apolitical notions of heritage in the service of narrating a more critical and politicized perspective toward the poverty and violence in the region's history.

CORDEL ENTERS EXPERIMENTALIST AND ALTERNATIVE NETWORKS IN RECIFE

After their enthusiastically received first performance, Cordel, still a folklore revue, toured the circuit of centers throughout Pernambuco. During this first tour, they made contact with two major culture brokers in Recife: Juvenal de Holanda Vasconcelos (known as Naná Vasconcelos or simply Naná) and Antonio Gutierrez (known as Gutie). Naná and Gutie proved key to bringing Cordel into contact with new networks of experimentalism and alternative music. Naná produced Cordel's first recording, and Gutie managed Cordel, aiding them in their transformation into a touring band.

In Recife in the late 1990s, two musical currents were emblematic of contrasting approaches to heritage and folklore: the Movimento Armorial and manguê beat. Cordel can be heard as an attempt to dialectically reconcile the tension between these two. Movimento Armorial was a regionalist movement that combined baroque-era musical practices with local Luso-Brazilian traditions of precolonial roots. Since the 1970s, from his positions of power within the state's cultural bureaucracy, poet and playwright Ariano Suassuna had strongly supported this erudite effort to consecrate and elevate nostalgic northeastern sounds. Armorial stood in conflict with manguê beat, a Recife music scene bringing together in the 1990s of MPB (*Música Popular Brasileira*) and rock/funk/hip-hop or, more broadly, national music and youth music. Manguê beat combined local Afro-diasporic and Afro-indigenous sounds (*coco*, *mara-catú*) within a cosmopolitan framework of rebellious transnational pop sounds (hip-hop, punk rock, and metal). The conflict between manguê beat and Armorial came to a head when Suassuna made the comment that he would have more respect for manguê beat icon Chico Science if he were to change his name to Chico *Ciência*; Suassuna was implying that Chico Science's links to transnational flows of pop music sung in English had diluted and disfigured his northeastern Brazilian identity.

The folklore-revue-turned-iconoclastic-band Cordel drew from many of the same backlands artistic and poetic reserves that Suassuna revered, yet Lirinha and his band became determined to integrate them into a performance that sought to match or exceed the intensity of a punk or metal show. To this end, they recruited two drummers, Nego Henrique and Rafa Almeida, who had grown up playing percussion in a *candomblé*/*Xangô* religious community in the poverty-stricken Morro da Conceição neighborhood of Recife. This collaboration between the rural interior backlands and the urban coastal capital furthered their goal of bringing together the regionalism of Armorial and the rooted cosmopolitanism of manguê beat.

Cordel's iconoclasm derives from their efforts to revise the story of the northeastern backlands that they found so badly told by others—in particular, others not from

the region. They adopted a posture influenced by the aesthetic of hunger, as envisioned by director Glauber Rocha, the central figure in revolutionary experimental Cinema Novo in the 1960s. The aesthetic of hunger was a manifesto decrying cinematic depictions of territories of poverty. In films such as *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (1964) (released in English as *Black God, White Devil*) Rocha sought to give the bourgeois filmgoer a visceral sense of what poverty, hunger, and violence on the social margins felt like. Many cinematic representations of the backlands in the 1990s, such as the Oscar-nominated *Central Station* (1998), filmed in part right outside Arcoverde, took a gentler, more sentimental approach. This prompted film scholar and critic Ivana Bentes to compare the brutal 1960s aesthetics of hunger with what she calls the 1990s “cosmetics of hunger” in which the backlands were used as a scruffy but charming backdrop.⁷ Cordel went against the grain of the prevailing cosmetics of hunger, performing a more visceral depiction of the region. To counter the cosmetics of hunger, Lirinha returned to experimentalist Cinema Novo for inspiration. The band’s harsher approach closely aligns with Rocha’s treatment of the region in *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*. Both Rocha and Lirinha retell the stories of the mythologized historical figures Antonio Conselheiro and Lampião—the maverick Catholic mystic and the violent redistributionist bandit—filtering their messianic stories through a critical, Marxism-inflected perspective. Like the folk singer who serves as an unreliable narrator in Rocha’s film, folkloric sounds remain an ingredient in Cordel’s musical mix but not an ingredient to be necessarily trusted or privileged.

Turning to the critical aesthetics of Cinema Novo was also a means for Cordel to position themselves in dialogue with the Tropicália movement. In the late 1960s, during the most repressive days of the military dictatorship, tropicalist Caetano Veloso cited Rocha’s film *Terra em transe* (1967; *Entranced Earth*) as inspiration for his music with its absurdist tendencies and pessimism toward politics. A generation later, under Gutie’s management, Cordel positioned themselves both inside and outside mangue beat, which was a scene being crowned as an heir to Tropicália. By the 1990s, when Cordel formed, once transformative 1960s MPB performers such as Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and Milton Nascimento had long established themselves as a new mainstream. Cordel’s return to Rocha’s aesthetics of hunger for inspiration was a move away from what they viewed as complacency on the part of the older generation. As Christopher Dunn and Idelber Avelar note, MPB musicians—rooted in the 1960s generation—opted to engage allegorically with the problem of political violence in their music, while in the 1980s–1990s, rock musicians, and bands like Sepultura with their death metal, enacted this violence viscerally in their performances.⁸ Cordel featured fans of MPB, such as guitarist Clayton Barros, as well as fans of metal, such as percussionist

⁷ Ivana Bentes, “The Sertão and the Favela in Contemporary Brazilian Film,” in *The New Brazilian Cinema*, ed. Lúcia Nagib (London: Tauris, 2003), 124–125.

⁸ Christopher Dunn and Idelber Avelar, eds., *Brazilian Popular Music and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 20.

Emerson Calado, and worked to bring together these two modes of artistic engagement with social violence.

Cordel's cover version of the song "Cio da Terra" ("Fecundity of the Earth") is emblematic of this bringing together of intellectual, poetic, and visceral treatments of social violence. The song was written by two of the most important figures in MPB from the 1960s to the present: Milton Nascimento and Chico Buarque. Their version of this hymn-like environmentalist song is plaintive and fragile. The lyrics of the song describe the cycles of agriculture, from harvesting wheat and sugar cane to eating the many foods that are made from these crops. Buarque and Nascimento sing it in wistful harmony, evoking the brotherly duos of *música caipira* and their songs about rural life and loss in the context of labor migration to the cities.

The cover version of Milton and Chico's prayer to the earth that Cordel often performed draws from the musical vocabularies of both MPB and metal. It begins quietly, like Milton and Chico's version, until the vocals appear. Cordel shouts the vocals in staccato unison, contrasting with the careful harmonies of the MPB stars. Cordel's version becomes increasingly musically aggressive and angry. Irregular, percussion-driven phrases place the tune in the context of heavy metal riffage, and parallel fifth-driven power chords move the song from a church to a heavy metal arena show. This new arrangement resignifies the lyrics, shifting the mood from mourning to defiance. While the original idealizes the cycles of agriculture and ecology, the cover foregrounds how land in the era of the Landless Peasant Movement is a site of struggle. Lirinha's shouts after the verses occupy stylistically a space between Milton's sustained cries and the kind of guttural screams more at home in metal.

NO LONGER SEEKING PERMISSION TO BE AUTHENTIC: THE IMPACT
OF NANÁ VASCONCELOS ON CORDEL

While Gutie managed Cordel's transition from folklore revue to band thriving in alternative performance circuits, Naná Vasconcelos shaped their early sound through his role as the producer of their first CD. Naná Vasconcelos was a percussionist who would become internationally known for his participation in experiments recorded on the ECM (Edition of Contemporary Music) record label.⁹ His music combines elements of jazz, avant-garde contemporary art music, and non-Western musics into a style that was beginning to coalesce in the late 1970s under the label "world music." Naná is best known internationally for his participation in the making of three Codona records with former Ornette Coleman sideman Don Cherry between 1978–1982. His work with Codona cemented his position as an ingenious percussionist committed to radically extending the technique of instruments associated with particular musical practices and traditions, such as the role of the berimbau (an Afro-Brazilian musical bow) in

⁹ Naná Vasconcelos lived with Glauber Rocha in New York in the early 1970s. In their loft, Naná developed his radical techniques for playing the berimbau, while Rocha produced films and wrote manifestos.

accompanying the dance–martial art capoeira. Aided by high-quality microphones, Naná coaxed sounds out of every part of the berimbau. He refused to stay within the confines of standard capoeira playing technique; instead he brought these sounds into experimental jazz and the emerging category of world music.

While their manager Gutie ushered Cordel into the network of Recife-based alternative mangue beat, Naná advised the band to adopt some of the experimentalist techniques rooted in free jazz that he had developed in his work with Don Cherry. During the recording of Cordel's first album, Naná exposed Cordel to the experimentalist aesthetics and practices associated with the genre boundary crossing found on the ECM record label. Their self-titled first album retains their earlier goal of bringing together local traditions of samba de coco, popular poetry, *reisado*, and *toré*, but the process of *resgate*, or cultural rescue, that characterized their earlier project is no longer taken for granted as an unmitigated good.

A closer look at selected tracks from their Naná Vasconcelos-produced first album (*Cordel do Fogo Encantado*, 2001) will help to clarify how this revisioning of *resgate* led Cordel in an experimentalist direction. The album begins with a song that breaks from the straightforward interpretation of tradition and asserts a bolder posture in relation to regional tradition. The track titled “A chegada do Zé do Né na lagoa de dentro” (“The Arrival of Zé do Né to the Interior Lagoon”) serves as a key example of this more adventurous sensibility. The track begins with a sample of a field recording of a singer of *aboio* named Zé do Né. *Aboio* is a genre intertwined with ranch labor; it is a form of work song performed in a sparsely populated zone for the sake of communicating to the nearest cowhand a kilometer or two away, or for calling in a herd of cattle. The vocal genre is one of the Brazilian musical forms that contrast most starkly with Western common practice, in terms of both timbre and pitch intervals outside the Western tempered scales. With the aim of projecting their voices across the landscape, *aboio* singers belt their verses at full volume, aiming for a tone that strongly resonates through the nasal mask of the skull. Rising to a target pitch and then falling, *aboio* singing can at times resemble a warning siren.¹⁰

Zé do Né is a rancher who sings *aboio* as he tends to his cattle. The *lagoa de dentro* (the interior lagoon) is an actual pond, and Lirinha recorded Zé do Né singing as he arrived there one day. The band's disorienting arrangement of this sampled vocal material, however, suggests that the “interior lagoon” could also be thought of as located inside a listener's mind. Cordel's recording begins with the sound of a guitar that has been recorded and then played backward, so that instead of the sharp attack of a plucked string, the volume increases as though the instrumentalist is quickly approaching with each note. The physics of the imagined space of the track are further distanced from everyday life by dramatic panning from left to right. The melismatic melody of Zé do Né's sampled voice joins in the orbit of the guitar recorded backward. Cordel guitarist Clayton Barros creates an expansive sense of space through droning low notes and

¹⁰ Many northeastern musicians with whom I have spoken draw connections between *aboio* practice and the Islamic call to prayer, claiming a link that traces back to fifteenth-century Iberia and was brought over with the Portuguese.

punctuates with quicker, higher pitches, which become prickly stabs when reversed. The looped field recording orbits around the swirling guitar, detached from its original performance context. These elements combine to create a feeling of the Doppler effect, as well as the sensation that parts of the recording were made in slow motion.

The sample of Zé do Né's voice returns at a pivotal moment in a second track, "O cordel estradeiro", reinforcing Cordel's experiments in distancing themselves from celebratory folklore. Changes in the performance of the song between 1998 and 2001 trace their ambivalence toward the use of traditional sounds during their movement toward experimentalism. In early performances of the song, such as their first SESC show in 1998, the group was more comfortable with resgate. With a soothing accompaniment of only an acoustic guitar playing a consonant, stable progression following the cycle of fifths, Lirinha's lyrics evoke the poets and musicians who came before him. He asks them for their permission to be heard as an authentic culture bearer. During this first phase of their careers, before their transition out of being a folklore revue, Cordel's insecurity surrounding the performance of place and tradition were simply the jitters of an up-and-coming rookie. By the time they recorded the song in 2001, however, they had begun to problematize resgate, and their posture shifted. The song begins with the recitation of the line "My road-ready tale comes to ask them for permission to become *verdadeiro* [true and authentic]." When Lirinha reaches the word *verdadeiro*, however, he is now matched with a spooky, low-pitched, dissonant accordion line. Shifting the mood drastically, the line begins on C (the dominant of F Phrygian), leaps up a tritone, and then slithers back down without resolving. The repeating melody lurches along in truncated, irregular 15/8 time. (I hear it as setting a gothic mood not unlike the way Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor often does in horror movies set in haunted houses.) While this melody repeats, the sample of Zé do Né reappears, rendered even more strange by being played back in reverse. While the earlier 1998 performance of the song narrates a harmonious relationship between culture bearers and apprentices, the 2001 recorded version of "O cordel estradeiro" creates an unsettling atmosphere that expresses Cordel's unease toward the question of whether they are engaging in reverent homage or vampiric appropriation. The band's transition, as they understood it, from reproducing folklore to producing their own sound had begun; the process would radicalize as they moved to São Paulo and recorded their second album.

MACUMBA METAL: ANTINOSTALGIA AND THE AESTHETICS OF HUNGER

Cordel's second venture into the recording studio, *O Palhaço do circo sem futuro* (*The Clown in the Circus without a Future*; 2002), brought together the contrasting temporalities and senses of place found in the genres of MPB and metal, especially as personified by MPB star Milton Nascimento and metal band Sepultura.¹¹ In resonance

¹¹ Idelber Avelar describes this rift in his essay comparing MPB star Milton Nascimento and Brazilian metal band Sepultura. See Avelar, "Defeated Rallies, Mournful Anthems, and the Origins of Brazilian

with the apocalyptic temporality found in Sepultura, Cordel invokes the millenarianism of self-proclaimed prophet Antonio Conselheiro and the charismatic, messianic bandit Lampião. Yet, unlike Sepultura in their early career, Cordel allow room in their music for some Milton Nascimento–like expressions of hope. Pitching their music in a prophetic register, with the intensity of heavy metal and ecstatic Afro-Brazilian religious percussion, served to distance them from the bourgeois realm of good taste and Bourdieuan social distinction that MPB and preservationist roots music had become. At the same time, localizing the apocalypse by drawing on the region’s Luso-Brazilian, indigenous, and Afro-Brazilian prophecies regarding the end times allowed them to justify a strident, brutal sound without turning away from regional references completely.

Cordel made use of two experimental techniques from revolutionary dramatic theory that Rocha, in the service of his aesthetics of hunger, had deployed in *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*: Bertolt Brecht’s “Epic Theatre” and Antonin Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty.”¹² Artaud’s goal was to create an emotional experience in the theater so intense that it strips away the audience’s social sense of self. He sought to turn against the “trapped-beast origins” of ordinary language, using the voice instead for its animalistic timbres and incantatory power.¹³ Brecht on the other hand was a Marxist playwright who was skeptical of emotional catharsis. He wanted instead to encourage detached, critical viewing in an audience who would sit back and contemplate the materialist dialectics undergirding the actions on stage. To this end, he developed techniques of alienation, such as breaking the fourth wall. Brecht’s approach was similar to the type of estrangement proposed by Viktor Shklovsky that Madrid and Rojo explore in their chapter in this volume.

These Brechtian and Artaudian techniques can be found throughout this more experimental second phase of Cordel’s work. An excerpt from a poem by celebrated Pernambucan poet João Cabral do Melo Neto that Lirinha recites on *O Palhaço do Circo Sem Futuro* embodies the Artaudian impulse to tear down false constructs found in Cordel’s work. In “Dos três mal-amados” (“Of the Three Badly Loved Ones”), the poet declares: “Love ate my name, my identity, my portrait. Love ate my identification, my genealogy, my address.” Behind the spoken words, reinforcing this stripping away of the social self, the recitation competes with the sounds of a sledgehammer smashing concrete and other percussive noises.

These Artaudian and Brechtian techniques are showcased elegantly during the course of the track “Vou saquear a tua feira” (“I’m Going to Ransack Your Market”). The song was inspired by a newspaper article about a hunger riot at a grocery store in

Heavy Metal,” in *Brazilian Popular Music and Globalization*, ed. Charles A. Perrone and Christopher Dunn (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 123–135.

¹² See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964); and Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

¹³ Robert Sanford Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 374.

the region. The first section is more Artaudian; it is an attempt to place the listener in the position of being a rioter, in the midst of breaking windows and looting groceries. The band members are singing/shouting in rough unison, threatening the owners of the market as they stampede. Rather than stay in this adrenaline-fueled state, the band takes a step back and adopts a more Brechtian approach to the question of poverty in the region in the second section. An abrupt change of tone takes place here, from urgent punk rock to a contemplative waltz in a folkloric regional *reisado* style. During this section, Lirinha keeps his distance from the chaos, singing a contemplative and unsyncopated *reisado*-style melody. The song refuses to simply condemn or celebrate the looters, attempting instead to diagnose the incident by outlining a dialectics of violence. He sings of the northeastern backlands as a “fallow land without an owner,” describing the region with the colonial term *sesmaria*. The use of this word reminds the listener of centuries before, when the colonial government distributed land to selected, well-connected colonists after seizing it from local indigenous groups, articulating a link between unequal land distribution and poverty. Once the history lesson is over, they launch once more back into the immersive mayhem of rioting. This song forcefully and artfully expresses the bewilderment and disillusionment felt by many during the postdictatorship moment in Brazil leading up to the election of president Lula da Silva.¹⁴

LIRINHA BECOMES A CAREFUL CULTURAL SHOPLIFTER

Lirinha became a reluctant participant in the *resgate* drama of “rescuer” and “rescued,” moving in a more experimentalist direction to reject the role of mediator who makes marginal-turned-traditional sounds contemporary. At the same time this was happening, the samba de coco musicians marked as culture bearers with whom Lirinha apprenticed as a teenager became as restless in their role of the “rescued” as he was in his role as the “rescuer.” Samba de coco family groups, such as Samba de Coco Raízes de Arcoverde, began to record and perform professionally, transforming repertoire previously considered public domain.

This shift in conceptions of intellectual property rights also fueled Lirinha’s anxious experiments. Poet and novelist Micheliny Verunschik once described her close friend Lirinha as a “stylistic kleptomaniac” because of the way he stitched together text and music from the worlds of literature, cinema, and folklore. Verunschik said this as a compliment, despite referring to theft in her turn of phrase. Lirinha’s highly intertextual songwriting approach is based, she explained, on a belief in the death of the

¹⁴ After over two decades of authoritarian military rule ending in the late 1980s, neoliberal economic reforms coexisted with the claims of insurgent citizens working to narrow the gap between the soaring rhetoric of citizenship amidst the severely lopsided distribution of rights in Brazil along lines of race, economic class, and gender. See James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

individual author and the premise that all texts are the product of collective creation. A literary scholar from the state capital once visited Arcoverde to speak at a symposium on popular culture; during his talk, he reiterated Michelinny's perspective with the quip "They used to call it plagiarism, now it is intertextuality."¹⁵

What made this offhand comment so rich at the time, in 2004, at the height of Cordel's popularity, was that across town from this lecture on poststructuralist literary theory lived families of working-class samba de coco musicians who were increasingly emphatic in their authorship claims. Lirinha's success occurred around the same time that the samba de coco musicians he cited as his influences also gained access to state-sponsored festival stages and recording studios. Lirinha developed a longstanding relationship with these samba de coco families that was mutually beneficial but ultimately somewhat lopsided due to certain lucrative festival circuits of performance opportunities Cordel was able to access but samba de coco could not. Lirinha, for his part, paid homage to samba de coco and Arcoverde on stage, inspiring fans to travel to Arcoverde to hear the sources of Cordel's sounds. Samba de coco musicians, for their part, kept their homes in Arcoverde, dramatizing an ethnography-like tourist encounter with visitors.

Individual authorship was being questioned in an intellectual register just as marginal-turned-traditional musicians were pressing forward with efforts to be recognized as individual authors rather than being relegated to the public domain. This tension played out through the ways in which the practice of resgate was being rejected and revised, as musicians sought to escape being entombed in older, static notions of folklore. Verunsch's rhetoric of kleptomania implies that cultural fragments are up for grabs (an iteration of the concept of cultural cannibalism). However, the volatility surrounding resgate as roots musicians were professionalizing compelled Lirinha to choose his citations with care. In this case, choosing a more experimental path also harbored the advantage of leaving Cordel less vulnerable to lawsuits, or at least to bitter feuds adjudicated in the court of local public opinion.

In 2009, right at the end of Cordel's eleven-year run as a touring band, Lirinha produced a one-man play, *Mercadorias e futuro* (*The Future Market*). This solo project illustrates how careful his cultural "shoplifting" had become by the end of the first decade of the 2000s, as tension around authorship increased. According to Lirinha, he wrote and performed his one-man show in order to explore the entanglements of art and commerce, or in his own words, the process of "selling that which can't be sold."¹⁶ In *Mercadorias*, Lirinha plays a street vendor and culture broker named Lirovsky who describes his mission this way: "I work seeking prophets. I hunt, identify, interpret, rename, classify, share, paint over, add on the extras, mend, traffic, decorate, manufacture—this is how I make a living. I make money with poetry about the future and its derivatives."¹⁷ By dramatizing the role of an intermediary, Lirinha enacts

¹⁵ I heard this during a session of an event at the Autarquia de Ensino Superior de Arcoverde (AESA-CESA) in 2004.

¹⁶ Personal communication with José Paes de Lira, July, 2009.

¹⁷ José Paes de Lira, "Lirovsky," in *Mercadorias e futuro* (São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2008), 14–15.

a playfully satirical performance of ethnography; everything Lirovsky does, from reciting poetry to telling stories, eventually returns, cheekily, to the stated goal of selling the book the character has compiled.

Throughout the play, Lirovsky breaks the fourth wall in order to unmask the labor that goes into producing a staged performance. Rather than having offstage techs seamlessly manage the complex sound and lighting cues, Lirovsky controls them himself from a cart on stage. He uses yellow safety foot pedals that are arranged around him to trigger fanfares, musical accompaniment, commercial radio-style jingles, sound effects, and disembodied voices. He speaks in heterophony with the prerecorded voices, alternating between maintaining tight unison, falling behind the recording, and anticipating lines by a second or two. Through this interplay of embodied and spectral voices, he is looking at and attempting to expose the way he incorporates material from others into his own work in a kind of performative ventriloquism.¹⁸

At one pivotal section of the show, Lirinha's alter ego Lirovsky recites a story along with audio clips of his mother that offer the "raw" source of his inspiration for all to hear. He recounts the story along with her voice, reframing her words in the spaces between samples of her speaking. He transforms her anecdote—a true story about one of Lirinha's childhood bouts of sickness—into an allegory of his relationship with Lula Calixto, a street vender and samba de coco singer who taught him about local musical traditions. The fact that he chooses to process words from his mother—the source least likely to sue him—rather than those of Arcoverde's culture bearers indexes the receding availability of what is locally digestible for this cultural cannibal. If he, indeed, is a stylistic kleptomaniac, as Verunschik claims, he has learned to be a careful shoplifter.

Lirinha's use of "raw" audio footage in telling this story reveals the seams between the sources of inspiration he stitches together in his creative process in a way his previous work obscured. However, he is still the scriptwriter, the sampler, and the one who decides with his foot exactly when the samples are triggered. The "unmasking" of his creative process, purporting to offer a glimpse into his stylistic kleptomania, can also be seen as an attempt to inoculate himself against a line of questioning about the cost of cultural borrowing to which he was increasingly vulnerable as the 2000s wore on. José Jorge de Carvalho, for example, critiques the dynamics between educated, middle-class folklore brokers and those marked as "folk," asserting that "cultural loans" were taken out that "with the passage of time, became robbery."¹⁹

Situating Lirinha's work in this tension between Verunschik and Carvalho's positions illuminates his experiments. In contrast to Carvalho's undoubtedly critical reference to robbery, Verunschik's statement that Lirinha's approach is one of "stylistic kleptomania" is intended affectionately. Informed by contemporary literary theory, Verunschik is celebrating intertextuality and a belief in the death of the individual

¹⁸ *Mercadorias e futuro* performance, Itau Cultural, São Paulo, July 11, 2009.

¹⁹ José Jorge de Carvalho article "Metamorfoses das tradições performáticas Afro-Brasileiras: De patrimônio cultural a indústria de entretenimento," *Série Antropologia* 354 (Brasília: Universidade de Brasília, 2004), 7, <http://www.unb.br/ics/dan/Serie354empdf.pdf>, accessed May 30, 2016.

author—what Jonathan Lethem refers to as “the ecstasy of influence,” flipping Harold Bloom’s older concept of anxiety of influence.²⁰ Lirinha grew up within earshot of ideas for and against cultural cannibalist practices like those expressed by both Verunschk and Carvalho and has deftly navigated this entanglement with resgate, adjusting his trajectory toward experimentalism as he went along.

Lirinha’s critical posture toward resgate and folklore has continued into his present work. He embarked on a solo career in 2010. His track “Memória” from this latest phase extends the critical reflection that was evident in his one-man show. I hear it as further evidence that Lirinha’s experiments emerged out of his grappling with the need to counteract stultifying and nostalgic regional cultural memory. As a teenager, he began Cordel as a high school science fair experiment. Over a decade later, he mulled over the science of memory’s malleability, singing:

Do you remember? . . .
 I know about the cerebral circuit that recollects
 The construction of what happened in the frontal lobe
 But I returned to replant your memory . . .
 I go against the grain of your memory . . .

CONCLUSION

If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting
 at one level may catch people up at other levels.

—LILA ABU-LUGHOD

Lirinha and the other members of Cordel often spoke of the struggle of occupying a generic space in-between.²¹ What they performed was not quite roots music, not quite mangue beat, not quite Armorial, not quite heavy metal, not quite regional, and not quite universal. They took pride in occupying spaces in between artistic forms. What they performed was not just song, not just poetry, not just theater, not just brutally visceral, and not just intellectual. The power of their singular live shows—before the group’s dissolution in 2010—stemmed in part from this restless posture toward settled categories of performance. That said, I close this chapter by focusing further on the metacultural questions of cultural funding in the context of the President Lula’s administration—when the group most thrived—because these questions offer an opportunity to address how artistic and cultural work that arises as a radical experimental rupture can become, in certain ways, normative.

²⁰ Jonathan Lethem, “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism,” *Harper’s* (February 2007); Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²¹ The epigraph here is from Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women,” *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 41–55.

The “not quites” and “not just” listed above serve as marks of Lirinha’s distinctive artistic vision. Viewed more pragmatically, however, this generic in-betweenness can also be interpreted as evidence of a kind of triangulation of genres that allows the band to access to a wide range of performance opportunities. The flip side of being “not quite” or “not just,” when executed properly, can mean inclusion within all three of Ana Maria Ochoa’s principal parameters of canonic validation for traditional and popular music: heritage, youth, and revolutionary aesthetics.²² Despite the difficulty of categorizing Cordel’s genre, gatekeepers have judged them to be “enough like” roots music for certain roots music festivals and “enough like” experimental music to appear in rarefied venues with space for critical intellectual and avant-garde voices. The band members of Cordel are aware of the risk of their brand of “refurbished folklore,” foregrounding the hybrid, becoming a part of a new Bourdieuan sphere of distinction.²³ Guitarist Clayton Barros once stated this concern this way: “[we] constantly strive to make our work less elite, to not let ourselves be influenced by people from high society, or by people who are intelligent, in quotation marks.”²⁴

I write six years after Cordel’s breakup, as much of Brazil holds its breath during the limbo of President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment process, a bureaucratic coup d’état. As part of this rightwing turn, by the time this chapter is published, the terms “postdictatorship” and “democratization” may well no longer apply to Brazil as they did in the 1990s and 2000s, when Cordel thrived. The extent to which the band’s success was deeply entwined with the historical and political developments of the decade is now becoming clear. Cordel’s popularity peaked during the first administration of President Lula da Silva, who grew up just down the BR-232 highway from Arcoverde in the Pernambucan backlands. Under his presidency, funds for public cultural sponsorship increased significantly, and the Rouanet Law, which had passed a decade earlier, incentivized private sponsorship as well.²⁵ Writing about recent Brazilian cultural policy, Bryan McCann argues that avant-garde Cinema Novo, and the aesthetics of hunger in particular—formative influences on Lirinha’s sensibility—went from being radical in the 1960s to being a highly fundable artistic approach. He points out three Cinema Novo-influenced themes found throughout Cordel’s work that have found success with public and semipublic funders during the 2000s: “the denunciation of dictatorship, the feudal struggle in the backlands and the tale of urban degradation and marginalization.”²⁶

²² Ana María Ochoa Gautier, “Sonic Transculturation, Epistemologies of Purification and the Aural Public Sphere in Latin America,” *Social Identities* 12, no. 6 (2006): 803–825.

²³ Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 60. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

²⁴ Interview with Clayton Barros at the Gafieiras website from the early 2000s <http://www.gafieiras.com.br/Display.php?Area=Entrevistas&SubArea=EntrevistasPartes&ID=7&IDArtista=7&css=1&ParteNo=10>, accessed January 30, 2005, no longer available on the website.

²⁵ Bryan McCann, *The Throes of Democracy: Brazil since 1989* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

It is by no means my intention to diminish Lirinha's expansive artistic vision by pointing out how closely his work hewed to themes and aesthetics favored by funders during the Lula da Silva era. I began this research as a fan, and I continue it as an advocate and admirer of his work. Nevertheless, I include it because it serves as a case study of how forms of experimentalism and alternativity are received as radical or normative depending on the shifting and heterogeneous networks that foster them.

5

PERUVIAN CUMBIA AT THE THEORETICAL LIMITS OF TECHNO-UTOPIAN HYBRIDITY

Joshua Tucker

THIS CHAPTER DEALS with Peruvian chicha, a genre historically derided as a popular music beloved mainly by migrant proletarians from the country's Andean and Amazonian provinces. The guitar-based adaptation of Colombian cumbia has recently become a part of ongoing, related conversations—both within and outside its home country—about music's role in mediating social relations. In Peru, chicha has become central to a nationalist project that seeks to bury age-old bigotries dividing Lima's white elite from the indigenous and mestizo (culturally and racially "mixed") majority. Its ideologues aim to foster a sense of nationhood rooted not in Andean, Amazonian, and criollo (roughly, white-identified) inheritances but in the inventive mestizo practices of Lima's cholos—provincial migrants understood to have abandoned indigenous identities.¹ Outside the country, chicha has attracted fans amid a sea change in the nature of "world music" consumption. In this era of "World Music 2.0," Western listeners have turned away from quests for cultural purity, deep difference, or musical exotica, preferring instead the hybrid, audibly

¹ The term "criollo" is more complicated than my gloss here might indicate. It names a cultural identity that is now associated with Peru's white elite but borrows many elements once recognized as distinctively Afro-Peruvian. Such acts of borrowing have, in many cases, been actively forgotten, while in others, origins are treated as secondary to the process of cultural fusion through which specifically Afro-Peruvian sources were refined into criollo forms deemed more genteel. See Heidi Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

technologized sounds that animate urban music scenes across the globe and better represent the musical world-system.²

Chicha's reevaluation both within and outside Peru was driven primarily by the curatorial work of intellectual cosmopolitans (in Thomas Turino's specific sense of the term);³ it was not primarily the result of the ideas of the musicians who invented it between the 1960s and 1980s, their later activities, or the behavior of its erstwhile Peruvian fan base. In this case, intellectual cosmopolitans are people who, despite wide geographic dispersal and different social backgrounds, share a transnationally distributed aesthetic habitus that distinguishes them from their compatriots. In the case of chicha's curatorial community, that habitus is organized around postcolonial, antiessentialist rhetorics that take tropes of cultural difference as barriers to dialogue and equality rather than as markers of respect. Applying such a framework to musical practice, intellectual cosmopolitans deploy notions of electronic experimentation, psychedelic playfulness, and musical agency to place chicha in a frame of irreverent hybridity that is understood as a remedy for the intellectual shortcomings of an earlier era, typified by a more parochial form of relativism and cultural reification. Heard within this framework, chicha musicians become retrospective theorists of international hybridity and nationalist *mestizaje* (mixture): sonorous experimentalists whose music provides hard data about the limits of past identity discourse on the one hand and tools for making utopian alternatives on the other.

In the account to follow, I focus largely on conversations framed in terms of hybridity, syncretism, *mestizaje*, and their cognates—all watchwords of this cosmopolitan aesthetic formation. Of course, it would be cavalier to conflate such modes of critical appreciation with “experimentalism,” a term that typically names music that makes a more thoroughgoing search for unheard sounds and practices than does the popular dance music I consider here.⁴ Still, the complex of terms guiding contemporary chicha reception glosses sonorous modes of normative transgression and the crossing of ethnic boundaries for which those norms stand, meaning that the genre has been made to move in the same discursive terrain of aesthetic disruption and social reform as “experimentalism” itself. If indeed “experimentalism is a grouping, not a group,”⁵ then chicha's curators have been highly successful at grouping it with more explicitly experimental popular scenes; they have rendered it legible by borrowing critical terms

² Wayne Marshall, “World Music 2.0 (and W&W) on Afropop Worldwide,” *Wayne and Wax*, November 2, 2009, <http://wayneandwax.com/?p=2527>, accessed March 30, 2016.

³ Thomas Turino, *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁴ This is particularly true given that the term “experimentalism,” as typically used in Peru, tends to name other musical things entirely. On the one hand it designates self-consciously avant-garde compositional practices resembling those that animate art music milieus around the globe. On the other it designates forms of electronic dance music that, in their pedestrian adoption of long-standing, transnational motifs from techno music and remix culture, are if anything even less aesthetically challenging than chicha was in its heyday.

⁵ Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 6.

of art from (for instance) psychedelic rock and Brazilian Tropicália, without raising the specific claims that are made for those experimental scenes as such.

A single, extended example may clarify just how chicha became tied notions of aesthetic transgression and social change. The 2010 anthology *Cumbia Beat: Vol. 1* stands apart from other artifacts of the postmillennial chicha boom due to its seriousness of purpose, the high quality of its selections, and its compilers' expertise.⁶ Tracing cumbia's Peruvian evolution into chicha between the 1960s and 1980s, the collection features extensive liner notes by leading experts Santiago Alfaro and Alfredo Villar. Their account makes a forceful case for treating chicha as a means through which Peru's coextensive hierarchies of class, race, culture, geography, and sound came undone, clearing space for a sense of mestizo nationhood that is ascendant today. This account does so, however, through a critical register of hybridity that is more firmly tied to the present day than that of the artists under discussion. Thus the music of pioneering artists Los Demonios del Mantaro, who in the 1960s blended elitist dance-band cumbia with Andean (hence connotatively indigenous) *huayno* music to create sounds "syncretic and mestizo . . . heterodox and unclassifiable," is treated as evidence "against what a dualist and essentialist reading of reality would lead us to believe" about irreconcilability between provincial and metropolitan spheres. Elsewhere, Andean peers, such as Enrique Delgado, are described as aesthetic renegades who "appropriated rock, the virus that unleashed an epidemic of bell-bottoms, miniskirts, long hair, psychedelic colors, hallucinogenic drugs, and pacifism," to create "surprising fusions and amalgams" that challenged the era's social and musical norms.⁷

Even more pointed is the authors' citation from the jacket notes of guitarist Manzanita's 1969 album *Arre caballito*, which averred that "our country is creating new structures: just so, our extraordinary guitarist wanted to express his non-conformity, giving [Andean] huayno a tropical substrate."⁸ Aligning these words with rather specific tropes of tropicalist anthropophagy pioneered long ago by Brazilian critics,⁹ Alfaro and Villar go on to note that Manzanita's followers "facilitated cumbia's metamorphosis into a syncretic, heterodox genre that appeared to voraciously cannibalize acoustic traditions and modern technologies; there was no innovation that the tropical guitarists failed to add to their sound: delay, fuzztone, overdrive, wah wah or reverb, modulatory effects characteristic of rock, were mixed into a hallucinogenic sonic cocktail." As "beat experiments with tropical music blossomed across the nation's territory," they relativized the dominant expectation that Andean and Amazonian performers would stick to the folkloric styles of their home regions. Indeed, in a rebuke to such essentialism, the authors affirm: "the most important desire of the tropical musicians was that of creating the soundtrack of a true nation, mestizo and plural."¹⁰

⁶ Santiago Alfaro and Alfredo Villar, *Cumbia Beat: Vol. 1* (Lima: Vampisoul, 2010). All translations in this essay from Spanish to English are by the author.

⁷ Santiago Alfaro and Alfredo Villar, liner notes to *Cumbia Beat: Vol. 1* (Lima: Vampisoul, 2010), n.p.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Christopher Dunn, *Brutality Garden: Tropicália and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Alfaro and Villar, liner notes to *Cumbia Beat: Vol. 1*, n.p.

Of course, social or artistic criticism often advances by applying ideas from beyond the temporal or geographic purview of the object analyzed. I do not mean to impugn Alfaro and Villar's analysis on such churlish grounds—particularly since I am doing something similar, by framing contemporary chicha reception under the experimentalist rubric. I mean, rather, to indicate how thoroughly such commentators ground their claims for chicha's importance by appealing to its parity with modes of hybrid experimentalism that have global currency. By calling attention to chicha's blend of Andean huayno, Caribbean dance music, and psychedelic rock, use of acoustic and modern instruments, or refusal to obey ethnically essentialist principles of generic separation, such commentaries pitch chicha as a distinctively Peruvian form of pop experimentalism that is nevertheless familiar from other places. Stated differently, musical hybridity is here treated as a cure for exhausted binaries in a way that is thoroughly congruent with, when not directly borrowed from, the discourses of counter-cultural originality that are privileged in recent studies of global sound.

In this chapter I will adopt a more skeptical stance, rooted in the conviction that chicha's contemporary apparatus of reception may serve less to honor the music and its public than to provide grist for the mill of a techno-utopian hybridity discourse that is displacing older forms of musical connoisseurship. After a statement of theoretical principles, I sketch three different but related case studies, each rooted in a different country. Together they show how techno-utopian hybridity talk has discrepant effects when it is applied in contexts with disparate relations to the essentialisms it was designed to resist. The first case concerns US-based musician, producer, and club owner Olivier Conan, whose accidental encounter with Peruvian cumbia made him into an enthusiastic promoter of the style and who inadvertently set many of the conceptual terms for the transnational chicha boom that occurred late in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The second case briefly outlines contemporaneous events in Peru, where an ongoing effort to foster an inclusive mestizo society had already led supporters to select chicha as a symbol of their nationalist project. In this context, Conan's work was received enthusiastically, but its uptake also highlighted the biases that continued to operate beneath a veneer of social reform associated with chicha's new-found popularity. A third case study turns to Spain, where chicha's new-found status as a symbol of techno-utopian hybridity resonated with the antiessentialist principles that drove Spanish conversations on ethnic and national diversity. Here, chicha music became one of many means for cosmopolitans to engage in cultural dialogue while disavowing dated images of radical alterity, simultaneously foreclosing any real possibility of creating dialogue between Spanish activists and the Peruvian artists and fans responsible for chicha's success in the first place.

Throughout, I engage less systematically with chicha's sound and historical development—topics that have been amply covered elsewhere—than with the rhetorical techniques curators use to bring inexperienced listeners to music worth hearing.¹¹

¹¹ See, for instance, Jaime Bailón, "La chicha no muere ni se destruye, sólo se transforma: Vida, historia y milagros de la cumbia peruana," *Iconos* 18 (2004): 53–62; Wilfredo Hurtado Suarez, *Chicha peruana: Música*

I ask how those acts of curation might legitimate or deauthorize the actual subject positions of the musicians and audiences with different kinds of investment in the music. In the end I echo Timothy Taylor's admonition that the theoretical discovery of permanent hybridity and the glorification of an experimental spirit tend to enforce new modes of authenticity, reworking hierarchies of social and aesthetic distinction rather than assuaging such inequalities.¹² Finally, I suggest that Taylor's warning gains special critical purchase when set into dialogue with musics that hail from Latin America, where visions of experimental hybridity have long underpinned projects of nationalist mestizaje.

HYBRID THEORIES IN TRANS/NATIONAL CONTEXT

Because I am treating popular music's global travels and the ideological baggage that popular music carries, it is worth copying a gesture that opens a justly famous article on what used to be called "world music."¹³ To summarize the current state of thinking on the topic: the "world music" industry category, invented to deliver sounds from outside the Global North to Western multiculturalist consumers, held some promise both for dismantling dominant musical assumptions and for making careers for musicians eager to access the lucrative marketplaces of Euro-America. However, persistent financial inequities between artists and mediators problematized the potentials of this industry category. Though couched in the language of social justice, world music's apparatus largely essentialized its artists by treating them as bearers of fragile musical cultures, ailing in the face of an onslaught of Western cultural capitalism. Said differently, the artists were seen as untapped reservoirs of epistemological and sonorous difference, raw materials that might prove useful in reinvigorating the stagnant musical and cultural life of a declining, alienated West. Such reductionism erased the circulation, exchange, and exuberant fusion that had long shaped musical cultures around the globe. It went further by making such contrived alterity into a measure of worth and leaving the creative transnational fusions of local artists to be dismissed as the

de los nuevos migrantes (Lima: ECO, Grupo de Investigaciones Económicas, 1995); Carlos Leyva Arroyo, *Musica "chicha," mito e identidad popular: El cantante peruano Chacalón* (Quito: Abya-Yala, 2005); Raúl R. Romero, "Popular Music and the Global City: Huayno, Chicha, and Techno-Cumbia in Lima," in Walter Aaron Clark, ed., *From tejano to tango: Latin American Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Raúl R. Romero, *Andinos y tropicales: La cumbia peruana en la ciudad global* (Lima: Instituto de Etnomusicología, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2007); Joshua Tucker, "From the World of the Poor to the Beaches of 'Eisha': Chicha, Cumbia, and the Search for a Popular Subject in Peru," in Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Pablo Vila, eds., *Cumbial: Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Thomas Turino, "'Somos El Peru' (We Are Peru): Cumbia Andina and the Children of the Andean Migrants in Lima," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 9 (1990): 15–37.

¹² Timothy Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). See also Jonathan Ritter, "Chocolate, Coconut, and Honey: Race, Music, and the Politics of Hybridity in the Ecuadorian Black Pacific," *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 5 (2011): 571–592.

¹³ Steven Feld, "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 1–2.

work of imperialism's dupes. In short, "world music" as a category helped to ensure that the new global imagination was as debilitated by ethnic essentialism as the system it ostensibly challenged—and world music scholars were sometimes complicit.¹⁴

After this debacle, musical commentators turned away from traditionalism and boundary thinking and developed instead a set of theoretical approaches that acknowledged musicians' adaptive creativity. Treating them as individualized creators rather than tokens of culturally authentic types, such approaches tease out musicians' active role in shaping the sonorous world-system. Attuned to the ways music workers redefine the very cultural and geographic borders that they ostensibly cross in an age of technological flow, theorists in this mode seek to interpret the contingent dialogues and sympathies that accrue around musical exchange.¹⁵ They either describe the sheer disinterest in fixed identity that typifies many music scenes (driven instead by knowingly eccentric stylistic appropriation), or they seek to register the emergent mores of an era defined by circulatory decontextualization and pleasure in perplexity.¹⁶ In either case, such theories place electric and/or digital technologies at their centers. Formerly suspect as evidence of Western contamination, these technologies are now treated not only as channels of contact but also as central to an emergent "aesthetic of the global imagination," allowing musicians to comment reflexively on the electronic mediations they use to make contemporary sound worlds.¹⁷ In addition, in fact, recent writings often adopt a thoroughgoing techno-utopianism. Rooted in the belief that the intersection between media technologies and hybrid aesthetics facilitates the creation of unheralded "audiotopias," theorists now treat such sonorous spaces as imaginative laboratories for undoing the cultural essentialism of an earlier theoretical era, preparing the way for more concrete forms of emancipation.¹⁸

Seeking not difference but dialogue,¹⁹ and treating music workers as creative agents rather than cowering naifs, the frame of techno-utopian hybridity has cleared a space for formerly deauthorized subjects to stand forth in their fullness. However, techno-utopian hybridity can easily lead to the same kind of theoretical hubris that it targets. In a cogent critique, Taylor has noted how often hybridity is interpreted as a

¹⁴ On the industry's invention of the "world music" category, see Simon Frith, "The Discourse of World Music," in Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds., *Western Music and Its Others* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). For accounts of artists taking advantage, see Jocelyne Guilbault, *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1994); Timothy Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁵ See Jayna Brown, "Buzz and Rumble: Global Pop Music and Utopian Impulse," *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (2010): 125–146.

¹⁶ See David Novak, "Cosmopolitanism, Remediation, and the Ghost World of Bollywood," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2010): 40–72.

¹⁷ Veit Erlmann, "The Aesthetics of the Global Imagination: Reflections on World Music in the 1990s," *Public Culture* 8 (1996): 467–487.

¹⁸ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁹ cf. Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 64.

new kind of authenticity and has asked whether “the widespread usage of the term as a descriptor has also meant that it is sometimes used as a prescriptor.”²⁰ In this modality, hybridity simply reverses an earlier polarity, deauthorizing those musicians, listeners, and theorists who understand local forms of cultural difference as real and worthwhile properties. If hybridity has simply entered “the dynamic of popular cultural politics to be incorporated, reterritorialized and reworked by hegemonic structures to produce new marginalized and essentialized identities,” then utopian claims that are made in its name demand to be scrutinized as rigorously as simplistic claims of authentic alterity.²¹

Against such hybrid reification, Taylor calls for concrete studies of how “the discourses of hybridity affect understandings of musicians and musics, and how identifiable musical hybrids are treated discursively.”²² Said differently: when analysis is restricted to textual analysis—product—rather than the fashioning and use of that text—process—it becomes impossible to tease out the power dynamics that constrain committed practitioners of utopian hybridity just as powerfully as they constrain their opposites. Too often the utopic possibilities of “global ghettech” remain untested against the meanings of music on the ground, so to speak.²³ Not all hybridities are created equal, nor are they treated in commensurable ways across their spheres of diffusion, and their effects are therefore worth specifying—as the best literature on the topic proves.²⁴ Chicha happens to be a very good object for testing such claims. Upsetting to the categories that musical and theoretical traditionalists cherish, rooted in technical experimentation, and performed and patronized by people whose very being has challenged the oversimplified social categories dear to Peruvian society, chicha perfectly echoes the theoretical zeitgeist. Furthermore, the cosmopolitan agents behind its national and international revalorization were attuned to precisely the sorts of antiessentialist debates and theories I have reviewed here.

This, however, brings me to a last piece of the theoretical frame that I want to establish before sketching three scenes of chicha’s international circulation. Latin America has long served as a laboratory for connecting musical experiment, cultural mixture, and social emancipation, making it a particularly suitable place to seek out test cases

²⁰ Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 141.

²¹ Ashwani Sharma, “Sounds Oriental: The (Im)possibility of Theorizing Asian Musical Cultures,” in Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma, eds., *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music* (London: Zed Books 1996), 20.

²² Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 141.

²³ This is not to deny wholesale the validity of work that puts Internet ethnography into service as a method for investigating the dynamics I refer to here. It is, however, to argue, against many proponents of that valuable field, that they can fully account for music’s real-world dynamics by examining what people say and do online. This is particularly true for situations where musical activity is largely organized around live performance and everyday listening practices that do not show up online—a characterization that, I would suggest, still accounts for the vast majority of the world’s music.

²⁴ See, for example, Alejandro Madrid, *Nor-tec Rifa! Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Ritter, “Chocolate, Coconut, and Honey.”

for theories of globalist hybridity.²⁵ Beginning in the era of independence, but with greater strength since the early twentieth century, many Latin American nationalists have asserted the uniqueness and the value of their societies by deploying a precursor of today's utopian antiessentialism. According to these nationalists, what distinguished their countries was a disposition to blend elements of Iberian, indigenous, and African origin. Citizens transacted mutual investments in food, religion, music, slang, and so on across ethnic boundaries that were rendered increasingly nominal in societies where cultural *mestizaje/mestiçagem* was the default mode of social interaction. This nationalist *mestizaje* has, however, generated resistance from those who see it as a genocidal tool denying the survival and the specificity of indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures—as “an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion,” in Ronald Stutzman's resonant phrase—but this has barely slowed its deployment in nation-making projects.²⁶ And music has been absolutely central to these nationalist projects, with popular, obviously “mixed” genres regularly being selected as key pieces of evidence of the reality of mestizo nationalism.²⁷

In this light, the frequency with which Latin American genres engage today's technoutopian hybrid musical imagination is hardly surprising. It might even be proposed that the global preeminence of Brazilian music beyond other Latin American alternatives and the out-of-place application of “tropical” tropes from Brazilian criticism to neighboring areas derive from these musics's congruence with the lines of the current theoretical debate. It is precisely at this point, however, that the long-standing skepticism toward *mestizaje* evinced by Latin American subalterns—not least in Brazil—can provide a useful counterweight to the triumphalism of hybrid discourse.²⁸ The literature that critiques *mestizaje* is vast and varied, but I am inspired here by anthropologist Stephan Palmié's *Wizards and Scientists*, not only because it touches specifically on experimental creativity but also because it clearly demonstrates how discourses of hybridity authorize particular subjects.²⁹ His account of José Antonio Aponte—whose

²⁵ After nearly two decades, the single most cogent introduction to the subject remains Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997).

²⁶ Ronald Stutzman, “El Mestizaje: An All-Inclusive Ideology of Exclusion,” in Norman E. Whitten, Jr., ed., *Cultural Transformations and Ethnicity in Modern Ecuador* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 45–94.

²⁷ A short list of exemplary studies on this topic would include Paul Austerlitz, *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Bryan McCann, *Hello Hello Brazil: Popular Music in the Making of Modern Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Zoila Mendoza, *Shaping Society through Dance: Mestizo Ritual Performance in the Peruvian Andes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afro-Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997); and Peter Wade, *Music, Race, and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

²⁸ See Roger Bastide and Florestan Fernandes, *Branços e negros em São Paulo: Ensaio sociológico sobre aspectos da formação, manifestações atuais e efeitos do preconceito de cor na sociedade paulistana* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1959); Abdias do Nascimento, *O genocídio do negro brasileiro: Processo de um racismo mascarado* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1978).

²⁹ Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

hybrid paintings were unintelligible to the authorities of his day and were therefore condemned as aberrant primitivism even amid a groundswell of pride in Cuba's hybrid nature—shows forcefully how the very discourse of *mestizaje* acts to separate and hierarchize. On an elementary level, this discourse retrospectively reifies one set of identity categories as the “pure” ingredients of a future-oriented *mestizo* identity, leaving the former—bearers of “tradition,” or “primitive” ancestors—to fade away or languish as “contemporary ancestors.” On the other hand this discourse misrecognizes the hybrid practices of nonelites as evidence of aberration rather than of *mestizaje* of a subaltern stamp: as unskilled and therefore maladapted *mestizaje*, to be eliminated in the name of progress. The effect is the disappearance of cultural formations alternative to elite *mestizaje*, which is assumed to be uniquely capable of “mixing” elements in a way that is proper to “modern” subjectivity. Stated more bluntly, *mestizaje* typically amounts to a force for authorizing *particular styles of hybridity*.

Such, I suggest, is the register in which both *chicha* and techno-utopian discourse operate. They divide a world of necessarily “hybrid” music cultures into valuable and not-so-valuable versions of hybridity, along a line of postcolonial critique that may well be out of place in local contexts. This is not to say that *chicha*'s proponents intended this course: in fact, they have tended to proceed from the best of intentions and to begin from the most theoretically sophisticated place; their efforts have come undone only through interaction with the more complicated realities of life in the world.

SKETCH ONE: THE ACCIDENTAL CURATOR

The central actants in *chicha*'s postmillennium transformation are, first, the CD *Roots of Chicha*, released in 2007 on the independent Barbès record label, and to a lesser extent, the band *Chicha Libre*, whose songs are aesthetically rooted in the playful hybridity of classic *chicha*.³⁰ Behind both was French musician Olivier Conan, compiler of *Roots of Chicha*, director of the Barbès label, and coowner of a Brooklyn club with the same name. *Roots of Chicha* was initially an object of limited, esoteric interest, circulating mainly among the global hipsterati. Indeed, as if to illustrate the connection, in a news story only peripherally related to *Chicha Libre*, Conan described the club as having been robbed by a “hipster-type, early 20s kind of guy [who] looks exactly like all of our patrons.”³¹ The CD played a weighty curatorial role, consolidating an international public's impressions of *chicha*'s sound and—via liner notes written by Conan himself—its origins and ideological implications. Its featured tunes became an instant canon, one that still stands ten years later and has organized the structure of cosmopolitan *chicha* fandom within and outside Peru.

³⁰ Olivier Conan, *Roots of Chicha: Psychedelic Cumbias from Peru* (Brooklyn: Barbès Records, 2007).

³¹ Jason Tomassini, “On the Trail of a Statue, and a Thief,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2011, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9904E6DD113DF933A15751CoA9679D8B6>, accessed March 29, 2016.

It is easy to account for *Roots of Chicha's* appeal, for it only demonstrated what Peruvian listeners and appreciative scholars have known for decades: in its 1960s and 1970s heyday, chicha was a wildly inventive, endlessly fun style. Chicha also provided food for thought, by defying the sclerotic cultural boundaries between Andes and coast, national and international, that guided Peru's music industry. *Roots of Chicha's* tracks are entirely representative of the era, featuring short, tuneful call-and-response melodies, performed by dual guitars or collective voices, over an instrumental base that combines rock band resources with Caribbean percussion and early synthesizers. They are playful and lighthearted, combining a wealth of references ranging from age-old Andean melodies, to Caribbean montuno vamps and 1960s-style surf guitar tremolos. They also take a listener on a kaleidophonic journey through the era's electro-modern sonosphere, with each appearing to explore a different timbral galaxy. Clean, echoing guitars, distorted banjos, wah-wah pedals, and other oddities swirl around whooping imitations of tropical birds, or celebratory party chatter clearly patterned after contemporaneous Nuyorican *bugalú* recordings. Overall, the album is easily interpreted as a rebuke to a kind of thinking that expected folkloric tradition from people of Amazonian and Andean descent, denying their fully coeval status and interest in sonorous possibility.

For present purposes, the collection is also noteworthy for hitting nearly every marker of aesthetic legitimacy that has accrued around what I am calling technoutopian hybridity discourse.³² Subtitled "psychedelic cumbias from Peru," it directly evoked experimentalism and, not incidentally, Amazonian psychotropics with a moniker that was not part of any mainstream Peruvian vocabulary. Themes of musical experimentalism and social change are foregrounded on the back cover, where chicha is characterized accurately enough as "western-influenced indigenous music geared toward the new urban masses who wholly identified with the electric hybrid." The text goes on to note that the CD's "cumbias amazónicas" drew on Colombian cumbia rhythms but also Andean melodies, Cuban *guajiras*, and "the psychedelic sounds of surf guitars, wah-wah pedals, farfisa [*sic*] organs, and moog synthesizers," thereby name-checking many of the sound technologies that have become nostalgic emblems of futurism past—and indeed were at the cutting edge in the 1960s and 1970s.

Inside, the liner notes more specifically imbricate experimentalism and social justice, describing chicha as a "pop music that educated Peruvians usually look down upon." (This remains true in 2017, though the situation became more complicated because of the CD that contained these words.) The notes also echo contemporary literature on experimental hybridity by placing chicha in dialogue with a global current of musical development wherein "local groups from all countries began to emulate British Invasion and American psychedelic bands" and "eventually developed a specific national character." Here chicha was interesting not because it brought listeners into contact with an authenticity tied to traditionalism and cultural difference but precisely

³² All quotations are from the jacket and notes that accompany Conan, *Roots of Chicha*.

because it relativized ideas about where such boundaries lay and how they could be crossed. It was “distinctly Latin, not Peruvian. It was Pan-Latin: like the new instruments . . . the rhythms were borrowed, yet the music was undeniably national”; it was “familiar and exotic, traditional and modern.” Nor was the music’s value relegated to origin in some putatively unspoiled, premodern place: rather, as Conan repeatedly noted, it was primarily associated with the country’s gritty urban peripheries.

Conan founded his band Chicha Libre at the same time as *Roots of Chicha*’s release; the band played music modeled on the principles of experimental psychedelia that Conan himself had attached to “Amazonian *cumbia*.” Featuring an eccentric lineup of bass, electric guitar, Latin percussion, the accordion-like Electrovox, and Conan on Venezuelan cuatro, the band echoed the eclecticism of its namesake genre without directly imitating it and performed a mix of original songs as well as covers of old Peruvian cumbias. Notwithstanding the laudable self-awareness with which Conan approached both band and CD, however, public reception often echoed tropes dating from an era of world music marketing that he specifically disavowed. Speaking with me on June 29, 2011 (as well as in multiple interviews that appeared around the date of the compilation’s release), Conan told a tale of discovery that superficially tracked a narrative form already critiqued in the earliest writings on world music’s colonialist tropology.³³ According to his narrative, he had come upon sounds from the Amazon and seized the opportunity to capture his discovery and share it with like-minded aesthetes. Conan’s tale was pointedly couched so as to distinguish itself from the open exoticism and colonialism of his predecessors but was widely reported in tones almost as breathless as the caricature I have provided here. Critics were not particularly careful about accurately registering the music’s geography, riddling coverage with inaccurate statements about the music’s provenance and character. Apparently conflating Conan’s own use of the cuatro with Peruvian custom, more than one account described chicha inaccurately as a fusion of “traditional music from various parts of Peru with musical styles from Colombia and Venezuela,”³⁴ or called it “a genre popular in Latin countries, including Venezuela.”³⁵

But the unintentional effects of Conan’s own characterizations overshadowed such minor errors. In a rush to release the CD before fully researching the history of the genre and its home country, Conan had prepared a product that veered into a mode of ethnic marginalization that has long plagued Peru and has specifically affected chicha musicians in recent memory. The error is most cogently summarized in the liner notes’ patently false statement that “chicha started out in the late sixties, in the oil-boom towns of the Peruvian Amazon.” It didn’t. Cumbia was adopted and adapted all over Peru after its arrival from Colombia in the 1960s, and the Amazon was an early

³³ See, for instance, Louise Meintjes, “Paul Simon’s Graceland, South Africa, and the Mediation of Musical Meaning,” *Ethnomusicology* 34, no. 1 (1990): 37–73; Taylor, *Global Pop*.

³⁴ Vincent M. Mallozzi, “A Peruvian Sound in a Brooklyn Bar,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/29/nyregion/29band.html>, accessed March 29, 2016.

³⁵ Tommassini, “On the Trail.”

site of such efforts. But the variant called *chicha* is conventionally associated with the *cumbia* variant that emerged in Lima in the 1970s, performed largely by and for the city's Andean migrant majority and beloved for highlighting the ethnic origins and the hard lives of these long-abused victims of Western and internal colonialism.³⁶

Conan's misconstrual of this fact, and his placement of *chicha*'s origins in the Amazonian lowlands, echoed with uncomfortable exactness a long-standing mode of cultural appropriation that is familiar not only from Peru but from other Latin American contexts as well. Here, a tradition associated with a despised ethnic group is "cleansed" of negative associations, either through factitious association with a different, more palatable origin,³⁷ or when its core elements become "refined" through fusion with more perfect Western aesthetics.³⁸ Peru's *cumbia* scene had been reordered in this way over the course of the 1990s, as *chicha* was displaced by a distinct style called *tecnocumbia*.³⁹ The two were overwhelmingly similar, and many *tecnocumbia* bands were merely *chicha* bands that had changed instruments. The nature of the change, however, was telling, for *tecnocumbia* bands abandoned the twin electric guitars that identified *chicha*, adopting instead contemporary synthesizers that echoed Mexican *cumbia*. Furthermore, the musicians associated themselves not with the Andes but with the Amazon, attiring themselves in skimpy "tropical" clothing and singing of a hot-blooded passion that is conventionally associated with the lowlands, in contrast to an ostensibly stoic Andean character. Elementary and reductive, such stereotypes nevertheless provided a new target of identification for Peruvians who longed to align their selves with a transnational Latino identity that has become tied to "tropical" exuberance,⁴⁰ and that makes little room for indigenous identities like those tied to the Peruvian Andes. Indeed, in a telling study of festival dancers in Cusco—former Inca capital and emotional heart of Peruvian indigeneity—Zoila Mendoza powerfully describes how fears of dowdy indigeneity affect contemporary Andean youths.⁴¹ In that case, the matter was resolved through the uptake of Bolivian *saya* and *caporal* dances—spuriously described as African inheritances and performed using blunt stereotypes of Afro-Latin tropical exuberance and therefore useful in accessing a hegemonic, transnational *latinidad* where African heritage has long displaced indigeneity as an object of ethnic desire.

³⁶ The situation is more complex than I develop here, since the recent *chicha* boom has driven a highly ideologized debate about what distinguishes *chicha* from *cumbia*, in what times and what places. It is nevertheless true that decades of reportage and scholarship predating this moment characterized it as I have here.

³⁷ See Austerlitz, *Merengue*.

³⁸ See Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919–1991* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

³⁹ See Romero, "Popular Music."

⁴⁰ See Darien Lamén, "Claiming Caribbeanness in the Brazilian Amazon: Lambada, Critical Cosmopolitanism, and the Creation of an Alternative Amazon," *Latin American Music Review* 34, no. 2 (2013): 131–161.

⁴¹ See Mendoza, *Shaping Society*.

By underplaying chicha's Andean roots, then, Conan unwittingly engaged a history of disempowerment that is widely resented in Andean Peru, and specifically by chicha's erstwhile audience.⁴² Finally, as if to underline the insult, Conan's liner notes evoked the single most familiar trope for legitimizing Latin American experimentalism, noting (accurately enough) that "the oddly post-modern combination of western psychedelia, Cuban and Colombian rhythms, Andean melodies, and idiosyncratic experimentation was close in spirit to the pop syncretism of Brazilian Tropicália bands such as Os Mutantes." Locating chicha in the Amazon and asserting its legitimacy by way of a comparison with South America's burgeoning imperial power, Conan touched nerves that are raw in a country where Andean disenfranchisement is a living problem. Admirably, he corrected most these interpretations in *Roots of Chicha 2*, a second volume released in 2010. However, by then *Roots of Chicha* had already inflected a revisionist process of Peruvian nationalism that intersected such acts of appropriation at an oblique angle.

SKETCH TWO: THE MACHINERY OF CHOLO NATIONALISM

Roots of Chicha's release came amid a transformation in Peruvian nationalist discourse, and Conan's work helped to shape patterns of change that were then new and malleable. The roots and effects of this new nationalism are difficult to summarize easily, and I have done so at greater length elsewhere.⁴³ In brief: since the millennium, the economic and social power of Lima's provincial migrant community has, after long subterranean growth, begun to remake in earnest the social dynamics of a country founded on parallel inequalities of race, region, and power. The process began in the middle of the twentieth century, as people from the poor indigenous and mestizo communities of the Andes and (to a far lesser extent) the Amazon flooded the prosperous capital. There they became the majority and, despite severe prejudice, gradually secured economic and social capital through black-market labor or otherwise undesirable work. Meanwhile, they and their children blended sounds from home with those that dominated Lima's soundscape, creating a distinctive musical culture identified with the figure of the cholo—the bold, self-confident migrant whose prosperity threatens to undo older structures of inequality.

Peruvian theorists long observed such developments with hopeful anticipation, reading the distinctive cultural practices and social mores of Lima's cholo neighborhoods for signs of a different, more just future. Amid a sustained economic boom that began after the 2000 ouster of authoritarian president Alberto Fujimori, the change

⁴² See Arturo Quispe Lázaro, "La Tecnocumbia: Integración o discriminación solapada?" *Revista Quehacer* 135 (2002): 103–113; José María Salcedo, "La misma chicha con distinto tecno," *Revista Quehacer* 125 (2000): 92–97.

⁴³ See Tucker, "From the World of the Poor."

seemed to arrive with a suddenness that is hard to explain.⁴⁴ Andean businesspeople, entertainers, and politicians moved to the center of public life, in tandem with rhetorics of inclusiveness and equality that contrasted starkly with the blunt racism of prior ages—all presided over by Peru's first modern president of Andean descent.⁴⁵ Witnessing and interpreting these developments, the tone of Peruvian scholarship changed markedly, too, moving from future-oriented hope for change to the task of interpreting and shepherding a revisionist nationality whose moment had arrived. They did so primarily by drawing on Anibal Quijano's pioneering writings on *cholificación*, or cognate theories, hailing urban cultural mixture as a source of nationality that skirted Peru's old ethnic binaries.⁴⁶

The dynamics of this new nationalist moment have had two effects that are relevant for my purposes here. The first is a wave of emotional and financial investment in the artifacts of cholo culture on the part of government actors, public intellectuals, and business interests—many of which are now run by and for cholo citizens themselves. Formerly treated as the aesthetically embarrassing detritus of a subaltern majority that was to be assimilated in the name of social progress, cholo music, food, and fashion were all absorbed into a new marketing apparatus. Elite chefs, designers, and students of haute couture seized on elements of cholo culture, selling “*novoandino*” cuisine, hipster t-shirts, and elegant hybrid handicrafts at elevated prices in Lima's tonier districts, all packaged with the message that their purchase was tantamount to an investment in social justice. A second effect, more pertinent for my purposes here, was registered in the realm of scholarly discourse, where social theorists zealously took on the challenge of thinking the relations between market, music, and *mestizaje*. Reading the greater availability of boundary-transgressing, hybrid products at all levels of society as evidence that Peru's citizenry was no longer invested in old hierarchies, these theorists heralded the dissolution of binaries that had set apart coast from interior, white from nonwhite, rich from poor, bifurcating Peru into parallel irreconcilable societies.

Chicha took an early, central role in scholarship on Peruvian *cholificación* due to its aptness as a symbol for the boundary-busting activities associated with the term.⁴⁷ However, the resonance between sonic practice and social progress is not nearly as simple as such triumphalist writings might indicate. Indeed, the form that the uptake

⁴⁴ Aside from the generalized loosening of public discourse that came after Fujimori's ouster, and the lifting of his firm control over Peru's press, one obvious and widely believed explanation has to do with businesses' desire to make money from the subalterns, who in that era were largely excluded from many of Peru's fields of consumption.

⁴⁵ The example usually cited to illustrate the atmosphere of the prior age is the long-running television program *Paisana Jacinta*, which featured a male actor playing the title character, an Andean migrant woman made ridiculous for her ugliness, stupidity, odor, and linguistic malapropism. After newly invigorated protests, which began in this post-2000 era, the show was finally canceled.

⁴⁶ Anibal Quijano, *Dominación y cultura: Lo cholo y el conflicto cultural en el Perú* (Lima: Mosca Azul Editores, 1980).

⁴⁷ The single greatest error that appears in Conan's liner notes for *Roots of Chicha* may be the entirely false assertion that “critics and intellectuals didn't write about it.”

of chicha took in this moment might be seen more properly as a corrective to the utopianism of Peru's new hybridity discourse tout court. Nationalist *choledad* creates its own exclusions and inclusions, reworking rather than destroying older hierarchies. Even as chicha music has been adopted as a national symbol, its scene has split into distinct factions, each typified by different structures of reception and bearing different social overtones—with the top of the scale dominated by the cosmopolitan tropes of experimentalism, psychedelia, and pan-Latin tropicality that *Roots of Chicha* unleashed on the world.

US DJ Jace Clayton picked up on this during a 2010 visit to Lima and later mused about the experience.⁴⁸ Seeking to convey the way Brooklyn's hipster scene was adapted by Peruvian elites, Clayton registered their fervent uptake of their compatriots' chicha music, in a form that was clearly mediated by Conan's compilation. Clayton argued, accurately, not only that "Peruvian hipsterism meant that the middle-class kids who looked down on cumbia all their lives were suddenly throwing parties and dancing to it" but also that "the marketing term invented by Barbès—'cumbias psicodélicas'—[had] entered into the Limeño hipster lexicon." Dismissing as "ungenerous" a local friend's suggestion that "these poor rich kids only value local culture when repackaged by other, cooler countries," Clayton nevertheless acknowledged that fans were clearly driven by "an awareness that this poorly dressed and deeply unhip aspect of their Peruvian-ness had entered into a global conversation."⁴⁹ These descriptors accurately convey the extent to which Lima's cosmopolitans inhabit the same formation as the patrons of Conan's Barbès club and the extent to which the sanction of that cosmopolitan formation outweighs lingering local prejudices against cholo culture. Clayton echoes, if faintly, the tenets of both techno-utopian world music discourse and Peru's cholo nationalist rhetoric. If nothing else, he suggests, this transnational redirection of aesthetic bigotry has brought a newly diversified sonic landscape to Peruvian elites; "the door is cracked open," one presumes, to future concrete forms of dialogue.⁵⁰

This moment has awoken many Peruvian citizens to perspectives and cultural currents that were long peripheralized in public discourse due to their hybrid and hence suspiciously "nonnational" tenor. In the realm of music alone, recent years have seen the promotion not only of chicha collections that surpass *Roots of Chicha* in their range and comprehensiveness but also of comparable historical collections devoted to Peruvian bugalú, psychedelic rock, Andean fusion, salsa, jazz, and beyond. Yet this moment has not augured the forging of truly inclusive nationality, for certain forms of cumbia have simply been privileged so as to reinforce old patterns of hierarchy. The popularization of chicha music tends simply to rework the binary of white-identified privilege and cholo subalternity by tying "psychedelic," experimental chicha to the former and relegating chicha's old guard to association with the latter. In this sense,

⁴⁸ Jace Clayton, "Vampires of Lima," in Mark Greif, Kathleen Ross, and Dayna Tortorici, eds., *What Was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation* (New York: n+1 Foundation, 2010), 24–30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

Clayton misses the mark when he chides a colleague's "ungenerous" reading of Lima's hipsters, for hipsterism functions here as little more than one more metropolitan idiom useful in refining subaltern practices into more palatable forms while dispensing with the presence and preferences of their creators.⁵¹ To critique the persistence of this pattern is not "ungenerous," it is to refuse to overlook a legacy of brutal colonization and routine cultural humiliation that continues to resonate in the gestures of the "vampires" he describes. The door may be cracked, but it is also stuck there, for the chicha that circulates in Lima's elite districts of Barranco, Miraflores, San Isidro, Surco, and La Molina consists overwhelmingly of the very tracks that *Roots of Chicha* unintentionally certified as suitable for elite consumption. In other words, this rather non-representative sampling of Peruvian cumbia, sold under a misnomer and associated with myriad historical inaccuracies, has taken precedence not only over the truth of the genre's story but also over possible patronage for the actually existing chicha artists who continue to perform in the cholo neighborhoods that abut these five districts.

This is not to say that older chicha stars, or their contemporary inheritors, have been absent from the nationalist conversations of the moment. Rather, it is to say that they tend to follow one of two paths, each of which underlines the extent to which chicha's bifurcation marks continuity, not rupture, with historic patterns of exclusion. In the first instance, chicha pioneers have been converted into saleable commodities via sanctifying narratives that reposition striving, petty-capitalist cholo musical artists as a symbol of a new national identity. The outstanding example is a 2006 television miniseries entitled *Chacalón: El ángel de los pobres*. If this miniseries did not kick off the chicha revalorization campaign, it certainly consolidated chicha's progress in Peru's public sphere. The series told the story of the eponymous figure once considered to embody chicha's connection to vice, violence, and aesthetic degradation by recasting him as a literal angel whose fundamental decency perdured even amid mischaracterization by Peru's powerful.⁵²

A second path that chicha took to public prominence is best illustrated via the figure of Tongo, who became an inescapable media icon after the unexpected success of his song "La pituca" (The Snobby Girl), which touched on social inequality.⁵³ Tongo would hardly have come to widespread attention in an age before Internet circulation made it safe for elites to consume chicha music outside its marginal venues of performance. With interest in the genre newly piqued, however, the overweight, decidedly unfashionable, and apparently unembarrassable Tongo found himself snidely lionized by a new sort of audience. Affecting to find his labored singing and dowdy

⁵¹ See de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos*; and Mendoza, *Shaping Society*.

⁵² As Víctor Vich has argued, this series and later copycats aim, first, to profit, by selling the lives of Peru's popular classes back to them in well-trodden melodramatic form, and second, to naturalize a bootstrapping message about grit and determination that saturates the public sphere of Peru, a country whose leading public intellectuals and organizations are deeply committed to such neoliberal principles. Víctor Vich, "Dina y Chacalón: El secuestro de la experiencia," *La Mirada del Telemo* 2 (2009), <http://revistas.pucp.edu.pe/index.php/lamiradadetelemo/article/view/3541/3421>, accessed March 7, 2017.

⁵³ He was declared one of Peru's most popular artists by leading newspaper *El Comercio* in 2010.

appearance legitimately fascinating, they made him into the kind of “star,” air quotes and all, that might be familiar to observers experienced in hipsterism’s mode of cynical “appreciation.” (In hipster “appreciation,” aesthetically degraded objects are made into objects of identification only so that a sense of critical distance can be maintained, as “fans” model an irony considered to be the only fit response to the commodified popular culture of hypercapitalism.)⁵⁴ Tongo hurled himself into the role, rerecording “La pituca” in comically poor English and becoming a regular on the television program of acid-tongued commentator Jaime Bayly, who insulted the singer to the amusement of viewers.⁵⁵

Of course, Tongo leveraged his ritual humiliation into a series of commercial opportunities, most notably an ad campaign for Telefónica, Peru’s then dominant communications company.⁵⁶ Chacalón’s music, largely inaudible in Lima’s public soundscape before the airing of his associated miniseries, saturated it the very day following the program’s premiere and has never since been absent.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it is difficult to connect such sonorous or tokenistic changes with more concrete forms of social dialogue and easy to show how they reify familiar ethnicized class differences. Chicha’s artists and audiences did not really get heard in the public sphere: rather, either they were ventriloquized by corporate enterprise as parables of nationalist sentiment or economic morality, or they acted as sponges for elite scorn. Lima’s elites may be listening to these artists’ music, but they are not listening alongside chicha’s lower-class audiences, in the poor and middle-income neighborhoods its stars hail from and in which they mainly perform. Instead, inevitably, these elites listen to the covers of white, upper-class musicians whose work inevitably involves fusing chicha with more metropolitan sounds.

The standard-bearer for the latter phenomenon is Bareto, a group that plays a blend of rock, chicha, and ska in topnotch Lima venues, rather than the open lots and cheap clubs that host traditional chicha stars. Such cross-class prestations have shaped popular aesthetics for so long that they are properly viewed as constitutive of popular music practice in general, but chicha musicians and fans unaware of such theoretical insights nevertheless revile the group. A quick survey of commentary and publicity materials might suggest reasons for such animadversion, but a single recent example may suffice. In the summer of 2013 the group toured the United States, touting its performances with a press release titled “Bareto: El grupo que revoluciona

⁵⁴ See Mark Greif, “Epitaph for the White Hipster,” in Greif et al., *What Was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation*, 136–167.

⁵⁵ Tongo and Bayly are widely reported to be friends, and the assertion seems to be true, suggesting perhaps that the antagonism of the program is part of an act. Still, there is little doubt that Bayly’s characterization of Tongo’s “rat face” and other barbs elicit laughs because they are humiliating for the migrant artist.

⁵⁶ The humiliation continued here, however, as Tongo was presented in various ridiculous guises, including the dress and makeup of Disney’s Snow White. The campaign, “Chau chinita,” revolved around the phasing out of the 50-céntimo public phone charge—“chinita” being a slang term for Peru’s 50-céntimo coin.

⁵⁷ In fact, though Conan did not agree when I proposed it to him, I strongly suspect that his hearing of chicha on Peru’s streets came about in the wake of this phenomenon.

la cumbia en Perú arranca su gira de verano por ocho ciudades de USA” (The Group That’s Revolutionizing Cumbia in Peru Begins Its Summer Tour of Eight US Cities).⁵⁸ Not content to credit the group with a dubious vanguardist status, the release went on to characterize Bareto’s method in terms that could just as well have described the work of the artists whose work they ostensibly revolutionized, noting the group’s intention to “reinterpret and recuperate the principles of Peruvian popular music, especially *cumbia selvática* with influences of psychedelic rock, and mix them with other Latin rhythms like Jamaican reggae and ska, son, and merengue.” The release further misrepresented musical history by arguing that Bareto’s special contribution was the pairing of cumbia “with lyrics touching on social and urban issues”—a procedure that typified the chicha music of Andean migrant artists like Los Shapis and Chacalón himself.

This, then, is a point at which utopian discourses of productive hybridity and cross-class dialogue come up against the persistent inequalities that structure lives outside musical consumption. When old guard chicha artists find their careers framed by imperatives to mythification or humiliation, and while elite audiences take their cumbia cues from North American or fellow elite cumbia efforts versed in cosmopolitan experimentalist discourse, then it seems clear that the touted nationalist reconciliation through hybridity has some shortcomings. Nobody gave me a more cogent illustration of this situation than Conan himself, who witnessed the effects on a triumphal 2011 visit to Lima. Chicha Libre played a renowned jazz, world music, and New Age club identified with the city’s bohemian bourgeois community, but shortly after the tour one band member told me instead about being dropped into a situation of what he called “class warfare.” Visiting radio stations to promote the show and to speak of their own appreciation for chicha, the band faced calls from irate listeners who dismissed them as yet another group of cultural pirates. They found a different kind of evidence for imperfect musical dialogue between different social sectors at the very venue where they were to play. Conan, whose chicha fandom was never restricted to Amazonian cumbia variants, had sincerely wanted to perform alongside Los Shapis, the most beloved and emblematic of chicha’s living artists. (Conan described them to me as “Peru’s Beatles.”) Apparently horrified at the ramifications of accommodating these subaltern heroes in their tony venue, the club management flatly refused. Undeterred, Conan arranged for the duo to sneak into the venue and join them unannounced. A victory, perhaps, but such subterfuge suggests not only the stubborn persistence of the social and aesthetic binaries that organize Peruvian society but also the direct role Lima’s much-vaunted cumbia scene can play in maintaining, rather than challenging, those divisions.

⁵⁸ Press release, July 2, 2013, from Bareto’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/bareto-el-grupo-que-revoluciona-la-cumbia-en-per%C3%BA-arranca-su-gira-de-verano-por-/10151750729728792>, accessed March 29, 2016.

THIRD TAKE: THE ESSENTIALISM OF EUROPEAN ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

I spoke with Conan and other members of Chicha Libre in Madrid, and the circumstances of that meeting make an appropriate coda, insofar as they provided another, more explicit angle on the discrepant local instantiation of techno-utopian hybridity. On June 30, 2011, while conducting one of several summers' worth of fieldwork among Peruvian immigrants in Spain, I attended a performance by the band as part of a festival at the city's Casa de América. Billed as Madrid's premiere center for promoting relationships with Latin America—or, in typical Spanish parlance, "Iberoamérica"—the Casa de América was completely unknown to my working-class immigrant acquaintances. Housed in an opulent nineteenth-century mansion near the city's wealthy Salamanca neighborhood, the Casa de América tended to host conferences, exhibitions, and lectures by leading Latin American artists and intellectuals. Self-consciously highbrow, it rarely if ever catered to the distinct interests of the city's overwhelmingly working-class Latino public, aiming instead to foster dialogue between the intellectual elite of the peninsular country and its former colonies.

It is also safe to say that programming at the Casa de América departed from and helped to sustain an antiessentialist ideology of culture and ethnicity that is fundamental to contemporary Spanish life.⁵⁹ Spanish models for treating cultural diversity follow the perhaps more familiar French approach, wherein the very recognition of ethnic identity is treated as a form of "affirmative exclusion" that is hardly distinguishable from chauvinism—as a threat to a political order founded on the sovereign individual as the proper bearer of rights.⁶⁰ In Spain, such principles are further inflected by a rejection of the folkloric nationalism that characterized Franco's regime; post-Francoist fears about breakaway Basque and Catalan linguistic minorities, whose ideologues use ethnicized difference to justify political independence; and a more generalized commitment to "Europeanism," construed largely in terms of a "constitutional patriot" civic apparatus that makes citizenship and belonging into matters of fealty to a framework of laws and principles rather than "tribal" loyalties.⁶¹

The result is that everyday Spanish interactions, and certainly government policy, tend to be characterized by vigilance regarding ethnic difference and the routine interrogation of actions or statements that might be taken as evidence of a belief in ethnic identity. In my work with Peruvian migrants, which dealt largely with the notion of "Latino" identity in the peninsular country, I regularly found myself nearly unable to communicate with Spanish citizens on the topic. Fully versed in the ideology of ethnic invisibility, they tended to reject categories such as "immigrant" or "Latino"—relatively

⁵⁹ This, too, is a complicated matter that I have treated more extensively elsewhere. See Joshua Tucker, "Sounding the Latin Transatlantic: Music, Integration, and Ambivalent Ethnogenesis in Spain," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 4 (2014): 902–933.

⁶⁰ Jean-Loup Amselle, *Affirmative Exclusion: Cultural Pluralism and the Rule of Custom in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁶¹ For a fuller account see Sebastian Balfour and Alejandro Quiroga, *The Reinvention of Spain: Nation and Identity since Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

uncontroversial for someone versed in North American identity discourse—as quasi-ethnic distinctions rooted in forms of difference that were supposed to remain invisible to Spanish law. Agents at government-run agencies catering to immigrant communities made it clear to me that they specifically avoided the reinforcement of cultural identity, seeking instead to bring potentially “tribal” immigrants to the same color- and culture-blind place that Spanish citizens supposedly inhabited. Little of this rang true to my working-class Andean friends, who constantly experienced the discriminatory effects of their difference and had no illusions about Spain’s achievement of color blindness; nor were such attitudes universally disseminated among Spaniards, who are no more naïve than the citizens of other countries. Nevertheless, these attitudes had, and continue to have, a powerful effect on Spanish policy, programming, and public discourse.

Musical activity does not stand apart from this ideological structure, nor do the writings of Spanish cultural theorists who write on the subject.⁶² I spent many hours in migrant *peñas* consuming huayno, cumbia, and *vals* alongside joyously nostalgic Peruvian friends, and I often found that Spanish activists connected with Latin American communities resisted music heavily marked as “folkloric,” on the premise that it was one vector for maintaining an intolerable Otherness. The Casa de América is no exception to this rule. Aside from a parade including some of the city’s numerous Latin American folkloric dance troupes, during my summers in Madrid the musical programming at Casa de América was overwhelmingly focused on such popular artists as Brazilian Adriana Calcanhotto or Mexican Lila Downs, performers whose intellectual bona fides render them palatable to cognoscenti, if rather irrelevant to most of Madrid’s working-class immigrants.

This is not, of course, to argue that such an institution bears any obligation to present folkloric music, to cater to audiences who like it, or to refrain from raising the tone of Madrid’s sonorous life with innovative performances. It does, however, help to place an ideological frame around the event, titled “Chicotrópico,” at which Chicha Libre appeared and to account for the audience who attended their performance. The event was subtitled “Encuentro de experimentos tropicales,” a phrase that evokes—whether inadvertently or by design—both the spirit and the content of Latin America’s most famous experimental musical movement. The programming, too, was clearly shaped by the sorts of expectations that the dominance of Brazilian pop and of Tropicália in particular has naturalized among a certain international audience for Latin American music. It featured artists from across the hemisphere, performing a productively bewildering combination of musical styles, ranging from the avant-garde electro-Andean-cum-dubstep-and-cumbia fusions of Argentinean trio Tremor—affiliates of the renowned ZZK collective—to the eight-bit dance music of Guatemalan performer Meneo, created live on a repurposed Nintendo Gameboy. The program was designed to challenge stereotypical expectations about what Latin America sounds

⁶² See, for instance, Josep Martí, ed., *Fiesta y ciudad: Pluriculturalidad e integración* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2008).

like—expectations that might, by contrast, be fulfilled in any of the salsa, bachata, or Andean folklore peñas that cater to Madrid’s Latin American immigrant community. Unsurprisingly, though, this was not who showed up for the performance. While I did no formal survey, an informal take based on visual observation and attention to spoken accents suggested that the audience was overwhelmingly composed of Spanish hipsters, attired in precisely the same manner as the patrons of Chicha Libre’s weekly shows in Brooklyn. Indeed, the band closed the festival’s first, Friday night show with an outstanding and energetic performance that was ecstatically received by the crowd, ending with a psychedelic cumbia version of The Clash’s “Guns of Brixton” that blew the roof off the genteel establishment.

Some time after the concert I arranged to meet its organizer, Bruno Galindo, to inquire about his motivations and artistic choices. In a quick conversation between trains at Madrid’s Atocha station, he seamlessly combined elements of Spanish anti-essentialist politics and techno-utopian hybridity discourse in a way that once again suggests the congruence between ideologies otherwise located in different places and different parts of the social spectrum. He had wanted, he said, to avoid a stale folklorism that tended to frame the presentation of musicians from the continent, to show a current of Latin American experimentalism that, to quote the festival’s publicity materials, “shattered expectations and broke clichés.”⁶³ Of course, Chicha Libre was a perfect demonstration of the kind of experimentalism he had in mind—and indeed the festival’s name was later updated, by way of *Roots of Chicha*, to “Encuentro de experimentos tropicales y psicodélica latinoamericana” (emphasis added). What Galindo and his coorganizers may have refrained from asking was what kinds of irony might be involved in inviting a Brooklyn-based band composed almost entirely of French and American performers to educate Spaniards in the value of an experimental hybridity with the potential to liberate Latin Americans from stereotypes; or what Madrid’s many working-class migrants, devoted to “tribal” identities and the “clichéd” musics that are contentiously associated with them, were listening to in packed weekend clubs far outside the city’s wealthy urban core.

CONCLUSION

For scholars interested in the health of the relationship between sound and society, or experimental music and social justice, hybridity and its cognates cannot be casually invoked as palliatives for older, colonialist discursive frames that have been found wanting. The empire does indeed strike back, and as indigenous activists and scholar allies have long known, hybridity discourse is one of its preferred tools, for its boundary-challenging rhetoric is useful in denying local cultural specificities and hence the very existence of the ethnic basis on which populations have been and

⁶³ Chico-Trópico, “Qué es Chico-Trópico,” <http://chicotropico.com/que-es-chico-tropico/>, accessed March 29, 2016.

continue to be oppressed.⁶⁴ Much of contemporary Peruvian political and cultural life is structured by a denial of indigeneity that proceeds in this mode, dismissing claims that link indigenous difference to political rights as a form of discredited “indigenism” dead to all but the proponents of an exhausted multiculturalism.⁶⁵ The new, cross-class prominence of *chicha* is regularly deployed not only to demonstrate a new national mood but also to suggest the falsity of the boundaries between Andes and coast, white and indigenous, that have been so clearly drawn in past literatures and lived experience. In this light, Alfaro’s tone-neutral comment that Lima’s *cholos* sought national integration and “stopped calling themselves indigenous to call themselves peasants, *cholos*, *provincianos* or *mestizos*,” comes close to the line where hybridity meets domination. Alfaro does so by mystifying the nature of the “choice” that *cholos* have routinely made—in which the cultural humiliation and economic marginality that accrue to Indian identities are pitted against the social recognition and upward mobility that accrue to their abandonment.⁶⁶

For scholars of hybridity who are truly invested in social justice, the task would seem to be that of treating hybridity and experimentalism not as utopian panaceas but as relativizing tools, useful for tracing evolving relations between difference and sameness. This act, in turn, would demand attention to the redrawn boundaries that inevitably become erected in the process. To say that hybridity is a constant and that every generation creates new possibilities and forms of disempowerment is only to beg new questions. Why should scholars fail to specify hybridities and their effects in real life? When it comes to cases like Peruvian *cumbia* and its ties to a mendaciously liberatory model of nationalist *mestizaje*, should we, like Clayton, deliver a casual “can’t hate on that” and move blithely on to celebrate the greater sonorous freedom enjoyed by elites, when it is won at the expense of subaltern dignity and recognition? Or should we register comment—even protest?⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See Charles R. Hale, “Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (2002): 485–524; and Kay Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁶⁵ A very cogent early outline of this position can be found in *La utopía arcaica*, a critical work by Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa—not coincidentally, a longtime expatriate who resides in Madrid and regularly used his weekly column in the city’s newspaper *El País* to excoriate Catalán separatists and indigenous Latin American leaders alike. See Mario Vargas Llosa, *La utopía arcaica: José María Arguedas y las ficciones del indigenismo* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996). See also Ramón Pajuelo Torres, *Reinventando comunidades imaginadas: Movimientos indígenas, nación y procesos sociopolíticos en los países centroandinos* (Lima: IEP, 2007); and Rosemary Thorp and Maritza Díaz, *Ethnicity and the Persistence of Inequality: The Case of Peru* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁶⁶ Santiago Alfaro Rotondo, “El lugar de las industrias culturales en las políticas públicas,” in *Políticas culturales: ensayos críticos*, ed. Víctor Vich (Lima: IEP, 2006), 160.

⁶⁷ Clayton, “Vampires of Lima,” 27.

6

EXPERIMENTALISM AS ESTRANGEMENT

Café Tacvba's *Revés/Yosoy*

Alejandro L. Madrid and Pepe Rojo

ANNIVERSARIES ALLOW US to indulge in nostalgia. Their celebration grants us permission to revel emotionally in the content that is produced when we look at our past, intuitively select moments from it, and make sense out of them according to the specific coordinates of our present. These annual celebrations are occasions to select from our story the moments that more closely resonate with the ways we want our past to be meaningful; as such, they are moments of invention and reinvention. In 2009, the Mexican rock band Café Tacvba celebrated its twentieth anniversary by playing a tour titled “20-20” (20 years–20 cities) and reediting their 1999 double album *Revés/Yosoy*. Many bands would try to capitalize on their audience’s nostalgia by producing greatest hits albums, but Café Tacvba decided to take the reissue of a ten-year-old cult CD as a central aspect of their commemoration. Four years later, in 2013, when preparing the celebration of their upcoming twenty-fifth anniversary, the band presented its newest album, *El objeto antes llamado disco* (2012) in a concert in Tijuana in which the musicians avoided playing their most popular hits, instead devoting a large portion of the program to tracks and songs from *Revés/Yosoy*. Tijuana music reporter Roberto Partida Sandoval described the event as an “experimental and difficult to digest concert [in which] the quartet revised their most introspective repertory.”¹

We suggest that Café Tacvba’s continuous return to *Revés/Yosoy*—an album that has been described indistinctly as a “disco de mierda” (piece of shit CD) and an “obra

¹ Roberto Partida Sandoval, “Café Tacvba, dimensionados,” *Zeta*, June 21, 2013, <http://zetatijuana.com/noticias/espectaculoz/14418/cafe-tacvba-dimensionados>, accessed June 17, 2005.

de arte mal entendida” (misunderstood work of art)²—at key celebratory moments in the band’s career is no accident but a symptom of these musicians’ desires and artistic aspirations. The band’s return to this album is also an indication of the importance that the strategies of estrangement have had in the shaping of their individual and collective public personae. In this essay, we propose a thick description of the album in light of the notion of estrangement in order to explore the ways Café Tacvba’s sonic and stylistic experimentation in *Revés/Yosoy* reverses the audiences’ listening experience and forces them to hear familiar sounds from the inverted perspective of the Other.

Estrangement is conventionally understood as alienation, disaffection, split, or schism.³ In literary theory, the concept was first used by the Russian formalists, especially Viktor Shklovsky, who developed the term *ostranenie* (estrangement) in order to account for the process by which Russian prose writers remove their material from the sphere of automatized perception. For Shklovsky, the goal of art was to lead to knowledge through active perception rather than recognition. He argued that reiteration of perception makes objects recognizable; one gets used to these objects and perceives them automatically rather than actively. Shklovsky suggests that for objects to retain their aesthetic power they need to be estranged and complicated in order to “make perception long and laborious.”⁴ Although Shklovsky’s work has been influential in literary studies and science fiction, it has not yet found a place in music or sound studies. Engaging Shklovsky’s work allows us to argue that Café Tacvba, by transforming and decontextualizing sounds and musical styles that mainstream audiences connect to specific traditional practices, allows listeners to discover new possibilities in everyday sounds, thus negotiating innovative aesthetic horizons.

The notion of estrangement is also illuminating in exploring the subversive character of *Revés/Yosoy* as an artifact generated within globalized marketing networks and the changing local Mexican music industry. In order to achieve commercial success, familiarity and the fulfillment of sonic expectations, and even stereotypes, are essential to neoliberal globalized music market strategies. Café Tacvba’s *Revés/Yosoy* estrangement tactics can be understood as a direct and playful attack on these notions; it makes something unexpected out of the sounds that late capitalist advertising strategies require from a Mexican band in order to succeed in a market that both emphasizes and tames Otherness for the benefit of global audiences. Earlier albums by the band dealt with these expectations in more ludic ways, making the sounds of anticipation into nostalgic or kitsch experiences (“María” from *Café Tacvba* [1992], “La ingrata” from *Re* [1994], or “Ojalá que llueva café” from *Avalancha de éxitos* [1996]). *Revés/Yosoy* takes these ideas several steps further. Its subversive character

² See the reviews at the CD’s Amazon page, http://www.amazon.com/Reves-Yosoy-Caf%C3%A9-Tacuba/dp/B00000JMBW/ref=sr_1_37?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1434604734&sr=1-37&refinements=p_32%3ACafe+Tacuba, accessed June 17, 2005.

³ *Merriam-Webster*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/estrangement>, accessed May 10, 2014.

⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* (1929), trans. Benjamin Sher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 6.

lies in the way it challenges the levels of expectation that the global entertainment industry placed on a band that was a successful icon of the Rock en tu Idioma or Rock en Español marketing strategy.⁵

FROM CIUDAD SATÉLITE TO TELEVISIA

In 1989, Rubén Albarrán (vocals and rhythm guitar), Joselo Rangel (vocals and lead guitar), Enrique “Quique” Rangel (vocals and bass), and Ivo Ezeta (drums)—who had met while studying graphic and industrial design at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco—formed a band called Alicia Ya No Vive Aquí (Alicia Doesn’t Live Here Anymore).⁶ Under the influence of British alternative groups like The Clash, The Cure, or The Smiths, the band started rehearsing and making music in a garage in Ciudad Satélite, their upper-middle-class neighborhood in the northern suburbs of Mexico City. The band soon went through important changes: Ezeta was replaced by Emmanuel “Meme” del Real (keyboards, programming, vocals); the musicians decided to sing only in Spanish; they changed their name to Café Tacvba;⁷ and they started playing the underground circuit in Mexico City—including iconic clubs, bars, and *antros* (joints) like El Hijo del Cuervo, El 9, LUCC, Rockotitlán, and El Tutti Frutti.⁸ In this new incarnation, the band started developing a loyal alternative fan base in Mexico City that cherished its brash, unconventional, punk-like sound. (Joselo Rangel’s take was that such sound was the result of involuntary harmonic dissonances between him and Meme del Real, a consequence of not having formal musical training.)⁹ Café Tacvba was one of the many bands that came out of Ciudad Satélite in the pre-NAFTA moment of the late 1980s. The band’s underground success, however, went beyond the boundaries of the small music circuit of this suburb—bootleg cassettes from their concerts were sought after at underground music markets like Mexico City’s iconic El Chopo—and made them the emblem of that particular musical generation. This success quickly caught the attention of Argentinean producer Gustavo Santaolalla, one of the artistic talents behind Rock en Español, the mainstream strategy to capitalize on the growing underground rock scenes not only in Mexico but all

⁵ Rock en Español was a strategy of Ibero-American labels to take commercial advantage of the different underground rock scenes throughout Latin America and Spain by exposing bands to mainstream distribution networks. Rock en tu Idioma was Mexico’s response to this idea, a marketing campaign started by BMG-Ariola and supported by the powerful TV network Televisa in 1986; it gave alternative Mexican rock bands unprecedented access to mainstream mass media.

⁶ Joselo, “Believer,” *Excelsior*, November 9, 2012, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/opinion/2012/11/09/joselo/868842>, accessed June 24, 2015. The name of the band was a tribute to Martin Scorsese’s cult film *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974).

⁷ Café Tacuba is the name of a traditional restaurant in downtown Mexico City. The band’s name is intentionally misspelled (with a *v* instead of a *u*) in order to avoid copyright infringement.

⁸ Laura Martínez Hernández, *Música y cultura alternativa: Hacia un perfil de la cultura del rock mexicano de finales del siglo XX* (Puebla, Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla, 2013), 174.

⁹ Joselo Rangel, email to the authors, June 16, 2015.

over Latin America. On Santaolalla's recommendation, the band was signed by Warner Music in 1990.¹⁰

Joselo himself acknowledges that working with Santaolalla meant polishing Café Tacvba's original harsh sound: "When we recorded with Gustavo Santaolalla, [our] direct, rough, and even punk sound changed a lot, it became softer. Gustavo arranged the dissonances between the chords I was playing and those Emmanuel was playing, and that changed everything."¹¹ Although the band's first commercial CD, *Café Tacvba*, was a success that sold over forty thousand copies in two weeks and eventually earned the band a Double Gold Record,¹² the new sound was a disappointment for many of their early underground followers. Many of them accused the musicians of selling out after the band began appearing in mainstream forums—especially those of Televisa, the powerful private TV network, which was akin to the devil for many underground fans. Joselo explains that playing the network's TV shows was "a way of opening up for us, we wanted people to know what we were doing . . . [We did not want] to hide but the opposite. We thought that the music was exactly the same and what changed was only the medium. We were able to reach places that we never could have otherwise."¹³ Nevertheless, underground fans had made up their minds, and the term *televisos* became a popular way to dismiss Café Tacvba and other bands and musicians who benefited from the Rock en Español networks. Regardless of these setbacks, their commercial success brought Café Tacvba a new international fan base, especially after the releases of their subsequent albums, *Re* and *Avalancha de éxitos*, which achieved great success in Latin America, notwithstanding their initial cold reception in Mexico.

In the mid-1990s, Café Tacvba was one of the most promising up-and-coming Latin American acts. Their third album, *Avalancha de éxitos*, their first recording to appear on Billboard charts (reaching number 12 on the Latin pop charts), presented a collection of covers that propelled them into enormous popularity throughout the Americas. The album epitomized the kitschy character of the band's musical style, which freely mixed ska, bolero, heavy metal, ranchera, hip-hop, *balada*, punk, *huapango*, and electronic idioms. But instead of following this production with an album that repeated the formula of their earlier success, Café Tacvba presented their label with a record of highly experimental music for a commercial band promoted as "Rock en Español," the transnational marketing strategy that had paved the way for their commercial success. The album, *Revés*, was a collection of instrumental tracks that took familiar sounds from a variety of musical styles, transformed them, and recontextualized them away from their traditional forms. The

¹⁰ Joselo, "Santaolalla," *Excelsior*, August 19, 2011, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/opinion/2011/08/19/joselo/701935>, accessed June 24, 2015.

¹¹ Rangel, email to the authors.

¹² Martínez Hernández, *Música y cultura alternativa*, 174. The Double Gold Record is a certification given by the Recording Industry Association of America to albums selling over 150,000 copies.

¹³ Rangel, email to the authors.

band avoided identifying these tracks with standard titles, referring to them by numbers, letters, or even grammatical symbols. The result was a highly unconventional album whose strange sonic and visual materials defied Warner's marketing channels and Rock en Español. "The record company was in shock," Joselo later related; "they couldn't understand anything. They were waiting for the lyrics to start, and they never did."¹⁴ The executives at Warner cut a deal with the members of the band, allowing the recording to be distributed only as part of a double feature that included also *Yosoy*, a second album that conformed to the song conventions typical of the songs on their first three albums, written before the release of *Avalancha de éxitos* but recorded after *Revés*.¹⁵

Released in 1999, *Revés/Yosoy* flopped, and Warner dropped the band.¹⁶ Despite thin critical praise and poor sales, the album did win a Latin Grammy for Best Rock Album and quickly became a cult object for hardcore Latin rock fans. Regardless of the album's inability to reach out to a large audience, it did strike a special chord among rock critics and specialists who were waiting for a rock album by a Latin American band that would also be an artistic statement, a validation of sorts of their music as "high art."¹⁷ Its conceptual character allowed Café Tacvba to acquire an artistic aura that transcended their status as Latin pop stars. For some fans of Rock en Español the experimental sounds of *Revés/Yosoy* were revolutionary, oozed "a mixture of spontaneity and inventiveness that is rarely seen," and "redefined where pop music's potential really lies."¹⁸ Thus, the commercial inception of *Revés/Yosoy* became a key moment in Café Tacvba's story. It expanded their scope and credibility precisely because by embracing experimentation (and the possibility of failure it implies), the band showed its willingness to gamble in order to achieve the type of cosmopolitan artistic distinction to which they aspired. Ironically, by being less themselves in *Revés/Yosoy*, they were able to become *more* themselves.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Credit here should be given to Gustavo Santaolalla, who proposed making an album of covers in 1996 (*Avalancha de éxitos*) because the songs that would later form the 1999 album *Yosoy* still needed a lot of work. Joselo says "it was probably Santaolalla who proposed digging those songs out of the attic where they would probably have been forgotten . . . Gustavo is a producer who knows how to mediate between a band and a record company, he's really good at giving the latter what they need (radio hits and good records) and getting the best out of a band." Ibid.

¹⁶ Years later, Warner returned the *Revés* master tapes to the band, a "highly unusual case in the recording industry." Thereafter, a clause was included in Café Tacvba's contracts to ensure that "esoteric albums, referring particularly to weird albums like *Revés*, would not count as part of the band's contract albums." Ibid.

¹⁷ Several fans have compared the artistic and conceptual character of *Revés/Yosoy* to The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and the aesthetic merit of David Bowie's *Low* (1977). See the reviews and customer comments at Amazon and 89decibels.com: <http://www.amazon.com/Reves-Yosoy-Caf%C3%A9-Tacuba/dp/B00000JMBW>, accessed July 16, 2015; and <http://www.89decibels.com/resenas/cafe-tacvba-reves-yosoy>, accessed July 16, 2015.

¹⁸ Costumer reviews in the CD's Amazon page, http://www.amazon.com/Reves-Yosoy-Caf%C3%A9-Tacuba/dp/B00000JMBW/ref=cm_rdp_product, accessed January 9, 2016.

Working in the studio to record *Revés* was a new experience for the band. Their previous albums had been produced following conventional strategies. That is, the band composed the songs, recorded demos of them, brought the demos to Warner, and only went into the studio to record the final product after receiving their go-ahead (and all of these steps happened under the musical supervision of their producer, Gustavo Santaolalla). *Revés* started as a similar endeavor. The *tacubos*, as the members of the band are known, rented a house in Naucalpan, in the El Mirador neighborhood, near Ciudad Satélite, and went into it with the idea of recording the demos for the label. However, their musical approach was different from previous projects; it was imbued with a sense of experimentalism from the very beginning. They started by building the studio from the bottom up: “We did it all ourselves, we covered the walls with egg cartons and foam padding. We carpeted [the floors] and laid out the cables. We bought the ADATs [Alesis Digital Audio Tapes].”¹⁹ This time, they did not have actual songs, or even outlines of songs, when they entered the studio. Instead, they went in with the idea of experimenting with new technologies and improvising; each band member intended to play instruments on which he was not proficient. As Joselo remembers, there were also instances of chance that determined the sonic aesthetic trajectory of the album: “At that time, I did not use any guitar pedals, so I bought some, choosing them based on their colors. A silver one, a purple one and a green one. They turned out to be a Fuzz, a Flanger and a Phaser.”²⁰ As the musicians acknowledge, they “allowed everything, including the composition, to arise there,”²¹ in the studio, as part of their collective experimentation.

One of the most important aspects of these recording sessions was the fact that Rubén Albarrán decided not to sing. As Quique and Joselo explain, with this attitude they wanted to become a sort of antiband: “If the singer does not sing, does he exist? If the keyboard player does not play the piano, does he exist? If the bass player does not play the bass, does he exist? If the guitarist does not play the guitar, does he exist?”²² Since they did not record in an actual studio but rather at a house they had arranged as a studio, without sound engineers or producers of any kind, most of the technical problems during the recording sessions and the production of the demos were solved by the musicians themselves. The seemingly anarchist attitude of the *tacubos* slowly generated an interesting musical product, and one that questioned their identity as a rock band: an instrumental album. The uniqueness of the process of recording and

¹⁹ Rangel, email to the authors. Alesis Digital Audio Tape is a recording system that allows for the recording of eight digital audio tracks. It was first available in 1992 and is considered responsible for the increase of home studios in that decade.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Joselo Rangel quoted in Germán Arascaeta, “Café Tacvba: Ya no hay barreras por romper, se rompieron todas,” *Vos*, October 31, 2013, <http://vos.lavoz.com.ar/pop/rock/cafe-tacvba-ya-no-hay-barreras-romper-se-rompieron-todas>, accessed June 24, 2015.

²² Joselo and Quique Rangel quoted in Martínez Hernández, *Música y cultura alternativa*, 177.

the improvisatory character of the sessions generated a problem when they brought the demos to Santaolalla and Anibal Kerpel. After listening to the tapes, the producers decided that it would make no sense trying to re-create the pieces again in a studio; the tracks could not come out as they did in the demos. Therefore, what the musicians had envisioned as preliminary sessions became the actual recording sessions, and the demos became—with a few adjustments and a proper mix—the masters for their new album.

CREATING OBJECTS

One of the most peculiar characteristics of Café Tacvba is their stability as a group. Their ability to maintain a lineup is rare in the music business, especially when a band is commercially and critically successful, as they have been for the last twenty-five years. “Every time we start a new project,” says Joselo, “we look for different ways to work and see what we can come up with.”²³ When Café Tacvba stepped out of the studio, they hadn’t thought about releasing a conceptual double album. Ending up with *Revés/Yosoy* was the result of a process in which extramusical issues became central to dealing with the record company’s demands and desires. Santaolalla’s suggestion of making a double album was used as a tactic to further Café Tacvba’s musical exploration of reflective structures (that is, estranged translational and rotational symmetries as well as quasi-symmetrical structures, sometimes including palindromic structures) through extramusical strategies and allowed the band to think of the double album as a single object. Professional training in graphic and industrial design as well as industrial engineering among the members of Café Tacvba played an important role in the creation of the conceptual album. The musicians were used to making, designing, and producing objects.

The development of the concept album as a musical artifact belongs to the second part of the twentieth century; it is a modernist attempt to deal with a modern condition that could be defined as “objectivity.” “The concept of an aesthetic object as an *object*,” writes Lev Manovich, “that is, a self-contained structure limited in space and/or time, is fundamental to all modern thinking about aesthetics.”²⁴ The record, as a modern object with clear boundaries and limits, creates its own inside, which in the case of the conceptual album can become more than a collection of songs (or potential singles), developing instead into a thematically unified and understood (or heard) exploration of a particular subject. The conceptual album is a musical discourse made up of several smaller enunciations, or tracks.

Revés/Yosoy was produced at a time when record companies had complete negotiating power and control over the shaping of albums as objects. Just before the electronic distribution of music changed the playing field, labels were in charge not only

²³ Rangel, email to the authors.

²⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 163.

of producing records but also of manufacturing the actual album and then promoting, regulating, and distributing it. The changes brought by digital communication also affected the way we understood these objects. What was once a closed object expanded its boundaries, allowing for what Walter Benjamin identified as the shifting of the object's aura from its process of production to its consumption and reception.²⁵ *Revés/Yosoy* is also an exploration of the possibilities this particular object, the album, afforded at its apex within a still robust music industry,²⁶ just before MP3s, digital music file-sharing, and the development of the iPod slowly turned the CD—as the incarnation of the album—into an obsolete object by the beginning of the twenty-first century.²⁷ The physical nature of an album privileges a linear reading/listening; that is, one hears the record from start to finish. The “shuffle” function in today's iPod is a good example of how digital media are able to estrange this teleology.²⁸

In *Revés/Yosoy*, the notion of “preferred” reading is made difficult by the fact that it is a double album and one does not even know where to start; which album comes first in an ideal listening teleology? In a sense, the reflective structure of the double album creates a circular dynamic between its constituting individual albums that disregards a linear reading from the outset. The estranged symmetry between *Revés* and *Yosoy* creates multiple possibilities: it drops us into a never-ending loop, a form in which the point of entry is unimportant. Furthermore, the palindromic title of *Yosoy* enhances the possibility of unusual listening strategies for the albums, disregarding their formal beginnings or ends. The nature of this particular double feature creates a series of loops and connections that allow for novel nonlinear readings/listenings, while at the same time its nature as an object also enables the possibility of traditional linear readings. In the case of songs from *Yosoy* such as “Árboles frutales” (Fruit Trees) and “Bicicleta” (Bicycle), the multiple tracks each song is divided into (thirteen and twenty-six tracks, respectively) encourage a linear listening. Furthermore, with the exception of the last

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1970), 220–227.

²⁶ Other Latin American rock bands also took advantage of the music industry's commercial peak in the 1990s to produce albums that have been construed or perceived as experimental, among them Fobia's *Leche* (1993), Divididos' *Otro le travaladna* (1995), La Ley's *Vértigo* (1998), and Los Fabulosos Cadillacs' *La marcha del golazo solitario* (1999).

²⁷ The launch of file-sharing at the end of the 1990s marked the beginning of the CD's decline. The introduction of the iPod in 2001, which enabled the portability of MP3 files, made the CD an obsolete technology. See Dorian Lynskey, “How the Compact Disc Lost Its Shine,” *Guardian*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/may/28/how-the-compact-disc-lost-its-shine>, accessed January 10, 2016. For a more comprehensive history of the commercial trajectory of recording technology see Greg Milner, *Perfecting Sound Forever: The Story of Recorded Music* (London: Granta Books, 2009). For a more nuanced critique of the discourse about fidelity as the final goal in the development of sound reproduction technology see Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

²⁸ CD technology had already made shuffle listening possible back in the 1990s, when the album was produced. For an in-depth study of the aesthetic consequences implicit in the kind of listening strategies allowed by the iPod see Arved Ashby, *Absolute Music, Mechanical Reproduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 162–193.

track, which lasts twenty-four seconds, the tracks are very brief—six to seven seconds long in “Bicicleta” and seventeen to eighteen seconds long in “Árboles frutales”—and often begin or end in the middles of words; listening in shuffle mode would make such songs’ melodic and harmonic motion, as well as its lyrics, plainly incomprehensible. However, the shuffle mode could provide the listener with an experimental experience of sorts that might not have been contemplated by the band at the moment of designing and producing the album; shuffle mode could provide a moment of estrangement that made the song anew, regardless of its unintelligibility as a more traditional object. One may argue that as such, *Revés/Yosoy* offers the best of both worlds.²⁹

According to Manovich, the reflective loop, the mirror-like structure, characterizes the “new temporality”³⁰ of digital media; the basic shape of the loop forms the basis for “a new narrative form appropriate for the computer age.”³¹ But “the loop and the sequential progression do not have to be considered mutually exclusive.” Indeed, Manovich’s argument is that “a computer program progresses from start to end by executing a series of loops.”³² These loops, when fed into a computer recording device, become objects, and these objects can in turn be manipulated and rearranged. The reliance on loops and samples when composing the songs in *Revés* emphasizes the preeminence of these technological possibilities. Within this framework, we can think of the ADATs with which Café Tacvba recorded *Revés* as a form of hybrid technology, a bridge between analog and digital recording.

A particular case is the track titled “10” in *Revés*, which consists of a rearrangement of samples recorded at a rehearsal of the Compañía Nacional de Danza Folclórica. When Meme visited the rehearsal, he was surprised that the dancers rehearsed without music. The Compañía isolated their dance steps from the music, creating a new “dance object” out of an old musical one. When Meme sampled the sound of their *zapateado* (footwork), he engaged a loop; he extracted “sound objects” out of the dance, in the same way that recording techniques “abstracted” music out of the bodies of the musicians and their instruments, giving them a new material home. Then Meme used these sounds as objects to be manipulated in order to compose a track, to create a new sonic narrative.

The packaging and design of the album follows the same logic. A galaxy is shown on the front cover, but in the inside sleeve this galaxy is nested within a traditional Mexican *peltre* (pewter) cup. There is also a cutout that could be folded into a supposedly useless cardboard cup (fig. 6.1). Rubén designed the album and asked members of the group for self-portraits, coming up with a series of graphic translations of themselves to use in the design. Meme’s drawing is very elegant and abstract, while Quique’s is slightly more realistic. Joselo decided to forgo graphics

²⁹ The numbering of tracks in *Revés* is unordered; in addition, some numbers are missing from a progressive sequence (1, 4, and 12), and there’s even one track titled “5.1.”

³⁰ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 314.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 317.

³² *Ibid.*



FIGURE 6.1. Café Tacvba, *Revés/Yosoy* (1999). Front and back of the CD package.

and wrote a straightforward description of himself. Rubén opted to portray himself with three overlapping figures: an image of Saraswati (the Hindu goddess of knowledge, music, and arts), a *ranchero* with sombrero and boots, and a dancing skeleton with a hat—all of these portraits constituting a nested proliferation of insides.³³ As a strategy to portray themselves, the members of Café Tacvba embedded objects inside objects, and gave translations of these objects into different semiotic and cultural codes.

While the packaging plays with the symmetric possibilities of the album's double name, it also creates an empty space between both records that is filled with possibilities, not only in terms of the songs and their creation but also in terms of the album's very conception. As part of the negotiations, Café Tacvba managed to release an album in which its name was not included on the front cover, which had never happened with a major label record release in Mexico. Their status as a commercially successful band was acknowledged on the back cover, which displays a visual palindrome made out of bacon, lettuce leaves, and orange slices, which in turn seem to articulate bones. These elements frame a brain, whose particular symmetric nature serves as the central feature of the design—the vulval connotations of the frame itself make the brain look as if nested within a vagina of sorts. It's as if a different biological arrangement had been produced, forgoing differentiation between animal, vegetable, and human; between consumption, produce, and thought; between rational and sexual. In the middle of this visual palindrome a printed tag is superimposed, exactly like the ones placed above organic products in any Mexican supermarket, barcode included. The tag shows the name of the band and the titles of the albums (fig. 6.1). Café Tacvba clearly knew that this particularly strange object they had created was still indeed a product for the market.

³³ Rubén Albarrán's choice of imagery is not arbitrary; Saraswati is herself nested within a divine trinity (along with Lakshmi and Parvati, the Hindu goddesses of fortune and love).

INSIDE THE ESTRANGED SYMMETRIES AND PALINDROMES
OF REVÉS/YOSOY

A palindrome is a sequence of characters that reads the same way forward or backward. In contemporary literary circles, palindromes are usually considered no more than amusing games or curiosities. But palindromes are as old as writing; they have been used for magical purposes and as supposed wards of protection for thousands of years. Palindromes open up possibilities of meaning at the same time that they erase them under their playfulness. They are deeply nonsensical and shallowly profound. They are also fun.

In a way, choosing palindromes to name a double album makes both records into mirror images of themselves (at least symbolically), making everything in the inside of the album's packaging into a backward reflection of itself. Guillermo Lavín explains this layering: "the word 'revés' means backwards, inside out, or reverse in Spanish. If you break the word down into two syllables, you get 're' and 'vés.' 'Re' is part of the diatonic scale (as in do, re, mi), but also the title of Café Tacuba's 1994 masterpiece *Ré*. 'Vés' means 'to see.' Backwards, the two words are 'sé ver,' which literally means 'I know how to see.'"³⁴ Joselo recounts that Rubén had originally come up with "Se ve revés"—a straightforward palindrome that can be translated as "it looks or seems backward"—although in the final version of the title it ended up being just "Revés," half a palindrome, or a partially concealed one. Curiously, *Revés* spelled backward is also the English word "sever." *Revés* is thus also a palindrome, though a severed one.

Palindromes challenge Western literacy conventions because they force us to read in the "wrong" direction, against the arrow of time created by writing. In *Hystericizing the Millennium* (1992), Jean Baudrillard framed the palindrome and other "instantaneous, childish and formal games" as "alternative to the linearity of history . . . to a disenchanting confusion, to a chaotic oversupply of current events." It is no coincidence that Baudrillard chose to refer to the palindrome back in 1992, as he thought we were "entering on a retroactive form of history [where] the disappearance of the end . . . seems to be characteristic of our culture and our history."³⁵ This "retroactive form of history," fueled by both electronic culture and the end of the millennium, challenged the traditional "linear unfolding" of history, language, and progress—and the objects that sustain them—throwing us into a different relation with both the past and the future. As mentioned earlier, two songs in *Yosoy*, "Árboles frutales" and "Bicicleta," are broken up into several tracks; this is unnoticeable when listening to the record, but the graphic display on the CD player or iPod shows it clearly. When we asked Joselo about this, he told us that Rubén wanted the record to have fifty-two tracks, because

³⁴ Guillermo Lavín, "Backward Rhythms: Mexico City's Café Tacuba Gets Experimental with *Revés/ Yo Soy*," *Scene*, November 18, 1999, <http://www.clevescene.com/cleveland/backward-rhythms/Content?oid=1473168>, accessed June 20, 2015.

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "Hystericizing the Millennium," *CTheory*, no. 14 (1994), http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/hystericizing-the-millennium/, accessed June 20, 2015.

it is “a sacred Aztec number. The ceremonial fire in Aztec temples was renovated every fifty two years (it’s their own kind of century).”³⁶

These references are nested inside *Revés/Yosoy*. The estranged, translational, rotational, and reflective symmetries implied by complete and partial palindromes continue inside. Even the quadruple-gatefolded CD sleeve enhances this strategy; it is a single album according to its packaging and distribution but actually with two albums inside. Opening the sleeve creates a mirror. When unfolded, the albums end up on opposite sides. Inside each album is a collection of tracks/songs. *Revés/Yosoy* is a collection of insides, organized by four musicians working as a unit. There’s a track with few lyrics (“13”) in *Revés*, the instrumental album; while there’s an instrumental one in *Yosoy* (“Sin título” [Untitled]). The lyrics in *Yosoy* speak of experiences that range from watching a caterpillar go down the stem of a plant in “Lento” (Slow) to feeling engulfed by the cosmos in “Espacio” (Space). From the minute life of the caterpillar to the overwhelming grandiosity of the universe, scales change constantly throughout the album. There are nests inside nests; the cover is a galaxy; its content should be inside.

The album also brings to mind Ciudad Satélite. One of the neighborhood’s most peculiar characteristics is its lack of straight streets, because it was designed by Mario Pani and José Luis Cuevas as a series of circuits that never cross as straight lines, in a way that makes street lights useless. “Nested” circuits with no stop signs, all streets melding into each other; “a city outside of the city,” as the title of the architectural plan of suburban Ciudad Satélite dictated.³⁷ After forty years of urban growth, it became a city inside the city, but also a center of its own.³⁸ To complicate things further, the nesting achieved in the layout of the actual CD—its design, the artwork, as well as the aesthetic impression of the contrasting sonic material—by placing the two albums facing each other also creates estranged symmetries. Its complex layering opens up multiplicities; its conceptual structure’s nature creates coincidences that probably transcend the band’s intentions.

Musically, *Revés* is largely made out of the juxtaposition and mash-up of short repeated loops and riffs, ostinati that often leave a quasi-palindromic sonic impression in the listener due to their circular character. The electric guitar riffs in “9” are presented as rhythmic mirror patterns that slide or leap up and down the harmonic structure; the repeated loop of the electric guitar featured in “11” offers a similar

³⁶ Rangel, email to the authors. It should be noted that this numerological thread could be continued. The Mexicas had a 260-day ritual cycle, broken down into 13-day units. *Revés* has thirteen tracks, but the last one doesn’t have any music. So there are either twelve tracks, parallel to the months in the Western calendar; or thirteen, as the moon cycles in a year or as the attenders of the Last Supper. (This is one of the reasons why some consider 13 to be a bad luck number; someone always dies.) The ninth track in the album is titled “13,” while the thirteenth track is a silent one whose title is “. . .”. Although “silence is also music,” as Joselo explains about this last track, silence is still a very peculiar kind of nothing.

³⁷ “Una ciudad fuera de la ciudad.” See Daniel Garza Usabiaga, “Las Torres de Satélite: Ruina de un proyecto que nunca se concluyó,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 31, no. 94 (2009), 133.

³⁸ Joselo remembers that a neighbor’s rooster kept interrupting the *Revés* recording sessions. “What was a rooster doing in the suburbs?” he asked, as if a rural lifestyle was somehow still alive in and nested within the city. Rangel, email to the authors.

characteristic. In “13,” there are palindromic and inverted mirror loops, the latter after the words “este ritmo está al revés” (this rhythmic pattern is backward). One of the aspects that gives the album its uncanny character is the manner in which the musicians achieve a sense of difference within the tracks’ highly repetitive sonic organization, the way in which they estrange the basic music material and make it aesthetically relevant after it has been repeated more than twenty or thirty times. They achieve this by introducing slight variations and/or rhythmic displacement, or even suddenly slowing down the track’s speed (as in “5”), and especially by creating polyphonic sections in which different loops are perceived as nested within each other through mash-ups.

“Everything moves in loops and curls, in tropes, in inversion of meanings,” wrote Baudrillard, trying to find ways out of “the simulation of linear history ‘in progress.’”³⁹ The estranged symmetries in *Revés/Yosoy* come and go, to and from, as a palindrome does, creating a *vaivén* (come-and-go). The song “La muerte chiquita” (The Little Death) uses a Spanish translation of the French idiom for orgasm, which accounts for the disappearance of the subject in the moment of pleasure. But in the song, this little death is also a character whom the singer woos: “sus pestañas dos palmeras en cuyo vaivén yo me rindo” (your eyelashes are palm trees on whose sway I surrender). Even the difference between the horizontal and vertical gets lost in the *vaivén* of the palms with the wind and the blinking of the character’s eyes. If palindromes create a *vaivén*, a hypnotic pattern of sound that can be modulated by speed, this *vaivén* becomes a key aesthetic element opened up by the nested symmetries: it is neither here nor there, neither commercial nor underground, neither individual nor collective, neither Mexican nor international. The conceptual reflections create the musical possibility of an in-between. This liminal aesthetic space appears clearly in the *vaivén* of listening to “La muerte chiquita” along with “M.C.” from *Revés*. The eerie character of the mirror-like sonic image between these two tracks—a vocal track sung by Rubén Albarrán and an instrumental track played by the Kronos Quartet—is not inherent to any of the pieces but appears in their dialogic aural perception. It is in the in-betweenness of the listening experience that questions of identity arise. Are they the same song? Is the instrumental track a version of the vocal track or is it *al revés* (the other way around)? Which one is a version and which one is the original? Which one is the estranged version of the other? Questions about the identities of these tracks are only relevant in the in-betweenness of their reception.

“YO NO DIGO NADA; YO SOY”: QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY IN THE
REFLECTIVE MAZE OF PERFORMATIVITY

Joselo Rangel states that the title for *Yosoy* came out of a peculiar moment of public interaction with his fans. Early in his career, before the band became the huge

³⁹ Baudrillard, *Hystericizing the Millennium*.

commercial success it would later be, he was riding a *pesera* (collective taxi) when two female fans recognized him and approached him for an autograph. Then, two men who witnessed the exchange but did not know who he was tried to bully him with an ill-intentioned question: “Who do you say you are?” “I do not say anything [*Yo no digo nada*],” Joselo replied; “I am [*Yo soy*].”⁴⁰ A question of identity is clearly at the center of the story. For the men who failed to recognize him as a public figure, Joselo was at best a nobody trying to pass as somebody; at worst, he was someone who could be discursively rendered invisible. Their question “Who do you say you are?” would be akin to saying “Tú no existes” (you do not exist). Joselo’s assertive response (“I am”) not only speaks of the performativity of identity (the subject’s identity is produced as it engages and responds to the Other) but also suggests that the performative power of becoming oneself could be preceded by a moment in which the voice is present but says nothing (“I do not say anything”). The voice in between its embodied presence and its absence from the realm of discourse offers many possibilities of becoming while largely remaining a promise. This anecdote almost sounds like a premonition of the performative moment that *Revés/Yosoy*, the band’s half-“voiceless” double album, would induce.

The first song of *Yosoy*, “El padre” (The Father), describes the bitter realization of a character who, standing in front of a mirror, discovers that he is turning into his father. He is caught inside a cyclic dynamic, an estranged symmetry. The experience is not pleasant. He is becoming “that whom [he] hate[s] the most.”⁴¹ The character withdraws into this mirror image, “preferring to be silent, getting used to the sound of his voice being his father’s,”⁴² because “he feels like someone else, discovering the whole world through someone else’s eyes.”⁴³ This is a very particular kind of psychoanalytical estrangement called *unheimlich* (ominous); it refers to the very moment when the familiar reveals itself as the Other precisely because it is familiar.⁴⁴ Lacan uses this Freudian term to describe the subject’s particular relation with the Other. Slavoj Žižek has shed light on these libidinal economies by explaining that the quintessential question of desire is not “What do I want?” but “What do others want from me?”⁴⁵ The subject’s desire is the desire of the Other; thus, we are constituted, first and foremost, through and in the Other. It is “out there” where the subject begins to form

⁴⁰ Rangel, email to the authors.

⁴¹ “En quien más odio a ti te da.”

⁴² “Ahora prefiere callar hasta acostumbrarse a que la voz que le saldrá es la misma que su padre.”

⁴³ “Y él se siente otro, descubriendo el mundo entero desde otros ojos.”

⁴⁴ *Heim* means “home” in German. It should be noted that the straight translation of “unheimlich” would be “unfamiliar,” which sounds particularly close to other translations of Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*, not only defamiliarization but also alienation. We prefer to use “estrangement” because it is a strategy meant to show something as “different,” not just as “alienating.” For Lacan, everything starts in the “outside.” Alienation is the starting place of subjectivity, which arrives into itself through a process similar to estrangement.

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *El acoso de las fantasías*, translated by Clea Braunstein Saal (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1999), 19.

itself: “Man finds his home in a point situated in the Other.”⁴⁶ The experience of the ominous means finding what was once familiar, what was once the subject, as oneself: “the presence elsewhere constitutes this place as absence.” Finding oneself as the Other opens up oneself as an absence, “making us appear as object by revealing to us the non-autonomy of the subject”,⁴⁷ it is precisely the experience of not being oneself because one is the Other.

In “El padre,” the figure of the Other is the father, but one could argue that the character of the father is a metaphor for tradition, for the past. In the song, this realization comes from looking at the mirror and finding wrinkles on the image. Thus, the ominous realization comes along with growing old and finding oneself entangled with the Other, with the Other as oneself. The character in the song comes to this realization through the gaze and the voice, the two objects of Lacanian desire.⁴⁸ Lacan theorized these objects as *objet petit a*, objects of desire situated at the borders of one’s body, one’s orifices—which constitute borders in themselves, belonging neither to the subject nor to the Other. They are places of estrangement, and they are also the *raison d’être* of desire, the places where subjectivity happens precisely because these objects “fall” from the Other and connect up “with something which is to be considered in the *inneres*, the inside of the body.”⁴⁹ Lacan uses this to posit the “notion of an outside before a certain interiorization”; the ominous is realizing that one is/was this outside. The object petit a “introduces for him [the subject] the distinction between the me and the not-me.”⁵⁰ The object petit a as the place of absence, and thus the cause of desire, is nongraspable because it is precisely that which eludes one. Once again, we encounter a palindromic *vaivén*; inside, but never one’s own; outside, but intimate; in between the Other and the subject. One’s voice always sounds like someone else’s; one’s gaze learns to see what others see. In spite of that, both become one’s own. Although the object petit a, as a function, is the motor of desire, its absence, its own nature as lacking, produces anxiety. According to Lacan, identity is that which we place over the object petit a to soothe that anxiety. It is the way the ego covers that absence and “knows” what the subject desires, or it is the way the superego commands the subject what to desire, thus preventing real desire, or at least a different one, from emerging.

The voice is closely linked to identity not only in psychoanalytical theory. Rock bands are always identified by their vocalists and the qualities and particularities of their voices. It could be argued that vocality, more than anything else, is what gives a band its unique musical identity, its particular aural space in an audience’s sonic spectrum. Café Tacvba’s case is no exception. Rubén’s physical and discursive voices

⁴⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: Seminar X* (1962-1963), translated by Cormac Gallagher from unedited French typescripts, 32, <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-X-Revised-by-Mary-Cherou-Lagreze.pdf>, accessed June 23, 2015.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Lacan added the gaze and the voice to Freud’s original objects of desire, the oral, the anal, and the phallic.

⁴⁹ Lacan, *Anxiety: Seminar X*, 68.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

were central in determining the band's identity, both through his particular nasal voice and his elusive public persona, as he continuously changed both his stage name and his look from album to album. Café Tacvba's decision to make an instrumental album can also be understood as a way to estrange their identity; to forgo exactly that which made them particular, to "let go" of their identity up until then; to search for a sense of lacking, a renewal of desire by letting go of their familiar voice and rendering a central aspect of its eclectic image, the persona of its main vocalist, invisible. The band understood that a voiceless album would be a statement that the band's music was not to be received as a showcase for Rubén's voice, a voice that would normally be a recognizable feature, central to their positioning in marketing terms.⁵¹ People would likely not recognize Café Tacvba if they didn't hear Rubén singing. An instrumental album meant sabotaging what, at least in terms of the market, they had achieved.

Furthermore, the voice is intimately tied up to language and to the meaning-making qualities of language. As a language-based experience, lyrics point toward a "meaning." A song speaks about "something," it produces a clearly identifiable subject. But *Revés* forgoes that. Even the notion of "song" was sidestepped, with the musicians speaking of "musical moments" instead.⁵² One of Café Tacvba's strategic decisions had been singing songs in Spanish and not in English, a desire shared by most rock Mexican musicians of their generation. That feature became one of the core aspects of their identity and was used by record labels to market them as *Rock en Tu Idioma*. With *Revés*, as with the troubled character in "El padre," Café Tacvba identified the *revés* side of the mirror and articulated that other meaning of its palindromic reversal, its English meaning, "to sever"; they were cutting ties with their past. When the tacubos pitched an instrumental album to Warner they were wiping the slate clean.

The question was then "how to be?" Lacan says that the problem with Hamlet's (in) famous "to be or not to be" line lies in its evasion of asking "what" is one to be. The verb "to be" begs for an adverb or a noun to pair up with as the actual object of identity, to take the place of the object *petit a*. The lack of this object, and the anxiety produced by its absence, is precisely the possibility of a new desire to emerge, as it is not blocked by an image. That is what "Yo soy" (I am) does as a palindrome; the moment of anxiety, of not having an identity, can be prolonged by its palindromic state, because it finds rhythmic displacements, slight variations and layers of speed with which to bear this lack of a "what it is that I am." This *vaivén* inside the palindrome, coupled with the estranged, nested, and rotational symmetries throughout the album, allowed the band to extend through music the moment before identity resolves itself and comes to rest.

Yosoy's second track, "La locomotora" (The Locomotive), which follows "El padre," tries to find different Others with whom to engage in the mirror-gazing game. It is a

⁵¹ It was Rubén Albarrán who apparently pushed the band in this direction: "we started jamming, but we were against songs born from jamming. I suppose it was Rubén who suggested working this way, he usually suggests doing things differently. It's part of his personality. It seems he gets bored doing always the same." Rangel, email to the authors.

⁵² Guillermo Lavín, "Backward Rhythms."

“what if?” song: “If apes made music, if reptiles sung lyrics of their own inspiration beneath your window, then where would I be? If trees cried and moved, if the desert made verses and broke the heat into pieces, if the heat hated itself and traveled to another region, then where would I be?”⁵³ In “El padre,” the ominous experience of the character seeing his father in the mirror is a reaction against sameness. But for Café Tacvba that mirror image in the past was also themselves, a tradition, and a marketing strategy. “La locomotora” is an attempt to find difference through the possibility of nesting through different Others, in different translational and rotational symmetries, of finding different mirror images and speculating what would be left of oneself. *Revés* answers this not by pairing up with different others but by “letting go” of the voice, not adding up but subtracting. Café Tacvba was the emblematic success of Rock en Español, but by dropping Spanish, where would they be? (“Entonces, ¿dónde quedo yo?”) They were no longer a local rock band, a language-based success. They were no longer Rock en Tu Idioma.

Revés also underscores this moment of reinvention for the band by other means, especially addressing questions of sound and its semiotic charge. With this album, Café Tacvba also estranges the sound palette that made them unique in their previous albums. If the *jarana* and *huasteco* violin expanded the notion of rock and created a bridge linking the band to Mexican folk traditions in “Ojalá que llueva café” from *Avalancha de éxitos* (some may even argue they made *son huasteco* cool for a whole generation of Mexican youngsters who followed the band), the use of the *jarana* and the folk references in *Revés* actually offer a culturally situated reimagination of Mexican folk signifiers. Nested within the strident sounds of electric guitars and basses, repeated in hypnotic minimal loops, or distorted through computer processing, the traditional sound of the *jarana* in “11,” the *requinto jarocho* in “7” (a minimalist summoning of *son jarocho* that keeps the listener waiting for a singer to come in), and the funky, “music-less” zapateado rhythmic patterns of the Compañía Nacional de Danza Folclórica in “10” go through a process of defamiliarization, comparable to the way tradition turns into the Other in “El padre.” The familiar is thus placed at a zero point, the in-between subject and object, a liminal space between subjectivity and culture, somehow recognizable but uncannily unfamiliar. And it is there that it awaits its moment of resignification, its time to become something else, to be made anew in the exchange between performance and reception. But before all of this even takes place, the production process of the album has already played its performative role; it has allowed Café Tacvba to estrange themselves, to challenge language-based marketing strategies and sound-based semiotic circuits. With *Revés/Yosoy*, Café Tacvba became their own particular way of dealing with desire. They became Café Tacvba.

⁵³ “Si los simios hicieran música, si los reptiles cantaran bajo tu ventana coplas de su propia inspiración, entonces, ¿dónde quedo yo? Si los árboles lloraran, si se pudieran mover, si la lluvia reprochara el momento de caer, si el desierto hiciera versos y en pedazos al calor, si el calor se detestara y viajara a otra región, entonces, ¿dónde quedo yo?”

53100: CIUDAD SATÉLITE, CAFÉ TACVBA, DIFFERENCE, AND
THE COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION OF NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

Ciudad Satélite is proud of Café Tacvba.⁵⁴ There are indexes of such pride in everything from Wikipedia's entry about the suburb, which places "the members of Café Tacvba" at the top of a list of distinguished people from Ciudad Satélite,⁵⁵ to the unsuspecting middle-aged *satelucos* (folks from Ciudad Satélite) who proudly boast of being friends, neighbors, or at the very least having gone to school with one of the tacubos.⁵⁶ Reciprocally, Ciudad Satélite also has a very important place in the band's mythological puzzle. It is repeatedly mentioned in press releases as the musicians' place of origin—even decades after the beginning of their musical career—and the tacubos themselves have invoked it continuously throughout their career. From choosing to include "Metamorfosis" by Axis (the satelucos band that won the legendary 1983 Festival de Rock Juvenil Peerless) in *Avalancha de éxitos*,⁵⁷ to naming their album *Cuatro Caminos* after the bygone symbol of the border between Mexico City and its northern suburbs, and to taking the iconic Torres de Satélite as background for the videos of "La ingrata" (The Ingrate) from *Re* and "Volver a comenzar" (Begin Again) from *Sino* (2007), Ciudad Satélite and its emblems remain central leitmotifs for the band. Indeed, one could argue that Café Tacvba's success story within the transnational recording industry at the height of its neoliberal inception in Mexico could also be seen as a metaphor of the complex relationship between cultural colonialism, national identity, and difference that has always informed satelucos' desires for cosmopolitan belonging.

Built on lands that belonged to Miguel Alemán Valdés, the first postrevolutionary president to organize a campaign and implement national policies to attract foreign investment to Mexico (in the 1950s), Ciudad Satélite was born as a symbol of modernity in the margins of the modern city. Geographically situated well beyond the northern limits of Mexico City, Ciudad Satélite was meant to be a carefully designed architectural landmark and a self-sufficient urban development that would allow families to escape the chaotic lifestyle of a metropolis that was already growing beyond any logical proportion. As much as these suburbs were a living symbol of the organized modernity that the regime's postrevolutionary controlled capitalism would bring to the country—the so-called Mexican Miracle—they were also Mexico's utopian response to the post-World War II US suburban boom. Thus, Ciudad Satélite and the lifestyles it has fostered have always been defined in dialogue with Mexico's imagination of US modernity; they are a direct elitist response to a desire for a modernity and cosmopolitanism represented by the American way of life that nonetheless remained out of reach

⁵⁴ 53100 is Ciudad Satélite's zip code.

⁵⁵ "Ciudad Satélite," in *Wikipedia*, https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciudad_Sat%C3%A9lite, accessed June 27, 2014.

⁵⁶ The authors of this chapter, who are satelucos *irredentos* (unredeemed), should be included among these last.

⁵⁷ Joselo, "Nostalgia," *Excelsior*, April 8, 2011, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/node/719687>, accessed June 27, 2015.

for most Mexicans. This surplus between purpose and reality—its difference—gave Ciudad Satélite its libidinal distinction as well as its status at the margins of national consciousness. Regardless of the dystopian character that reality imprinted on this project through the decades, these cosmopolitan associations remained. The 1980s, with the neoliberal turn the country went through after Miguel de la Madrid's presidential administration (1982–1988), provided a fertile ground for the reignition of these fantasies. The construction of the then largest McDonald's in the world in 1988 and the bizarre consumerist response and boastful pride it generated among satelucos is a good example of the type of expectations they had from the country's full neoliberal immersion.⁵⁸ This was precisely the cultural moment that saw the birth of Café Tacvba.

Not unlike the rest of the country, the 1980s witnessed the development of a strong underground rock scene in Ciudad Satélite; and like most rock scenes it was imbued with a sense of rebellion and contestation. But contestation in Ciudad Satélite, the middle-class bastion of neoliberal fantasy, could never look and sound the same as contestation in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, the large low-income municipality on the northeast outskirts of Mexico City. Instead of patronizing *hoyos fonquis* (funky holes), satelucos avidly attended concerts at the Iglesia de Boulevares, a church under construction that became an icon for the area's rock scene. Many bands and musicians played their first gigs at this church, including Trial, Rubén Albarrán's band in the early 1980s.⁵⁹ Playing rock concerts at a church would seem like a huge contradiction for most rock musicians and fans, but for satelucos this is simply one of the anecdotes that colors the uniqueness of their rock scene at the time.

For Joselo and Quique, the intimate contact with this scene and the realization that their peers could be successful rock musicians was very influential in solidifying their own longing to form a band. As Joselo remembered: "I suppose that looking at other satelucos reaching the final of a rock competition [the 1983 Festival de Rock Juvenil Peerless] and recording an album was a motivation to keep playing the guitar, learning songs, and form a band. It is different from dreaming to be like the English bands, that was like dreaming of being astronauts."⁶⁰ A few years later, their band became the most salient icon of this rock movement. But their commercial success came with the stigma that such an endeavor carries, and many underground rock fans accused the tacubos of being sellouts (they became televisos). However, for many of their satelucos fans, young people attending elite colleges such as Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey or Universidad Anáhuac who were more accepting of ideas such as entrepreneurship and capitalism, the band's appearance in *Siempre en Domingo* and other Televisa shows was a source of pride and self-validation. As Joselo explains, "for as much as one wants

⁵⁸ McDonald's patrons would actually dress up in order to go out to eat at the restaurant, as the working-class character this fast-food franchise is associated with in the United States was somehow lost in translation. Carlos Tomasini, "El adiós del McDonald's de Satélite," *Chilango*, June 12, 2015, <http://www.chilango.com/ciudad/nota/2015/06/12/el-adios-del-mcsatelite-original>, accessed June 29, 2015.

⁵⁹ Joselo, "Nostalgia."

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

to be an indie, we live in a capitalist world”;⁶¹ and Café Tacvba’s early success was a result of their being one of the first indie bands to understand and take advantage of the desiring machine of neoliberal capitalism. They recognized that beyond the apparent sameness of consumerist experience of neoliberalism this is actually a system that, like colonialism, thrives in difference. Neoliberalism needs the idea of difference in order to create a coherent fantasy of neoliberal human relations; furthermore, it requires the desire that arises in difference in order to develop viable markets, an issue a keen eye might have foreseen when paying careful attention to the bizarre success of the world’s largest McDonald’s. Years before the members of the Nortec Collective understood that in order to successfully engage the transnational music industry they needed to respond to what it requested from them,⁶² Café Tacvba developed a hybrid music style that responded to this very libidinal economy (“ask not what I want but rather what others want from me”). By combining local sounds and rhythms with cosmopolitan musical practices, Café Tacvba became the sonic embodiment of the Other’s desire for difference that informs the transnational music industry.

CONCLUSION

Traveling from Ciudad Satélite to Mexico City’s Centro Histórico (historical downtown) could be seen as a metaphor of crossing an invisible political and cultural border, from modernity’s aspirational future to Mexico’s buried past. This *vaivén* informs Café Tacvba’s approach to both their musical and professional endeavors. Their estrangement techniques mirror a world that had itself been estranged out of tradition and into a cosmopolitan future through neoliberalism. They belong to a generation of *satelucos* who found McDonald’s exciting and the Mexicas alien, who lived the promise of a utopian first world while embedded in and surrounded by the third. They were exactly at the crossroads where the avant-garde meets the market in neoliberalism: constant change and technological innovation. The very possibility of making an album like *Revés/Yosoy* was fueled by their entrance into the neoliberal global market. Their first album had done well in Mexico, but *Re* was rejected in their home country while becoming a huge success in Chile and Colombia; comparatively, *Avalancha de éxitos* did not do as well in Mexico as in Argentina. “Our audience changed with each album, not because we wanted, it just happened that way,” Joselo explains. “So we stopped worrying,” he continues; “someone will like it, and if they don’t, well, then we’re screwed.”⁶³ The transnational networks enabled by their relationship with Warner Music allowed

⁶¹ Joselo, “Ser indie,” *Excelsior*, November 3, 2011 <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/node/721223>, accessed June 27, 2015.

⁶² See Alejandro L. Madrid, *Nor-Tec Rifa! Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 65–86.

⁶³ Rangel, email to the authors.

them a continual growth in popularity regardless of the coldness with which their second and third albums were received in Mexico.

Regardless of the international success of Café Tacvba's first three albums, as well as their iconic place as distinguished people from Ciudad Satélite, the alternative spirit that informed the band's first encounter with music and the scene that nurtured them was still alive when they recorded *Revés/Yosoy*. Challenging the boundaries of their assumed identity, the album was a "surprising work with which the tacubos gained the respect of fans and critics for their music."⁶⁴ One could argue that in the case of Café Tacvba's *Revés/Yosoy*, experimentalism works not only as a unifying aesthetic principle in the locus of production but also as a powerful aural mediator that consolidates collective desires for distinction in both progressive and conservative scenes in the locus of consumption. In fact, by providing a space for the intersection of performativity, desire, cosmopolitanism, and estrangement, the experimental character of *Revés/Yosoy* puts in evidence the contingency of ideas such as "progressive" and "conservative." Through the estranging strategies of translational and rotational symmetries as well as the palindromes in this album, Café Tacvba compellingly ensures that we look at (and listen to) difference *al revés* and rediscover the entire world *desde otros ojos*.

⁶⁴ Ismael Nungaray González, "Revés/No soy: El que arriesga no siempre gana," *Bienvenidos al Itinerario Histórico!!!* (blog), July 2008 <http://itinerariohistorico.blogspot.mx/2008/07/revsyo-soy-el-que-arriesga-no-siempre.html>, accessed June 27, 2015.

Anticolonial Practices

7

GATAS Y VATAS

Female Empowerment and Community-Oriented Experimentalism

Ana R. Alonso-Minutti

GATAS Y VATAS is an annual music festival featuring solo performances by female musicians.¹ Initiated in 2010 in Albuquerque by young Hispanic women as an attempt to counteract the white male dominance of progressive music scenes, Gatas y Vatas has become a catalyst of female empowerment where participants experience liberation while defying gender norms in an all-inclusive environment. While they intend to foster complete freedom in the musical styles played in the space of the festival, most of the recurring performers engage with sound experimentation that challenges any given categorization.² That the title of the festival is in Spanish is not surprising given

This essay is based on fieldwork done in 2014 and 2015. I am deeply thankful to individuals associated with Gatas y Vatas who shared their time and experiences with me. Without their openness and generosity, my research efforts could have not been accomplished. I am equally indebted to my coeditors, Eduardo Herrera and Alejandro L. Madrid, and fellow contributors to this volume, especially to Benjamin Piekut, Susan Thomas, Joshua Tucker, and Susan Campos Fonseca, for their insightful comments and feedback during the elaboration process of this essay. Special thanks to my graduate assistant Lauren V. Coons for her editorial eye and helpful suggestions, and to my graduate students Christopher Ramos, Estefanía Cuevas-Wilcox, and Clara Byom, with whom I discussed preliminary versions of this essay.

¹ The festival was initially conceptualized as an event for female performers. Nonetheless, according to the most updated version of the festival's website, "trans and cis women, as well as genderqueer and nonbinary people," are also welcomed to perform. See "About," <http://www.gatasyvatas.com>, accessed December 28, 2015. A few male friends and partners of the festival's core organizers have carried some aspects of the event's production throughout the years.

² With the phrase "Anything goes, and anything can happen," the organizers of the festival attempt to foster an all-inclusive environment. No specific curatorial components, age restriction, or style parameters are applied in order to limit participation in Gatas y Vatas.

New Mexico's history; while the US government previously maintained a policy of eradicating Spanish, most Hispanic New Mexicans (Nuevomexican@s) have remained bilingual. *Gatas y Vatas* literally translates as “lady cats and gals”; however, this word choice contains cultural subtleties that should not be overlooked. In some Spanish-speaking contexts, *gata* is used as a synonym of a sexy woman—a “hot babe,” as the *Urban Dictionary* defines the term—while *vata* is often used to describe some kind of tough gal, worthy of respect.³ In the words of Marisa Demarco, founder and main coordinator of the festival, “*vata*” is synonymous with *chola* (thug lady) and is a term that “every *burqueño* knows.”⁴ Performers at the festival embrace a collective identification as *gatas* and *vatas* through engaging in a cultural exercise of resistance and belonging.

Drawing from ethnographic research, in this essay I argue that musicians associated with *Gatas y Vatas* perform a type of feminist experimentalism while constructing and embracing a local identity, a “*burqueño* pride.” While locally rooted, the festival is an alternative performance space for the configuration of a community of performers that contests issues of race, class, and gender. The result is a community-oriented experimental platform that has reached levels of inclusion and group solidarity rarely seen in experimental music scenes.⁵

While the role of women in experimental music scenes had remained largely neglected in scholarly narratives for a long time, the topic has more recently gained significant attention, especially during the last decade. What in 2002 Dana L. Reason Myers exposed as the “myth of absence,”⁶ referring to an apparent lack of female experimental music improvisers, has been echoed in subsequent scholarship across different music genres; from rock and punk to electronic and contemporary art music.⁷

³ Both “*gata*” and “*vata*” have different and often contradictory meanings across Latin America. While in some places in Mexico and Argentina “*gata*” is used when referring to a *mujer de la mala vida* (prostitute), in Brazil “*gata*” means beautiful/good looking/attractive. On the other hand “*vato/a*” (alternatively written *bato/a*) originally refers to a person from northwest Mexico, although in its most common usage it simply means “dude.” In the US Southwest, however, “*vato/a*” has often been associated with gang culture and hence has also been used to instigate racial segregation.

⁴ Marisa Demarco, interview with the author, June 12, 2014. The term *burque* is used as a synonym for Albuquerque and “*burqueño/a*” means someone/something from there. The use of these terms has increased in the past decade, especially as an act of resistance after Mayor Martin Chavez’s 2007 plan to brand the city as “the Q” in an attempt to attract out-of-state investors by making Albuquerque hip. Since then, local citizens have carried campaigns against this initiative, reinforcing instead a *burqueño* identity. “Soy de Burque,” an online community, was founded to “thrive in the cultural renaissance of all things *burqueño* and resist the cultural branding moniker ‘Q’ forced upon us by city officials.” See Soy de Burque’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Soy%20de%20Burque>, accessed December 28, 2015. Also see <http://www.soydeburque.com>; <http://soydeburque.blogspot.mx/>, and <https://myspace.com/soydeburque>, accessed March 7, 2017.

⁵ I moved to Albuquerque in August 2013, and while I share with *Gatas y Vatas* a self-identification as a woman of color—a *Hispana* and a *Latina*—I do not consider myself a *burqueña*.

⁶ Dana L. Reason Myers, “The Myth of Absence: Representation, Reception and the Music of Experimental Women Improvisers” (Ph.D. diss., University of California San Diego, 2002).

⁷ See Helen Reddington, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Julia Downes, ed., *Women Make Noise: Girl Bands from the Motown to the Modern* (Twickenham, UK: Aurora Metro Books, 2012); Tara Rodgers, ed., *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music*

Nevertheless, the discussion of experimental practices among nonwhite female communities has yet to become part of these scholarly projects. The scene this chapter is concerned with not only is actively challenging the myth of absence of women in experimental music but also is opening room for a much-needed discussion of a decolonial experimentalism practiced among predominantly identified Latin@ performers whose practice extends into and for the community.⁸

By focusing on experimental practices from a geographic location identified as the US-Mexico borderland, I intend to bring attention to the border as a space of cultural negotiation and resignification⁹—as an in-between state of contradictory identity discourses, where traditions are constantly reconfigured—while focusing on the local specificities of a burque experience. The political rhetoric of Latin@ performance in the border is one of contestation over mainstream US oppressive social codes about race, class, and gender. In this sense, the experimental practices of Gatas y Vatas should be situated at the margins of an already marginalized community. From a peripheral position, the performative actions of the Gatas enact a decolonizing move and present a counter-hegemonic strategy to disrupt racial and gender normativities. From Gatas y Vatas's end, there is a commitment to intercede for female liberation and to propose a version of gender egalitarianism. From my end, I insist on the recognition and integration of decolonizing practices into narratives of and about contemporary experimental music. Hence, this essay seeks to be a decolonizing effort to counteract the systematic neglect of the contributions of nonwhite female artistic communities.

Although aspects of Latin@ identity are too complex to be fully addressed here, it is worth mentioning that among Nuevomexican@s ethnic/racial labels such as Hispanic, Spanish, Indo-Hispan@, Spanish-American, Chican@, and Latin@ constantly compete with one another.¹⁰ The usage of these terms among diverse social groups and

and Sound (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Sally McArthur, *Towards a Twenty-First-Century Feminist Politics of Music* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), respectively.

⁸ I follow Aldama, Sandoval, and García in their use of the term “Latin@” as “an umbrella term for linking a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and genders across this hemisphere. This naming seeks connection among people who differ in nation, ethnicity, gender, race, and class but who nevertheless share a similar de-colonial relationship to western European imperial histories—that is, to the current global neo-colonial cultural and economic forces of the 20th and 21st centuries.” Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García, “Towards a Decolonial Performativity of the US Latina and Latino Borderlands,” in Aldama, Sandoval, and García, eds., *Performing the U.S.-Latina and Latino Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 4.

⁹ Also see Alejandro L. Madrid, *Nor-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Norma E. Cantú, and Brenda M. Romero, eds., *Dancing across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, eds., *Performance in the Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Alejandro L. Madrid, ed., *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, eds., *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ “The names for the various groups that have settled in New Mexico,” writes Thomas H. Guthrie, “are notoriously problematic, since none are universally acceptable and most are homogenizing.” Choosing one term over another reflects particular identity politics. In the New Mexican context, for instance, Hispanics have adopted the terms “Spanish,” or “Spanish American,” as a whiteness strategy to

classes is not straightforward, and the adoption of one term over another varies widely according to social context. This unrestrictive ambivalence reflects the intense ethnicity dynamics that characterize New Mexico's double colonial history.¹¹ While Gatas y Vatas is not restricted to performers who identify themselves with any of these terms, a great number of its participants grew up in New Mexico and, regardless of their ethnicity, identify themselves as Nuevomexicanas and, more specifically, burqueñas. It is in the makeup of this *identidad burqueña* where they feel most comfortable. A strong sense of local pride is particularly present among the festival's core group—the artists who have been more active in the organization and realization of this event: Marisa Demarco (Biwagatt), Monica Demarco (Chtuhla), Mauro Lorraine Woody (Lady Fox/Lady Uranium), Gena Lawson (Anna Mall), and Tahnee Udero (TAHNZZ). For the Demarco sisters, the situation is not that clear. They identify themselves as both Hispanic and white, and theirs is a mix of Puerto Rican, Italian, and Maltese. Both Mauro Lorraine Woody and Gena Lawson identify themselves as white, although they call themselves Nuevomexicanas. Tahnee Udero, who has both Hispanic and Native American background, identifies herself as Chicana/Latina. Invariably, all of them call themselves burqueñas.

Gatas y Vatas has been primarily a festival for Albuquerque about Albuquerque, where participants share a strong “burqueño pride.” This burqueño pride, which has close ties with Chican@ identity, is graphically shown in the images of the festival, each of which has been designed annually by a different female local artist associated with this network. These logos are reproduced in posters, T-shirts, CD compilations, and other objects.¹² Whether in color or black and white, there are some parallels among these images that signal the characteristics of the ideal version of a Gata y Vata: a nonwhite, strong, beautiful, resourceful, and daring female figure (figs. 7.1 and 7.2).¹³ Regardless of their ethnic background, the performers associated with the festival feel comfortable with this constructed identity.

The toughness of becoming a Gata y Vata, for the Demarco sisters, comes in part as a result of living in the desert. As Marisa says, “living things grow tougher in hard conditions,” and in this hard atmosphere there is a need for solidarity and support. She continues: “a model of how to spread our vision is [imagining] a lot of little pockets of things that are surviving and feeding each other and being good neighbors.”¹⁴ The desert grants Gatas a psychologically open space for a perceived limitless creativity.¹⁵

distinguish themselves from Mexicans. See Thomas H. Guthrie, *Recognizing Heritage: The Politics of Multiculturalism in New Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), xv–xvi.

¹¹ Michael Trujillo, *Land of Disenchantment: Latina/o Identities and Transformations in Northern New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

¹² The annual music compilations of Gatas y Vatas 2011–2015 can be purchased at <https://gatasyvatas.bandcamp.com/>, accessed March 7, 2017.

¹³ A compilation of the festival's logos from 2010 to 2015 can be found here: <http://www.gatasyvatas.com/imagery/>, accessed March 7, 2017.

¹⁴ Marisa Demarco, interview with the author, June 12, 2014.

¹⁵ Composer Walter Zimmermann also compared musicians to plants growing in the desert when describing the academic experimental scene of the 1970s (in the United States and Europe). In this climate,



FIGURE 7.1. Festival logo designed by New Mexican visual artist Nani Chacon, one of the foremost muralists of the city of Albuquerque, for *Gatas y Vatas* 2011. Used by courtesy of Nani Chacon.

Tahnee Udero says: “everything here is very resilient and harsh, but still beautiful, and I’m inspired by all of that.”¹⁶ For *Gatas*, to endure hardship while experiencing the openness of the high desert is central to the makeup of a *burqueña* artistic persona.

The social and class circuits in which the *Gatas* develop their network are those of the working class of the city, sharing among them a sentiment of cultural resistance commonly associated with Chican@ culture.¹⁷ Going beyond the time frame of the festival,

Zimmerman says, musicians need to subsist despite their usefulness to “any commercial tools.” He writes: “So I found out what they have in common besides being different. The ways of SUBSISTENCE. How to survive under hard conditions and the resulting beauty and vigour of this existence, which is one precondition for the necessary revolutionary changes. This book is dedicated to the memory of Harry Partch, because I feel that he lived in the essence all of what it means: TO BE A DESERT PLANT.” See Walter Zimmermann, *Desert Plants: Conversations with 23 American Musicians* (1976), https://www.academia.edu/7095446/Desert_Plants_Conversations_with_23_American_Musicians, accessed December 30, 2015.

¹⁶ Tahnee Udero, interview with the author, June 5, 2014.

¹⁷ As Carlos Muñoz says, “Chicano youth radicalism represented a return to the humanistic cultural values of the Mexican working class. This in turn led to the shaping of a nationalist ideology, which although anti-racist in nature, stressed the nonwhite indigenous aspects of Mexican working-class.” Carlos Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (New York: Verso, 2007), 26.



FIGURE 7.2. Festival logo designed by Tahnee Udero for Gatas y Vatas 2012. Used by courtesy of Tahnee Udero.

Gatas y Vatas has fostered an artistic and social bond among musicians that is carried out through a great variety of community-oriented projects all year long. This distinguishes Gatas y Vatas from other festivals and networks, which tend to be more loosely connected groups of artists who are geographically separated. As a natural extension of this community-oriented sentiment, throughout the year the Gatas organize a series of fundraising events to cover a variety of the festival's expenses—including an equal honorarium for each performer. While there is a very modest entrance fee to the festival, most of the fundraising is accomplished prior to the event and through various community ventures.

My involvement with Gatas y Vatas began in 2014, when I learned of its existence. Although the festival has gained a strong presence in the city—and to my knowledge is the only enterprise of its kind in the region—I learned of it not through the media but after becoming acquainted with Manny Rettinger, studio recording engineer and director of the Electric Ensemble at the University of New Mexico. Rettinger has become a patron of the experimental scene in town: he not only has been a key mentoring figure to a great majority of local experimental musicians but also has funded various projects, given away equipment, and allotted studio recording time—far beyond campus

activities.¹⁸ His use of contact microphones in musical instruments and other objects, as well as his invention of the “Chuppers” (electroacoustic instruments),¹⁹ has been very influential for the sound development of some of the core performers at Gatas y Vatas, in particular for Marisa Demarco, who is the founder and main organizer of the festival; Monica Demarco, her younger sister; and Tahnee Udero. Moreover, Rettinger’s adherence to the aesthetic of *rasquachismo*, which will be further discussed, has become core to the Gatas’s creative work. As Marisa says, “all roads lead to Manny.”²⁰

As I became acquainted with this community-oriented music scene that operates at the outskirts of institutional boundaries, some questions began to arise: to what extent is the experimental practice of particular performers associated with Gatas y Vatas shaped by a burqueña identity? In what ways does their creative output reflect individual positions regarding geographical and institutional borders? In what follows, I offer a closer discussion of the artistic trajectories of Marisa Demarco, Monica Demarco, and Tahnee Udero. Looking into these young women’s creative and performance decisions will help to grasp how becoming a Gata y Vata has granted them a degree of female empowerment. Their artistic output could be regarded as sites for negotiating gender identity, cultural background, and political outlook. To begin, I will address the creative work of Marisa Demarco, the primary force behind the festival. My angle of approach to her practice considers the ways she channels her journalistic vocation into her creative work. The ambivalent relationship Marisa has had with the traditional study of music performance in an academic setting—something she arguably shares with experimental musicians across genres—functions as a creative channel in which she subverts academic conventions from within. In addition, a closer look into Monica Demarco’s trajectory illustrates the ways the experimental practice of a Gata y Vata, while rooted in a gendered activism, challenges the geographical limits of the burqueña identity by embracing a level of identification with Hispanic women across the US-Mexico border. Finally, an examination of Tahnee Udero’s artistic choices renders visible the cultural complexities of being a Nuevomexicana; the autobiographical nature of her work exemplifies a type of experimentalism shaped by family history and personal memories of overcoming the cultural challenges of the region.

¹⁸ In spite of his seminal role as a local patron of experimental music, Manny Rettinger has been subject to marginalization from academic settings. Although he has taught courses in music and technology and directed ensembles of electroacoustic collective improvisation at the University of New Mexico, he has yet to receive official recognition as a member of the music faculty. This marginalized position might have made Rettinger’s creative endeavors look appealing to the circuits associated with the Gatas y Vatas network.

¹⁹ Photos and videos of Manny Rettinger’s Chuppers can be found in The Chuppers & UNM Electric Ensemble Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/The-Chuppers-UNM-Electric-Ensemble-127161606195/?ref=br_rs, accessed March 7, 2017. See also Manuel Rettinger’s personal YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7ZaTxfdapJGYR4Xk2r6VDg>, accessed September 10, 2016.

²⁰ Marisa Demarco, interview with the author, June 12, 2014. For the uninitiated in *rasquachismo*, see Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “*Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility*,” in *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo* (Phoenix: Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, 1989).

THE DEMARCO SISTERS: EXPERIMENTALISM BEYOND INSTITUTIONAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BORDERS

Both Marisa and Monica Demarco's professional endeavors have a strong community component: Marisa is a radio journalist for the local station affiliated with NPR, and Monica regularly organizes events for the benefit of children's music education as an extension of her piano studio. Both sisters graduated from the University of New Mexico and share the opinion that the most influential individual from their university years was Manny Rettinger, who became their mentor. They share with Rettinger an ambivalent position toward academic settings. Although Marisa started her undergraduate degree in music, she became frustrated with what she views as a very constrained system and switched to the women studies program.²¹ In the Music Department, she did not find faculty support to pursue her interest in extended techniques for the voice, much less in the use of microphones and other electronics in vocal performance. Disregarding this constriction, she pursued those routes independently with Rettinger's help. Although Marisa may have lacked official academic recognition as a performer and composer, years later she was invited to participate in the 2012 John Donald Robb Composers' Symposium, an event aimed to "bring internationally acclaimed composers to the University of New Mexico campus [for] one of the longest-running festivals of new music in the world."²² Coordinated by Christopher Shultis, then professor of composition, the 2012 symposium was planned as part of New Mexico Centennial celebrations and featured composers who either lived in the state or had spent significant time there.²³ Marisa accepted the invitation with surprise and a certain degree of hesitation. For the occasion she composed *Cardiac*, for voice and electronics, in which she explored her conflicting feelings toward traditional academic music performance settings. She used the same technological and stylistic aspects of this piece in her subsequent performances for *Gatas y Vatas*.²⁴

Cardiac focuses on some music students' practice of consuming beta blockers "to steady the hands and calm the nerves."²⁵ The commission and occasion for the piece's performance granted Marisa a space to critically engage with her conflictive experience in academic music, where, as she reports, emotional connection in performance was sacrificed in favor of technical proficiency. In her time as a music performance major she experienced an atmosphere of extreme competitiveness, which she witnessed as a self-deprecating process that led students to take beta blockers to dampen performance

²¹ Marisa graduated from the University of New Mexico in 2005 with a double major in women studies and creative writing and a minor in music.

²² "John Donald Robb," in *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Donald_Robb, accessed December 28, 2015.

²³ Christopher Shultis, program notes to Forty-First Annual John Donald Robb Composer's Symposium, University of New Mexico, March 22–31, 2012, <http://www.chrissultis.com/2741213-composers-symposium>, accessed February 3, 2017.

²⁴ Marisa Demarco, "Cardiac," <http://www.bigawatt.com/2013/08/29/cardiac/>, accessed June 24, 2015.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

anxiety.²⁶ Her journalistic drive led her to incorporate into this piece electronically manipulated fragments of interviews she conducted with music students at the University of New Mexico who had either used or considered using beta blockers during performances. She questioned her informants about the effects the drug had on them, and gathered their opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using it.

Bridging her experience as a journalist in voice editing with her experience as a composer of electronic music, Marisa starts her twenty-minute piece by manipulating the voices of the recorded interviews using two turntables. She alters the speed and range of the voices in such a way that it is impossible to recognize who is speaking. About a minute into the piece she takes a beta blocker pill from a little plastic bag, puts it in her mouth, and swallows it with a couple of sips of water. By taking the drug right there and then, she is making herself and the audience complicit in the performative act. While the electronic component continues to play, she uses tape to adhere a cardio microphone to her chest, which allows the audience to hear her heartbeat. The pulse, rendered audible by her microphoned heartbeat, provides a rhythmic layer to the electronic track reproducing the manipulated voices, which are now in the background. About five minutes into the piece the recorded voices are silenced, and as Marisa prepares to sing, all we hear is her regular heartbeat. She sustains a single pitch nonvibrato with an open vowel (“ah”) for about ten seconds, during which the cardiac rhythm increases in speed and volume. When her heartbeat returns to a regular speed, she repeats the vocalization for another ten seconds, and after another pause to regulate her heartbeat, she vocalizes again, this time raising the pitch a whole step. After this third utterance, the recorded voices enter again, and the audience hears the manipulated voices of anonymous informants reporting on how the audience reacts passively during a given performance. The sustained and repeated pitch sung by Marisa and accompanied by the sounds of her agitated heartbeat could be understood as a subversive action meant to purposefully disappoint audiences who might expect melodic lines coming out of the singer’s mouth while forcing them to hear the effect that the drug might be having on the singer’s internal organs.²⁷

Later in the piece Marisa turns down the chest microphone and tapes a second one to her neck. With this second microphone, she amplifies the sound of her breathing and humming, adding a layer of texture to the recorded voices. Slowly, she introduces a layer of distortion to her hummed track and diminishes the volume of the recorded voices. As the piece progresses, the only sounds we hear are those from the distorted loop of her microphoned neck and her humming. The level of saturation increases for the next couple of minutes, and then she turns on the chest microphone to add yet another layer of sound: her amplified heartbeat. This moment, which marks the climax of the piece in terms of saturation and intensity, is completely centered on the sounds produced not by her singing voice but through the amplification of the sounds

²⁶ Marisa Demarco, interview with the author, June 18, 2015.

²⁷ All interpretive and analytic observations of the music discussed in this essay are mine. The evaluative statements about the pieces and performances reflect my own subjective interpretations.

of her body. She silences the distortion and turns down her chest microphone, and all we hear is her heartbeat accelerated and multiplied with a loop. Hence, throughout the piece, the majority of the amplified sounds do not come through Marisa's mouth but from her internal organs. This is music not sung but *felt*; music produced *inside* the body. Her piece is a statement of a type of performance emotion that is completely visceral (it cannot be any other way) and confronts the notion of regarding the performer as a middleman, as someone who is *just* interpreting what someone else wanted—a restriction that characterized her experience with the academic study of music.

Cardiac renders audible the bodily mechanisms that make possible each and every sound produced by and in performance. By exposing the effects of using relaxing drugs, Marisa addresses her displeasure with academic systems that privilege sound over body in performance. The charge of emotionality that Marisa conveys in *Cardiac* might not be achieved from sung pitches but through bodily reactions to a drug made audible by technology. Hence, the climactic moment of *Cardiac* stresses that both composition and performance are not about a singing voice but a living body. Through electronic amplification and manipulation, Marisa centers her piece on what Roland Barthes calls the geno-song: "The bodily elements of vocal utterance" or the materiality of singing.²⁸ The transformation of the voice into an androgynous mechanized self subverts any preconceived notion of a "woman's voice." Taking a beta blocker on stage becomes a performatic act of resistance and protest, in which she makes herself and the audience complicit.²⁹ Moreover, she exposes the anxiety disorders that her informants have experienced in classical music performance through a performatic act realized inside an academic environment, achieving subversion from within.³⁰

As a reporter of KUNM (the local affiliated station of NPR) for its Public Health section, Marisa is heavily invested in investigating and reporting on everything that affects burqueños' well-being: from accounts of the consequences of certain public health legislations to stories about sexual assaults on the University of New Mexico campus and studies on the effects of the Trinity Test.³¹ Marisa's passion for burque leads her to use her creative work as an outlet with no censorship where she raises

²⁸ Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, introduction to Dunn and Jones, eds., *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–2. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1997), 181–183.

²⁹ Following Diana Taylor, I use the term "performatic," "to denote the adjectival form of the nondiscursive realm of performance." In this sense, performatic refers to the "theatrical" aspect of performance. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.

³⁰ Marisa Demarco's posture is exemplary of a "vernacular experimentalism," one that fights the system from the inside and on its own terms. See Tony Herrington, "Bad Thoughts on the Death of Mike Kelley," *Wire*, February 16, 2012, <http://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/themire/20884/bad-thoughts-on-the-death-of-mike-kelley>, accessed January 6, 2016.

³¹ On July 16, 1945, the United States Army detonated the world's first nuclear weapon in New Mexico (in the Jornada del Muerto Desert). The test's code name was Trinity, and it was conducted in secret. The health effects on residents living near the detonation have yet to become part of the public historical memory.

awareness of the challenges of the region. One such challenge is the severe drought resulting from climate change and global warming. In her piece *La Virga* (2013), for a group of six vocalists and Rettinger's invented electroacoustic instruments (Chuppers), Marisa incorporates excerpts of interviews she conducted with the vocalists in which they relate their memories of weather and weather events from their childhoods relative to how they perceive weather today. "Virga" is a meteorological term for rain that evaporates before it hits the ground, a particularly common phenomenon in the desert, where low humidity and high temperatures cause rain to evaporate quickly. Visually, virga creates colorful optical scenes: visible currents of wind and rain and brilliant sun pillars. It also creates longer droughts and hence increases the likelihood of natural fires. Some consider it the most common weather phenomenon of New Mexico: a promise of rain that doesn't reach the ground.

In this piece, Marisa's intention is not to document or explain this meteorological issue; she is interested in creating a sonorous tapestry with a backbone of burqueñ@s' childhood memories of *experiencing* weather. She weaves individual stories centered in the singers' subjectivities of geography and climate and bounces them back into the Chuppers, which are simultaneously activated by the vocalists' live singing. In this sense, she continues to challenge the traditional dichotomy between composer and performer—here the "performers" are the ones who create the sound material (interviews) and the content (their stories) of this piece. The collage, then, is formed collectively. Though it was not Marisa's conscious intention to use *La Virga* as a means of raising social awareness and offering political criticism, she does so through enacting performativity based on burque's everyday life and converts sound into a public act.³²

While Marisa has focused her creative trajectory on giving a voice to that which affects the local community, the creative output of her younger sister Monica has extended to a transnational level to voice a connection with women across the US-Mexico border. As part of her requirements as a composition student at the University of New Mexico, Monica wrote *Hijas de la Chingada* (Daughters of the Fucked Woman),³³ for voice, prepared piano, and tape, for a composition recital (2007)—a piece that earned her the Scott Wilkinson Music Theory and Composition Award and inclusion

³² The audio recording of *La Virga* is available at <https://soundcloud.com/bigawatt/la-virga>, accessed March 7, 2017.

³³ "La Chingada" has been regarded as the Mexican representation of motherhood: "es la madre que ha sufrido, de manera real o metafórica, la acción infamante del verbo que le da nombre." See Cristina González-Hernández, *Doña Marina (La Malinche) y la formación de la identidad mexicana* (Madrid: Encuentro Ediciones, 2002), 147. La Chingada is an alternative name for La Malinche (a Nahuatl woman who lived in the sixteenth century and played a role in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire; she became Hernán Cortés's mistress). In *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), Octavio Paz refers to Mexicans (mestizos) as the "Sons of La Malinche," the offspring of the rape victim (la chingada). Therefore, La Chingada is a term that exposes masculine aggressiveness and violence against the female gender. Gloria Anzaldúa and other Chicana@ writers have used the image of La Malinche/La Chingada as an empowering symbol of resistance to cultural hegemony and patriarchal domination: "Si, soy hija de la Chingada. I've always been her daughter." See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 39. See also Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art inside/outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the Cara Exhibition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

in the Robb Composers' Symposium 2008.³⁴ Although she may have first conceived this piece as a degree requirement in a specific university context, she continued to perform it at other venues (not necessarily academic) both in town and outside New Mexico.

Even though it had been eight years since she had written this piece, Monica became very upset while talking with me about *Hijas de la Chingada* on a summer afternoon of 2015. It was clear to me that the emotional and personal process she had gone through in the composition and performance of this piece still affected her in a profound way, and I was eager to understand why. Monica wrote *Hijas* soon after she learned about the events of what has been commonly referred to as “las muertas de Juárez,” the phenomenon of feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. For Monica, as for arguably all burqueñ@s, Juárez is not a foreign place; it’s a city just four hundred miles to the south. The murdered women are not aliens; “they could be our cousins, our sisters, our classmates,” Monica said.³⁵ To her, these murders do not belong in *another* country; they represent violence against women right on the other side of the same Rio Grande/Río Bravo that runs through New Mexico and Chihuahua.

For Monica, *Hijas de la Chingada* was much more than an enraged reaction to feminicide; it was also a call for action.³⁶ The three-movement piece became a strategy to create awareness of extreme gender-based violence against women that continues to happen across the border. Her attitude, common to all Gatas y Vatas, speaks of the reality of living on the borderlands: a site of struggle and identity negotiation where there is a constant subversion of the notion of north and south. As Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano have expressed, feminicide is the murder of women based on a gendered power structure that is both public and private. It is “systemic violence rooted in social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities.”³⁷ Monica’s *Hijas de la Chingada* is not just a musical piece *about* a local event in Juárez; it is a performatic enunciation that calls to attention the intersection of political subjugation of gender “with the cruelties of racism and economic injustices in local as well as global contexts.”³⁸ At every performance of this piece, Monica raised funds to be donated to a program that provided financial assistance to the victims’ families. Nonetheless, she stopped performing the piece after confronting

³⁴ Monica Demarco’s main composition advisor at the University of New Mexico was Christopher Schultis.

³⁵ Monica Demarco, interview with the author, June 6, 2015.

³⁶ I use the term “feminicide” following Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano. In the preface to *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas*, Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos writes: “I preferred feminicidio in order to differentiate from femicidio and to name the ensemble of violations of women’s human rights, which contain the crimes against and the disappearances of women. I propose that all these be considered as ‘crimes against humanity.’ Feminicide is genocide against women, and it occurs when the historical conditions generate social practices that allow for violent attempts against the integrity, health, liberties, and lives of girls and women.” See Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, eds., *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xv–xvi.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the indifference of audiences and the eventual elimination of the program to which she was donating.³⁹

Revisiting the piece's content and its context is, to Monica, a source of pain and hopelessness. Her affective reaction to the piece's reception comes from a conscious identification of herself as *una hija de la chingada*, one of them.⁴⁰ This feeling of collective identity is present in the very first line of the piece's text, written by her sister Marisa: "We see you—now," which is sung by a soprano in a "light and airy" A5 over the resonance left by a thick and aggressive sweep with a thumbnail inside the piano that opened the first movement. On the one hand the text creates an ambiguity of subject: the "we" could refer to both lyricist (Marisa) and composer (Monica), and the "you," ambiguously singular or plural, gives presence to the individual and collective hundreds of women whose lives have been forcefully taken away. A feeling of directness, simplicity, and urgency is created through the enunciation of the line "we see you," using the same pitch, and repeated twice. A third utterance of the line increases the registral space drastically (a major tenth) in order to introduce the addressee, "you," and locating the urgency in a continuous "now" (ex. 7.1).⁴¹

While listeners might not have access to the dramatic visual content of Monica's graphic score, she adds a graphic dimension to the live performance by incorporating three of her drawings, which are projected during live performances of all three movements. After the first line, the rest of Marisa's text in the first movement describes two angles of the story. One of them, which the soprano sings live, graphically describes a series of physical aggressions to the female body: "nipples bitten / breasts cut off / burned / char is skin / strangled." The other angle, which is reproduced by the tape playing in the background, puts in evidence the particular context of Juárez's maquiladoras and provides an identity to the initial "you"—a maquiladora: "RCA / General Motors / DuPont / General Electric / Ford / maquilas, that's 'factories,' that's Cortes / tariff-free / duty-free / women make better factory workers / maquiladoras, malinches / dexterous, patient / lesser wages / you, maquiladora." The superimposition of Marisa's recorded voice reading this text on the musical palette of the remainder of the movement provides the listener with two dimensions: the journalist side (reporting facts and identifying who, where, when, why) and the performer side, in which a

³⁹ Monica Demarco, interview with the author, June 6, 2015.

⁴⁰ By identifying herself as *una hija de la chingada*, Monica is following other Chicana artists and writers who have reappropriated this figure to redefine Chicana femininity. Calling herself *una hija de la chingada*, therefore, constitutes an act of empowerment. See Deborah L. Madsen, *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 9. See also note 34 here.

⁴¹ Audio and video recordings of *Hijas de la Chingada*, performed by Monica and Marisa Demarco at the University of New Mexico's Keller Hall on 2008, is available at Monica's website, <http://www.monicademarco.com/compositions-and-performances/compositions/las-hijas-de-la-chingada/>, accessed March 7, 2017.

EXAMPLE 7.1. Monica Demarco, *Hijas de la Chingada* (2007), movement 1, staves 1–2. Used by courtesy of Monica Demarco. Note the dramatic content of Monica’s colorful handwritten manuscript. It highlights an intentional crafting and an individual emotionalism on behalf of the composer. A colored image of this musical example can be found at the companion website for this book.

sense of personal connectivity is established between the performer (or listener for that matter) and the victims alluded to in the song. Moreover, in this movement both text and music establish a sense of multiplicity of voices and bodies that is represented by the presence of two performers on the stage (pianist and singer, which in the case of many performances was Monica and Marisa), by the recorded voice of Marisa, and by the body parts drawn in Monica’s images, projected on a big screen behind the performers (fig. 7.3).

Musically, the piercing sound of rapidly bowing the strings of the piano box with bass strings tied with ribbons provides an eerie accompaniment to the disjointed melody and screaming of the soprano in the first section. The second section, marked by the entrance of the recorded tape, starts by the repetition of the line “bruises are” also sung in the same pitch (A5), while the pianist also iterates the same pitch by plucking the A string inside the piano (“like a telegraph”). This mechanical aspect is then followed by another one: an oscillating motive (melisma) on the syllables “cri-es,” sung with a descending minor second (G#6–G6), where Monica indicates to the singer to “sing like a siren,” while both performers are bowing the strings of the piano box rapidly and furiously. In terms of timbre, the voice of the singer produces even more string vibrations, as she is singing into the piano box while she pulls the fish line. The singer speaks the last line, “we didn’t hear, but we see you,” ending the movement with spoken unaccompanied text. After a loud sung mimicking of a police/emergency siren, this last line brings the multiplicity of symbols and layers of meaning in the piece back



FIGURE 7.3. Monica Demarco, image to be projected during the performance of the first movement of *Las Hijas de la Chingada*. Used by courtesy of Monica Demarco.

to the purpose of its addressees: this piece is intended to give presence to them, “las muertas de Juárez.”

If the first movement creates a visual and sonorous image of collective voices and fragmented bodies (with an emphasis on the plural “you”), the second movement, much lighter and melodic in character, focuses on a contextualization of the “you”: a woman (a daughter, in this context) with specific physical qualities and personality traits, seen not only by her mother but also by a “he.” The text clearly identifies not only the gender of the assaulter but also the power dynamics operating in his mind: after all, she is “easy to find” (fig. 7.4). The entire stanza reads:

mamá dice que está muy bonita
he saw you



FIGURE 7.4. Monica Demarco, image to be projected during the performance of the second movement of *Hijas de la Chingada*, “Easy to Hold.” Used by courtesy of Monica Demarco.

skin so dark like hers
 slender
 hair long, you are sweet and
 he saw you
 working
 pretty, easy to find
 mamá dice que está bonita y obediente
 skin so dark, skin like hers

The language exchange in this stanza makes reference to a reality of living in the US-Mexico border, where it is common for first-generation Latin@s to switch to Spanish when talking to their parents or about them, and alludes as well to a cultural identification that both Demarco sisters share as *hispanas* living in the border. Musically, the movement travels from a light and somewhat playful beginning to a passage of trills in both piano and voice that intensify in volume and register, while the text announces the presence of the male observer (see ex. 7.2).

EXAMPLE 7.2. Demarco, *Hijas de la Chingada*, movement 2, staves 7–8. Used by courtesy of Monica Demarco. A colored image of this musical example can be found at the companion website for this book.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for two parts: Soprano and Piano. The Soprano part has lyrics: "ea sy pre-ety pre-ety pre-ety he sua gor". The Piano part has performance instructions: "* Soprano trills and accented until it becomes vibrato, into vocal slide" and "* keep contour, rhythm is free". The score is written on four staves, with the Soprano part on the top two and the Piano part on the bottom two. There are various musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The third and final movement also presents two superimposed dimensions: one that emulates the job context of working in a maquila, which involves “mechanical” repetitions, and another dimension that centers on numbers: the number of years of feminicides, the number of bodies, the number of maquilas on the border, and an exposé of the ambiguity of the count:

10 years
 500 bodies
or so
no one counted exactly
 hundreds missing
 400 maquilas on the border
or so
no one counted

In the Demarco sisters’ performance, Monica steps forward from the piano and enunciates the lines placed in italics—perhaps to corroborate the ambiguity alluded in the text, while Marisa sings the rest. Projected on the screen is Monica’s drawing of a field covered with a multitude of crosses in a landscape that could resemble multiple sites, including Albuquerque (fig. 7.5).

This sense of identification and recognition the Demarco sisters experienced with *las muertas de Juárez* was intensified some years later by the event the media labeled the West Mesa Murders, when multiple bones of eleven women were found, in 2009, in a neighborhood close to where the Demarco sisters grew up in Albuquerque.⁴² In looking at the photos of the victims, Marisa recalls that they resembled the young women she used to look up to when she was in middle school and high school: the “badass” girls, the *vatas* who looked cool, strong and liberated, representing all that

⁴² For more information about the West Mesa Murders, see the Special Report conducted by Robert Browman and Nicole Perez, “West Mesa Murders,” *Albuquerque Journal*, <https://www.abqjournal.com/community-data/west-mesa-murders>, accessed March 7, 2017.



FIGURE 7.5. Monica Demarco, image to be projected during the performance of the third movement of *Hijas de la Chingada*, “No One Counted.” Used by courtesy of Monica Demarco.

Marisa wanted to be.⁴³ I could hear Monica’s pain and frustration when she said: “This continues on. This horrible thing is happening and it will keep happening. And then it happened in our own backyard.”⁴⁴

To end *Hijas de la Chingada*, Monica and Marisa—composer and lyricist—recite in unison the last lines of the text: “We see you / what’s left / we see you.” By opening and closing this piece and acting as a powerful lyric motive throughout the work, the phrase “we see you” creates a sense of connectivity with female bodies and voices. Even though Monica recalls audiences responding to her piece by saying “Well, this is Mexico’s problem, not ours,” she cannot see it as such.⁴⁵ There is a cultural and geographical realization that those women are like the vatas Marisa wanted to be like, “skin so dark, skin like hers.” *Hijas* raises awareness of how often human rights for nonwhite communities are ignored and exposes the criminalization and invisibilization of working-class women of color. Monica’s piece is not only about an event in

⁴³ Marisa Demarco, interview with the author, June 18, 2015. In response to the Mesa murders, Marisa wrote *Lemons with Salt* (2012), a hip-hop experimental song that explores her experiences of growing up in Barelmas, a neighborhood in the South Valley, where she was surrounded by cool cholos, whom she regards as her childhood heroes. See <https://bigawatt.bandcamp.com/track/lemons-with-salt-3>, accessed March 15, 2017.

⁴⁴ Marisa Demarco, interview with the author, June 18, 2015.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Juárez; it also calls to attention the intersection of gender subjugation with the cruelties of racism and economic injustices on both sides of the border.⁴⁶ In *Hijas de la Chingada* Monica maps a sonic geography that takes a charged political and ethical stance against adherence to essentialized views of nation-state borders.

The level of identification Monica felt with *las muertas de Juárez* led her to ponder about substances that are common to all human beings beyond skin color, race, and other socially constructed identifiers that are at the root of discrimination. For *Gatas y Vatas 2013* Monica composed *Protein*, for voice, electric cello, and electronics, a work for which she wrote a poem that exposes a message of impermanence, recycling, and the unity of all beings. Musically, *Protein* unfolds as a huge arch. The piece begins with a solo female voice (Monica's) singing an unaccompanied modal melody that opens up the register and is later followed by the entrance of an electric cello. A series of boom boxes play tape recordings of the main cello melody at different time intervals to create the effect of a phase cloud. At around the midpoint of the piece the voice disappears to give room to a passage of further electronic distortion and cello harmonics. Toward the end of the piece the voice comes back, repeating the line "there will be a day" like a mantra, accompanied by distorted electronics.⁴⁷ It is not hard to interpret the incessant repetition of that line as representing Monica's attitude of hope for a day when equality of all beings is reached.

For the performance, Monica paints her partially naked body to depict the muscle formations and places behind her a mural she painted of a pig prepared for *la matanza* (butchering ceremony).⁴⁸ She extends the concept of humans' unity with the animals by bringing onto the stage a dog she feeds chicken to. Through her painted nakedness, she exposes multiple contradictions in the political histories of gendered bodies in experimental practices. Her performance could be viewed as a social commentary on how marginalized women construct their own empowerment and challenge restrictive social hierarchies.⁴⁹

TAHNEE UDERO: SOUNDING GEOGRAPHY OF MEMORY, FAMILY,
AND THE DESERT

Tahnee Udero has made a name for herself as a New Mexican noise artist. Her work has appeared on several occasions in the Ten Best Noise Tracks listed by *the Village Voice*,

⁴⁶ Fregoso and Bejarano, *Terrorizing Women*, 5.

⁴⁷ The complete poem by Monica Demarco reads: "all of my love is impermanent / there will be a day / when my calcium, / my protein / are recycled / for you / these tendons, / these teeth, / and all my love / for you."

⁴⁸ *Matanza* is a ceremony of animal butchering, very common in New Mexico.

⁴⁹ There is no video footage of *Protein*, but at Monica's personal website one could find the audio of the live performance during *Gatas y Vatas 2013*, as well as a couple of images of her mural and painted body work. See <http://www.monica-demarco.com/compositions-and-performances/compositions/protein/>, accessed March 7, 2017.

where her album *Xila* was ranked number 2 in 2013 and her album *Born in Space* was ranked number 9 in 2014. Moreover, *Xila* was ranked number 1 in Best of 2013: Noise by *Magnet*. Udero's path to finding her own voice in this genre came through the back door, by "messing around" with her boyfriend's electric guitar pedals. She recalls that while her boyfriend Rene was rehearsing with his all-male group, she and the other band members' girlfriends would play around with the musical and electronic equipment, making sound collectively with whatever they had around: instruments, microphones, an assortment of guitar pedals, and so on. Eventually, they decided to form an all-girls band.⁵⁰ It was in this playful and intimate environment that Udero began to feel comfortable and safe to freely explore noise. For her, noise became an opportunity to venture into a realm of "no expectations" for imagining and reinventing family traditions: "Noise started to feel like something I could do, a great learning opportunity and outlet for me."⁵¹ For her debut at Gatas y Vatas, in 2011, Udero ventured to create noise as a solo artist, and adopted the artistic name TAHNZZ.

Udero regards performing as a kind of ritual, closely interwoven with folk myths associated with Hispanic New Mexicans. When performing, she becomes La Curandera. She arranges her performing gear as an altar, with a variety of religious candles, idols, herbs, and sarapes; objects that carry a strong religious symbolism. Her curandera subjectivity is a place for female human agency. She makes herself look old by painting wrinkles on her face, hence critiquing mainstream social codes that praise the beauty of the young while discarding the old.⁵² All those in attendance witness a ritual in which noise carries the power of sacredness. As La Curandera, Udero repositions decolonial narratives by embodying female subjectivities that re-create rituals from before the institutionalization of the US-Mexico border.⁵³

Udero's creative work blurs and subverts the normative positioning of north and south. For the cover of *Xila*, she created her own version of Graciela Iturbide's photograph "Mujer ángel, Desierto de Sonora, México" (1979), which shows a Seri Indian woman walking in the desert of Sonora, Mexico, carrying a tape recorder in her hand.⁵⁴ Udero recognizes the landform depicted in Iturbide's photograph as the one she grew

⁵⁰ The newly created "noisy girls" group Baby Shampoo began performing in Albuquerque and had their first festival appearance at Titwrench Festival in Denver in 2010. Founded in 2009, Titwrench—an all-female music festival—inspired Marisa Demarco to create Gatas y Vatas and has functioned as an "older sister" to the burque event.

⁵¹ Tahnee Udero, in discussion with the author, June 5, 2014.

⁵² Additional photos of Udero performing as La Curandera are available at the companion website for this book.

⁵³ This type of performativity, one that is associated with a genealogy of Amerindian "shamanism," is, of course, not unique to Udero's practice. The need to establish a bond with that which is "ancestral" permits a performance of the Other and has been present in a variety of countercultural movements since the mid-twentieth century. Performing indigeneity is commonly found in the work of other Latin American "noisers" and broadly in music scenes associated with psychedelia, trance, and rave. Thanks to Susan Campos Fonseca for pointing this out.

⁵⁴ Iturbide's "Mujer ángel, Desierto de Sonora, México," belongs to the SFMOMA collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the image's permanent URL is <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2007.231>, accessed March 7, 2017.



FIGURE 7.6. Cover of album *Xila* (2013) showing Tahnee Udero's rendition of Iturbide's "Mujer ángel." Photograph by Szu-Han Ho. Used by courtesy of Tahnee Udero.

up in, and she sees herself as the woman walking in the desert; to her, there is no geopolitical distinction (fig. 7.6).

Noise critics praise the sonic openness of the sparse texture of Udero's noise work and readily associate that aspect of her work with an imaginary vision of the New Mexican desert. Although that association could be deemed superficial, the vastness of the desert has indeed been of key importance to Udero's conceptualization of her noise work. Moreover, in Udero's visualization, what matters is what happens in and through the desert; the desert becomes a metaphor for personal journey and community migration.⁵⁵ In Udero's imagination, she embraces her Indian ancestry by imagining herself as Iturbide's Seri woman crossing the desert. At the same time, that personification is loaded with a constructed memory of a past time when her Mexican grandmother, Josefa Puentes, as a young girl, crossed the desert, carrying her siblings, to the other side of the Rio Grande. Her family story is entwined with the complex and conflictive history that has characterized relationships among the Native Americans, Mexicans, and Euro-Anglos sharing New Mexican land.⁵⁶

The name "Xila" is recorded in the seventeenth-century journal written by Franciscan missionary Alfonso de Benavides and describes a land inhabited by Apaches and now known as Gila, a rural community northwest of Silver City, New Mexico. In the booklet that accompanies her album, Udero prints the word "GILA" and with her handwriting

⁵⁵ Conceptually, Udero's work is connected to a genealogy of experimental musicians who associate their artistic journeys with a journey crossing the desert. See footnote 15 here.

⁵⁶ I am aware of the common invisibilization of other ethnicities in New Mexico, but my intention here is to emphasize that Udero's work highlights the tension among these cultural groups in particular.



FIGURE 7.7. Tahnee Udero's *Xila* (2013), released on cassette tape inserted into a handmade *costalito*, along with a matchbox with a milagro inside, and a small chapbook with images of the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico. Photograph by Szu-Han Ho. Used by courtesy of Tahnee Udero.

superimposes the letter *X* over the letter *G* as a subversive decolonizing act of reappropriation (fig. 7.7).⁵⁷ To Udero, this act is both political and personal, for it is closely connected to her family history.

The programmatic titles that Udero assigns to each of the four tracks of her album *Xila* emphasize aspects of the historical conflicts among the communities that make up her ethnic background. The first track is titled "In Front of the End People," the English translation of *Bedonkohe* ("in front at the end people"), the name of an Apache tribe.⁵⁸ In choosing this title, Udero is honoring the tribe of her paternal grandfather and more specifically one of the tribe's chiefs, Mangas Coloradas, a leading figure in the history of Santa Rita del Cobre—a town where Udero's grandparents lived,

⁵⁷ Robert Julian, *The Place Names of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 147. It is now believed that *gila* is a Spanish corruption of an Indian word. For the entry "Gila," Julian writes: "The origin of this name is problematic. It almost certainly is a Spanish corruption of an Indian word, and the tribe most likely is Apache, for they are the Indians who in historic times inhabited the Gila region." Udero consulted this source when deciding on the title for her piece. "Gila" is also a Hispanic pronunciation of *dzil*, the Navajo and Apache word for mountain. I thank Enrique Lamadrid for pointing this out.

⁵⁸ Donald L. Fixico, ed., *Treaties with American Indians: An Encyclopedia of Rights, Conflicts and Sovereignty*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 7.

outside present-day Silver City.⁵⁹ Mangas Coloradas lived from about 1790 to 1863, a time of great upheaval and multiple wars among Apaches and Mexicans, Mexicans and Anglos, and Anglos and Apaches.⁶⁰ He fought relentlessly to keep the invaders (both Mexicans and Anglos) out of Apache territory. In the 1830s, driven by a hatred of Mexicans, Mangas Coloradas allowed Anglos to stay in Santa Rita, which turned up to be an atrocious mistake that led to the infamous Johnson massacre, where twenty or more Apaches were killed by a group of Anglo settlers led by John Johnson in April 1837, near Santa Rita.⁶¹

In terms of its sonorous content, “In Front of the End People” presents disjointed bursts and moments of static interference that could be compared to distorted human voices woven in spirals of sound. If this track suggests the conflict between Apaches, Mexicans, and Anglos—as conflated in Udero’s internal identity struggle—the second track, “Badlands Walk,” alludes to the dangerous beauty of the desert as a metaphor for a life journey. Explaining the conceptualization of this track in relation to “Mujer ángel,” Udero says: “Hers is not a romanticized walk. There’s going to be struggle, not glamour. She’s not walking in the garden, you know?”⁶² While the track is based on layers of drones, Udero uses accents that resemble the sound produced by rattlesnakes. There are moments of apparent expansion that are suddenly interrupted by explosive torrents of aggressive sound. Carrying a depiction of the physical challenges found in New Mexico, the third track, “The Year of the Fire,” creates awareness of the multiple fires caused by constant drought in this territory. The extreme fire conditions were particularly intense during the three years prior to 2013, when the album *Xila* was released. Perhaps in an attempt to express in sound the way wildfires affect the atmosphere of New Mexican lands, Udero decided to end her album with the most sonorously intense and forceful track, “Hacheta.” In this track, the layers of sound gradually increase in volume and texture until they reach a total saturation. The word *hacheta* is a diminutive form of *hacha* (axe), an instrument that historically was used as a weapon to break the armor covering enemy soldiers’ bodies.⁶³ Using the diminutive form of the word was a conscious choice; as Udero expresses: “I wanted the weapon to be in proportion to my size.”⁶⁴ By positioning herself as the *mujer ángel* who travels in the desert with a *hacheta* in hand, she uses her noise work as an empowering tool that reaches beyond her self in order to reveal the conflicts that have characterized cultural exchanges rooted in ethnic differences. In this way, her noise work also

⁵⁹ For more information about Santa Rita’s history, see Christopher J. Huggard and Terrence M. Humble, *Santa Rita del Cobre: A Copper Mining Community in New Mexico* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶¹ The succession of events that surround the legend of the Johnson massacre has been disputed among historians. For a general account of the massacre and the role Mangas Coloradas played on it, see Edwin R. Sweeney, *Mangas Coloradas: Chief of the Chiricahua Apaches* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

⁶² Tahnee Udero, interview with the author, July 27, 2015.

⁶³ *Diccionario de la lengua castellana: La Academia Española*, 6th ed. (1822).

⁶⁴ Tahnee Udero, interview with the author, July 27, 2015.

challenges romanticized notions of New Mexico as a “Land of Enchantment” where ethnic conflicts are veiled by political strategies that insist on the state’s tricultural “harmony” among Anglo, Hispanic, and Native American. This idealized view is propagated throughout the web: several internet sites, including that of the New Mexico Secretary of State, advertise the state as “a mosaic where various cultural ingredients intermingle and complement each other, while each retains its basic identity.”⁶⁵

The complexities behind Udero’s family history, particularly in regard to ethnicity, are interwoven with histories of New Mexican lands. Following the belief that “noise takes you to a certain place,” Udero re-creates local topographies through sonorous *curanderismo*.⁶⁶ She named her 2014 album *Born in Space* after the Society of People Born in Space, an organization formed by the ex-residents of Santa Rita, New Mexico—the hometown of her grandparents. Like most families of Santa Rita, they were workers of the Chino Mine, an open-pit copper mine that has been operating since 1910. In the 1950s and 1960s the mine underwent such extensive expansion that the residents of Santa Rita were forced to move out of town and the entire community was displaced. By 1970, Santa Rita no longer existed. Udero’s grandparents moved to Bayard, a small town nearby. In the 1970s, dislocated families formed the Society of People Born in Space as a strategy to maintain a community bond and remembrance.

For her YouTube video *Born in Space*, Udero excerpts historical video footage of 1920s Santa Rita and incorporates her noise work as the soundtrack.⁶⁷ Her noise music brings history and geography to public attention and constructs a critical consciousness where witnessing produces power. In *Born in Space* she weaves a tapestry of her family history, which is one of deportation, displacement, devotion, and resilience. At its downloadable site, *Born in Space* contains audio, image, and text files, arranged in the form of a virtual exhibit.⁶⁸ Udero wants the listener (or the visitor of the exhibit) to enter not only a sonorous dimension but also a spectrum of cultural and family history. Her multimedia exhibit consists of two noise tracks, several images of topographic maps showing how the expansion of the pit assaulted the landscape and evaporated a community, a copy of a scholarly study documenting the history of the Society of People Born in Space, and a photo of a bill of sale of Udero’s grandmother’s purchase of her house.

⁶⁵ New Mexico Secretary of State, Hispanic Culture, http://www.sos.state.nm.us/Kids_Corner/Hispanic_Culture.aspx, accessed March 15, 2017. This phrase is used on several websites that highlight New Mexico as a tourist destination.

⁶⁶ Tahnee Udero, interview with the author, June 5, 2014.

⁶⁷ This YouTube video of *Born in Space* is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mJhgpJ-clQ, accessed March 7, 2017. The caption Udero wrote for the piece, published at deepwhitesound.com, an international online exhibition platform of experimental audio, reads: “The sounds and images collected here represent a time and place that no longer exists. Santa Rita is part of my family history—its environmental, economic, and social history. It’s a place that faded away until it finally vanished. Few artifacts endure; they remain born in space.” See “DWS139: Tahnzz – Born in Space,” <http://deepwhitesound.com/dws139/>, accessed March 7, 2017.

⁶⁸ *Born in Space* can be downloaded here: <http://deepwhitesound.com/dws139/>.

In terms of sonorous content, *Born in Space* gives the impression of being an “artifact” born in a vacuum, or “in a space, for the sound goes from the mixer straight to the recording device. There is no room sound.”⁶⁹ The first track, “Artifact 1,” creates what seems to be a manipulated rendition of imaginary sounds produced by machinery used in mining. The track begins with three layers that increase in intensity. Irregular pulses are introduced, and texture changes are caused by “wind-like” crescendos and decrescendos. The sonorous material could bring to mind the distortion produced by the big heavy machinery used in open-pit mines (large dump truck hauling copper); the articulations are taken slowly, and the register never achieves significantly high ranges. A very different soundscape is found in “Artifact 2,” a track that could be subdivided into four distinct sections: a first section characterized by a layer of arched glissandi of a fluttering effect covering the upper range; a permanent drone; and two layers of scattered noises, one of which is a shuffling motive of three distinct ascending sounds. The glissandi disappear, and another layer of static is loudly introduced—this one resembles the sound produced by a truck in motion. Around minute 3 into the track, we hear a motive (labeled for convenience motive A) with a very clear repeated pitch and rhythm content superimposed on the drone layer and other accents. This motive is given volume and strength, and its regularity tricks the listener into a certain predictability, a known territory (ex. 7.3).⁷⁰

EXAMPLE 7.3. Tahnee Udero, *Born in Space* (2014), transcription of “Artifact 2,” motive A.



This motive is carried until after minute 5, when it disappears and the track transitions into a much more unstable section (in terms of predictability). This section of the track is what Udero uses as soundtrack for the three-minute video she created using the historical video footage of Santa Rita.⁷¹ While the historical footage largely concentrates on images of the open-pit mine, the portions she selects for her video are those showing life in the town: streets, houses, mine workers, children playing, animals. Only toward the end does she incorporate images of the machinery utilized in the open-pit mine. At this point, Udero’s track transitions to another section, which corresponds to the place in the video footage that concentrates on images of the mine. Therefore, more than just a soundtrack, Udero’s work could be understood as a sonorous retelling

⁶⁹ Tahnee Udero, interview with the author, July 27, 2015.

⁷⁰ The transcriptions of the motives of Udero’s *Born in Space* are meant to highlight certain musical qualities. It should be understood that, given that it is a noise track, all pitches and rhythms are inexact.

⁷¹ The historical footage of Santa Rita, dated 1927 and uploaded to YouTube by the University of Idaho Library’s channel, is titled “Ray-Chino Mining Co., Santa Riata Mine, Silver City, New Mexico.” Only images are preserved, no sound. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlbZy6ZWECM>, accessed September 1, 2015.

of the passing of time in Santa Rita; of how any “predictability” of life in Santa Rita during the 1920s was taken away when Chino Mine Company decided to expand the open-pit mine and to discharge an entire community. The resilience of this displaced community prompted them to keep certain bonds by creating the Society of People Born in Space. Perhaps in the interest of retelling this story, Udero transitions from this section to one that presents a motive (B) that could be regarded as “spatial”; the texture is thinner, and a very disjunctive and high-pitched motive, outlining a tritone, makes an appearance. This is the only motive of pitch-content that is based on a dissonant interval, which emphasizes its distinctiveness (see ex. 7.4).

EXAMPLE 7.4. Udero, *Born in Space*, transcription of “Artifact 2,” motive B.



Motive B is carried throughout until about minute 8, when the layer that resembles that of a truck engine increases in volume and transitions into a last section, with another distinct melodic ostinato (in a minor mode) given to a low synthesized range (motive C). With this ostinato, the track is driven to its conclusion (see ex. 7.5).

EXAMPLE 7.5. Udero, *Born in Space*, transcription of “Artifact 2,” motive C.



It is hard not to associate the sonorous trajectory of this track with Udero’s perception of the history of the town of her grandparents, a history of displacement where mechanisms of economic power forever changed the landscape of a region and the future of a community. By granting sonorous and visual recognition to a lost town, Udero is critiquing US economic strategies that have oppressed minorities throughout history.

For Udero, the distribution of her noise tracks is not just an operational process; it is a process charged with cultural and personal significance. Instead of circulating conventional CD copies, she carefully prepares her noise work using an assortment of crafts. For instance, she released her album *Xila* using cassette tape, which could be regarded as the “object” reproduced in the cassette recording carried through the desert by the *mujer ángel*, as embodied by Udero. Each tape is placed inside a small cloth cover, a *costalito* (a woven sack used by farmers to collect produce). By using cassette tape—an old-fashioned sound carrier—as the medium of distribution of her noise work, Udero is adhering to an aesthetic of recycling that is characteristic of *rasquachismo*—which is also present in Rettinger’s invented Chuppers. *Rasquachismo*, from the word *rasquache*—‘lower class’, ‘vulgar’, or of ‘bad taste’—is a concept

developed by scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto to describe a Chicano artistic sensibility that, from the perspective of the ‘underdog’, is also “a form of resistance incorporating strategies of appropriation, reversal, and inversion.”⁷² In rasquachismo, according to Amalia Mesa-Bains, “the irreverent and spontaneous are employed to make the most from the least. In rasquachismo one takes a stance that is both defiant and inventive. Aesthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials In its broadest sense, it is a combination of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and persevere with a sense of dignity.”⁷³ More specifically, Udero’s aesthetic posture resembles the performance methodology that artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña labels “techno-rascuache,” where strategies of recycling and recontextualizing ideas are core to a performance methodology.⁷⁴

Udero’s strategy of appropriation of an obsolete technology functions as an act of resistance against neocolonial models that associate technology and science with white men while marginalizing women and people of color as far removed from any technological advancements. Her position echoes that of another Chicana New Mexican artist, Marion C. Martinez, whose artwork makes a statement about recycling technology, specifically computer hardware, parts of machines, and discarded electronic parts.⁷⁵ Contextualizing Martinez’s aesthetics as representative of “Chicanafuturism,” Catherine S. Ramirez explains: “[Hispanics] appear to have changed very little over the centuries and seem to occupy a world older than and separate from the white, capitalist, mechanized, and/or digitized world of modernity and postmodernity. In particular, by virtue of being associated with the preindustrial and predigital, they are often deemed incapable of understanding, mastering, or even living with science and technology, signifiers of the present and future Hispanos have been excluded from the world of science, technology, and reason, and confined to the domain of superstition, mythology, and intuition.”⁷⁶ The exclusion of Hispan@s from the technological world

⁷² Book synopsis, <https://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/THEARCHIVE/FullRecord/tabid/88/doc/845510/language/en-US/Default.aspx>, accessed March 7, 2017. See Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility,” in *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo* (Phoenix: Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, 1989), 5–8.

⁷³ Amalia Mesa-Bains, “Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana *Rasquachismo*,” in Gabriela F. Arredondo et al., eds., *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 300.

⁷⁴ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 47. The aesthetics of “techno-rascuache” has parallels with what some scholars have called “Afrofuturism” and “Chicanafuturism,” movements that expose the racist ideologies of systems of colonialism that “cast people of color as ‘primitive’ and therefore incompatible with progress and technology.” See Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson with the Corazones del Westside, “Actos del corazón: Las sabias—Bridging the Digital Divide, and Redefining Historical Preservation,” in Andrew J. Jolivet, ed., *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 144. See also Alondra Nelson, ed., *Afrofuturism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Catherine S. Ramirez, “Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33, no. 1 (2008): 185–194.

⁷⁵ Clara Román-Odio, *Sacred Iconographies in Chicana Cultural Production* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 114.

⁷⁶ Catherine S. Ramirez, “Deux ex Machina: Tradition, Technology, and the Chicanafuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez,” *Aztlán* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 63–64.

and their response of adhering to an aesthetic of recycling is particularly relevant in the context of New Mexico, a place that became both “a dumping ground”—in Ramírez’s words, “on July 16, 1945, when scientists from Los Alamos National Laboratory detonated the world’s first atomic explosion at the Trinity Test Site”—and home to “the nation’s first subterranean storehouse for defense-generated, transuranic waste.”⁷⁷ Therefore, by reintegrating technological waste as artistic product, both Martínez and Udero are contesting colonial paradigms and at the same time bringing a sense of healing to the land.

For a subsequent release of *Xila*, Udero used matchboxes with the image of her impersonation of the *mujer ángel* printed on the outside, and she included several items inside: a single match, a small piece of paper with the download code,⁷⁸ and a *milagro*—a small object, usually metallic, depicting something for which a miracle is sought (fig. 7.7). Believing in miracles granted by prayers or offerings is ingrained in the majority of Hispanic Catholics from early childhood.⁷⁹ The votive offerings (*ex-votos*, Latin “from a vow”) are connected with petitions regarding diseases, disabilities, injuries or other misfortunes, and protection but can also represent thanksgiving. *Milagros* are usually left in public places and are meant to fulfill a vow to God or a saint. In this way, Udero links the sonorous and physical dimensions of her creativity with a religious symbolism often present in Chicana cosmology. “Among believers in prayer, [*milagros*] are simply a way of giving that prayer—whether of petition or of thanksgiving—a tangible form. They are, in short, artifacts of faith.”⁸⁰

Milagros come in a wide range of shapes; from parts of the body (arms, legs, hearts—usually representing parts of the body that need healing) to animals and various sacred icons. There is no consensual interpretation of each *milagro*; its owner or carrier can assign a symbolism appropriate to a particular need. The *milagro* included in the set of *Xila* I own has the shape of two eyes. This particular *milagro* has been used not only as a prayer for healing various eye conditions but also as a prayer for protection, as the eyes represent a spirit watching over.⁸¹ To me, Udero’s *milagro* carries this twofold promise: healing for the New Mexican land, marked by a double colonial history resulting in contentious ethnic conflicts, and protection for the countless *mujeres ángeles* who cross the desert in search of a better life.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 66. This subterranean storehouse, named the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), is located approximately 26 miles east of Carlsbad, New Mexico. It is the nation’s only repository for the disposal of nuclear waste. See <http://www.wipp.energy.gov/wipprecovery/about.html>.

⁷⁸ Printed inside the matchbox is also the website of the experimental music label SickSickSick, founded by sound artist Raven Chacon. Chacon has provided significant support to individual and collective endeavors of some of the musicians associated with *Gatas y Vatas*, and is a seminal figure in Albuquerque’s experimental music scene.

⁷⁹ Eileen Oktavec, *Answered Prayers: Miracles and Milagros along the Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 28.

⁸⁰ Bernard L. Fontana, foreword to Oktavec, *Answered Prayers*, xiv.

⁸¹ For more information about *milagros*, see Eileen Oktavec, *Answered Prayers: Miracles and Milagros Along the Border* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1995).

Udero charges her work with a strong dose of significance; her noise work is a testimony to histories of geographies, communities, and beliefs and, in a more immediate way, of her personal journey. In the context of *Gatas y Vatas*, her performances as *La Curandera* allow listeners to participate in a ritual where noise takes you to a certain place, an intimate space of memory, confrontation, and cultural belonging.

GATAS Y VATAS: AND THE FIESTA GOES ON

For the *Gatas* the festival is like Christmas: a holiday they look forward to all year long.⁸² The expectation of who will perform and what will happen thrills these performers. Their shared commitment to a “DIY” aesthetic, in the words of Cecilia McKinnon (*Star Canyon*), a *Gata y Vata*, has allowed for a “spirit of self-reliance” that “promotes intergenerationality in the music scene.”⁸³ *Gatas y Vatas* has fostered the creation of an artistic and social bond among musicians who have experienced marginalization. But *Gatas y Vatas* is more than an annual music festival; it is a network. The performers associated with it collaborate in a great variety of events and participate in musical activities throughout the year, either in musical groups or individually. According to another *Gata*, Gena Lawson (*Anna Mall*), the festival “truly is a work of love from our entire community helping us make it come together.”⁸⁴ A palpable consequence of this network has been the significant increase in the participation of women in the local music scene. In Albuquerque, women are on stage now more than ever, thanks largely to this venture. Being associated with this group has empowered performers to take other stages on their own. In the words of Mauro Lorraine Woody (*Lady Uranium*), “*Gatas* is real because we believe in its power and magic. It has been a collective dream.”⁸⁵

The perceived expressive safety at *Gatas* is an integral component of the festival and one often highlighted by the performers themselves. The embracing and supportive attitude of both *Gatas* and the audience causes performers to take risks they would not take otherwise. Antonia Montoya (*Alonerly*), a *Gata y Vata*, explains:

I’ve heard the voices of women bring syrupy melodies, high-pitched screeching, wailing, deep rumbling sounds, comedic banter and rapping. The performers

⁸² Mauro Lorraine Woody, e-mail message to the author, August 2, 2015.

⁸³ Cecilia McKinnon, e-mail message to the author, August 15, 2015. The prominence of technological expertise among the musicians associated with *Gatas y Vatas* is a result of their adherence to the DIY aesthetic. Their remarkable dexterity in the use and adaptation of electronic devices should be underscored as an overt contestation of the assumed male gender of everything technological.

⁸⁴ Gena Lawson, e-mail message to the author, August 1, 2015. This community support is evident in that all festival ventures are solely funded by the community. In this regard *Gatas y Vatas* presents a very unique situation: the festival is a noncommercial institution that is *not* directly associated with the academy. It stands at the outskirts of both accredited institutions and the commercial market while keeping a kind of durability and expectancy possessed by institutions. I thank Benjamin Piekut for his remarks on this issue.

⁸⁵ Mauro Lorraine Woody, e-mail message to the author, August 2, 2015.

climb up on stage alone, expose their creativity, and the audience makes it the safest place for that creativity to be exposed . . . Many of us draw a lot of inspiration from it—thanks to its safe and accepting environment, where women help one another, expect great things from one another, take risks, grow, and share, in community. When it's your time, you are on stage alone with your creativity. That's a woman's place I never thought I would call home.⁸⁶

The practices of Gatas y Vatas map trajectories of marginalized performers, regardless of their social status, ethnicity, and age. Not only is this network an urgent response to the predominant male domination of the stages of experimental music scenes (or arguably any music scene for that matter) but also a call for awareness of injustices that permeate all areas of society.

As Benjamin Piekut has noted, experimentalism is a grouping, not a group; it is not what is described but what is *performed* as experimental.⁸⁷ The musicians associated with Gatas y Vatas perform experimentalism while largely embracing a burqueño pride. Their musical expressions are intrinsically connected to a sense of a local place and a local community. While embodying a “burqueño pride,” Gatas resist the racist, classist, and sexist stance of mainstream society, at both local and global levels. Their performative utterances of decolonization could be understood in the context of what Peter García calls a “fiesta of egalitarianism.” “In this process of de-colonization,” García says, “Nuevo mexicana/os actively resist the consequences of political, territorial, aesthetic, intellectual, cultural, religious, and linguistic colonization.”⁸⁸ From the margins of the margins, the festival Gatas y Vatas proposes a community-oriented experimentalism centered on female empowerment and, by doing so, extends an invitation to us to imagine alternative versions of egalitarianism in experimental music discourses and practices.

⁸⁶ Antonia Montoya, “Risk-Taking at Gatas y Vatas,” *Pyragraph*, September 17, 2013, <http://www.pyragraph.com/2013/09/risk-taking-at-gatas-y-vatas/>, accessed November 1, 2015.

⁸⁷ Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁸⁸ Peter García, “‘Te Amo, Te Amo, Te Amo’: Lorenzo Antonio and Sparx Performing Nuevo México Music,” in Aldama et al., *Performing the U.S. and Latino Borderlands*, 219.

8

NOISE, SONIC EXPERIMENTATION, AND INTERIOR

COLONIALITY IN COSTA RICA

Susan Campos Fonseca

Translated by Julianne Graper

DOES NOISE—A SONIC creative practice featuring glitches, hiss, computer generated sounds, distortion, hum, and other unconventional sound materials—represent a disruption in a society like Costa Rica’s?¹ Costa Rican journalist Fernando Chaves-Espinach responds to this question this way: “What should we expect when we go beyond the limits of what we understand as music? . . . Until recently, it was very clear: in Costa Rica, music was made with everything, except with noise. Not any more: 2014 was . . . the year of breaking the boundaries of what we understand as music.”² Chaves-Espinach interviewed sound artists and composers of electroacoustic music whom he considered to have crossed those lines, among them Sergio Fuentes, Esteban Mora, Ronald Bustamante, Fernando Arce, Mauricio Ordóñez, José Duarte, Alejandro Sánchez, Alonso Fonseca, and Joan Villaperros, along with Sergio Sasso, Joaquín Gil, Alejandro Cardona, Otto Castro, Mauricio Pauly, and Federico Reuben, as well as myself.³ The definition of Noise that he ultimately proposed resulted from

The author would like to thank Marcela Hernández for her help with the editing of this chapter.

¹ Note from the editors: the author alternates between a capitalized “Noise” (denoting a particular music category based on the described sonic elements or, as the author sometimes uses it, a musical sphere) and lowercased “noise” (denoting sound materials).

² Fernando Chaves-Espinach, “Este fue el año del ruido (y aún sigue más),” *La Nación*, December 8, 2014, http://www.nacion.com/ocio/musica/musica_noise-musica_experimental-ruido-2014_o_1456054394.html, accessed July 2, 2015.

³ It is important to highlight that in addition to me there are other women dedicated to sound experimentation in Costa Rica, even though Chaves-Espinach did not include them in his 2014 article. They are

the consensus among the interviewees: “Electroacoustic music includes the practice of combining the electric with the acoustic, with distinct musical structures. By *noise*, we understand the use of [sounds not typically considered musical], improvisation, and technology as compositional materials.”⁴ This, in a general sense, is how creators in Costa Rican studios understand Noise, and this definition underlies the Noise scene.

Ray Brassier points out, however, that Noise “not only designates the no-man’s-land between electro-acoustic investigation, free improvisation, avant-garde experiment, and sound-art; more interestingly, it refers to anomalous zones of interference between genres: between post-punk and free jazz; between *musique concrète* and folk; between stochastic composition and *art brut*.”⁵ The uses of noise as an aesthetic principle, of improvisation as a compositional resource, and of technology as the materiality of a work are not exclusive to Noise music, but they make this practice into an act of interference, an act that questions the conceptual boundaries between genres using electroacoustic research.⁶ Brassier continues: “As a result, the functioning of the term ‘noise’ oscillates between that of a proper name and that of a concept; it equivocates between nominal anomaly and conceptual interference.”⁷ In this chapter I will center on the disputes this interference has generated on a conceptual level, especially in relation to Noise as an experience and a creative space different from “music.” Brassier explains this aspect in these terms: “Yet in being used to categorize all forms of sonic experimentation that ostensibly defy musicological classification—be they para-musical, anti-musical, or post-musical—‘Noise’ has become a generic label for anything deemed to subvert established genre.”⁸

Furthermore, I will explore how these conceptual disputes open a window into a society that is currently debating and constructing its own contemporaneity in dialogue with conceptions about indigeneity, music, musical composition, musicality, and experimentalism in the twenty-first century. I will also inquire into how discourses about experimentation and innovation coming from Noise are constructed under certain assumptions regarding technology, and how the Noise scene in Costa Rica can help us to think about experimental sound practices in Latin America and the world. On an aesthetic level, I will problematize how the “noise community” (formed by sound artists) imagines itself in the face of a “community of musicians,” separated by the principles of “academic training.” I will then explore how this noise community conceives itself as an anomalous zone in Costa Rican society, evidencing processes of “interior coloniality” that function on a micropolitical level.

Paulina Velázquez, Camila Garro, Susana López, Fiamma Aleotti, Coco-Chan (Coraima Díaz), the band *ColorNoise* (Sonya Carmona, Alison Alvarado, Mari Navarro), and the DJs María Wabe, DJ Monik (Monik Zdan), and Melissa O.

⁴ Chaves-Espinach, “Este fue el año del ruido (y aún sigue más).”

⁵ Ray Brassier, “Genre is Obsolete,” *Multitudes* 28 (Spring 2007), <http://www.multitudes.net/Genre-is-Obsolete/>, accessed June 28, 2015.

⁶ Eldritch Priest, *Boring Formless Non-sense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

⁷ Brassier, “Genre Is Obsolete.”

⁸ *Ibid.*

The term “interior coloniality” refers to a condition of oppression and subordination, usually of one ethnic group over another. It is also used to designate the manner in which the dominant group of a country exploits minorities for its economic advantage.⁹ In this study, I will analyze interior coloniality as a phenomenon of internal colonialism (a more subjective construction of individuals who imagine themselves as different to their Others), manifest first at a conceptual level inside communities dedicated to sonic experimentation, and second at an ethnic level in the utilization of ethnographic materials of indigenous peoples in sonic experimentation. Interior coloniality, as other scholars have shown, plays out at the micropolitical level, in particular that of communities and specific organizations. As Teresa Bardisa Ruiz says: “Organizations are not subject to universal laws; rather they are *cultural artifacts*, an invented social reality that depends on its scientific meaning and on the intentions of the people who [integrate those organizations].”¹⁰ Interior coloniality is, in a nutshell, an educational problem. Musical teaching influences the conceptualization of sound, noise, and their connected practices, as it affects the entire hierarchical system of cultural institutions. Musical education also serves as a source of identitarian construction and imagination for individuals and communities.

Finally, to exemplify these processes, I will analyze how these supposedly separate communities converge in their utilization of ethnographic materials in the search for what is theirs. They search for a sound/noise that is their own but at the same time experimental, resorting to principles of indigenism that were previously used in classical music from Costa Rican composers. Drawing on the work of John Corbett, I will use this last example to demonstrate how microcolonialism functions under experimental and decolonial premises, using noise and ethnographic materials that are considered to represent an aural Otherness.¹¹

PHILOSOPHY AND MUSIC IN DISPUTE: NOISE

In his 2014 essay, Chaves-Espinach uncovered the link between electroacoustic music and Noise in the Costa Rican environment. Two years earlier, when the composer and sound artist Otto Castro wrote “Construction of a Collective of Composers of Electroacoustic Music in Costa Rica: The TIC Confronts Traditional Music,”¹² he

⁹ See Pablo González Casanova, “Internal Colonialism and National Development,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 1, no. 4 (1965): 27–37, and Robert Blauner, “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt,” *Social Problems* 16, no. 4 (1969): 393–408.

¹⁰ Teresa Bardisa Ruiz, “Teoría y práctica de la micropolítica en las organizaciones escolares,” *Revista Iberoamérica de Educación* 15 (September–December 1997), <http://www.rieoei.org/oeivirt/rie15ao1.htm>, accessed June 28, 2015.

¹¹ John Corbett, “Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others,” in Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, eds., *Western Music and Its Others* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 166.

¹² Otto Castro, “Construcción del colectivo de compositores de música electroacústica en Costa Rica: Las TIC frente a la música tradicional,” in Adina Izarra and Luis Germán Rodríguez Leal, eds., *Canto electroacústico: Aves latinoamericanas en una creación colaborativa* (Madrid: Fundación Telefónica, 2012), 35–51.

prioritized a description of the constitution of a community differentiated in musical practice by the technological media that it utilized but not by a particular aesthetic. Centering the disruption and innovation of composers of electroacoustic music in relation to the technologies that produce their work is a generalized procedure in experimentation. This comes as a result of the confusion generated by a scientific rhetoric that understands “new technological media” as experimental, due to mediation by a machine.¹³ Nonetheless, new technologies are not all necessarily derived from the same processes and can be linked—or not—to an academic institution that ensures that their experimentation is realized under the strict rigors of science.¹⁴

In Costa Rica, for example, some of the creators involved in Noise projects—such as Melómana Distorsión, La Jauría, Piratas del Cosmos, Begotten Costa Rica, and Achromatic Prod—build their own devices. They recycle them or hack them, designing their own laboratories without being limited by access to legitimate experimental spaces in academic terms. (This does not imply that their experimental work is excluded from academic spaces, which can be museums, galleries, universities, and related institutions.) This democratization of media underscores the significance of the concept, and not just the presence, of technological media in defining the artists’ approach to experimentation; technological media are part of the language or materiality of a work. If Noise is a disruptive act in a society such as that of Costa Rica, it is disruptive not only because of technological mediation (which has its counterparts, too) but also because of the conceptual disputes and micropolitics that generate it.¹⁵

The sources analyzed in this chapter show, however, that it is in their relationship to innovation and technology that the academic and the Noise spheres differ. In order to understand these arguments, we must consider experimentation in technological terms. In the context of Costa Rica, where technological media and resources are very limited and tend to be centralized in the metropolitan area of the country’s capital, having the capacity to construct a suitable laboratory for sonic experimentation resolves basic practical problems. Central in these practices is the “makers” movement, a group of people who design and manufacture their own tools for making

¹³ This rhetoric is present in Luigi Russolo’s statement: “Thus we are approaching noise-sound. This revolution of music is paralleled by the increasing proliferation of machinery sharing in human labor.” Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise (futurist manifesto, 1913)*, translated by Robert Filliou (n.p: ubuclassics, 2004), 5. Available at http://www.artype.de/Sammlung/pdf/russolo_noise.pdf, accessed August 19, 2017.

¹⁴ Georgina Born has previously addressed this issue. For a long time, the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique established the models used in the development of laboratories for experimental creation, which were applied in different places in the world. In addition, it established the models for experimentation and rationality that were accepted as legitimate. See Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁵ In this regard, Greg Hainge’s ideas have been especially relevant for this study. In particular, his vision of the necessity of an ontological study of noise, the mediation of noise in its listening at an epistemic level, and the repercussion of the idea of noise on the paradigms on whose basis the concept of “musical” is constructed (engendering possibilities like Noise music). See Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

noise as a result of their creative research. Makers experiment not only at the level of noise and improvisation—returning to the definition of Chaves-Espinach—but also through technology. This movement is led by people from the university sphere, such as Tomás de Camino Beck (founder of the Research Center for Innovation at the University Veritas, and the Citizen Laboratory of Innovation, Science, and Technology, “Inventoría”, established first at the University of Costa Rica and then at Lead University), as well as others from the Noise scene, like Joan Villaperros and Alejandro Sánchez. The aesthetic explorations of the makers movement go hand in hand with an alternative technological production based on recycling and intervention (with circuit bending and Arduinos, for example).¹⁶

This creative capacity identifies noisiers with a maker and hacker culture that turns members of the Noise sphere, such as Sánchez and Villaperros, into what I have named “sound creator makers.”¹⁷ Even though this relationship with the maker and hacker movement could be considered a marginal aspect of the noisier’s work, linked with its materiality, it allows us to study the ideas and processes involved in the production of such works, as well as the noisiers’ underlying ways of understanding noise and improvisation in experimentation. This consideration, in turn, permits an analysis of the extent to which these ideas and processes depart from different epistemes of “music,” since in academic musical composition, noise and improvisation are also present as elements of innovation.

The possibilities of experimentation explored by sound creator makers are not always feasible in Costa Rican academic music training centers, despite the fact that Otto Castro created the Composition and Experimentation Laboratory at the University of Costa Rica’s School of Music as a place for similar objectives. Other programs that aim to open spaces for research in this creative sphere include the Cultural Identity, Art, and Technology Program of the Research Center of Arts Education; the Festival of Sound: Education, Technology and Cultural Sound;¹⁸ the Central American Audio and Acoustic Festival;¹⁹ and the cycles and projects organized by Debates Sonoros-UCR (a collaboration between the University of Costa Rica’s School of Music, School of Electric Engineering’s Pattern Recognition and Intelligence Systems Laboratory, and Institute of Arts Research).²⁰ The existence of these programs,

¹⁶ In general terms, circuit bending is the creative, chance-based customization of the circuits within electronic devices, such as low voltage. A reference is the tutorial by Reed Ghazala, *Circuit-Bending, Build Your Own Alien Instruments* (Indianapolis: Extreme Tech, 2006). Arduino, on the other hand, is a free hardware platform; for more technical information, I recommend consulting the work of Joshua Noble, *Programming Interactivity: A Designer’s Guide to Processing, Arduino, and Open Framework* (Sebastopol: O’Reilly Media, 2009).

¹⁷ Costa Rican sound creator makers are part of the activist initiative MusicMakers Hacklab, a global network of creators who make use of collaborative laboratories for digital musical creation and experimental electronic art. They create instruments, work on biomechanics and robotics, research, and learn alternative techniques of fabrication and production.

¹⁸ Festival Sonoro. Educación, Tecnología y Cultura Sonora.

¹⁹ Festival de Audio y Acústica Centroamericano-FAAC.

²⁰ Some examples of the results of Debates Sonoros-UCR include the Turriatology Artist Residencies and the Deus Ex Machina Project, which unite sound creator makers, dancers, audiovisual artists, and

however, does not mean that sound experimentation is included in the curriculum of academic music training. Experimentation with electronic media is not understood as a specialty in the conservatories, which only offer degrees in the areas of musical performance, composition, and conducting.

It can be stated accordingly that, within the frame of electroacoustic music in Costa Rica, the sound creator makers (who build their own tools) and sound artists (who don't make their own tools), realize types of artistic and technological research that are innovative for the musical scene of the country. Nonetheless, their own practices, laboratories, and understandings of the technologies that they utilize are diverse. An example of this fact is the equipment and workplaces of Ronald Bustamante (sound artist) and Alejandro Sánchez (sound creator maker), which I call "creative labs," following the scientific rhetoric already in place among the participants in this scene. Bustamante's lab equipment consists of the following hardware: electric guitar, prepared electric guitar tuned in B, theremin (etherwave standard), no-input mixing board, Moogerfooger Ring Modulator, Minifooger Delay, Line 6 Echo Park Delay, Boss DD20 Giga Delay, Red Panda Particule Granular Delay, ElectroHarmonix Holy Grail Reverb, Walrus Audio Cathedral Reverb, Zvex Fat Fuzz Factory, and MXR Phase 100; the following software: Ableton Live, MAX4Live, Illformed Glitch, and Glitchmachines Convex; and the following controllers: Korg Nano Pad, Korg Nano, and Kontrol Novation Launchpad.²¹ Sánchez's lab equipment consists of a laptop, a desk microphone, a toy airplane with circuit bending, a toy car with circuit bending, two small toy marimbas, three clay ocarinas, a bamboo rain stick, metal tubes, PVC tubes, zinc cans, glasses, paper, sounds of flowing water, electric motors, various surfaces, ambient sounds of rural and urban environments, vocalizations, various bodily sounds, a battery, virtual instruments, a basic synthesizer, and wood flutes.²² Figures 8.1 and 8.2 show the organization of the equipment in both Bustamante's and Sánchez's labs.

The two labs contrast not just in their organization of equipment but also in their technological utilization, the inclusion or lack of analog instruments, and the types of intervention applied to the electronic equipment. In short, the technologies are different, even if the purpose is the same: "the use of noise, improvisation and technology as materials to compose."²³

The boundary between noisiers and musicians was tacitly disarticulated in 2013 when Sergio Fuentes, a young student of sociology, received the highest award for academic composition in Costa Rica: the Aquileo Echeverría National Prize for Composition. This situation detonated a dispute about how that which is understood in the academic sphere (the conservatory) as "nonmusic" (noise and the "computer music," which are not included in the curricula of Costa Rican conservatories) could be given a prize in a category that

scholars in the spheres of architecture, robotics, engineering, and biomechanics, with the objective of developing collaborative projects.

²¹ Ronald Bustamante, email to author, January 12, 2016.

²² Alejandro Sánchez, email to author, January 12, 2016.

²³ Chaves-Espinach, "Este fue el año del ruido (y aún sigue más)."



FIGURE 8.1. Ronald Bustamante's lab equipment. Used by courtesy of Pablo Murillo.



FIGURE 8.2. Alejandro Sánchez's lab equipment. Used by courtesy of A. Sánchez.

corresponded to what had been considered music. Until that moment, the winners had been composers of symphonic works and concertos. The boundaries had been transgressed, as Chaves-Espinach suggests; at the same time, paradoxically, the transgression was legitimized. The press highlighted the fact that the jury granted the highest prize to a “young composer” who combined “different musical rhythms like drone, shoegaze, post-metal and electroacoustics,”²⁴ justifying the jury’s decision with the statement that “this is a person committed to social themes, and the project is accessible and free, publicized in a friendly manner on the internet,”²⁵ which supported “the independent sector of music.”²⁶

It was not the first time that the prize was awarded to a work that crossed these boundaries. Otto Castro received the prize in 2009 for his work *Cantos de La Llorona/Songs of the Crying Woman*. The work combined electroacoustic production technology with instrumental technology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in collaboration with the Ganassi Group, a local early music ensemble (fig. 8.3). In his *Cantos*, Castro questioned the conception of experimentation based on the use of new technologies. Instead, embarking from the myth of La Llorona, the Crying Woman, he focused on the idea, the concept, and the processes: in this case, the transgression of categories (electroacoustic music and early music); the representation of the new and the old; innovation and heritage; and European (Western) and American (indigenous) cultural imaginaries. Castro was, however, a composer and university professor who worked with academic musicians like himself. This prevented his nomination from generating the type of public polemic that Fuentes’s unleashed.²⁷

A number of circumstances led to the controversy. In the press release about the prize, the term “Noise” does not appear, but Fuentes’s work is considered to be experimental music. Where does the dispute about the term come from, then? In published communications via social media in 2014, Fuentes defined his project in these terms: “Wiesengrund Project is a trans-noisist political organization centered on the dissemination of ideas from the discussion of cultural media by these proposals from sound art, electroacoustic music, video-art, and noise.”²⁸ However, on his website, he says: “The Wiesengrund Project is an experimental music project that ranges

²⁴ Verónica Jiménez, “Sergio Wiesengrund y Syntagma Musicum son los ganadores de los premios nacionales en música,” *Red Cultura*, February 7, 2014, <http://redcultura.com/php/Articulos1215.htm>, accessed February 12, 2016. The composer’s work was described this way in the jury’s declaration and by Sergio Fuentes himself, but it should be clarified that these are not “rhythms” but musical genres. This is yet another piece of evidence of formative and conceptual conflict. Much of the press coverage shared this approach.

²⁵ Katherine Chaves R., “Un salto de la música antigua a la experimental,” *La Nación*, February 7, 2014, http://www.nacion.com/ocio/musica/salto-musica-antigua-experimental_o_1395260517.html, accessed February 12, 2016.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Between 2013 and 2014 Otto Castro, as coordinator of the Composition and Experimentation Laboratory at the University of Costa Rica’s School of Music, conducted activities that brought together the protagonists of sonic experimentation at the national level. These events, however, maintained the concert format privileged in Western classical music.

²⁸ Communication by Sergio Fuentes at the Facebook page of the Wiesengrund Project, <https://www.facebook.com/sergiowiesen>, accessed December, 31, 2014.



FIGURE 8.3. Otto Castro, Roberto Fournier, and Ganassi Group. Used by courtesy of Adela Marín.

from drone, shoegaze, post-metal to *musique concrète* and electroacoustics.”²⁹ As Otto Castro suggests, there was a history behind Fuentes and his proposal. Fuentes, like other exponents of Noise, such as José Duarte, Daniel Ortuño, and Julio Zúñiga, trained privately with Castro some years before.³⁰ Even if academic mediation occurred, Castro declared: “I never believed in a methodology for teaching composition, because it doesn’t awaken that internal self that every student carries. Rather, [these methodologies] creat[e] a desert in their creation, they sterilize it or it ends up being a copy of their teacher. In these three cases, Duarte, Fuentes, and Zúñiga, all had a strong inclination towards noise from the beginning. Duarte was interested in electronics in real time, Zúñiga in pointillism, and Fuentes in sound material that had political and social implications.”³¹ In the case of Sergio Fuentes, the controversy emphasized that the prize was given to someone who, unlike the other winners, had not even completed a university degree; he had no career (officially) legitimated by any academy. This someone made something called Noise, he was part of a self-defined “trans-noisist political organization,” and his work was available on the Internet. Unlike the works that had won the great majority of the previously awarded prizes, Fuentes’s music did not make

²⁹ The Wiesengrund Project, <https://wiesengrundproject.bandcamp.com/>, accessed February 9, 2016.

³⁰ Otto Castro, email to author, February 6, 2016. Note from the editors: Although the author characterizes Julio Zúñiga as an exponent of Noise, Zúñiga himself acknowledges himself to be interested in experimental and electroacoustic music more broadly and does not call himself a noisier.

³¹ *Ibid.*

reference to local musics or even to Latin American music more generally. Moreover, he worked under a pseudonym, Sergio Wiesengrund. In short, the highest national prize for academic composition had been awarded to an entity called the Wiesengrund Project.

Sergio Fuentes is not the only, or the first, noisier from Costa Rica. Since the 1980s, other sound artists and creators in the electroacoustic sphere have preceded him in using Noise as a path for experimentation. (Examples are the group aUTOperro, formed by the architects Fernando Arce, Mauricio Ordoñez, and Douglas Morales; the collective Extremos Sonoros, founded by the engineer José Duarte and the mathematician Ronald Bustamante; and the Network of Costa Rican Sound Art (Oscilador), coordinated by Otto Castro.) In sum, even though Fuentes, as Castro informs us, “already had audiences and held concerts,”³² in the Noise medium he was a promising youth, not one of its founders or pioneers. Consequently, if the goal was to include noisiers (as an independent sector of music) in the canon of national composition under the justification that an organized community already existed in the sphere of electroacoustic music, the jury could have found other candidates with better careers. Nonetheless, the question “Why Sergio Wiesengrund?” was not posed in any official media, nor was the question “Why Noise?”

The ongoing controversy motivated Pablo Hernández, philosophy professor at the University of Costa Rica, and me to organize a meeting titled “Philosophy and Music in Dispute: Noise” within the cycle of events called *MayoNoise: Sound Art, Culture and Technology*.³³ The meeting brought together—for the first time in Costa Rican history—philosophers, social scientists (primarily anthropologists and sociologists), musicians involved with experimentation, and noisiers to confront their conceptual constructions and techniques related to “sound.”³⁴ One theme that surfaced during the meeting was how noisiers and musicians imagined themselves as belonging to separate communities, divided both by technology (noisiers utilize computers, musicians “musical instruments”) and by the training they receive (noisiers do not have musical training according to the conservatory model, and musicians do). These differences may lead to incongruences, such as understanding instruments of sound creation, for example a piano versus a computer, as fundamentally different kinds of technology. This apparently simple conceptual problem turned out to be fundamental in pointing out that the differences had to do with a dispute at a micropolitical level; a dispute that unites and separates imagined communities over invented social realities that are

³² Otto Castro, email to author, February 7, 2016.

³³ The events of *MayoNoise* took place on May 7, 12, 14, 16, and 29, 2014. The videorecording of the first part of “Filosofía y música en disputa: Noise,” can be found at my website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fMQnDqfYzc>.

³⁴ See Fernando Chaves-Espinach, “Este fue el año del ruido (y aún sigue más),” and Manfred Vargas, “Experimentaciones sonoras desde el Atlántico: El proyecto Turriatology explora el potencial creativo de los paisajes y ruinas del cantón de Turrialba,” *Voz UCR* 8 (2014): 18–21.

agreed on by individuals and their groups of influence. These realities are put to the test when the terms of experimental labor are questioned.³⁵

During the forum, we posed a basic question: What does it mean to award a prize intended for “music” to “nonmusic” (Noise)? If the difference was, as Chaves-Espinach suggests, the utilization of noise, improvisation, and technology, these elements were not strangers to electroacoustic music. The dispute existed in part because communities and creators imagined themselves as different from one another; each side held a position about whether Noise was or wasn’t music. The controversy was not just a discussion based on aesthetic and technological discourses; the very idea of what music is—with its canons, pantheons, and technologies—was challenged by an apparently external entity (Noise) that had now been treated as legitimate by institutions that were charged of reproducing the notion of what music is and that until this point had agreed about it. This was a philosophical and musicological problem but above all an educational one. The models that sustained music education in Costa Rica were the basis for the dispute.³⁶

A dispute in similar conceptual terms might seem trivial in the United States and Europe, places where most narratives about experimentalism have been set. In these places, parallel discussions belong to the history of the avant-garde and of countercultural movements. In Costa Rica, where artists only began to explore musical-aesthetic terrains beyond tonality in the 1970s, such debates were lived as an epistemological 180-degree turn. Even though the musical academy in Costa Rica had been taking institutional shape since the end of the nineteenth century,³⁷ it had only achieved recognition in the international compositional scene in the 1970s. Composers like Benjamin Gutiérrez and Bernal Flores, followed by Mario Alfaro Güell and Luis Diego Herra in the 1980s and Alejandro Cardona, Carlos Escalante, Marvin Camacho, Eddie Mora, and Carlos J. Castro in the 1990s, had laid the foundations for composition professorships at the University of Costa Rica and the National University.³⁸ In this institutional space, experimental composers of renown, such as Alejandro Cardona and Otto

³⁵ This may not be an isolated case. It is one more reason to consider, to the extent possible, exploring micropolitical practices on which imaginaries about experimentation in Latin America are constructed.

³⁶ This problem has been studied by Guillermo Rosabal, who collaborated on the design of the musical education programs for public schools in Costa Rica. See Ministerio de Educación Pública, *Proyecto de ética, estética y ciudadanía: Programas de estudio de educación musical* (San José: Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2009). Rosabal poses it in terms of “coloniality,” as models that are imposed by the Western musical canon. José Manuel Rojas sees it as coming from the influence of the national symphonic system and its impact on music education. See José Manuel Rojas, *¿Para qué carretas sin marimbas? Hacia una historia crítica de la práctica de la música “clásica” en Costa Rica (1971–2011)* (San José: Editorial Arlekin, 2015). Rosabal and Rojas develop their studies from a decolonial theoretical framework.

³⁷ María Clara Vargas Cullell, *De las fanfarrias a las salas de concierto. Música en Costa Rica: 1840–1940* (San José: Universidad de Costa Rica Press, 2004).

³⁸ Otto Castro documents how these processes were systematized and opened spaces for experimentation with new media. Castro, “Construcción del colectivo de compositores de música electroacústica en Costa Rica.”

Castro, were considered part of the academic sphere, in contrast to the newcomers (via the national prize) to the “canon,” such as Sergio Fuentes and company.³⁹

Composers such as Cardona and Castro sustain their prestige not only through musical production but also through their academic training in music and their positions as university professors; their academic positions provide them with cultural capital to experiment with legitimacy. Since the rise of experimentation with new media in Costa Rica in the 1980s, work generated by academic experimental composers has had to share space with other forms of thinking and experimenting that do not always participate in a systematic or methodological training that is comparable to academic training. In addition, in Costa Rica, experimental composition with new media still does not form part of the programs of study, and those who carry it out continue to be seen as intruders into the formal academy. In sum, the dispute generated by the awarding of the National Prize for Composition to Fuentes illustrates that experimentation is possible from different epistemic and ontological experiences. These experiences and creative spaces can converge (or not) in experimental action, depending on who carries them out, the communities they inhabit, the imaginaries that form them, and the micropolitics that sustain them.

In 2015, Otto Castro asked: “What newness do Noise and glitch have in Costa Rica with respect to the propositions of ‘the Italian rumorists’ from the beginning of the 20th century? Are we in the presence of new values, or of creators who repeat certain proceedings already tested by ancient works in the sphere of ‘noise’?”⁴⁰ With these questions, Castro uncovers the way experimentation continues to be understood as a set of processes of “rupture” that are evaluated according to chronological experimental canons generally understood both as universal and as contributions to local environments.⁴¹ In addition, experimentation is judged as actions by individual “creators”

³⁹ Otto Castro and Alejandro Cardona are experimental composers from Costa Rica, nationally and internationally acclaimed. Both have collaborated with the Mexican Centre for Music and Sonic Arts and have been included in the third volume of the audio recording *Autoctofonías. Obras mixtas y acusmáticas con instrumentos originarios latinoamericanos* (2014). This audio collection gathers together some of the leading sound creators in Latin America. It is a fundamental reference in the field of experimentation and research in the region.

⁴⁰ Otto Castro, email to author, February 7, 2016. A glitch is an “error” in the information system. Noisiers utilize glitches as an aesthetic resource. Examples of these uses are found in Rebeca Arguedas Ramírez, “‘The Glitch as a Pre-text: Feeling the Pulse of the Street’: 20 Years of ICAT [Cultural Identity, Art, and Technology Program of the Research Center of Arts Education],” *Suplemento Cultural* 113 (2015), http://www.icat.una.ac.cr/suplemento_cultural/index.php/en/the-community/123-cultural-identidad-globalizacion/1161-el-glitch-como-pre-texto-sentirle-el-pulso-a-la-calle-20-anos-del-icat-entrevista-a-adrian-cruz-coordinador-del-programa-identidad-cultural-arte-y-tecnologia-icat-y-a-sergio-fuentes-sociologo-y-compositor-rebeca-arguedas-ramirez, accessed February 12, 2016.

⁴¹ In this regard, Georgina Born points out: “Serialist and analogous modernisms thus evince an intriguing omnipotent fantasy of aesthetic autarchy—the fantasy that one could invent a new musical language without reference to other musics, without recourse to syncretism, stripped of representational intent, and through a process of pure conceptual invention The experimental music tradition branched in the postwar period into minimalism, systems, environmental, and ambient musics, and has existed in tense proximity with avant-garde developments in jazz and improvised musics. It has become a focus for practices of, and debates around, crossovers between art and popular musics, and thus for the analysis of postmodernism in music.” In Born and Hesmondhalgh, *Western Music and Its Others*, 16–18. Otto

who transgress the boundaries established by a community. Experimentalism includes a confrontational process that is established “against,” generating what is understood as a disruption. The problem comes from considering innovation in universal terms, that is, believing that once something is experimented in Europe or the United States, it will cease to be innovative in other times or places.

In reality, innovation comes from specific processes generated in specific places. What we understand about innovation in music has both an epistemic as an ontological character; for instance, we are schooled on how we should play the piano, and even how to think of it. But if we are taught other nontraditional ways of playing the piano, if we learn extended techniques, for example, our whole concept and experience of the piano is different. There is thus a micropolitics implicated in how we get to know sonic experimentation, and how a creator is defined as innovator. This illustrates that artists need not necessarily share the same cultural capital to arrive at similar results. One might ask, then, why are different sonic experimentations assessed on the basis of the same historical, epistemic, and ontological models? What if we were to consider how these communities produce and imagine themselves, independently of experimentation made in the centers of hegemonic power? Could following this path open a window onto other forms of understanding and practicing experimentation?

PROCESSES: DISRUPTION AND INNOVATION AGAINST WHAT?

While Matt Sakakeeny describes music as “an idea and a problem,” David Novak defines noise as “a powerful antisubject of culture, raising essential questions about the staging of human expression, socialization, individual subjectivity, and political control.”⁴² Novak is defining noise itself, not Noise music. However, I adopt his general definition of noise to delimit it as an aesthetic principle of Noise music. If Noise is an “antisubject” and music is an “idea,” how did the dynamic between the ontologies of these terms inform the dispute in Costa Rica? Broadly speaking, the confrontation came from the fact that an idea of music had been constructed in relation to Western musical notation whose symbolic violence continues to be applied to the sound imaginaries of non-Western or nonacademic cultures. In the background, the dispute encountered music as an ethnohistoric problem.⁴³

Castro's questioning is relevant in the sense that it illustrates how experimentation continues to be evaluated in terms of fantasies and traditions, following an assumption of teleological order.

⁴² David Novak, “Noise,” in David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 112, 125.

⁴³ In his text “Does ‘Music’ Exist?” Carl Dahlhaus uncovers how “the category of ‘music’ provides us with the criteria through which we isolate as ‘specifically musical’ certain characteristics that are determined by complex cultural processes.” Dahlhaus indicates how expanding the concept to include the sound production of other non-European cultures may end up making it “estranged from its origins,” which would be of “doubtful legitimacy from the point of view of the history of ideas.” He also proposes that “a way out of the dilemma is opened only when the ethnohistorical problem is related to the historical problem; this is, when one attempts to resolve the difficulties confronting them.” See Carl Dahlhaus, “¿Existe ‘la

This confrontation developed from the history of ideas, represented here by philosophical traditions and histories of Western music, sustained in written text, and transmitted by education and notated music. Costa Rican noisiers developed a symbol to represent the process by which Noise becomes an antisubject, nonmusic: a pair of crossed-out eighth notes. This act of symbolic resistance to the codes imposed by notated music seems to define not just their manner of understanding sound but also the ceremonies that constitute the actions and artistic productions in which they participate, productions characterized by performativity with the machine (in the tradition of computer music), orality and improvisation (preserved in the recorded support), distribution on the Internet, and the utilization of scenic resources inherited from happening and multimedia art. An example of this type of multimedia proposal is *Blinded* (2015), by Sergio Fuentes, described in the following manner: “With this multidisciplinary project, in which the image, sound and installation are unified under a philosophical exploration, Sergio Wiesengrund proposes the error as a jumping off point for expression.”⁴⁴ *Blinded* is also an example of the conjunction between noise and glitch described by Castro. This work was included in the exposition *Teramorfofis*, curated by Lola Malavassi for the TEOR/ética Arts Foundation.⁴⁵ Regarding Fuentes’s proposal, Chaves-Espinach writes: “In *Teramorfofis*, the work most explicitly critical of the political and economic system may be *Blinded*, a video installation on three screens of the Wiesengrund Project (Sergio Wiesengrund [Noise] and Mariela Sandía [videoart]). With damaged video and sound files, they generate disturbing textures with images of newsreels, popular videos and half recognizable soundscapes.”⁴⁶

But what would happen if we were to bring together the two worlds supposedly separated by the episteme of notated music?⁴⁷ What would happen if what we understand by Noise, in its utilization of noise and improvisation, was put to the test in its technological mediation? During the meeting “Philosophy and Music in Dispute: Noise,” an exercise was proposed: noisier Alejandro Sánchez and academic musician José Manuel Rojas were invited to dialogue and improvise from a work of Sánchez, *Monumentum*

música?”, in *¿Qué es la música?* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2012), 12. See also the ongoing work of Mayra Esteves and the Centro Experimental Oído Salvaje, which applies decolonial theories to sound studies in Latin America. Esteves proposes a revision based in the history of ideas of how the concept of music became a colonizer of sound on being implanted by Western colonial systems. She goes even further, proposing that colonization is realized in terms of sound. See Oído Salvaje: Antenas-Intercepciones <http://antenas-intervenciones.blogspot.com/>, accessed February 13, 2016.

⁴⁴ Fragment of a press note published in *Festival Nrmal x Epicentro*, November 2015, <http://festivalepicentro.com/the-wiesengrund-project/>, accessed February 13, 2016.

⁴⁵ Information about the exhibition is available at the website Teor/ética: Arte + Pensamiento, <http://teoretica.org/portfolio/teramorfofis/> accessed August 24, 2017.

⁴⁶ Fernando Chaves-Espinach, “En Teorética irrumpe el rumor de la ciudad,” *La Nación*, May 10, 2015, http://www.nacion.com/ocio/artes/Teoretica-irrumpe-rumor-ciudad_o_1486651363.html, accessed February 9, 2016.

⁴⁷ I should clarify that musical notation continues to transform itself, including graphic and spectral notation, but in this case it refers to traditional musical reading and writing taught in the conservatory and transmitted by basic general music education in Costa Rica.



FIGURE 8.4. Alejandro Sánchez, conceptual map of *Monumentum* (graphic score of “Hombre” No. 4). Used by courtesy of A. Sánchez.

(figs. 8.4 and 8.5).⁴⁸ This exercise, in which Sánchez (computer) and Rojas (English horn) explored noise together with different techniques and technologies, transgressed the episteme because the work was by the noisier, not the musician.⁴⁹ It became evident from the meeting that this process materialized the disruption and innovation of Noise, presenting music as an idea and as a problem. The exercise was possible because Rojas recognized in Sánchez’s proposal what he identified as resources of musical experimentation in the avant-garde tradition of electroacoustic music; Sánchez, in turn, recognized noise in the music of Rojas. This exercise provided a live demonstration of the existence of a kind of noise ceremony, possible because both artists shared the idea that they were realizing sonic experimentation, even while using different technologies (computer, English horn) and coming from different epistemes.

But there are further complications. The experience of music, its ceremonies and rituals, thought up by creators who do not consider themselves to be musicians, leads to nominalisms in search of an identity; in this case, under the stamp of Noise. That much was clear. Less clear, however, was to assume experimental processes as a product of Otherness and as a result of an experimentation in scientific, exploratory terms: an experimentation that discovers something new. Otto Castro suggested that this demonstrated that the results could be very similar, in a historical perspective, to those obtained by other peers. Nonetheless, in imagining themselves as a separate

⁴⁸ *Monumentum* was inspired by poems by the Costa Rican writer Jorge DeBravo. See <https://begotten-cr.bandcamp.com/album/monumentum>, accessed February 9, 2016.

⁴⁹ Sánchez is a young student of agronomy, noisier, and independent producer. His projects are Begotten Costa Rica and Achromatics Prods. Rojas has been a professional musician for over fifty years. He is an outstanding instrumentalist dedicated to contemporary classical music and a member of the National Symphonic Orchestra of Costa Rica.

H O M B R E

Alejandro Sánchez Núñez
(*Begotten* - 2013)

Synth: Organ/Celesta

Electr. Process: FLStudio + Amplitube plugin

Settings: Bass 100%, Treble 0%, Mid 50%. Reverb 50% 75% + 50% Wet/Dry

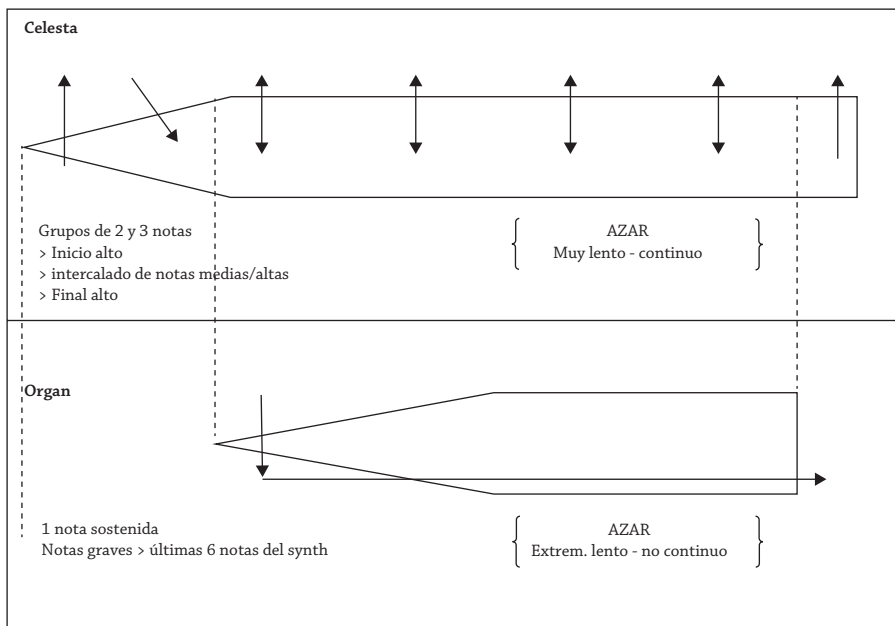


FIGURE 8.5. Sánchez, Conceptual map of *Monumentum* (spectral design of “Hombre” No. 4). Used by courtesy of A. Sánchez.

community, noisiers seemed to show a type of academic cultural appropriation that in turn was a critique of music as a political and ideological institution. The Costa Rican noisiers are, in essence, an example of “musically imagined communities,” and in these communities, as Georgina Born affirms, “musical experimentation becomes metaphorical microcolonialism.”⁵⁰ An example of this is that Costa Rican noisiers, even while critiquing it, continue to use terminology inherited from the Western classical music tradition: they call their events “concerts,” they define their practice as “composing,” and they develop systems of notation. Although they conceive of themselves as antisubjects, as nonmusicians, they also participate in this idea and problem. Even the symbol with which they identify, the pair of crossed-out eighth notes, depends on the iconography of Western classical music tradition. It is in reference to this tradition

⁵⁰ Georgina Born, introduction to Born and Hesmondhalgh, *Western Music and Its Others*, 19.

(and its negation) that they define themselves. The central object in the dispute continues to be music and its conceptualization.

SONIC EXPERIMENTATION AND MICROCOLONIALISM

The question remains as to whether we can consider sonic experimentation a kind of microcolonialism. Inasmuch as we assume that an aural Otherness exists that is colonized after exploration and discovery, the argument is feasible. Take, for example, the manner in which many noisiers, sound artists, composers of electroacoustic music, and composers of contemporary classical music fall back on ethnographic materials, considering them, paradoxically, a shared aural Otherness. I point to a paradox here because, even in the name of nonmusic, even if they imagine themselves as members of a marginal, separate community, noisiers also find their aural Otherness in ethnographic materials from indigenous communities so as to generate a local color understood as Costa Rican.

Ana María Ochoa Gautier, in her book *Aurality*, claims interest in “a particular history of comparativism and of difference, articulated through the relation between aurality (what is heard or references the ear) and orality (what is pronounced or references the mouth), as it emerges in this history.”⁵¹ I understand Ochoa Gautier’s argument as an epistemic aural shift.⁵² In particular, she recollects Jean-Luc Nancy’s musings about “a tension and an adequacy . . . between a sense (that we hear) and a truth (that we understand).”⁵³ Here Nancy meditates about visual mediation in the representation of sound and how this mediation translates an aural experience into orality in saying, enunciating, verbalizing, and finally conceptualizing. What happens between the experience of hearing and that of saying (what Ochoa Gautier calls “places of hearing”) is unknown. However, verbalizing these processes turns them real. How do these places of hearing emerge in history, in narratives? This is what interests me about Ochoa Gautier’s quote.

This unknown is manifest, I assume, in what is heard. In this case, it is about the aural Otherness in what is heard as noise, as an epistemic and ontological construction that subsists mediated by imaginaries of sound, music, and musical notation (in, for

⁵¹ Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 140.

⁵² For philosophical takes on epistemic aural shifts, see Jacques Derrida, *Políticas de la amistad seguido de El oído de Heidegger*, trans. Patricio Peñalver and Francisco Vidarte (Madrid: Trotta, 1998); Jean-Luc Nancy, *A la escucha*, translated by Horacio Pons (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2007); María Zambrano, *Notas de un método* (Madrid: Mondadori, 1989); Eugenio Triás, “Música y filosofía del límite,” in *Discursos de investidura como doctores honoris causa de Don Eugenio Triás y Don José Saramago* (Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2007); and Luc Delannoy, *El espejo: Ensayos sobre la consciencia musical seguidos de la consciencia inacabada* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones en Neuroestética y Neuromusicología A.C., 2008). See also my “In croce: María Zambrano and Sofia Gubaidulina,” *Sonic Ideas/Ideas Sónicas* 6, no. 12 (2014): 13–32, in which I compare the ideas of these philosophers.

⁵³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *A la escucha*, 12.

example, transcriptions and literary descriptions). These imaginaries are sustained in the narratives of communities that musically conceptualize themselves as being from different places that are made possible by this unknown. Comparativism seems to be the tool by which a common place is established; music as an idea and a problem translates, compares, systematizes, and provides shared spaces, even in difference.

Nevertheless, experimentation is a type of metaphorical microcolonization. As John Corbett indicates, “non-Western musics provide a mirror that allows Western music to reconsider itself”;⁵⁴ and “non-Western music [is] a catalyst to develop and discover new musical materials from their existing instrumental means.”⁵⁵ This reflexive mediation is possible in Western music, which considers itself capable of absorbing and implementing materials that it understands as Other with the objective of renewing itself. It is paradoxical that both noisiers and composers of contemporary classical music in Costa Rica proceed in the same way, resorting to transcriptions and recordings of the indigenous communities that inhabit this country. In so doing, their work coincides with the objectives of the composers of “new music” studied by Corbett. In addition, although the noisiers are supposedly working under decolonial assumptions, they confront their condition as Westerners under “Latin Americanist” premises.⁵⁶ It is for this reason that I bound the microcolonial problem of sonic experimentation within terms of interior coloniality. It is no longer about “New Music and other Others,” as Corbett suggests but is now about how the imagined Others make sense of themselves through a possible internal Other; understanding it, ultimately, as a source of aural Otherness. This is a delicate point; I will endeavor to give examples that introduce the problem and how it impacts the invention of an experimental aural Otherness in Costa Rica.

As a way to return to this chapter’s initial question—whether or not Noise represents an act of disruption in a society such as Costa Rica’s—we might consider a photograph by Costa Rican artist Pablo Murillo (fig. 8.6). The image sums up the resistance to the dominant phenomenon in the contemporary art camp in Costa Rica, which Pablo Hernández identifies as a “Central Americanist” discourse; it is a critique of the type of identity politics in which artists self-essentialize themselves in order to fulfill expectations of Otherness and to insert themselves in the market of Latin American art.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ John Corbett, “Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others,” in Born and Hesmondhalgh, *Western Music and Its Others*, 169.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵⁶ In this regard, the Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez says: “the aesthetic of the beautiful, proclaimed by the modernist intellectuals of Latin America until the end of the 19th century, is not associated with a program of *cultural decolonization*, as Iris Zavala suggests, but rather supposes the creation of a colonial discourse centered on a specific mythology: *Latin Americanism*.” Santiago Castro-Gómez, *Crítica de la razón latinoamericana*, 2nd ed. (Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2011), 147.

⁵⁷ Pablo Hernández Hernández, *Imagen-palabra: Lugar, sujeción y mirada en las artes visuales centroamericanas* (Madrid: Vervuert, 2012). The Contemporary Art Camp began with the organization of the First Central American Biennial in 1971. The Central American Biennial defines Central America as the geographic zone formed by the following countries: Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Panama.



FIGURE 8.6. Pablo Murillo, “This is Not Central American Art.” Used by courtesy of Pablo Murillo.

Hernández’s identification doesn’t deny the existence of internal self-criticism about micropolitics, around which narratives about a Central American art are erected, as demonstrated by Murillo’s photography.⁵⁸

This Central Americanist attitude has its homologues in the classical contemporary music sphere. Examples include the projects supported by the University of Costa Rica and the National University, such as the composition seminar⁵⁹—coordinated by Alejandro Cardona and Eddie Mora, with the presence of the Symphonic Orchestra of Heredia—directed by Mora and presided over by Marvin Camacho.⁶⁰ These projects foster a community of Costa Rican composers with the objective of dialoguing with relevant figures in contemporary classical music at the Latin American level.⁶¹ Mora himself has underlined how the orchestra and the seminar are openly “Latin Americanist.” For Mora, the most important aspect of this labor “is the decision to make contemporary and Latin American music.”⁶² Following on these ideas, musicologist Ekaterina Chatski, wife of the composer and

⁵⁸ For reference, an example is the catalog *Travesía por un estrecho dudoso* (San José: TEOR/ética, 2012).

⁵⁹ Seminario de Composición, on the director’s page, Eddie Mora, <http://eddiemora.com/es/bitacora/proyectos/contempo/85-xiii-seminario-de-composicion-musical-2014>, accessed June 29, 2014.

⁶⁰ Symphonic Orchestra of Heredia, official webpage, <http://www.sinfonicodeheredia.com/>, accessed February 11, 2016.

⁶¹ Alejandro Cardona offers a perspective on these dynamics on a Central American level in “Algunas reflexiones sobre la música ‘clásica’ contemporánea en Centroamérica,” *Istmica* 7 (2015), <http://www.revistas.una.ac.cr/index.php/istmica/article/view/7067>, accessed February 6, 2016.

⁶² Natalia Díaz Zeledón, “Orquesta Sinfónica de Heredia presentó su programación para la temporada 2016,” *La Nación*, February 8, 2016, http://www.nacion.com/ocio/musica/Orquesta_Sinfonica_de_Heredia-programacion_2016-concierto_o_1541445964.html, accessed February 11, 2016.

conductor, characterizes the Symphonic Orchestra of Heredia as a “decolonizing project.”⁶³

The idea of breaking the boundaries of music, discussed by Chaves-Espinach, reappears here as the focus of the Symphonic Orchestra of Heredia, which declares its commitment to the music of a time, a place, and an identity. Mora prioritizes a type of experimentation guided by a Latin Americanism that was initially forcefully critiqued by conservative sectors of Costa Rica who believed that symphonic orchestras should dedicate themselves to the Western classical canon.⁶⁴ It should not be surprising that this polemic occurs in Costa Rica in the twenty-first century. As I explained in the case of Noise, experimentation in Costa Rica is still a recent phenomenon that clashes, collapses, and implodes in the midst of post-postmodernity. The need of inserting Costa Rica into the global sphere evidences the need to explore processes that—like Otto Castro’s questioning about “noise” and “glitch”—might present themselves as disordered compared to the teleology of experimentation established in European or US contexts.

This is not circumstantial. The first transgressions of musical boundaries—with the work of composers such as Benjamín Gutiérrez, who explored atonality, and Bernal Flores, who explored the Hansonian system—coincided with the Central American biennials in the 1970s.⁶⁵ These phenomena are interwoven, giving evidence of micropolitical networks of collaboration and influence between people and institutions, including university, private, and governmental infrastructures. A history of experimentalism in Costa Rica is therefore necessary, and this essay may be the first attempt to delineate that history; a history that focuses on sonic experimentation as micro-colonialism. In sum, these processes show how circles of composers are unified by an aesthetics marked as either Central American or Latin American through the use of ethnographic resources like indigenous, Afro-descendant musics and mestizo folklore— inherited from traditional songbooks and nationalist musics from the beginning of the twentieth century—along with neoclassical and postmodern compositional resources.

⁶³ Ekaterina Chatski, “El proyecto descolonizador de la Orquesta Sinfónica de Heredia en sus últimas temporadas de concierto (2011–2013),” <http://www.ekaterinachatski.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ElproyectedescolonizadorOSH22.03.15.pdf>, accessed February 11, 2016.

⁶⁴ The dossier for the album *Rompiendo moldes* (2013) by the Symphonic Orchestra of Heredia includes an essay by the critic Andrés Sáenz titled “Un presagio pesimista,” published in *La Nación*, April 8, 2012, in which he indicates: “it seems to me a lamentable error that, as announced for the coming year, the OSMH [Symphonic Orchestra of Heredia] dedicates itself in an exclusive manner to Costa Rican and Ibero-American music and dispenses with the invaluable cultural and artistic legacy of the European tradition, without which the music of our composers would not exist.” See <http://www.ekaterinachatski.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/OSH-ROMPIENDO-MOLDES-copia-copia.pdf>, accessed February 11, 2016.

⁶⁵ Benjamín Gutiérrez studied at the New England Conservatory (Boston, Massachusetts) and at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales in the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (Buenos Aires, Argentina; see Herrera here); Bernal Flores studied at the Eastman School of Music (Rochester, New York), as assistant to Howard Hanson. For more biographical information about Costa Rican composers, see Ekaterina Chatski, María Clara Vargas Cullell, and Tania Vicente León, *Música académica costarricense: Del presente al pasado cercano* (San José: Ed. Universidad de Costa Rica, 2012).

OFFBEAT SOUND EXPERIMENTATION

Imagined musical communities, such as those described in this essay, develop micropolitics geared toward asserting their own self-representation while strengthening a tendency to assume ethnic abstractions as “natural.” Now, what happens on the side of the noisier and sound artists? They may imagine a place of difference because of their technological exploration, but they still share this ethnifying tendency with the community of electroacoustic music composers. What is identity then? One may well assume that, as these processes show, identity is destruction. We construct identities by destroying ourselves to then reassemble the fragments. An entity is taken, dismembered according to various priorities, reassembled, and so, over and over again, the action is repeated with or without a predetermined order until the entity becomes unrecognizable to itself. It does not know what it was any more. It is said to be folklore, past tradition, and its origin remains dissolved in the annals of time. But the path of this dismemberment can be followed like the trail of blood in a hunt, and so, as Ochoa Gautier indicates, “it emerges in this history.”⁶⁶ The utilization of the sound practices of indigenous peoples is an example of this phenomenon. And in Costa Rica, the blood trail can be followed from the first empirical ethnographic transcriptions from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present.

This is obviously a very complex problem, so I will focus on the processes I have identified as sonic archaeologies of the present.⁶⁷ I begin by addressing an archaeological project; the exhibition *Metaphors of Sound: Materialization of Music in Precolombian Populations*, produced by the Museum of the Central Bank of Costa Rica (2015).⁶⁸ The show involved the collaboration of members of the musical and Noise spheres, such as composer and ethnomusicologist Jorge Luis Acevedo; and musicians Eduardo Oviedo, Manuel Dávila, and Andrés Cervilla. They contributed with “supplies for the investigation, loaning of objects, video, and audio,” determined “the tessituras of the wind instruments,” and executed the recordings of those instruments under the assumption that they were gathering a “collection of unrecorded facts in this history of music and Costa Rican archaeology.”⁶⁹ This is a clear example of microcolonization via sonic experimentation, in this case with reconstructive archaeological objectives. No members of the country’s indigenous communities were consulted for the instrumental exhibition. It was all arranged by Costa Rican musicians with Western classical training working under the assumption that the sounds of these instruments could be homologous to the system of Western musical notation. For sound processing, the exhibition

⁶⁶ Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 140.

⁶⁷ Susan Campos Fonseca, “¿Arqueologías sonoras del presente?,” *Boletín Música* 37 (2014): 27–43.

⁶⁸ *La metáfora de los sonidos: Materialización de la música en las poblaciones precolombinas*, Museos del Banco Central; see <https://museosdelbancocentral.org/author/demo/page/3/>.

⁶⁹ Priscila Molina and Mónica Aguilar, *La metáfora de los sonidos: Materialización de la música en las poblaciones precolombinas* (San José: Fundación Museos Banco Central de Costa Rica, 2017), 2.

included the participation of a noisier, Joan Villaperros.⁷⁰ Villaperros shared/mediated the process of aurally imagining the reconstruction of “soundscapes”—following the curatorial premises of the exposition—heard/understood as indigenous, the aural Otherness supposedly preserved in the archaeological artifacts gathered in the exhibition. This microcolonizing act was realized by hearing the indigenous, the natural, and the social as the Costa Rican past.⁷¹

Although the micropolitics at work here could be considered circumstantial, this exhibition coincided with the installation *Indigenous Voices*, in the Latin American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2015), curated by Alfons Hug, Alberto Saraiva, and Sylvia Irrazábal. Here Costa Rica was represented by the artist Priscila Monge and her sound installation “Carajacaquijerrisuf.”⁷² This work uses an ethnographic recording of practices by the ethnic group Maléku, but the artist signed it for its insertion in the biennale: she, not her sources, the Maléku, was presented as the *author*. This sound installation makes evident a problem of microcolonialism in these types of experimentation. Monge mentions the names of her indigenous informants, Liliam Elizondo and Denia Blanco, the sources of this music, but she calls them *narradoras* (storytellers) while referring to herself as the author of the piece.

Noisier Alejandro Sánchez and composer Eddie Mora have also carried out projects linked to this appropriation-homage via aural. Both utilize and refer to ethnographic materials, assimilated in their creative languages—Noise and contemporary classical music, respectively. Their efforts resulted in the albums *Tierra adentro* (2015), by Sánchez, and *Bosque adentro* (2015), by Mora.⁷³ Is there a difference between the work of the noisier and that of the academic composer? With respect to objects of sound production, Mora utilizes an orchestra, piano, percussion, and an ocarina. Sánchez also uses the ocarina and percussion instruments, but the rest of his material is electronic. Are they differentiated by the position from which they listen and articulate? Are both equally experimental, and is their microcolonization process the same? Their idea of experimentation using the aural Otherness of the indigenous community (in this case the Bribri community) is comparable; do their ethnifying micropolitics work in a similar manner? Do they relate even if they take different ways of hearing (as noisier and musician) as points of departure?

The ethnification of experimental discourses and the gesture of taking a present, living act (that of an indigenous woman chanting, for instance) as an archaeological vestige constitute a serious research problem. This artistic discourse is a colonial gesture

⁷⁰ The name of Joan Villaperros is not mentioned in the catalog, but the latter offers photographic documentation of his collaboration, facilitated by Villaperros in his social networks.

⁷¹ Priscila Molina and Mónica Aguilar, “Sonidos del bosque, sonidos en movimientos y relación social,” in *La metáfora de los sonidos*, 19.

⁷² Priscila Monge, “Carajacaquijerrisuf” (2014), http://universes-in-universe.org/esp/bien/bienal_venecia/2015/tour/latin_america/priscilla_monge, accessed June 29, 2015.

⁷³ See Alejandro Sánchez, *Tierra adentro* (2015), <https://begotten-cr.bandcamp.com/>, accessed June 29, 2015, and Eddie Mora, *Bosque adentro* (2015), <http://eddiemora.com/es/publicados/audio-cd/coleccion-personal/90-bosque-adentro>, accessed June 29, 2015.

insofar as it uses ethnographic material from an indigenous community without a critical approach. The response from the public was also acritical, as it exempted both the artist and the international curators from any ethical responsibility whatsoever. The spectators, thus, legitimated the artists and the artistic milieu as acting in a disruptive and innovative manner. This is, ultimately, a case that requires a highly rigorous research. Many gaps remain. The appropriation of these resources is justified under the belief that they contain an aural Otherness that is capable of facilitating the opening of a new world of possibilities for sonic experimentation.

Now, the potential key to this aural Otherness as sound material for innovation resides, paradoxically, in the assumption of its condition as past. This is possible because of the historical narrative, of how Otherness emerges through the process of articulation, because its mode of listening is unknown. The artifacts are assumed, but the sounds they produce are colonized by an aurality that does not belong to them. It is worth asking, however, whether the epistemic and ontological mediation of listening is the same. Under the assumption that musical training differentiates the modes of listening of noisiers and musicians, the answer would have to be no. The disruption and innovation of Noise resides in the act of listening to the world; it resides in the possibility that noisiers, as well as musicians, add up to microcolonial experimental processes that cannibalize indigenous cultures in pursuit of a common imaginary. And in this process, although they argue that they are decolonizing or valorizing the indigenous community, in reality both groups continue to use them as raw material.

The purpose of analyzing these sonic archaeologies of the present is to open the questions of how identity discourses are elaborated on ethnifying bases, and to what extent experimentation makes references to heritage in its search for disruption and innovation. Technology is not innovation in itself, and these kinds of sonic experimentation are microcolonizing processes carried out by members of communities that, under micropolitical premises, identify themselves as different from an imagined Other, the indigenous people. In the case of Noise in Costa Rica, technologies and aurality may be different, but the act of symbolic violence in sonic experimentation remains the same.⁷⁴

This is without a doubt a problematic aspect of such experimentation, especially when composers use notation to represent the aurality they seek, notation in which the microcolonizing process is manifested. In the case of noisier and sound artists, this representation is at a conceptual level; not all utilize graphic representation, and some

⁷⁴ There are more than fifty works in which I have identified the same tendency, such as the works I have described by Monge, Sánchez, and Mora. Other outstanding examples are *Cuarteto Kerwá*, by Carlos J. Castro, and *Siete Haikus*, by Marvin Camacho. Both composers explore the metaphorical possibilities described by Corbett without directly inserting ethnographic material but rather exploring from it, in search of an imagined aural Otherness capable of mediating experimentation that decolonizes them. See also Marvin Camacho, "El realismo mágico en el canto indígena bribri y su impacto en la música contemporánea costarricense," *Boletín Música* 31 (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 2012): 87–93; Carlos J. Castro, "Cuarteto Kerwá," *Boletín Música* 37 (2014): Appendix.; and Campos Fonseca, "¿Arqueologías sonoras del presente?"

work instead directly from the frequencies preserved in recordings that constitute the ethnographic sound files. The technical processes are different, as is the conception and material representation of aurality, even if the intention is similar. Identifying this common intent reveals a belief in a possibility that is realized through sonic experimentation. The processing of materials is not the same, but the collective imaginary of an indigenous aural Otherness—as both an experimental element and a process of identity—is.

Another example of a sonic exploration that is regarded as innovative is the liner notes to Eddie Mora's album *Bosque adentro*, where Henning Jensen Pennington, the rector of the University of Costa Rica, affirms that the works included are “an example of these hybridization and cross-fertilizations of the meeting of cultures and traditions, in a context of creative renovation.” But how the “meeting” occurs remains unclear. The indigenous community from which sound materials are extracted remains completely outside the process, as in the case of the installation by Priscila Monge at the Venice Biennale. We could note that both Alejandro Sánchez and Marvin Camacho did carry out fieldwork in indigenous communities. Similarly, Proyecto Jirondai has defined itself as a rescuer of “voices of memory.”⁷⁵ Even though the mediation between materials differs—some taken from anthropological or archeological publications and others collected directly from the sources—the microcolonizing process, in its metaphorical mediation and the micropolitics implicated in the constitution of cultural imaginaries, is shared.⁷⁶

CONCLUDING WITH A QUESTION

Noisiers and composers appropriate, intrude on, and imagine indigenous communities as aural Others, as preterit sonorities, by adopting their sound materials and practices. In this way, the artists deny the indigenous people's creative and experimental contemporaneity. Such people are not regarded as artists or creators. They are sources; they are means to attain an experimentation that supposedly decolonizes Costa Rican creators. Another conflict subsists here: the insertion of indigenous populations as equals into Costa Rican society. While such equality may be legally true, it is not true on a symbolic level, as these processes reveal.

⁷⁵ See Proyecto Jirondai's website, www.jirondai.com, accessed March 19, 2017.

⁷⁶ The academic sphere has, nevertheless, initiated the inclusion of indigenous teachers in research projects dealing with their heritage. An example is the case of the University of Costa Rica professor Guillermo González Campos, and Freddy Obando Martínez, an indigenous teacher from the Cabécar group. Both developed projects linked with the Cabécar community at the University of Costa Rica Atlantic headquarters (Recinto Turrialba), along with professor Hannia Watson. Despite the fact that a link has been established with the Cabécar community, who construct and imagine their community in contemporaneity with academia, this process continues to be a paradox. See Guillermo González and Freddy Obando, *Historias del Clan Kätsubawäk* (Turrialba: Ed. UCR, 2015); and Bernardo Bolaños and Guillermo González, *Las miradas con que vemos: Análisis de la representación audiovisual de los pueblos indígenas en Costa Rica* (San José: Ed. UCR, 2010).

Costa Rican composers often cite Bolivian composer Cergio Prudencio's famous premise: "Decolonization is a path of invention".⁷⁷ These composers refer to the priority of decolonialization in Latin American composition. In this study of the Noise scene in Costa Rica, I raise the question: is it decolonization, or is it interior colonization? The Ecuadorian scholar Marya Estévez says: "The representation of the OTHER as a confirmation of the SELF (artist) is a question of epistemic violence."⁷⁸ Perhaps before exploring processes of decolonization in sonic experimentation, at least in the Costa Rican case, we need to rigorously investigate the processes of interior colonization that sustain the construction of our own contemporaneity. Not to negate it, or to justify it, but to understand it in its aporias—that might be perhaps a starting point. The cases analyzed here are sonic archaeologies of the present that reveal the micro-colonizing processes present in sonic experimentation. Noise in Costa Rica is a hinge, a point of inflection, for a critical take on experimentalism in Latin America.

⁷⁷ The quote comes from an conversation between Prudencio and Jorge Luna, mentioned in Ximena Soruco Sologuren's article "A propósito de la Orquesta Experimental de Instrumentos Nativos: Crear, enseñar y escuchar es decolonizar," *Ciencia y Cultura* 31 (2013): 39.

⁷⁸ Mayra Estévez Trujillo, *Estudios sonoros desde la región andina* (Quito-Bogotá: Centro Experimental Oído Salvaje/TRAMA, 2008), 95.

IV

Performance, Movements, and Scenes

“WE BEGAN FROM SILENCE”

Toward a Genealogy of Free Improvisation in Mexico City: *Atrás del Cosmos* at Teatro El Galeón, 1975–1977

Tamar Barzel

Free improvisation is a composition that emerges in the moment at which there is an idea, which arises from silence, and which develops until there is a structure, a melody, a rhythm that repeats itself outside any given meter and that continues unfolding, developing, unfurling into something the listener remembers [but] that can't be repeated . . . It's a kind of sleight-of-hand, a game one plays with time [and] with the emotions that emerge from the music. It's a way to bring attention to the ephemeral and to delight in it, in all its fullness. It's an improvised musical expression of a person's individuality . . . I just give myself to the music, I give myself to the piano, and let it happen. There's no more thinking. Your consciousness goes to another level. It's not something that has to do with the world. It's something that has to do with feelings, energy, the flow of life and of love.

—ANA RUIZ (2017)

I would like to extend my gratitude to the volume editors for inviting me to include a chapter in this collection, as well as to two anonymous reviewers for their close readings of an earlier draft of this article. I am grateful and indebted to all the artists and others who have so generously shared their time, memories, hospitality, and resources with me as I have prepared the manuscript. My warmest thanks to Pablo Iván Argüello and the Fonoteca Nacional de México for allowing me to listen to recently digitized recordings not yet available to the public, as well as to Germán Bringás, Alain Derbez, Ingrid Ebergenyi, Nando Estevané, Arthur Henry Fork, Angélica García, Carlos Icaza, Jazzamoart (formerly Francisco Javier Vázquez Estupiñán), Evry Mann (formerly Robert Mann), Victor Rapoport, Regina Tattersfield, Leslie San Vicente, Gerardo Alejos Victoria, Carlos Vivanco, Eric West, Henry West, Luis Urías, and most of all Ana Ruiz, without whose labor, dedication, and generosity this article would not have been written. Thanks are also due to Jacky Avila and Natalia Bieletto for their collegial support, to Bieletto for her help with transcriptions, to Xavier and Carolyn Meade for sharing their photographs, to Adriana Camacho and Antonio Gritón for sharing their artwork, to Oswaldo Mejia for his invaluable research assistance, and to Tim Smyth for his expert translations.

MEXICO CITY, 1975.¹ El Galeón, a three-hundred-seat black-box theater nestled in the heart of the city's grand Chapultepec Park, is packed with spectators sitting on tiered benches—young men and women in jeans and cotton pants, tank tops, loose-collared shirts. Knees bounce babies here and there, shoes are on or off, and someone has brought a flute, which flashes under the lights. A former storehouse for scenery and stage sets, El Galeón is windowless but gleaming, a cavernous space pod with a domed interior. Sheets of tin line its gently curving walls, which give way to a glinting, textured surface overhead. On the floor—surrounded on three sides by their audience—three performers are in the midst of a high-energy, freely improvised collaboration that is to spin out over thirty minutes. Ana Ruiz (Mexico, b. 1952) is seated at a grand piano, Robert Mann (United States, b. 1950) is to her right on drum set, and standing between them is Henry West (Mexico, b. 1943) on alto saxophone. If music is, as composer-improviser Vijay Iyer suggests, “the sound of human bodies in motion,” it is also the sound of human minds in action, and a collective improvisation is the sounded realm of humans acting, reacting, and interacting, in concert.² This evening, as the artists parry, respond, and breathe together, their improvisation creates a palpable register of intensified experience: the room feels charged with a sense that *something is happening*. In order to create the conditions under which it will happen and to fully appreciate it while it is happening, one has to pay attention. The audience, responding to the social conventions of the space, the zeitgeist of their milieu and historical moment, and the mandate these improvising musicians are bestowing upon them, is paying attention.³

For eight months in 1975–1976, El Galeón saw this kind of scene repeated every Monday night during performances by the ensemble Atrás del Cosmos (Behind the Cosmos). It was an experience to be had nowhere else in the city. The music was unique in the local landscape, impossible to pigeonhole as either jazz or contemporary concert music, for it had a foot in both genres while also drawing on global idioms and ranging freely into uncharted stylistic territory. Moreover, its rhetorical coherence—the organizing principle that led audiences to attend to each improvisation as to an unfolding drama—stemmed not only from formal devices, such as repetition, contrast, and motivic development, but also from the music's very lack of predictability: the act of tempting entropy, of standing on the brink of chaos without succumbing to it, intensified the performers' interreliance and sharpened the eventful human quality of each improvisation. It was evident to audiences that the success or failure of the whole enterprise rested not only on technical virtuosity or compositional acumen but also on each player's investment in bringing the ensemble's intense, thus intensely personal, interrelation into public view. It might be argued that in modeling such a radical, even ethical

¹ The epigraph to this chapter is from Ana Ruiz, email to the author and personal conversation, January 5 and 11, 2017; in Spanish and English. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

² Vijay Iyer, “Improvisation, Action Understanding, and Music Cognition with and without Bodies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, vol. 1, ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 74–90.

³ This description is drawn from archival photographs, press reports, and interviews I conducted in 2015–2017 with musicians and audience members.

mode of socio-creative relationality—one that demanded self-actualization, but only within a social compact—the ensemble was at the vanguard of its moment and in tune with its public. But *Atrás del Cosmos* also set itself apart from the era's social upheavals and political concerns, designing its concerts at El Galeón as worlds unto themselves. The ensemble offered its audiences a potentially transformative evening's experience that was rife with radical possibility but was neither couched in political terms nor related in any obvious way to whatever was happening outside the theater's confines.

The 1970s saw Mexico City's middle classes, like their counterparts in other cosmopolitan cities, chafing against mores and worldviews that in the wake of the social and political upheavals of the 1960s had come to seem too rigid, overly commercial, or, in the case of institutionalized art and culture, collusive or corrupt. This disaffection emerged in an uneasy climate as the governing party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), which was ostensibly engaged in building a democracy based on revolutionary ideals, exposed the hollowness of its rhetoric both through sponsoring the violent suppression of protests by student activists in 1968 and 1971 and through its ambivalent relationship with indigenous people.⁴ Even as Mexico had long been a haven for exiles from other countries—having famously sheltered Leon Trotsky, Luis Buñuel, and Gabriel García Márquez—local activists were subject to reprisals, while outspoken artists and intellectuals could attract harassment and censorship if their work threatened to subvert the status quo.⁵ Audiences looking to music for ways to address these tensions could turn to the *canto nuevo* (new song) movement or to underground rock, but *Atrás del Cosmos*, unlike musicians in those circles, framed its work as neither an act of political subversion nor a harbinger of social change. Instead, it modeled for its audiences a process by which to move beyond entrenched ideas, structures, and expectations. Judging by firsthand testimony, contemporaneous press reports, and the popularity of its performances, its message resonated with a bohemian audience that was in a searching mood—a mood that, as art historian Cuahtémoc Medina has asserted, seized the city's middle classes, manifesting itself through “sexual dissent, psychotropic curiosity, spiritual experimentation, skeptical positions regarding modernity, in brief, anything contesting those repressive and production-oriented limitations that made up bourgeois identity Art [became] a space to express a particular form of heterodoxy for some practitioners.”⁶ Observers described the experience of hearing the ensemble perform in vivid terms, bearing out Iyer's recent assertion about the notion of “embodied empathy” among audiences of improvisational music: it is an

⁴ María L. O. Muñoz, *Stand Up and Fight: Participatory Indigenismo, Populism, and Mobilization in Mexico, 1970–1984* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016). See Analisa Taylor, *Indigeneity in the Mexican Cultural Imagination: Thresholds of Belonging* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009).

⁵ Alan Eladio Gómez, *The Revolutionary Imaginations of Greater Mexico: Chicana/o Radicalism, Solidarity Politics, and Latin American Social Movements* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 54; Arden Decker, “Los Grupos and the Art of Intervention in 1960s and 1970s Mexico” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2015).

⁶ Cuahtémoc Medina, “Recovering Panic,” in Olivier Debrouse, ed., *La era de la discrepancia: Arte y cultura visual en México/The Age of Discrepancies: Art and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1968–1997* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Nacional de México, 2006), 97. See Edward J. McCaughan, *Art and Social Movements: Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlán* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).



FIGURE 9.1. *Atrás del Cosmos*, c. 1976. Left to right: Henry West, Ana Ruiz, Robert Mann. Used by courtesy of Ana Ruiz.

empathy that “extends to an awareness of performers’ coincident physical and mental exertion, of their ‘in-the-moment’ processes of creative activity and interactivity, the risks taken in the face of unbounded possibilities, the inherent constraints of the mind deciding and the body acting in time.”⁷ The performers’ command over their instruments, the freshness of their musical ideas, the intensity of their interactions, and their physical proximity to the audience created a quality of mutual involvement. For *Atrás del Cosmos* and its audiences, free improvisation seems to have served as a public forum for deep introspection, a politically unmarked yet socially subversive act of collective resistance to outmoded ways of thinking.

Billing their music as “Free jazz,” “Free music,” and “It’ll hurt you but you’ll like it” (“Te va a doler pero te va a gustar”), Ruiz and West had begun performing together in the early 1970s, collaborating with a series of drummers until Mann joined them in the summer of 1975 (fig. 9.1).⁸ The three worked together intensively for eight years—rehearsing during the day, performing at night, teaching classes in improvisation, and giving concerts across the city and country under the auspices of Mexico’s Institute of Fine Arts (El Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes; henceforth “Bellas Artes”)—until disbanding in 1983.⁹ Outside a small circle of contemporaries and the journalists who documented its work, *Atrás del Cosmos* is little known today.¹⁰ But *Atrás del Cosmos*

⁷ Iyer, “Improvisation,” 60.

⁸ Antonio Malacara Palacios, “La entrevista *Atrás del Cosmos*: Henry West,” *Conecte*, January 1980, 7.

⁹ El Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes was established in 1946; its first director was composer Carlos Chávez.

¹⁰ The most comprehensive history of the ensemble is included in a Spanish-language monograph by Alain Derbez, *El jazz en México: Datos para esta historia* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012).

stands as the country's foremost ensemble devoted to free improvisation after composer Mario Lavista's Quanta ensemble, which was active from 1970 to 1972, and at least three lesser-known, short-lived but revolutionary ensembles of the late 1960s (Escorpión Ascendente [Scorpio Rising], El Inconsciente Colectivo [The Collective Unconscious, after Jung], and Las Damas Chinas [Chinese Checkers/Chinese Ladies], discussed below). Moreover, in addition to releasing one commercially produced cassette tape, *Cold Drinks/Hot Dreams* (1981), Atrás del Cosmos made a substantial body of rehearsal and concert tapes, which are currently being conserved and digitized at the Fonoteca Nacional, Mexico's national sound archive; this body of work forms what I believe to be the most substantial record of twentieth-century free improvisation in Mexico.¹¹

As a pioneering improvisation collective with a strong public presence from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, Atrás del Cosmos occupies a singular place in the history of music in Mexico. The ensemble would be historically significant if only because it served during this period as the city's main forum for free improvisation and its essential training ground for free improvisers, thus standing as a key precursor to the city's contemporary scene in experimental music and sound art. But the ensemble's story also makes it plain that musicians in Mexico have long been contesting the idea that boundary-pushing creative practice—whether conceived as experimentalism, contemporary music, or *la música de vanguardia*—is the main province of the academy and is coterminous with score-based concert music, a notion that has prevailed in much Latin American and US-based scholarship, and one for which this volume, with its fluid concept of experimentalism and its concern with “what happens when experimentalisms happen,” offers a refreshing corrective.¹² The creative interchanges between Atrás del Cosmos and US-based improvisers—including avant-garde jazz trumpeter Don Cherry—also bolster arguments for the fundamentally transnational nature of twentieth-century “American” (i.e., US-based) concert music, popular music, and jazz, particularly with regard to relationships forged between artists and institutions in the United States and Latin America.¹³

¹¹ Henry West, Ana Ruiz, Robert Mann, and Claudio Enríquez, *Cold Drinks/Hot Dreams* (audiocassette), el ágora, [1981, rec. 1978]).

¹² For example, Mariano Etkin, “Reflexiones sobre la música de vanguardia en América Latina,” in *Ensayos de Música Latinoamericana*, ed. Zoila Gómez García, 333–335 (Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1982); Juan Orrego-Salas, “Traditions, Experiment, and Change in Contemporary Latin America,” *Latin American Music Review* 6, no. 2 (1985): 152–165; José M. García Laborda, “Últimas tendencias en la nueva música Española: La composición musical en la década de los ochenta,” *Revista de Musicología* 16, no. 6 (1993): 3723–3734. For an intervention, see Manuel Rocha Iturbide, “Arqueología de la música experimental en México,” in *Ready Media: Hacia una arqueología de los medios y la invención en México* (Mexico City: Laboratorio de Arte Alameda, INBA y CONACULTA, 2010), 169–181.

¹³ See, for example, Ángel G. Quintero Rivera and Mariana Ortega Breña, “Migration, Ethnicity, and Interactions between the United States and Hispanic Caribbean,” *Latin American Perspectives* 34, no. 1 (2007): 83–93; and Gaye Theresa Johnson, “‘Sobre Las Olas’: A Mexican Genesis in Borderlands Jazz and the Legacy for Ethnic Studies,” *Comparative American Studies* 6, no. 3 (2008): 225–240.

Finally, the story of *Atrás del Cosmos* illuminates the path by which Mexico City's contemporary improvisation scene developed from its surprising beginnings, which lay not primarily in the local jazz scene or the concert music avant-garde but in the city's experimental theater and intermedia arts scene of the 1960s. To be sure, as art historians Daniel Escoto and Manuel Rocha Iturbide have noted, that scene, particularly the branch associated with film and theater director Alejandro Jodorowsky (Chile, b. 1929), was a fertile incubator for freely improvised music in the 1960s.¹⁴ However, to date, little research has been done to trace the paths of musicians who were involved in those circles or to consider whether that involvement had wider repercussions. Although more work remains to be done on this front, West, who brought new ideas about improvisation to Mexico after an apprenticeship in New York City's music scene, also emerges as a key, probably unique conduit for a set of ideas inherited from experimental theater that helped shape the ensemble's performance practice and served as its conceptual underpinning.¹⁵

In the discussion that follows, I focus on *Atrás del Cosmos*'s tenure from 1975 to 1977.¹⁶ The ensemble's long history merits a fuller treatment, but this span of years offers rich terrain for considering its work in its historical moment and cultural context, particularly for the way it both emerged and diverged from experimental theater praxis. A residency would have represented a rare opportunity to any ensemble, but for an improvising ensemble with no wider scene to support it, the long stretch of weekly concerts at El Galeón proved remarkable, both for the creative ground its members were able to cover together and, relatedly, for the sustained relationship they were able to build with their audiences. The residency also led to the ensemble's involvement with Cherry (United States, 1936–1995), who came to Mexico in February 1977 at the invitation of Bellas Artes to work with *Atrás del Cosmos*, in conjunction with his Organic Music Project. That year the ensemble also completed a national tour, led a month of weekly public workshops, and performed in two concerts at the National Auditorium on May 14 and 15.

Although these concerts testify uniquely to the ensemble's cultural stature, it maintained a strong local presence for six years afterward, adding Claudio Enríquez on contrabass while continuing to perform and tour for Bellas Artes. Ruiz and West also widened the ensemble's scope, giving lessons in basic music theory to the self-taught musicians

¹⁴ Daniel Escoto, "El escorpión, la máscara y la jaula: Tres incursiones de mexicanos al territorio del sonido en los años setenta," in XXXVI *Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte. Los estatutos de la imagen, creación-manifestación-percepción*, eds. Linda Báez Rubí and Emilie Carreón Blaine (Mexico City: National Autonomous University of Mexico-Institute of Aesthetic Research, 2014), 197–212; Iturbide, "Arqueología de la música experimental." In the late 1960s, Jodorowsky was also involved in Mexico's experimental rock scene, serving as creative director for what Zolov terms "the avant-garde rock performance television program *1, 2, 3, 4, 5, a Go-Go!* [broadcast] live weekly for a brief time on Telesistema . . . [which] integrated rock music and theater to produce spontaneous television performance." Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 117 and 286, n. 103, quoting Luis Urías, "*1, 2, 3, 4, 5, a Go-Go!* Al borde del efímero electrónico," *Zona Rosa*, March 15, 1968, 8–9.

¹⁵ In this way as in many others, the story of *Atrás del Cosmos* parallels that of Quanta. Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, "La 'destrucción renovadora' de Quanta," *Pauta* 32, no. 130 (2014): 22–34.

¹⁶ Ruiz recalls that Cherry stayed with her for several months after the National Auditorium concerts, performing around the city and country, including a performance at the Casino de la Selva, a legendary hotel (since destroyed) in Cuernavaca. Ruiz, personal conversation, January 11, 2017.



FIGURE 9.2. La Banda Atrás del Cosmos (Atrás del Cosmos big band), c. 1980. Left to right: Luis de Tepoztlán (“El Apache”); Ana Ruiz (holding infant son Eric West); Henry West; Rafael Figueroa; Peter Smith (back); Robert Mann (middle); Alejandro Folgarolas (front); Sergio Delgado; Claudio Enríquez; Luis Tao; Carlos Vivanco. Used by courtesy of Ana Ruiz.

who sought them out and then leading their students into developing a facility and personal language in freely improvised music—training that to my knowledge was available nowhere else in the country. Ruiz later described the process: “they played, but they had never read a score. They played by ear, but they didn’t know music. So we decided to teach them music, a little bit about it—we would write the music, we would add a treble clef, bass clef, harmonies, melody, etcetera, and then we played that, and we improvised over that. We went beyond what was written. We were able to take them to a new place. We told them, ‘This is how you write it, but you have the capacity to take it to a new place, to destroy what is written and make your own music.’ And for them, it was a very good principle.”¹⁷ From this cohort of young improvisers, many of whom had been drawn into the ensemble’s orbit by Cherry’s workshops and concerts, Ruiz and West formed La Banda Atrás del Cosmos, a big band with about twelve players. By using this band as a teaching vehicle, they created a kind of apprenticeship system by which to transmit their understanding of free improvisation to a new generation of Mexican musicians (figs. 9.2 and 9.3).¹⁸

¹⁷ Ana Ruiz, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 17, 2015; in Spanish.

¹⁸ In one indication of its local standing, in April 1979 this ensemble performed at the inauguration of the massive amphitheater at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México built to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the university’s independence (see fig. 9.3).



FIGURE 9.3. La Banda Atrás del Cosmos performing at the inauguration of the outdoor amphitheater Espacio Escultórico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, April 1979. Front, left to right: Rafael Figueroa, trumpet; Henry West (standing); Ana Ruiz, saxophone; Alejandro Folgarolas, saxophone; Luis de Tepoztlán (“El Apache”), saxophone (face obscured). Middle, left to right: Sergio Delgado, guitar; Luis Tao, guitar; Robert Mann, drum set. Back, left to right: Carlos Vivanco, guitar; unidentified (arms crossed); Marcelo Segberg, conga drums. Used by courtesy of Ana Ruiz.

MAGICAL EMPATHY: AN UNLIKELY CONVERGENCE

That Atrás del Cosmos was able to accomplish all this is testimony not only to its artists’ dedication but also to their creative chemistry, which each ensemble member recalls as having been immediate and powerful, and which they were able to develop into a near-telepathic musical flow that was palpable to their audiences. As saxophonist Alejandro Folgarolas—who devoted himself to a career in music after first hearing the ensemble perform—recalled in 2015, “I was eighteen then, and now I’m fifty-nine, and I still can’t explain how they arrived at that magical empathy—how they were able to communicate in fractions of a second, in milliseconds, achieving this magical rapport.”¹⁹ Music critic Antonio Malacara Palacio concurred, writing in 1977: “Their music is completely free, a continuous flow of improvisation . . . They are the purest expression of our present moment. They are creators [and] interpreters in the same instant.”²⁰ If such compatibility was unusual, it is even more striking that it

¹⁹ Alejandro Folgarolas, roundtable discussion, Festival de Improvisación, Jazz Libre y Ruidismo “Cha’ak’ab Paaxil,” moderated by Gerardo Alejos Victoria, Querétaro, Mexico, March 12, 2015; in Spanish.

²⁰ Antonio Malacara Palacios, “Robert Mann, Ana Ruiz, Henry West: Algo más que música . . . libertad/Algo más que libertad . . . música,” *Conecte*, February 1, 1977, 32; translation by Tim Smyth.

emerged among improvisers with such divergent musical backgrounds. Ruiz, whose grandmother—an amateur classical pianist—was her first teacher, studied piano performance at the National Conservatory until switching to composition at age nineteen. Her composition teachers included Mario Lavista (Mexico, b. 1943), Manuel Enríquez (Mexico, 1926–1994), and Gerhart Münch (Germany, 1907–1988), who encouraged her to set aside notions of “proper” technique so as to take an exploratory approach to her instrument—by playing the piano strings directly, for instance, or using her fists to generate ringing harmonics. While focusing on composition, she continued performing, with a focus on modernist and experimental composers, taking part, for example, in a marathon concert of Erik Satie’s *Vexations* and performing John Cage’s *4'33"* at the Benjamin Franklin Library at the US embassy, with Lavista conducting both performances.²¹ She also began improvising on the piano under Münch’s tutelage, and she recalls having played briefly in Quanta, improvising on the unique microtonal instruments of composer Julián Carrillo (Mexico, 1875–1965).²² Soon afterward, however, she left the Conservatory to marry and begin raising a family. During this period she stopped playing and composing, and she ultimately decided not to continue her studies at the conservatory, discouraged by the lack of work opportunities for classically trained musicians. But after her marriage dissolved, she was drawn back to music, and by 1972 she had embarked on an intense personal involvement and creative collaboration with West.

Whereas Ruiz had listened to jazz growing up but had never played it, West had formal training in jazz but not classical music. He recalls, however, listening to the classical recordings of J. S. Bach with his father, “a great listener, someone who concentrated on music, who didn’t treat it as background music.”²³ He began studying conga drums as an adolescent, and by age fourteen he was playing professionally in a Mexico City mambo band, immersed in the city’s vibrant scene for *música tropical*, Caribbean- and Colombian-influenced dance music arranged for jazz orchestras. He soon became interested in jazz improvisation and began studying alto saxophone, eventually moving to Boston to study jazz performance, composition, theory, and arranging at the Berklee School of Music.²⁴ Like Ruiz, after about two years in music school, he grew frustrated with the creative constraints he encountered there and dropped out, returning to Mexico in 1962 to study business administration in Monterrey, where he gigged on conga drums and played saxophone in jazz backing orchestras. But in this arena he ran up against creative limits once again, and by the late 1960s, like Ruiz, he

²¹ Concert programs courtesy of Ana Ruiz. Satie’s *Vexations* (1893) consists of an eighteen-note melody with two harmonizations, a tempo marking of “Very slow,” and a performance note that indirectly suggests that the work be played 840 times. This results in a performance of around twenty hours.

²² See Alejandro L. Madrid, *In Search of Julián Carrillo and Sonido 13* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 255–285.

²³ Gerardo Alejos Victoria, “Henry West,” unpublished document, courtesy of Alejos Victoria, in the author’s possession; in Spanish.

²⁴ West also played saxophone in the Mexican rock band Los Sinners, with whom he recorded the hit song “La carrera del oso” (The Bear’s Path) in 1959. Malacara Palacios, “Robert Mann, Ana Ruiz, Henry West,” 32.

too had stopped playing music. He found a more satisfying outlet in theater, and in 1964 he began studying mime with Jodorowsky, who had apprenticed under Marcel Marceau and was dividing his time between Paris and Mexico City, directing experimental happenings, theatrical productions, and films.²⁵ Ultimately, West spent several years immersed, “hook, line, and sinker,” in Jodorowsky’s creative world, taking part in Jodorowsky’s productions while acting as his secretary and musical amanuensis.²⁶ By 1970, West and Jodorowsky had formed a free improvisation ensemble with intermedia artist Luis Urías, who had been collaborating closely with Jodorowsky in Mexico City since the early 1960s. West’s experiences in this ensemble, *Las Damas Chinas*, served as the backdrop for the deep dive into free improvisation he took with *Atrás del Cosmos* a few years later.

Unlike Ruiz and West, Mann came to *Atrás del Cosmos* with little formal musical training, and he describes Ruiz and West as having served as not only musical partners but also teachers and role models during their tenure together in the ensemble.²⁷ In *Atrás del Cosmos* Mann found a way to reconcile what had been three competing pulls: academic studies, musical performance, and spiritual seeking. He had an early background in school band drumming, and while attending Florida State University he had played drum set in folk, blues, and rock ensembles, including a jam band modeled after the Grateful Dead—his first experience with improvisation. After taking year off at age nineteen to devote himself to music, he graduated from college and enrolled in a Ph.D. program in religious studies at McGill University in Montreal. While completing his coursework, he studied tabla performance with artists from the local Indian community, and then he took another leave of absence from school to explore the jazz scene in New York City. After spending a session at what would become Karl Berger’s Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York, he decided to go to Mexico City for the summer—a decision that was to determine the course of his life as a professional musician.²⁸ About midway through Ruiz and West’s run at *El Galeón*, Mann happened to be in the audience, and his experience from that vantage point was a potent one—“It was the music I had been hearing in my head,” he explained in 2015, “I recognized it right away”—so much so that he abandoned his doctoral studies and moved to Mexico in order to begin working with them.

Although Ruiz, West, and Mann had all been drawn to improvisation in the past, collaborating in an ensemble devoted to free improvisation led them into uncharted territory. *Atrás del Cosmos* had been born out of a creative partnership Ruiz and West

²⁵ Jodorowsky had studied mime in Paris under Étienne Decroux in the 1950s and then joined the troupe of one of Decroux’s students, Marcel Marceau. Cristina Johnston, “Alejandro Jodorowsky,” in Bill Marshall, ed., *France and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History: A Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 625–627.

²⁶ Henry West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015.

²⁷ Evry Mann (formerly Robert Mann), interview with the author, Arlington, Massachusetts, August 28, 2015.

²⁸ Although the Creative Music Studio was to become a legendary improvisational music workshop, it was still in development when Mann was in residence and did not get fully underway until the following year. Mann, interview with the author, Arlington, Massachusetts, August 28, 2015.

had embarked on in 1972. (They had met through drummer Micky Salas, and the three played together briefly in a rock band.) West had just returned from New York City, where he had been working as a musical consultant on Jodorowsky's film *La montaña sagrada* (The Holy Mountain; 1973), alongside Don Cherry, who composed the score.²⁹ Plunging into free improvisation meant, for West, willfully forgetting the song forms and conventions for improvising he had internalized during his years of performing jazz professionally and studying it academically. For Ruiz, this process entailed looking beyond the composer-performer distinction embedded in the European classical tradition, turning away from her mandate to interpret the composer's intentions as inscribed in the written score, and pushing herself to imagine music that existed outside the genres and traditions with which she was most familiar. Ultimately, she recalled, she chose a path devoted to searching out what she came to call "my own music":

I got rid of the sheet music, the staff, and the score in front of me, and I started playing from nothing. And it took a lot of work because I was used to reading my pieces and knowing that my mind didn't have to work, my fingers would move the way they were supposed to move, and all the notes would be perfectly in place and all that. When I began to improvise with Henry, we began from silence. And from silence, we started with a single sound, and I started experimenting with really listening to the piano, and I got rid of the cobwebs that came from having sheet music in front of me. And in three or four months, we were able to improvise.³⁰

Both Ruiz and West found the project gripping in a way unmatched by their previous experiences. In whatever time they could spare from their professional lives—West was a recording engineer and assistant to the manager at PubliServicios, an advertising agency, Ruiz gave piano lessons, and they both worked as music copyists—they continued rehearsing every day at their house behind (atrás) the Cosmos cinema, an imposing 1940s-era movie palace they could see while they were rehearsing—hence the deceptively metaphysical name they eventually adopted for the ensemble.³¹ In their social milieu, friends often dropped by each other's homes for visits and meals. Word quickly spread about the work they were doing, and a coterie of like-minded colleagues began making their way to the house behind the Cosmos to take part in their ventures into free improvisation. (When they joined forces with Mann in 1975, he moved into a former servants' quarters on their roof and then decamped to a house across the street.) Few of them had played free before, and the house thus became the city's de facto training ground for fellow travelers who sought to develop an improvisatory

²⁹ West's contribution is not credited on the recent release of the original soundtrack. See *Allen Klein Presents Alejandro Jodorowsky's The Holy Mountain* (compact disc) (ABKCO Music, 2007).

³⁰ Ruiz, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 17, 2015.

³¹ West later worked as creative group director at Gutierrez Silva & Associates, an advertising agency, and Ruiz wrote jingles for a production company. Henry West, email to the author, January 11, 2017.

practice outside the structures and norms of straight-ahead jazz. As Ruiz recalled, on their days off from work, “We played all day. All day. We ate breakfast, and we played. We ate lunch . . . and we started playing again. At night, friends came over, and we kept playing. Luckily we lived in a neighborhood that let us do this . . . [smiling] We were the artists who lived in the ‘funky’ neighborhood.”³² By the time Mann arrived, Ruiz and West’s house had become the kind of creative crucible memorialized in jazz historiography, with perhaps the closest parallel being the house in Philadelphia where Sun Ra’s ensemble lived and rehearsed for many years.³³ It was a musical workshop that was also a social space, a “hang,” and a crash pad, but the easygoing atmosphere served a crucial purpose in the sense implied by ethnomusicologists’ discussions of enculturation, or the process by which people absorb and become fluent in particular modes of music making. “Thinking in jazz,” in the phrase coined by Paul Berliner, denotes the lifelong course of study and practice jazz musicians must undertake in order to learn to improvise, a discipline for which the regular opportunity to listen, rehearse, and perform with other improvisers is crucial. Unlike any other space in the city, the house behind the Cosmos gave a community of aspiring free improvisers the sustained and immersive environment they needed to polish their craft, develop a personal syntax, and pursue creative ideas that could be realized only in this sort of context.³⁴

Once they had achieved some improvisational fluency, Ruiz and West began seeking regular collaborators with whom to perform in public. By the summer of 1975, with Nando Estevané (Mexico, b. 1954) on percussion, they had secured a regular gig at El Granero, a two-hundred-seat theater administered by Bellas Artes.³⁵ Their concerts there were filled to capacity, and Bellas Artes soon moved them to El Galeón, a theater that held about three hundred people, where Mann first heard Ruiz and West perform and approached them after the show—on what happened to be Estevané’s last night with the ensemble—to tell them how much their music had moved him.³⁶ They were also dispatched around the country to perform at the government-sponsored

³² Ibid.

³³ The Cosmos Cinema was a grand movie palace built in 1946 that had fallen on hard times by the 1970s, after serving as a refuge for student demonstrators during the Corpus Christi Massacre of June 10, 1971. It was located in Colonia Tlaxpana, a working-class neighborhood in the municipality of Tacuba. Arturo Páramo, “Excelsior Cine Cosmos, sobre su cadáver harán una funeraria,” *Excelsior*, June 22, 2012, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/2012/06/22/comunidad/842884>, accessed December 20, 2016. See James Alex Garza, *The Imagined Underworld: Sex, Crime, and Vice in Porfirian Mexico City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 20.

³⁴ Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁵ They called themselves A-H-A (Ana-Henry-Antonio). In benefiting from the economic patronage of Bellas Artes, Atrás del Cosmos shared common ground with Quanta. As Alonso-Minutti notes, the economic security Quanta won through sponsorship allowed them to develop an intense improvisational practice, “to the extent that it became a style of life; they improvised for several hours, seven days a week, and they gave hundreds of concerts each year.” Alonso-Minutti, “La ‘destrucción renovadora’ de Quanta,” 28–29.

³⁶ Ruiz recalls that the concerts at El Granero were free, whereas audiences bought tickets to the performances at El Galeón.

casas de cultura that are found in cities and towns throughout Mexico, as well as at parks, schools, and prisons, which included, according to West, a jail in La Paz, Baja California, as well as the notorious Lecumberri jail in Mexico City. Ruiz and West were accustomed to receiving a range of responses—from outrage to bafflement to elation—from their listeners, and a weekly residency offered them the opportunity both to explore creative territory that would otherwise have remained out of reach and to cultivate a new audience.

El Galeón proved to be a fortuitous space for the ensemble, providing just the right conditions for the work they aspired to do. “It was an intimate space,” Mann recalled, “and it was a great place to play music The sight lines were good, the acoustics were good—you could really feel the connection with the audience in there There was very little separation. And it wasn’t a club, they weren’t selling drinks, there weren’t distractions. People came there to hear music or see theater. That was it. So it was a really intense, focused experience God, we had so many amazing evenings there.”³⁷ The nature of the space itself, along with its commercial function (or lack thereof), behavioral conventions, and ambient sound quality, played an important role during the residency. Restaurants and bars were clamorous and hectic, conducive neither to the kind of music the trio wanted to present nor to the relationship it sought to build with its audience. Although the trio was drawn to the idea of performing in a space that supported a focused listening experience without the intercession of dancing, eating, drinking, conversation, or commerce, the atmosphere in a concert hall was too formal for its aims, and the received norms, which enforced a division among performers, composers, and audience members, were too rigid. At the same time, the ensemble was not driven by the kind of activist politics (coupled with a willingness to compromise on acoustics) that led some of its contemporaries to perform primarily in public spaces, a practice that, in serving “as the locus of a complex exchange across class boundaries,” would likely have allowed them to reach a different kind of audience.³⁸ Ultimately, in regard to performance space, the ensemble sought to merge conventions from the classical tradition, in which music is a transcendent medium and the concert hall its hushed temple, with a practice akin to the “poor theater” philosophy of Jerzy Grotowski, who had called for theatrical works to be performed “face to face with the spectator so that he is within arm’s reach of the actor, can feel his breathing and smell the perspiration.”³⁹ El Galeón, an intimate black box theater with excellent acoustics, which attracted simpatico listeners who were seated close by and at nearly the same level as the performers, was well suited to their purposes.

What they were after had much in common with ideas current in experimental theater: a performance that could have the force of a ritual and could become a vehicle for *communitas*—that is, a register of shared experience that, in Victor Turner’s classic formulation, “is almost everywhere held to be sacred . . . it transgresses or dissolves

³⁷ Mann, interview with the author, Arlington, Massachusetts, August 28, 2015.

³⁸ Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 162.

³⁹ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 40–41.

the norms that govern institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.⁴⁰ What would be ritualized was not a prescribed series of events, however, but the act of paying attention—on the part of both performers and audience—to an extemporaneous sonic drama. Classical concerts were ritualistic, too, but the musical text was already determined. Straight-ahead jazz was more flexible, but it tended to adhere to familiar song forms and formal plans that listeners knew would bring them back home from wherever an improvisation might have taken them. Audiences who came to a concert of free improvisation, particularly one staged in an intimate theater, could understand themselves to be participants in a new kind of performer-listener relationship, one for which the precepts were still to be codified and the text still to be written. As Folgarolas recounted, “I also realized this as a spectator—that [sometimes] it’s not deliberate . . . There are moments when the musicians make a face as if to say, ‘Am I really doing this?’ . . . Musicians sometimes do things that they never remotely thought they had in them.”⁴¹ This quality of unpredictability did not appeal to everyone. Estevané recalled that some people in the audience would leave “because we didn’t play standards, we didn’t play familiar things. There was not a single standard.” The trio, he continued, “played what came to us. From the soul . . . It was music to create different atmospheres, and to create emotions.”⁴² But this music, whose unconventionality pushed some listeners away, could draw others out in surprising and visceral ways. Ruiz explained: “When music is live, it’s very powerful for the people who are experiencing it, and my children’s friends, young kids would tell me, ‘Ana, you made me cry.’ Some friends of my own age [would say], ‘Ana, I don’t know how you [all] made it happen, but I started to cry.’ Of course, it was the sound that made them cry. And they were healing tears, it wasn’t sadness. It was emotion.”⁴³

Other artists in the audience, taking their cue from the musicians’ responsiveness to each other and to the sense of shared experience that seemed to charge the room’s atmosphere, would sometimes respond spontaneously to the music. Ruiz recalled: “A lot of artists started coming to our concerts—painters, dancers, actors, and musicians too—suddenly, there would be someone onstage, and they would start doing a Tibetan dance, someone else would stand up and start miming, performing a mime routine while we were playing.”⁴⁴ Participatory music making and dancing were a familiar part of the city’s social life, but this kind of improvised performance also had some

⁴⁰ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1969) (London: Aldine Transacion, 2011), 128.

⁴¹ Folgarolas, roundtable, March 12, 2015.

⁴² Carlos Icaza (with Tamar Barzel), interview with Nando Estevané, Mexico City, January 11, 2017; in Spanish.

⁴³ Ruiz, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 17, 2015.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Ruiz touches here on a contemporaneous interest among artists and researchers in exploring connections between Tibetan and indigenous Mexican rituals. See Sonia Morales, “Nicolas Nuñez y el taller de investigación teatral de la UNAM: conjunción de rito y teatro,” *Proceso*, February 28, 1987, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/145527/nicolas-nunez-y-el-taller-de-investigacion-teatral-de-la-unam-conjuncion-de-rito-y-teatro>, accessed August 20, 2017.

precedent in Mexico City's avant-garde creative circles. In the early 1970s, Lavista's Quanta ensemble had presented collaborations with modern dancers; those who had seen a series of ensemble performances led by intermedia artists Víctor Fosado or Juan José Gurrola in the late 1960s would have witnessed a juxtaposition of free improvisation, experimental film, modern dance, and spoken word ("poesía vibromental").⁴⁵ Moreover, as noted, beginning in the mid-1960s, Jodorowsky had included improvised music in his *efímeros* (happenings) and theater pieces. A decade later, Atrás del Cosmos's performances reflected a similar spirit, notably in eliciting improvised dancing and dramatic movement (such as miming) by those in attendance. Such participation seems to have been occasioned not by the ensemble's overt direction but by the main value it modeled in performance: an insistence on the free expression of one's individual voice as part of a group setting, toward cultivating a collective sense of involvement in an evolving experience.

The audience at El Galeón was a cross-section of Mexico City's creative class, its expatriate community, and proponents of the alternative lifestyles that were emerging during this era—an era when, after the government-sanctioned massacres of student demonstrators and subsequent official clampdown on rock music and rebellious youth subcultures, lifestyle choices offered a safer avenue for more diffuse kinds of resistance to the status quo.⁴⁶ In the audience on any given night, local artists and musicians sat with émigrés who had fled to Mexico City from the Pinochet regime in Chile and political instability in Argentina.⁴⁷ Aspiring teenage rockers in bell-bottom jeans sat next to young bohemian families and *jipitecas* (Mexican hippies). Mann recalls that a Dutch visual artist who taught at a nearby Montessori teacher-training school brought her students to the concerts every week and created action-drawings

⁴⁵ Archival material from these performances was on display at a remarkable exhibition, *Victor Fosado: Con mil diablos a caballo*, about Fosado (a jewelry designer whose career spanned painting, music, multimedia events design, and filmmaking) that ran from October 21, 2016, to January 15, 2017, at Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil in Mexico City, curated by Julien Cuisset and Victor Fosado III, with curatorial research by Angélica García, assisted by Paulina González. This material included archival recordings, programs, posters, press reports, and photographs from live and televised performances of experimental music, dance, and theater from the late 1960s. On January 7, 2017, the exhibit's curators presented a roundtable discussion with interdisciplinary artist Luis Urías and recording engineer Victor Rapoport about improvisation and sound experiments in Mexico City in the 1960s. Many thanks to Urías for bringing this exhibit and event to my attention. See Alonso-Minutti, "La 'destrucción renovadora' de Quanta," 26–27. Another sonic artifact remains from Gurrola's forays into free improvisation: the long-playing record *En busca del silencio/Escoipión en ascendente* (1970), with Juan José Gurrola, electric organ and voice; Roberto Bustamante, electric guitar; Mauricio Vázquez, piano; Víctor Fosado, percussion instruments; and Eduardo Guzmán, trumpet. This recording includes a few audible jazz inflections, notably in the lines played by the pianist and trumpeter, and is sometimes described as "free jazz." However, it is primarily a sound collage, with spoken word performance by Gurrola. See Manuel Rocha Iturbide, "El Zen jazz de Juan José Gurrola," July 20, 2006, [artesonoro.net http://www.artesonoro.net/GALERIA/Gurrola/EntrevistaConGurrola.htm](http://www.artesonoro.net/GALERIA/Gurrola/EntrevistaConGurrola.htm), accessed January 6, 2017.

⁴⁶ Olivier Debroise and Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Genealogy of an Exhibition," in Debroise, *La era de la discrepancia*, 28.

⁴⁷ During the Echeverría presidency (1970–1976), "Mexico welcomed leftist political exiles from other Latin American countries." Louise E. Walker, *Waking from the Dream: Mexico's Middle Classes after 1968* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 26.

during the ensemble's performances. West explained, "Altogether it was the gestalt: it was the group, the people who were in the group at that time, the venue, the people who went to hear the group, and the interactions within the public. Because we had a lot of artists there, and writers, and intellectuals."⁴⁸ Indeed, performers and attendees recall that the audience was seeded with young Mexicans who would go on to prominent careers in the arts and letters: Ariel Guzik, now a sound-installation designer who represented Mexico at the 2013 Venice Biennale; Francisco Javier Vázquez Estupiñán (who later adopted the name Jazzamoart), now an expressionist painter who has derived a unique visual language from jazz; Alain Derbez, now a poet, novelist, improvising saxophonist, and historian of jazz in Mexico; music critics Antonio Malacara Palacios and Evodio Escalante, the latter now a poet and professor of Spanish literature at the Metropolitan Autonomous University in Mexico City; Memo Méndez Guiú, now a songwriter of Mexican popular music; and Eugenio Toussaint, an acclaimed composer, arranger, and pianist who co-founded the seminal Mexican jazz ensemble Sacbé in 1976.⁴⁹ "It was a *scene*, you know?" recalled Mann. "It was the place to be, if you were part of this kind of artistic intelligentsia, at the time. So there was a buzz about the show—you know, it was special. I've never experienced anything like it since."⁵⁰ Audiences and performers also bonded socially outside the concerts, helping to engender the common sense of ownership over the creative process—West called it "cocreation"—the ensemble was seeking.⁵¹ "There was this large creative and intellectual set of [expatriates] in Mexico City," Mann explained; "thirty-five or forty people from all over the world . . . There was already a strong Mexican tradition, of course, in the arts, so those were like the core people . . . We would get together at somebody's house, at least once a month, and have these big dinner parties that lasted until two, three in the morning . . . A lot of those people came to all our shows." West added, reflecting on the role of social relations in supporting the shared compact of cocreation between artists and audiences: "We had an intermission. And to me, intermissions are very important. Because that is when people that have gone to the concert can get together, and it becomes like a reunion of like-minded souls."⁵²

As the Galeón residency built up momentum, the ensemble came to the attention of the general director of Bellas Artes, Juan José Bremer.⁵³ Ruiz recalled Bremer's surprise

⁴⁸ West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015.

⁴⁹ This list is drawn from conversations with Ruiz, West, and Mann as well as other attendees, including Derbez, Jazzamoart, and guitarist Carlos Vivanco, a member of the Atrás del Cosmos big band.

⁵⁰ Mann, interview with the author, Arlington, Massachusetts, August 28, 2015.

⁵¹ West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015. For an in-depth exploration into the relationship between improvisative "cocreation" and social change, see Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Co-creation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁵² West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015.

⁵³ Mann described the transaction with Bremer in more detail: "That painter who was teaching at that Montessori school, one of her students was the wife of the guy who got appointed to be head of Bellas Artes [in the new political administration, beginning in 1976], José Luis Bremer. So they came to one of our concerts. So this guy said to us, 'What would you guys like to do? I'll do one big project with you,' and

on first hearing their music: “We brought him into the recording studio to listen to a tape of one of our concerts there. I was scratching the piano strings, playing it from the inside, I had put rubber bands on the strings and done everything to make it a prepared piano, and the gentleman was astonished.”⁵⁴ Something else Bremer learned that day led him to endorse the ensemble as an exemplar of the arts in Mexico: he had thought that West was US American. Upon learning that Mann was the only US American in the ensemble and concluding that the *Atrás del Cosmos* could serve as an authentic ambassador for contemporary Mexican culture, Bremer decided to sponsor the ensemble in a bigger way. Ruiz continued: “and he said to us, ‘What do you want to do?’ And we asked him to bring Don Cherry.”⁵⁵ Bremer agreed to the proposal, and in February 1977, Cherry arrived in Mexico City to begin working with the ensemble.

DON CHERRY AND THE ORGANIC MUSIC PROJECT

As Cherry began rehearsing intensively with *Atrás del Cosmos*, Bellas Artes organized a tour of major venues throughout Mexico, culminating in two concerts at the imposing National Auditorium in Mexico City. These concerts lent an incongruous cultural imprimatur to a subcultural music that was operating outside, and in contradistinction to, the musical and cultural mainstream. As Malacara Palacios wrote in 1977, “there has never been anything like it played anywhere . . . [*Atrás del Cosmos*] offer a musical position contrary to jazz and jazz musicians.”⁵⁶ The incongruity went beyond the performances themselves, as Ruiz and Mann both recall Bellas Artes as having filmed both concerts with the plan of broadcasting them on national television.⁵⁷ Ruiz described her amazement at this development: “The Auditorio Nacional is a space for cultivated music. For serious music. For serious performances. The Bolshoi [Ballet] performed there—it was a very special place. And suddenly, we were the first ones to give a concert—no, two concerts, of free jazz!”

Collaborating with Cherry increased the ensemble’s visibility and stature, but it is ironic that one of the giants of avant-garde jazz pulled *Atrás del Cosmos* into working within more structured forms than it had aspired to do in the past; by this point in his career, Cherry had fully shifted his focus to the flexible, world music–jazz fusion idiom he had begun exploring in the early 1960s. The ensemble members have unequivocally warm memories of their time with Cherry, but they also remember having adapted their approach to suit Cherry’s vision. As Ruiz explained, before Cherry’s arrival, “we had very few formal songs or pieces. Because that didn’t interest us, building up a

Henry said, ‘I want you to bring Don Cherry.’ So this guy made it happen [*laughs*]! Nice to know people in high places.” Mann, interview with the author, Arlington, Massachusetts, August 28, 2015.

⁵⁴ Ruiz, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 17, 2015.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Malacara Palacios, “Robert Mann, Ana Ruiz, Henry West,” 32.

⁵⁷ It is unclear whether this footage still exists; it was never broadcast and is no longer held at the National Archive. Thanks to Oswaldo Mejía for investigating many possible avenues for procuring it.

repertoire. We had a few things that we grabbed onto musically, four or five beats, and from there, *bah bah bah* [i.e., counting off quickly before starting to play], we jumped in.”⁵⁸ West concurred, recalling: “With Don Cherry, we played more structured . . . we explored that arena, which we hadn’t explored before.” I asked him: “And then once he left, did you go back to playing more free?” He answered: “Oh, yes. I was never comfortable with playing those themes. Playing that structured.”⁵⁹ West also noted that the shift to performances based on tunes composed by Cherry, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Miles Davis went along with a change in energy level: “We called ourselves ‘jazz libre’ because the instruments were like jazz instruments, right? They were piano, percussion, saxophone. But if you make the analogy with punk rock, if we had played guitars, et cetera, we would have been punk rock. The energy level was very high. Very, very high . . . Sometimes . . . we cooled down a little bit, but there was always that energy there.”⁶⁰ As realized in performance, the arrangements Cherry and Atrás del Cosmos developed featured stretches of free improvisation anchored in modal, vamp-based contexts, also incorporating vocal chanting and non-Western instruments.⁶¹ Although they still embarked on stretches of improvisation that were high-activity, loud, and rhythmically and texturally dense, with Cherry the ensemble’s performances were more likely to open in a quietly meditative mood, with a tonally centered solo or a precomposed theme.

Under Cherry’s direction, the ensemble did more than give formal performances. Cherry and his wife, designer Moki Tambauka, had embarked on what would become the Organic Music Project in the late 1960s, and it had since become the focus of his creative attention, bolstered by his study of non-Western musics during extended trips to India, Turkey, and North Africa.⁶² In addition to concertizing, which supported crosscultural artistic exchanges and yielded several commercial recordings, the Organic Music Project had an outreach component, involving members of the public in communal music making through workshops that disseminated a message of global

⁵⁸ Ruiz, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 17, 2015.

⁵⁹ West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ For example, “Without Name or Number” (Coleman); “Desireless” (Cherry); and “Sanctuary” (Davis).

⁶² Barry Kernfeld, “Don Cherry,” in Mark C. Carnes, ed., *American National Biography: Supplement 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 88–91; program notes for concert titled “Don Cherry: Concierto de jazz,” National Auditorium, Mexico City (May 14 and 15, 1977), courtesy of Ana Ruiz. Tambauka is credited as such in the program notes to the National Auditorium concerts in 1977, and I refer to her by this name here. She is usually credited elsewhere as Monika or Moki Karlsson. For a discussion of Cherry’s compositional interest in non-Western music, see Peter Lavezzolli, *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 317–322. Lavezzolli dates this interest to the early 1960s, citing Cherry’s piece *Eternal Rhythm* (1968) as “the first jazz composition to incorporate Indonesian [Balinese] music into a mix of blues and free improvisation” and touching on Cherry’s albums *Mu* (1969), *Live Ankara* (1969), *Organic Music Society* (1972), *Relativity Suite* (1973), *Eternal Now* (1974), *Brown Rice* (1975), *Hear&Now* (1977), and *Music/Sangam* (1982). Cherry also studied non-Western instruments, including *doussn’gouni*, a West African chordophone, and in 1978 he formed the world music–jazz fusion ensemble Codona, together with Colin Walcott (tabla, sitar, percussion) and Naná Vasconcelos (berimbau, percussion).



FIGURE 9.4. Don Cherry at El Galeón: Organic Music Workshop, Mexico City, 1977. (Note improvising flutists in the background.) Photograph by Xavier and Carolyn Meade. Used by courtesy of Xavier and Carolyn Meade.

harmony. In keeping with its own policies on public education and access to the arts, Bellas Artes contracted with Cherry and *Atrás del Cosmos* to lead Organic Music workshops for three hours every Monday for about a month.⁶³ Cherry's presence, which was widely noted in the press, attracted a new cohort of improvisers eager to participate in the workshops (fig. 9.4).

In the wake of the US civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and global anticolonialist uprisings, Organic Music aimed to rise above politics and borders. The workshops were designed around a philosophy Cherry and Tambauka shared with the ensemble, an understanding of music as a healing force, a catalyst for spiritual growth, and a medium for peaceful cultural exchange set apart from the political fray. They also sought to create homey environments that would nurture Organic Music in local communities and outside the commercial and professional sphere. With that idea in mind, Tambauka (who also sat in on tambura) designed and stitched large hanging banners that served as backdrops for their performances and workshops. Two such banners can be seen

⁶³ "Singular experimento: La música, vehículo de nuevas formas para relaciones humanas," *Diario de la Tarde*, April 12, 1977; advertisement for the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, *Excelsior*, April 4, 1977.

in the photograph reproduced here (fig. 9.5), one spelling out the names of the basic pitches (*svaras*) in Indian classical music (Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pha, Dha, Ni, Sa) along with the roughly corresponding pitches of the Western scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C), to which Cherry could refer in teaching audiences simple melodies and theoretical concepts.⁶⁴ In the context of the message of global unity promoted through the workshops, the banners suggested an alternative to the widely displayed Mexican flag, while also recalling the countercultural flags, on which the national flag's eagle and serpent had been replaced with peace symbols, that had been on display at the notorious Avándaro rock festival in 1971. As historian Eric Zolov has argued, such flags staked a symbolic claim on the nation while linking Mexican rock counterculture to international counterculture.⁶⁵ With their bright, hand-sewn, color-block patterns framing Cherry and Atrás del Cosmos during the El Galeón workshops and at the Auditorio Nacional concert, Tambauka's banners served a related function: as ecumenical flags under whose sign is performed neither the national anthem nor a defiant claim on the national polity but something at once less worldly and more ambitious: improvised music with a transnational reach, a personal voice, and a transcendent spiritual purpose.

In this inclusive atmosphere, attention to local musical traditions was curiously absent. Indeed, despite his interest in melding jazz with global idioms, his engagement with funk music, and his studies of musics and instruments in and of many places outside the United States, Cherry—whom Ruiz recalls as having taken a delight in Mexican handicrafts, clothing, and food—does not seem to have used his time in Mexico to delve into folkloric musics such as *son jarocho*, indigenous instruments such as the duct flute or *teponaztle* (slit drum), adaptations of European instruments such as the *jarana* (a small guitar), or popular dance musics such as the *danzón*. It is not possible to know why, but in making this choice he was acting in concordance with the precedent set by Atrás del Cosmos, which for the most part did not incorporate local idioms into its own work.

One key exception was the ensemble's incantatory, drone-based meditation on "Las golondrinas" (The Swallows), a sentimental local favorite with which Atrás del Cosmos often ended its otherwise *sui generis* and unpredictable concerts, thus radically remaking this widely known song of farewell, whose traditional purview includes journeys, retirements, and funerals.⁶⁶ It is true that in making this rhetorical move, far

⁶⁴ Program notes to concert titled "Don Cherry: Concierto de jazz" (1977). See "Singular experimento." Cherry had been incorporating this kind of teaching into his practice for several years; in a live concert recording from 1971, he can be heard teaching a concert audience the clapping pattern for the sixteen-beat North Indian *tala* (metrical cycle) known as *tintal*. "Sita Rama Encores," on Don Cherry/Krzysztof Penderecki, *Actions* (2002). Tambauka's original tapestries are featured on many of Cherry's album covers from the period, including *Organic Music Society* (Caprice, 1972) and *Live Ankara* (Sonek, 1969).

⁶⁵ Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 207–209.

⁶⁶ The song is based on "La golondrina" (The Swallow) (words by Niceto De Zamacois, music by Narciso Serradell, c. 1870). George Torres, "The Bolero Romántico: From Cuban Dance to International Popular Song," in Walter Aaron Clark, ed., *From Tejano to Tango: Essays on Latin American Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 155.



FIGURE 9.5. *Atrás del Cosmos* and Don Cherry residency at El Galeón, Mexico City, 1977. Back, left to right: Claudio Enríquez, contrabass; Henry West, alto saxophone; Ana Ruiz, piano; Front, left to right: Robert Mann, tabla; Don Cherry, pocket cornet; Moki Tambauka, tambura. Despite his presence in this photo, Enríquez was not yet a regular ensemble member at that point. Photograph by Xavier and Carolyn Meade. Used by courtesy of Xavier and Carolyn Meade.

from shying away from culturally specific referentiality, they were making a semiotically loaded statement. By using the song to close out their long journeys into unfamiliar territory, they were enacting a symbolic return to a place at once familiar and irrevocably warped.⁶⁷ As Mann recalled:

Bellas Artes sent us all over the country to play in the *casas de cultura*, and many of them were in smallish cities and towns. Often, I would look out at the audience and think, “My god, these poor folks have no idea what we are going to do here.” And we would play such intense music, and then at the end Ana and I would lay down this churning arhythmic foundation and over the top of it Henry would come in with the melody from that familiar song. And always, without exception, the crowd would begin to cheer and the evening would end on this wonderful shared experience of that lovely tune. The only thing I can liken it to is if you have ever taken psychedelics and gone way out and then finally you are back—exalted

⁶⁷ Yolanda Lastra, Joel Sherzer, and Dina Sherzer, *Adoring the Saints: Fiestas in Central Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 80.

from the journey but thankful to have landed safely home. It was that kind of feeling in the auditorium . . . We had this following in Mexico City of course, but the response in these other places was quite incredible—hell, we were even popular in the prisons where we played. And I think ending with that traditional song that everyone knew by heart was critical to that acceptance and response.⁶⁸

Although Mann cites “Las golondrinas” as pivotal in reconciling audiences to the strange journey on which the ensemble had taken them, *Atrás del Cosmos* seems to have deployed this piece strategically, as I believe it to be the only audibly Mexican signifier the ensemble regularly visited. This was the case even though playing free did not necessarily mean eschewing tonal harmony or stylistic references. In the recordings I have heard so far, some of the ensemble’s improvisations are built, at least partially, over pedal points and vamps, and *Atrás del Cosmos* also drew on influences that signaled its participation in a wider musical and cultural world. Thus, the ensemble’s musical materials included some loosely conceived non-Western influences such as modal scales, a sense of classical pianism on Ruiz’s part (evident through some of her harmonic choices and melodic figurations), and Mann’s work on tabla and *balafon*. The ensemble’s relationship to both straight-ahead and avant-garde jazz was evident as well, through the kinds of melodic lines Ruiz and West developed, their use of blues scales and figurations, West’s bluesy timbre and intonation, and Mann’s syntax on drum set. The notion of “playing free,” then, meant the freedom to play what the musicians wished. Unlike either “free jazz,” which is typically conceived as being free from conventional harmonic progressions and song forms, or “free improvisation”—usually framed as eschewing stylistic markers and reaching toward nonreferentiality—the artists in *Atrás del Cosmos* were free to play anything, period. Yet, for the most part, this liberty did not lead them to engage with music or instruments that were marked as local or Mexican, whether through their ancient origins, local history, social function, or regional popularity.⁶⁹

In making this choice, they differed from other improvisers of the period who were interested in developing a distinctively local kind of contemporary jazz, as well as from performers who (following in the footsteps of Mexican classical composers such as Carlos Chávez [1899–1978]) sought to incorporate indigenous instruments and reimagine ancient traditions through their work. Notably, this cohort included percussionist Antonio Zepeda, with whom Ruiz and West had collaborated in 1975 and who had performed contemporary music using pre-Hispanic instruments with Fosado and Urías in the 1960s.⁷⁰ As Zepeda’s ultimate replacement, Mann had a far different relationship

⁶⁸ Evry Mann, email to the author, January 10, 2017.

⁶⁹ It is also the case, however, that the recordings I have heard so far have dated from 1977 and after—that is, after the ensemble had spent several months rehearsing, teaching, and performing with Cherry. By the ensemble members’ own testimony, their approach had changed as a result of that encounter.

⁷⁰ *Victor Fosado*, Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, 2016–2017. Other performing artists in Mexico who had worked along these lines or would do so in the future, using a variety of approaches and idioms, include Juan José Arreola, Gerardo Bátiz, Isaac Borcegui, Efrén Capiz, Arturo Chamorro with the ensemble

to the effort undertaken by Mexican artists and intellectuals to “fuse indigenous and mestizo culture,” in part by engaging with indigenous instruments, a movement in which Zepeda was to become a central figure.⁷¹ During this period, indigenous activism was growing, and coalitions of indigenous and nonindigenous Mexicans were seeking to recast cultural attitudes and national policies toward indigenous people. Mexicans who identified as mestizo were engaged in a project of coming to terms with their complex history and heritage, while at the same time, romantic notions about indigenous cultures had led “native indigenous people [to populate] the utopias of several Mexican countercultural searchers” as well as the US counterculture.⁷² As a white US American, Mann’s choice to skirt this complicated terrain is not surprising. Thus, in turning to non-Western musical traditions under the auspices of Organic Music, rather than taking up indigenous Mexican percussion instruments he brought in the tabla, an instrument he had studied in college. From a different cultural vantage point but similarly in light of their own personal and creative backgrounds, Ruiz and West chose to turn inward to find what Ruiz called “our own music” rather than looking to indigenous Mexican sources for meaning or inspiration. Indeed, through reading, rehearsal, and personal study, they were bent on deepening their engagement with free improvisation, which meant focusing their attention outside the purview of idioms that hewed to normalized syntax and prescriptive formal models. Finally, as Derbez has acerbically suggested, “Mexican jazz, to be Mexican [i.e., to be perceived as Mexican by outsiders], requires the Mexican Jazz Player [to be] disguised as a Revolutionary, a Chicano, an Indian, a conqueror, a guerrilla subcommandante; Mexican jazz to be Mexican must syncopate songs like ‘La cucaracha’ [and] ‘Bésame mucho’. . . and must turn ‘Take Five’ [whose five-beat meter stamps it as quintessentially modernist] into a jarabe or a huapango.”⁷³ This statement may be exaggerated for effect, but it gestures toward the context in which Ruiz and West were working, one in which a radical insistence on self-determination might make artists wary of proffering work whose content could be superficially parsed as “Mexican,” particularly by outsiders. It suggests that they were not only devoted to plumbing their inner voices but also wanted to make their project legible in those terms, and that keeping away from local sources was one way of telegraphing that intent. In modeling a process of self-discovery that was untethered from the most familiar sources, and in locating the deepest root of creativity within

Parceiro, Arturo Cipriano with the ensemble La Nopalera, Tino Contreras, Luis Márquez and the ensemble Tribu, Luis Perez, Jorge Reyes, Eugenio Toussaint, and Jorge Martínez Zapata with the ensemble Zazhil. See Derbez, *Datos*.

⁷¹ Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 176.

⁷² Medina, “Recovering Panic,” 99. Mann sometimes played balafon during the trio’s stint with Cherry. His balafon work would likely have had some local resonances due to the central role played by marimbas in Mexican folkloric music. After concentrating on drum set, Mann turned to playing tabla during the ensemble’s work with Cherry, who also introduced him to the doussn’gouni. Mann later traveled to Mali and Senegal to study doussn’gouni and balafon. Evry Mann, email to the author, January 8, 2017.

⁷³ Alain Derbez, “Symptomatology of Mexican Jazz in the XXI Century,” 2002, Jazz Journalists Association Library, <http://www.jazzhouse.org/library/?read=derbez2>, accessed December 30, 2016.

themselves rather than in indigenous sources with which they had no intimate experience, they were making a case for free improvisation on its own, uncategorizable merits and inverting what could be decried as the eschewing of Mexican particularity into a decolonizing impulse.

Ruiz had a pressing personal reason not to pursue the path taken by some Mexican improvisers of her generation to engage with local culture, study ancient instruments, or turn to indigenous traditions. As she recalled, one of her friends had “started playing protest music in ’68 and in the seventies, when protest music was really necessary for Mexico, and afterwards, he put together a lot of groups of jazz fusion with folk music (*música folklórica*) [His music] was really very beautiful It had melodies, and a singer, and it was for the Revolution, and it was for the people, the common people, that kind of music.” But, she continued bluntly, “playing folk music doesn’t interest me I liked that, but I don’t want to play it.”⁷⁴ Although she frames this disinclination to weave local idioms into her work as a matter of personal taste, it is also representative of a larger struggle particular to her experience as a female musician. By the mid-1980s Ruiz had remarried, and now with four young children who demanded much of her time and energy, she stopped playing in public for five years. It was an uphill battle to maintain her creative autonomy in a male-dominated music world. Even as she continued working as a music copyist, writing jingles, and teaching piano, she reserved her own music, whether played at home or for an audience, as a sphere for self-expression. Male musicians, she explained, “see you first as the teacher, you’re the mother, you’re the pianist, but his name comes first. Or, when the time comes to give credit, it’s always ‘I’m the one who formed the group.’ There’s no recognition. And I want there to be recognition for the work women do.”⁷⁵ Fighting to be heard on her own terms served as a precept on which she has had no interest in compromising for the sake of what might ostensibly be a wider or more pressing political cause.

Of the three ensemble members, West—who was in his mid-twenties in 1968, about ten years older than Ruiz—voiced the strongest sense that *Atrás del Cosmos* was involved in what some of his contemporaries in the experimental art world were beginning to term “cultural work,” a conviction that reflected his impression that Mexicans were seeking a way to recover their bearings after the trauma of 1968.⁷⁶ As he explained in 1980, “we are building a society here. So, in Mexican society, there are a lot of jobs to be done These jobs depend on what people living in that society believe is necessary for their lives. The people we are bringing together believe that learning more about music and musical techniques is important to their lives.”⁷⁷ Like the artists and critics who have championed free jazz as a mode of collective activity that can lead to political action and social change, West saw *Atrás del Cosmos* as politically relevant for

⁷⁴ Ruiz, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 17, 2015.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ “Proceso Pentágono,” in Debroise, *La era de la discrepancia*, 221.

⁷⁷ Malacara Palacios, “La entrevista *Atrás del Cosmos*: Henry West” (part 2), 21.

Mexican audiences after 1968 in modeling new social possibilities and ways of engaging the world:

When *Atrás del Cosmos* came out—which was some years after '68, of course—the Mexican society was, I think, getting a new facelift, people were looking for new things in Mexico For the people that came to see us, I think if I could encapsulate this, [what was significant in relation to '68] was the possibility of change And of course if something is static, in order for it to change, it has to move. And in order for that movement to stop, it has to become static. So there is this yin-yang of things going from one state to another state. Just like a philosophical idea, like an image. Yes? So . . . music that is completely free brings the idea or the possibility that the old things are no more, and that change is coming.⁷⁸

With its insistent newness, then, an *Atrás del Cosmos* performance might offer performers and audiences alike a glimpse around the corners of what seemed possible. To Uriás, West's mastery of circular breathing, and his penchant for using the technique to open the ensemble's concerts by playing a single note for an improbably long time, were crucial to the ensemble's success in reaching its audience. The technique, he believes, allowed West to gently usher audiences into the challenging odyssey that was to follow:

That was very important, because people suddenly knew that there is another reality, completely different from our reality—[where] somebody can play without breathing. And then, when he got them into that level [superseding] all music, [superseding] our own bodies, he started . . . giving the concert [He] brought people [unconsciously] into understanding that he was doing something [remarkable]. Because he could come in and say, "You know what, I learned this and that, and I'm going to show it—" No. He just put them in [i.e., plunged them into that state]. And people maybe couldn't understand it rationally or explain it, but they knew that there was another reality, and that he was a superhuman—but a human as humble as them.⁷⁹

The practice of bringing the audience to appreciate the superhuman power that resides within ordinary people dovetailed with the ensemble's strategy of bringing audiences home with "Las golondrinas" at the end of each concert. Indeed, to the same end, Uriás recalls that in West's early performances of free improvisation, he would sometimes make a seamless transition, first using circular breathing to draw out a single pitch

⁷⁸ West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015.

⁷⁹ Luis Uriás, interview with the author, Mexico City, January 10, 2017.

and then flowing into the melody of “Dios nunca muere” (God Never Dies; 1968), the widely beloved Oaxacan song by Macedonio Alcalá:

It’s very interesting because you take people from the known world of music that they . . . understand, and then after a while [*smiles*] they are flying, on the clouds [*making gentle uplifting, swooping gestures with his hands*] and looking down [*laughs*], and they didn’t realize that they came into this incredible world of improvisation and other music—but so easily [*smiles*] . . . It’s like people who learn not to breathe under the water for ten minutes . . . Not [*just*] anyone can do that [*laughs*]. And when you do that, you go into another dimension. And this [*kind of philosophy in contemporary art*] usually is something that is related to avant-garde events, specialized events that only a few people can understand. But the way he did it, taking all the people from one simple sound to this other level, was incredible.⁸⁰

Atrás del Cosmos seems to have succeeded in developing a performance practice that did what free improvisation aims to do: lift audiences out of the mundane and gesture toward hitherto unimagined possibilities. Before they began working together, all the ensemble members had been seeking out new creative horizons, but none was fully prepared for the surprising terrain they would come to traverse as a group. Although there was little to guide them in recent memory or in the city’s contemporaneous music scene, West’s earlier involvement in experimental theater did offer a praxis of art-making that helped frame their music in its moment, and that now serves as a crucial frame for making sense of their work in the Weberian Geertzian sense—that is, in regard to the “webs of significance” in which people and the things they make lie suspended.⁸¹

ATRÁS DEL COSMOS: A GENEALOGY

In 1982, music critic Evodio Escalante lauded Atrás del Cosmos for the unique role it played in the city’s creative landscape, also offering readers a way of making sense of its sui generis music: “No other group . . . has remained so firm and defiant against the soft apricot tones of Mexican jazz as [Atrás del Cosmos] . . . For years, [this] has been the only group to fight for a new vocabulary, syntax and language of free, unbounded improvisation, which depends on the cry and screech, but also on Tibetan meditation mantras . . . I have lived in Mexico City for eight years, and no other Mexican group has given me such a rich, intense, renewing experience of jazz.”⁸² By placing the

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

⁸² Evodio Escalante, *Figuras del jazz contemporáneo (I): México en el jazz* (Mexico City: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, 1990), 15–16, previously published in *Territorios*, no. 13, October–November 1982; translation by Tim Smyth.

ensemble squarely within the sphere of jazz, Escalante not only encouraged comparisons between *Atrás del Cosmos* and other local jazz ensembles (to *Atrás del Cosmos*'s advantage) but also linked the ensemble to a history, repertoire, and set of values and performance practices that came from outside the local context. To be sure, there was an active Mexican jazz scene, including Latin jazz big bands steeped in twentieth-century Afrocuban innovations, but the local music scene, like jazz overall, was also sonically and imaginatively inflected by African American music and expressive culture. As ethnomusicologist Travis Jackson has noted, understanding that inflection is crucial for understanding jazz, because this same inflection is constitutive of meaning-making among jazz musicians.⁸³ The titles of jazz ethnographies—*Saying Something*, *Blowin' the Blues Away*—thus tend to make pointed reference to the centrality of African American metaphors in the way jazz musicians theorize their work, inflecting what they play, how they play it, and what kinds of meanings it accrues among artists.⁸⁴ *Atrás del Cosmos* was strongly influenced by jazz, and that idiom offers a crucial lens with which to understand what they accomplished, both musically and conceptually. But jazz was not the sole conceptual frame for the ensemble in the sense that Jackson describes. Considering why brings us back to the role of experimental theater in what might be termed the protohistory of free improvisation in Mexico.

IMPROVISATION AND EXPERIMENTAL THEATER

My research on *Atrás del Cosmos* dovetails with recent scholarly work that traces a genealogy of intermedia performance and musical improvisation in Mexico City. If this genealogy can be said to have a point of origin, it is located neither in the local jazz scene, as one might expect, nor in contemporary classical music, but in experimental theater and the ideas of Alejandro Jodorowsky. The Chilean-born Jodorowsky played a provocateur's role in jolting the city's theater scene into new territory in the 1960s, directing works whose gleeful flouting of convention, and aspiration to sweeping self-liberation, galvanized the city's artistic circles. It was among the visual artists, designers, dancers, and musicians who collaborated with Jodorowsky that the notion of "playing free" seems to have first taken hold. The full scope of Jodorowsky's work is too broad to discuss here, but, as I suggest below, it provided a singular imaginary for *Atrás del Cosmos*, serving as a point of reference for the ensemble's performance praxis, particularly as it was able to develop that praxis during the *El Galeón* residency.

In the early 1960s in Mexico City, Jodorowsky began collaborating with a circle of fellow artists and seekers to develop a philosophy of action-based theater he called "Panic," which he outlined in a manifesto, *Teatro Pánico*, published in Mexico in 1965.⁸⁵

⁸³ Travis A. Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning in the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 24–48.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; see Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁸⁵ Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Teatro Pánico* (Mexico City: Era, 1965). Illustrations by José Luis Cuevas.

In keeping with the ideas of avant-garde theater of the era, one of his aims was to break away from the formalization and institutionalization of theater; he subtitled his preface “¡Sacar el teatro del teatro!” (Take Theater out of the Theater!). In scores of *efimeros*, which he and his confederates began producing in public and semipublic places in Mexico City around 1961, he brought his Panic philosophy to the streets. Each *efimero* sought to materialize the three essential elements of Panic—euphoria, humor, and terror—and each was based on a loose, events-based script that incorporated improvisations derived from the gamut of human activity, from quotidian behaviors, such as brushing one’s teeth, to those that mimicked and sometimes performed acts of sex, love, violence, and religious (largely Christian, Jewish, and pagan) ritual.⁸⁶ As art historian Arden Decker has suggested, the *efimeros* reflected international concerns in theater while pushing into new territory, involving “all manner of artists, musicians, poets, actors, dancers, prostitutes and performers engaging in a chaotic and delirious production of simultaneously occurring collective and individual actions The interaction with objects and materials was meant to be a ‘real action’ and not an act of representation. Having been removed from the role of ‘spectator’ and liberated from ‘individual thought,’ [efimero participants experienced] a form of cathartic release from the crisis of contemporary life.”⁸⁷ In flirting with hysteria and anarchy, the *efimeros* proffered pandemonium as the only useful reaction to restrictive social codes and outmoded mores, inside and outside the theater.

Jodorowsky incorporated musical improvisation into the *efimeros*, partly for sonic effect and partly to contribute to their incantatory quality of barely controlled mayhem. By so doing, he melded these happenings with the kind of absurdist sonic improvisations that were part of the European “Fluxus-festivals” in the early 1960s.⁸⁸ There was, however, a key difference: the Fluxfests focused on improvising with ordinary objects, which reflected the Dadaist principle of blending art with everyday life. In a departure from that practice, in both his *efimeros* and his subsequent theater productions, Jodorowsky collaborated with colleagues to design fantastical, one-of-a-kind instruments, to be played in costume. Thus, although the *efimeros* might have involved mundane substances like “eggs, shaving cream, milk, baby carriages, axes,

⁸⁶ Jodorowsky, *Teatro Pánico*, 13.

⁸⁷ Arden Decker, “The Panic Man: Shock and Alejandro Jodorowsky’s Panic Theory,” *Terremoto*, 7 September 2015, <http://terremoto.mx/article/the-panic-man-shock-and-alejandro-jodorowskys-panic-theory/>, accessed December 1, 2015. Discussions of Jodorowsky rightfully place his work in the context of other avant-garde theater of the 1960s—including Artaud, Grotowsky, and the Living Theater—to whom he may indeed owe a debt, but theater historian Christopher Innes also argues that the varied branches of the theatrical avant-garde—some of which emerged independently from each other—drew on a shared well of concepts. Christopher Innes, *Avant-garde Theater, 1892–1982* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 7–8.

⁸⁸ “Fluxus artists also gathered at ‘Flux-festivals,’ or ‘Fluxfests,’ initiated by Maciunas in 1962, beginning with concerts at the Wiesbaden state museum, six concerts in Copenhagen, seven in Paris. These performances were primarily music compositions There was Fluxus music for lips, mud, bottles, pebbles, balloons, ladders, and violin, and piano pieces requiring twelve pianos. The next year (1963) the festivals expanded to Dusseldorf, Amsterdam, the Hague, and Nice and grew to incorporate street events.” Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 271.

and tortillas,” the instruments Jodorowsky commissioned were artful and outlandish. They included the Baldimbo (a standing drum set made from galvanized tin buckets, designed by Urías and played by Micky Salas in Jodorowsky’s Gran Efímero Pánico de San Carlos in October 1963) and the Cornicordio (a large resonator designed by Jodorowsky and Urías on which one sat with one’s back to the audience, so the sound came out of a horn in the rear), which Jodorowsky played at the Gran Efímero Pánico.⁸⁹ As Urías explained, the Cornicordio’s design reflected one of the three essential elements in the Panic philosophy—humor:

JODOROWSKY said that he wanted to build an instrument whose sound could come out of the rear—the ass—of the player. I provided the idea of using a big galvanized tin bucket A couple of horns were added—made of galvanized tin pipes from a stove’s exhaust system—to support a steel pipe arch to hold the strings, attached to the border of the tin bucket . . . [along with] a tube and cone on the back for the sound to come out.”⁹⁰

Jodorowsky’s coconspirators in these escapades, most from the so-called Rupture generation, included Urías, who was a key early ally; Gurrola; Gelsen Gas (Angel Sánchez Gas), a visual artist and writer who financed several of the efímeros; and Fosado.⁹¹ Fosado himself was to play a central role in the development of free improvisation in Mexico City: Las Musas, an artists’ café he opened in the bohemian Zona Rosa neighborhood in 1967, served as a crucible for sound experiments in the late 1960s.⁹² Urías recalls that on Thursday evenings, one could hear an improvising ensemble there led by Gurrola, who “had no musical training and was only doing sounds at random, playing Farfisa organ, and Fierro, a painter, playing the bugle (short piston trumpet).”⁹³ Gurrola was to name the music he developed at Las Musas “música neuro-atonal” and “Zen Jazz,” and in 1970 he would incorporate it into *Scorpio Inmortante*, a multidisciplinary production that involved dancers, film projections, and spoken-word poetry.⁹⁴ El Inconsciente Colectivo was another improvising ensemble that performed regularly at the cafe, presenting new music on ancient instruments; in 1968 it included Urías on electronically amplified found objects and tape loops, Fosado on teponaztle and pre-Hispanic flute, and Zepeda on pre-Hispanic percussion instruments and

⁸⁹ Decker, “Panic Man”; Luis Urías, interview with the author, Mexico City, January 10, 2017. Photographs of these instruments are included in the Panic manifesto; see Jodorowsky, *Teatro Pánico*.

⁹⁰ Urías, email to the author, November 11, 2015.

⁹¹ See Maris Bustamente, “Non-objective Arts in Mexico 1963–1983,” trans. Eduardo Aparicio, in Coco Fusco, ed., *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 204–217; Luis Urías, interview with the author, Mexico City, January 10, 2017.

⁹² Escoto, “El escorpión, la máscara y la jaula” 201–202; Víctor Fosado: *Con mil diablos a caballo* (2016–2017); Urías, email to the author, November 11, 2015.

⁹³ Urías, email to the author, November 8, 2015; Víctor Fosado: *Con mil diablos a caballo* (2016–2017).

⁹⁴ Program for *Scorpio Inmortante, un espectáculo de Juan José Gurrola* [July 16, 1970]; “Surge el Jazz Mexicano,” *Excelsior*, n.d., both included in the exhibition, Víctor Fosado: *Con mil diablos a caballo* (2016–2017).

voice.⁹⁵ West was not in Mexico when this group convened, but he had gotten to know Jodorowsky and Urías in 1964, and in 1970 the three formed Las Damas Chinas, an ensemble that was to perform Urías's music for Jodorowsky's infamous theatrical production *Zaratustra* in the early 1970s. West recalls the experience of playing in Las Damas Chinas as foundational to his development as a free improviser:

I can't divorce myself from that [experience doing theater with Jodorowsky]. In fact, the first time that I played completely free improvised music was with a group that [Jodorowsky] formed called Las Damas Chinas . . . We [performed at] the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo in Pachuca one time, I remember. And it was completely free music, but it had a lot of theater within it. For example, in the concert in Pachuca, they got some aluminum foil, and I was playing baritone [saxophone]. And they got the aluminum foil and they encased me, with the baritone, in aluminum foil. And then they picked me up and they carried me out of the auditorium, and this is how the concert ended [*laughs*].⁹⁶

As indicated by West's description of being encased in a medium typically used to cover food and keep it warm, and then being carried offstage in the middle of the performance, Jodorowsky's influence was as much conceptual as aesthetic. Jodorowsky's imprint on *Atrás del Cosmos* was similarly in evidence for Escalante, who observed:

The ensemble's work includes an important theatrical element borrowed from Alejandro Jodorowsky, with whom West worked for a while before re-dedicating himself to music. This lends the group's shows the distinct feeling of a '60s-style happening. At any given moment, West's music might . . . become a discourse on the incommunicability of the concert itself that includes dancers and other aspects of theater . . . West never explains or tries to describe what he is doing, and does not even say what piece he is about to play, or who wrote it . . . Theatrical or not, the listener comes away with the impression of a form of music which is almost wholly improvised, leading to an experience that feels like liberation.⁹⁷

With his subtle theatricality and abstruse midconcert disquisitions, West hardly transferred the Panic concept wholesale to the work he sought to do with *Atrás del Cosmos*. The central Panic element of "terror," for example, was absent from *Atrás del Cosmos*'s performances. And rather than taking its performances out of the concert hall and into the streets (as Panic mandated and as Quanta had done), *Atrás del Cosmos* followed the example Jodorowsky set in his post-efímero productions, using theatrical measures to

⁹⁵ Urías, e-mail to the author, November 11, 2015, and December 31, 2016; *Victor Fosado: Con mil diablos a caballo* (2016–2017).

⁹⁶ West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015. See A. Catani, "Safari fotográfico de Catani," *El Heraldo de México*, May 6, 1970, 2. Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Zaratustra: Su Música. . . Su Filosofía. . .* (long playing record) (Discos Tizoc, 1970). Produced by Victor Rapoport; music by Las Damas Chinas.

⁹⁷ Escalante, "El jazz en México," 15–16.

infuse its performances with extra-ordinary meaning and lift them out of an everyday context. Jodorowsky had also influenced *Atrás del Cosmos* directly, through visiting its rehearsals, in bringing theatrical precepts to its performance practices. According to Ruiz, Jodorowsky “gave us ‘tips,’ explained his point of view to us, what to do, how to play, and he gave us images, and he talked with us about concepts that were as theatrical as musical.”⁹⁸ Reiterating the connection she and her colleagues made among performance space, performance conventions, and expressive potential, she continued: “We didn’t want to play in bars, or in restaurants. We wanted to say something to the people in the audience . . . *Atrás del Cosmos* put on a ‘show.’ We put on a complete spectacle. We wore special outfits . . . And I used to want the drummer to play a cymbal when I walked onstage . . . Otherwise it’s more like a job than a ritual, and I wanted to make it into something more. Not to show up late and say, ‘Ah, I already know what I’m going to do.’ We made the music into a ceremony.”⁹⁹ Ruiz and West had grounded their early forays into free improvisation in the practice of starting from silence, and she noted that *Atrás del Cosmos* recast this practice as an act of theater during their performances, explaining that sometimes, in order to command the audience’s attention: “We began with silence and only then began to create a sound. It excited people. ‘Fired up’ [preñida] is the word.” I said: “Like a catharsis.” She answered: “Yes. So that’s how it was like theater.”¹⁰⁰ It is thus appropriate that *Atrás del Cosmos* came to occupy El Galeón, which had been designed by avant-garde theater director Abraham Oceransky and was established as the site of Mexico’s first “experimental theater lab” in 1977.¹⁰¹

Although scant recordings exist, the improvisations West did with Jodorowsky seem to have been more limited, more noise-based, more Dadaist, and more abstracted from personal style than the work *Atrás del Cosmos* aspired to do.¹⁰² Thus, at the Las Damas Chinas concert West described, which the program billed as a “Concert of Ultramodern Music,” Valerie Trumblay was listed as performing “harp in an ultraornamented style, squawks, howls, and panting,” with Urías on saxophone and a “box of surprises (baby’s rattle, Metro ticket).” (fig. 9.6). Urías recalls that during and after the ensemble’s stint in *Zaratustra*, he and West began developing free improvisation away from this absurdist model and in a more personal direction, which West continued to pursue with Ruiz in the years to follow, even as he transferred some of the psychosocial aspects of Panic to his work as an improviser. For example, reflecting on his involvement in the efímeros, West explained: “It was a possibility of us doing things which were completely free. Right? Like getting into the stage, and getting a quart of milk, and dropping it on yourself, or what have you. And this I think is what translated into the music. Because if I was able to do this within the avant-garde, the theater, so to

⁹⁸ Ruiz, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 17, 2015.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Estela Leñero Franco, “Cultura y espectáculos: Teatro: Abraham Oceransky,” *Proceso*, January 14, 2013, <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=330682>, accessed January 3, 2015; “Teatro El Galeón,” <http://www.chapultepec.com.mx/visita.asp?Lugar=129>, accessed December 3, 2015.

¹⁰² As of this writing, Urías was working with the Fonoteca Nacional to digitize what he believes to be the only surviving recording of his work with West during this period.

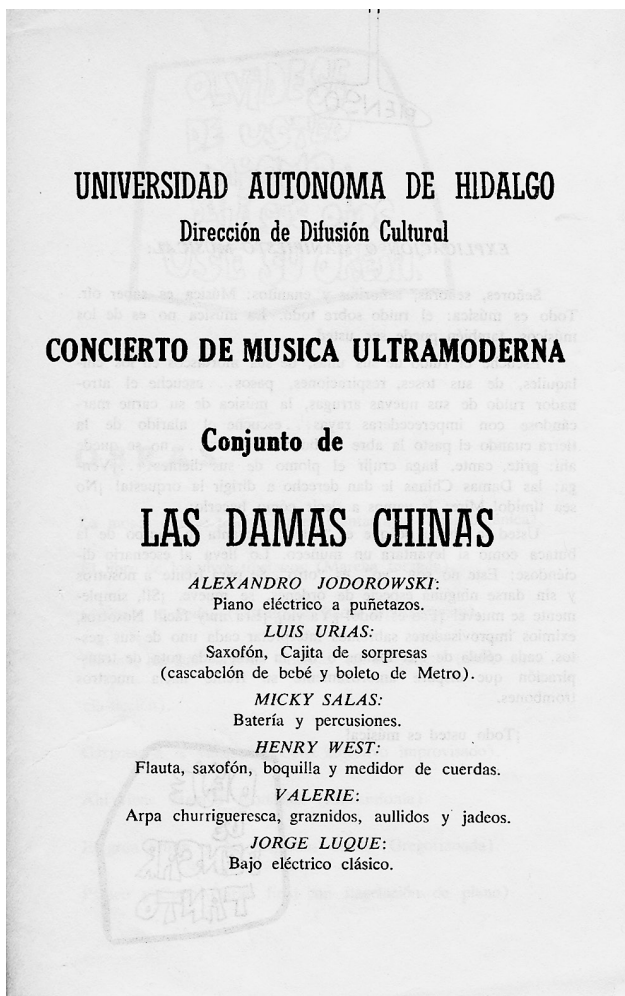


FIGURE 9.6. Program for *Las Damas Chinas*, Universidad Autónoma de Hidalgo (June 22, 1970). Alejandro Jodorowsky, electric piano played as in a fistfight; Luis Urías, saxophone, box of surprises (baby’s rattle, Metro ticket); Henry West, flute, saxophone, mouthpiece, string action ruler; Valerie [Trumblay]: harp played in heavily ornamented style, squawks, howls, and panting; Jorge Luque, electric bass played in classic rock style. Used by courtesy of Luis Urías.

speak, then I was able to transfer it to the music. If I can do it here, I can do it here.” Gesturing toward the wider social impact of Jodorowsky’s work, as well as its affinity for the Zen Buddhist philosophy that Jodorowsky, Urías, and West had studied together, he continued: “And [one achieves] this [freedom to improvise] . . . by getting rid of fear of criticism.”¹⁰³

In addition to this aim of freeing oneself from the fear of launching into the unknown, three other aspects of the Panic philosophy played a key role for *Atrás del Cosmos*: the

¹⁰³ West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015.

fusing of musical performance with elements of theatricality; the notion that certain kinds of performance can liberate artists and audience members from their prosaic roles as entertainers and spectators; and the idea that performances can create the conditions under which bankrupt social constraints yield to an expanded consciousness and new ways of being-in-the-world. These concerns overlapped with those of artists involved in jazz's New Thing and other explorations into composition/improvisation, and for all the importance that Jodorowsky and experimental theater had for the ensemble, I do not mean to minimize the impact of jazz and jazz performance practice, both of which were central. Ruiz cites jazz improvisers Cherry, Ornette Coleman, Graham Collier, John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders, and Cecil Taylor as artists she admires and with whose work she felt *Atrás del Cosmos* had a kinship, and as they were working out their own improvisational practice, she and West traveled to Colorado to study with the jazz-fusion trio Oregon. West, of course, had studied jazz at Berklee and had gigged as a jazz saxophonist, and Mann had gone to New York City to explore the jazz scene before moving to Mexico, also attending an early session of Karl Berger's Creative Music Studio. But there were other influences too. In particular, Ruiz cites Terry Riley as an important teacher and creative model. She and West devoted stints of time to studying with Riley (in the United States and Mexico), and both have recounted transformative experiences playing and listening to contemporary concert music, also describing sound art and the study of various kinds of world music (particularly Indian classical music) as pivotal in expanding their horizons and compelling them in new creative directions.

It is hardly possible to delineate all these influences separately, but the practices and values embodied by jazz and experimental theater seem to have worked strongly and in tandem for *Atrás del Cosmos* in regard to its self-fashioning, self-presentation, and meaning-making. Take, for example, Ruiz's recollection of the experience of the sessions in free improvisation that she and West held at their house: "For some [of the musicians who came over], it was really difficult to improvise, but some found it easy, and we brought them with us to perform at the theater. So for a lot of people it was a major change in their life, *like a transformation, to be able to go onstage and say what they wanted to say.*"¹⁰⁴ Ruiz's mention of "transformation" here resonates with the Zen-inspired aim toward self-transformation that ran through Jodorowsky's theater philosophy. That aim, which he articulates in the Panic manifesto, was made manifest in his theater production *Zarathustra*: his adaptation of Nietzsche's classic parable of self-overcoming and a cultural sensation that ran for two hundred performances in Mexico City.¹⁰⁵ As part of the same thought, however, Ruiz refers to the practice of *saying something*. Although for Ruiz this notion was not suspended in the same webs of African American expressive significance and did not possess the equivalent historical resonance it did among the musicians Monson quoted in the title of her jazz ethnography, it is nevertheless unmistakably resonant with the African American values that are encoded into jazz practice.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ruiz, interview with the author, Mexico City, March 17, 2015; italics added.

¹⁰⁵ Terán Karina, "Hace 30 años Zarathustra sacudió las buenas costumbres de la clase media," *Proceso*, August 20, 2006, 63, 65.

¹⁰⁶ See Monson, *Saying Something*.

It is notable that jazz trumped theater in this realm, as *Atrás del Cosmos* diverged from the Panic concept in the ensemble's approach to working as individuals within a collective. "Panic," writes Jodorowsky, "attempts to eliminate individual thinking."¹⁰⁷ *Atrás del Cosmos* had a different purpose, one more in line with jazz practice. West's anecdote of working with Cherry in *Atrás del Cosmos* is telling on this front:

I started on alto [saxophone], and then . . . when playing with Don Cherry I discovered that we could get in tune better if I played soprano At the beginning it was a funny sensation. Because we could get in tune to the point where my instrument disappeared for me I couldn't hear myself playing, because we were so in tune that I could only hear the trumpet. And then [*laughs*] I had to get out of tune a little bit, to hear myself Also, we talked about tuning Ornette [Coleman] said that you have to be in tune with yourself. And that when playing within a group, you could be a little high, a little low, but you could still be in tune if you were a little high or a little low. That you had to be in tune with yourself!¹⁰⁸

The notion of maintaining a distinctive voice and "being in tune with yourself" even as one contributes to a collective endeavor is fundamental to jazz, and it speaks to the imbrication of jazz with African American expressive culture. In *Panic*, individual agency was to be wiped out, submerged into the collective consciousness that emerged from the *efímero*. In *Atrás del Cosmos*, a musician had the responsibility to develop a unique personal voice, which was continuously in dialogue with the other musicians and with the sound of the whole. (The tenets of individuality and originality in classical composition doubtless also had an influence, but jazz, which is based on the principle that each performer must shape a unique vocabulary and sound with which to articulate original ideas over the course of an improvisation, usually in dialogue with fellow performers, is more salient here.) Jazz and experimental theater, then, form twin points of origin—acting sometimes in concert, sometimes in conflict—for the musical and conceptual work *Atrás del Cosmos* aspired to do, with other influences also playing a part. Given the multilayered musical backgrounds and interests of its participants, as well as the cosmopolitan moment out of which it emerged—one that saw a Chilean-born Jewish theater director collaborate with Mexican colleagues to realize a philosophy he had first visited in Paris along with a Spanish expatriate and the son of Polish Jews, after which two Mexican musicians and a white US American convened with an African American and a Swede to produce jazz-based music with universalist aspirations—it seems only appropriate that the conceptual and cultural "roots" of an ensemble such as *Atrás del Cosmos* should be impossible to fully untangle.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Jodorowsky, *Teatro Panico*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ West, interview with the author, via Skype, August 9, 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Jodorowsky, who developed his *Panic* philosophy most fully in Mexico, had initially collaborated with Spanish playwright Fernando Arrabal and illustrator and writer Roland Topor, the child of Polish Jews, to envision what "Panique" should entail. Jonathan L. Owen, "Avant-garde Exploits: The Cultural

CONCLUSION: "LOOKING BACK ON WHAT WE MADE FROM NOTHING,
WHICH NOW SEEMS TO BE WORTH REMEMBERING"

The members of Atrás del Cosmos were in agreement about the importance of cultivating an individual voice in a collective context and devoting themselves to a rigorous rehearsal practice that would allow them to do so effectively in front of (and in synchrony with) an attentive audience.¹¹⁰ But if free improvisation was the art of being fully present in the moment—if the live, lived experience was the point—then it was not a given that the ensemble's collective voice could or should be preserved on recordings. Indeed, embedded in the aim of developing a live musical practice was the principle of letting go of one's attachment to the experience once it was over.¹¹¹ This notion resonated with contemporaneous concerns among the city's arts collectives, which idealized a "poetics of collaboration," and it reflected the ensemble's interest in music that could neither be fixed in nor prescribed by a score but could be arrived upon only through a common effort.¹¹² For Ruiz in particular, engaging with free improvisation had entailed turning away from the fixity and primacy of the musical score, a move that tied in with a rejection of the hierarchical distinction between composer and performer that inhered in the Western concert tradition. Concurrently, like their predecessors in Quanta, from the beginning of their work together Ruiz and West had sought to preempt any claims of musical authorship or ownership that might arise, even in the context of a collective, improvisative practice. As West explained in 1980, before their trio crystallized as Atrás del Cosmos, he and Ruiz convened a number of different ensembles that played only once: "We wanted to form a group of people that would change its name constantly so there could be no ego problems, or else problems with people recognizing us—so that we wouldn't be famous, nothing like that . . . We made posters and then bands played once and disbanded, and then another band played another time (i.e., they played with different people, under another name)."¹¹³ Although she appreciated the merits of this position at the time, Ruiz eventually found herself at odds with it. It might be the case that recordings could never capture what was most vital about their work, and that their creative practice was at odds

Highs and Lows of Polish Emigré Cinema," in Kamila Kuc and Michael O'Pray, eds., *The Struggle for Form: Perspectives on Polish Avant-garde Film, 1916–1989* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 103.

¹¹⁰ The subtitle of this section is from Luis Urias, written statement sent as a group e-mail with the subject heading, "Invitación al conversatorio 'Ecuaciones sónicas, variaciones camaleónicas. Fosado en la vanguardia del sonido,'" on December 30, 2016, in the author's possession; in Spanish.

¹¹¹ In regard to such notions about ephemerality, Jodorowsky, who had studied with Zen Buddhist monk Ejo Takata (who also took part in Jodorowsky's theater production *Zarathustra*) may also have been influential. As Medina suggests, "possibly Jodorowsky shares a degree of responsibility for the supposed ethical character of the 'ephemeral' that became dogma in Mexico, and resulted in a resistance to leave any documentation for actions and objects that were conceived as perishable." Medina, "Recovering Panic," 50.

¹¹² Rubén Gallo, *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 167.

¹¹³ Malacara Palacios, "La entrevista Atrás del Cosmos: Henry West" (part 2), 22.

with claiming ownership over, or even an attachment to, a fixed musical “product.” But these concerns can also be seen as stemming from a kind of privilege. For Ruiz, as a female artist in a male-dominated context, the central fight was to have her voice fully heard in the first place. This concern was compounded by the way journalists tended to focus on West, who was by all accounts a charismatic figure; as Derbez wrote in a poem published in 2013, “the people jammed into the Teatro del Galeón / looked at West / like he was some occult magician / twisting the wind.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, because he played saxophone (normative star of the jazz combo), sometimes opened the ensemble’s concerts playing a solo using the seemingly superhuman technique of circular breathing, would hold forth during long monologues onstage, and was male (unlike Ruiz), Mexican (unlike Mann), and older than both Ruiz and Mann, observers tended to lend West a mantle of authority. (In our first conversation, I made the mistake—following the cue of some newspaper articles from the period—of referring to him as the ensemble’s “bandleader.” He replied: “Be careful with [saying] I was the bandleader, eh? Be very careful. We were all bandleaders, yes?”)¹¹⁵ For Ruiz, such misapprehensions over naming and leadership are not only a wearisome result of gendered assumptions about female power, autonomy, and creativity but are also imbricated with the issue of personal voice and the question of historical legacy.

A female presence in an improvising ensemble complicates the notion that suppressing names and declining to enter one’s work into the historical ledger is always exemplary of a “democratic attitude” or represents a subversion of the pernicious commercial and power structures that leach music of its true meaning and compromise artists’ authentic voices.¹¹⁶ Such choices may be intended to undermine the gender and class privileges that permeate the hierarchies of concert music, and they may indeed serve as a principled refusal of the commodification of musical creativity, but they also reproduce some of the problems they aim to resist in that they do nothing to elevate visibility or claim cultural capital for those whose voices would likely not have been heard in the first place. Female improvising musicians of the 1960s and 1970s would have had no need to insist that their names be suppressed from public view and that their music not be recorded. They were a priori delegitimized in their compositional authority, and they were accustomed to being left out of the history books.¹¹⁷ In this light, Ruiz’s determination to preserve the ensemble’s work is not only a historically minded endeavor but also a feminist one.

As the only member of the trio who stayed in Mexico, Ruiz is also its main culture-bearer in Mexico City’s contemporary music scene. In 1982–1983, both Mann and West moved to the United States. Mann eventually received a master’s degree in

¹¹⁴ Alain Derbez, *El jazz según Don Juan y más silábales ráfagas* (Mexico City: La Zonámbula, 2013), 58–64; translation by Tim Smyth and Tamar Barzel.

¹¹⁵ Malacara Palacios, “La entrevista Atrás del Cosmos: Henry West” (part 2), 22.

¹¹⁶ Alonso-Minutti, “La ‘destrucción renovadora’ de Quanta,” 27.

¹¹⁷ For an intervention, see Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, eds., *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

composition at Mills College, pursued a career as a percussionist, and developed a youth drumming program in upstate New York, but only Ruiz committed herself to the path she and West had set out on together: teaching Mexican improvisers; concertizing; and forming new ensembles devoted to free improvisation, including La Cocina (with Ariel Guzik, Evodio Escalante, and Alain Derbez on saxophone, Ruiz on piano, and Jazzamoart playing drums and doing action painting) and Radnectar (with Guzik on saxophone, Germán Herrera on percussion, and Ruiz on piano) in the 1980s. More recently, she convened an all-female improvising ensemble, Cihuatl, and released a recording, *Free Jazz Women and Some Men*, in 2015 (fig. 9.7).

The gaps and silences of the archive, and thus the lopsided representations of history archives afford, are by now familiar territory in the academic literature, but what role should archives play for music that derives its very power from being impossible to capture? Over the course of my research I have become acutely aware of the contingencies out of which improvisational music passes from liveness into history—thereby transubstantiating from “the suspense-filled plenitude of the not-quite-known” into its thinner,

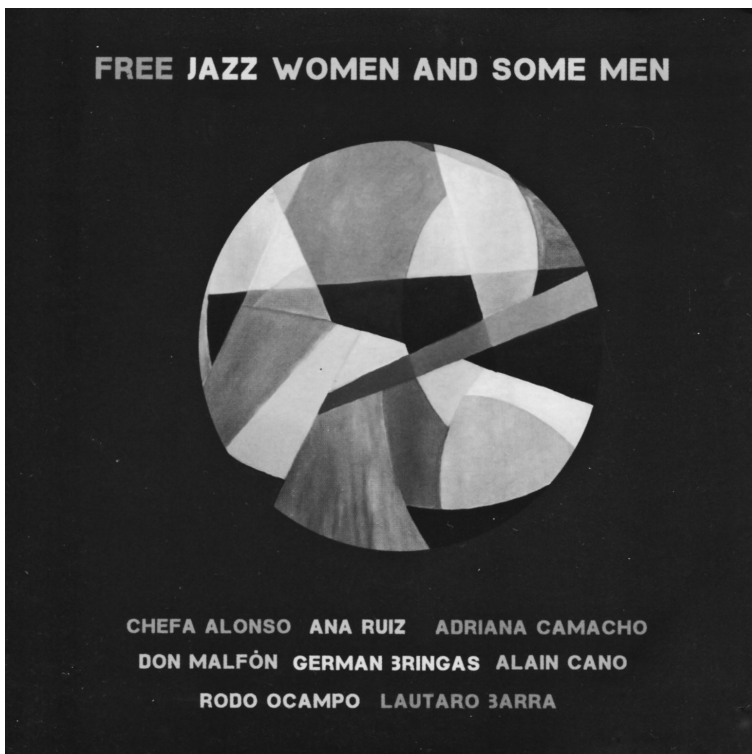


FIGURE 9.7. *Free Jazz Women and Some Men* (compact disc) (Jazzorca Records, 2015). Chefa Alonso, soprano saxophone; Ana Ruiz, piano; Adriana Camacho, contrabass; Don Malfón, alto saxophone; Germán Bringas, tenor saxophone; Alain Cano, contrabass; Laura Barra, soprano saxophone. Cover design: Adriana Camacho, from a fragment of the painting *Mujer desnuda abrazando la vida entera* (*Nude Woman Embracing the Whole of Life*) by Antonio Gritón. Used by courtesy of Camacho and Gritón, Ana Ruiz, Germán Bringas, and Jazzorca records.

reproducible simulacrum.¹¹⁸ In contrast to the United States and Europe, with their relatively large and robust communities of improvisers and dense catalog of commercial releases, the history of experimental improvised music in Mexico is slight, and its historical record even slighter. Over the past decade, the historical narrative about twentieth-century music in Mexico has been enriched by new scholarship based on artifacts that capture, record, or encode a variety of sources: scores, interviews, concert programs, field notes. If history (that is, recorded history) is made up of narratives built on the “world of paper,” then the sound of music history being made is not only the scratching of a pen or the clicking of a computer keyboard but also the whirl of a tape recorder.¹¹⁹ That sound is almost absent from the sphere of twentieth-century free improvisation in Mexico, in which recordings are both vanishingly small in number, hard to obtain, and, in the case of *Atrás del Cosmos*—an ensemble that recorded its rehearsals and performances not for posterity but for the purposes of self-study—disintegrating.¹²⁰ Insofar as improvising musicians embrace ephemerality as a value in its own right, their silence in the historical record takes on its own kind of resonance. But that silence also amounts to a kind of withdrawal from cultural memory, a withdrawal that takes on different valences for different people. It is due almost solely to Ruiz’s determination that *Atrás del Cosmos* be remembered—an attitude I interpret here in a feminist light—that the ensemble’s sonic record—a set of traces never to be mistaken for the thing itself, which can only be experienced and never captured—is now being preserved.

For its founders, working in *Atrás del Cosmos* was a formative experience and remains a warm memory. For its followers, the ensemble was a unique presence in the city, spurring free improvisation to unprecedented places while offering improvisers a supportive second home, a creative workshop where music-making and daily living were intertwined. The artists in *Atrás del Cosmos* made no grandiose claims as to the political and social changes their music portended. But through a combination of lucky circumstance, single-minded purpose, and a resonance with ideas that had taken hold in their moment and milieu, they achieved something unique. In performance, *Atrás del Cosmos* cultivated an alternative community, modeled an engaged creativity, and drew everyone in the room toward a shared purpose: to be there together, paying attention, in such a way that would allow something new to unfold.

¹¹⁸ Susan Leigh Foster, “Taken by Surprise: Improvisation in Dance and Mind,” in Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble, eds., *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 399.

¹¹⁹ Graham Freedman, “‘It Wants All the Creases Ironing Out’: Percy Grainger, The Folk Song Society, and the Ideology of the Archive,” *Music and Letters* 92, no. 3 (2011), 25; Jacques Derrida, *The Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). For an important recent discussion of the challenge of archiving improvisational music, see Michael C. Heller, *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 145–178.

¹²⁰ In 2016, the Fonoteca released a new edition of two rare recordings by bandleader Tino Contreras, *Yumare: Sinfonía tarahumara* (1984) and *Quinto sol* (1978), noting on its website: “after an arduous digital remastering process, it is now possible to listen to [these] interesting and experimental works . . . which are very difficult to find on vinyl.” Fonoteca Nacional, <http://www.fonotecanacional.gob.mx/index.php/agenda/calendario-de-eventos/presentacion-de-disco/yumare-quinto-sol-de-tino-contreras>, accessed January 25, 2016. See also Madrid, *In Search of Julián Carrillo*, 232–233.

EXPERIMENTATION AND IMPROVISATION IN BOGOTÁ AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Rodolfo Acosta

WHAT IS IT that we understand when we say “experimental?” This entire volume addresses this question and I certainly do not have a definitive answer. Nevertheless, I do wish to point out what may be obvious: “experimental” may mean different things to different people in different times and places. This last aspect seems especially significant in this context, given that we are talking about Latin America, a region that has been and is still subjected to a colonial/neocolonial relationship with both western Europe and the United States.¹ We are therefore faced with the task of discussing concepts that have been widely explored in scholarly research of those colonial centers but not necessarily in Latin America, the supposedly peripheral region we are examining in this volume. The risk is that, as has happened in so many fields, this scholastic inequality may lead us to impose categories, tools, and concepts on a complex cultural grouping for which they were not necessarily designed. Just as the imposition of a foreign economic model on a society for which it was not created may have catastrophic results, so may the use of inadequate models have an adverse impact on cultural studies.

A survey of the literature on the history and aesthetics of academic music in Latin America shows that the use of the term “experimentalism” is scarce and when it does appear it seems rather vague or is used as a given. For instance, we are meant to simply accept Gerard Béhague’s typification of Mesías Maiguashca (b. 1938) as “the only

¹ It is, of course, more than a region; Latin America is a population, and a certain number of that population live in places outside the geographic region traditionally defined as such, especially in the United States of America.

Ecuadorian composer that since 1950 has developed an experimental aesthetic.”² Béhague does not tell us anything of Maiguashca’s aesthetics or what might be experimental in his work. The only hint of what “an experimental aesthetic” could mean is Béhague’s mention that Maiguashca works in the electroacoustic realm; this is, of course, no real hint, given that this is merely a medium, not an aesthetic. A further problem is that writers, including Béhague (even in the same book), may also label composers who work with electroacoustic media “avant-garde.”³ In many of these texts the term “avant-garde” is used for composers who work with indeterminate elements,⁴ but it is also used quite often for those who write atonal music, be it twelve-tone, serial, or so-called free atonality.⁵ In fact, the liberty in using this last term extends freely not only to composers who might be dubbed “abstract” or “modernist” in other texts but also to neoclassical composers of the 1920s.⁶

Evidently, there is a feeble consensus in regard to the use of the term “experimental” and the term also appears to be inextricably tangled with a host of other terms that are used in an equally interchangeable way. This may be due to a lack of rigor in the work of those of us who have commented, critiqued, analyzed, researched, and written about academic music in Latin America. It might also have to do with the idea that some things have slightly different meanings here in Latin America than elsewhere, and that some categories might need to be understood with different nuances. “Universalism,” a significant label that crops up when talking about this group of musical tendencies in twentieth-century Latin America, should also be singled out, even if it cannot really be discussed here. Given the political, social, and economic situation in the region throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, Latin American countries came up with ideas of nationalism which projected images of nation-states that naturalized the value systems of their elites. After the wave of centennial celebrations in the first two decades of the twentieth century, some artists began questioning these national caricatures with supposedly objective supranational universalism. Beginning in the 1920s, musical tendencies that could be labeled with any “ism”—such as experimentalism and modernism—began to appear in countries such as Mexico and Argentina, through the work of musicians such as Julián Carrillo (1875–1965) and Juan Carlos Paz (1897–1972), respectively. In some cases, the labels used to describe the actors participating in these cultural processes might be of a technical and quite specific nature; examples include Carrillo’s microtonality or Paz’s dodecaphonism. In most cases, however, the

² Gerard Béhague, *La música en América Latina (una introducción)* (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1983), 438. All translations from Spanish and French to English by the author.

³ *Ibid.*, 475; Béhague discussed “avant-garde” when writing about Alcides Lanza (Argentina, b. 1929).

⁴ José Ignacio Perdomo Escobar, *Historia de la música en Colombia* (Bogotá: Plaza & Janés, 1980), 178; see his discussion about Jesús Pinzón Urrea (Colombia, 1928–2016).

⁵ Enrique Pinilla, “La música en el siglo XX,” in *La música en el Perú* (Lima: Fondo Editorial Filarmonía, 2007), 178; see his discussion about Armando Guevara Ochoa (Peru, 1927–2013).

⁶ Esteban Buch, “L’avant-garde musicale à Buenos Aires: Paz contra Ginastera,” *Circuit: Musiques contemporaines*, 17, no. 2 (2007): 13; see his discussion about the Grupo Renovación.

labels employed to describe these actors—such as “avant-garde” or “modern”—were rather vague.

These movements diversified and spread during the following decades and throughout the region but shared the rejection of dominant nationalisms, which were often seen as reactionary. For this reason, the term “universalist” began to appear as a generalizing term, grouping together different styles, techniques, and so on, used to carry out this opposition to a traditionalistic status quo. Given some of the relationships that developed between artistic nationalisms and economic/political power, the negative reactions these nationalisms generated and how these other proposals could be understood as forward-looking are understandable. Of course, there is a fundamental paradox in this reasoning, given the colonial nature of a mentality that seeks the so-called third world’s way forward in the latest—or sometimes not even the latest—fad from the so-called first world. To accept something as universal and oppose it to something considered local, but furthermore to instinctively consider the former ethically, aesthetically, and technically superior to the latter, often ends up being a reinstatement of Euro/USocentric,⁷ albocentric, and androcentric submission.

Despite these reasonings, I am first and foremost a practical musician; as a composer, improviser, conductor, and performer, I started doing things that *felt* experimental early on and did so for a very simple reason: I was curious. I wanted to know what would happen if I did this or that, very much like cartoon scientists mixing things that will probably explode. I cared little for what musicologists might know about experimentalism and even less for what philosophers or social theoreticians might think about its ideological connotations. I was uncontrollably passionate about music and convinced that it could be very different and much *more* than what I knew at the time. So I started to play around with what I was learning, sometimes exploring through rational thought and sometimes experimenting through the physical act of *doing*.

When I started studying twentieth-century music history in 1991 it felt like I was coming home, even if I was only being taught what had happened in academic music of western Europe and the United States. I found that pretty much everything I had intuited already existed and I felt thrilled for two main reasons: on the one hand the musical world to be explored suddenly expanded in all directions to unimaginable dimensions; on the other I found that I did not feel silly for having reinvented the proverbial wheel with my own experiments. I realized that actual experience (etymologically so close to experimentation), learning through living, is invaluable, regardless of whether the objective result already exists through someone else’s work. At pretty much the same time, I consciously discovered free improvisation and my mind was simply blown away. The combination of what I was learning through the study of history, theory, analysis, and composition, as well as the practice of improvisation, all came together to begin transforming me into the kind of musician I wanted to be.

⁷ I derive the term “USocentric” from the use by Frank Lloyd Wright, among others, of the term “usonian” to refer to things pertaining to the United States of America and not the rest of the American continent.

Years later I would come to realize that this exciting time had not only been a matter of individual experience, but that I had been caught in the middle of an important moment in Colombian musical history. For this reason, and because of the lack of historical/musicological writings regarding it, I began studying the period. I have made it a point to tell everyone I can about it, whether through lectures, classes, or writings. In what follows, I will discuss the practice of experimental improvisation—both free and otherwise—that arrived and developed in Bogotá at the end of the twentieth century and how the road to it was paved by the variegated ideas of experimentalism (whatever that may mean) that preceded it.

TOWARD EXPERIMENTATION

Given the ambiguity of terms such as “avant-garde” and “experimental,” often used in writings about atonal or electroacoustic music, it would make sense to start this discussion there. Unfortunately, lack of space forces me to be exceedingly brief and merely point out a couple of names and dates that stand out as particularly important in the development of these fields in Colombia.

The first undoubtedly atonal (twelve-tone, in fact) piece in Colombia seems to date from 1954, when Roberto Pineda Duque (1910–1977) started studying with the Italian composer Carlo Jachino (1887–1971) at the National Conservatory of Music in Bogotá. The piece is Pineda Duque’s *Serenata* for string orchestra, which was premiered at the Conservatory’s Auditorium in 1955 under the baton of the composer himself.⁸ Different types of serialism were gradually incorporated into the study of composition in Colombia, and serialism eventually became established as an academic topic. As a trait in actual composition, however, serialism never took a strong hold. So-called free atonality on the other hand did become a major aspect of Colombian compositional practices, both on its own and in various polystylistic settings that appeared from the mid-1960s onward.

The first electroacoustic piece in the country was *Ensayo electrónico*, composed by Fabio González Zuleta (1920–2011) and premiered in March 1965 at the Cristóbal Colón Theater in Bogotá.⁹ In November of that year, again at the Conservatory’s auditorium, Blas Emilio Atehortúa (b. 1933)¹⁰ premiered the first mixed piece, his *Cantico delle creature* for bass voice, two chamber choirs, two pianos, wind instruments, two double basses,

⁸ Juan Carlos Rodríguez Álvarez, *Roberto Pineda Duque: Un músico incomprendido* (Itagüí, Colombia: Eticom-Nuestros Medios, 2010), 67–75.

⁹ Carlos Mauricio Bejarano, “Consolidación de la música electroacústica colombiana en los años noventa: Una aproximación personal,” in Susana Friedmann Altmann, ed., *Arte en los noventa: Música* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2004), 124.

¹⁰ Information to be found on Atehortúa’s year of birth differs widely, ranging from 1931 to 1948. The composer himself has at different times offered contrasting information. Most scholars have settled on 1933 since that is the year documented in the national ID he used in the 1960s and corresponds to the information he gave at that time to different institutions, both national and international.

percussion, and two magnetic tapes.¹¹ Few electroacoustic compositions survive from the following decade, and although some of them were quite good, for a while it seemed as if local composers had abandoned this field. The actual problem proved to be a matter of infrastructure. Technological changes of the late 1980s brought the field back to life by the turn of the decade in the hands of a new generation of composers, among whom Mauricio Bejarano (b. 1955) and Juan Reyes (b. 1962) initially stood out. Since then, electroacoustic composition has been a major part of Colombian contemporary music, and all succeeding generations have incorporated it into their common practice.

Atonal and electroacoustic musics may differ in many regards, but when compared to improvisatory practices they share common ground: they are both fields in which the differentiated phenomena of composition and interpretation unequivocally exist.¹² Both activities, when compared to the concert in which they seem to come to life, are in fact carried out elsewhere and "elsewhen." In musical practices of this sort, the concert is therefore a social ritual in which the results of the processes carried out by composer and interpreter are presented to another actor, the audience, so that the music may thus become a full-fledged social phenomenon.

By contrast, an improvising musician supposedly generates a music that does not exist until the instant when it is produced and does so in the place where the concert is occurring. However, one of the things that tends to distinguish experimental from nonexperimental improvisation is how far this principle is taken. In most musical traditions that use, incorporate, or profess improvisation, very specific rules exist that contextualize what improvisation may mean within them; in fact, these rules often end up defining the given musical genre. Inevitably, these rules are learned and practiced in places and moments different from those of the concert, even if the specifics of a given performance do occur in the concert itself. For example, if I were to decide to learn how to play *puya*, I would first have to acquire one of the correct instruments for its practice. I would then have to find someone to teach me the basics of what may be played on that instrument in that specific genre. I would have to practice on my own, given that, as in many improvisational traditions, the idea of virtuosity is important in *puya*. I would have to form a traditional trio and rehearse with them. Finally, I would get up on stage and improvise in concert before an audience. As such, this would represent an intermediate situation in terms of space/time dissociation, with composed/interpreted music at one end and actual free improvisation at the other.¹³

¹¹ Ana María Romano, "Jacqueline Nova, recorrido biográfico," *A Contratiempo* 12 (2002): 29–40.

¹² I am using the terms "interpretation" and "interpreter" as something different from "performance" and "performer," with the latter pair referring to what happens in situ in an actual performance, onstage, if such a differentiation of space exists in a given musical practice. The former pair refers to a process of conscious construction of meaning (musical, symbolical, sociological, etc.) that a piece may have and that takes place before actual performance. In fact, interpreter and performer are not necessarily the same person.

¹³ These are, of course, conceptual poles, and actual musical practice always takes place somewhere in the middle. There will always be a certain aspect of dissociation, at least in terms of preparation; the

These rules are the “idiom” to which Derek Bailey refers when writing about idiomatic improvisation, saying that of the two types of improvisation he discusses, this one is “the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom . . . and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom.”¹⁴ Wade Matthews has used the term “discursive model” to name the rules, and he labels traditional improvisatory practices as “improvisation with a discursive model.”¹⁵ In this kind of improvisation, a clearly initiated listener exists, one whose familiarity with these rules gives him or her a statistical knowledge of what may happen in a given performance. For this listener, a special pleasure exists in contemplating the way an improviser performs a dialogue with the rules that define the musical genre and which are familiar to both listener and improviser.

Rules, of course, are breakable, and genres are not altogether static. This may well be the process by which numerous situations that can be understood as experimental improvisation came to be. A question such as “What if we were to do this?”—the quintessential starting point for an experimental process—can be strongly intuited in improvisational situations that may be described as guided, controlled, contextualized, and conducted. All these types of improvisation seem to spring forth from a *change* in rules rather than an *absence* of rules. For this very reason, these are often improvisational practices that fit well within the idea and realm of composition and thus ideally call for a very specific performer: an improvising interpreter.

While countless musical traditions have enriched it, the history of experimental improvisation within contemporary academic music in Colombia is intimately bound to US indeterminacy, experimentalism, and conceptual art. In fact, it was specifically through conceptual art that experimental improvisation first came into being in the country through the work of Gustavo Sorzano (b. 1944).¹⁶ On April 4, 1968, Sorzano organized an unprecedented concert/lecture at the Mechanics Auditorium of the Industrial University of Santander in Bucaramanga, titled “Música = Sonido Organizado.”¹⁷ The event unfolded in three parts. First, there was a lecture on electronic music. Second, there was a concert of tape music by İlhan Mimaroglu, Luciano Berio, John Cage, Robert Ashley, Calvin Hampton, and Sorzano himself. For the third part, the Grupo de Cámara Contemporáneo performed two graphic score pieces by Sorzano: *Beethoveniana para piano preparado* and *Estudio III*, both mixed pieces for

practical difference has more to do with the musician’s *intention* of being closer to one of the poles and how the musical materials (structure, content, etc.) take advantage of this decision.

¹⁴ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation, Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), xi.

¹⁵ Wade Matthews, *Improvisando, la libre creación musical* (Madrid: Turner Publicaciones, 2012), 37–48.

¹⁶ María Mercedes Herrera Buitrago, *Gustavo Sorzano, pionero del arte conceptual en Colombia* (Bogotá: La silueta, 2013). This book was awarded the “Historical, Theoretical or Critical Essay Prize” from the District Institute for the Arts (IDARTES) and is included in their series “Colección de ensayos sobre arte colombiano.”

¹⁷ This redefinition of music as organized sound was originally set forth in the 1920s by Edgard Varèse. In choosing this name, Sorzano seems to express an unequivocal affiliation to experimental tradition in the United States.

prepared piano and electronic oscillators.¹⁸ Although it was certainly not the first concert that included electroacoustic music or mixed media, Sorzano’s event does seem to have been the first live electronic performance in Colombia. Furthermore, because of the indeterminate nature of his graphic scores, this also seems to be the first case of consciously experimental improvisation in the country, even if not altogether “free.”

At the time, Sorzano had been studying visual arts and architecture in the United States. He moved permanently to Bogotá in 1969. There he formed an experimental music collective called MUSICA VIVA, mirroring and building on the experiences of the MUSIKA VIVA ENSEMBLE, of which he had been a part at Cornell University.¹⁹ MUSICA VIVA had its premiere with a participatory event that Sorzano called “Arquitectura del sonido” and that took place at the Pablo VI Auditorium of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana on November 13 and 14, 1969.²⁰ According to Herrera Buitrago, “among [Sorzano’s] aims were the dissolution of boundaries between author and public, traditional genres and academic disciplines, and that which separated art and life.”²¹

At first, Sorzano’s Colombian collective brought together professors and students, not from music or visual arts but from the university’s schools of architecture and electronic engineering. Before the year ended, however, he had quit Javeriana University and began inviting in people from other institutions and backgrounds, including trained musicians.²² As their projects became increasingly experimental, MUSICA VIVA’s participatory events gradually incorporated more multimedia elements and improvisation, both guided and apparently free. In the end, at least ten of these events were held throughout the 1970s, but Sorzano decided to retire from public (and musical) life around 1982. Unfortunately, none of his companions seems to have continued the adventures of MUSICA VIVA, and their amazing achievements were forgotten.

Even before Sorzano’s organizing efforts, other composers involved in different aspects of musical avant-garde in Colombia may have been experimenting with fringe elements, such as graphic notation and contextualized improvisation.²³ The first of these was probably Blas Emilio Atehortúa, who must have come across or even studied such subjects as early as 1963–1964, during his first biennium at the Centro

¹⁸ The Grupo included musicians Lucila Reyes Duarte, Lucila Paillí Azuero, Edmundo Puentes, and Antonio Ramírez.

¹⁹ Herrera Buitrago names both groups as Musika Viva and Musika Viva Ensemble; the spellings I have chosen to use follow the ways they appear in the posters made by Sorzano and reproduced in Herrera Buitrago’s book.

²⁰ “Participatory event” refers to an artistic event in which the audience is invited to participate actively in the realization or interpretation of the art works.

²¹ Herrera Buitrago, *Gustavo Sorzano*, 102.

²² Herrera Buitrago points out, for example, the participation of musicians such as Tristán Arbeláez Mendoza (1946–2005) and Samuel Bedoya Sánchez (1947–1994).

²³ It is worth noting that on several occasions Sorzano said he did not consider himself to be a composer nor did he pretend to make music or even art, as opposed to how the public and press initially perceived him; his disappearance from the canon of art and music history in Colombia might therefore be understood as a direct consequence of his own attitude.

Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (CLAEM) in Buenos Aires.²⁴ I venture this assumption bearing in mind that CLAEM's Contemporary Music Festival had already included highly aleatoric and graphic scores by European composers, such as Pierre Boulez, Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, since its first installment in 1962. Atehortúa returned to CLAEM in 1966 and 1967, when an interest in experimental musical practices was clearly blossoming. Noting that the group of teachers he had during his time in Buenos Aires included Bruno Maderna, Earle Brown, and Luigi Nono, it would seem extremely likely that among experimental elements, at least indeterminacy would have been a topic of study or discussion, as it was, in fact, of performance.

In 1965, during his first break from CLAEM, Atehortúa offered the course "Música Contemporánea" at the Music Conservatory in Bogotá; students in this course included composers Jacqueline Nova (1935–1975) and Francisco Zumaqué (b. 1945).²⁵ One may assume that the new techniques and aesthetics shared by Atehortúa during this course may have included indeterminacy, graphic scores, and/or electroacoustics. After her own period of studies at CLAEM during the 1967–1968 biennium, Nova developed a keen interest in electroacoustic music, both for unaccompanied tape as well as mixed media. Unaccompanied tape was significant not only for her strictly musical production but also in the creation of interdisciplinary works through collaborations with other fields, such as visual arts, theatre, and cinema. Mixed media is particularly significant for this discussion, given the ample use of graphic and otherwise experimental elements in her scores.

As Eduardo Herrera's chapter in this volume reveals, during the early 1960s the term "experimental" was widely used to mean "electroacoustic music" and was initially coined in this sense at CLAEM.²⁶ As the decade progressed, "experimental" came to mean highly indeterminate music. By the last installment of CLAEM's festival in 1970, "experimental" seemed to mean improvisation, even if sometimes minimally structured, whether by an individual or a group. It is in this sense that we must understand the work of the Grupo de Experimentación Musical del CLAEM,²⁷ which had its

²⁴ José Luis Castiñeira de Dios, ed., *La música en el Di Tella: Resonancias de la modernidad* (Buenos Aires: Secretaría de Cultura de la Presidencia de la Nación, 2011). The CLAEM (Latin American Center for Advanced Musical Studies), an extremely important center for advanced studies in composition, existed as part of the Torcuato Di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires between 1962 and 1971, becoming what may have been the most significant meeting point for Latin American composers in history. See also Eduardo Herrera's chapter here.

²⁵ Romano, "Jacqueline Nova," 29.

²⁶ Other examples of equating the word "experimental" to "electroacoustic" outside Latin America can be seen in Lejaren A. Hiller and Leonard M. Isaacson, *Experimental Music: Composition with An Electronic Computer* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), or in the original meaning of the acronym GMEB, which stood for Groupe de Musique Expérimentale de Bourges. Eventually GMEB was redefined as "Groupe de Musique Électroacoustique de Bourges."

²⁷ The composer-performers (all students at CLAEM) who at some point played in the Grupo de Experimentación Musical included the Brazilian Jorge Antunes (b. 1942); the Uruguayans León Biriotti (b. 1929), Ariel Martínez (b. 1940), Antonio Mastrogiovanni (1936–2010), and Beatriz Lockhart (1944–2015); the Chilean Gabriel Brnčić (b. 1942); the Argentinians Pedro Caryevschi (b. 1942), Eduardo Kusnir (b. 1939), José Ramón Maranzano (b. 1940), Jorge Blarduni (b.1930), Luis Zubillaga (1928–1955), and Bruno

first performance in 1969, the same year the Movimiento Música Más was founded,²⁸ immediately after Larry Austin’s *One-Man Show*, a music theater piece he presented at CLAEM.²⁹ But this kind of avant-garde stage art had already begun to be explored at CLAEM by Argentinian composer-performers such as Oscar Bazán (1936–2005), Gerardo Gandini (1936–2013), and Alcides Lanza (b. 1929), arguably as far back as 1962. As further evidence: Steve Lacy’s free jazz landmark *The Forest and the Zoo* was recorded in 1966 at the Di Tella Institute by its main sound engineer, Fernando von Reichenbach (Argentina, 1931–2005). All these paths laid out significant elements that can be understood as leading toward—if not already incarnating—openly experimental tendencies and free improvisation, both in Argentina and in South America in general. This period, 1962–1969, pretty much spans the entire history of CLAEM, and therefore the events described were part of the context that Atehortúa and Nova must have come across as students there.

I have thus far mentioned two fronts of Colombian experimental music in the late 1960s and 1970s: one was represented by Sorzano, came directly from the United States, and was indebted to performance art, happenings, and Cageian aesthetics and ethics. The other, possibly initiated by Atehortúa but more clearly represented by Nova, came from Buenos Aires and, through it, from western Europe and, to a lesser degree, the United States. This second path is more closely bound to the European avant-garde that grew out of Darmstadt and is therefore closer to its notions of what contemporary music and music-theater should be. Sorzano’s views and practices were evidently more experimental than the rest: he understood the concert/performance as a “metawork”; conceived the constituent compositions as either conceptual pieces or as process descriptions; and through the idea of participatory event, questioned the differences between artist and audience. In this context, improvisation became an essential element, as it was through improvisation that the actual content of a piece would come to be. Nova on the other hand had a more traditionally musical outlook, considering the individual piece an independent work of art and the concert a collection of pieces. She clearly differentiated between artist and public and felt the need for trained musicians (and in some cases trained actors) to perform her work. In her artistic stance, indeterminacy could create flexibility and variability, but always within the margins of a minutely executed composition. This description could also be applied to the work of

D’Astoli (b. Italy, 1934); the Peruvian Alejandro Núñez Allauca (b. 1943); and the Puerto Rican Rafael Aponte-Ledée (b. 1938). See Eduardo Herrera’s chapter in this volume.

²⁸ Movimiento Música Más was founded by the Argentinians Guillermo Gregorio (b. 1941), Roque de Pedro (b. 1935), and Norberto Chavarri. Although they proclaimed themselves to be anti-CLAEM, we must remember that Gregorio was a former student and admirer of the Center’s founder/director Alberto Ginastera. It is also significant that former CLAEM students Núñez Allauca, Blarduni and Zubillaga as well as the Argentinian Luis Arias (b. 1940), would perform with them since 1970, either as guests of MMM or as part of the Conjunto de Música Contemporánea de Buenos Aires or the Grupo de Improvisación de La Plata. See Andrew Dewar’s chapter here.

²⁹ John Corbett, liner notes to the CD *Guillermo Gregorio: Otra música, Tape Music, Fluxus & Free Improvisation in Buenos Aires 1963–70* (Chicago: Atavistic, 2000).

Atehortúa and others of their generation, given that the range of freedom offered to the performer is rather limited from the point of view of improvisation as such.

Looking back, the most important precedent for free improvisation in Colombia is probably the work of Jesús Pinzón Urrea (1928–2016). After 1970, right at the time of the consolidation of Sorzano's *MUSICA VIVA*, Urrea had clearly begun to experiment with graphic notation in his compositions.³⁰ In 1971 he performed as pianist in the debut of Nova's chamber ensemble *Agrupación Nueva Música*, in a concert that presented music by Francisco Kröpfl (b. 1931), Gandini, Bazán, Nova, and Pinzón himself. In 1972 he was invited to the *Symposium Internazionale Sulla Problematica Dell'attuale Grafia Musicale* in Rome, where he presented two of his pieces: *Liberación* and *Test sicológico musical*.³¹ Given the nature of the symposium and Pinzón's notations, it is not altogether clear whether "presented" refers to the pieces having been performed or the scores having been exhibited. In fact, *Liberación* had already been published on the 1972 LP *Música de Jesús Pinzón*; the "presentation" could have therefore been a listening session of its recorded form. Regardless of what this presentation actually was, Pinzón must have had an enriching experience at this symposium. Cross-pollination of ideas was key to the symposium; the event brought together numerous lecturers from western Europe (Cornelius Cardew and Heinz-Klaus Metzger), North America (R. Murray Shafer and Robert Ashley), and South America (Gustavo Becerra-Schmidt and Gerardo Gandini). Gandini, a former teacher of both Atehortúa and Nova at CLAEM, would touch upon three relevant points in his lecture: first, the graphic input of new Latin American composers to contemporary notational explorations (in which he singled out the work of several of his former CLAEM colleagues); second, the particularities of graphic representation in electronic music and improvisation; and third, the double sense of certain graphic scores that may be appreciated for their value as both sound and visual art.³²

In his brief Roman experience, Pinzón found reassurance for what he had already been doing in Colombia; he continued to experiment with a renewed enthusiasm. He applied his explorations to music that ranged from small solo pieces to large orchestra and choir works, and although he never worked with electroacoustics, his timbral imagination was admittedly related to electronic sounds. Most of his compositions were for classically trained musicians, but he also developed experiments in what he called "endogenous music," music written specifically for nonmusicians, both children

³⁰ Carlos Barreiro Ortiz, *Jesús Pinzón Urrea: Música sin inhibiciones* (Bogotá: Centro Colombo-Americano, 1991). This collection of writings and images includes a 1991 interview conducted by Barreiro in which Pinzón stated that his experiments with graphic scores had begun as early as 1960, with some outlines for piano. Unfortunately, no music yet found seems to confirm this; from 1970 onward, however, his exploration of these notational tools is constant and increasingly important to his work. Given the similarity in sound of the two years as spoken in Spanish, it could very well be a simple mistake of transcription.

³¹ Barreiro Ortiz, *Jesús Pinzón Urrea*, 33.

³² Diana Fernández Calvo, *Historia de la representación gráfica del sonido en el sistema notacional de Occidente (desde el siglo IX a.C. hasta el siglo XXI)* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Artes y Ciencias Musicales, Universidad Católica Argentina, 2014), 273–279.

and adults. As time passed, some of his scores became less and less determinate, in terms not only of content but also of form and structure. Unlike other Colombian composers of the time, he seemed to find the relative abandonment of control appealing instead of problematic. His interest in the score as a visual aesthetic object grew, as did his curiosity regarding what kind of musical behavior could be generated from this sort of visual stimulus, based more on intuitive suggestion than on structuralist imposition. In his own words: “I had obtained great results because the music thus derived was an uninhibited music, if you will, as the interpreters were not reading notes but rather, improvising music, allowing themselves to be swept away by the graphics.”³³

The maximal point of evolution in the development of Pinzón’s work with the graphic score–improvisation continuum came with *Sonóptica, música para ver y oír*, a group of five pieces composed in 1983: *Sonata, Ajedrez, Dicotomía, Inmerso*, and *Espacial*.³⁴ As with much of his other music, these wildly graphic scores can be considered an example of polystylism; they move between abstract and figurative drawing, suggestions of movement and narrative, as well as different degrees of reminiscence of traditional notation. The pieces may be performed as individual works or as a cycle; as a cycle, they can be presented in any sequence. They are also indeterminate in regard to instrumentation, duration, and how the scores are to be read. In leaflets that accompany the scores, Pinzón offers brief analysis and notational glossaries with which he explains the pieces and the elements that serve as their building blocks. Nevertheless, in a general annotation he counters the limiting tendencies of these explanations by saying:

The sign is the basic generative element of the *Sonóptica*. It is polysemous, as regards its musical aspect [. . .], the resulting music will not always be the same, but will vary according to the performance, the period of its interpretation Thus, the Sonoptic Score and its musical signs are like eternal fountains of suggestions, possibilities, impulses, and stimuli that interpreter and even composer can use to co-create and paraphrase according to one’s own musical criteria . . . the *Sonóptica* goes further than to simply give an order or instruct: it seeks to educate, orient, foster, and stimulate the creative process, but without coercion.³⁵

Sometime around 2003, when we began performing these pieces with Ensemble CG,³⁶ Pinzón told me that while composing and first performing the *Sonópticas* back in 1983,

³³ Pinzón quoted on Barreiro Ortiz, *Jesús Pinzón Urrea*, 10.

³⁴ The name of the cycle translates as *Sonoptic, Music to See and Hear*, and those of its component pieces as *Sonata, Chess, Dichotomy, Immersed*, and *Spatial*.

³⁵ Leaflets accompanying Jesús Pinzón, “*Sonóptica, música para ver y oír*,” score, 1983, unpublished, private collection.

³⁶ Based in Bogotá, Ensemble CG has published recordings of two of the pieces: *Inmerso*—included in the double CD *colón electrónico 5 años. 2002–2006*, published by the Ministry of Culture of Colombia in 2007 and performed by Beatriz Elena Martínez (voice), Sergio Restrepo (guitar), and Daniel Áñez (piano), under the direction of Rodolfo Acosta—and *Dicotomía*—included in the CD *música onjetiva*, published independently by Ensemble CG in 2012 and performed by Beatriz Elena Martínez (voice),

he had realized that the musicians he worked with had no contact with the kind of improvisation needed for their interpretation. For this reason, he explained more in the leaflets than he had intended. In fact, he had even been forced to transcribe possible improvisations for the instrumentalists to perform, and some aspects of this contradictory solution leaked into the leaflets, to the extent that they might be misleading (for example, naming specific instruments and figures to be played). As he had commented two decades before, however, times change, and the performance of this kind of music is affected by the shifts that take place in the local musical scene.³⁷ As far as I know, these pieces were seldom performed at their time of composition, although Pinzón took it upon himself to prepare an ensemble and record their performance of the full cycle on LP.³⁸ Nevertheless, as time has passed, the *Sonópticas* have become a reference point for local performers of contemporary music interested in experimental repertoire and especially experimental improvisation. For my own and succeeding generations, these compositions have achieved iconic status, to the point that the name of one of the constituent pieces, *Inmerso*, has been borrowed as the name for a weekly radio program on contemporary Latin American music hosted by composer Melissa Vargas (b. 1980),³⁹ and a fragment of the score functions as a backdrop to the main page of the website of the *Círculo Colombiano de Música Contemporánea*.⁴⁰

TOWARD FREEDOM

The degree of improvisational creativity required for the performance of pieces like those by Sorzano or Pinzón can be such that both performers and listeners undoubtedly feel on the very edge of truly spontaneous creation of music that, up until the previous instant, did not exist. Nevertheless, in those cases we are still on *this* side of the edge; we are on the side of determinacy, still holding on to the idea of a composition, however intangible it may seem. The leap of faith into actual free improvisation seems to have first been taken in Colombia by the legendary group *Sol Sonoro*.⁴¹

Guillermo Bocanegra (guitar), Daniel Áñez (piano), and Sergio Trujillo (viola), under the direction of Rodolfo Acosta.

³⁷ Knowing some of my work and that of Ensemble CG, Pinzón realized that the kind of improvisation that the *Sonópticas* inspire and demand is second nature to us. For this reason, he gave me permission to interpret them as I might see fit, considering or not the indications in the leaflets.

³⁸ The LP *Sonóptica, música para ver y oír*—which includes all five pieces—was published independently in 1983 with the following performers: Ruth Lamprea and Mario Díaz Mendoza (violins), Ernesto Díaz (viola), Ernesto Díaz Mendoza (violoncello), Luis Pulido (flute), Oscar Osorio (oboe), Emilio Montoya (clarinet), Humberto Ortiz (percussion), and Claudia Calderón (piano), under the direction of Jesús Pinzón.

³⁹ The radio show *Inmerso* airs every Thursday at 10 p.m. on UN Radio (98.5 FM in Bogotá); for podcasts of programs spanning 2012–2015 visit <http://unradio.unal.edu.co/nc/detalle/cat/inmerso.html>.

⁴⁰ The Colombian Circle for Contemporary Music is a nonprofit association that works for the development of contemporary music in Colombia. See <http://www.cmc.com.co/>, accessed March 4, 2017.

⁴¹ The beautiful name of the group translates as *Sounding Sun*.

Free improvisation has been described in many ways. Bailey has called it “non-idiomatic improvisation.”⁴² Matthews defines it as “the sounding exercise of freedom” and goes on to describe it as “the creation of music in real time on a dynamic model,” a likeness that makes a clear reference to chaos theory.⁴³ If we understand chaos as a dynamic system that—responding to a sensibility to initial conditions—develops in a complex order, then the idea of free improvisation as a music governed by chaos makes sense, both for those who are improvising and those who are listening.⁴⁴ Bailey, who also refers to this practice simply as “free music,” emphasizes the openness of the practice: “Diversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it.”⁴⁵

This lack of a given idiom in which the improviser must participate (or be an example of) and the relative absence of standardized measurements by which to be judged together establish a marked contrast to idiomatic improvisation and to the interpretation of composed music. But freedom also implies a responsibility that arises from the fact that its practice occurs in real time, that it is invented from scratch right in front of the audience; there should be no preestablished rules to tie the improviser to any style or technique. This is an ethical responsibility; the free improviser will not be told what to do or how to do it, something that occurs implicitly or explicitly in other practices. To be sure, every kind of music demands study, practice, preparation, and all sorts of hard work, but these very ideas will be enormously different for the free improviser. In the face of a responsible freedom, these concepts must be discovered and rediscovered, constantly reinvented and questioned. It is a complex search for the possible social function of a consciously invented musical practice.

In 1986, while studying electroacoustic composition at the Phonos Foundation in Barcelona, the Colombian musicians Ricardo Arias (b. 1965) and Roberto García Piedrahita (b. 1958) joined the Catalan Luis Boyra to form Sol Sonoro. According to Arias, the main idea for the group was to “carry out collective improvisation and composition with electroacoustic media, objects, invented instruments, and a traditional instrument or two.”⁴⁶ Although the sound sources could be enormously variable,

⁴² Bailey, *Improvisation*, xi–xii.

⁴³ Matthews, *Improvizando*, 224.

⁴⁴ James Gleick’s popular 1987 book *Chaos: Making a New Science* opens with a quote by John Updike: “human was the music, natural was the static.” To a certain degree, improvisation has set itself up as a “natural” music in contrast to composition, which is understood as ‘artificial,’ in the best sense of the word. See James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), frontmatter.

⁴⁵ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 83.

⁴⁶ Ricardo Arias, “Cronología sumaria,” in Carlos Barreiro Ortiz, ed., *Jóvenes compositores colombianos* (Bogotá: Centro Colombo-Americano, 1994), 9. One of the most important concert promoters in Colombian academic music history, Barreiro (1954–2013) organized the very significant concert cycle “Jóvenes compositores colombianos” between 1987 and 2000, reaching fourteen installments. To be included by Barreiro in one of these concerts was tantamount to an official confirmation of one’s status as a “real” composer in Colombia.

García initially concentrated on the use of synthesizers and computers, Boyra on prepared electric guitar and computer programming, and Arias, starting out, on flute. (To be able to fill the needs of the group, the flute had to be enriched by both recent Western and traditional Eastern instrumental techniques and by live electronic treatment.)⁴⁷ Sol Sonoro soon expanded its arsenal of sound sources with all sorts of “amplified objects,” turning anything into a musical element. In rather Cageian fashion, music thus reclaims its relationship to everyday surroundings, questioning the idea of art—be it object or activity—as something detached from the rest of reality. Evidently, Sol Sonoro’s position stands against music tradition, not only insofar as vocal/instrumental music but also regarding the strict dogmas of *musique concrète* and *elektronische Musik*.

Tradition, as it turns out, was an important problem for the members of Sol Sonoro from the very beginning. The group was, in fact, originally called *Tradición Simultánea* (Simultaneous Tradition), a name Arias explains this way: “As a Colombian, I did not feel at ease playing classical European music, jazz, or even Afro-Caribbean music, for that matter. It can be said that I opted for a *non-tradition*.”⁴⁸ This idea of nontradition can be seen, I think, in the group’s choice of instruments. Computers and synthesizers had been used to make music since the 1950s, but as neo-instruments for live performance in the 1980s they were still a recent development and therefore lacking in/free of tradition. The electric guitar, whose history is a couple of decades longer, has had an even harder time being accepted in academic music; regardless of how many pieces we compose for/with it, most people insist on keeping it subjugated to urban popular music practices.⁴⁹ And what can be said for “found objects,” amplified or not? What kind of tradition could be developed when *anything* can become a musical instrument? Given enough time, of course, technique, aesthetics, and traditions can be developed for any neo-instrument. Eventually, Arias abandoned the flute as he gradually developed an instrument for which he became widely known: the Balloon Kit. About that, Arias wrote:

During the first years [with Sol Sonoro] we always used amplified mirrors and other flat, solid surfaces as idiophones, rubbing, scratching, hitting them, etc., with hands and multifarious objects. When I started using balloons, around 1987, it was then partly just a matter of transferring some of these techniques to a round, soft, and elastic surface (at the same time Luis [Boyra] and Roberto

⁴⁷ When we met in 1991, Arias presented himself as a “pedal flutist,” given that his live electronic transformations were carried out with electric guitar pedals.

⁴⁸ Ricardo Arias, “Scratching the Surface: The Balloon Kit in My Life,” *Experimental Musical Instruments* 13, no. 2 (1997): 29.

⁴⁹ In his undergraduate thesis, electric guitarist Johan León—reacting to his teachers’ insistence on the supposed nonexistence of contemporary academic repertoire for/with electric guitar—gathered information on some five thousand pertinent compositions. Given that there are so many pieces, their absence from performance programs for the instrument seems inexplicable.

[García] also diverted into soft territories, of a more intangible nature, designing computer programs for use in live performance).⁵⁰

In 1991, Sol Sonoro visited Colombia to participate in the II Festival Internacional de Música Contemporánea de Bogotá, an event organized by the tireless promoter of new music Cecilia Casas Cerón (1943–2015).⁵¹ During the festival, Sol Sonoro performed at least one concert and gave a lecture. If I remember correctly, the concert combined free improvisation and recent electroacoustic music of experimental tendencies from Spain/Catalonia. The lecture, however, was strictly dedicated to aspects of improvisation, such as the aesthetic dimension of immediacy and the ephemeral or the technical challenge of creative listening-reacting. The ideas of real-time creation and expression—always seeking to free musicians and listeners of the constraints presented by traditional genres of improvisation—projected themselves as magical elements of this way of making music. I cannot remember if there were any performance students in the audience, but it was definitely we, the composition students, who immediately felt captivated and took the step toward this new kind of improvisation.

In 1992 García returned to Bogotá. In 1993, he became professor at the Music Conservatory of the National University of Colombia, fostering interest in these new types of music through his very presence.⁵² Also in 1993, Sol Sonoro performed again in the III Festival Internacional de Música Contemporánea de Bogotá, and in the following years, the festival kept inviting musicians (both foreign and local) involved in improvisation to perform concerts, offer lectures, and lead workshops. Thus, festivals IV (1995) and V (1997) featured the Austrian duo of Klaus Obermeier (electric guitar) and Robert Spour (keyboards); festival VII (2001) programmed events by American Jessica Catron (violoncello) and the local Grupo FOM; festival IX (2007), the last one held, then under the direction of García and titled *in audito*, brought Brian Willson and Nicolas Collins from the United States.

After they settled in Bogotá in 1993, Sol Sonoro performed in the bar Chapinero Mutante, seemingly the first case of a local bar opening its doors to experimental music

⁵⁰ Arias, “Scratching the Surface,” 29–30. See also Arias, “Cronología sumaria,” 10. Regardless of its early improvisatory use, the first appearance of balloons in Arias’s compositions was in *Música global* (1991–1993) a music-action for a minimum of fifty-four performers and a host of rubber balloons. According to Arias, the piece was premiered “in a reduced version for duo” in October 1992 in Barcelona. Its first performance in Bogotá—and the first time I remember him as balloonist—was during the eighth installment of the “Jóvenes compositores colombianos” cycle curated by Barreiro at the Tairona Hall of the Colombo-American Center on April 26, 1994. I doubt we were fifty-four performers, but given that there was an actual group onstage and that the members of the audience participated, we were surely many more than two.

⁵¹ The International Contemporary Music Festival of Bogotá was a biennial festival that took place between 1989 and 2007, completing nine official editions; although it was not held in 2005, in 2000 there was a special, short (one-week) version. Except for festival IX, all editions were directed by Cecilia Casas Cerón and constitute one of the most important contributions to the history and practice of contemporary music in Colombia. A thorough study of this festival would seem to be one of the most pressing needs in Colombian musical historiography.

⁵² Bejarano, “Consolidación de la música electroacústica,” 130–135.

and free improvisation, even if it was a one-time-only event.⁵³ Back then it seemed rather meaningless, but as the years passed we would come to realize that the bar/club setting is particularly appropriate for improvisation. Chapinero Mutante was thus the first of several bars that would help develop this genre, particularly in the twenty-first century, with 6L6 (in 2006–2007) and with *matik-matik* (from 2008 onward) standing out as the most influential.

In 1994, under their individual names, Arias and García performed the Colombian premiere of John Cage's *Cartridge Music* (1960), a work widely acknowledged as the initiator of live electronic music.⁵⁴ This genre has always been closely linked to the development of experimental improvisation and this premiere helped some of us in the local music scene look back to the process of consolidation of international improvisation and thus begin to find our own place in it. That same year, Arias received what would be the first state grant in Colombia given to a free or experimental improvisation project when the Colombian Institute for Culture funded his project *Dúos Postales y Otras Correspondencias*. Described by Arias as “duos of improvised music, both in real time as well as in deferred time (via mail),”⁵⁵ the project culminated in a recorded compilation of many very short improvisations with different improvisers, both local and foreign. Among the former I remember Roberto García, Alejandro Gómez Upegui, and myself. Among the latter I remember Hans Tutschku, Wil Offermans, Nicolas Collins, and Dror Feiler,⁵⁶ as well as some of Arias's old collaborators in Barcelona: Luis Boyra, Carlos Gómez, Gabriel Jakovkis, and Miquel Jordà. For the local duos, the recordings were done in situ in real time and, in principle, with no editing or previous planning. For the true postal duos, Arias recorded solo improvisations that he then sent his colleagues in different countries so that they would work out their own improvisations on top; this is the reason why Arias described them as duos “in deferred time [and space].”

In August 1995, Arias, García, and Inés Wickmann organized the first Festival de los Tiempos del Ruido, which had a special emphasis on practices considered somehow

⁵³ Like García, Arias decided to stay in Colombia, but his permanent return was gradual. Initially, he stayed in 1993, but between 1995 and 1996 he moved to the Netherlands to study at the Institute of Sonology of the Royal Conservatory of The Hague. He then moved to New York City to carry out master's studies at City University of New York and New York University; he lived there between 1996 and 2007 before finally returning to Colombia.

⁵⁴ The concert at which *Cartridge Music* was premiered, called *Sonido electroacústico: Colombia—Estados Unidos*, took place at the Tairona Hall of the Colombo-American Center, August 23, 1994, and was, again, organized by Barreiro.

⁵⁵ Arias, “Cronología sumaria,” 10.

⁵⁶ Hans Tutschku (Germany, b. 1966) is a composer and live electronics performer who first visited Colombia in 1993 as part of the Ensemble für Intuitive Musik Weimar. Wil Offermans (Netherlands, b. 1957) is a flutist and composer; he had also visited Colombia in 1993, in III Festival Internacional de Música Contemporánea de Bogotá, but as performer (along with Junko Ueda on voice and *biwa*) of his own compositions, all of which included quite a bit of improvisation. Nicolas Collins (United States, b. 1954) is a composer and multiinstrumentalist, while Dror Feiler (Israel/Sweden, b. 1951) is a composer and saxophonist; these last two have maintained a permanent contact with Colombia, visiting on numerous occasions throughout the years.

experimental, such as electroacoustic music, sound art, and particularly improvisation.⁵⁷ This festival took place on prestigious stages throughout Bogotá and Cali and brought together national and international participants, counting among the latter such well-known improvisers as Collins and Feiler.⁵⁸ The national participants also included many nonmusicians, such as Beatriz Eugenia Díaz, Gilles Charalambos, Lucas Ospina, and Mateo Castillo. The inclusion of these young but already somewhat recognized visual artists attracted new audiences, widening the field of action for improvisation and other experimentation. Maybe without realizing it, these artists began to reestablish links that had seemed broken since the times of Sorzano and his *MUSICA VIVA*, alliances wherein a revival of interdisciplinary and multimedia creation related to improvisation could flourish. Through this festival, unprecedented visibility (and audibility) was given to these musical/artistic experiments, alternative genres within the already alternative practices of contemporary music and art. Looking back, 1995 would also mark the end of a germinal period in Colombian free improvisation, as Arias’s departure for the Netherlands sealed the end of *Sol Sonoro*.

THE LATE 1990S

If I have concentrated more on Arias than on García up to now, it is because, of the two, Arias has devoted himself more exclusively to free improvisation. García on the other hand has developed as an electroacoustic composer–sound artist, professor, and concert organizer, all related to so-called new media and the general topic of electronic arts. Nevertheless, his constant presence in Colombia contributed enormously to the development of improvisation, as well as to all of these other fields. His uninterrupted work at the National University of Colombia and his brief stint at the University of Los Andes, for example, were decisive in setting off some of the most important activities of students at both universities.

Throughout the second half of the 1990s, and largely thanks to García, concerts including all sorts of experimental improvisation became increasingly common. As before, our proposals kept on being accepted within universities, so we continued to hold events at the National and Los Andes universities, with other schools joining the adventure as time passed. Gradually, some nonscholastic spaces, such as galleries and museums—including the Bogotá Museum of Modern Art and the Contemporary Art Museum—started opening their doors to these experimentations. It should be mentioned that although more traditional concert venues did not seem eager to house these types of music, they did not really seem *opposed* to them either. Halls such as the Tairona Hall at the Colombo-American Center or even the Luis Ángel Arango Library’s

⁵⁷ Festival de los Tiempos del Ruido means Festival of the Times of Noise. The name is taken from the popular moniker given to a mysterious event in seventeenth-century Bogotá in which an unexplainable fifteen-minute roar made people fear that the end of the world was at hand.

⁵⁸ Bejarano, “Consolidación de la música electroacústica,” 138.

Concert Hall—the most prestigious chamber music hall in the country—finally began to include events featuring experimental improvisation in their regular programming, outside the festival context. Later, other comparable venues did their share, even if sometimes shyly. The Cristóbal Colón Theater, in fact, became one of our most important allies, especially during the wonderful Colón Electrónico cycle of 2002–2006.⁵⁹

Experimental improvisation proved to be particularly attractive to composers who were finishing undergraduate studies at the time. We felt that a collective built around such concepts, besides offering a context for outright improvisation, could work well for us in two complementary ways. On the one hand in a milieu in which orchestras, choirs, and even established chamber ensembles had very little (if anything) to do with the development of Colombian music considered to be avant-garde or experimental, the idea of having our own group of composers/performers/improvisers seemed like a valid solution. If we wanted our music to be played, we would play it ourselves. On the other hand the kind of work done in such an ensemble would set it up as a music experimentation laboratory in which to try out all sorts of things: new instrumental and vocal techniques; new electronic and digital tools; new compositional approaches and aesthetics; and new ideas of what might constitute a musical instrument or a concert.⁶⁰ Actual free improvisation therefore continued to develop in parallel to various others forms of improvisation, contextualized in differently indeterminate compositions. These were fixed on or expressed through traditional, graphic, textual, or oral scores,⁶¹ and in performance, regardless of whether they were part of compositions, the improvisations could be conducted, independent, or interdependent.⁶²

The first group of this kind that I know of in Bogotá was Tangram, which saw the light of day as part of a larger ensemble brought together for the premiere of my piece *Carceris Tonalis* (1995) on November 23, 1995, during my graduation concert at the

⁵⁹ Initially coordinated by García, this time with the help of Ricardo Rozental and under the leadership of Clarisa Ruiz (the theater's talented director at the time), this cycle represented one of the peaks of experimental programming in Bogotá, with weekly events offering a varied range of musical and audiovisual projects.

⁶⁰ It appears that all the local improvisation groups of the late 1990s and early 2000s showed an interest in working with nonconventional instruments, found objects, and recycling (garbage, especially scrap metal and bottles, used as instruments) and were open to all kinds of sound sources or tools for sound transformation. The influences behind this have been manifold, ranging from Cage's percussion pieces of the late 1930s and early 1940s to 1997's *Stomp Out Loud*; from *Einstürzende Neubauten*'s early 1980s recordings to Sol Sonoro's own work. It is also noteworthy that many of us were working from the improvisational ethics of playing all the instruments we could get our hands on, and that led us to playing any *thing* as a musical instrument for improvisation. Besides, doing this is simply a lot of fun, the sounds waiting to be discovered are often gorgeous, and it makes having a large range of instruments affordable.

⁶¹ By "oral score" I mean a specific way of communicating a piece conceived by a composer in which it is expressed to the interpreters via verbal (nonwritten) instructions. The idea is comparable to teaching a group how to play a game instead of handing them written rules.

⁶² The concept of interdependency is particularly significant to the composition of actual pieces for improvisation groups, different from more traditional indeterminate compositions and their performance. In this context, relational systems will be of utmost importance in terms of structural function, as well as in what is in fact notated.

University of Los Andes. The program notes included a short group biography from which I extract the following: “Although made up of a nucleus of five composer/performers (Rodolfo Acosta, Roberto García, Alejandro Gómez, Johann Hasler, and Alba Fernanda Triana), the group has been conceived to contract, expand, assimilate and be assimilated by any formation the music requires.”

To us, this flexibility seemed like a necessary and natural characteristic within the practice of contemporary academic music, and for this reason several composers and performers passed through the Tangram experience. The word “passed,” by the way, was quite literal, since I do not think we had two concerts in which we had the same personnel (except for the duo format that, toward the end, we settled on with García). The doors were open for anyone who wanted to join, but also for those who wanted to leave, regardless of how long they had collaborated with the group or their reasons for leaving. No judgment whatsoever was ever passed in any case. The idea was to facilitate a space for individual and collective experiences, not to create an ensemble with a repertoire and a history to document. In fact, except for that first concert, which was not really a Tangram event, I was always opposed to and forbade recording or filming of our presentations. I believed, as Sol Sonoro had propounded in that first lecture in 1991, that the real-time collective experience created and shared by the improviser/audience continuum was essential to the true experience of improvisation, especially that which pretended to be free.⁶³

Given the characteristics of those who participated in Tangram (I hesitate to call us members), performances tended to flow more smoothly when we worked with composed pieces (even if they were very open or barely planned) than when we did outright free improvisation. Nevertheless, any type of event could lead to strong reactions on the part of the performers: I remember, for example, a *pieza de ocasión* I composed for the Olav Roots Auditorium of the National University in 1996, when the Conservatory was purportedly haunted.⁶⁴ The piece was called *Invocación al descabezado*,⁶⁵ and in it I combined completely fixed elements (electroacoustic music on tape) with semifixed elements (a graphic scheme and a series of instructions set forth as a verbal score). These elements contextualized what would be done by the group of improvising performers, which I conducted improvisationally with a set of signals I had made up. By the time of this event Tangram may have included guitarists Jorge Posada and Felipe Álvarez, as well as composer Juan Carlos Marulanda (b. 1970, acting as percussionist). Gómez (one of the original members) had already decided that his musical path lay not in experimental but in commercial music. After *Invocación*, Triana (b. 1969) realized

⁶³ Nowadays, two decades later, I certainly wish I had documentation of the many things we did with Tangram; even if I have not continued enforcing it as I did back then, I still believe in the ethical premise and therefore do not regret having been somewhat radical about it.

⁶⁴ By “*pieza de ocasión*” I mean a piece composed for a specific musical situation, never to be repeated; this may differ from the *pièce d’occasion*, which is usually festive and whose defining context tends to be extramusical.

⁶⁵ The title translates as *Invocation of the Beheaded One* and was a rather creepy joke that annoyed many who claimed to have seen a headless ghost at the Conservatory.

that she was not interested in these types of musical practice or in being a performer or improviser. Meanwhile, Álvarez began to doubt his traditional upbringing as a classically trained guitarist and soon abandoned it. Nothing for me was so dramatic (and revealing), however, as what happened at our next concert, which was strictly free improvisation: Marulanda, in the middle of the concert, realized with great discomfort that this type of music was not for him. He left the stage rather suddenly and awhile later he left the auditorium, all *during* the concert itself.

These stories might seem to describe Tangram's failures, but to me they were proof of that this kind of music constitutes a space of sincere and transparent self-contemplation, a critical mirror in which to recognize or disavow oneself; the reactions were simply a matter of being consequential. In this way, which I saw as beautifully honest, the group gradually shrank until only García and I were left. At this point, our discussions made it evident that we enjoyed improvising more than performing concerts and thus we ended up rejecting the public event altogether. The last period of Tangram's history was therefore represented by the two of us locked up after hours in some room at the Conservatory improvising freely by ourselves and for ourselves. That was the first time I came to consider whether maybe free improvisation was not an artistic form for public presentation in the traditional concert ritual. The difference between what the improviser and an audience member might feel seems so large that it might make it a valid experience only for the one taking an active performative part. Of course, this lingering doubt has not stopped me from performing in countless improvisation concerts throughout the years or from attending them as an audience member.

The Conservatory is usually accused of being staunchly traditionalist, as is often the truth. But during the second half of the 1990s it was an open space for improvisation and other kinds of experimental music explorations, even if those explorations took place with little infrastructure no economic support, and under a certain cynical reticence. Due to the influence of García and Mauricio Bejarano, these alternative forms gained a certain academic and artistic recognition at the institution.⁶⁶ Through electroacoustic composition classes and semester-long improvisation workshops, García awakened a passion for experimentation in a generation of students, composers, and instrumentalists alike.⁶⁷ Even though I had already graduated (and from another university for that matter), I always did what I could to be a part of García's projects. In this way, I was also able to involve other outside participants, such as Fernando Rincón (b. 1973) and Alexandra Cárdenas (b. 1976), who were both composition students at University of Los Andes.

Although Los Andes had indeed been receptive to free improvisation (even since Sol Sonoro's first visit in 1991) and different avant-garde and experimental

⁶⁶ Bejarano's creative inclinations may have usually been closer to electroacoustic composition, but he has always proved to be interested in varied experimental tendencies.

⁶⁷ Among this generation I remember Johann Hasler (b. 1972), Germán Osorio (b. 1977), Olga Godoy, Alejandro Olarte, Claudia Mejía, and Sandra Ordoñez.

musical tendencies, the most interesting things seem to have happened there from 1998 onward. That year, the collective ECUA (Estudiantes de Composición de la Universidad de Los Andes) came to life through the efforts of Fabián Torres (b. 1977), Daniel Leguizamón (b. 1979), Daniel Prieto (b. 1978), and Rodrigo Restrepo (b. 1977), among others. As the name suggests, the group was fundamentally made up of composers, but some performers—among them pianist Daniel Áñez (b. 1982)—also took part in their events. ECUA eventually carried out important artistic programming, especially during the short time when García taught at Los Andes. ECUA’s projects featured the work of all sorts of composers and performers, even beyond any institutional affiliation, and after programming much vocal/instrumental and electroacoustic music they gradually discovered improvisation as a creative medium. This find led to an interesting insight: through the freedom it seeks, free improvisation may, in fact, lead its practitioners away from what brought them to improvise in the first place. Thus, some of ECUA’s members started incorporating improvisation and often electronics to work with theater, dance, and video and ended up abandoning concert composition/performance as such. Some started exploring instrument building (including the recurring fascination all of us had at some point with found objects, scrap metal, and other sorts of musical recycling), finally leaving behind not only traditional instrumental practice but also the instruments themselves. Others, drawn to the lingua franca of computer programming, ended up abandoning musical practice for other artistic fields in which it is used or took up programming as a field unto itself. Once again, these outcomes might seem to exemplify failure, but to me they are achievements: aspects of our experimental musical practices, such as indeterminacy and improvisation, help us to establish dialogues with other artistic fields, other forms of knowledge, or other cultures, even allowing us to migrate between them.

One last school I wish to mention is Javeriana University. Completely unaware of its illustrious experimental past, Javeriana joined the improvisatory adventure when, toward the second semester of 1998, American composer Michael Gatonska formed an experimental music ensemble within the university’s Department of Music. I remember a particular presentation that took place at the Pablo VI Auditorium, the same hall where Sorzano had held his performances back in 1969. The event was a group improvisation in audiovisual counterpoint with the projection of Werner Herzog’s film *Fata Morgana* (coincidentally, filmed in 1969). As had happened years before, the audience was invited to participate. Long strips of bubble wrap had been laid out throughout the hall, and as it is simply irresistible, we had no choice but to start popping! Among the students participating in the ensemble I recall Javier Arciniegas (b. 1977), Marco Suárez (b. 1974), Eblis Álvarez (b. 1977), Andrés Martínez, and Camilo Sanabria. Although the group was very short-lived, at least the first three members listed would later take part in Grupo FOM and, as such, performed a few interesting concerts during 2000–2001.

Between October 30 and November 4, 2001, García organized a second installment of the Festival de los Tiempos del Ruido, no less than six years after the first. In many

ways, it was similar to its predecessor, but there was now a feeling that we did not need foreign improvisers anymore to have a successful event. Mexican sound artist Miguel Hernández Montero (b. 1968) was, in fact, present, but the truth is that he was already in Bogotá working on an electroacoustic composition residency. Arias, by then living in New York City, was also present, but we could hardly count him as a foreign visitor.

I would like to finish this story of experimentalism and improvisation in Bogotá by sharing two memorable anecdotes from this festival. The first is about the penultimate concert, which took place at the León de Greiff Auditorium of the National University and brought together a large number of musicians and digital visual artists on one stage. In the printed program, Arias, García, and I appear next to Víctor Albarracín, Andrés Burbano, Hernández Montero, Pedro Soler, and Sergio Pineda (although I seem to remember a larger number of participants). I must confess that the mix between the two types of artist was complicated; in fact, it was so unsatisfactory for García that he left the stage in the middle of the concert. The problem, it would seem, had to do with how the improvising musicians created more complex, web-type relationships through sound and time as we improvised, while the visual artists, working on real-time image treatment with digital media, seemed much more individualistic and their discourses comparatively disconnected. Encounters of this sort have multiplied in the twenty-first century thanks to the rapid evolution of audiovisual computing; however, this has not necessarily solved the problem of interdisciplinary improvisation. In any case, this Big Bang, as both the group and the event itself were named in the program, seems to have been the first free improvisation orchestra in Colombia and was thus symptomatic of things to come. A decade later, for example, the B.O.I. (Bogotá Orquesta de Improvisadores) appeared and would become important for the local scene, offering countless musicians of different backgrounds the opportunity to participate in free and experimental improvisation, in many cases for the first time. In retrospect, this Big Bang ended up being a point of articulation between two distinct periods in the history of improvisation in Bogotá; honoring its name, a virtual explosion of experimentation and improvisation immediately followed and continues to this day.

The second anecdote pulled from this festival jumps back to the inaugural concert, which was scheduled to be a program of recent computer music created at Stanford University's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics and curated by Juan Reyes, who was working there at the time. Back then, the Internet could not handle such large files, so an actual CD with the pieces had to be sent; the courier route, however, was not direct from California but had to pass through New York. Coming so soon on the heels of September 11, 2001, air transportation was still extremely limited, and the package never arrived. The day of the inauguration, just a few hours before the scheduled concert, García contacted a handful of improvisers and asked us to rescue the event with a free improvisation session in an open-air space at Los Andes. After having set up all the equipment, just when we were about to begin, it started to rain! The audience members themselves helped us unplug everything, drag all the equipment to a nearby classroom, and set everything up again. Finally, the concert began and we dove into a *very* long uninterrupted improvisation. After some time, a few of

the audience members began to participate very gradually, making sound by whatever means possible: dramatically writing on a blackboard, playing a broken piano, banging on walls and pipes, and loudly sweeping the floor with a broom. After a couple of hours, the improvisation continued, but I had to leave; when I was saying goodbye, I realized that all those who had begun as the improvisation group were outside, smoking and chatting. It was the supposed audience and not the supposed performers who were still carrying on the concert and had been doing so for quite a while!

What strikes me most about this story is the feeling that the members of the supposed audience had already and very naturally appropriated something of the spirit and semiology of free improvisational practice. Moreover, I found it profoundly moving that they had erased the limits between musicians and audience without necessarily having been invited, challenged, or forced to do so. They had confirmed through socioartistic action the communal aspect that we all believed free improvisation fostered.

I never saw this happen again (spontaneously, that is, without an explicit invitation). Years later, I started thinking it might have been an illusion or at least a sort of beautiful accident, some circumstantial glitch that had more to do with the rain and the equipment than with some transcendental neo-folk redefinition of our identity and our sense of belonging, as confirmed through music as a nonspecialist social practice. Then I realized what I said above regarding the explosion and enormous diversification of improvisation that developed in the years that followed. Questions arose: Who was there that night, in that concert? Who decided to jump in and improvise? Why did they do it? How did it affect them? Could it be that some of the people who in the coming years would redefine the marvelous world of free and experimental improvisation in Bogotá were there in that magical moment?

EPILOGUE

In the years following the 2001 Big Bang, activities in free improvisation and other experimental practices did, in fact, flourish. The aforementioned Colón Electrónico cycle developed between 2002 and 2006 at the Colón Theater; at its most active it reached weekly programming. The Festival en Tiempo Real: Nuevos Encuentros Sonoros appeared in 2009 and was continued by the concert cycle Lado B: Nuevos Encuentros Sonoros in 2010, both under the coordination of Ana María Romano (b. 1971), who for a while also coordinated the *colón electrónico* cycle. I have already suggested Noches Híbridas LabNova, organized by Gilberto Castillo in 6L6 during 2006–2007, as among the most relevant projects in Bogotá’s bar scene. The most important efforts in this direction, however, have undoubtedly been made by *matik-matik*, a bar established in 2007 as a hub for noncommercial and experimental musical practices in the city. Owned by Diana Gómez and Julien Calais and run by Benjamin Calais, it has hosted countless events, including large improvisation cycles such as 2009’s Labomatik and Aleatorio; 2010’s On the Rocks!;

2010 and 2011's *Yáwar/Games*; and since late 2010 until present day, the ongoing activities of the B.O.I. As may be expected, all this activity has bred a new generation of improvisers, among whom I might list performers such as Daniel Leguizamón, Beatriz Elena Martínez, Juan David Rubio, or Santiago Botero, as well as groups such as 3X3, CLIC, Tacet, 5M, or Abraxas, often short-lived projects due to their very nature. Other schools besides those already discussed—such as Central University and the District University (whose ASAB School of Arts is the former Bogotá Higher Academy of Arts)—have incorporated experimental ensembles into their programs. From the latter school rose *EMCA* (ASAB Contemporary Music Ensemble) in 2003, not only the longest running student ensemble dedicated to contemporary and experimental music in the city but also the source of many improvisers, interpreters, and independent ensembles.

The list of events and people not only has grown exponentially in the last decade and a half but has also diversified widely. It would be impossible to even name, let alone comment on, the hundreds of events part of this expansion. It might be more useful to mention for now that the influence of experimental improvisation has notably enriched, beside its own field, other kinds of music in Bogotá, such as the noncommercial popular music practiced by the many members of the collective *La Distritofónica*. In a historic spiral, recent academic music has also been influenced by improvisation, affecting composition as well as interpretation, the latter in terms of not only vocal, instrumental, and electronic performance but also conducting. Likewise, improvisational and experimental musical tendencies have eased further collaborations with digital audiovisual art, modern dance, theater, performance art, and a host of other interdisciplinary explorations in these years. As we reach the quarter-century mark of free improvisation in Bogotá, it will be exciting to hear how the always-elusive concept of experimentation continues to be redefined, especially as it challenges inherited caricatures of what we, as Colombians, are supposed to be.

EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC AND THE AVANT-GARDE

IN POST-1959 CUBA

Revolutionary Music for the Revolution

Marysol Quevedo

IN POST-1959 CUBA, a select group of composers endorsed new music and promoted aesthetically innovative compositional approaches by employing the key values of socialist and revolutionary ideology in their writings on musical aesthetics. The compositions and writings discussed in this chapter demonstrate that the support of musical innovation in post-1959 Cuba was closely tied to leftist political movements before 1959. Some of the groups and individuals involved in pre-1959 leftist artistic groups—who were persecuted throughout the 1950s by Fulgencio Batista’s repressive political regime—welcomed the Cuban Revolution. After 1959, leftist artists saw in the revolution the promise of artistic freedom, government support of arts and culture, and the potential of creating art that would reach the masses. In the early years of the Cuban revolution, composers Leo Brouwer (b. 1939), Harold Gramatges (1918–2008), and Juan Blanco (1918–2008) shared the ideals of the revolutionary leaders—filmmaker Alfredo Guevara (1925–2013) and Fidel Castro—of broadening access to culture and using culture in the service of the revolution. Although the music championed by these Cuban composers may have challenged the expectations of the traditional concertgoing audience, its political significance gained for its creators the support of the Cuban revolutionary government. The examples discussed in this chapter reveal that these composers gained access to resources that allowed them to promote their singularly daring musical approaches and preferences. Their staunch support of the revolution and socialist ideology granted them access to advisory and administrative positions in the new cultural institutions established by the revolutionary government. By using the rhetoric of revolutionary discourse, these composers heralded new, innovative,

and experimental composition as the true musical language of the Cuban Revolution. Experimental approaches to music in post-1959 Cuba, however, were not so eagerly promoted and defended by all local composers. As the concluding section of this chapter shows, composers Edgardo Martín and José Ardévol—also loyal supporters of the revolution—questioned the validity and lasting influence of experimental composition.

This chapter explores how experimental music aesthetics intersected with leftist political discourse in a music scene little explored up to this point: the art music scene of revolutionary Cuba. This study dialogues with the growing literature on Cold War music and politics in peripheral nations where the international socialist cause was subsumed to serve national local needs.¹ Cuban composers legitimized their approaches first and foremost by aligning themselves with a national music tradition of *vanguardismo* that also allowed them to engage in musical experimentation. Although they interacted with composers in the Soviet Union and East Germany, Cuban composers' varied and innovative compositional approaches were more closely connected to the techniques and styles promoted in contemporary music circles as diverse as those of Warsaw and Darmstadt. The Cuban case also reveals how musical aesthetics can be co-opted by diverging political movements to represent their values and, in particular, how musical innovation and experimentation was touted as the musical approach that best served and represented the Cuban Revolution. In the context of this book, the Cuban situation exemplifies how the specific uses and meanings of experimental musical practices played out in a Latin American context. As most of the examples discussed in the rest of this volume show, musical experimentation was usually associated with politically and socially marginal or peripheral music scenes; in this sense, the case of musical experimentation in revolutionary Cuba stands in stark contrast, since it took place within official government cultural institutions. But, as many of the other case studies in this book indicate, musical experimentation was associated with the political and social left. The situation of revolutionary Cuba is particularly interesting for these very reasons: the political establishment was built on a foundation of leftist ideology.

First, I lay out my working definitions of the terms *avant-garde*, *experimentalism*, and *vanguardia* and how they apply to the specific case of new music in post-1959 Cuba. I then proceed with a discussion of the writings and activities of composers involved during the 1950s in the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo ("Our Time" Cultural Society). Although the society claimed to be politically neutral, they constantly critiqued the cultural policies of Batista's government, in particular the activities of the Instituto Nacional de la Cultura (National Culture Institute). In addition, many of

¹ Lisa Jakelski, "Górecki's *Scontri* and Avant-garde Music in Cold War Poland," *Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009): 205–239; Rachel Beckles Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music during the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music Divided: Bartók's Legacy in Cold War Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Carol A. Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Nuestro Tiempo's members were communists, and the society received ample support from the Cuban Communist Party. Because of the society's fusion of aesthetic innovation, support of national and local art, and leftist politics, its members were prime candidates for leadership positions in revolutionary Cuba. This chapter shows that although the Cuban Revolution broke with the political, economic, and cultural framework of the previous administration, on cultural matters there was a sense of continuity as the politically leftist intellectual elite of the 1950s went from working in spite of political persecution to working for the new regime.

This discussion of the pre-1959 leftist musical scene is followed by my analysis of writings by Cuban composers in which they promoted musical innovation and experimentation as the aesthetic approach that best reflected and served revolutionary society. This section examines journal and magazine articles by Blanco and Brouwer in which they defended Cuban composers' freedom to employ any compositional technique as long as it was used in service of the revolution. In their writings, they go a step further by explicating how experimental techniques best serve and reflect the Cuban Revolution. I follow this discussion with an examination of experimental music by Brouwer and Blanco for symphony orchestra, film music, and Blanco's electronic music for massive outdoor events. In the case of film music, I argue that the Cuban Film Institute allowed composers to use experimental music in the service of overtly political films. Brouwer's use of experimental music in the 1968 film *Lucía* demonstrates that a film's overt political message justified experimental composition. I explore the case of two compositions for symphonic orchestra premiered by the Cuban Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional (National Symphony Orchestra, OSN) in October 1969. Brouwer's *La tradición se rompe . . . pero cuesta trabajo* and Blanco's *Contrapunto espacial III* challenged musicians' and performers' expectations of symphonic concert music. Brouwer's writings present these symphonic works as prime examples of musical innovation in revolutionary Cuba. Further justifying the use of experimental music, Blanco provides a detailed explanation of how electroacoustic works could have a broader impact than music written for the concert hall because electroacoustic music was better suited for use in massive outdoor performances. Finally, the writings of José Ardévol and Edgardo Martín reveal that there was a group of composers who did not share Brouwer's and Blanco's aesthetic views. The concluding discussion of these alternate outlooks on musical experimentation demonstrates that the actual Cuban music scene included composers who self-identified as the musical *retaguardia* (old school) and whose approaches leaned toward a more conservative and neonationalist musical language than that of Brouwer and Blanco.

MUSICAL VANGUARDISMO, EXPERIMENTALISM, AND THE AVANT-GARDE IN CUBA

The term *vanguardia* has been employed by Cuban artists and intellectuals since the 1920s to refer to art that was both aesthetically innovative and politically engaged.

The Grupo Minorista was one of the earlier twentieth-century groups in which artists promoted new and local cultural production as a means to educate the people and counteract cultural domination from the United States. The Grupo Minorista openly critiqued Cuban president Gerardo Machado's politics, and its members were persecuted for their leftist views. The aesthetics promoted by the group's members combined modernist artistic approaches with local and national elements. They established a precedent of vanguardismo that influenced later generations of Cuban artists. Innovative aesthetics continued to be put to the service of leftist political views by artists and intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s. This definition of the artistic vanguardia served as a model for the *artista comprometido* (artist committed to the new political ideology) in revolutionary Cuba. After 1959, artists who were openly supportive of the revolution through their writings and who created art that promoted revolutionary and socialist ideology were *artistas comprometidos*. The term *vanguardia* gained political weight as many of the former members of the Grupo Minorista supported the revolution not only through their art but also as advisors and administrators in the new cultural institutions. Therefore, my use of the term *vanguardia* is informed by the particular history of the politically committed artistic avant-garde in Cuba.

I employ the term "avant-garde" in reference to specific aesthetic practices that align with US and European uses of the term; avant-garde art was at the cutting edge of artistic production, and at its early stages in the early twentieth century the artistic avant-garde had close associations with the political left. But as the twentieth century progressed, avant-garde art was repressed by socialist regimes, in particular in the Soviet Union, and consequently was co-opted by the US and western European governments as a symbol of progress and artistic freedom represented by Western capitalism in Cold War cultural politics. The term *vanguardia* was used by Cuban artists in reference to a variety of approaches that sometimes leaned more toward modernist aesthetics and at other times engaged with experimental practices. Cuban composers hardly used the term *experimentalism* to describe their approaches and preferred to use the terms *vanguardia* and *innovation*. The works discussed in this chapter, however, show that they engaged with musical practices that are better described as experimental, for they share traits with the work of composers in experimental music circles in other Latin American countries, the United States, and Europe. As Eduardo Herrera argues in his chapter here, "experimental" was not *one thing* but *a cluster of things*. Like the composers associated with the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales in Buenos Aires, the Cuban composers' brand of experimentalism was pluralistic: some engaged with electronic music techniques; others engaged with serialism; and still others with spatiality, indeterminacy, extended instrumental techniques, and sonorist textures. What unified these varied approaches in the Cuban case was the composers' belief that their works' break from tradition through innovation would lead to the audience's critical questioning of art and culture and to the cultural edification of a socially conscious citizen.

Blanco in particular advocated for the use of experimental music in public spaces and large outdoor events in order for it to reach the masses and have a transformative

effect. The presence of experimental art in the everyday was further justified as characteristically Cuban through Alejo Carpentier's concept of *lo real maravilloso* (the real marvelous). *Lo real maravilloso* explained the presence of fantastical and other worldly events and elements in the everyday lives and history of Latin America. Experimental music in the context of everyday life would have a transformative effect on individuals, but because *lo real maravilloso* was part of Latin American life, experimental music was not a jarring imposition but one more way in which Cuban individuals encountered the fantastical. The eclectic nature of experimental art was in line with definitions of the Latin American criollo and Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation, which defines Latin American identity as in a constant process of transformation that incorporates elements from various sources, resulting in hybrid cultural expressions. Therefore, the use of experimental music in Cuba epitomized not only revolutionary culture but also Cubanness and Latin Americanness.

In Cuba, in a parallel case to Herrera's discussion of avant-garde practices in the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales, experimental practices were validated by institutional support. In contrast, however, the Cuban institutional apparatus that promoted experimental music was not privately funded but part of the nationalized cultural framework that promoted art among the masses in order to educate the *hombre nuevo* (new man). Therefore, musical experimentalism in Cuba was supposed to be transformative and experienced in the everyday, a trait shared with experimental music circles in other countries. But the political context in which experimental music was created differed greatly from that of experimental artists in the United States, as the transformative power of experimental music was defended by Cuban composers using the values of the Cuban socialist revolution.

CUBAN MUSICAL VANGUARDIA BEFORE 1959

The pre-1959 writings and activities on culture and music of Blanco and Harold Gramatges—particularly during their involvement in the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo—anticipate the cultural policies of the revolutionary government, revealing a strong connection between pre-1959 leftist intellectuals and the post-1959 revolutionary cultural agenda. The *vanguardista* tradition from which Gramatges, Blanco, Brouwer, and others drew inspiration and legitimacy in the post-1959 era was rooted in artistic manifestations from the earlier decades of the century. During the 1920s and 1930s the ideals of the Grupo Minorista and Afrocubanismo influenced the development of a classical compositional style that drew on Afro-Cuban music elements, such as percussion, rhythms, and melodies, with composers Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García-Caturla as the leading musical figures.² The Grupo Minorista was formed by leftist artists and intellectuals, published their views on politics and culture in the

² Anthony Kapcia, "Revolution, the Intellectual, and Cuban Identity," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 1, no. 2 (May 1982), 67.

Revista de Avance, and promoted modern and national artistic production. They also denounced Cuban president Alfredo Zayas for his rampant abuse of power and corruption. Antoni Kapcia argues that a “distinctly *comprometido* [committed] approach was expressed above all by the Grupo Minorista, which . . . produced its manifesto in 1927 that expressed its radical mixture of *Vanguardismo*, *Aprismo*, Marxism and elitism by calling for artistic and political rebellion, modernization, reform and the popularization of art.”³ The Grupo Minorista set the model for future politically committed leftist artists, or *artista comprometido*, who sought to improve society through education and culture. *Aprismo* characterized left-of-center Latin American political movements and was associated with the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance).⁴ During the 1920s and 1930s, several of the Grupo Minorista artists and intellectuals engaged in the artistic movement of Afro-Cubanismo, which drew inspiration from Afro-Cuban culture to create poetry, paintings, and music that were both modernist and Cuban. Roldán and García-Caturla associated with members of the Grupo Minorista and engaged with the same aesthetic issues. One of the ways Roldán and García-Caturla’s music reflected the Minorista concerns was through their use of Afro-Cuban percussion, rhythms, melodies, and forms. Among Cuban musicologists, Roldán and García-Caturla are considered the first musical vanguardia, with the second vanguardia after 1959 claiming Roldán and García-Caturla as its predecessors.

After Roldán and García-Caturla’s unexpected deaths in 1939 and 1940, respectively, the younger generation of composers (who included Gramatges) established the Grupo de Renovación Musical. Under the tutelage of Spanish composer José Ardévol, this group of young composers was trained in the neoclassical tradition Ardévol promoted. They also maintained ties with US new music circles, some of them studying at Tanglewood and Peabody. The connection to US composers was a continuation of the ties García-Caturla and Roldán established during the 1920s and 1930s with Henry Cowell’s New Music Society and the Pan American Association of Composers. The compositional approach of the members of the Grupo de Renovación Musical was characterized by neoclassical tendencies, influenced by Spanish and French neoclassical composers. The group disbanded in 1948, as its members explored diverging and individual styles.

Some of the former members of the Grupo de Renovación Musical continued composing independently from any group that promoted specific political or aesthetic views, while others went on to establish and lead one of the most socially committed artistic groups of the 1950s: the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo.⁵ Gramatges led the society as its president with composer Blanco acting as secretary and editor of its journal. Other composers and musicians actively participated in the society’s

³ Ibid.

⁴ The movement was founded in 1924 in Mexico City by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, with the goal of establishing a continental Latin American political party.

⁵ “Manifiesto,” *Nuestro Tiempo*, no. 1 (1951): 1–2; reproduced in Ricardo Luis Hernández Otero, *Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo: Resistencia y acción* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2002), 19. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

activities, including composer Argeliers León (1918–1993) and conductor Manuel Duchesne Cuzán (1932–2005). All of these individuals went on to hold important positions in musical institutions after the 1959 revolution. Gramatges was named Cuba’s ambassador to France; Blanco served as music editor for *Bohemia*, music director of the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura (National Culture Council), and director of CMZ (the Ministry of Education’s radio station); León served as director of the music department of the Biblioteca Nacional and the folklore department of the National Theater; and Duchesne Cuzán was named director of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, a position he used to promote new, avant-garde, and experimental music. According to its stated purposes, the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo strove to create more socially engaged art that reached out to and awakened the social consciousness of the people and that reflected a Latin American and Cuban cultural aesthetic.⁶ In their manifesto they proclaimed: “We come about to bring the people to art, bring it closer to the aesthetic and cultural concerns of our time, precisely now that, sensing these realities already, it demands a vehicle that allows it to appreciate and assimilate them for its quickest cultural formation and maturing . . . We are the voice of a new generation that arises in a moment during which violence, despair, and death want to take over as the only solutions.”⁷ In their writings, the members of Nuestro Tiempo critiqued what they considered to be the prevailing “conservative” and “traditionalist” views and tastes of the individuals in charge of concert programming for the Orquesta Filarmónica de La Habana, insisting on the inclusion of “contemporary and Cuban works in its regular programs.”⁸ They also organized their own concerts and lectures to promote Cuban music traditions.

On the thirtieth anniversary of the Orquesta Filarmónica de la Habana, Gramatges wrote a piece in the November 1954 issue of *Nuestro Tiempo*, the society’s journal. Rather than celebrating the orchestra’s thirty years, he recounted the ways its conductors, administration, and musicians fell short of the standards all orchestras should meet. He listed the various conductors who had followed after Amadeo Roldán’s death, noting some of these conductors’ lack of interest in promoting new and Cuban symphonic repertory: “Erich Kleiber (1943–1944) arrived, with the undisputed capacity for the position of main conductor, but affected, in his Germanic arrogance, by a certain contempt toward Latin American music and for national symphonic production. The orchestra, under his direction, reached unforeseen quality, but this was accompanied, unfortunately, by a traditionalist repertory, depriving the people from contact with good contemporary music and the symphonic scores of the country [Cuba].”⁹ For Gramatges, Kleiber’s focus on the Germanic music canon and exclusion of new music by

⁶ “Propósitos,” *Nuestro Tiempo*, no. 1, 1954, reproduced in Hernández Otero, *Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo*, 30.

⁷ “Manifiesto,” reproduced in Hernández Otero, *Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo*, 19.

⁸ Harold Gramatges, “Treinta años de la Orquesta Filarmónica de La Habana,” *Nuestro Tiempo* 1, no. 2 (November 1954): 1 and 14, reproduced in Hernández Otero, *Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo*, 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

Latin American and Cuban composers prevented listeners from experiencing national and new music production. The focus on Germanocentric repertory relegated national vanguardista compositions to the margins. But it was not always the conductor's decision that kept contemporary and Cuban works out of the programs. Gramatges noted that the orchestra's patrons had opposed the inclusion of contemporary and Cuban works when Argentine composer Juan José Castro (1895–1968) had served as director, leading to his departure after only one year of service with the orchestra.¹⁰ Gramatges identifies the patrons' lack of support for new Latin American and Cuban music as one of the major setbacks in the development of the musical culture of Cuba, but he also proposes some possible solutions to these issues. In his view, the government had failed to see the importance of a symphonic ensemble for the country's reputation and morale: "There hasn't been a government capable of understanding that we cannot call ourselves a civilized people without the existence of a symphonic ensemble that keeps it in touch with the great music of all time periods, and composers with an instrument which is the only medium to deliver to his people the efforts of his work."¹¹ Gramatges places responsibility for the orchestra's subpar programming and performances on the government's lack of financial support. This statement also reveals that the standards toward which Gramatges and those involved in *Nuestro Tiempo* hoped Cuban culture would strive were derived from European and US models; in order to be "civilized," Cubans had to do so in the terms of other "civilized" nations. In addition, the only way to remedy the orchestra's quality was for the government to take constitutional measures: "It is necessary to stabilize the orchestra's economic life by way of permanent laws that guarantee the livelihood of the musician, so that he can regain his discipline."¹² Gramatges implicitly points to his (and the society's members') political leanings toward nationalizing cultural institutions through guaranteed state support, foreshadowing the work he would carry out as advisor and diplomat after 1959.

In spite of claiming political and ideological neutrality in their early publications, the group continuously critiqued what they viewed as conservative, Eurocentric tastes promoted by Fulgencio Batista's government's cultural institutions. As an antidote to the neglect of newer and more daring art, *Nuestro Tiempo* supported artistic work that engaged with avant-garde aesthetics while also voicing the specific concerns of the "American" artist. In the wake of the 1959 revolution, the members of *Nuestro Tiempo* openly supported the new regime in a letter inserted in their journal in which they congratulated the new administration on overthrowing the previous dictatorship. The author(s)—the piece is signed "Sociedad Cultural *Nuestro Tiempo*"—included a list of goals the new administration should keep in mind in order for "the transformative Revolution of our civil life to be reflected in the cultural [realm]":

¹⁰ "After some passing conductors, our podium was occupied by the Argentine Juan José Castro (1947–1948). This distinguished musician . . . seemed like the ideal man to fulfill all of our aspirations. Then it was the orchestra patrons who were against the inclusion of contemporary and Cuban works in the regular concert programs (an issue that motivated his retreat after a year among us)." *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹² *Ibid.*

- Complete reorganization of the National Institute of Culture and its placement in the hands of the most responsible exponents of our art, our science, and our letters;
- [Forge] close ties between expressions of the country's high culture and an intensive popular educational divulgation;
- Complete respect of the free broadcasting of thinking in all of its creative expression;
- The State's moral and material support of the country's artistic and cultural organizations, and strict respect of their independence of criteria and action;
- Free cultural exchange in the international [realm], without any sort of crippling restrictions;
- Channeling of Cuban culture through revelatory paths of our best liberal and revolutionary traditions that promote our national character;
- Battle against damaging cosmopolitanism that harms the national cultural heritage as tends to happen, for example, in the realm of popular music.¹³

The article closes with a statement specifying who should be involved in building the new cultural programs, excluding from the revolutionary cultural efforts those individuals and institutions that had collaborated with the previous administration. "Nuestro Tiempo, in rejoicing over the democratic victory that our people have just achieved, hopes that, finally united in spite of discrepancies of aesthetic theory or of political leanings, all the intellectuals and artists and all the cultural institutions that did not tarnish themselves with embarrassing alliances with the dictatorship will unite so that 1959 marks, in the cultural as well as in the political [realm], the beginning of a new, higher, and memorable stage for Cuba."¹⁴ The declaration from January 2, 1959, by *Nuestro Tiempo* reveals the group's political leanings, as well as their views on the role of culture in civil society and the relationship between the state, cultural institutions, and artists and intellectuals. *Nuestro Tiempo* recommends that the revolutionary government promote liberal, revolutionary, and national traditions, and popular education in culture; it also advises the new government to protect Cuban culture from disfiguring cosmopolitanism. The latter, in particular, points to the then growing interest among the Cuban youth in US commercial pop music and their declining interest in "older" local genres, such as boleros and sones, that were closely associated with older generations and Cuban identity. The statement is also telling of the fraught relationship between the members of *Nuestro Tiempo* and the Instituto Nacional de la Cultura during the 1950s, as their first recommendation was to reorganize it and place it in more responsible hands. Several members of *Nuestro Tiempo* served as administrators for the new cultural institutions after 1959. Their artistic activities in

¹³ "Cultura Libre en Cuba Libre," *Nuestro Tiempo* 5, no. 26 (November-December 1958), inserted page, reproduced in Hernández Otero, *Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

the years preceding the revolution established the basis for many postrevolutionary cultural policies.

VANGUARDISMO AND EXPERIMENTALISM IN REVOLUTIONARY CUBA

During the 1960s and 1970s, within the new political framework, Cuban composers created avant-garde and experimental music that reached audiences through everyday experiences—in films, at their jobs as factory workers, and in public spaces such as parks or boulevards—and in more “special” extraordinary settings, such as symphonic concerts. The writings of both Blanco and Brouwer during the first decade of the revolution offer insight into how they used “innovative” music in the service of the revolution, how the resources and institutions created after the revolution enabled them to promote avant-garde music, and how they engaged with the broader international context of avant-garde art. Blanco, in particular, collaborated with visual artists to create multimedia artworks in which lighting or installations were presented with electronic music played through strategically placed speakers in public spaces. Both Blanco and Brouwer provided music for several films; their experimental compositions underscored the footage of films that promoted the values of socialism and the revolution. In these two types of setting—public spaces and films—experimental music reached a much larger audience than in chamber or symphonic music concerts. Blanco in particular believed that technological advances in sound amplification allowed the composer to create works that did not require the spatial and acoustic features of the concert hall.

Blanco encouraged Cuban composers to experiment with styles and techniques deemed unacceptable by composers and musicologists from the Eastern European socialist bloc who promoted musical conservatism. In a 1961 report for *Revista Casa de las Américas* Blanco noted his disagreement with the point of view of visiting East German and Soviet composers and musicologists whose views aligned with Stalinist-Zhdanovist aesthetics, which denounced “serialism, atonality, and harsh dissonance as too complex for the general public and inadequate for relaying an appropriate ideological message.”¹⁵ During their visit, the foreign composers and musicologists held listening and discussion sessions focusing on new music with Cuban composers. Blanco noted that “the most polemic attitude of our visitors was captured in [their reaction] to the position of the most advanced Cuban composers who presented their view that the development of new styles and techniques, such as twelve-tone compositions, aleatoric music, microtonalism, athematism, electronic and concrete music, etc.,

¹⁵ The visitors included Nathan Notowicz, musicologist and secretary general of East Germany’s Composers Union; Gunther Kochan, German composer; and Vladimir Feré, Soviet composer and composition professor at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. Laura Silverberg, “Between Dissonance and Dissidence: Socialist Modernism in the German Democratic Republic,” *Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 1 (2009): 48–50.

constitute achievements of humanity, that, when stripped of all orthodoxy or dogmatism, can be put to good use by composers of our time to enrich their works."¹⁶ Blanco describes the foreign visitors' attitude toward the Cuban composers' approval of new music techniques as "polemic" and implicitly defends the Cuban composers' stance by explaining that these techniques can be used by any composer to enrich his or her language, as long as they are stripped of "orthodoxy and dogmatism," code terms for bourgeois capitalist decadence. We repeatedly find Cuban composers defending their use of new composition techniques by arguing that any technique is useful if stripped from ideological or political context and reused within their work as revolutionary composers.

In the same article, Blanco recounted the musical activities that took place during 1960 and 1961. He critiqued several musical institutions for their lack of programming of new music, in particular by Latin American and Cuban composers, echoing Gramatges's earlier critique of the Orquesta Filarmónica de La Habana's concert programming in the 1950s. Blanco was appointed music advisor to the National Symphony Orchestra, and by the late 1960s the ensemble was praised by guitarist and composer Brouwer for its inclusion of new compositions in almost every concert, although its concert programs from this period reveal that concert programming still leaned heavily toward the western European music canon.¹⁷ In addition to serving as music advisor to the National Symphony Orchestra, Blanco served in several other institutions after 1959, holding some of the most influential administrative and advising positions in Cuban culture, including director of the Ministry of Education's radio station, CMZ; music director of the Consejo Nacional de Cultura (1967); president of the Music Section of the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Cuban Writers and Artists Union, UNEAC) (1961); director of the music band of the Estado Mayor of the Ejército Rebelde (1961); secretary for public relations of the UNEAC (1962); founder of the Brigada Hermanos Saíz; editor—by appointment of President Osvaldo Dorticós—of the culture section of the magazine *Bohemia* (mainly writing its music criticism section); music advisor to the Propaganda Department of the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos (1970); and music advisor to Casa de las Américas (1971), where he organized the first Jornada de Música Latinoamericana in Cuba. In his capacity as music director of the Consejo Nacional de Cultura, he promoted not only new art music compositions but also popular music—organizing the First International Popular Music Festival at Varadero (1967)—and jazz, such as the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna ("modern music" here as a code term for jazz), the forerunner to the Afro-Cuban jazz orchestra Irakere.¹⁸

¹⁶ Juan Blanco, "La música," *Revista Casa de las Américas*, no. 9 (1961): 121–122.

¹⁷ Leo Brouwer, "La vanguardia en la música cubana," in *La música, lo cubano, y la innovación*, 2nd ed., 1989 (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1982), 23.

¹⁸ Neil Leonard III, "Juan Blanco: Cuba's Pioneer of Electroacoustic Music," *Computer Music Journal* 21, no. 2 (1997): 12.

Like Blanco, the younger composer Brouwer also served as music advisor to several cultural institutions, including the Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas (Cuban Film Institute, ICAIC). Brouwer's writings for various culture and music journals chronicle the history of avant-garde music in Cuba since 1959 and reveal the powerful and influential network he and other like-minded composers established within Cuban cultural institutions and outside Cuba by maintaining contact with foreign avant-garde music circles. Brouwer's compositions during the 1960s were marked by experimentation, in particular controlled indeterminacy, extended instrumental techniques, and graphic notation. In all of his post-1959 writings regarding avant-garde music in Cuba, Brouwer framed music and the composers' role within the Cuban revolution's ideological agenda.¹⁹ For example, in the late 1960s, he critiqued the support structure for music and art in bourgeois capitalist countries, mainly the United States. He posited that oppressed cultures have an answer, a solution to the imposition of cultural and aesthetic values from the oppressor: "The solution of a colonized country lies in *suppressing the defining traits of the oppressing culture and not the common traits of universal culture*."²⁰ Brouwer specifically opposed the institutional framework that cultivates new music in capitalist countries for being out of touch with the masses, in their "ivory towers," and the "mythical role assigned by the *establishment* to composers in capitalist society."²¹ In contrast, the socialist and revolutionary context in which Cuban composers worked, Brouwer argued, allowed them to be in touch with the everyday people and create experimental music to be listened by the masses. Unlike their counterparts in capitalist society, he added, Cuban composers had taken over the actual making of history, which led to their ability to experiment in their own ways.

In regard to the composer's role in revolutionary society, Brouwer added: "Music is one area of culture that enriches the socio-political complex of the people, [music] identifies itself with [the people] and represents it. I do not conceive of culture as a product alienated from man, and thereby from the society that conceived him. The musician is a worker in the specific, semantic, sense of the word."²² In addition, Brouwer considered innovation a key condition of revolutionary culture: "To innovate

¹⁹ Brouwer, "La vanguardia en la música cubana," 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 (emphasis in the original).

²¹ "Un nuevo caso se presenta en un país que ha salido de la colonización, como Cuba . . . Nosotros los cubanos, conocemos los dos casos anteriores por experiencia directa: la cultura impuesta por la sociedad del consumo y la del colonizador. Sencillamente diré que podemos experimentar nuestra propia forma. Esto nace de la 'toma de contacto' con la historia diaria que construimos nosotros mismos. Somos vistos más de cerca por la masa. Así, el hombre que hace la cultura, y por ende la música, pierde un poco del papel mitológico que le ha asignado el *establishment* de la sociedad capitalista, con torre de marfil y todo, gana una justa interpretación de su trabajo y pasa a ser un constructor de la sociedad que representa." *Ibid.*, 21 (emphasis in the original).

²² "La música es un renglón de la cultura que enriquece el complejo político-social de un pueblo, se identifica [15] con éste y lo representa. No concibo la cultura como product enajenado del hombre y por tanto de la sociedad que lo engendró, sino como una representación más de su poder creador. El músico es un obrero en el sentido específico, semántico, de la palabra." Leo Brouwer, "La música, lo cubano y la innovación," *Cine Cubano* 69 (1970): 15–16.

is, without a doubt, one of the most difficult things to achieve in a moment of great richness of means as is our century. It is also, radically, one of the conditions of revolutions In a world of constant change, of dialectic vision, innovation becomes part of the work's mechanism, without turning into routine. In a permanent revolution all the parts and mechanisms that need to be changed are revolutionized or transformed."²³ Brouwer defended Cuban musicians' and composers' use of the most advanced techniques in the context of revolutionary ideals, stating that these techniques did not pose a threat to the revolution because the revolution itself stood for and supported the most advanced scientific and artistic developments: "The incorporation of the most advanced technical means does not present any danger of 'deformation,' given that it is the line of the Cuban Revolution to arrive at the highest technification of production."²⁴ As this and other writings reveal, musical innovation consisted of a constellation of techniques, styles, and approaches to composition that included extended instrumental techniques, indeterminacy, controlled indeterminacy, open forms, audience participation, physical placement of performers in relation to the audience and other spatial considerations, serialism, aleatoric procedures, and electroacoustic composition, among others. In combining these approaches, many of the compositions by Cuban composers resulted in works that can be described as polystylistic or as collages or happenings. Brouwer's writings justified the ways the new music composed by him, Blanco, and other Cuban composers, such as Carlos Fariñas (1934–2002), fulfilled the ideological goals of the Cuban Revolution through constant innovation. Brouwer also argued that the Cuban Revolution benefited composers who experimented with new music techniques by allowing the composer to be in closer contact with the people. By describing specific works as examples (listed below) of how the Cuban composers' avant-garde and experimental music served the revolution by reaching the masses, Brouwer laid out the aesthetic parameters other composers could engage with in order to also produce new music that was ideologically committed to socialism and the revolution. The language Brouwer employed also points to the Cold War dichotomies of East/communism versus West/capitalism and the pressures felt by Cuban composers to prove they were creating works just as avant-garde and experimental as those of composers in other countries, but with the benefit of a sociopolitical system that supported their work's mass dissemination.

The first issue of Casa de las Américas' *Boletín Música* included an article by Brouwer titled "La vanguardia en la música cubana" (1970). In this text, he recounted the first ten years of avant-grade Cuban music since the 1959 revolution, chronicling performances of new music in art music concert settings, as well as events where Cuban composers provided experimental music to accompany mass political demonstrations, commemorations, and sporting events, among others. He highlighted as a starting point his encounter with the international avant-grade at the Warsaw Autumn Festival of 1961. He remarked: "Listening [to the music] in Warsaw was a vital impulse,

²³ Ibid., 18–19.

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

a definitive point of departure for the Cuban avant-garde.”²⁵ He preceded this comment with an explanation that the relevance of this trip did not lie on encountering something new—he had circulated among his colleagues recordings of music by Stockhausen, Boulez, and Feldman four years earlier—“but in the continuity of the contact, and needed saturation of the ear.”²⁶ He also pointed out that during those years (1961–1962) Cubans had started to suffer the consequences of the economic and cultural embargo “imposed by the United States of America on Cuba.”²⁷ The Warsaw Autumn Festival itself functioned as an oasis for avant-garde and experimental music within the more traditionalist and conservative musical establishment of the Eastern European socialist bloc. The Cuban composers’ aesthetic preferences aligned better with the relatively more daring and open music scene of the Warsaw Autumn Festival than with the musical approaches promoted by the official composers in Moscow and East Germany.

Brouwer noted 1964 as a milestone year in the history of new music in Cuba. That year was marked by the first performances in Cuba of Brouwer’s and Blanco’s experimental compositions. These included two performances in January and February at the UNEAC and an OSN concert in July.²⁸ The January concert featured the premiere of Brouwer’s *Sonograma I* (1963) for prepared piano, deemed the first work to make use of aleatoric techniques by a Cuban composer. In February the UNEAC hosted the first concert in Cuba of original electronic music featuring Blanco’s *Música para danza* (1961), *Estudio I* and *Estudio II* (1961–1962), and *Ensamble V* (1961). The events Brouwer described not only presented Cuban audiences with new music by Cuban composers but also framed these compositions with other works that reflected the same avant-garde impetus, notably works by Polish composers.²⁹

Brouwer argued in 1970 in “La vanguardia en la música cubana” that the vanguardista composer was both free and committed; free to create but also committed to bringing the music to the people. He was able to share new compositions with the people because, according to Brouwer, the revolution had developed a socially conscious citizen who was not prejudiced as a listener. The vanguardista composer was able to bring avant-garde music to the people because the revolution created spaces and opportunities for him to do so, in particular for mass and public events. Aside from the aforementioned events listed by Brouwer, which would have reached an audience of regular concertgoers who included the artists and intellectuals of the UNEAC, Brouwer also mentioned several instances in which the experimental compositions by Blanco and himself reached a wider segment of the population. They composed music to accompany the local Cuban Olympics (Blanco), the celebration of the thirteenth

²⁵ Leo Brouwer, “La vanguardia en la música cubana,” *Boletín Música 1* (1970) : 22.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

²⁹ This can be seen in the programing of the July 1964 concert of the Cuban National Symphony Orchestra that included works by Tadeusz Baird, Grazyna Bacewicz, Blanco (*Texturas*, for magnetic tape and orchestra), and Krzysztof Penderecki. *Ibid.*, 23.

anniversary of “26 de Julio”—the first attempt by Fidel Castro and his men to overthrow Batista’s dictatorship by attacking the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 1953—in 1966 (Brouwer), and the Cuban pavilions of Expo ’67 in Montreal and Expo ’70 in Osaka (Blanco), among others.³⁰ Brouwer argued: “It is obvious that the demand for our work is the result of the functionality of this music in the current world, where mass communication media acquire an important dimension and avant-garde music becomes more functional—in this sense—than *standardized* products.”³¹ Brouwer and his fellow composers also composed film music, much of it using experimental techniques for feature films, shorts, and documentaries produced by the ICAIC.³² Through film, a massively disseminated medium, the experimental music of Cuban composers reached millions of viewers within and outside Cuba. At the same time, film music also served the revolution, since most of the ICAIC films were ideologically committed to promoting revolutionary and socialist values.

EXPERIMENTALISM IN FILM MUSIC

Brouwer specifically cites music for Cuban film as a prime example of how Cuban composers’ avant-garde works can reach wider audiences, more so than a symphonic work such as *La tradición se rompe*.³³ In a 1970 article on Cuban film music, Brouwer discusses the role music should play in this medium, supporting the total artwork, fully integrating with the script, images, theater, and dialogue, without lending itself to being removed from the film as an independent work. He adds that in ICAIC productions all the elements that go into creating a film are conceived with one single premise in mind, “within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing,” citing the famous dictum from Fidel Castro’s “Palabras a los intelectuales” and framing the ICAIC films within the cultural policy of the revolutionary government.³⁴

Film was the preferred artistic medium in revolutionary Cuba. The ICAIC was created only eighty-three days after the triumph of the revolution in 1959. Film was identified as an ideal medium for educating the masses because of its relative ease of reproduction and dissemination. The wording of the law that established the ICAIC highlights the “power” of film as an artistic, educational, and ideological tool, stating that film is “an instrument of opinion and formation of individual and collective conscience [that] can contribute to make deeper and more transparent the revolutionary spirit and to

³⁰ Ibid., 24.

³¹ Ibid., 24–25 (emphasis in the original).

³² Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas; for other examinations of the Institute see Susan Thomas’s chapter here, and Tamara Levitz, “Experimental Music and Revolution: Cuba’s Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC,” in Benjamin Piekut, ed., *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Study* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

³³ Ibid., 25.

³⁴ Fidel Castro, “Palabras a los intelectuales, La Habana, 1961,” *CF. Revolución, letras, arte* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1980), 14, 47.

sustain its creative impetus.³⁵ Thus, the establishment of the ICAIC overtly aimed at furthering the revolutionary government's goals in shaping a new revolutionary society and the *hombre nuevo*. Film scholar Julianne Burton categorizes Cuban film from this period under the umbrella of "New Latin American Cinema," characterized by the directors' use of film "as a tool for consciousness-raising [concientización], as an instrument for research and social analysis, and as a catalyst to political action and social transformation."³⁶ As part of this wider movement, Cuban filmmakers aimed to engage with reality and social issues, problematize them, enrich reality, and become part of the dialectical process.³⁷

In 1960, upon his return to Cuba from his studies in the United States, Brouwer was appointed director of the newly created music section of the ICAIC.³⁸ In 1968 he composed the music for one of the most critically acclaimed films produced by the ICAIC during the first decade of the revolution, *Lucía*. In three parts, the film follows the lives of three women named Lucía in three moments of Cuban history—the war of independence in 1895, the fall of Machado in 1932, and the beginning of the revolution in "196 . . ."; with each section focusing on the effects of the political and historical circumstances on their private lives. Brouwer explained his approach to creating the musical score for this film in his article "Lucía en tres movimientos" (*Lucía* in Three Movements), published in the film journal *Cine Cubano*. In the article he included a table outlining his compositional process (transcribed in table 11.1).³⁹

Although much of the score is neo-Romantic in style—with clear tonal melodies—and at times evokes Cuban genres, such as the *contradanza* and the *danzón*, Brouwer reserves avant-garde and experimental techniques for scenes fraught with incoherence, focusing on the uncomfortable realities of politically uncertain times. A scene (beginning at 5:10) from the first part of the film, set in 1895, juxtaposes the private and secluded life of society women with the public reality of the war. Outside the windows of a private home, men walk down the streets, returning from battle, some wounded, while other men have died. They encounter a vagabond woman who screams "Silence!" and then "¡Viva España!" and laughs hysterically. The visceral visuals are enhanced by Brouwer's use of sound clusters in the strings, along with angular, fragmented atonal lines played by the woodwinds, highlighting the chaos and downward spiral of Cuban citizens—in this case men who are fighting on the Spanish side, as confirmed by

³⁵ 10 [i.e., "diez"] años de cine cubano: Publicado por el Departamento de Cine de "Marcha" en homenaje al Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) en su X aniversario (Montevideo, Uruguay: Marcha, 1969), 8.

³⁶ Julianne Burton, "The Camera as 'Gun': Two Decades of Culture and Resistance in Latin America," in "Culture in the Age of Mass Media," special issue, *Latin American Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (1978), 50–51.

³⁷ Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, quoted in *ibid.*, 51.

³⁸ In 1958–1960, Brouwer attended the Hartt College of Music of the University of Hartford and the Julliard School of Music, where he studied with Vincent Persichetti and Stephan Wolpe.

³⁹ Brouwer worked on the music for each of the three sections backward, starting with "Lucía 196 . . ." and finishing with "Lucía 1895." Table 1.1 is a transcription of the diagram published in Brouwer, "La música, lo cubano y la innovación," and I have retained the order presented by Brouwer.

TABLE 11.1.

Compositional process for the film music for <i>Lucía</i> .		
Order of composition	Historically representative instrument	Thematic treatment
Lucía 196 . . .	Guitar	Leitmotiv: La guantanamera, by Joseíto Fernández (final symphonic version) Secondary themes—popular forms (original themes): bossanova, shake, march, go-gó, altered rhythm
Lucía 1932	Flute	Leitmotiv: on a prelude by Chopin (with variations) Secondary themes: (a) original themes: within the most stylish current style (b) epic theme in the style of nineteenth-century overture (c) juxtaposition of old popular tunes with aleatoric music in the form of a collage
Lucía 1895	Piano	Leitmotiv: on a theme by Schumann (with variations) Secondary themes: (a) original themes that combine elements in the style of Schumann, Dvóřak (b) concrete elaboration [music] (surreal scenes) (c) aleatoric elaboration [music] (d) juxtaposition of (b) and (c) in various tracks

Source: Leo Brouwer, *La música, lo cubano y la innovación* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1982), 61–63.

their cries of “¡Viva España!” Through his use of avant-garde techniques Brouwer also engaged with the musical language developed by avant-garde composers in the United States and Eastern and Western Europe, a musical language he became acquainted with during his studies in the United States in 1958–1960 and his visit to Warsaw in 1961.

As shown in table 11.1, Brouwer combined concrete music and aleatoric passages for scenes he labels “surreal.” Avant-garde music framed the scenes it underscores as distinct from the scenes with more tonal and traditional music. In this article, Brouwer

emphasized that the historical distance and the *universal* themes of “Lucía 1895” allowed viewers to relate to the issues presented in this portion of the film: “loneliness, love, sentimental betrayal (for whatever reason), and death.”⁴⁰ Brouwer highlights the universality of the surreal moments of this section of the film—the interior, well-guarded private lives of affluent families contrasted with the external, violent, and disturbing reality of the war—by shying away from overtly Cuban musical idioms and employing compositional techniques associated with several international avant-garde music circles. Brouwer’s use of avant-garde and experimental idioms fulfills both aesthetic and political goals: it heightens the visually surreal scenes with unexpected and unusual music, and it critiques the colonial situation and the struggle between *criollos* and *peninsulares* (Spaniards and pro-Spanish Cubans) that resulted in a war-ravaged country.

EXPERIMENTALISM IN SYMPHONIC MUSIC

In his article “La vanguardia en la música cubana,” Brouwer uses three examples of newly composed and recently performed symphonic works to illustrate the musical characteristics of the Cuban musical vanguardia, rather than providing a list of compositional styles or techniques. He briefly describes Carlos Fariñas’s *Relieves*, Blanco’s *Contrapunto espacial III*, and his own *La tradición se rompe . . . pero cuesta trabajo*. These three compositions were premiered by the OSN on October 10, 1969, under the direction of Duchesne Cuzán.⁴¹ In the concert’s program notes, Ángel Vázquez Millares describes Brouwer, Fariñas, and Blanco as “the first Cuban composers who tackled, with audacity and efficacy, the current expressive resources and techniques They speak the language of *today* and open infinite possibilities of our musical creation’s future.”⁴² The notes focus on time, present and future, and the composers’ accomplishments as being the first, the vanguardia, in bringing the Cuban music scene up to date with current composition techniques. Brouwer’s description of Fariñas’s *Relieves* highlights the use of clusters, the spatial placement of the musicians (fig. 11.1), pointillism, and controlled aleatorism, by which I believe Brouwer was referring to controlled indeterminacy. (Cuban composers used the term “aleatoric” in reference to both aleatorism and indeterminacy.)

When describing Blanco’s *Contrapunto espacial III* (discussed in further detail below), Brouwer emphasizes the work’s reliance on staging, as it used actors who moved among the audience. Brouwer also notes the sonic effect of noise and the interaction of

⁴⁰ Burton, “Camera as ‘Gun,’” 60.

⁴¹ Duchesne Cuzán was a member of the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo throughout the 1950s, and once he was named conductor of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, along with Enrique González Manti, he became one of the strongest advocates for its performance of new works. Duchesne Cuzán usually conducted its concerts of new music.

⁴² Ángel Vázquez Millares, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, program notes, October 10, 1969, Museo Nacional de la Música Cubana, Havana.

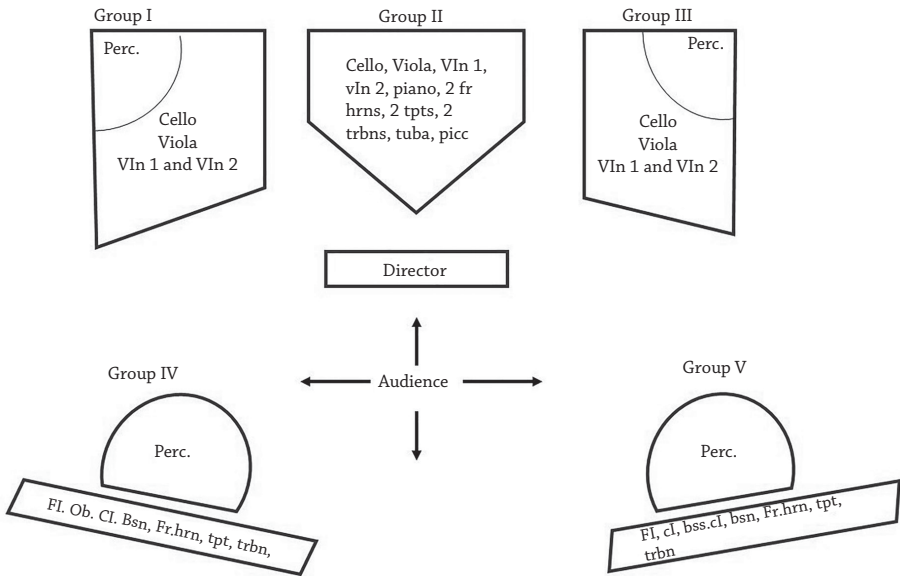


FIGURE 11.1. Transcription of hand-drawn diagram of stage layout for *Relieves*, printed in Ángel Vázquez Millares, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, program notes, October 10, 1969, Museo Nacional de la Música Cubana, Havana.

the musicians and actors, resulting in a *happening*, a term Brouwer used in English. In Brouwer's discussion of his work, *La tradición se rompe*, he replicates the notes included in the OSN concert program, which also appear in the LP liner notes for the 1970 recording of this work for the Cuban label Areito.⁴³ The description of *La tradición se rompe* emphasizes several traits that characterize it as experimental: quotation; collage; controlled indeterminacy; investing the orchestra musicians with a sense of independence and agency in the creation of the work of art; the composer's sonority overtaking that of the "masters"; challenging of concept of time by experiencing several historical epochs simultaneously; and audience participation that turns the concert into what Brouwer labeled with unique capitalization a "POP" event, a happening. The polystylistic result obliterates the hierarchies of classical music that had been established and preserved by the Cuban cultural elite in the decades that preceded the revolution. The work's rebellious tones situate it at the vanguardia of Cuban classical music; it not only opposes the traditional classical music repertory but also secures Brouwer's place in the revolution as an artista comprometido who enacts the revolution's rebellious spirit through his work. The three compositions Brouwer provides as examples of the Cuban musical vanguardia aimed to transform the concertgoing

⁴³ The OSN concert program notes and the LP indicate that Ángel Vázquez Millares had written the description of Brouwer's *La tradición se rompe*, even though Brouwer reproduces them without significant editing. These participations play as sonorities with the orchestra at the same time that they recreate a "POP" activity. Brouwer does not negate tradition; he transforms it.

experience into an event in which the audience was a participant and not a mere spectator. Each work achieved this through different means: Brouwer used signs to prompt the audience to participate in specific ways; Fariñas surrounded the audience with sound through the spatial placement of groups of musicians in the concert hall space; Blanco used electronic and prerecorded sounds amplified through speakers as well as actors who moved among the audience. Examining the available scores and recordings for Brouwer's and Blanco's pieces helps us identify with more precision the techniques that make these compositions experimental.

BROUWER'S *LA TRADICIÓN SE ROMPE . . . PERO CUESTA TRABAJO*

The manuscript score for Brouwer's *La tradición se rompe* contains an appendix that includes the excerpts the musicians must play at specific moments, in addition to the ones that are already written out and provided by Brouwer in the score. The appendix also provides performance indications for special notation, as well as a note on how to prepare the signs or posters that will be shown to the audience to ask for their participation, specifying that the signs must be prepared using the most "in-fashion" typography at the time of future performances.⁴⁴ This concern with typography is telling of Brouwer's preoccupation with the effect and relationship between sound and visual material, intending for his work to be performed by and for later generations, thus becoming part of the classical repertory that he attacks and contests throughout the work. In addition, he gives performers individual agency not only by assigning them individual excerpts from the classical orchestral and solo repertory but also by asking them to play these excerpts "de pie" (standing up).

At rehearsal letter T, Brouwer's sonority interrupts and attacks the three excerpts of classical music in three separate moments: the string section playing an "Allegro" by Handel, the horn line from Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* at rehearsal letter U, and one of Liszt's *Paganini Etudes*. The dissonant, full orchestral chords, along with the percussion section playing in tandem with, but independently from, the rest of the orchestra, present a dramatic contrast to the classical excerpts they attack. The orchestra drowns out the sound of the classics, imposing Brouwer's sonority.

The musical and compositional traits and techniques do not mark this work as experimental on their own. The addition of the composer's intention and the way he expects the performers and the audience to engage with the work become crucial in placing this work not only in the context of experimental music but also in congruence with the ideological goals of the Cuban revolution's cultural policies. The work challenges audience expectations; the title of the work itself points to Brouwer's intention of *breaking* from tradition. In the liner notes, the language is even more combative, describing the performers as "attacking" the great masters. Brouwer creates a new

⁴⁴ Leo Brouwer, *La tradición se rompe . . . pero cuesta trabajo*, manuscript, Museo Nacional de la Música Cubana, 35.

work by superimposing pieces from a variety of styles and time periods, challenging the listeners' concepts of time. The "classics" are explicitly used as weapons against the very tradition they represent. This break from tradition—in particular pinning well-known pieces of music against each other—as well as its active engagement with audience members, enacts the Cuban revolution's rebellious spirit, promotes the revolutionary value of collectivism, and cements Brouwer as an ideologically committed composer.

JUAN BLANCO'S CONTRAPUNTO ESPACIAL III

Like Brouwer's *La tradición se rompe*, Blanco's *Contrapunto espacial III* presented orchestra musicians and audiences with a performance and listening experience drastically different from the usual orchestral repertory fare. *Contrapunto espacial III* combines several compositional techniques and approaches that characterize the work as experimental. Like Fariñas's *Relieves*, *Contrapunto espacial III* features the spatial placement of musicians throughout the hall. Through this work Blanco also engaged with several other experimental techniques, including a graphic score, actors, magnetic tape, and controlled indeterminacy.⁴⁵ Descriptions of the piece specify the performing forces as twenty-four instrumental groups, twenty actors, one child, a sax soloist, and two magnetic tapes.⁴⁶ In "La vanguardia en la música cubana," Brouwer describes the work this way: "effective noise-ism, *happening* between the components of the work (actors and musicians), a saxophone walks among the actors. The directly recorded voice of a boy recites a philosophical text. The actors move among the audience. The weight of this work falls on the staged [component]."⁴⁷ Blanco divides the orchestra into twenty-four groups: seven string sextets, two woodwind sextets, two woodwind trios, three brass trios, seven percussion groups, and three pianos. The score and individual parts for each performer consist of an octagon with six geometric figures cut out (rectangles, square, lines) (shown in ex. 11.1).⁴⁸

There are sixteen possible versions of the individual scores, depending on how the individual musician places the score, which has eight possibilities per side (as an octagon) and can be flipped to its reverse side to provide another eight possible readings.

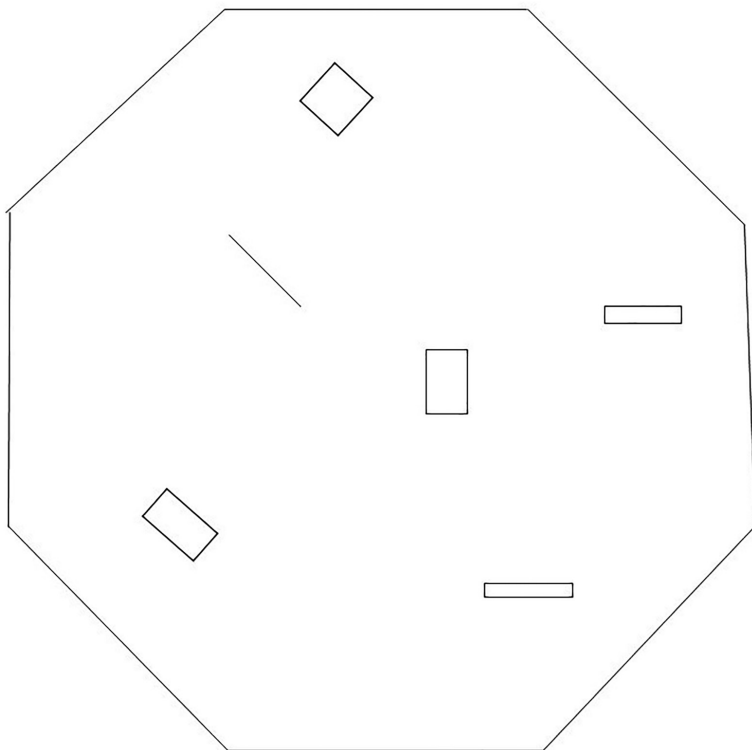
⁴⁵ The manuscript for the work, held at the Museo Nacional de la Música Cubana, has the title *Contrapunto espacial III* crossed out and the new title, *Octagonales*, written in pencil, above the crossed-out title. The piece appears with a dedication to Leo Brouwer. It is difficult to ascertain when the dedication was added, and when the title was changed, and whether these changes had anything to do with the reception of the work by the administration.

⁴⁶ The description in the program of the work's 1969 premier specifies that it was performed by the OSN, twenty actors, three magnetic tapes, and one child at the García Lorca Theater.

⁴⁷ Brouwer, "La vanguardia en la música cubana"; Juan Blanco, *Contrapunto espacial III* (1969), <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/oeu.php?NumEnregOeu=000003332>, accessed December 12, 2014.

⁴⁸ This diagram was printed in Orquesta Sinfónica, program notes, October 1969, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional box, Museo Nacional de la Música Cubana. See Argeliers León, "Del acto y el resultado," *Boletín Música* 26 (n.d.): 11.

EXAMPLE 11.1. Juan Blanco, score of *Contrapunto espacial III* (1969). This diagram was printed in Ángel Vázquez Millares, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, program notes, October 10, 1969, Museo Nacional de la Música Cubana, Havana.



The lines, squares, and rectangles indicate relative pitch and durations, while dynamics and articulation decisions are left up to the player. Blanco provides a range of possibilities for figures to be performed as interpretations of the horizontal and diagonal lines, and adds that the work's duration is dependent on how many variants and how many times each performer decides to play through the score. The same variant can be performed with different tempi and dynamics in consecutive order, producing another version of the variant. Because each instrumentalist made his or her own decisions regarding tempo, articulation, duration, and specific pitches, no two performances of the work could even come close to resembling each other. The experimental nature of *Contrapunto espacial III* depended on a combination of elements: the graphic score, controlled indeterminacy, the magnetic tape, and the actors who move among the audience.

Blanco's intention to challenge the expectations of symphonic music and to immerse the audience in a performative context in which sound and actors envelop the listener also marks the work as highly experimental. The program notes explain the work's conceptual basis, in which Blanco highlights the contradiction between the human-biological and the technological (the magnetic tape part). The work should elicit a

psycho-biologic response in the performers and the listeners through the spatial placement of the twenty-four instrumental groups, the actors, and the speakers playing the magnetic tape.⁴⁹ The program notes refer to the ample aleatorism in the piece as the source of freedom for the musicians.

As Brouwer describes the work in his article in *Boletín Música*, the result of *Contrapunto espacial III* is a happening, and as Blanco indicated in a later interview with Neil Leonard, the work's performance was not received well by the National Council of Culture. According to Blanco, the premiere of *Contrapunto espacial III* on October 1969 was so scandalous that the person in the National Council of Culture "responsible" for allowing the piece to be performed was fired, and that soon afterward the "administration grew more concerned about works that expressed independent political views, and it made attempts to control artists who were critical of the system."⁵⁰ The close of the 1960s was also marked by the beginning of the *quinquenio gris* (five-year gray period), which was characterized by government repression and censorship of writers and artists. The increase in government censorship was closely tied to greater Soviet demands for the Cuban government to control Cuban artists and intellectuals, the failed *zafra* (sugar cane harvest) of 1970, and the establishment of the Cuban Ministry of Culture. After 1970, we also see Cuban composers employing more overt references to socialist and Cuban revolutionary values in classical compositions through the use of overtly political poems, titles, and dedications. Regardless of the increase in government censorship, Blanco continued to hold a privileged position from which he created experimental works and also served the revolution.

In a 1972 interview with Pedro Simón published in *Boletín Música*, Blanco provides specific examples of how experimental music could reach the masses. He explicates how new music could fulfill the needs of revolutionary society. In a composer's search for a language that reflects and participates in the new socio-political-economic system, he says: "there can be no hurried rejections of techniques, methods, systems, etc., of any sort, adopting in each situation those that better serve the purpose—adapting them, modifying them, or inventing others—if it is essential."⁵¹ Blanco's symphonic music output was scarce in comparison to his works for chamber groups and electroacoustic music; he preferred to compose works that could reach much larger audiences than symphonic concert music and saw the concert hall as somewhat limiting and outdated. He expressed his reservations regarding the limitations of the concert hall and said that the technological advances in sound reproduction and amplification allowed the revolutionary composer to reach a larger audience. For Blanco, the concert hall was suitable for music that needed "the resonance of walls, ceiling, and floor of the concert hall."⁵² He believed that the physical space of the concert hall limited the range of compositional techniques a composer could test out.

⁴⁹ Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, program notes, October 1969.

⁵⁰ Leonard, "Juan Blanco," 15.

⁵¹ Pedro Simón, "¿Hacia otra nueva música?," *Boletín Música* 22 (1972): 12.

⁵² Juan Blanco quoted in Simón, "¿Hacia otra nueva música?," 13.

Upon reflecting on a series of works he had created between 1966 and 1972, Blanco adds that they give him “the impression that they constitute a preliminary step to a *singularly Cuban* solution.”⁵³ He describes seven works he composed during this period, most in collaboration with visual artists who provided a lighting component, that were performed in outdoor spaces for mass events. In his description of the works, he specifies the number of speakers, the physical space where the works were presented, and the spatial layout of the speakers in relation to the audience. For example, *Poema espacial No. 1* (April 1967) was performed in San Andrés in the province of Pinar del Río, using four speakers placed in the shape of a triangle—three placed horizontally on the slope of a mountain against a fourth point placed on a tower in the valley 250 meters from the slope speakers—and was accompanied by lighting designed by Rogelio Prats. The work was performed for an audience of three thousand peasants from the region, who experienced the performance from the middle of the triangle.⁵⁴

Some of the works described by Blanco in his interview were composed exclusively through the use of electronic sounds, but others used recordings of speeches and songs relevant in the context of the work’s function. For example, the work *Viet Nam* was presented in December 1967 at a nature preserve in Havana for an audience of fifteen thousand people placed in the center of a 25,200-square-foot rectangle that had thirty-seven speakers around it. Blanco created a four-track magnetic tape recording that used electronically produced sounds and the manipulated recordings of speeches by Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Min, Ernesto Guevara, and Robert McNamara in their original voices; the words of Nguyen Van Troi when facing the firing squad; and two Vietnamese tonal songs. The work also included a lighting component designed by the celebrated Romanian-born Cuban artist Sandu Darie, known for his abstract paintings. The political motive—Cuba’s support of the Vietnamese people in the Vietnam War and Cuba’s denouncement of US involvement in Vietnam—justified the means of production and dissemination: electroacoustic music using overtly political source materials for outdoor massive presentation through spatial placement of speakers.

Blanco was creating soundscape works around the same time that composers in North America and Europe were also exploring the potential of electronic music amplified in outdoor spaces. But Blanco’s works were steeped in the political context of revolutionary Cuba; they were a “singularly Cuban” solution to the question of how new music could serve a socialist society. The function of mass events justified the means of electronic music composition. Experimental music—electronic music performed in large outdoor spaces that also featured lighting design—reached a significantly larger number of listeners than compositions for the concert hall (with the exception of concert hall performances that were broadcast through radio and television). But the physical, collective experience of the performances of electronic music described by Blanco had the transformative potential that in his opinion most concert hall music had lost. The physical outdoor space, the use of electronic amplification and lighting

⁵³ *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

design, along with the overtly political source materials Blanco used and transformed in his electronic tracks contributed to an artistic experience that aligned with revolutionary values of collectivism, egalitarianism, hard work, and innovation.

Blanco proposed to take his experimental electronic works one step further: to the permanent “sonorization” of urban spaces. According to him, the most important traits, or effects, of projects of this nature were to help define urban spaces; to insert the sound structure in an organized way so that it became part of everyday life, stimulated popular sensibilities, and brought coherence to the architectural design, color, and other elements of the space; and to attenuate the effects of noise pollution.⁵⁵ His discussion concerning the functionality of electronic music in the new, socialist society elucidates his own thought process in creating electroacoustic pieces and reveals that he took the role of *artista comprometido* seriously. Blanco’s vision of the permanent sonorization of urban spaces did not come to fruition, but he did establish a legacy for making experimental music more accessible to the masses. Blanco exemplified the *vanguardista* composer, in both aesthetic and political terms.

CRITICAL OPINIONS OF MUSICAL EXPERIMENTALISM

Contemporary Cuban newspapers, magazines, and music journals do not report on audience reception of the experimental works produced by Blanco, Brouwer, and their peers (Carols Fariñas and Héctor Angulo, among others). This is not surprising, considering that these composers were on the editorial and advisory boards of the national newspapers and magazines. But this did not mean that some composers did not object to, criticize, or even question the validity and relevance of experimental approaches to composition. In a later interview with the music journal *Clave*, Blanco notes that Cuban *música de vanguardia* had its detractors, mostly those who had been part of the Grupo de Renovación Musical in the 1940s, and in particular its leader, José Ardévol, whose music throughout the 1940s and 1950s was marked by a neoclassical approach. In his *La música en Cuba* (1969), when discussing Blanco’s use of postserial techniques and electronic composition, Ardévol opined: “Whatever may be the value that time will grant these works, it is unquestionable that this composer has been, in the last years, an important factor in terms of awakening interests and search for new horizons.”⁵⁶ He is leaving “time” to determine what the true value of Blanco’s work and contribution will be, yet he is acknowledging that Blanco has stirred curiosity among the younger generation of composers.

Edgardo Martín voiced stronger doubts in his history of Cuban music, *Panorama histórico de la música en Cuba*. In the seventh chapter, “Revolución y Música,” Martín celebrates the revolution’s triumph and then details the benefits and successes achieved by musicians thanks to the new government.⁵⁷ He emphasizes that all musicians,

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁶ José Ardévol, *Introducción a Cuba: La música* (Havana: Instituto del Libro, 1969), 111.

⁵⁷ Edgardo Martín, *Panorama histórico de la música en Cuba* (Havana: Universidad de La Habana, 1971), 185.

along with everyone else in Cuba, were eager to be part of the revolution, to contribute to it, and to right the wrongs of the past.⁵⁸ In an earlier chapter Martín includes the section “Movimiento de vanguardia,” under which he groups Blanco, Fariñas, Brouwer, and Duchesne Cuzán under the rubric of La Vanguardia Cubana, a group united by the objectives of “assimilating, disseminating, and developing in Cuba” techniques known in Europe as “concrete music, electronic music, aleatorism [*sic*] and spatialism.”⁵⁹ He adds about the composers:

This group immediately controlled, from the music section of UNEAC [the Cuban Writers and Artists Union], diverse marketing media and spaces in newspapers—for example, the “Arts and Letters” section of *Bohemia* magazine—; it also controlled part of the programming of the OSN [National Symphony Orchestra] and it made sure to influence some of the music students, and in little time they awakened great expectations among the public, mobilizing in their favor young and amateur musicians, and attracting the curiosity of intellectuals and people interested in some way in the new. To shake up Havana circles even more, they proceeded to give informative conferences and lectures with sonic illustrations, expanding upon the reasoning behind their experimental guidelines—at the same time that they made negative judgments against all Cuban musical art achieved in the three preceding decades, which they marked as “nationalist” and “limited.”⁶⁰

Martín goes on to describe a moment of tension and disagreement between two camps of Cuban composers: those of the vanguardia, who explored avant-garde and experimental compositional techniques and critiqued past composers for not venturing into more daring musical landscapes, and those who continued working with what Martín categorizes as “medios tradicionales” (traditional means)—the violin, the piano, the orchestra, the voice, dodecaphony, serialism, the sonata, the quartet, and the cantata.⁶¹ Martín adds that the disagreements did not play out in public but *entre telones* (between the curtains) and that the arguments brought forth a healthy discussion among composers and musicians, challenging established definitions of music and opening up the possibilities of exploring the creation of *sound* itself as a compositional endeavor. He concludes by acknowledging that even if the new techniques did not replace what he terms “traditional” means of composition, they now could be incorporated within said “traditional” or “conventional” means.⁶² Indeed, if one examines articles and reviews of new music from *Bohemia* and other magazines, as well as the more specialized articles included in *Boletín Música*, published by Casa de las Américas, one is left with the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 158.

impression that most Cuban composers were engaging with experimental compositional techniques, not only with little to no resistance from the state and their musical peers but also with the support and in the service of revolutionary and socialist ideology. Martín's discussion of the Cuban vanguardia of the 1960s reveals that in spite of the appearance of wide acceptance of and support for experimental music in Cuba, as presented in the press and through concert programming, Cuban composers were divided into "traditionalist" and "vanguardista" camps, and that these arguments did not play out in the press—controlled by the "vanguardistas"—but behind the scenes. Therefore, it is difficult to gauge with precision who stood on what side of the argument, and it seems, in examining compositions created by several composers during the 1960s, that most of them were at least open to experimenting with the techniques promoted by Blanco, Fariñas, and Brouwer, even if they were not hardline champions of musical experimentalism. As mentioned earlier, and as is supported by Martín's discussion, the key to the apparent success and support of experimental music lay in the influential positions held by the vanguardista composers—as directors and advisors in several cultural institutions—and through the publication of their writings on music in newspapers, magazines, and journals.

As we examine the writings of Blanco and Brouwer and compare them to Ardévol's and Martín's histories of Cuban music, a more complicated picture of the new music scene in 1960s Cuba is revealed. In Blanco and Brouwer one finds composers who defended their experimental compositions aesthetically and ideologically, serving the revolution and the Cuban people by engaging with compositional techniques that other composers found rebellious and that challenged norms and expectations. But in Ardévol's and Martín's accounts, what seems like the wide acceptance and support of experimental music is problematized. Not all composers engaged with experimental techniques, but those who did had accrued cultural capital and used it to influence the content of concert programming and articles for *Boletín Música*, *Bohemia*, and other publications. Within these institutions they promoted the idea that experimental music was an inevitable result of the revolution's triumph.

The writings of Gramatges, Blanco, and Brouwer present a set of recurring and common concerns among Cuban composers. According to Gramatges, before 1959 Cuban composers struggled to reach audiences due to the established cultural elite's preference and support of "traditional" and "conventional" music and ignoring of contemporary music by Cuban and Latin American composers. After 1959, Brouwer and Blanco defended the notions that avant-garde music embodied the rebellious spirit of the revolution and supported its ideology, and they claimed that composers gained access to the masses through government-sponsored mass communication because post-1959 audiences were more open and less prejudiced against new music as it became—thanks to the revolution—part of their everyday lives. In spite of the rupture in political and socioeconomic systems brought by the Cuban Revolution, Cuban composers continued to promote new music as their predecessors, and they themselves, had done in prior decades. One cannot discard the possibility, however, that these composers were also using the revolutionary ideals to promulgate their cultural and aesthetic goals and to

disseminate their music and that of their peers. Cuban composers' engagement with avant-garde and experimental compositional approaches fulfilled the Cuban revolution's goals of shaping a socially conscious citizen, presented these composers as *artistas comprometidos* who engaged with musical means of production prevalent in new music circles throughout the world, and fulfilled the revolution's internationalist aims, as well as Cuban composers' aesthetic needs for experimentation, all while bringing avant-garde and experimental music to a larger section of the Cuban citizenry.

12

PERFORMANCE, RESISTANCE, AND THE SOUNDING OF PUBLIC SPACE

Movimiento Música Más in Buenos Aires, 1969–1973

Andrew Raffo Dewar

ON JUNE 28, 1966, a right-wing military junta led by General Juan Carlos Onganía overthrew the government of Argentina. In the subsequent cultural crackdown, an era of suspicion and paranoia engulfed Argentine society that would last throughout the 1970s, when a second, even more brutal regime assumed power. Guillermo Gregorio, an Argentine–American composer, woodwind instrumentalist, and architect, remembers the night after the coup, a particularly painful and poignant moment of the 1966 Onganía takeover that was later dubbed *noche de los bastones largos* (the night of the long sticks) (fig. 12.1): “When the first day of the military came, they went to the universities and made double lines of police with helmets and long sticks, and they made the professors, chancellors, and all the students [walk out through] the two lines . . . as they went out, like robots, [the police were] hitting the heads and shoulders of the students with sticks . . . This was emblematic, of course, because they were literally hitting culture on the head!”¹

It was in the midst of this intense period of political and social tumult that Movimiento Música Más (MMM) was formed.² During the Onganía regime, this little-known intermedia performance collective created a number of works that engaged with public spaces and the citizenry of Buenos Aires, interjecting an artistic response

¹ Guillermo Gregorio, interview with the author, November 16, 2008. Chicago, IL. (Global, for all GG non-email interviews)

² Movimiento Música Más can be translated as “the movement of music plus,” or the “more than music movement.” All translations from Spanish to English, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.



FIGURE 12.1. “Noche de los bastones largos,” Buenos Aires, July 29, 1966. Photo in public domain.

to the rigid governmental control of those spaces and bodies.³ As a group, MMM was always in flux in terms of its membership, but it counted among its ranks photographers, graphic designers, painters, and blue-collar laborers, in addition to musicians and composers, such as its three founding members: Guillermo Gregorio, Norberto Chavarri, and Roque de Pedro. By bringing a number of their performances outside to reclaim plazas and streets in Buenos Aires, MMM attempted a subversive approach to political activism cloaked in seemingly bizarre, outlandish artistic activity. Their activities illustrate what I call a “camouflage of naiveté”: allowing the political criticism and activism of their art making to proceed largely unnoticed by the dictatorship because of—not in spite of—their pseudo-amateurish, idiosyncratic, and surrealist aesthetic.

This chapter, like others in this volume, examines the work of a little-known experimentalist “Other” that, in this case, existed at the periphery of 1960s Argentine internationalism. I focus on just two of MMM’s many performance pieces: *Plaza para una siesta de domingo* (1970)—in which some members of MMM held a well-publicized birdsong contest in a city plaza while other members performed in a large cage—and the 1971 *Música para colectivo línea 7*, composed by Norberto Chavarri, during which the group performed on a city bus, using the vehicle itself as an instrument. These two

³ I use the term “intermedia” to describe MMM’s activities because of the overlapping and integrative nature of the various media the group engaged with in their work (such as theatre, music, visual art, and conceptual art), as opposed to the term “multimedia,” which usually signals a combination of disparate media that, while generally presented to an audience simultaneously, remain a collection of separate media entities.

performances embody MMM's approach to experimentalism: a commitment to bringing art and people into public spaces during a time of rigid governmental control of those spaces and bodies, and an interest in the political symbolism generated by their actions.

MMM is not present in the prevailing narratives of Argentine history, nor in those of twentieth-century experimentalism. This chapter argues that MMM's activities shed light on how creative individuals respond to extreme situations, and how their autochthonous form of arts-centered political engagement presents a unique case study of arts activism. In addition, MMM's work allows us to explore problems in the accepted narratives of musical experimentalism, to put forth another example of what Branden Joseph has called "minor history." Adapting Deleuze and Guattari's work on Kafka and "minor literature," Joseph argues: "The 'minor' is not the qualitatively or quantitatively inferior, but what is marked by an irreducible or uncontainable difference. It is not a subcategory or subsystem in the conventional sense, but what Deleuze and Guattari call at one point an 'outsystem.'" ⁴ MMM's work, presented here as a Latin American "outsystem," exists beyond the bounds of prevailing narratives of experimental music but at the time was also viewed in Argentine experimentalist circles as an outlier, on the lunatic fringe. Furthermore, Joseph expands on Deleuze and Guattari's application of "the minor," discussing the previously underresearched work of Tony Conrad as "minor," with regard not to aesthetic value but to its (non)appearance in "major histories." Due to its uncategorizable difference and crossing of disciplinary bounds, Conrad's work has been difficult to subsume into a "major" history. The "aesthetic zones of indiscernibility" that "minor" works inhabit, Joseph argues, are the very reason that "'minor' figures often appear from the point of view of major history to be an unruly and indistinct mob . . . [or as] misguided or underdeveloped practitioners." ⁵ Indeed, MMM's troubled relationship to the "legitimate" art worlds of Buenos Aires—as characterized by several of MMM's participants—confirms this view.

Theorist Erin Manning has further extrapolated on Deleuze and Guattari's work in a way that is useful to this study of MMM, describing the "minor gesture," which Manning characterizes as having an insurgent relationship to "the major" as "a force that courses through it, unmooring its structural integrity, problematizing its normative standards." ⁶ Manning also critiques the unquestioning belief in the major's primacy as a change maker, stating that it "is based on accepted accounts of what registers as change as well as existing parameters for gauging the value of that change." ⁷ In fact, Manning argues, "it is the minoritarian tendencies that initiate the subtle shifts that created the conditions for this, and any, change. The grand is given the status it has not because it is where the transformative power lies, but because it is easier to

⁴ Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2008), 50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*

identify major shifts than to catalogue the nuanced rhythms of the minor.”⁸ Manning concludes that while the minor is “precarious,” “there is no question . . . that we put too much credence in that which persists.”⁹

In classifying MMM’s work as a Deleuze-Guattari-styled “outsystem,” I propose that MMM existed simultaneously both within the intentional aesthetic internationalism and cosmopolitanism of late 1960s Buenos Aires and outside both this national cultural scene and the experimentalism of European and North American actors such as John Cage, Fluxus, and so on. This inside/outside dichotomy exists in part because their work and (largely nonacademic) musical backgrounds did not interface well with the so-called mainstream avant-garde of Buenos Aires (as MMM members Gregorio and Chavarri described the scene connected to the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales [CLAEM]). As mentioned earlier, MMM’s members were largely marginalized and often perceived as charlatans by the Argentine cultural elite. In short, this chapter takes as its subject the intermedia “outsystem” of MMM in Buenos Aires, their interconnections to the cosmopolitan forms of these practices, and their localizing of experimentalist aesthetics under a dictatorial regime.

Due to the largely subcultural position MMM held in the Argentine art world and the social fragmentation that occurred among these artists due to the later Videla regime, this study is heavily reliant both on oral histories from MMM members and on the meticulously kept scrapbooks of Guillermo Gregorio, which include concert programs, photographs, and newspaper clippings (along with other ephemera). The primary ethnographic sources for this research are three former members of MMM, including Guillermo Gregorio, a composer and performer who has been living in the United States since the late 1980s and was one of the cofounders of MMM, and composer-performer and MMM cofounder Norberto Chavarri. In addition, I have interviewed composer-performer and multimedia artist Ramiro Larrain, who remains in Argentina, along with Chavarri.¹⁰ Because of a number of difficult issues surrounding the interpersonal dynamics of the group, as well as Videla’s later, terrifying mid-1970s military regime that scattered many of MMM’s members to the four winds, I have had difficulties locating more of the artists involved in the group who are willing to discuss the period.¹¹

As Eduardo Herrera has written in his chapter here, CLAEM, at the Di Tella Institute, founded in 1962, was an important center for avant-garde music in Buenos Aires. Both CLAEM’s and MMM’s activities, however, existed in the broader context of the very

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰ Both Larrain and Chavarri spent time living in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, initially to escape the “dirty war” of General Videla’s regime.

¹¹ Particularly disappointing has been my inability to locate and interview any female members of MMM, namely Graciela Granata, Marta de Oliveira Cezar, Mónica Stesowsky, and Margarita San Martín. I am also dismayed at being unable to secure an interview with the third founding member of MMM, Roque de Pedro.

rich and cosmopolitan arts environment of 1960s Buenos Aires. Laura Podalsky and other scholars have noted that happenings and *ambientaciones* (environments) were a popular trend in the Argentine arts of the 1960s, “blending the conventions of visual art with those of theater in such a way that ‘spectators’ frequently became active participants in the production of the artwork.”¹² Happenings were “mentioned frequently in the daily press.”¹³ Indeed, John King noted that the term came to mean “anything out of the ordinary, suspicious, and slightly scandalous.”¹⁴ While this essay is most interested in how the political content of MMM’s work interfaced with the broader culture and political moment in which it was created, it is important to highlight Podalsky’s point that “conservative groups and the government alike took umbrage” at the types of work produced at Di Tella and by MMM as much for their “affronts to traditional decorum and codes of social conduct as for their unsanctioned political expressions.”¹⁵

On the surface, MMM’s work is seemingly conceptually indebted to the activities of Fluxus and other 1960s arts collectives in Europe and the United States, but while MMM’s participants were aware of these developments elsewhere, they were creating domestically inspired aesthetic responses to the complex problems of late 1960s and early 1970s Buenos Aires.¹⁶ MMM’s “glocal” approach to art making transforms cosmopolitan experimentalism into a localized practice that adds what ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has called a local “tint.” Turino identifies this “tint” as marking a “key moment in the development of a given cosmopolitan site” in the context of a localization that is then passed down, generating further creative reinventions of the cosmopolitan. While this is not really the case in the bounded and marginalized history of MMM, Turino’s term is still useful to describe MMM’s localizing of cosmopolitan practices.¹⁷ Its dialogue with the cosmopolitan and the indigenous is difficult to parse from this temporal distance, but the group did quite intentionally attempt to frame their work as deeply connected to local culture and the complexities of contemporary Buenos Aires under dictatorial rule. As MMM member Ramiro Larrain put it, the group had a more “introspective view” of their work’s relationship to the wider world; they used indigenous Argentine instruments and engaged with contemporary politics, in contrast to the efforts of many of their artistic contemporaries,

¹² Laura Podalsky, *Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955–1973* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 139.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ John King, *El Instituto Di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985), 138.

¹⁵ Podalsky, *Specular City*, 143.

¹⁶ Gregorio has recounted that there was a network of artists and fans in Buenos Aires who imported and traded recorded and printed materials, such as the seminal 1960s *Source*, a magazine of experimental music published by Larry Austin, and scores and recordings by Ornette Coleman, John Cage, David Tudor, and others. (Guillermo Gregorio, interview with the author, November 16, 2008).

¹⁷ Thomas Turino, “Are We Global Yet? Globalist Discourse, Cultural Formations and the Study of Zimbabwean Popular Music,” *British Forum for Ethnomusicology* 12, no. 2 (2003): 51–79.

who placed their work in a more cosmopolitan conversation with the art worlds outside Argentina.¹⁸

MEMBERS' PERSONAL HISTORIES

The personal histories of the group's membership are key to understanding MMM's activities. Illustrating both commonalities and the unique aspects of their multifarious backgrounds that ground their experiences with MMM in the cosmopolitan cultural milieu of Buenos Aires, these origin stories serve to illuminate the many threads that drew these individuals together to make art as a collective.

Guillermo Gregorio

Guillermo Gregorio was born in Buenos Aires in 1941 to a middle-class traveling sales representative for a fabric company.¹⁹ Gregorio grew up during the peak of paradoxical labor hero Juan Perón's rule. At home, Gregorio listened to European art music and Argentine folkloric music. After hearing a recording of Louis Armstrong when he was about thirteen, Gregorio convinced his father to buy him a trumpet, which he soon found did not suit him. He fell in love with the clarinet playing of Armstrong's sideman, Johnny Dodds, and quickly made the shift to that instrument, later adding alto and tenor saxophone. Gregorio was soon performing in weekly jam sessions and dance halls with a young group called the Hot Dogs Band (fig. 12.2). They played 1920s Chicago-style "hot" jazz because, as Gregorio has said, it was strangely fashionable in Buenos Aires at that time.²⁰

During that time, Gregorio also attended a series of seminars with renowned Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera and became interested in the graphic arts, enrolling in architecture school so he might make a living while feeding his new interest. In the seminars with Ginastera, he was taken by the music of Anton Webern and Edgar Varèse and the musique concrète of Pierre Schaeffer. The visual art he was drawn to included that of European formalist such as Moholy-Nagy, Van Doesburg, and Max Bill (fig. 12.3). As a result of this rich and diverse mixture of influences, his appetite for modernist art and music grew in tandem with his love for jazz.

His introduction to vanguard jazz occurred in 1961 when he met Alberto Celesia, an independently wealthy patron of the arts and small-scale importer of foreign recordings. Through Celesia, Gregorio was exposed to the work of Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy, but also became enamored with the music of John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Earle Brown. He also encountered La Monte Young's 1960 text pieces, which

¹⁸ Ramiro Larrain, email to the author, December 2, 2015.

¹⁹ Of the three MMM founders, I have had the most contact with Gregorio, and I have also had access to Gregorio's archives.

²⁰ Guillermo Gregorio, interview with the author, November 16, 2008. For more on Gregorio's consumption and performance of jazz and African American music and other aspects of his cosmopolitan "jazz journey," see Andrew Raffo Dewar, "Hot and Cool from Buenos Aires to Chicago: Guillermo Gregorio's Jazz Cosmopolitanism," *Jazz Research Journal* 6, no. 2 (2013): 151–169.



FIGURE 12.2. Hot Dogs Band, c. 1958. Used by courtesy of Guillermo Gregorio.

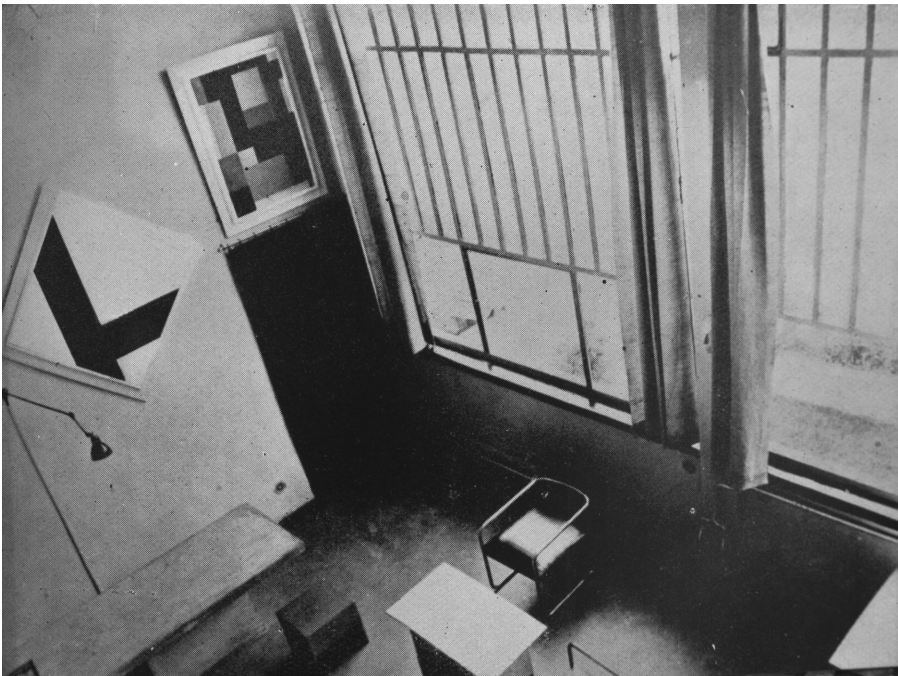


FIGURE 12.3. Photo of Theo van Doesburg's studio, which was inspirational to Gregorio. Used by courtesy of Guillermo Gregorio.

greatly inspired him, particularly *Composition 1960 #5*, in which butterflies are released into a performance hall.

Norberto Chavarri

Norberto Chavarri's childhood was similarly middle-class and based in Buenos Aires, where he was born in 1940. He studied piano with Fedora Aberastury, whom he says was "not only my piano teacher, but a great trainer of artists. She introduced me to Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, esoteric techniques, Gurdjieff . . . and decisively influenced me to free my mind of cultural atavism, to induce me to abandon the piano and start a creative practice as a composer."²¹ Chavarri also had a nourishing relationship with Argentine avant-garde composer Juan Carlos Paz, who was somewhat forgotten at the time Chavarri knew him but whose work has seen a resurgence in interest of late. Chavarri remembers that Paz "felt forgotten and undervalued. I was his humble disciple. I enjoyed the privilege of attending *tertulias* [arts salons] at his home, and in a *confitería* [soda fountain-cafeteria] at the intersection of Viamonte and Florida."²² Unwittingly, this relationship influenced my future, because I found nothing of interest in the music of Paz and I felt empty, unprotected, with a blank mind and the need to move forward without the guidance of any aesthetic model forged by my elder."²³ Chavarri's youth was also enriched by taking part in the city's café culture, especially at Café La Paz on Corrientes Avenue and Montevideo: "In the evening writers, artists, philosophers, psychologists, and subversive activists gathered and discussed the Revolution, the Third World, Cortázar, the latest film by Ingmar Bergman or Fellini, Dada, Surrealism, and all the subjects of progressive and forward-thinking people."²⁴ Indeed, Café La Paz, which opened its doors in 1944, was a center for a diverse range of artists and intellectuals, a place with a "preponderance for the avant-garde left" but whose "decline began with the last military government, when many of its regulars were exiled or disappeared for thinking differently."²⁵

It was in this social and intellectual milieu that Chavarri met the young composer Roque de Pedro. The two became close friends, drawing on their shared backgrounds "as musicians with conservatory training, as teachers of young students, [as writers of] music criticism . . . and [as participants] in Buenos Aires' Bohemian life."²⁶ In 1966,

²¹ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, August 19, 2015. Aberastury herself is a very interesting figure. She was born in Chile in 1914 but relocated early in life to Argentina. She then spent time in the 1940s–1950s in New York City, where she worked with modernist composer Edgard Varèse. She became interested in Eastern thought and later wrote a book about her "system of conscious movement."

²² Florida is a popular shopping district in Buenos Aires full of stores and cafés; it has been a pedestrian mall since 1971 (a decade or so after the period discussed by Chavarri).

²³ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, August 19, 2015.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Carlos Losauro and Sandra Venditti, "El café La Paz dejó atrás la bohemia y entró en la onda light," *La Nación*, June 5, 1997; <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/70277-el-cafe-la-paz-dejo-atras-la-bohemia-y-entroy-la-onda-light>, accessed January 15, 2016.

²⁶ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, August 19, 2015.

while hanging out in the kitchen of Chavarri's parents' house, the two young artists developed a new way to teach the history of music—using a combination of audio recordings and slides. In 1969 this resulted in their first joint publication, *Historia audiovisual de la música*, which included both a book and four hundred slides.²⁷ The two later shared a studio in the Conventillo de las Artes at 543 Libertad, across the street from Plaza Lavalle and one block from the famous Colon Theatre. As Chavarri remembers, “the place had a special charm because it had been taken over by haggard painters and musicians.”²⁸

De Pedro, Chavarri, and Gregorio in particular attended many of the public programs at CLAEM. Despite the conflicts they perceived with regard to CLAEM's overarching aesthetic and some individuals involved with the program, the MMM members interviewed for this study acknowledged that their engagement with CLAEM's public programs was an important learning opportunity for them. These programs drew them together (in part due to their mutual feelings of marginalization) and put them in touch with a wider world of experimentalism they could then draw on to enrich their own work.

Roque de Pedro

Roque de Pedro, the third founding member of MMM, was born on November 26, 1935, in the deep southern Argentine frontier, in Comodoro Rivadavia, Chubut province. He graduated from the Manuel Belgrano National Fine Arts School and later from the Carlos López Buchardo National Conservatory of Music in Buenos Aires with a degree in composition and piano. As of 2009, he was professor of composition at the National University of the Arts in Buenos Aires. He also worked as a freelance music critic for *Clarín*, a major newspaper in Argentina, from 1966 to 1985 and taught at the University of Salvador; Technical School; the Conservatory of Music Manuel de Falla; the National School of Drama; and the National University of Lanus, among others. In 1977 he published a book on jazz entitled *El jazz: Historia y presencia*.²⁹

Ramiro Larrain

For Ramiro Larrain, born in May 1946 in Buenos Aires but with family roots in Benito Juárez, “music was always present” in his life. Nevertheless, he did not begin to play an instrument until he was nineteen, when he took up first the guitar and later the alto

²⁷ Roque de Pedro, Norberto Chavarri, and Graciela Yentel, *Historia visual de la música* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Plaman, 1969).

²⁸ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, September 8, 2010.

²⁹ Roque de Pedro, *El jazz: Historia y presencia* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Convergencia, 1977). In his later years, de Pedro held managerial positions in various government and private agencies, including a position as director general of artistic and special education at the Ministry of Culture of the city of Buenos Aires between 1984 and 1989. He is also one of the founding members of the association *Cultrún* (Composers Associates). Gobierno de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, “Roque de Pedro,” http://www.buenos-aires.gob.ar/areas/cultura/dg_ens_art/pdf/cv_depedro_roque.pdf, accessed January 20, 2016.

saxophone.³⁰ As a child, he was exposed to European art music. He discovered Mozart's music while listening to a radio he brought to his room, and Argentine criollo music that the household's maids listened to.³¹ He also remembers being deeply affected by the sounds he heard in his semirural upbringing, from guitars, singing, and whistling to the sounds of animals and the wind rushing across the pampas.³² While whistling his way through childhood, the guitar became his entrée into the world of music. He took lessons from composer Rolando Mañanes (who would later, in the 1990s, take part in the composers' association Cultrún, with which de Pedro was involved), from whom he learned both rudiments and a "more free and creative vision" of music.³³ Shortly thereafter he met and began studying alto saxophone with jazz saxophonist Jorge Anders. During this period, Larrain became "absolutely bored of what and how [he] should play music," resulting in him "quitting the guitar and taking up the saxophone like a placard."³⁴

Around this time, a copy of *El perseguidor*, by influential experimental Argentine author Julio Cortázar, fell into his hands. After reading this novel about Johnny Carter, a troubled saxophonist in Paris (modeled loosely on American bebop legend Charlie Parker), and his interactions with a journalist named Bruno who is writing his biography, Larrain "threw himself on the saxophone like a starving castaway."³⁵ Shortly thereafter, he began performing with the Free Ensemble, a free jazz quintet of four wind players and a drummer. He met experimental artist Elda Cerrato and her partner, composer Luis Zubillaga, who invited him to play with the Grupo de Improvisación de La Plata (Improvisation Group of La Plata), organized by Zubillaga with Jorge Blarduni and Enrique Gerardi, all three of whom were students at CLAEM. Larrain counts Cerrato, Zubillaga, Blarduni, and Gerardi among his "teachers" in this early period of his career, as well as Cordobes musician Oscar Bazán (an early experimentalist also connected to CLAEM) and the influential, politically active mixed media artist Leon Ferrari.

I have outlined the details of the developmental periods in the lives of Gregorio, Chavarri, and Larrain (and to a lesser extent de Pedro) in order to illustrate their cosmopolitan nature, the various interlocking networks to which they were connected, and their wide-ranging aesthetic influences; these elements played important roles in MMM's aesthetic aims and direction (fig. 12.4). The quotidian cosmopolitanism that drew these artists together was one of affinity, shared aesthetic, and countercultural outlook. The transnational aesthetics the young artists were absorbing and sharing with one another would soon be reshaped into their own autochthonous expressions, drawn from a wide range of sources, with inspiration flowing from both within and outside Argentina.

³⁰ Benito Juárez is a rural area of the pampas, in the southern section of the province of Buenos Aires.

³¹ Ramiro Larrain, email to author, August 18, 2015.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.



FIGURE 12.4. Movimiento Música Más in Café Tortoni, c. 1970. Used by courtesy of Guillermo Gregorio.

1969—THE FORMATION OF MOVIMIENTO MÚSICA MÁS

The arts and music scene of 1960s Argentina was a complex period of almost obsessive aesthetic internationalization, in an ultimately failed attempt to bring Argentine arts to global attention. There was an enormous amount of institutional support for this internationalist project, but the relationship between artists and the institutions eventually became untenable, in part because of the perceived imperialist, capitalist, and ideologically conservative nature of some of the funding sources.³⁶ This tension generated by the 1960s Argentine internationalist project, and its attempted institutionalization of the avant-garde, is embodied in painter and sculptor Pablo Suárez's

³⁶ Andrea Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

1968 “resignation” letter written in response to an invitation to present work at the Di Tella Institute: “I cannot accept . . . an Institute that represents cultural centralization, institutionalization The institution only lets in products that are already prestigious, which it uses when either they are no longer applicable or they are beyond reproach . . . that is, it uses them without running any risk.”³⁷ Suárez continues his polemic, stating that the meaning of any topical work is nullified by its acceptance of institutions and that artists “who want to be understood must say it in the street or where they will not be distorted.”³⁸

The Di Tella Institute was one of the primary benefactors of the internationalization project, having been initially established by two young industrialist heirs interested in making Buenos Aires a center for artistic experimentation. In his important research (some of which appears in this volume) on CLAEM, which was established at the Di Tella Institute in 1962, Eduardo Herrera has traced the support of the center to not only the Di Tella brothers but also to US actors involved with cultural Cold War development plans aimed at Latin America. While Herrera has not found direct financial connections to CLAEM from programs such as President John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress initiative, he points out that “many of the individuals involved in the formulation of these policies and the general notions that they held were in contact [with] and belonged to the same social networks as those in the philanthropic foundations that provided grants, such as those for the art centers at the Di Tella Institute [e.g., the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations].”³⁹ Herrera argues that it is “not just that these ideas were the backdrop for the birth of projects like the CLAEM, but that the same groups of people, acting in different structural positions, also articulated the discourses of modernization in various sectors—many of which were open to them as a specific result of their economic capacity.”⁴⁰ The music center was just one of several arts centers housed at Di Tella—the others focusing on the visual arts and theater—but it was an important site for the creation of work by Latin American composers who would later become internationally well known. In addition, the Di Tella Institute sponsored residencies by international composers, including Iannis Xenakis, Aaron Copland, Olivier Messiaen, Earle Brown and Luigi Nono—a group MMM founder Norberto Chavarri sardonically calls “the grand maestros of *gatopardismo*,” a literary reference which, roughly translated, signifies on the idea that “everything changes but nothing changes.”⁴¹

³⁷ Pablo Suárez, “Letter of Resignation” (1968), in Inés Katzenstein, ed., *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-garde* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 291.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Eduardo Herrera, “The CLAEM and the Construction of Elite Art Worlds: Philanthropy, Latin Americanism and Avant-garde Music” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 2013), 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, September 8, 2010. “Gatopardismo” is a reference to a mid-1950s novel by Sicilian author Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in which one of the story’s characters suggests that “if we want everything to stay the same, we must change everything.”

Di Tella was the site of the first meeting of the three artists who would form MMM. It became the ideological whipping boy of MMM, which somewhat disparagingly called those involved with it the “mainstream avant-garde.” On the other hand a number of the artists at Di Tella felt that MMM’s members were not serious enough about their craft as artists, in part because of their use of nonmusicians and the general public in a number of their works.⁴²

It was a performance on September 24, 1969, by Larry Austin at Di Tella that brought Guillermo Gregorio, Norberto Chavarri, and Roque de Pedro together. After the concert, Gregorio struck up a conversation with Chavarri and de Pedro, and the three headed to a café for a heated discussion of aesthetics and politics, during which, Gregorio remembers, “they said they were planning a *movement*, not a group . . . we discussed that it [would be] music ‘plus’ other things that were not exactly music.”⁴³ Chavarri’s memories of the founding of MMM are slightly more impressionistic:

We did not feel affinity with those “executive first class” musicians with electronic musings or the laboratory of Stockhausen. We were closer to Satie than Ravel, more Weill than Webern. Now, in the distance, I visualize the moment of awakening to my vocation as when atoms become unstable and are able to impregnate the sky, exploding with something unusual . . . One night I met two architects who participated in this “atomic instability,” and who were also looking for something new and different to place their artistic concerns. Adrián Barcesat and Guillermo Gregorio had much to contribute in building this multidisciplinary group. We discovered each other as cultural orphans, and that encouraged us to unite our skills.⁴⁴

The trio decided to call the group Movimiento Música Más in order to introduce themselves “as a group of distinct and diverse intellectuals trying to involve the community in the creation of collective art.”⁴⁵

According to Gregorio and Chavarri, MMM’s committed focus to collective art making and active engagement with the general public (as opposed to a passive consumption model) set them apart from their Argentine contemporaries. Chavarri has noted the reasons for the experimentation of MMM: “We were people from lower middle class *barrios* in a little corner of South America. We had nothing to lose if we burned the ships of civilization with our incursions into the continent of experimentation.”⁴⁶

⁴² Gregorio recounts a story of a well-known visiting US composer being shepherded away from MMM members after a concert by people connected to CLAEM as they passed each other on a stairway, in a seeming effort to keep this individual from speaking to the MMM artists. That said, it is important to note that some composers who were associated with what Gregorio and Chavarri called the “mainstream avant-garde” of Buenos Aires were supportive of MMM’s activities—for example, Luis Arias, Enrique Gerardi, and Luis Zubillaga. Guillermo Gregorio, interview with the author, November 17, 2008.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, September 8, 2010.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

In fact, MMM felt they were marginalized by the “mainstream avant-garde” because they were not part of the “elite art worlds” of CLAEM. Chavarri’s statement highlights the importance of class in MMM’s critique of CLAEM but also further explains MMM’s inclusion of both autodidacts and nonmusicians in both their membership and their performances. The choice was intentional, and while their aesthetic orientation welcomed the stochastic “chaos” in their work that this decision produced, it was also a class-based and politically minded commitment to their ideals, keeping in line with MMM’s hope of making “something more than music.”⁴⁷

The group’s membership was fluid but included photographers, graphic designers, painters, and blue-collar laborers in addition to musicians and composers. Though Gregorio had had some contact with the proto-Fluxus work of La Monte Young, the MMM founders never discussed Fluxus as a model or inspiration for the movement. (In hindsight, both he and Chavarri say that the group was “practically the definition of Fluxus.”)⁴⁸

The group’s first collective work was an event at the Opera Theatre at the close of the International Congress of Architects in Buenos Aires in 1969; the theme that year was “architecture as a social factor.”⁴⁹ The piece had all the components of the MMM pieces that would follow. It was highly theatrical, provoking the public to interact and take part in the performance—whether they knew they were or not. In addition, traditional concepts of music and musicality were not the primary concern of the work but a by-product of the social process set in motion with the work’s activities.

We prepared a work that would close the show. We worked together, creating *El tiempo y el coro*, our debut work. We entered the stage as members of a choir in concert dress and remained silent and still for a long time, projecting a hieratic attitude and looking at the public. This eventually made the audience upset and outraged by the unbearable silence that was occurring, and they began to insult and shout. The public ended up becoming the real choir, and the “choir members” standing on stage started clapping, to unveil their role as the spectators. We managed to reverse the roles, a goal that was more outrageous than desired.⁵⁰

Ramiro Larrain attended this first performance by MMM as an audience member and, struck by their work and aesthetic aims, cast his lot in with the budding collective.⁵¹ The confrontational and participatory nature of the piece charted a course for MMM’s future work, but also reflected the artistic milieu of the Argentine art scene at this time. This period was immediately after the groundbreaking Tucumán Arde (Tucumán

⁴⁷ Guillermo Gregorio, interview with the author, November 16, 2008.

⁴⁸ Shortly after the formation of MMM, Gregorio “devoured” copies of the seminal journal of avant-garde music *Source*, edited by Larry Austin, which Gregorio had borrowed from Luis Zubillaga. Ibid.

⁴⁹ International Union of Architects, “All Congresses,” <http://www.uia-architectes.org/en/participer/congres/tous-les-congres>, accessed August 22, 2017.

⁵⁰ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, September 8, 2010.

⁵¹ Ramiro Larrain, email to author, August 18, 2015.

Is Burning) activities of 1968 in Buenos Aires and Rosario, during which a group of vanguard artists (including León Ferrari, one of Larrain's self-described mentors) sought to break down the divide between art and the everyday and between art and politics—as other contemporaneous international art movements were attempting to do at the time. There was also a move to critique the internationalist project (and a specific government “union busting” labor dispute in Tucumán province) in an attempt to create a revolutionary yet identifiably Argentine creative practice. In developing this emerging revolutionary arts practice, many artists “left the limits of institutional boundaries and took to the streets,” which Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman point out “entails the loss of the safety of a known environment to an unprotected, vulnerable place. You risk not only the artist's own body, but also the body of the work, which sometimes coincides with the body of the public.”⁵² Longoni and Mestman also point out that in this violent and highly politicized period, the language of violence (perhaps unsurprisingly) was extremely prevalent in contemporaneous artists' writings.⁵³

This transmutation of violence into both the aesthetics of the period and the broader collective subconscious of Argentine society is echoed in Carassai's work, which presents compelling evidence of ubiquitous visual and linguistic metaphors of violence in Argentine mass media outlets during this period. One key example is the use of the word “liquidate” in advertising from the period that slyly implied both the sales and assassination usages of the word. Carassai also notes that in the early 1970s “the verb ‘to kill’ became a positive superlative expression, especially for young people, synonymous with something great or spectacular,” as well as the commonplace use of imagery of riflescopes and circular targets that “were also successful advertising strategies” and “could be found everywhere from magazine covers to advertisements for industrial bearings.”⁵⁴

Leon Ferrari wrote at the time that among the concerns of Tucumán Arde was the internationalist tendencies of the period that were perceived as “ordering” artists to “make art without ideology, without meaning . . . for an audience composed of the cultural and social elite.”⁵⁵ Ferrari continues: “The artist of the Left therefore suffers a dissociation between what he thinks and what he makes,” pointing out that when artists made works to subvert this conundrum and those works become successful, the result was a “failure of their intentions . . . so art also becomes an enemy of the artist, deforming his ideas, pacifying his rancor.”⁵⁶ Ferrari points out that the resultant relationship between self-identified revolutionary artists and the art economies in which they were enmeshed becomes one in which a “buyer didn't care if he was being insulted as long as the insult was artistic . . . the accused who buys an accusation is patronizing

⁵² Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán Arde”* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2008), 305.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Sebastián Carassai, *The Argentine Silent Majority: Middle Classes, Politics, Violence, and Memory in the Seventies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 239, 228.

⁵⁵ León Ferrari, “The Art of Meanings” (1968), in Katzenstein, *Listen Here Now!*, 311.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

the accuser, using him as a trophy of his own class, as a trophy of his class's wisdom."⁵⁷ Ferrari's indictment is leveled at both the bourgeois art market's co-option of politically charged art as a "trophy" to prove its "class's wisdom," as well as any artists naïve enough to think the political content of their work can remain ideologically intact after being subjected to the art economy's capitalist machinations.

Regarding this larger historical backdrop of 1960s Argentine artists' incorporation of politics in their work, Andrea Giunta has described "a constant friction between the political and cultural spheres" that led to a situation in which "politics became unavoidable for artists not only as a theme in their work, but also as a problem that had to be resolved with the creation of new art forms."⁵⁸ Indeed, the discourse among artists at the time was rife with manifestos like Ferrari's. As Giunta indicates, the decade-plus of institutionally based and funded internationalism had largely failed, and "if the avant-garde wanted to continue being a disruptive element, if it hoped to upset the established order, it could no longer act within the framework of the institutions."⁵⁹

It is in this charged environment that MMM took their work into the plazas, streets, and public transit systems of Buenos Aires, in an attempt to engage the public directly with experimentalism that might puncture the illusory veil between artists and their public. The group was deeply interconnected with the broader arts community that was working through these aesthetic and political crises. Larrain's citing of prominent visual artists as mentors during this period, Gregorio's multiarts background as an architect and musician, and the inclusion in MMM's membership of photographers and other artists are but a few pieces of evidence that illustrate MMM's intersection with the broader art worlds of Buenos Aires.

PLAZA PARA UNA SIESTA DE DOMINGO (1970) AND MÚSICA PARA
COLECTIVO LÍNEA 7 (1971)

Beginning in roughly 1970, MMM began to create a series of collectively composed outdoor performance actions in the urban environment of Buenos Aires. Chavarri called these works "pedestrian musics" (*músicas peatonales*—a play on words suggesting both "pedestrian" and "tonal"). The first piece in this series, titled *Registro de circulación vehicular*, composed by Gregorio, featured instrumentalists standing on street corners and using passing cars as a graphic score, with varying aspects of the sound being determined by the cars' colors, velocities, makes, and models, with others making notes on the vehicles' activities. As Chavarri notes, these "pedestrian musics" were created "in the social context of a city in conflict—its inhabitants walked in silence, with inexpressive looks of 'don't mess with me.' [The pieces] were intended to break

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics*, 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 268.

this routine of ‘urban mourning’ with the desire to shake the citizenry and observe their reactions.”⁶⁰

Plaza para una siesta de domingo (Plaza for a Sunday Afternoon Nap) began with the idea of holding a birdsong contest in a public plaza, since many locals owned pet birds, and gradually expanded into a multimovement performance piece. The announcement in the mainstream newspaper *Clarín* (to which de Pedro was an occasional contributor) of the “first national birdsong contest” trumpeted that “birds of all races can participate” and that the “songs would be judged by a panel of composers.”⁶¹ Citizens who wanted their birds to compete in the contest were to visit an MMM “office” between specific hours of the day to enter their feathered friends in the event.

The performance took place on Sunday, November 8, 1970, at 3:00 p.m. in the centrally located Plaza Rubén Darío, in the middle of what would normally be “siesta,” a time when most people would be free to attend. The work began with a series of “conga lines,” starting from the peripheries of the plaza, led by members of MMM, and followed by children and unsuspecting passersby, who were handed small sound-making children’s toys, such as clickers and kazoos, and that then processed toward the center of the plaza, where a large cage was constructed, with Chavarri inside, conducting simple rhythmic and melodic instructions for the musicians and participating public. Throughout this procession, the contestants in the birdsong contest (both feathered and not) had begun gathering throughout the plaza, adding their own chirping din to the lines of MMM “pied pipers.”

The birdsong contest was held after everyone had processed to the location of the large cage, where Gregorio and Chavarri clearly recall the sounds of dozens of singing birds mixing with the laughter of children.⁶² Following the contest, or perhaps during it, the members of MMM who had led groups through the plaza entered the large cage and began playing simple melodic fragments that the public outside the cage were meant to spread across the plaza (fig. 12.5).

Gradually MMM wound down this portion of the performance, and children were allowed to use the giant cage as a jungle gym, before the event came to an end (fig. 12.6).

Another piece in the “pedestrian music” series, Chavarri’s 1971 composition *Música para colectivo línea 7* (Music for Bus Line 7), found the group performing on a city bus, using the vehicle itself as an instrument, fusing the group’s experimentalist sensibilities with the Buenos Aires public transit system and its unknowing riders (fig. 12.7).

Chavarri recalls the impetus for the work:

Six musicians boarded a bus in regular service. Each musician took a place in the vehicle with sticks, and played percussion according to a score designed to

⁶⁰ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, September 8, 2010.

⁶¹ “Canto de pájaros,” *Clarín*, November 6, 1970.

⁶² Guillermo Gregorio, interview with the author, November 17, 2008.



FIGURE 12.5. Movimiento Música Más performing in a cage during Chavarri's *Plaza para una siesta de domingo*, 1970. Used by courtesy of Guillermo Gregorio.

convert the movements of the vehicle into rhythmic patterns. The driver agreed to deliver a printed program of the “concert” to passengers boarding. The driver could also interact with the musicians, honking. The real conceptual work was to convert a transport vehicle into an instrument that was executed from within and moving through the streets, transporting the audience.⁶³

The performance attracted the attention of *La Nación*, a major Argentine newspaper, which ran a two-page story with photos of the event and the headline “MMM Claim Their Position: Quotidian Sounds Have All the Possibilities of Being Considered Aesthetically.”⁶⁴ Luisa Valenzuela’s article begins by stating that MMM are the “sons” of Erik Satie (“the grandfather”) and John Cage (“the father”). The article then retells the story of the group’s founding and its aesthetic aims. The group had significant coverage in the press throughout this period of their work, perhaps due to connections to that network through the writing of de Pedro and Chavarri, perhaps due to the flamboyantly public nature of their projects, or both.⁶⁵

⁶³ Norberto Chavarri, email to author, September 8, 2010.

⁶⁴ Luisa Valenzuela, “Turning a Bus into a Musical Instrument,” *La Nación*, August 23, 1971.

⁶⁵ The group also received notices in *La Opinión* in both 1973 and 1975, the latter a review of Chavarri’s 1975 final composition for the group, *Film without Film*.

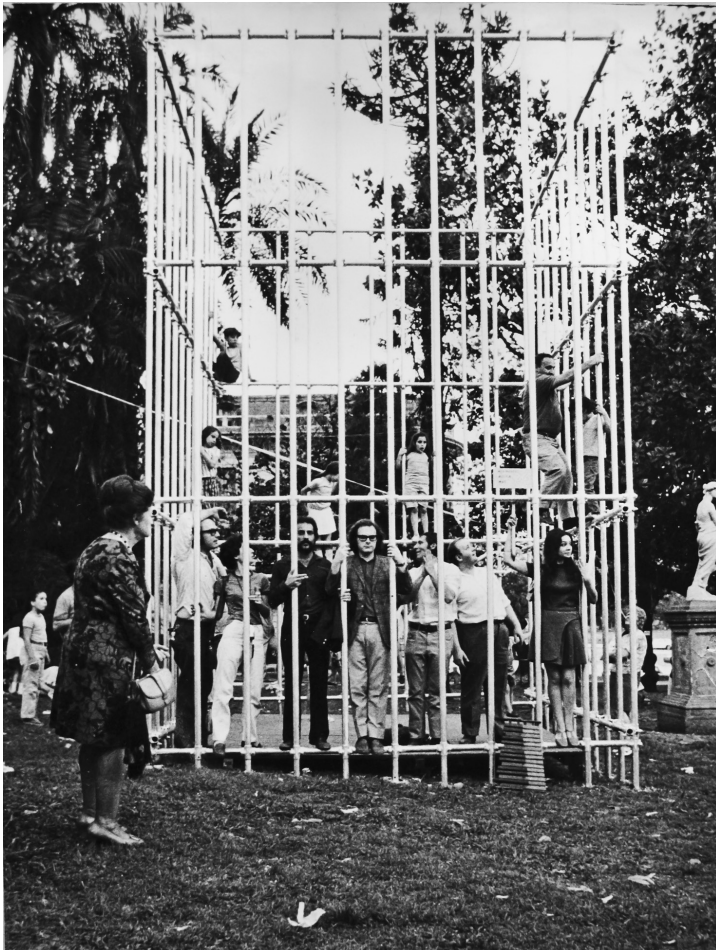


FIGURE 12.6. Movimiento Música Más performing in a cage during *Plaza para una siesta de domingo*, 1970. Used by courtesy of Guillermo Gregorio.

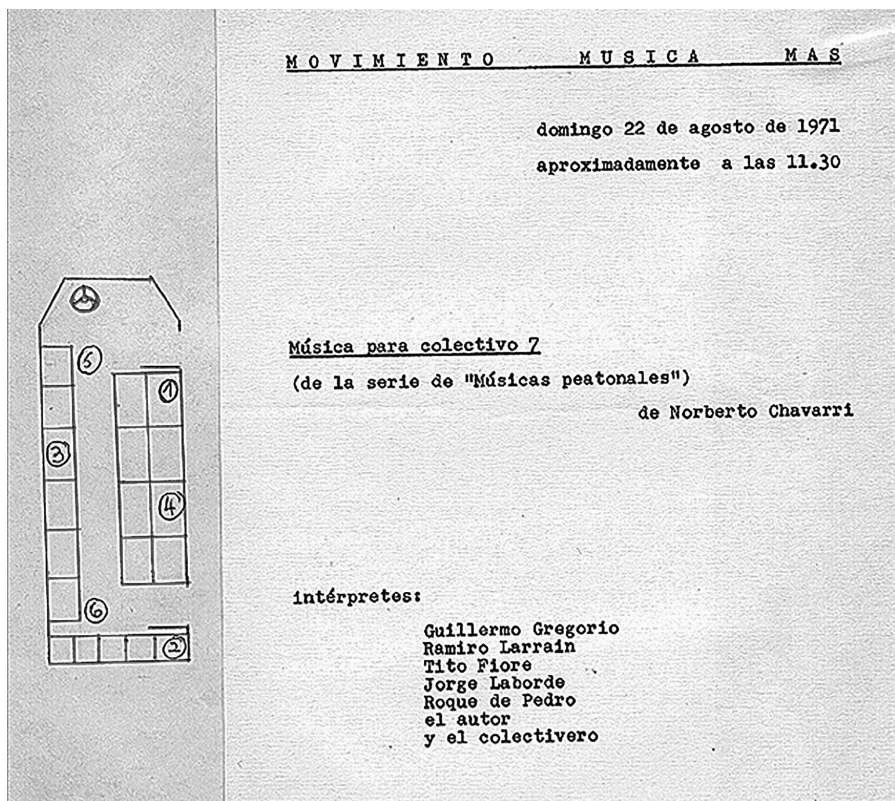


FIGURE 12.7. Program handed to “audience members” by bus driver during performance of Chavarri’s *Música para colectivo línea 7*. Used by courtesy of Guillermo Gregorio.

IMPACT, HISTORICAL MEMORY, AND THE “CAMOUFLAGE OF NAIVETÉ”

In his 1968 essay “Art and Social Commitment,” Argentine poet Ricardo Carreira asks, “what kind of art should we be making . . . ?”⁶⁶ His suggestion: “The more massive and quotidian the better. Quotidian like my shoes, but as though one of them were much too big and the other much too small.”⁶⁷ Carreira suggests that in order for a work to exude a social and political engagement, it must simultaneously feel like an essential part of “the everyday” yet somehow also be remarkable and surprising, different from quotidian expectations. Even following these “guidelines,” however, he says, “art doesn’t make for total revolution . . . [it] can accompany it . . . the most effective art is that which is not alienated; when freedoms are curtailed, the art of freedom is precious.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ricardo Carreira, “Art and Social Commitment” (1968), in Katzenstein, *Listen Here Now!*, 317.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 318.

How might we evaluate the lasting political and social import of MMM's work, and how was MMM able to manifest such seemingly overtly political projects during a dictatorial regime? I suggest that MMM's activities, which were largely marginalized by the artistic institutions and institutionally affiliated artists of Buenos Aires, were also unknowingly "hidden" by a "camouflage of naiveté," resulting from exactly the amateurism that the more "mainstream" avant-gardists (to use MMM's terminology for their institutionally "approved" contemporaries) and the official arts institutions perceived in and ascribed to their work. While MMM's work flew in the face of traditional "good taste" and was sometimes deemed outrageous in the press, it was perhaps *because* their work was seen as "not serious" that the dictatorship may have greeted its political content with indifference.

This concept of a "camouflage of naiveté" dovetails to some degree with political scientist James C. Scott's work on power relations in discourse. Scott develops a theory of "public transcripts" and "hidden transcripts" to describe aspects of the performance of power and the dynamics of domination. "Public transcripts," according to Scott, result from "the theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination," producing "a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear."⁶⁹ It is in the best interest of the subordinate "to produce a more or less credible performance . . . making the gestures he knows are expected of him," which typically results in "convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values," sometimes creating the illusion that "subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination."⁷⁰ The power of these dominant "transcripts," Scott argues, is subverted via the "hidden transcripts" of subordinate discourse, which draws its power in part from being embedded in the "public transcript" while concurrently communicating "'off-stage,' beyond direct observation by power holders."⁷¹ Thus, the public performances by MMM, while adhering to a "public transcript" of the perceived amateurism and lack of seriousness ascribed to them by both the "mainstream avant-garde" in Buenos Aires and the dominating dictatorship, also communicated a "hidden transcript" of defiance and resistance that was, to use the vernacular, hidden in plain sight. In other words, MMM's domination of public space with seemingly absurd activities during this period of rigid control functioned as an animated and performative conversation that performed the gestures that the dominant forces expected while distracting them from a *sotto voce* insurgency that was asserted simultaneously, under cover.

With these conceptual touchstones in mind, what political content exists in these two MMM works? The performance of *Plaza para una siesta de domingo* took place free

⁶⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Scott is careful not to oversimplify by casting either of these "transcripts" as "right" or "wrong," instead encouraging an assessment of the discrepancy between them so one might "judge the impact of domination on public discourse." *Ibid.*, 5.

of charge in a public plaza on a Sunday during siesta, allowing, in theory, anyone to attend the event. The goal was to bring the people of Buenos Aires out into the tightly controlled public spaces of the regime to spend time together as a creative body, which in itself was a political action under the regime. The piece was an attempt to manifest Chavarri's hope of "breaking the routine" and "shaking up" the citizenry of Buenos Aires, whom he viewed as part of the (oversimplified and stereotyped) apolitical and/or apathetic Argentine "silent majority" during this period.⁷² The birdsong contest was announced as being open to "birds of all races," a symbolic and somewhat hidden gesture of universalism. In addition, the line between the "audience" and "performer" was blurred, with anyone being allowed to contribute to the sonic fabric of the event. Perhaps most obviously noteworthy is the presence of the cages, both those of the bird contestants and the giant cage the group performed in. According to Gregorio, the cages were overtly meant as allegories for the political situation at the time and the tight control of both personal and public space, which the MMM hoped to counteract with their artistic intervention.⁷³

But in regard to the constructed ideological division between MMM and the Di Tella Institute, one interesting yet contradictory issue remains: many of these MMM events were sponsored by municipalities or arts organizations.⁷⁴ How might we reconcile what seems to simply be a case of trading one form of institutional support for another? There is the important difference that the Di Tella Institute was in part funded by foreign entities and the MMM performances were facilitated by local organizations. Neither, however, was truly "countercultural," in the popular use of the term, because of their engagement with existing governmental and institutional structures. In addition, because of Chavarri and de Pedro's slightly more traditional pedigrees, they were able to activate, when needed, their network of contacts in the so-called legitimate music world to secure venues or other resources.⁷⁵

Feeling that MMM were playing both sides of the ideological field, on the one hand staging political performances as a marginalized artistic counterculture and on the other being able to mobilize fairly mainstream support networks for reportage and other forms of aid, eventually caused Gregorio, around 1973, to abandon his work with MMM as he went through a very personal political crisis: "It was [around] the time of the return of Perón . . . I thought it was a moment of political responsibility, and that I had to put [my work] in function [with] that . . . I got the feeling that Norberto and Roque didn't want to make anything explicitly political. So, I started considering that we were playing a game that was not in accordance with the social and political responsibility of

⁷² Sebastián Carassai has discussed this "silent majority" at length. He describes the citizenry who remained "aloof from political militancy" as having a "middle-class sensibility." See Carassai, *Argentine Silent Majority*, 66.

⁷³ Guillermo Gregorio, interview with the author, November 17, 2008.

⁷⁴ See, for example, the Center for Arts and Communication, founded by Jorge Glusberg (a wealthy industrialist not unlike the Di Tella brothers), which partially funded *Plaza para una siesta de domingo*.

⁷⁵ For example, in one case, MMM presented a piece with symphony orchestra at the Teatro Colón.

[the] moment . . . [which] required a certain kind of engagement.”⁷⁶ Larrain had a similar experience:

The dictatorship and the subsequent appearance of Perón put me in a very bad state, and suddenly I felt I could not be an artist. I had to stop all activities and just work in an obsessive way. I got seriously angry when someone called me an artist. This state lasted a long time, and cost a lot of therapy to get back to work. Luckily I started at the University of Buenos Aires as a teacher, founding a chair of photography for designers, and shortly after that I met again with León Ferrari and Elda Cerrato, and with their help I returned to my job as an artist but with a multimedia plan. I remain a political artist. In those early years of my return we worked on the memory of the dictatorship, with the motto “memory and justice” as a guide, both for cases of disappearance and for damages pseudo democracy caused to the workers and the country.⁷⁷

Chavarri’s involvement with MMM continued until 1975, though he also felt that the group had failed “to reach all its objectives. The dream of creating a community of creative amateurs didn’t solidify. We did, however, produce a vibrant effervescence and intensify the fires of our interior freedom. I still receive messages from people thanking me for the influence MMM had on their lives, though it nearly cost me my own.”⁷⁸ As Chavarri hauntingly describes it, “violence and intolerance have been present throughout my musical life. Before, during and after Onganía, with governments that were democratic or military—death came from both the left and the right . . . art was our exit door from the shadowy world that plagued us.”⁷⁹ The stories of MMM suggest that the deep and continuing problems of art making in Argentina are not simply delimited by what we as onlookers might call “times of turmoil,” such as those of the Onganía regime, but are wounds that continue to injure for years beyond the initial trauma.

THE CASE FOR “MINOR MUSICS”

One of the most obvious issues with the prevailing narratives on musical experimentalism is the still limited (but steadily diversifying) geographic purview of scholarship on the field, with this volume being one significant intervention. As scholars continue to push outward from studies of canonical locations of experimentalism like western

⁷⁶ Guillermo Gregorio, interview with the author, November 17, 2008.

⁷⁷ Ramiro Larrain, email to author, December 2, 2015.

⁷⁸ According to Chavarri, unknown assailants broke into his home with a photo of him in their hands and official paperwork to take him away to “who knows where.” He enlisted the help of a childhood friend who had a powerful family member in the federal police to save him. Norberto Chavarri, email to author, September 8, 2010.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Europe and the United States (and in particular New York City), we have an opportunity to learn from these so-called peripheral (or “minor”) forms of experimentalism and a responsibility to incorporate their unique expressions into a more globally representative historical narrative. For example, Egyptian composer Halim El Dabh’s 1944 wire recorder concrete music piece was created in the studios of Radio Cairo just as Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry began exploring the possibilities of multiple turntables and concrete sounds in France. Should facts like these affect the prevailing narrative of electronic music history or remain as footnotes or historical curios?

Certainly a growing number of scholars are reconsidering the “great stories” of musical experimentalism.⁸⁰ This case study and the other complexifying stories included in this volume are interventions for further exploration and critical revision of “major” histories. It should be noted, however, that simple inclusion is not the goal of “minor” histories, nor are they meant to displace “major” histories. In fact, as Branden Joseph has argued, “minor” histories are not isolated developments or self-contained movements unto themselves; they are in fact dependent on their contentious relationship to “major” histories for their importance. Joseph goes so far as to say that “if ‘minor’ artists retain a place within major history . . . it is on account of their relation of proximity to the movements and categories engendered by major history and because of the unceasing pressure that they exert upon them.”⁸¹ Furthermore, Joseph states that the persistence of “minor” histories “within the historical record, as a remainder (via preterition or slightly awkward footnotes), is a mark or acknowledgement of their effect.”⁸²

In the case of MMM, what mark is made on major histories when a group of largely self-taught, sometimes intentionally “amateurish” artists, inspired in part by the proto-Fluxus text pieces of La Monte Young, carry that cosmopolitan inspiration to very different localized ends, giving it a local “tint” born from the intense political and aesthetic strife of late 1960s Buenos Aires? How should the difficult and perilous political backdrop of a military regime affect our interpretation of these creative works, and the people who made them, as opposed to similar activities happening in democracies with protected free speech in other places around the world?

Clearly, as this is the first in-depth study of MMM’s work, not much of a historical mark has previously been made.⁸³ However, in placing MMM in counterpoint to Eduardo Herrera’s chapter here on the contemporaneous “major” history of CLAEM,

⁸⁰ See Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); and Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁸¹ Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*, 51.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ It should be noted that John Corbett wrote informative liner notes that included information on MMM for the 2000 CD release by Atavistic of Guillermo Gregorio’s early work *Otra Musica: Tape Music, Free Improvisation in Buenos Aires 1963–70* (UMS/ALP209CD).

the institutional, aesthetic, financial, and ideological positions of both groups of artists become clearer because of—not in spite of—their relation to one another, regardless of the fact that CLAEM is a known historical quantity and MMM has been, at best, “an awkward footnote.”

In addition, what we learn by examining MMM is something about how and what cultures remember. As eminent anthropologist Clifford Geertz once wrote, culture is the “stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.”⁸⁴ In this case, the prevailing stories told about this era of Argentine culture do not center on stories like that of MMM—or even that of CLAEM. Carassai, in his work on Argentina’s middle-class “silent majority” of the 1970s, concluded that although the protagonists in major histories of the period no doubt “occupied the center of the political stage,” there were also “countless anonymous stories unfold[ing] in the background, playing less of a leading role but still influencing, and at the same time suffering the influence of, the course that the events took.”⁸⁵ These actors, Carassai states, “may not have been the protagonists of history, but they were no mere spectators.”⁸⁶

Indeed, MMM’s members were “no mere spectators.” They demanded that their audiences step out of the anonymous comfort of being an observer to take an active role in their art actions, creating temporary aesthetic communities of the body politic that, for a moment, reimagined normative behavior in the public spaces of a city under the pall of a dictatorship as something audaciously incantatory and revelatory. Their art was carried out on the quotidian streets of Buenos Aires but posited a reimagined, alternative, surreal quotidian world that the poet Ricardo Carreira said should be “like my shoes, but as though one of them were much too big and the other much too small.”⁸⁷

In many ways, MMM fulfilled Jacques Ranciere’s definition of political activity in the arts as “reconfiguring the distribution of the perceptible,” introducing “new objects and subjects onto the common stage,” making “visible what was invisible” and making “audible as speaking beings those who were previously heard only as noisy animals.”⁸⁸ If, as Ranciere has described, political activity is “a conflict aimed at deciding what is speech or mere growl,” the artists of Movimiento Música Más have spoken boldly and clearly.⁸⁹

POSTSCRIPT

In the spring and summer of 2017, MMM re-emerged, fueled by a multi-generational mix of original members and younger artists and performers inspired by their work.

⁸⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 448.

⁸⁵ Carassai, *Argentine Silent Majority*, 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁷ Carreira, “Art and Social Commitment,” 317.

⁸⁸ Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011) , 4.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Luis Conde, the primary organizer of this renaissance, discovered MMM through an 18 September 2016 blog post by Victor Tapia, a 21-year-old Communication Sciences student at the University of Buenos Aires.⁹⁰ On his blog, Tapia presented MMM materials from a range of sources, including the text of one of this author's written interviews with Chavarri. Conde, born in 1965, is an experimental woodwind player and arts organizer who by coincidence has a studio in the same Conventillo de las Artes building where Chavarri and de Pedro had a studio in MMM's early days. Conde got in touch with original MMM members Larrain (with whom he had been acquainted since 2001), Pablo Zukerfeld, Chavarri, and eventually Gregorio, who was to be interviewed in the fall of 2017 in New York City by Conde and Argentine filmmakers Luciana Foglio and Luján Montes as part of an MMM video documentary project they began filming in May 2017.⁹¹ As Conde re-assembled these original members, he also began organizing events that would energize others, resulting in an ambitious series of new MMM actions, discussions, and performances that took place between August 10-31, 2017 at the National Bicentennial House, a venue "inaugurated in 2010 as a space dedicated to Argentine history," and sponsored in part by the Office of the Minister of Culture.⁹²

As Chavarri has noted about this surprising reinvigoration of the group, and their sudden reincorporation into Argentine history through a series of new performances at a state-sponsored venue, "the most valuable thing about MMM is not the vindication of our past, but a projection toward the future, embodied in young generations who share our passion for experimental art and collective participation."⁹³

⁹⁰ <https://universoepigrafe.wordpress.com/2016/09/18/bondis-plazas-y-experimentacion-movimiento-musica-mas-los-olvidados-vanguardistas-de-la-musica-argentina/>

⁹¹ Luis Conde, email to author, August 20, 2017.

⁹² See <http://www.casadelbicentenario.gob.ar/category/la-casa> and <http://www.casadelbicentenario.gob.ar/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/gacetilla-MMM-FINAL-2.pdf>

⁹³ Norberto Chavarri, facebook message to author, August 21, 2017. Translation by the author.

AFTERWORD

Locating Hemispheric Experimentalisms

Benjamin Piekut

THE FIRST ADJECTIVE in the phrase “American experimental music” has, since its discursive consolidation in the 1950s, persistently if tacitly referred to the United States of America. After Cornelius Cardew met John Cage and La Monte Young at the end of that decade, *American* extended to the United Kingdom in a kind of special relationship cemented via Anglo-Saxon whiteness.¹ In his classic book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (1974), Michael Nyman declared: “Experimental music appears to have sprung up quite spontaneously in the early fifties: it was not the culmination of a long line of development, being largely without a linear history.”² Of course, Nyman does list some precursors, including Charles Ives, Erik Satie, Luigi Russolo, and the microtonal experiments of Ferruccio Busoni, Alois Haba, and Harry Partch. But it is clear that he does not consider these precursors to have formed a coherent tradition, since he calls both Cardew and Young (born in 1936 and 1935, respectively) “founding experimental composers.”³

Yet US composers and writers in the first half of the century used the term “experimental” frequently, though not without contradiction, to mark a distinction from the more common term “modern”; the way they did it tells a relevant story about

¹ Amy C. Beal, “Negotiating Cultural Allies: American Music in Darmstadt, 1946–1956,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53, no. 1 (2000): 105–139.

² Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1974] 1999), 31.

³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

hemispheric nationalism and its correspondence with shifts in the conceptualization of “American experimental music.” For authors like Aaron Copland or Henry Cowell, the “experimentalists” were those composers working on the latest melodic, harmonic, and metrical advances; the notation of complex rhythms; or the standardization of terminology for complex musical techniques like polytonality and cross-rhythms.⁴ (In Copland’s opinion, the best young moderns—Paul Hindemith, Darius Milhaud, Sergei Prokofiev, and Ernst Krenek—were not experimenters.) The quest for more new sounds and how to control and reproduce them marked experimentalism for Cowell, but he also wrapped the concept in a discourse of nationalism, one that seems relevant to the readers of this volume, given the historical mutability of the term “America” when counterposed to “Europe.” For example, Cowell’s introduction to *American Composers on American Music* (1933) outlines a fascinating taxonomy of what he understood to be American composers active in the first third of the century. Though not directly concerned with experiment per se, his eight categories advance a Pan-American nationalism imbricated with notions of originality: those who were developing “indigenous American” materials in an original way; foreign-born composers who had made America their home; Americans who wrote original music but maintained Teutonic influence; Americans who wrote original music but maintained French influence; Americans who wrote unoriginal music by taking indigenous materials and adapting them to European styles; those who were unoriginal and were writing European-style music; foreign-born Americans who composed in a European style; and young, original Americans who had not yet developed mature voices.⁵

From my perspective, Cowell’s prized first category—Americans writing original American music—closely corresponds to latter-day constructions of the American experimental tradition, with “originality” substituting for “experimental.” Aside from the slight dissonances of Colin McPhee and Roy Harris, Cowell’s grouping—himself, Ives, Carl Ruggles, Charles Seeger, Henry Brant, Ruth Crawford, Carlos Chávez, Alejandro García Caturla, and Amadeo Roldán—would be familiar to students of “American experimental music.” The inclusion here of a Mexican (Chávez) and two Cubans (García Caturla and Roldán) reflects Cowell’s role as organizer of the Pan-American Association of Composers (cofounded by Cowell, Chávez, and Edgard Varèse in 1928) after 1929, as well as the emergence of an elite kind of hemispheric resistance to European cultural hegemony.⁶ Indeed, as Deanne Root has documented, the Pan-American Association of Composers may have included twice as many US Americans

⁴ Aaron Copland, “Music since 1920,” *Modern Music* 5, no. 3 (1928): 16–20; Henry Cowell, “The Music of Edgar [sic] Varèse,” *Modern Music* 5, no. 2 (1928): 8–18; Henry Cowell, “Our Inadequate Notation,” *Modern Music* 4, no. 3 (1927): 28–33; Henry Cowell, “New Terms for New Music,” *Modern Music* 5, no. 4 (1928): 21–27.

⁵ Henry Cowell, “Trends in American Music,” in Henry Cowell, ed., *American Composers on American Music* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1933), 3–13.

⁶ Deanne Root, “The Pan American Association of Composers (1928–1934),” *Anuario Interamericano de Investigacion Musical* 8 (1972): 48–70; Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 154–156.

as Latin Americans, but Chávez, García Caturla, Roldán, and Heitor Villa-Lobos together had more works performed under the auspices of the organization than any other composer except Ives, who was the group's main source of financial support.

Almost thirty years later, in his preface to the 1962 edition of *American Composers on American Music*, Cowell wrote: "Today . . . there is no question but that those who were most determined and uninhibited in their 'experimentalism,' and who seemed so shockingly untamed in the Twenties, are now widely thought of as representing the 'essence' of America."⁷ American composers were only really American if they were different from Europeans. The way to be different from Europeans was to be original (in 1933) or experimental (in 1962); therefore, experimentality was intrinsically American. The precise *manner* in which Americans might set themselves off from European influence, however, was open to a wide array of individual choices, so Cowell published a book that was open to the many "different trends" of composition in the Americas. He marveled at this wide range of musics, and, again in 1962, wrote: "I have never believed that any one individual could speak for an entire continent, in all its variety of cultures and societies. . . . It seemed to me even then [in 1933] that to be American was to honor difference, and to welcome the experimental, the fresh and the new, instead of trying to establish in advance the road our creative life should follow."⁸ By the time he wrote these words, however, the Latin American artists had fallen off the lists of commentators on American experimentalism. As Amy Beal has demonstrated, Wolfgang Edward Rebner's 1954 lecture in Darmstadt, "American Experimental Music," had connected Ives, Cowell, Varèse, and Cage to a tradition that, in Beal's apt summation, emphasized "*sound* rather than *system*."⁹ Cowell's suggestive grouping notwithstanding, this lecture is the earliest known articulation of the notion of an experimental tradition. The narrow focus of the presentation meant that Cowell's Latin Americans, like most of his others, do not appear in Rebner's talk.

Meanwhile, Cage was developing a distinct position on experimentalism in essays such as "Experimental Music: Doctrine" (1955), "Experimental Music" (1957), and "History of Experimental Music in the United States" (1959), all of which turn away from Cowell's research-and-development model and toward something more Rebneresque: a kind of sound- and listening-based practice that highlighted spontaneity, process, graphic notation, and—a residue of R&D—magnetic tape. In "Experimental Music: Doctrine" (1955), Cage remained silent on the issue of precursors, influences, or a sense of experimental tradition, though he was clear that his subject was experimental music in the United States. This geographical limitation raised the possibility of an experimental music *outside* the United States, however, and "History of Experimental Music in the United States" would indeed make reference not to Latin American figures but to European experimentalism, specifically calling the tape music of Henri Pousseur, Luciano Berio, Bruno Maderna, Pierre Boulez,

⁷ Cowell, "Introduction to the 1962 Edition," in *American Composers on American Music*, x.

⁸ *Ibid.*, vii–viii.

⁹ Beal, "Negotiating Cultural Allies," 122.

and Karlheinz Stockhausen “more experimental” than that of their North American counterparts.¹⁰

Read in light of the rest of the article, however, the remark is strangely out of place, for the 1959 piece is Cage’s most explicitly nationalist statement on the experimental tradition. Reflecting on the pre-1950 (and then still current) understanding of experimentalism, Cage wrote: “If one uses the word ‘experimental’ (somewhat differently than I have been using it) to mean simply the introduction of novel elements into one’s music, we find that America has a rich history.”¹¹ By loosening his conceptualization of the term to include Cowell’s sense of material and technical expansion, Cage created a kind of non-European buffer zone that included himself (prepared piano), Brant (spatially separated ensembles), Crawford and Gunther Schuller (sliding tones), Leo Ornstein (clusters), Dane Rudhyar (“resonances”), Alan Hovhaness (“near-Eastern aspects”), Lou Harrison (tack piano), Harry Partch (new instruments), and Virgil Thomson (who used something Cage referred to as the “athematic continuity of clichés”). Of course, had Cage followed this meaning of experimentalism into the 1950s, as many other writers had done, he would have found himself on the margins of a world where composers understood themselves as researchers working with the latest sound technologies. Instead, Cage aimed to construct a useable past for New York School experimentalism that could stand in opposition to the domination of Europe, here symbolized by its evil twins Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. His buffer zone, he wrote, “are not experimental composers in my terminology, but neither are they part of the stream of European music which though formerly divided into neo-classicism and dodecaphony has become one in America under Arthur Berger’s term, consolidation: consolidation of the acquisitions of Schoenberg and Stravinsky.”¹²

Cage names these two composers no less than four times in his short essay, and insists that experimentalism—“what is urgently needed”—can only occur in the United States, whose “native musical resource” is its “capacity for experimentation.”¹³ In an unintentional but eerie reference to the emerging US global hegemony, Cage observed that it would not be easy for Europe to give up being Europe. “It will, nevertheless, and must: for the world is one world now.”¹⁴

I doubt that Cage was here referring to the massive postwar project of establishing US military bases throughout vanquished territories in Europe and the Pacific, an unprecedented projection of force that has continued to the present day. But the Marshall Plan—specifically its endeavors intended to demonstrate the United States’ credentials in cultural leadership—was a crucial part of the framework in which Cage defined his one-world/US nationalism.¹⁵ Significantly, Cowell’s Pan-American

¹⁰ John Cage, *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁵ Georgina Born has perceptively called this “the ideological conflation of ‘America’ with ‘the world’”; see Born, introduction to Georgina Born and David Hesmondalgh, eds., *Western Music and Its*

resistance to Europe had given way, by the time of Cage's accounts of the 1950s, to a US-centered narrative that foregrounded the New York School.¹⁶

I provide this short (and ultimately inadequate) survey of groupings to suggest that Latin American music and musicians have not always been absent from a broader understanding of American experimentalism, just as Latin@s in the United States have participated in historical and contemporary experimental scenes. Although I agree with Beal that the notion of an "American experimental tradition" only coheres in the 1950s, a similar concept operated hazily in the decades before, when Latin American artists were audibly present in the proceedings. But I also wish to note the cultural ramifications of a shift in US imperialism from a hemispheric to a global scale following World War II. These emergent postwar historical circumstances provide the backdrop for the essays in this book, all of which consider events after 1950. In place of the shared New World nationalisms of the early twentieth century, the artists and intellectuals discussed in these pages navigate an experimentalism that runs up against other currents: countercultural cosmopolitanism and the Latin American New Left; international market conditions defined by World Music 1.0 and 2.0; US government- and foundation-supported research centers; new political valences defined through decolonization; and an academy ignorant of or flummoxed by the proliferating varieties of advanced music making in the second half of the century. Above all, as the editors and contributors make clear, they encounter an existing scholarly discourse that has foreclosed a hemispheric understanding of American experimentalism in favor of a largely US-UK version.

These essays help to build a better picture of the multiplicity of postwar reconfigurations of the global cultural field, and they avoid the discourses of belatedness and anachronism that have long shadowed discussions of modernism and avant-gardism outside of Europe.¹⁷ Contributing to the massive project of rethinking how we tell the stories of postwar music, the volume goes beyond offering an intervention into experimental music studies. But it does that, too, by inciting a tension about terminology that twists around the difference between the editors' aim to localize experimentalism in the actions of knowing practitioners and their desire to bring these single cases into a dialogue under the umbrella of the term itself. In this sense, they participate in the search for a theoretical model that acknowledges differences as well as similarities in

Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 21.

¹⁶ Peter Yates's introductory essay to John Edmunds and Gordon Boelzner, *Some Twentieth Century American Composers: A Selective Bibliography*, vol. 1 (New York: New York Public Library, 1959), also neglected mention of Latin Americans; see Amy C. Beal, "'Experimentalists and Independents Are Favored': John Edmunds in Conversation with Peter Yates and John Cage, 1959–61," *Notes* 64, no. 4 (2008): 659–687.

¹⁷ On this subject, see Leon Wainwright, *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011); see also the synchronic curatorial approach of Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, eds., *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic: 1945–1965* (Munich: Prestel, 2017).

local experimental practices. As art historian David Cottingham has written in another context, “this model would need to acknowledge discursive determinants and local variations, the tension, perhaps the dialectic, between commonalities and differential spaces.”¹⁸

I am less interested in a kind of linguistic nominalism that restricts us to the terminology and concepts of historical subjects than I am in cultivating awareness of the situated practices of experimentalism, as the editors put it, such that we can transform experimentalism from what Ann Stoler calls a “summary statement,” which precludes further analysis by posing as complete and self-evident, into a “working concept,” which we use provisionally to track variations and suggest revisions.¹⁹ Many of the authors in this volume closely follow the local usage of terms like *avant-garde*, *experimentalism*, and *vanguardia* in order to resist “any universalist claims about [experimentalism’s] stylistic sonic outcome,”²⁰ according to the editors. Indeed, the evidence collected herein demonstrates that Latin@ and Latin American experimenters adopted a range of positions on the work of people like Cage or Stockhausen or on the concepts of chance, improvisation, and politics. They adapted, ignored, revised, misunderstood, emulated, or rejected existing models and invented new ones with local discursive, material, and repertorial resources. Someone like Cage never had a monopoly on chance, of course, and music makers around the world developed their own artistic strategies quite independently from the US composer’s activities.

We might conceive of this experimentalism as a vernacular formation, one that is “spoken” in local dialects that translate imperfectly.²¹ Such a conception would emphasize use, adaptation, and process rather than the aesthetic contemplation of fixed objects prized by the cultivated arts. Moreover, it would insist that “global experimentalism” must be more than the simple sum of all experiments in sound, one that betrays a latent consistency across discrepant regional settings; instead, the vernacular helps to describe a network of inconsistencies drawn together in practice, across a host of differences.

Like any *avant-garde*, this vernacular one—wherever it manifests—confronts persistent aesthetic norms and cultural values against which insurgent challengers can define alternatives (often drawing on but renovating those same established vocabularies).²² In a post- or neocolonial setting, as art historian Nelly Richard points out in “The Problematic of Latin American Art,” these *avant-gardists* work at the crossroads

¹⁸ David Cottingham, “The Formation of the Avant-garde in Paris and London, c. 1880–1915,” *Art History* 35, no. 3 (2012): 596–621.

¹⁹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 206.

²⁰ See the introduction.

²¹ Since 1900, the global vernacular has been forged through classic Hollywood cinema and African American popular music far more than it through any *avant-garde*. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 59–77.

²² Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review* 144 (March–April 1984): 104–105.

of two histories: one of foreign interference, another of local elites in search of an origin and continuity for current social arrangements.²³ But this aesthetic discourse draws only one ordinal point around which an avant-garde might turn. Its other vectors include the emergence of new communications technologies affecting modes of poesis and sensation, the imaginative proximity of real social change, and the encounter with distinct cultures and life experiences wrought by European colonialism.²⁴

As many of the chapters in this collection make clear, the production and circulation of recordings, like the geopolitical realignment already mentioned, established a new problematic for experimentalism in the postwar period.²⁵ Recordings and their transnational circulation had already existed for more than fifty years, of course, but the cheap manufacturing and shipping costs of vinyl LPs (compared with albums of three or four 78s), along with the rapid expansion of the recording industry, meant that more kinds of music made it onto musicians' turntables in the 1960s than ever before.²⁶ It seems scarcely possible to imagine the multisited explosion of advanced musical techniques—open improvisation, noise, electronic music, psychedelia, and electroacoustic improvisation, to list those referenced here—without the generative role of the LP recording, which provides another perspective on the vernacular. Taught and learned by ear, and placing central importance on timbre and noise, the vernacular finds a certain kind of extension in the recorded form, where do-it-yourselfers gain access to a wealth of new sounds without the restrictive mediations of the score, seminar, or journal article that would have introduced them only one generation before.²⁷ In 1954, Rebner could not yet have had the circulation of LPs in mind when he noted the importance of sound over system in the American experimental tradition, but in a few short years, these consumer commodities would dramatically reroute the cultural flows of all music, experimentalism included. In the terms Pauline Oliveros used to describe her collaboration with Mexican electronic musicians from the Nortec Collective, these flows would now consist of “all audio both ways.”²⁸

²³ Nelly Richard, “The Problematic of Latin American Art,” in *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile since 1973* (Melbourne: Art & Text, 1986), 86.

²⁴ Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” 104–109; George Yúdice, “Rethinking the Theory of the Avant-garde from the Periphery,” in Anthony L. Geist and Jose Monleon, eds., *Modernism and Its Margins: Reinscribing Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 61; James M. Harding, “From Cutting Edges to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-garde Performance,” in *The Ghosts of the Avant-garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 136–158.

²⁵ For a consideration of some of the ways this problematic has been negotiated in experimental and improvised music, see David Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

²⁶ Richard Osborne, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2012).

²⁷ Chris Cutler, “Necessity and Choice in Musical Forms, Concerning Musical and Technical Means and Political Needs,” in *File under Popular: Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music* (London: November Books, 1985), 19–38.

²⁸ Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, “Sounds of the Sweatshop: Pauline Oliveros and *Maquilopolis*,” in Benjamin Piekut, ed., *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 211–228.

The contributors also demonstrate that terminology itself, held at a critical arm's length, can be transformed into a tool to pry apart the assumptions built into relevant concepts. For example, the relationship between the avant-garde and institutionalism remains a fascinating, promising, and variegated site of investigation. As is well known, Peter Bürger advanced the critique of the autonomous art institution as a defining characteristic of the historical avant-garde.²⁹ How curious, then, that the emergence of an avant-garde in music after World War II would turn on its institutionalization by means of funding by the CIA and the US State Department, private US foundations, or other state-funded initiatives like Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM). As Georgina Born has made clear in her classic study of that computer music facility, French avant-gardism has often drawn on a history of vanguard leadership by the artistic elite; the tendency embodied in IRCAM, she contends, is one bending toward institutionalization, not against it.³⁰ In a similar manner, as Ricardo Roque-Baldovinos and Alejandro L. Madrid suggest, Latin American avant-gardists in the first half of the twentieth century actively “collaborated in the development of cultural policies and the foundation of state-sponsored artistic institutions in their countries.”³¹ Few music scholars have pursued this peculiar relationship; unlike in art history, for example, there is no ongoing conversation about institutional critique (or its absence) in the music disciplines.³²

Yet the complementary pair of chapters by Andrew Raffo Dewar and Eduardo Herrera in this collection highlights the multiple and contradictory positions of the avant-garde in a single historical setting: Movimiento Música Más and CLAEM both claimed this mantle from very different sites in the cultural field. And Susan Thomas's chapter on Grupo de Experimentación Sonora del ICAIC in Cuba documents that institution's support of experimental techniques in the face of occasional opposition from its governmental sponsors. Facing a different kind of constraint, Café Tacvba adopted techniques of estrangement in order to distance themselves from the most dominant musical institution of the last sixty years, the international recording industry. Meanwhile, as the cases described by Ana R. Alonso-Minutti and Susan Campos Fonseca make clear, the institutionalized academy continues to distinguish itself as a place where new forms of advanced music making find little purchase.

These thoughts on institutionalism—a primary concern for theories of the avant-garde but never a big one for scholars of experimentalism—indicate that my reading of this book might be broader than the editors intend, or perhaps that “experimental

²⁹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

³⁰ See Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

³¹ Ricardo Roque-Baldovinos, “The ‘Epic Novel’: Charismatic Nationalism and the Avant-garde in Latin America,” *Cultural Critique* 49 (Autumn 2001): 65; and Alejandro L. Madrid, *Sounds of the Modern Nation: Music, Culture, and Ideas in Post-revolutionary Mexico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 8.

³² In art, see Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds., *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009). Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimpson, eds., *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

music” as a site of inquiry is too small or limited to hold these contributions. I have always thought that the limitations of experimentalism should not be brushed aside in favor of a more expansive counterhistory; experimental music was a specific historical network that, like any network, enrolled actors of various kinds as it excluded many others. Scholars can document these exclusions while peering beyond the outer edges of a limited network, as the contributors to this book have done, in order to describe and analyze what else was going on. Such an endeavor depends on following Cage’s example by loosening our tactical sense of the term “experimentalism” in order to animate new research questions and avenues of exploration. It details and analyzes this multiplicity in a lateral rather than linear way, sensitive to the ruptures, disjunctures, and asymmetries across which discourses and techniques move or get invented anew.

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