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Sonic Negations: Sound, Affect, and Unbelonging Between Mexico and the United States

By

Iván Alejandro Ramos

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Performance Studies

And the Designated Emphasis

In

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

In the

Graduate Division

Of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:

Professor Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Co-Chair

Professor Juana María Rodríguez, Co-Chair

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Spring 2015

Abstract

Sonic Negations: Sound, Affect, and Unbelonging Between Mexico and the United States

By

Iván Alejandro Ramos

Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies

And the Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Co-Chair

Professor Juana María Rodríguez, Co-Chair

This dissertation uses the concept of auditory cultures to trace how Mexican and U.S. Latina/o subjects use sound and music to articulate political dissent. “Sonic Negations: Sound, Affect, and Unbelonging Between Mexico and the United States” brings together the fields of performance and sound studies to show how the sonic presents a contested political arena through which transnational Latina/o artists, musicians and listening publics construct alternative sensory realms detached from national forms of belonging. I contend that non-culturally dependent forms of sound—noise, metal, punk, and 80s British music—allow individuals to approach negative affects, such as melancholia, despair, and idleness. Drawing from recent work in performance studies and queer theory on the political potentialities of negative affects, the study argues for the importance of attending to the political critiques inherent in auditory cultures and practices within both Latina/o and Latin American contexts.

The first chapter analyzes Mexico City-based artist Iván Abreu’s series *M(R.P.M)*, in which he creates playable ice-records of nationalist Mexican songs. I investigate how the pieces invite listeners into the complex history of ice in the Latin American imaginary to question contemporary calls for Mexican nationalism. The second chapter contemplates the early performances of Mexican artist collective SEMEFO and the work of underground Tijuana-based musician María y José. I argue for the ways these artists use aggressive sound to confront the unending violence that has plagued Mexico over the last few decades. My third section concentrates on performance artist Nao Bustamante and her “mariachi-punk” band Las Cucas to consider the lesbian punk scream as an ethical rejection of normative Latina and queer identity. The final chapter contemplates the phenomenon of the Latina/o fan culture around British rock star Morrissey. I show how Latina/o listening publics turn to melancholia and depression as affects that force us to reconsider relationality by questioning the nation as the site of inclusion.

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I. Introduction

Sound, Negativity, and the Dissolution of Latinidad

I begin with two moments, each taking place on a different side of the border, but deeply linked nonetheless. The first is a short performance art piece by Colombian artist Cristina Ochoa at the XV Muestra Internacional de Performance held at the Ex-Teresa Arte Actual Museum in Mexico City. This iteration of the festival has as its name, “El Sonido de la Última Carcajada,”—the sound of the last laugh. The performance piece, *Phantom Power*, opens on a dimly lit stage, a giant glittery silver vinyl star at its center, and a DJ mixing booth at the back of the stage. Three microphones hang from the ceiling, suspended by chords, and next to the table lies a megaphone on the ground. At first a woman emerges and stands behind the mixing booth, two other figures waiting in the background; she starts playing a mix, a series of song snippets, all sung by female voices, all in English, many identified as punk, but some reaching further back in musical history and others forward. The three characters, described in the artist’s text accompanying the performance as “riot girls,”¹ are dressed extravagantly and colorfully, with their faces covered, their outfits reminiscent of the history of women in punk rock, from Joan Jett to Pussy Riot. The track plays for a couple of minutes as the DJ dances and, at times, sings along. During this interlude the two other women, now unmasked, step out and start screaming and jumping, at first onstage, but then interacting with the audience. This action has the goal of “instigating, teasing, pushing, and provoking” the audience. The presence of the girls is riotous and purposefully obnoxious. The reaction from the spectators is mixed, but soon some of them begin to jump along with the women, at times taking the stage, yelling into the microphones, creating a cacophony of voices and sounds from the tracks that are still playing, and switching songs at a rapid pace. Even if someone knows the lyrics to a song, the song doesn’t last long enough to keep singing along. The conjunction is disorienting but the audience has been roused into movement. Without knowing when the track will end, the audience is left alone to continue the action; eventually, the three women disappear while the track keeps playing.

The second moment is much smaller in scale, even easy to miss. At an 80s party night at Neo’s, a dance club in Chicago, among the eclectic mix of dancers—from formerly adolescent white goths, to young Latina/os who adore 80s New Wave and punk music—a figure dances in the back. It’s a Latino man, somewhere in his 40s or 50s. His dancing to the music of Joy Division, Blondie, and The Smiths is extravagant, deep in concentration. I would call it joyful, but there are no discernible signs of something that could easily be called pleasure. Instead, each move looks practiced, and his face is stern. Dancing, it seems, is serious business for him. When other dancers try to approach him in drunken admiration, he quickly shrugs them off. Although the dance floor is often understood as communal, this man has carved out his own psychic space. Unlike most of the people at the bar who are here with friends enjoying a night out, this man is alone. He is not dressed in tribute to the fashion of the 1980s, and if someone were to see him on the street, our cultural scripts would not peg him as a fan of 80s American and British New Wave and punk music. But his dancing is ecstatic. Everyone who catches a glimpse of him will inevitably stare at his commitment to the dance. I can’t keep my eyes off him,

¹ Ochoa, Cristina. “Phantom Power. Registo Ex-Teresa.” Performance Document. Courtesy of the artist.

and my most immediate point of recollection comes from somewhere else entirely: the final scene of Claire Denis' 1999 film *Beau Travail*, in which the main character, a middle aged French Foreign Legion officer dances extravagantly (if also far from joyfully) to that symbol of 1990s Euro-cheese pop anthems, "The Rhythm of the Night." This final scene of Denis' film is usually interpreted as an intimation of the protagonist's suicide. But when I juxtapose these two moments, suicide is at once not entirely evident yet not very far from the mind. After a few songs I lose track of this man, and continue my own dancing to the same music, surrounded by a group of other Latina/os who have accompanied me here tonight.

One might insist on the incommensurability of these two moments because of context (the museum vs. the dance floor), locale (Mexico City vs. Chicago), bodies (young female performance artist vs. older, working-class male), and even audience (one meant to bring in the public vs. one attempting to avoid it). But a second set of analytical propositions points in different directions. For example, we can use the lens of performance analysis to understand how these two bodies are taking up space, how each of their movements uses sonic accompaniment to disrupt their relationship to other bodies. We can turn to sound studies to focus on the kind of music being played here, each at first glance at a cultural remove from the temporal and geographic coordinates in which they are sounded—North American and British feminist punk and 80s rock and New Wave music. We can even link the two moments using the lexicon of affect theory, insisting on how each of these actions seems to invite us into a terrain saturated alternatively with aggression and withdrawal. All three of these analytical lenses indicate the approach I take in this dissertation, in which sound that is not easily or discernibly "Latina/o," "Mexican," or even "Latin American" facilitates affectively negative performative actions, practices, and modes of being. Indeed, the unruliness of movement that arises from these two examples, cued by the sounds of North American and British rock, punk, New Wave, and other non-culturally locatable musical forms, allows these two ostensibly "Latina/o" subjects to inhabit a moment of negation, of unruliness, and of unbelonging.

This dissertation explores a series of cultural productions and interactions I place under the umbrella of transnational Latina/o "auditory cultures." I argue through a series of case studies that over the past few decades artists, musicians, performance artists, and listening publics on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border have increasingly turned to sound as a way of negotiating, confronting, and negating neoliberal political, cultural, and economic demands. Drawing in part from Lauren Berlant's efforts in *Cruel Optimism* to excavate the "historical sensorium" of the present,² this project focuses on sound as the sensorial attachment that has allowed Latino/a subjects to oppose the neoliberal injunction to seek belonging as the apposite political feeling of the present. I contrast sonic forms of sensorial attachment to vision or sight, which I argue has been less effective in countering this neoliberal imaginary, and is often in collusion with it. In other words, I use sound, and in particular what I call non-culturally locatable sound, as an analytical category to consider aesthetic practices in Mexican and U.S.-based Latina/o aesthetic works produced since 1990. Beginning in 1990, of course, is no accident. This decade saw two deeply interrelated economic events for these nations, the signing and

² Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the so-called “Latino Boom” in the United States. Although often studied as separate phenomena, these events necessitated a reimagining of the Mexican and Latina/o subject in order to accommodate new market economies. Still, as most analysis of these emerging representational economies focuses on them as elements of greater market economies, I am most interested here in understanding why sound that explicitly did not fit into the paradigm of corporate circulation became so prominent during this time. Or rather, if during this decade it became essential to circulate Mexico and the Latina/o through new cultural representations, many of which were musical, how does non-culturally locatable sound manage to challenge and escape many of these representations? As I will show in the rest of this introduction, although it is central to understand the emerging economic and cultural stakes between Mexico and the United States in the 1990s, there is an alternative story about sound to be told. I ask, what does paying attention to sound bring forth when trying to understand the Latina/o political sensorium? How has non-culturally locatable sound become increasingly prevalent as a tool for expression in transnational Latina/o aesthetics?

Throughout the dissertation, the category of sound that is most present is music. Yet as I will outline in the following section, I use the terminology of sound rather than music in order to avoid a number of pitfalls the latter category would instigate. Primarily, I aim to forego the notion of “subculture” as the predominant analytical rubric by which to understand the subjects of my chapters. Such an approach, I assert, too often forecloses the possibility of speculative thinking about minoritarian cultural production, insisting instead on causal links. Indeed, the indicative question I aim to avoid in this dissertation is “why?” but insisting instead on “how?” The query, “why,” too often presumes a distance, requires an easily discernible explanation, and insists on making the connection between strategy and subjects visible. Particularly in the realm of aesthetics, minoritarian subjects are too frequently held accountable to the reductive logics of identity and ancestry in order to explain something as simple as the reasons “why” someone might like a particular film, book, or piece of music.

The second major element in the dissertation is my consideration of negation and negative affect in transnational Latina/o aesthetics. Each of the non-culturally locatable forms I analyze—noise, metal, electronic, punk, and 80s British rock—bears a close relationship to negative affects, or in more common parlance, to “bad feelings.” If ethnomusicologists, cultural anthropologists, performance studies scholars, and others have revealed the ways in which subjects have used cultural forms to form and reaffirm their sense of identity, here I seek instances in which the categories of “Mexican” and “Latina/o” are not asserted, but rather questioned, thrown into confusion, and challenged alongside the political schemas that aim to secure them as stable entities. Negative affect marks a refusal to engage with the normal political demands of cultural and national belonging. Instead, I opt for another term, “unbelonging.” To circumvent belonging does not mean a refusal to participate on any level but instead it is a mode of questioning what it means to be a proper political subject identified by national, ethnic, or cultural signifiers. These acts of negation, most of them rooted in some form of self-annihilation, allow these uses of non-culturally locatable sound to function oppositionally to the dominant way of being a Latina/o subject. This also begs the question, what happens when minoritarian subjects abnegate the forms of belonging prescribed to them? What is

possible when the points of encounter on the map of relationality are not found in belonging, language, or the possibility of a future tethered to an ancestral past, and instead we find ourselves and one another in our depression, in our tears, in our fear, in our anger?

This introduction will sketch out the methodological and theoretical stakes of the dissertation. In the following section, I explain why sound is a particularly useful analytical category by which to understand this project. I look at some of the main preoccupations in the emerging field of sound studies, forming my toolbox from a series of texts that inform how the term “sound” is used in this project. I also locate the reasons why I use the concept of “sound” as my point of departure rather than “music.” From there, I move to the question of negative affect. Drawing primarily from recent work in queer theory, I argue that a turn toward the “negative” does not necessarily signal a turn toward passivity. Instead, I linger on why negation might hand us an underutilized yet powerful tool to understand what it means, in the words of José Esteban Muñoz, to “feel brown.” Finally, I place these two fields—sound studies and queer theory—in conversation with the question of “Latinidad” itself. While I will explain some of the context through which I argue this “auditory culture” came to be, I am most concerned with explaining why sound and affect allow this project to model a methodology that does not rely on comparison. Indeed, I argue that sound and affect provide scholars working at the intersections of Latina/o and Latin American Studies with new avenues by which to understand the divisions and disciplinary distinctions imposed by borders, passports, and demographics.

The Potential of Sound

Music has been a particularly fertile ground to study the formation of oppositional cultural identities across a number of fields and disciplines. Latina/o Studies, for example, has analyzed how the circulation and distribution of music created in imagined homelands reasserts the possibility for Latina/os in the United States to reaffirm their identities. Musical forms such as salsa, ranchera, norteño, mambo, jarocho, trova, map themselves onto the indentitarian needs to construct a line between the United States and an imagined ancestral homeland. As Dolores Inés Casillas has shown in *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-language Radio and Public Advocacy*, that Latina/o listeners in the United States turn to radio as a way not only of reasserting their alliance to this homeland, but also as a way of mediating new political identities in the United States.³

However, my use of sound here allows me to expand some of the most salient terms in contemporary analysis of musical forms across the Americas, such as “globalization,” “hybridity,” and “circulation.” For example, in their collection *Postnational Musical Identities*, Ignacio Corona and Alejandro L. Madrid stress the importance of understanding music flows through the corporate marketing model that facilitates what kinds of music travel and under what circumstances. For them, “musical meaning is found at the intersection of production, distribution, performance, and

³ Casillas, Dolores Inés. *Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-language Radio and Public Advocacy*. (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

consumption.”⁴ In other words, the reception of a work cannot be separated from the cultural conditions that produce it. The authors argue that it is within this matrix of preoccupations that the notion of identity can be studied and accounted for. As much of the work in Latina/o music studies suggests, the particular market forces of globalization intersect with transnational subjects who seek through these channels to guarantee their identities against the specter of assimilation. This is not to say that these identities are not always already fraught, as for example Frances Aparicio evinces in her explorations of the negotiations of gender and sexuality in Puerto Rican culture in relationship to the circulation of salsa.⁵

As important as these works have been in giving us a vocabulary by which to understand the trajectories of Latina/o musical production, they rely upon a division between identity and market forces. For them, music is produced in accordance with a globalized listening market that ultimately eliminates the unwieldiness of listening. In this dissertation I move away from the fixed notions of identity required from this approach. A study of music that relies on the figure of identity to understand its impact presupposes a stable link between a musical practice and the identity of its audience. Yet the aesthetic works I explore defy the logic of markets and circuits of distribution. In most of these cases, the particular sound has no *essential* attachment to a particular identity marker. Further, most of the artists I discuss here do not form part of any single institutionalized practice, as in the case of a band like Las Cucas, who never had any ambitions to be listened by any sort of mass public. The practices I survey here owe more to the sonic as a tool to exist outside the space of identity. The affective power of non-culturally locatable sound upends any particular narrative about Latinidad, instead throwing it into confusion, threatening its obliteration while at the same time rooting it in a schema of oppositionality to any set of demands that would render it easily knowable.

I draw my correspondence between transnational Latinidad and sound here from some of the ways in which African-American studies, in particular, has illustrated the multiple ways in which sonic practices have rearticulated and resisted attempts to extinguish blackness. Fred Moten, for example, registers in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, the myriad ways in which black sonic production, from the scream to the sound of the jazz trumpet, formulated a space of liberatory politics.⁶ Alexander G. Wehelye in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* attempts a method of reading popular culture that “does not celebrate popular cultural resistance; nor does it scrutinize its ideological containment or hegemonic rearticulation. More exactly, I ask what new modes of thinking, being, listening, and becoming [...] are set in motion by

⁴ Corona, Ignacio and Alejandro L. Madrid. “Introduction: The Postnational Turn in Music Scholarship and Music Marketing.” *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Production, Distribution, and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario*. Eds. Ignacio Corona and Alejandro L. Madrid. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008) 7.

⁵ Aparicio, Frances. *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

⁶ Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003)

[these] cultural idioms.”⁷ For these scholars, the experience of blackness in the United States and beyond is intricately tied to the sonic. Thus, this project similarly explores how the incorporation of non-culturally locatable sound in aesthetic work in the United States and Mexico over the past decade has enabled its own new forms of thinking, listening, and becoming.

This dissertation joins recent volumes in the field of Latina/o Studies that take sound and music as their central objects. Two such books, Deborah R. Vargas’ *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* and Alexandra T. Vazquez’s *Listening In Detail: Performances of Cuban Music*, seek to turn the reader’s ear toward the sonic intricacies of Latinidad beyond the official narratives produced by the circulation of its music. My own exploration of the sonic sensorium of non-culturally locatable sound I highlight forms of listening that, in Vargas’s words, “are incompatible, inconsistent, unharmonious, and unsuitable within canonical Chicano/Tejano music narratives.”⁸ I expand upon this work by appealing to a broader definition of “sound” that includes but goes beyond music: I argue that music can be analyzed alongside other sonic and aural cultural practices, including sound and installation art, alternative fan and listening cultures, and even the sounds of technological apparatuses of surveillance and control at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Beginning from “sound” rather than “music” or “voice” or “the sounds of the city” puts one in an immediately precarious or indefinite position. Sound, after all, can be hopelessly indeterminate, such as in the case of ambient noise, or easily locatable, as when one listens to a piece of music through a pair of headphones. Because we are surrounded by sound, sometimes by choice, but most often not, it becomes easy to dismiss it, or to imagine it as an agential intrusion. In his introduction to *The Sound Studies Reader*, Jonathan Sterne argues that “Sound studies’ challenge is to think across sounds, to consider sonic phenomena in relationship to one another— as types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves— whether they be music, voices, listening, media, buildings, performances, or another other path into sonic life.”⁹ Sound marks for me the beginning of an analytical project that further decenters the mastery of the musician and ethnomusicologist alike. Music is central to my objects and analysis, yet as Barry Shank, in *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* argues, “To perceive sonic beauty as musical beauty is to hear a set of sounds as a coherent whole, the coherence and continuity of which enables a felt connection between the sounds themselves and the social world from which they emerge.”¹⁰ In other words, a shared sense of sound is an opportunity for publics to come into existence under a shared affective lexicon in which the perception of sound gives way to political knowledge. This is not to say that this realization depends strictly on already-existing social bonds: musical subcultures such as

⁷ Weheliye, Alexander G. *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 10.

⁸ Vargas, Deborah R. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) ix.

⁹ Sterne, Jonathan. “Sonic Imaginations.” *The Sound Studies Reader*. Ed. Jonathan Sterne. (London: Routledge, 2012) 3.

¹⁰ Shank, Barry. *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) 17-18.

punk, diasporic musical traditions, or even the soundtracks to political movements. Rather, musical beauty, particularly in those moments when it attaches itself to what French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, in *The Sense of the World*, refers to as *sens*, has the ability to question the very notion of public, throw into relief our sense of self as it relates to the other¹¹. Or, to invoke Jacques Rancière, musical beauty, which is for Shank not the same as beautiful music, has the capability to distribute the sensible, to manage dissensus, and to create a political imagination that does not rely upon normative configurations of politics.¹²

This strategy echoes what Alexandra T. Vazquez calls “listening in detail,” a methodology that encourages us to listen to those elements of music that may risk getting dismissed as trivialities or accidents, deviations from the elements of the official record. In Vazquez’s work, listening in detail bypasses the official national narratives imposed upon Cuban music. Taking into account the United States’ and Cuba’s equal investment in claiming national musical traditions toward their own ends, Vazquez argues that performances of Cuban music may also offer a counter-narrative, through “interruptions that catch your ear, musical tics that stubbornly refuse to go away. They are things you might first dismiss as idiosyncrasies. They are specific choices made by musicians and performers and come in an infinite number of forms: saludos, refusals, lyrics, arrangements, sounds, grunts, gestures, bends in voice.”¹³ This methodology allows us to attend to the excessive affects and counter-expressions often hidden in the sonic medium and thus to investigate how the sonorous invites us to find the “punctum” through our ears, to attend to acoustic gestures: whispers, hiccups, accents, lisps, mumbles, or the pitch of the voice.

The punctum I am most drawn to here is one that invites the listener toward dissolution, or the sonic inflections that risk doom as a pleasurable practice. This experience of sound for the listener precedes the logic of music. While most musicological approaches aim to explain music’s pleasures by understanding its compositional elements, my own analysis underlines amateur ears. This, for me, allows the entry into dissolution that we may experience as listeners. In his essay on Charles Baudelaire’s reaction to and fanatic obsession with Wagner’s music, French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the poet’s preoccupation comes from the composer’s ability to render the subject into, after Nietzsche, “the hysterical pleasure of submission.”¹⁴ In other words, the possibility of sound, unlike other art forms, and particularly the literary, is that it brings the subject into a realm of being before and beyond mastery of musical knowledge. In Lacoue-Labarthe’s words, “only music is capable of expressing, that is to say, signifying, but beyond signification, this subjective beyond of the subject: the aspect of the subject that, in the subject and as the subject as

¹¹ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Sense of the World*. Trans. Jeffrey S. Librett. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹² See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum Press, 2010).

¹³ Vazquez, Alexandra T. *Listening in Detail: Performance of Cuban Music*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) 19.

¹⁴ Qtd. in Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Musica Ficta: (Figures of Wagner)*. Trans. Felicia McCarren. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 24.

well, moves beyond the subject.”¹⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe argues that this epistolary encounter lays the foundation for a different kind of aesthetic thought. Baudelaire’s shock comes in great part from Wagner achieving in music what literature and, for that matter, previous music could not quite articulate, and in essence the proper event in which “Music [...] carries *aesthesis* to its limit: it gives the sensation, infinitely paradoxical, of the condition of all sensation, as if the impossible task of presenting the transcendental, that is to say the pure possibility of presentation itself, in general, were incumbent upon it.”¹⁶ It’s worth noting that the line Lacoue-Labarthe is trying to follow is uneasy yet productive. He suggests that in approaching *sens* itself, the subject is brought close to annihilation: the earlier pleasure of submission is not simply an aesthetic one, but rather “the very moment of accession to immortality, the moment when the subject, in his deepest privacy—in his soul—is both undone and achieved: dies unto himself or fades away, to live absolutely.”¹⁷ I will also mention here that Baudelaire, in his letter, makes a special note that he “*does not know music* and [his] entire musical education extends no further than having heard a few fine pieces by Weber and by Beethoven.”¹⁸ Baudelaire’s admission of his own lack of knowledge about music points us toward a listening practice beyond the trained ear of the musician and instead places it on the hands of a listener that does not need to know music in order to be absorbed by its affective pull. Sound, beyond simply the arrangement of something called music, or rather, music as sound, is able to draw the subject into this annihilation, intervene in the senses, forego the structures of subjectivity or even collectivity on which the political so often relies. And although we are speaking here of Wagner via Baudelaire, who had just heard the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*, the sheer ability for sound to absorb the self in something other than the inarguable beauty of Wagner’s music leads us to rethink how we understand the political in performance. Although this example might seem outside of the grasp of Latina/o studies, I insist on the usefulness of this exchange to emphasize how the listening subject is moved before mastery. If much work in popular music and sound studies concentrates on figures of singular musical genius, in this dissertation I am most interested in non-mastery and non-genius.

Recent work in sound studies has highlighted some of the ways in which sound reaches the body first as an affective force. As Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle argue, “If affect theory seeks to explore the parts of the experiential that are omitted by hermeneutic and/or discursive modes of analysis, then the sonic, as that which is so frequently resistant to semantic or semiotic interpretation, would seem like an obvious place to look for examples of affectivity.”¹⁹ This emphasis on one’s sensorial relation to music, the detail for Vazquez, or the *sens* for Shank, posits a form of listening that exceeds the demands of music as market commodity. Throughout these chapters, I follow this thread by shifting attention to how the subjects of aurality use sound to nullify the normative

¹⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe, 29.

¹⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe, 31.

¹⁷ Qted. in Lacoue-Labarthe, 24

¹⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe, 2.

¹⁹ Thompson, Marie and Ian Biddle. “Introduction: Somewhere Between the Signifying and the Sublime.” *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*. Eds. Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 10.

terms of Latinidad. For Anahid Kassabian, sound's ability to effect what she calls distributed listening ties it to the already unstable bounds of identity: "From moment to moment, in different contexts, the boundaries of any given identity will shift and change, sometimes quite radically, which suggests that the idea that identity is positional and static is a description of something that is believed and not a description of how identity actually happens."²⁰ Kassabian exemplifies this point through her own experience as a woman of Armenian descent living in England. Her Armenianess, she writes, depends on a series of factors—temporal, spatial, contextual—in which her connection to a "diasporic" identity shifts. This shows that "identity doesn't reside within a single subject; rather, it is a flow across a field, which constantly morphs into different shapes and contours, depending on the circumstances. Distributed subjectivity acknowledges that at some places at some points in time, I will—or I will not—be included in any given identity category."²¹ Sound's potential ability to remain un-narrativized makes it a prime location to understand these shifting registers of the self. Kassabian distinguishes what she calls "ubiquitous listening" from Adorno's expert listener in favor of "a nonindividual subjectivity, a field, but a field over which power is distributed unevenly and unpredictably, over which differences are not only possible but required, and across which information flows, leading to affective responses. The channels of distribution are held open by ubiquitous musics."²² In dislocating the expert listener in favor of an ubiquitous listener, an affective subject, we are able to more closely understand some of the everyday effects and affects of sound upon racialized listening practices.

This is an important lesson for transnational Latina/o studies and the aforementioned approaches in which the flows of Latina/o and Mexican music across transnational channels serve their primary purpose to fix a point of identification. While the models of circulation and reception are necessary and useful insofar as they allow us to question the role of capital and the importance of reasserting identity from a diasporic condition, I will show that sound offers a different story in which these terms are rejected as the categories of Mexican, Latina/o, Chicano, and beyond became increasingly dictated by economic, demographic, and cultural demands. In particular, understanding a connection between sound and affect traces an alternative path for what the futures of Latina/o identities hold. In the following section, I take the potentialities of affective engagement enabled by sound through their interaction with negativity.

In the Key of the Negative

Although scholars of sound have thus far tended to emphasize a Deleuzian/Spinozan conception of affect as a pre-linguistic force that travels between and beyond bodies through what Brian Massumi and other affect theorists imagine as a virtual space filled with potentiality, here I pair these investigations alongside a political conception of emotions drawn from recent work in queer theory.²³ For scholars such as

²⁰ Kassabian, Anahid. *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) xxvii.

²¹ Kassabian, xxvii

²² Kassabian, xxv

²³ For an account of this genealogy of affect, see Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich, Heather Love, Sianne Ngai, and others, a turn toward understanding pessimistic feelings carries the diagnostic possibilities of critiquing the present. I will not favor one term over another throughout the dissertation. Any attempt to understand the role sound has played in transnational Latina/o aesthetic production over the past few decades must be equally attentive to the Deleuzian emphasis on sensation as well as particular political feelings. In fact, one may not often precede the other, as a subject's political positionality may encourage her to seek sensations that are unpleasant, in concert with this social position.

By negative affect, I refer to what Sianne Ngai calls “ugly feelings.” In Ngai's work, these emotions are identified by “affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity.”²⁴ Negative affects are a way of protesting the demands for inclusion through production imposed by late capital through what she identifies as their “political ambiguity.” The appearance of these gloomy feelings, in other words, does not claim a legible vocabulary of oppositionality or resistance, but instead rewards the ambiguities that lingering in those feelings may provide. For Ngai, as for many of these writers, the exemplary character whose refusal constructs the potential power of negation is the eponymous protagonist of Herman Melville's “Bartleby, The Scrivener.” In the story, Bartleby, a scrivener at a Wall-Street law firm, simply refuses to follow his employer's command by endlessly repeating the phrase “I would prefer not to.” Melville gives no reason for Bartleby's refusal, at first of work orders, eventually to even eat or leave the office. But by lacking an explanation or increasing the intensity of his nonacceptance, Bartleby unmasks the very terms of the actions he's being asked to complete, from labor to living.²⁵ This is a lesson I pursue through the objects in this dissertation, the moments in which the transnational Latina/o subject exclaims, through the sonic, “I would prefer not to.”

Ann Cvetkovich and Lauren Berlant have investigated these forms of refusal as particularly powerful diagnostic tools for engaging with politics in the present. For example, in *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich shows how “everyday life produces feelings of despair and anxiety, sometimes extreme, sometimes throbbing along at a low level, and hence barely discernible from *just the way things are*, feelings that get internalized and named, for better or worse, as depression.”²⁶ Depression is then framed through what Berlant and Cvetkovich describe as the “impasse,” a sense of being stuck that contemporary capital must “unstick” if it is to retain its need for productivity. But the impasse becomes “a state of both stuckness and potential, maintaining a hopefulness about the possibility that slowing down or not moving forward might not be a sign of failure and might instead be worth exploring.”²⁷ Berlant sees how the affective mode of the present is tied to a “cruel optimism” that masks the impossible fiction of the “good life.” She argues that, “The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward

²⁴ Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) 1.

²⁵ See Herman Melville, “Bartleby” in *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (New York, Penguin Classics, 1986) 1-46.

²⁶ Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 14.

²⁷ Cvetkovich, 21.

mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy.”²⁸ But for the transnational Latina/o subject, the 1990s were a moment in which these fantasies seemed to be most within reach via the twin discursive and economic processes signaled by the signing of NAFTA and the “Latino Boom.”

In a complementary register that I consider particularly germane to transnational Latina/o studies, Heather Love analyzes the turn toward negativity, its “backwardness,” as a necessary project “for groups constituted by historical injury, [whose] challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it.”²⁹ This backward glance, in which the terms of historical injury are redeployed and dwelled upon, pose a distinct challenge to the comingling notions of modernity, modernization, and modernism that I will show in chapter one have been essential in constructing the very notion of the Latin/o American subject. Love emphasizes “feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness”³⁰ as feelings that force the subjects of her writing to remain stuck in a temporal space that rejects the coming promise of a liberated sexual identity. In similar fashion, I concentrate on some of the feelings above as necessary for the transnational Latina/o subject to pause upon the fulfillment of belonging. Neoliberal policies initiated throughout the 1980s and into the present rely precisely upon a future of integration in which *Latinidad* no longer bears the scars of stigma. In the case of Mexico, this was reflected through economic and cultural policies put in place from the 1960s that in each of their forms, aimed to guarantee the nation and its subjects the guarantee of economic and cultural equality with the ever-lingering figure of the United States. For Latina/o subjects in the United States, these assurances have taken the form of integrated political participation through the pledge of cultural, political, and legal citizenship.

But my championing of sonic withdrawal throughout this dissertation should not be simply understood as the false hope of remaining jammed within an oppressive present. As theorists such as Darieck Scott, Juana María Rodríguez, Hoang Tan Nguyen, and others have recently pointed out, embracing abjection may yield its own complex pleasures.³¹ *Sonic Negations* proposes the pleasures of abject relationality as an alternative way of responding to the promise of inclusion that continually eludes transnational Latina/o subjects. Significantly, all of the artists in my case studies began making their work after 1990. These contemporary artists all hold complex attitudes to the discourses of liberation, decoloniality, and revolution that emerged out of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and Latin America. Thinkers such as Enrique Dussel, Walter D Mignolo, and Néstor García Canclini have importantly teased out the links

²⁸ Berlant, 3.

²⁹ Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 1.

³⁰ Love, 4.

³¹ For this work on queer theory and the pleasures of abjection see Tan Hoang Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) Juana Maria Rodríguez, *Queer Gestures, Sexual Futures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: NYU Press, 2014) and Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

between modernity and colonialism in which decolonial liberation becomes the project and goal of Latina/o American aesthetics.³² But the potential of decolonization that this work ascribes to dreams of a future free from the abject relations predicated by the colonial encounter that remains into the present through Western and North American hegemony. While I do not discount the continuing importance of the decolonial paradigm for transnational Latinidad, I choose to highlight minor archives in which negative affects offer a different framework for theorizing a transnational Latina/o project that welcomes, rather than rejects, this abject past.

Refusing the Center, Sounding the Margins

The primary question that I explore throughout this dissertation remains, how and why did Mexican and U.S. based Latina/o subjects turn increasingly, over the past 25 years, to forms of negativity afforded through non-culturally locatable sound in aesthetic and cultural production? I have attempted to answer the “why” above in fairly straightforward terms: the 1990s and beyond appeared on the surface to open the possibility for economic, cultural, and national integration in ways that remain deeply troubling. In short, these promises of integration became most visible in the 1990s through the almost contemporaneous signing of NAFTA and the so-called “Latino Boom.” NAFTA was ostensibly promulgated by clinging to the notion that by relieving trade-tariffs imposed on transnational corporations, Mexico would be opened to a new golden age of trade. This entry into the free-market was promulgated through a vision that sought to assure Mexican citizens that after the economic depressions of the 1980s, Mexico could finally enter the transnational stage and reach the levels of economic progress perceived as pillars of the economic supremacy of the United States and Canada. As William J. Orme contends, “what is new about North America after NAFTA is that Mexico has switched continents, leaving ‘Latin’ America in order to enlarge and enrich the industrial societies of Canada and the United States.”³³ This move of course, provided quite the contrary. NAFTA opened the door to increasingly neoliberal policies that favored privatization, thus dismantling the already vulnerable structures of social welfare that had been implemented in the wake of the Mexican revolution in the first half of the Twentieth Century. The Mexican government assured its citizens that this turn toward privatization would in fact finally fulfill Mexico’s path toward modernization in line with the West. Or to put it differently, that the economic line that divides the U.S.-Mexico border into first and third worlds would effectively dissolve by equalizing the terms of trade. In the first chapter, I will explore how this promise has been at the very core of how Mexico and the very construction of Latina/o American modernity are imagined.

³² For this line of thinking on decoloniality see Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Inclusion*. Trans. Eduardo Mendieta, Et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Subjects: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

³³ Orme, William A. *Understanding NAFTA: Mexico, Free Trade, and the New North America*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996) xiii.

Shortly after the signing of NAFTA, the United States saw what is, in Ramón Rivera-Servera's words, "popularly referred to as the 'Latin Boom' or the 'Latin Explosion,' the mid-1990s into the early 2000s marked the largest gain in mainstream market share for Latina/o pop culture in commercial media in the United States. It also saw dramatic growth in the Latina/o population, incremental influence and gains in local and national electoral races, and the development of a national Latina/o niche market for media, goods, and services."³⁴ This boom, however, was in line with the increasingly entrenched notion of what Cristina Beltrán identifies as "the widespread invocation of Latinos as a sleeping giant,"³⁵ a forthcoming political community whose numbers will one day make them able to dictate the political future of the United States. But lest we forget, the inauguration of the "Latin/o Boom" was itself a kind of sonic event. After the murder of Tejana singer-songwriter Selena, the magazine *People Weekly* "moved into the Latino market with its launching of *People en Español* after its tribute issues commemorating Selena sold out overnight."³⁶ Latina/os became a cultural market independent from the American cultural mainstream, yet uniquely powerful as potential consumers. The primary form of consumption attributed to Latina/os in the United States came through music. Artists like Ricky Martin and Shakira became crossover sensations, releasing albums in English and Spanish, increasing the purchasing potential of Latina/os.

Thus far, the cultural aftermaths of NAFTA and the "Latin Boom" have been studied separately. As noted earlier, the economic framework of circulation has been the most prevalent analytic when studying cultural production through the shared temporalities of these events. In this dissertation, I propose that in addition to the cultural shifts enabled by these economic turns, we must include different forms of Latinidad that remained in opposition to the dominant narratives of inclusion.

My examples show that the turn toward an engagement with negative affect through non-culturally locatable sound became an increasingly powerful tool to contest the will-toward the nation that enveloped these populations for the better part of the last few decades. In finding these resonances, the primary term that I wish then to explore throughout these chapters is Latinidad. To use this designation cannot help but invite a number of pitfalls. As a notion that has gained most of its use within the United States as a word to define, describe, and study a demographic category that can only exist in relationship to other demographic categories that are *not* Latina/o, the term itself gives pause to subjects and scholars who live outside of the United States. Indeed, insisting on the category of the transnational Latina/o as a subject that is exportable beyond its defining lines in the United States begs pause from numerous locations. Yet my use of Latinidad, the transnational Latina/o, or the Latina/o American subject in which the American nods toward Latin America rather than the United States, aims an expansion of the usefulness of these terms. In particular, I appeal toward Juana María Rodríguez's notion of Latinidad as a discursive formation whose various elements make it a prime

³⁴ Rivera-Servera, Ramón. *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012) 10.

³⁵ Beltrán, Cristina. *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 4.

³⁶ Paredez, Deborah. *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) xi-xii.

concept by which to challenge stable notions of national or cultural identity. Using a rhizomatic model of the term, drawn from Deleuze's concept of the rhizome, "suggests the process through which contested constructions of identity work to constitute one another, emphasizing 'and' over 'is' as a way to think about differences. So *latinidad* is about the 'dimensions' or the 'directions in motion' of history and culture and geography and language and self-named identities."³⁷ To think through *Latinidad* as an additive denomination that is potentially endless and enriched by its different elements invites the possibility of untethering these terms from being claimed as identities always already defined by nation. This is the same drive I identify in José Esteban Muñoz's use of "brownness" in his later writings, as an expansive term better understood as an accumulation of sensations and feelings that capture some of the unspoken effects of racial difference.³⁸ Although I see my work here in line with Muñoz, I retain *Latinidad* rather than brownness to incorporate the points of intersection for those within Latin America whose histories stand in historical continuation to the colonial encounter and its continuing aftermath.

The taxonomies of what exactly constitutes a Latina/o, Latin American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and beyond, find themselves in constant flux. In appealing toward non-culturally locatable sound, transnational Latina/o subjects expand the vocabulary of identity and welcome the possibilities of chaos that the passport, or lack thereof, seeks to keep at bay. In doing so, I suggest, we are invited to question terms that remain entrenched within Latina/o and Latin American studies, such as home, assimilation, belonging, nation, community, and even history. For example, the question of *home* throughout this dissertation follows queer theory's attempt to sabotage the normativity of the family as the site of primary belonging. As Richard T. Rodríguez has demonstrated, a heteronormative notion of "la familia" has been much at stake in the development of Chicana/o cultural politics, often disciplining "those who fall outside its otherwise regulatory borders."³⁹ Although Rodríguez excavates moments in which this notion of the family is challenged and reimagined, I wish throughout this project to suspend these notions altogether. The home offered either by family or an imagined nation of origin aim to reify an idea where identity means belonging. I highlight artists, musicians, and listeners for whom there is no home, not because of the diasporic transitions that naturalize the notion that subjects can belong to one space more easily than another, but because the very figure of home becomes too-fixed of a category. As I will argue in chapter 3, the notions of home that will inevitably domesticize the female body alongside them are rebuffed in favor of a queer *Latinidad* that commences from the space of pain

³⁷ Rodríguez, Juana María. *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*. (New York: NYU Press, 2003) 22.

³⁸ For an account of the concept of "brownness" see José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position" *Signs*, Vol. 31, No. 3, *New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture* (Spring 2006), "Wise Latinas" *Criticism*, Vol. 56, No. 2. (Winter 2014), and "'Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That': Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons" *Social Text* 116. (Fall 2013).

³⁹ Rodríguez, Richard T. *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) 3.

and negation.

Another major category within Latina/o studies that I aim to dislodge with this project is the paradigm of assimilation. As John Alba Cutler has recently argued in *Ends of Assimilation*, Chicana/o literature since the 1970s has been invested in engaging, disengaging, and coming to terms with cultural and linguistic assimilation. A paradigm originally used to understand the integration of Puerto Ricans in New York into the “melting-pot” of the United States, assimilation and anti-assimilation have been the predominant limits of thinking about the integration of Latina/os into the cultural framework of the United States.⁴⁰ Throughout the following chapters, I challenge this model by troubling the notions of belonging on which assimilation rests. The aesthetics of sonic negativity I propose duly reject assimilation but also refuse to adopt the ancestral narratives of a “native” culture that anti-assimilation discourse requires. However, appealing to this fixed native culture represented through the image of the ancestral homeland forecloses the need to critique the way in which the “home” nation is also deeply invested in maintaining its hegemonic hold. It assumes that this other nation, the homeland, operates outside of the bounds of contemporary politics. As the protagonist of Mauricio Bares’s novel *Ya No Quiero Ser Mexicano* makes clear when he refers to his “obscene passport,” we mustn’t ignore that the other homeland, in this case Mexico, has not fallen prey to worsening regimes of violence and corruption at the hands of the government⁴¹. The turn to non-culturally locatable sound as a creative and listening practice destabilizes the very idea that there is a static un-troubled culture or originary nation that a subject can return to. For example, in chapter 4, I will show how transnational Latina/o Morrissey fans turn to the British rock singer in order to detach themselves from the taxing impositions of ethnic conservation in a way that does not simply restore the legitimacy of “becoming American.”

Thus, I propose a reworking here of the question that opens José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, if queerness is not yet here, can we assume Latinidad is?⁴² My answer with this dissertation is of course, no. This answer heeds Miranda Joseph’s critique in *Against the Romance of Community* that the notion of community deployed in contemporary discourse is enmeshed with the development of capitalism. The complementary impulses of community and belonging facilitate the flows of transnational capital. In refusing these corresponding precepts, I also join Joseph’s clarification that “fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation, [but] the practice of critique, and in particular a critical relationship to community, is an ethical practice of community, as an important mode of participation [...] a critique from the inside, not a condemnation from the outside.”⁴³ The artists, musicians, and listening publics through this dissertation use sound and negativity to dislodge the dominant narratives that aim to make

⁴⁰ Cutler, John Alba. *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴¹ Bares, Mauricio. *Ya No Quiero Ser Mexicano*. (Mexico: Nula Dispensables, 2007).

⁴² Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

⁴³ Joseph, Miranda. *Against the Romance of Community*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) ix.

transnational Latinidad easily knowable. But this desire extends beyond the production of sound, as Bares's novel shows, and as Carmen Giménez Smith and John Chávez explain in the introduction to their recent literary anthology *Angels of the Americlypse*, Latina/o cultural production is experiencing a shift that is "neither solely concerned with linguistic code-switching, nor with the recovery of the nationalist epic; neither solely concerned with the assimilation-driven lyric poem, nor with the politically charged narrative poem; neither solely concerned with the narrative infused with mysticism, nor with the gonzo-realist account of life in the margins."⁴⁴ Latinidad is not yet here because its potential as a demographic identity has been exhausted, but not its forward charge to imagine the world differently, beyond the bounds of its construction.

I divide the dissertation in two sections. The first takes place in Mexico, and puts the use of sound in aesthetics in the context of historical attempts to "modernize" the nation through trade and privatization. Chapter 1, "Melting Modernities: Ice, Sound, and Mexican Objecthood" looks at the work of Cuban-born, Mexico City-based sound artist Iván Abreu. I place his work in the context of the rise of sound art as a major genre in Mexican contemporary art. In this chapter, I explore the historical reasons why sound became such a prevalent form of dissent in the 1990s and beyond, which I show was largely due to the Mexican government's prohibition of rock and other non-culturally locatable forms of music throughout the 1970s and 80s. I focus specifically on a single sound series Abreu has developed since 2004, *M(R.P.M.)*, in which the artist creates a playable record made out of ice. For these pieces, Abreu uses records deeply linked with nationalist music genres, from the national anthem to ranchera songs, all recorded in 1967 and '68, years of massive political repression in Mexico. I take the record's performance, in which its play will lead to its annihilation, to investigate how both sound recording and ice are representative of complex histories and discourses around conservation and modernity in Mexico and throughout the Americas. This self-destruction functions as an opportunity to rethink notions of history that tether Latina/o American politics to the promise of revolution. I reveal how ice as a substance that helped bring forth trade as the promise of modernization has lingered within the Latina/o American literary and cultural imaginary in surprising ways. I argue that this history allows us to disengage from the telos of revolution.

Chapter 2, "Petulant Futurity: Violence and Mexican Musical Undergrounds" examines the early performances of the artist collective SEMEFO, alongside the work of Tijuana-based electronic artist María y José. This chapter looks at how sound is used in performance and music in order to critique the regimes of violence that have plagued the country since the 1980s, when the flow of drug trafficking shifted from Colombia to Mexico. SEMEFO's performances, which took place in 1990 and '91, were accompanied by a metal band that played alongside the performers. I argue that the aggressive force of metal allowed an early articulation that enlisted aggression as an aesthetic response to brutality. I then analyze the work of Tijuana based electronic musician Tony Gallardo under his moniker María y José. I explain that electronic undergrounds became essential to critiquing violence through humor and deadpan lyrics that played with notions of

⁴⁴ Giménez Smith, Carmen and John Chávez. "Introduction." *Angels of the Americlypse: An Anthology of New Latin@ Writing*. Eds. Carmen Giménez Smith and John Chávez. (Denver: Counterpath Press, 2014) xv.

death. I term the work of these artists as an enactment of “petulant futurity,” a performative action that disengage life from the hope of futurity, and instead invite viewers and listeners to play with images of their own destruction.

The remaining chapters cross the border into the United States, where non-culturally locatable forms of sound have worked to disentangle Latina/o subjects from the promise of inclusion augured by the demographic rise of Latina/os as a political category. Chapter 3, “Dyke Chords: Latina Screams and Ethical Becoming in the Punk Boleros of Las Cucas” analyzes the work of the short-lived, San Francisco-based lesbian Latina punk band Las Cucas. I focus on lead vocalist Nao Bustamante’s performance of one of Latin America’s most well-known boleros, “Sabor a Mí” to investigate how romantic despair may function as an ethical ground in the encounter between Latina and queer identity. I follow the despair in Bustamante’s voice to argue that punk is the negotiating site between the demands of Latina, queer, and lesbian identities. I read this performance against what I argue has been an over-emphasis on the figure of the mother within gay Latina/o studies. I contend that gay Latina/o cultural theory has too often compelled women to carry the psychic responsibilities for reproduction, safety, and security, often to the detriment of our ability to imagine Latinas as sexual subjects in their own right. To do so, I turn to a series of texts that theorize the fragmentary nature of desire, including Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* and Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*, to highlight how dissolution may offer a mode of relationality for queer Latina subjects.

Finally, Chapter 4, “Years of Refusal: Morrissey, Latina/os and the Joy of Melancholia” explores the phenomenon of the Latina/o fan base that has formed around British rock icon Morrissey. I use this minoritarian listening public to argue that depression becomes a social affect central to Latina/o counterpublics on the transnational stage. Though previous analysis has sought to explain the Latina/o attraction to Morrissey through the lens of class, I expand upon this conversation by suggesting that we understand this phenomenon by way of a psychic structure of the Latina/o subject that is accessed through Morrissey’s voice and lyrics. I suggest that to theorize this fan base we turn toward Antonio Viegó’s call for a politics of loss in Latina/o studies, and demonstrate that the attraction of Latina/os to the music of Morrissey and the Smiths operates through of a joyful melancholia. I examine Los Angeles based artist William E. Jones’ multimedia project *Is It Really So Strange?* to interrogate the different tactics in which Latina/o listeners give corporeal capacity to Morrissey’s music. I assert that in these mimetic acts of performance we can understand the political potentialities of the split Latina/o subject. I conclude by turning to the work of Mexican-Japanese artist Shizu Saldamando, whose drawings of Latina/o Morrissey fans illuminate how the turn to depression mobilizes friendship as a relational site that interrupts racial productivity by centering lingering and idling as key affects for minoritarian solidarity.

Toward New Forms of Listening

Together, these chapters attempt to offer an alternative way to think about the project of transnational Latinidad. I forego the major archives of Latin American and Latina/o studies, focusing instead on underexplored aesthetic moments. This dissertation hopes to contribute to the continuing mapping of alternative sensorial landscapes to understand national, racial, and sexual difference. I return to Alexandra T. Vazquez and her exploration in *Listening in Detail* of “cold-war kids,” the children produced by the

myriad conflicts of the Cold War. Vazquez notes that listening in detail may open the relational possibilities of understanding the connections between the living remains, the orphans that range from Cuban to Vietnamese to Korean descent. To understand their points of alignment, Vazquez warns us that we cannot rely on the comparative and its dictum toward evidence that serves to justify and facilitate the comparative project's analytics. She writes, "I recognize that the violences inflicted on and within the Koreas, Viet Nam, and Cuba are different and uneven, and require alternating tools for reflection. There is no way I can work comparatively with different experiences. That does not mean, however, that those who inherited such violences—violences that directly implicate the United States and its posturing during the cold war—cannot exchange a few stories and trade survival mechanisms."⁴⁵ Sound and listening in detail offer Vazquez such a point of connection, "an alternative way to engage phenomena across populations that does not strive to make large claims, build an immovable artifice, or forge static rubrics. To listen in detail is a practice that makes small moves; to lend attention to those powerful minute anomalies that disturb the surfaces of not only music, but also history and the ways we study it."⁴⁶ This approach informs why I eschew framing this dissertation as a comparative project that would separate Latinidad through the corpus of the nation. I opt instead for points of convergence that are powerful if transitory, or perhaps powerful precisely because they're transitory, refusing to be pinned to a larger narrative. *Sonic Negations* thus proposes Latinidad as the potential of not-wanting-to-be, to unbelong. This will-against-belonging manifests itself in crowded dance floors, through headphones in desolate bedrooms, singing at the top of one's lungs in the midst of a performance. And it is when these moments find each other that our longing for a something else is realized, if just for an instant.

⁴⁵ Vazquez, 243.

⁴⁶ Vazquez, 213.

Chapter 1
Melting Modernities:
Sound, Ice, and Mexican Objecthood.

Iván Abreu's *Música y Voz de la Patria Himno Nacional*, part of his 2007 sound art installation series *M(R.P.M.)* (Masa en Función de las Revoluciones por Minuto, or Mass in Function of Revolutions Per Minute) begins with the artist taking a record out of a silicone mold and placing it on a turntable. As the needle hits the record, we hear trumpets playing the "Marcha de Honor," the tune that traditionally accompanies the Mexican flag as it is presented on ceremonial occasions. But the sound is harsh, since the record is not made out of vinyl, but out of ice. Clouding the discernible sounds of the trumpets and drums are scratches that the ice has picked up from the original record mold, made rougher by the instability of the substance that now carries this musical information. The record continues to spin until finally its creator intervenes, stops the record and shakes the table violently, until the ice breaks. At a certain point, only half the record is left, and the turntable resumes its spin, picking up the sounds of the fractured ice record's cacophonous scratches, all traces of music from the original recording gone. The artist's hands interfere again, breaking down the ice even further, once more allowing the turntable to spin. The sound now is nothing but scratches, but the violence of the sound is different, even harsher and more grating on the listener's ear. To end of the performance, the artist-cum-DJ's hand stops the turntable, and the performance comes to an immediate halt.

The performance has lasted just a few minutes, but in that short span the audience has entered a network shaped by history, both recent and in distant memory, that has shaped the meanings of the nation itself. The interactions in this performance are multiple and difficult to disentangle. The record itself will become increasingly unstable with each revolution. But the implications of the artist's manipulation of the turntable extend beyond the production of sound. The turntable itself is forced to bear the effects of a material, ice, that was never meant to be placed on it. The needle will become damaged beyond repair. Human intervention has brought us here, but even Abreu's interaction with the piece brings him into the matrix of interactions as an actant, rather than an agential subject. As ice turns into minute drops of water, history seeps through the transformation of sound-bearing solid form into crystalline fragments of melting matter. This history is indefinite, slippery. This is partly because each revolution of the turntable only hints at possible points of encounter, but doesn't stop at a single one. The installation's sound archive most immediately evokes 1968, the year in which most of the records Abreu chose to freeze for the series were originally recorded and pressed. The title resonates with Latin American history and the eternal promise of popular revolution that has shaped the dreams and aspirations of Latin American national fantasies over the last two centuries. But the artwork also nods toward other histories, more hidden within the Latin American national imaginary, that trouble this project of "revolution." *M(R.P.M.)* potently draws us back toward the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an era in which both ice and sound reproduction technology became key objects of commodification and exchange throughout Latin America—and by extension, the artwork engages with the complex and difficult relationship Latin America has had with the promise and violence of modernity and modernization as such.

Encountering Abreu's work, we are shaken by the reminder of sound's relationship to the nation—and remember that one of the first ways in which we learn to

become citizens is through song. This chapter explores the potent ways in which Abreu's piece unites the material properties of sound recording with the material history of ice in Latin America to draw us into a historical entanglement that, while centered in Mexico, travels into points of encounter between Latin America and the rest of the world that continue to resonate into the present. My attention to Abreu's artwork requires a critical approach to Latina/o American history, culture, and politics that dislodges the nation-form as the primary site of revolutionary thought. As I will show, sound has been a particularly fertile sensory arena through which to engage the critique of national revolutionary fantasies. Sound has been a contested territory in Mexican national history, as since the late nineteenth century the Mexican state has focused its attention on primarily *visual* modes of representation in order to showcase its modernization to the rest of the world. This chapter considers Abreu's critical manipulations of ice and sound as an opportunity to reframe Mexico's—and by extensions Latin America's—*sensory* relationship to modernity by attending to the history a largely overlooked process that was central to establishing transnational trade with Latin America throughout the nineteenth century: refrigeration. The confluence between ice, sound recording, and the music of the nation found in Abreu's work allows us to uncover hidden and fractured entanglements within Latin American cultural and political imaginaries, and to counter what Nestor García Canclini argues has been the paradox of modernity in Latin America: "We have had an exuberant modernism with deficient modernization."¹ Indeed, as the overlooked, transnational history of the ice trade shows, the trajectory of modernization and trade in Latin America—which national histories wish to claim as a linear movement derived from the colonial conquest culminating with neoliberal free-trade—has many obscured material and sensory pasts which counter this trajectory. As I will argue, the conjunction of the ice trade with sound recording technologies that Abreu's work invokes suggests that if the visual has been the favored sensory arena of the state's efforts to control national imaginaries and aspirations, sound and the sonic allow us to access underexplored and often disruptive ways in which Latin America has grappled with its vexed relationship to modernity.

The idea of revolutionary consciousness is found throughout the hemisphere as a failed project that is still seeking resolution. As Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, and more recently John Alba Cutler, point out, the canon of Latina/o literature has been constructed around a division between the rebellious 1960s generation that resisted assimilation into capitalist modernity represented by the US, and the post-1980s group of Latina/o writers who were increasingly held captive by the mandate to write for an emerging "Latino" market.² In Latin America, we find similar lines of argument around the failed projects of revolution, as the radical group of revolutionary writers and cultural figures who came of age in the 1960s were either violently silenced or shed their earlier ideals in order to become part of the political establishment throughout the 1970s and 80s and into the present. Furthermore, as Maria Josefina Saldaña Portillo importantly

¹ Canclini, Néstor García. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 41.

² See Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and John Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

demonstrates, the reigning discourses of the Latin American revolutionary Left since the 1960s “subscribed not only to a developmentalist model of history but— more damning to the everyday practice of radical politics— to a developmentalist model of revolutionary subjectivity, consciousness, and agency.”³ These discourses have, in turn, shaped the very idea of what *Latinidad* means and how its various constituencies must interact.

M(R.P.M.) refuses a single reading, yet its form and mode of presentation brings to the fore questions regarding the place of sound within Mexican contemporary art. Throughout its exhibition history, *M(R.P.M.)* has seemed at times to be commenting on the previous century, as the failed promises of twentieth-century revolutionary thought in Latin America have been successfully co-opted by neoliberal nationalist discourses in the wake of the end of the dictatorships that ruled much of the continent in the second half of the twentieth century. Abreu’s ice record seems a particularly well-suited aesthetic object through which to consider this history. The sound record is a crucial material repository for the conflicting and contradictory histories of Latin American nationalisms and modernities. As art curator Trevor Schoonmaker notes,

Whether one is an audiophile or not, the record has a unique capacity to both convey a sense of belonging and to transport us elsewhere. As an object it is evocatively and literally marked with meaning and remembrance, with history. When we lower a needle onto a grooved record, we inscribe the surface again and again with an aftertrace of our presence and spirit. With each listening, with each scratch, we generate a new and very specific (and deeply nostalgic) *record* that contains within it time and memory, transforming the mass produced object into something highly personalized that is at the same time a document of our larger social and cultural identity.⁴

The vinyl record seems to hold particular prominence in both cotemporary Mexican sound art and visual art because of its ability to be treated as an art object in a way many other forms of sound reproduction cannot. The intersection in Abreu’s piece between the form of the record and its unstable material support, frozen water, structures my investigation into the ways in which aesthetic and performance practices that take sound as a category of artistic concern allow critical insight into the larger histories of Latin American modernity.

As in the rest of my dissertation, in this chapter I invite readers to get lost in the immediate affective force of sound, in the difficulty of making sound easily knowable within predominant ways of understanding history and culture. Performance studies provides an ideal ground in which to stage these encounters. History in this chapter is invoked by way of what Diana Taylor has described as the tension between “the archive” and “the repertoire” in Latin American performance traditions.⁵ Although Taylor is most invested in how corporeality itself bears the embodied memory of multiple cultures whose colonial encounters threaten to erase them from historical record, here I am

³ Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina. *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 6.

⁴ Schoonmaker, Trevor. *The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 14.

⁵ See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

pursuing the slippage between these terms. If the archive names the historical “record” itself, always in search of an official narrative that strives to displace our memory to achieve its goal, and the repertoire is the process by which the subjects of this attempt resist and undermine it, *M(R.P.M.)* operates squarely at the interstices of these forces. Through its reproduction of the historical record (in both meanings of the word) in the medium of ice, Abreu playfully gestures toward this instability in Latin American modernity.

Jacques Derrida’s concept of the specter is especially germane to this discussion, particularly considering the origins of sound recording technologies in the larger histories of attempts to preserve, resurrect, and engage with the voices of the dead. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues for a concept of Marxist historical thought through the “order” of hauntology. Derrida makes us aware that “haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar.”⁶ Derrida’s engagement with this concept arises from both his reinterpretation of deconstruction’s relationship to Marxism, insisting that the former has always been engaged in the project of the latter. In spite of this, I borrow the term hauntology to situate Abreu’s work in relationship to the larger material histories of Latin American sonic modernity. Hauntology, Derrida reminds us, forces us to recognize the moment in which “*time itself* gets ‘out of joint,’ dis-jointed, disadjusted, disharmonic, discorded, or unjust.”⁷ As Tom Lewis writes, for Derrida “The specter thus may be said to represent more than the instability of the real; it also represents the ghostly embodiment of a fear and panic provoked by intimations of an impossible state of being.”⁸ In Derrida, this contrapuntal motion is meant to produce a “new international” centered around Marxist politics. I take the revolving and melting circular movements of Abreu’s ice records in the same historical register to which Derrida points. The “revolutions” in the title of Abreu’s work refer in equal measure to the record’s spin as they do to the promise of the masses’ rise to overturn late capitalism’s demands. Thus, the specters are conjoined. They land elsewhere, making us aware of other hidden histories.

The Derridean specter in Abreu’s work is brought about by what art theorist Caleb Kelly refers to as “cracked media,” in which “the tools of media playback [are] expanded beyond their original function or as a simple playback device for prerecorded sound or image. ‘The crack’ is a point of rupture or a place of chance occurrence, where unique events take place that are ripe for exploitation toward new creative possibilities.”⁹ Kelly argues that cracked media occupies an important role in the history of sound in the arts. He maintains that the reason for this was a breakdown in twentieth century musical thought, in which the distinction between music and extramusical sound became increasingly unstable. I examine the record as an act of “glitching” or “cracking” the

⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) 4.

⁷ Derrida, 22.

⁸ Lewis, Tom. “The Politics of ‘Hauntology’ in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*. Ed. Michael Sprinkler (London: Verso, 1999) 140.

⁹ Kelly, Caleb. *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009) 4.

distinction between music and noise that Kelly draws attention toward. The glitch, Kelly maintains, is a necessary action in response to what Douglas Kahn has called “the deaf century.”¹⁰ In a century that privileged the visual as the primary form of knowledge, expression, and political reclamation, sound often figured as a disruptive presence. In the following section, I take this challenge up in relationship to Abreu’s work as the hidden history of the relationship between sound and the materiality of ice allows us to rethink some of the prevailing narratives about modernity, nationalism, and visuality within Latin American studies.

Imagining the Nation

Throughout the 1960s, in preparation for hosting the summer Olympics in October 1968, Mexico had the task of presenting itself as a “modern” nation that could effectively welcome and host the rest of the world as international eyes turned to the spectacular sporting events to be held in its capital. Indeed, this accelerated effort to modernize under the international glare was undertaken through what Luis M. Castañeda identifies as “a sequence of official design projects destined to support the claim that, in the aftermath of its revolutionary wars (c. 1910-20), a socially unified and prosperous Mexico had effectively arrived to the ‘developed’ world.”¹¹ Castañeda describes the various ways in which these projects of modernization functioned through what he calls “image economies,” in which the visual served to project the psychic image Mexico wanted to show the world. As Castañeda argues, this visual psychic fantasy sought to integrate a modern, technology adept Mexico into the nationalist past it had imagined for itself even before the Mexican Revolution. However, the Mexican state’s attempt to prove its modern legitimacy before the world stage was violently contested throughout the 1960s, culminating in what became the most emblematic clash between the revolutionary New Left and the conservative Mexican establishment during this period: the brutal massacre of over 300 unarmed student protesters in Mexico City’s Tlatelolco Plaza on October 2 1968, just ten days before the opening ceremony of the Olympics.¹²

Although by the 1960s the Mexican government had fully learned to adopt visual regimes in order to showcase its nationalist ambitions, the very construction of *Mexicanidad* as a visual identity extended back much earlier. Historian John Mraz goes so far as to note that “identity construction in Mexico has been carried through the modern visual cultures of photography, cinema, and picture histories.”¹³ Drawing from a vast visual archive, Mraz shows that before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the primary way in which *mexicanismo* or *lo mexicano* was expressed was through visual economies that were the result of multifarious networks of exchange stretching as

¹⁰ Kahn, Douglas. *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 272.

¹¹ Castañeda, Luis M. *Spectacular Mexico: Design, Propaganda, and the 1968 Olympics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) xv.

¹² For a thorough recounting of Tlatelolco see Raúl Álvarez Garín, *La Estrella de Tlatelolco: Una Reconstrucción Histórica del Movimiento Estudiantil del 68* (México, D.F.: Grijalbo, 1998) Elena Poniatowska, *La Noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de Historia Oral* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1998).

¹³ Mraz, John. *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) 2.

far back as the U.S. invasion and occupation of 1846. As Mraz shows, “The Mexican War [...] was the first conflict in the world to be documented in both lithographs and photographs.”¹⁴ The scopic regime inaugurated during this time would continue well onto the early twentieth century, as elite Mexican families sought to become immortalized in daguerrotypes, “cartas de visita” that offered early stereotypes of Mexican culture, and the modern iconography of the Mexican nation that became cemented in the intensely visual mediation of the 1910 Revolution. As Mraz writes, “as the struggle developed, photographers and filmmakers poured into Mexico to document the world’s first great social conflagration, taking advantage of the relatively free access to the action, especially when compared to the strict censorship exercised during World War I.”¹⁵

Among the incidents that most capture my attention from this time is the way in which the heroes of the Revolution were visually represented, as in the case of Pancho Villa who “signed a contract with the Mutual Film Corporation in 1914 for \$25,000, giving the company exclusive rights to film his battles and executions, which he was obligated to carry out in daylight or to recreate if they could not be recorded; he was to wear the uniform created by the company (although he was only permitted to use it when filming).”¹⁶ This minor detail reminds us that even the site of the creation of the modern political Mexican State was imbricated in a much more complex process in which even at its beginnings, the very ideological fabric of the nation was constructed through the elite manipulation of visual signifiers.

This brief discussion of the essential *visuality* of Mexican national modernity helps us understand why sound would become such a potent site of political critique in Mexican art and culture of the past several decades. Alejandro L. Madrid in *Sounds of the Modern Nation*, shows how questions about authenticity, modernity, and avant-garde cultures were negotiated in the long history of Mexican musical production. Madrid demonstrates that in musical developments during the 1920s—from the First National Congress of Music in 1926, to the premiere of the “Indianist” opera *Atzimba* in 1928—musical discourse was a fraught site where national identity was contested.¹⁷ In a different register, in his study *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution*, Rubén Gallo argues that “nowhere in the world was the literary fascination with radio as deep and as fruitful as in postrevolutionary Mexico.”¹⁸ Gallo writes, “The first radio station in Mexico City was launched by a literary magazine, *El Universal Ilustrado*, a weekly publication [...] that routinely published the work of the most experimental writers and artists of the 1920s, from Tina Modotti to Manuel Maples Arce, from Diego Rivera to Salvador Novo.”¹⁹ If the high levels of illiteracy throughout the nation would make the visual the central sensory realm in which to construct the nation, the sonic became a sensory mode through which writers and artists experimented with form and ideas critical of emerging nationalist discourses. Indeed, my argument

¹⁴ Mraz, 13.

¹⁵ Mraz, 59.

¹⁶ Mraz, 63.

¹⁷ See Alejandro L. Madrid, *Sounds of the Modern Nation: Music, Culture, and Ideas in Post-revolutionary Mexico*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Gallo, Rubén. *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-garde and the Technological Revolution*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) 123.

¹⁹ Gallo, 123.

about the power of Abreu's piece and sound's intervention is precisely that if Mexico has long used the visual to signal its emerging modernity, the aural and the sonic chronicles embedded within the story of Mexican modernization are crucial to our understanding of anti- and counter-nationalist political and aesthetic discourse.

I want to focus briefly on a key incident that sets the stage for the re-emergence of music and sound in Mexican contemporary art since the 1990s as an oppositional voice against what became the increasingly neoliberal Mexican state. In September 1971, what came to be known as the "Mexican Woodstock," the Avándaro festival drew over 250,000 people. Although envisioned and promoted as an apolitical event, "federal, state, and local armed forces made the government's presence ominously apparent: up to 1,000 soldiers with machine guns milled around the perimeter of the concert grounds, though no violent incidents were reported."²⁰ The festival would also make apparent a major shift in the class makeup of listeners and adherents to the musical movement known as La Onda, a rock movement that spanned the United States and Mexico, connecting Chicano bands with Mexican ones, blurring the lines of language and distribution. Zolov explains, "it was the striking presence of so many lower-class youth, the *nacos*, as they were derogatorily called by the middle and upper classes, sharing a common space and musical culture with other youth that caught the attention of many writers."²¹ This revision helps explain the Mexican government's increasing uneasiness with the countercultural possibilities of La Onda. If upper and middle class youths had been the main targets and promoters of rock music throughout the country, they were still arguably invested in maintaining the economic status quo that resulted from the Mexican Revolution. Working class youth, on the other hand, came from outlying neighborhoods like Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, where "rock had worked its way into an integral aspect of everyday life, where life performance offered the possibility of self representation in a society which mocked and marginalized them."²²

But the festival became the vehicle by which the Mexican government attempted to expel this emerging cultural resistance. Luis Echeverría's government, seemingly shocked by the sheer number of people rock music could bring together, cracked down on musical distribution, production, and performance. The government prohibited dissemination of materials, particularly recordings, related to Avándaro. Record companies abandoned the distribution of La Onda Chicana and magazines, groups, and venues were shut down. The government understood that music gatherings could open up the space for collective movements, and thus made it so "live performances were also prohibited. Without concerts, there was little basis for sustaining a native rock movement."²³ Indeed, the Mexican government prohibited large musical gatherings, but as a consequence of this repression, rock—and soon metal and punk—would move underground, where music would become practiced by populations that were already expelled from the national and local imaginary.

In the next chapter of this dissertation, I explore the specific ways in which this prohibition led to the circulation of musical countercultures, particularly metal, punk, and

²⁰ Zolov, Eric. *Refried Elvis the Rise of the Mexican Counterculture*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 203.

²¹ Zolov, 204.

²² Zolov, 205.

²³ Zolov, 222.

rock music, between Mexico City and the United States. But as these diverging and at times clashing examples show, sound offers an alternative sensorium from which to explore a more complex history of modernity and modernization. Although questions of modernization and industrialization are so often relegated from the period right before the Mexican Revolution through the present, we must attend to some of the ways in which these histories trek a much longer odyssey.

Even if an immersive trip to the archives of Mexican art through the 1950s and beyond reveals a rich history of avant-garde and experimental critical cultural production, particularly in performance, much of this art was created and remained beyond the institutional boundaries of state discourse. While performance based collectives like No-Grupo and El Sindicato del Terror, as well as numerous feminist, queer, and other individual performers, had intervened in many actions that attempted to form an alternative to the official narratives of Mexican culture, the 1960s and the following two decades saw the rise of what many have termed “Neo-Mexicanism.” As Rubén Gallo points out, Mexican art often presented the nation as “a mythical construct, a timeless universe filled with pyramids, Mayan glyphs, and religious symbols, and not a reflection of the Mexican reality of the 1990s, with its uprisings, assassinations, and social unrest.”²⁴

The 1990s brought about dramatic changes to not only the country’s political landscape, but also to the very structures of artistic funding. By 1995, Mexico had seen the rise of the Zapatista movement, the political assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, and the beginning of what would eventually become an uncontrollable drug war. As the country became increasingly tumultuous in various arenas, a new generation of artists began to use autonomous spaces to exhibit their work. Gallo argues that this group of young artists, which included foreign-born artists working in Mexico like Francis Alÿs and Melanie Smith, and Mexican nationals like Teresa Margolles, Pablo Vargas Lugo, Daniela Rossell, Eduardo Abaroa, among others, depart from Neo-Mexicanist production in three important ways: first, they abandoned painting and increasingly turned to installation, video, and performance; second, their semiotic lexicon departed from the nationalist symbols of the previous generation and increasingly utilized transnational media iconography derived from foreign film, TV, comics, and music; and third, they rejected the art market embraced by the neo-Mexicanists and instead produced work that was difficult, ephemeral, and ceased to engage with the figure of the nation as a symbol of national pride.²⁵ Gallo indicates that although local and international audiences often missed the subtler political messages in these artists’ works, they nonetheless inaugurated a new trend toward socially engaged art that utilized a new lexicon for engaging Mexico’s volatile changes. Once again, not only radio, but also sound, would come to claim a central place in this history.

Daniel Montero’s recent critical re-engagement with art during this period, *El Cubo de Rubik: Arte Mexicano en los Años 90*, points to a sculptural piece, “Obelisco Roto Portátil para Mercados Ambulantes” as inaugurating a period of new modes of production that side-stepped the institutional and aesthetic approaches favored by Neo-

²⁴ Gallo, Rubén. *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 7.

²⁵ Gallo, 8-9.

Mexicanism.²⁶ As new exhibition spaces sprang up, so did the variety of work possible, culminating in a 2002 exhibition at MoMA PS1, *Mexico City: An Exhibition About the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*. During this time many artists began to increasingly experiment with sound art, or “arte sonoro.” Unfortunately, very little attention or explanation has been given as to why sound art has enjoyed such a prominent place in artistic production until now. This is partly the result of the sheer number of aesthetic techniques and modes of presentation that have multiplied since the 1990s. This is also in part due to sound art’s multiple presentational forms as installation, sculpture, music, performance, objects, noise, and more. But it is undeniable along with these shifts in the contemporary landscape of Mexican art, sound has exploded, even if at times silently. By 1999, the first international sound festival, “Ruido” had seen dozens of artists from all over the world descend in Mexico City. Although the festival only spanned to 2002, it served to foster a community of sound artists and electronic musicians, and Mexico City as a central location for this kind of work. The co-founder and co-curator of the festival, Manuel Rocha Iturbide points out that this first exhibition also featured a variety of artists who worked mainly in other fields, but made work whose main engagement was with sound. And as recently as 2013, El Museo Universitario del Chopo, one of Mexico City’s most prominent contemporary art venues, presented the small yet comprehensive retrospective *Sonorama: Arte y Tecnología del Hi-Fi al MP3*, which featured the works of artists like Melquiades Herrera, Álvaro Verduzco, Guillermo Santamarina, and No-Grupo.

This proliferation of sound art producers, festivals, and gallery exhibitions begs the question, why did sound art become so important for Mexican artists and curators? While this chapter is dedicated to a single series, and the project of accounting for an entire history (as well as enumeration of artists), is much too large for this section, it seems particularly significant to underline the relationship between art produced after 1990 and its commitment to a politics beyond nationalism. As Rocha Iturbide mentions in his curatorial statement to the third sound-art festival, sound art more than any other form or aesthetic development is centrally tied to the dissemination, use, and experimentation with new technologies. Rocha Iturbide insisted as curator to include musicians who were explicitly using computers and other such equipment.²⁷

Sounds of Revolution

It is within this context that Iván Abreu began to create his work. Abreu’s personal history is implicated in many geographic sites and forms of aesthetic practice. Born in Havana, Cuba, in 1967, Abreu moved to Mexico in the 1990s to earn his masters degree in Information Technology Engineering at Anáhuac University. His training as an engineer has made him one of the most technologically sophisticated artists working in the contemporary Mexican art scene. Although not all of his work engages the sonorous, Abreu is particularly invested in how information forms the basis for aesthetic processes. For example, in one of his recent piece, *Similitude (National Anthems MX-US)* (2011),

²⁶ Montero, Daniel. *El Cubo de Rubik, Arte Mexicano en los Años 90*. (Mexico, D.F.: Fundación Jumex, 2013) 39-44.

²⁷ Rocha Iturbide, Manuel. “The International Sound Art Festival in Mexico City (Sound, Its Relationship to the Art Disciplines and New Technologies”
<http://www.artesonoro.net/artesonoroglobal/InternationalSoundArtFest.pdf>

Abreu utilized music analysis software to process the national anthems of both nations, displaying a pattern of grey tones, even rows corresponding to the Mexican national anthem, odd one to the United States'. The resulting image shows a confusing pattern of dissonant intersections, a visual symbol for the very dissonances between both countries. Abreu has claimed that he does not intend his art to be political, yet as I will show in my exploration of *M(R.P.M.)* by not claiming a direct political lineage with protest art, his work allows us to use sound to examine other distinct political grooves.

M(R.P.M.) is, by Abreu's own admission, a piece that has gone from playing with ephemerality toward efforts for its conservation via its institutionalization. In an interview with Mexican contemporary art magazine *Galatea*, Abreu complains that the initial experimentation of the piece has resulted in a "bureaucratic process" of repetition.²⁸ While Abreu's work has continued to evolve, I wish here to look back at the series, starting with its most recent iteration, as a gallery installation at the *Centro Cultural Tijuana*. I begin here because in this display the series is presented as a potential conclusion. (This is also the only one of the series I've seen in person). Even though Abreu created one more record for the exhibition, the installation singles out the most well known records it has transferred onto ice: *Musica y Voz de la Patria Himno Nacional* in 2007, *John Fitzgerald Kennedy The Presidential Years*, and *Historia Ilustrada de la Musica Popular Mexicana Los Inmortales de la Canción Ranchera*, both in 2008, and *Deutschlandlied*, in 2011.

Housed in the *Centro Cultural Tijuana's* 2013 exhibit, *Teoría de la Entropía*, *M(R.P.M.)* offered a summation of the project. The installation consists of three short wooden stools, standing a few feet apart, on top of which rest three projectors which in turn hold another short stool that support three of the molds utilized to make the records, each covered with a circular plate of glass. The projectors show video documentation of the pieces' original performance. The looping videos combine several performances, exceeding the number of molds. To the right is a small freezer, which holds the mold of the piece performed by Abreu at the start of the exhibition, inside of it is a frozen record, still intact. The light inside the freezer is commensurate with the hue of the projections, yet it stands out because of its luminosity. The back wall shows not only the projected video, but also photographs of differing sizes that serve as documentation of the creation of the records, details of the sculptures, and images of the original albums used for the molds.

The installation's setting recalls the dim lighting of a stage rather than the walls of a museum gallery. Lights emanate from the projectors and freezer, foregrounding the work's theatrical elements. The furniture used for holding the projectors, as well as the freezer, were custom-made for the exhibition, but consistent with 1960s design, when each of the original records were produced. The photographs are arranged in chronological order, from Abreu's first experiments using ice as a medium, to the final single performance of the piece, *Deutschlandlied*, in Berlin. Thus, each of the pieces in the exhibit has the specific task of storytelling or assisting as a custom-made prop. The molds themselves serve as the performing object, placed at the front of the exhibit, thus existing in performative tryst with the spectator. The molds do not function as documentation, but rather as quite present performative objects, or actants. Looking

²⁸ González, Grecia. "Entrevista con Iván Abreu." *Arte Galatea* <http://galatea-arte.com/articulo/2012/03/02/entrevista-con-iv%C3%A1n-abreu>

through the circular glass that covers them, one can see the details of the grooves from the record they once held. Yet the glass underlines the absence of the records, both in their original and frozen forms.

While discussions, disagreements, and disavowals around the question of documentation have permeated much of performance studies, particularly in relation to its “live form,” here I want to direct us to how the objects as performance may help us circumvent some of these discussions. Performance in these pieces exists through a multitude of levels, from Abreu’s own presence and intervention in the presentation of the pieces, to the very records themselves. While I will refer to Abreu as the creator, I am most interested in the life of the record as it is placed on the turntable and as the needle comes to action. I argue that the ice record itself performs, in large part because of the context in which it is created and played.

The record itself is made through a process in which Abreu uses silicone to create a mold of the original record, which he then fills with water. The mold contains the information from the original disc’s grooves, so when the water freezes, it retains this data. *Musica y Voz de la Patria Himno Nacional* was the first in the series of presentations. It was first performed in 2007 at the Fifth Muestra de Arte Sonoro at the X Teresa Arte Actual museum in Mexico City. The record connects the nation to voice and music through its title. The album was pressed in 1967, amidst massive social change in Mexico. The pieces included in the record include the “Marcha de Honor,” played typically in civic ceremonies to introduce the flag into the space. Anyone schooled in Mexico is familiar with this ceremony, in Monday morning assemblies, or at important civic events, from the inauguration of the president to high school graduations. The lyrics for the march indicate allegiance to the flag. Other songs include the Mexican national anthem, the military national college’s official anthem, and other state songs. Each of the pieces is played by a nationally sanctioned group, from the soldiers themselves to the national symphonic orchestra.

The sound as the record plays in Abreu’s ice version of it is heavily distorted. But a multiplicity of sounds compete for our attention: first, the distortion itself. Even if frozen water can maintain the record’s information, the very act of playing it begins to erase it with each revolution; second, the regular damage any vinyl record accumulates after years of usage dominates much of the soundscape; third, the multiplicity of instruments and voices captured in the grooves. With each turn the information in the disc becomes further fragmented. What first attracted me to the piece was precisely this, knowing that the object is meant to disappear through its very functionality. The record may self-annihilate, but it can be reproduced over and over. One only need to freeze more water in that mold. At the same time, even if one can reproduce the sound, each time the atmospheric conditions will be different, and the record will melt at a different speed, slowly or quickly depending on the circumstances. But in this particular performance the record will not melt. After a couple of minutes Abreu will come to interrupt it, as the disturbance from the ice becomes stronger and begins to take over the rest of the sound. After all, the needle is scratching ice. In the video, Abreu’s hands are visible on the record but not the rest of his body. Our eyes are still solely centered on the block of ice. He then leaves one of the three chunks of ice, but sound has now become indistinguishable. Abreu will end the piece by grabbing the one piece of ice and scratching with the needle. Beyond having made it, I am struck by this particular intervention into the integrity of the sound. This particular form of the dj scratch will not

produce intelligible sound, but a cacophonous scrape. As the violence from Abreu to the block of ice intensifies, the performance ends.

I want to linger for a minute on the concluding moments of the piece. The change brought about by the destruction of the record renders a radical transformation present in its very materiality, which morphs from recognizable sound into vibration. Indeed, as the piece mutates into cacophony, our own perceptual engagement with it changes as well. The vibrations at this moment don't just make contact with the ears, but instead interact directly with the listener/viewer's whole body. The scratching is far from pleasant, as Abreu transforms the sounds of the nation into a sonic assault, thus allowing us to imagine the violence of the benevolent state upon our own bodies.

Another performance, *Historia Ilustrada de la Música Popular Mexicana: Los Inmortales de la Canción Ranchera* shows Abreu working a record in another intonation. In this version, Abreu creates a fragmentary dyad between a fully frozen record and the fragmented chunk of the other one. First he plays the complete record, allowing to play the pieces in the album, all of them corresponding to the *ranchero* genre, perhaps the most popular post-revolutionary musical form in the country. After a few minutes however, he pulls a small chunk of ice from another mold and begins scratching it on the turntable. Here, Abreu will allow the original record, now broken, to keep playing as the failed mold takes his attention. By creating this dyad, Abreu offers no alternatives but only a literal presentation of the break in sound.

In presenting the record through several iterations, Abreu highlights how the performance of the ice vinyl itself varies according to atmospheric and geographic circumstances. A photograph shows the first completed experiment with the process, as the turntable is covered with the record in a decomposed state. This image foregrounds the melancholic tones of the piece. Although the first impression when seeing the record play may involve awe at the technical prowess of Abreu's work, seeing the melted record on the turntable points toward the instability of the process, which in turn stands for the instability of nationalism itself.

Frozen History

In this section, I wish to consider the ice record as an unexpected entry point to a history of modernization that, although not often studied, lingers at the margins of Latinidad and the Latin American imaginary. While the use of ice across a wide variety of culinary activities, from chilling beverages to making ice cream, had been used in many places throughout history, the widespread use of ice as a commodity around the world did not take place until the nineteenth century. By most accounts, the international ice trade was initiated by the American businessman Frederic Tudor in the early 1800s, when a friend of his made a remark about the potentially large market for ice in the West Indies. Tudor was at this point a failed businessman whose other ventures had failed to produce the fortune he sought. But his ability to access large amounts of ice easily in Buffalo, New York, gave Tudor the idea to pursue the production and distribution of ice as his next venture. As Gavin Weightman writes in his book on the early decades of the so-called ice-trade, "[Tudor] clung to one conviction: people living in tropical climates would pay a good price for ice if they could get it."²⁹ The first period of the ice-trade was therefore a

²⁹ Weightman, Gavin. *The Frozen-water Trade: A True Story*. (New York: Hyperion, 2003) 3.

colonial venture, although the “people” in question here refer to the colonial ruling classes rather than the slaves that made up most of the population in these areas. Tudor’s attempt to bring ice to the West Indies involved a process of trial and error, partly because no-one believed that ice would ever become a necessity in the United States. Yet “Tudor made cutting, transporting, and selling ice efficient to become profitable.”³⁰ Tudor’s realization was that for ice to become a commodity, it would require a global market where it could be seen as a technological necessity, rather than a natural phenomenon. Tudor’s first shipment to Martinique in 1806 was a disaster: “without an icehouse on the island to slow the rate of melting, the cargo disappeared quickly when the open hold exposed the ice to the warm tropical air.”³¹ Eventually, Tudor began to establish ice depots in several locations throughout the Americas from Cuba to Brazil. With the help of his associate Nathaniel Wyeth, he developed increasingly complex technologies to cut and store the ice. Among these innovations was the manipulation of the physical appearance of ice itself, as “the desire for transparent ice actually predated concerns over the safety of the product.”³² This aesthetic dimension of ice led to further innovations in its harvesting, which resulted in “ice so fine that you can see [and] read a printed paper through a block 42 inches long.”³³

The American trade set up monopoly deals with the British, Spanish, and French governments in control of these islands. One of their first major trading posts would be Havana, where by 1928 Tudor had set up the first major depot. While not much has been written on the history of the ice-trade at the international level, most of the existing scholarly literature on the phenomenon tends to emphasize American ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit. Even now, Tudor is hailed as an innovator who was truly the first person to establish the “cold-chain” that would set the stage for modern refrigeration technologies. These retellings ignore the fact that the ice-trade was a essentially colonial venture based upon the export of an American commodity to imperial ports around the world. As the trade routes from the Caribbean expanded, the demand for this new luxury item extended beyond the Atlantic routes and eventually reached as far as Calcutta, where Tudor reaped his highest profits.

We cannot minimize the importance of these changes to notions and capabilities of trade throughout the Americas and beyond. While the ice-trade existed on an international scale, the rise of interest in food conservation quickly hit emerging food industries in the United States and abroad. It was after all, the first functional ice containers that initiated the idea that food, such as fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables, could travel across long distances while still retaining their “freshness.” Eventually setting up trade with Cuba and the rest of the Caribbean, Tudor’s did not hide his feelings about the Latin Americans he encountered in the process. During a forced exile in Havana, he described the “grossness of the people extreme.”³⁴ The ice-trade would gradually die off as ice harvesting became increasingly obsolete with the development of

³⁰ Rees, Jonathan. *Refrigeration Nation: A History of Ice, Appliances, and Enterprise in America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013) 14.

³¹ Weightman, 15.

³² Weightman, 19.

³³ Fredric Tudor, qtd. in Rees, 19.

³⁴ Qtd. in Weightman, 61

new refrigeration technologies by the 1930s, but not before opening up new markets to Latin America.

Although several scholars have documented how the exploitation of consumable substances, such as sugar, coffee, and the coca plant have been central to the colonization of the Americas, it is in many ways ice that tells an earlier story of trade that persists onto the present. The ice-trade participated in a flawed modernity that reveals how the attempts by Latin American nations to visually signal their own technological progress were inseparable from histories of colonization and exploitation of their own peoples and resources by foreign powers—and individuals. It also highlights that questions of technological innovation were driven by ventures bearing the imprint of the spirit of entrepreneurial ingenuity that characterized the vision of modernity as it developed in the United States, but that when viewed from a transnational perspective bear a much different meaning with dire material implications.

Though now largely forgotten, the colonial traces of ice as a technology that ironically brought about great change in spite of the quest for conservation notably persisted in the Latin American imaginary. Perhaps the most well known appearance of ice in Latin American literature occurs in Gabriel García Márquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. The story of the fictional town Macondo, which stands in for the story of Latin American modernity, itself begins with vivid descriptions of ice. As the first line of the novel tells us: "Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía, había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo."³⁵ [Many years later as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to see the ice]. This opening image corresponds to an interplay between the brutal and the magical that permeates through the book. As Aureliano faces the firing squad, he begins to recall the event that will set-off the main trajectory of the story. Ice arrives to the still-germinal town of Macondo from a group of Gypsies who set up camp every year. The Gypsies would bring many inventions to a town in which "El mundo era tan reciente, que muchas cosas carecían de nombre, y para mencionarlas había que señalarlas con el dedo"³⁶ [The world was so recent, that many things lacked a name, and to mention them one had to point to them with one's finger]. "The other world" already weighs heavily upon the mythical early inhabitants of the town, and particularly its patriarch, Aureliano Buendía. García Márquez first describes the ice in extravagantly rendered detail, before even the readers are certain precisely what is being described: "un enorme bloque transparente, con infinitas agujas internas en las cuales se despedazaba en estrellas de colores la claridad del crepúsculo"³⁷ [An enormous transparent block, with infinite transparent needles in which the twilight was broken into colored stars]. Upon this sight, José Arcadio Buendía at first confuses ice with the world's largest diamond. After touching it he declares, "Este es el gran invento de nuestro tiempo"³⁸ [This is the greatest invention of our times]. García Márquez uses the language of aesthetic awe to illustrate José Arcadio's response. Ice does not appear simply as a commodity, but as a sublime object intertwined with the very notion of invention.

³⁵ García Márquez, Gabriel. *Cien Años de Soledad*. (Madrid: Catedra, 1984) 81.

³⁶ García Márquez, 81.

³⁷ García Márquez, 102.

³⁸ García Márquez, 103.

Some time after the original patriarch passes away, his grandchildren finally achieve the dream of bringing ice to Macondo. They build an ice factory, and along with it the wrath of modernity upon Latin America. As the frozen water trade expands beyond the boundaries of Macondo, Aureliano Triste, the protagonist of third part of the novel reaches a conclusion: “Hay que traer el ferrocarril”³⁹ [We must bring the train]. The arrival of the train in Macondo brings with it domestic electricity, a movie theater, and eventually, foreign investment in the form of the banana trade.

Making a brief but notable appearance after the train’s arrival is the gramophone. Unlike ice, this technology is not a hit in Macondo. Its unimpressed audience in the town finds the record to be a poor replacement for live music, and even as the new invention quickly makes its way to each household, it does so as entertainment for children. But as the novel progresses through its mythic account of Latin American history, the foreign owners of the town’s banana plantations instill marshal law, eventually massacring the workers who try to organize against the everyday terror the companies bring along with it. The book closes with a description of Macondo as a barren sight: the dreams of its cultural greatness having been eradicated almost completely by capitalist modernity.

Although *A Hundred Years of Solitude* is perhaps the most well known text to evoke the pathways of commerce that ice brought upon Latin America, the complex history of ice as a commodity persists as a remembered dream in more recent cultural and aesthetic practices. For example, in Francis Alÿs’s 1997 performance piece *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* the Belgian-born, Mexico-residing artist pushed an enormous block of ice through the streets of Mexico City until it melted—calling subtle and minimal attention to the inextricability of ice in Latin America from the laboring bodies that must be mobilized for its arduous maintenance. Another example is heard in the 2013 song “El Hielo (ICE)” by Mexican-American Spanish rock band La Santa Cecilia, who in the chorus sing the lines “El hielo anda suelto por esas calles/Nunca se sabe cuando nos va a tocar/Lloran, los niños lloran a la salida/Lloran al ver que no llegará mamá” [Ice is loose around these streets, you never know when it’s going to arrive/The children cry at the exits/They cry knowing that mom will never arrive.] The song title references the acronym of Immigrations and Custom Enforcement in the United States, and links the material properties of melting ice to the fear experienced by Mexican American communities in Los Angeles at the sight of the immigration agents targeting immigrants for deportation.

I point out these moments in the spirit of revolution found in Abreu’s piece. These convergences of ice, sound, and aesthetics do not aim to trace a linear history through modernity, but rather upend such attempts. As Mexican citizens once again march toward the potential for another revolutionary mobilization in the present moment, the title of Abreu’s work, *Masa en Función de las Revoluciones por Minúto*, itself offers an important warning—that we cannot tether hope toward a projected image of the nation. As Leftist thought in Latin America has long been mired by its orientation around the failed promise of political revolution, we must revise our understandings of this history to see the many sensory forms in which Latin American modernity unfurled. Abreu’s work shows us that we are forced to reckon with a future aggressively structured by the violence and exploitation frozen within its past. As we are forced to listen to the violent

³⁹ García Márquez, 330.

cracks of its material annihilation, we are able to hear to how the ice record's multiple forms of loss—of fidelity, of the sounds of the nation, of material integrity—melt into the shape of a still-revolving history.

Chapter 2
Petulant Futurity:
Violence and Mexican Musical Undergrounds

This chapter moves from sound's ability to grant us relief from the historical registers of capitalism and trade to what feminist theorist Sayak Valencia calls "capitalismo gore." I trace how artists and musicians in Mexico turned to sound as a strategy to evacuate the meaning of life itself at a moment when the legal mandates of the war on drugs made the very possibility of living increasingly precarious. I do so by developing a notion of "petulant futurity," a term I use to describe these antagonistic developments. Throughout this chapter, I argue for petulant futurity as a strategy utilized by artists and musicians for whom death and necroaesthetics become a withdrawal from and contestation to neoliberal demands for belonging. The first section of the chapter looks at performance group SEMEFO, active in Mexico City from 1990-1999, and their use of hard musical sounds, as well as their performance oeuvre, to understand the aesthetic shifts that became available to artists as the production of dead bodies exploded in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the second section of the chapter I turn my attention to the Tijuana/San Diego border to illustrate how the electronic music movement known as Ruidosón responded to the unstoppable rise in violence through the work of Tijuana based electronic artist Tony Gallardo II. I illuminate how metal and dance music allowed subjects to embrace notions of death in order to critique the increasing narcoviolence perpetrated across the country.

Petulant futurity is a way of understanding how unrelenting violence affects the everyday beyond the tropes of trauma. I draw this notion by appealing to Lauren Berlant's argument that to understand the ongoing violence of the present we must move away from the logic of trauma as "the primary genre of the last eighty years for describing historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going on and with respect to which people felt solid and confident."¹ Indeed, as I will show, petulant futurity displaces trauma as the primary way of understanding the quotidian contours of turbulence. After all, the scene of trauma is marked by its extraordinariness against a non-violent everyday. But SEMEFO and Ruidosón emerged at a moment where ordinariness was situated in relationship to the threat of bloodshed. Thus, the performance space and the dance floor became the very sites through which defiance could be registered not within the bounds of resistance, but as forms of negation that mocked these histories of violence with sulky abandon. In this context, prevailing notions of what it means to appeal to "the future" and indeed, even "a future" were replaced by an understanding of the future not as a nihilistic practice, but as a sonic interruption.

In *Cruel Modernity*, Jean Franco asks, "Why, in Latin America, did the pressures of modernization and the lure of modernity lead states to kill?"² While she explains that the relationship of the state and violence are by no means exclusive to Latin America, it is its explicit relationship to modernity itself that requires a "complex terrain that links conquest to feminicide, the war on communism to genocide, and neoliberalism to casual

¹ Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 10.

² Franco, Jean. *Cruel Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) 1.

violence without limits.”³ In the case of Mexico, the only Latin American nation to avoid a military backed dictatorial regime after 1960, the rise of violence has been the result of the meeting between the expansion of multinational exploited labor and most saliently, the so-called drug wars. Franco explains, “The daily death toll in northern Mexico resembles a list of wartime casualties; 2010 was a record year, with 3,080 deaths—that is, one fourth of the total deaths in the entire nation. Kidnapping and extortion are so routine that they seldom merit a line in the newspapers. The ante has been raised for the foot soldiers, among them youths in their teens, who are required not only to kill and torture but also be indifferent to their own deaths.”⁴ Franco reads reactions to this violence as hailing an apocalyptic affect, “the end of ‘civil’ society.”⁵ However, what happens when we read this violence as the logical conclusion of contemporary capital, which has increasingly relied on the production of dead bodies? Mexican feminist theorist Sayak Valencia calls this “capitalismo gore”:

Bodies conceived as exchange products that alter and break the logic of the process of the production of capital, since they subvert the terms of it by taking out of the game the phase of the production of merchandise, substituting it for merchandise embodied literally by the body and human life, through the predatory techniques of extreme violence, such as kidnapping and contract killings.⁶

For Valencia, contemporary accounts of capital or neoliberal development are incomplete insofar they ignore that this black market is in fact the world’s largest industry.

In *Narcoepics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety*, Hermann Herlinghaus locates the history of “narcotics” as essential to understanding the divide and development of Western modernity. Herlinghaus contends that, “While cultural critics are accustomed to thinking globalization in terms of power configurations related to capitalism, coloniality, the nation-state, Otherness, gender, immigration, and the mass media, most have neglected the formative role of modern struggles over narcotics in these regards.”⁷ This separation, between good narcotics—sugar, alcohol, medical drugs, and tobacco—and the “bad” narcotics—drugs deemed “illegal” through a variety of law enforcement practices—lie at the heart of the economic relationship between Latin America and the United States, and since the 1980s, between Mexico and its neighbor to the north. The consequences of this division have been at the heart of modernity, from the birth of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to cultivate sugar and tobacco, to the hundreds of thousands of dead bodies produced by the ongoing war on drugs. Herlinghaus maintains:

the word “drugs” resonates with either suspicion or excess, together with narcotics having become mass commodities—extremely diversified, highly profitable, and eagerly restricted; alas, we live in a world in which the notions of excess and fear evoke, not by chance, a sense of immaturity regarding the ways in which

³ Franco, 5

⁴ Franco, 22

⁵ Franco, 22

⁶ Translation mine. Valencia, Sayak *Capitalismo Gore* (Barcelona: Editorial Melusina, 2010) 15.

⁷ Herlinghaus, Hermann. *Narcoepics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 3.

contemporary societies handle their basic, bio-anthropological issues. If late modernity is about globalization, is it not also about the obsessive particularisms through which ruling elites try to secure their domains, geopolitically and locally? Or, to recall a cast of neoliberalist cynicism vis-a-vis our troubled world—chaos management should be profitable, in the first place.⁸

At stake here is the very notion of “life” that has been often at the center of critical theory over the past few decades, especially our attention to life and its management through the concept of biopolitics. Yet the very perception of life, or as Herlinghaus points out, the continuing desire and extinction of something we could refer to as “the good life,” has rarely been examined as carrying different valences between the West and its many Others. For our preoccupations around life to emerge as they have, we must first lay claim to a belief in life itself as an inalienable right to which certain bodies have access. Life, in its western conception, is “backed by notions such as the subject, science, democracy, and rights [...] in the leading industrialized countries, where the biosciences have been concerned with perfection-of-life technologies.”⁹ This conviction in life and *bíos* also must necessarily disavow death, unless constructed through the moments in which its massification brings it into crisis, thus we can understand much of the rising preoccupations around it through the aftermath of an event like the Holocaust and its lingering in the Western philosophical imaginary. The goal here “is not to foreground a Latin American ‘exceptionalism’ but to rethink the ‘normality’ of the normal, in view of an increasing number of chasms in modernity’s inner edifice.”¹⁰ In other words, how may we attend to the ways in which subjects in the global south, whose contours Herlinghaus locates as coming into being in 1989/90, aesthetically confront life and death at a moment in which the distinction between them has become increasingly defunct?

This shift, which the West disclaims as the war on drugs, is the central focus of *Capitalismo Gore*. For Valencia, contemporary accounts of capital or neoliberal development are incomplete insofar they ignore that this black market represents the world’s largest industry. Valencia calls *capitalismo gore* globalization’s “B-side.” The products and increase of brutal criminality throughout the world cannot be seen simply as adjacent to or even a byproduct of neoliberal globalization. As its B-side violence becomes a constitutive element of neoliberal economies. One of the major shifts brought about by the necropolitics of *capitalismo gore* according to Valencia, is from life as imagined within the tenets of Western liberal humanism, to one in which life and death become commodified, the body as merchandise.¹¹ This is reiterated through the logic of the attending economies that sprout: consumption (primarily that of drugs), private security firms that displace the responsibility for safety away from the government, and the increasing exploitation of natural resources. But perhaps most significantly, responding or living under *capitalismo gore* signifies stepping away from traditional notions of resistance.

Valencia’s urgent call is to recognize that the biopolitical and legal management of

⁸ Herlinghaus, 6.

⁹ Herlinghaus, 27

¹⁰ Herlinghaus, 31

¹¹ Translation mine. Valencia, 143.

the drug trade is not a matter of sustaining capitalism, but *capitalism itself*:
 the explosion of limitless violence and over-specialized announces the absence of a (regulable) future, and the fact that in the interstices of capitalism nobody has anything to lose, because life (the last of the grand taboos), is no longer important. Violence here and now blurs the possibilities of thinking the concept of *Future* in the way in which it has been produced in the West. Violence implies a revision of such a concept.¹²

This observation is essential to understand the aesthetic practices discussed in the chapter. Although in United States academic discourse, futurity has been mired in a tug-of-war between Lee Edelmans' notion of "no future" on the one hand, and José Esteban Muñoz's rebuttal in *Cruising Utopia*, the quest for futurity in a global south dominated by disorder must force us to understand how any idea of the time to come must be understood¹³.

How then, to create an aesthetic practice in which the critical call for futurity stands outside of its traditional signifiers? Sound's ability to near us to annihilation provides the key to this action. In particular, I prove that metal and punk, in the case of SEMEFO, and electronic music, for Tony Gallardo, produce a sonic imaginary that touches upon death and morbidity as a way of constructing the possibility of futurity. For each of these artists, however, futurity carries a different weight. For SEMEFO, at the dawn of the 1990s, their early performances presage and engage with the rise in violence that coincides with shifting registers through which Mexican political actors utilized death as a symbol for Mexicanity itself. Two decades after, Tony Gallardo and the Ruidosón movement in Tijuana show a preoccupation with a future received in the wake of devastation. But sound and music are essential in thinking this relationship because of the Mexican government's continuing appeal to the visual as the site of national identity. I call these practices "petulant" because of their hostility toward a normative notion of futurity.

And yet the idea and story of death has been central in the imaginary of Mexican culture and aesthetics. As Claudio Lomnitz demonstrates in his massively comprehensive *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, "the cult of death could be thought of as the oldest, seminal, and most authentic element of Mexican popular culture."¹⁴ The reason for this, Lomnitz argues, is due in part to the role that death always-already plays in constructing the nation. For Mexico, this relationship is conditioned by both its centrality in Latin American thought and as the constant recipient of the United State's economic failures. However, this historical relationship to death has shifted historically either as a populist call to arms, or the nation's attempt to rally its people. Through the 1980s, "the skeleton and the emaciated body returned during the economic crisis of the 1980s as signs of growing inequality. The various secularized uses of the body to figure social inequality found in the skeleton an extreme that was well tailored to the shrill protests conjured up

¹² Translation mine. Valencia, 21.

¹³ For a complete description on the differences around the concept of futurity in the U.S. academy see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Lomnitz, Claudio. *Death and the Idea of Mexico*. (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2005) 26.

by the economic revolution of the 1980s.”¹⁵

This return to the figure of the dead as central for populist movements concurred with larger cultural battles around the increasing adoption of Halloween as a holiday in Mexico, but “news coverage of *muertos* also took off in 1985 [...] since then, news coverage combines traditional celebrations of the fiesta with descriptions of political use of *muertos* by groups such as associations of Mexico City prostitutes, ecologists protesting nuclear power, indigenous-rights groups, gay-rights movements, and public-housing movements.”¹⁶ In the political arena then, death became a central recourse for activist movements to illustrate their plight. Lomnitz further links these passages to a contrasting shift in ideas around morbidity in the Western world. Perhaps most significantly, “on cultural plane, the denial of death was reflected in horror of decomposition, which was institutionally addressed by the widespread practice of embalming in the U.S. And British funerary business.”¹⁷

We cannot untangle these political moves from the ways in which artists continued deploying mortality in their own practice. As the rest of the chapter will discuss, the return of death as a symbol of social, economic, and cultural inequality coincided with two major developments: first, the continuing climb and eventual explosion of mass death brought on about by the drug war, and second, the aesthetic responses to U.S. dominance in Mexico. As figures of death, including the skeleton and the emaciated body, became a site of dispute in articulating Mexican culture, the undeniable numbers of bodies merged into our very understanding of Mexico today.

“The Longest Fifteen Minutes in Mexican Rock”: SEMEFO and Necroaesthetics.

Although official history as explored in the earlier chapter would have us believe that rock music became silenced throughout much of the 1980s, re-emerging toward the early 90s in the guise of “rock en Español,” musical genres like punk, metal, and hardcore would come to flourish in the undergrounds of working class neighborhoods. The following section will focus on the early works of the art collective SEMEFO, integrated centrally by Teresa Margolles, Arturo Angulo, and Carlos López. Their performances and installations would help launch Mexican performance art into the international stage, arming themselves with cultural developments that highlighted morbidity as a form of expression. They took their name from the eponymous federal agency tasked with retrieving bodies from crime scenes, performing autopsies, and in cases where family members are unable to care for the deceased, bury or cremate the corpses. Worth noting is that local SEMEFO branches are often in the predicament of not having enough space for deceased bodies, thus resorting to so-called “fosas comunes” or public mass burial sites.

In a short capsule on the work of the group in 1996, Naief Yehya writes, “There is no such thing as a silent Semefo performance. Wherever the group presents its flirtations with atrocity, one hears the deafening rhythms of the band, which has passed through covers of classic tunes, the hardest rock, experimental noise, and Grind Doom Death

¹⁵ Lomnitz, 453

¹⁶ Lomnitz, 458

¹⁷ Lomnitz, 465

Metal, a genre whose sound attempts to pay homage to every one of its adjectives.”¹⁸ Although primarily known for their later installations and the presence of Teresa Margolles, the group’s most well-known member, SEMEFO’s early performances helped set the stage for the rise of necroaesthetics in Mexican contemporary art. This shift, I argue, was made possible in part by the rich traditions of images and symbols of death in Mexican culture and art, but this was also cemented through the group’s innovative use of sound in their performances. Although, as we have seen, there is a rich history of sound in performance, SEMEFO’s practice varied from this because much of its aesthetic influence derived from underground music culture. Yehya continues, “Semefo’s music is, for many, an inseparable part of the whole of their show, and is intimately related to the physical violence, excess, secretions, and mutilations of dead flesh that the rest of the group [...] partake in. But it is worth the effort to submerge one’s self in the hasty violence of its compositions in order to discover a very vital and interesting group which in now way limits itself to making background noise.”¹⁹

Before discussing SEMEFO, however, I would like to take a detour to highlight the crucial role that punk, metal, and hardcore played during these years. As these sonic subgenres became cemented in the outskirts of Mexico City, they did so in areas that continue to function as alternative social spaces in reaction against the early years of neoliberal reform in the early 1980s. From 1984 to 1986, Patricia Moreno Rodríguez, also known as La Zappa Punk, led the band “Susy’s Peleonerías Punk.” The title of the group is a nod to the Ramones, but the band was made up of up to 32 girls at any given time. According to La Zappa Punk, “the band was like a family, we cared about each other; some were single mothers that lived on the street and others were family girls. We would support girls who got pregnant in accordance to what they wanted. It was a medium of resistance for marginalization and repression in a system as rotten as ours.”²⁰ Susy’s Peleonerías Punk did not know how to play any instruments, maintaining themselves true to the original ethos of punk rock. Today, only La Zappa Punk’s tales remain, as the band was never recorded in a studio or live, never photographed, and even the roster of members is beyond reach. Susy’s Peleonerías Punk, like much of the alternative music scene in Mexico through the 1980s existed because of a series of connections forged in the underground. La Zappa Punk would go on to found some of the Mexican punk scene’s most influential bands, such as Virginidad Sacudida (Discarded Virginity) in 1985. Its members came from Iztapalapa, Santa Fe, and Ciudad Neza. Indeed, in el Museo del Chopo’s archive of punk zines produced from the 1980s onwards, these outskirts reign supreme. Even now, there are vast numbers of Mexico City residents whose eyes widen upon hearing of Ciudad Neza, they have never been there yet they fear its ability to exist outside of the City’s boundaries. I call attention to La Zappa Punk to highlight the importance that “aggressive” music has played in helping develop an alternative feminist imagination in Mexico and Latin America. Mexico, Brazil, Puerto

¹⁸ Yehya, Naief. “The Sounds of SEMEFO” *Unomásuno*, 9 March 1996. 16. Rpt. in *SEMEFO 1990-1999: From the Morgue to the Museum*. Ed. Mariana David. (Mexico, D.F.: El Palacio Negro y Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011) 243.

¹⁹ Yehya, 243.

²⁰ Translation mine. Qted. in Estrada, Tere. *Sirenas al Ataque: Historia de las Mujeres Rockeras Mexicanas*. (Mexico: Editorial Océano, 2008) 183

Rico, Argentina, and beyond have all produced feminist punk bands that may occupy a footnote in the history of punk in America, but whose vibrancy and politics made them essential in their time. While I will return to the possibilities of uniting punk, feminism, and Latinidad in the following chapter, this history is large, complex, and wide-ranging.

This nod toward the communitarian undergrounds of punk leads us toward the spaces created in the wake of the Avándaro festival. Places like El Mercado del Chopo in Mexico City became congregational spaces where younger students from UNAM and the Mexican working class came together and traded records, drugs, and styles. In the midst of this mainstream silencing an abandoned psychiatric hospital, La Floresta, would become the site of a new aesthetics that would bring SEMEFO into prominence. In this abandoned space, the group's members would interact with a variety of students, artists, and performance artists to inform their eventual art practice. SEMEFO's earlier work arose in the context of Mexican contemporary art outlined in the previous chapter. The consequence of governmental crackdown on youth subcultures contributed to the Neo-Mexicanist movement to control national exhibits in art museums. But the secondary context, outside of the international art market, in which performance collectives came to develop their aesthetics, was indebted to the working-class subcultures nourished by outlying neighborhoods. We cannot forget that along with the changing context of neoliberalism, "In the beginning of the nineties, Mexico was no longer a mere transit country for illegal drugs but instead turned into one of the principal operative centres for drug production and consumption. The increasing presence of weapons coming from the United States, social inequality, impunity, absence of institutional credibility and the gradual abandonment of the countryside are some of the factors that turn death into something rather ordinary for Mexicans."²¹ Indeed, after a brief interruption from 1986 to 1991, the yellow-journalism magazine *Alarma!* which features gruesome photographs of crime scenes, accidents, and other scenes of death, resumed publication. These images flooded the media beyond the pages of the magazine. News programs dedicated to the visual culture of death expanded, partly because it was a way to make sense of the veritable explosion of violent incidents in Mexico City and beyond.

I want to keep these contexts firmly aligned as they provide the grounds to understand the direction of Mexican aesthetics since the 1990s. When the members of SEMEFO met as students at UNAM in the late 1980s, "the members started working around the visual and musical influences they shared [...] They used visual resources bringing them together with music and theatre as cathartic elements so as to provoke their audience—this included urinating on the public or even getting into fistfights."²² The musical influence that they most shared was death metal and hardcore music. The group's earliest incarnations as a collective included an eponymous metal band that accompanied and structured many of these performances. While the Mexican government had for the most part attempted to outlaw mass rock concerts, "underdeveloped" areas of Mexico City had responded to the ever-increasing violence through smaller collective actions, and like for Susy's Peleonas Punk, music became an essential way to develop these alternative

²¹ David, Mariana. "Necropsy: Writing the History of the Collective SEMEFO." *SEMEFO 1990-1999: From the Morgue to the Museum*. Ed. Mariana David. (Mexico: El Palacio Negro y Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011) 19.

²² David, 23.

communities.

Audiences for these performances consisted not only of the group's peers at UNAM, but also of the people that patronized places like El Mercado del Chopo. The rich history of metal, punk, hardcore, and other alternative music in Mexico City and beyond throughout this time remains to be written, but suffice it to say for now that the Mexican counterculture found much of its safeguard in the neighborhoods and peoples that were beyond even the reach of neoliberal governance. Although we could ostensibly group these encounters as "communities," part of the promise of metal in these performances is its ability to tether the line between belonging and alienation. There are no simple communities being forged through these performances. Instead they play with and risk rejection. But in playing with these negative tropes, a community of the rejected takes shape.

In a review for the group's first public performance in 1990, *Viento Negro* (Black Wind), Estela Leñero describes the scene:

A rock band—with its members dressed in white as nurses—opened the show playing thrash metal music. First appeared a man, with his body painted in brown and green, throwing entrails everywhere. Then, a woman painted in white with a real hog snout resembling a penis danced [...] They were making love violently, while also making it to 'Christ' tied to a tree. The audience would come closer or try to get away from the man who threatened them with throwing the entrails or hit them with a heavy tool.²³

Near the end of the performance, the woman (Mónica Salcido), cut the strapped-on hog snout until it bled. The performance took place at La Quiñonera, one of the emerging performance and art spaces in Mexico City at the time.

Although drawing from a tradition of Mexican street performance pioneered by the "grupos" across the 1970s and 80s, *Viento Negro* seems shocking even today by its placing of the female body at the center of the performance as a site of action and desecration. The metal band's ghoulish outfits, punctuated by white makeup, set up the space by pairing the sonic assault of the music to their visual presence. In this way, the actions on the makeshift space (the gallery's patio) are transformed and prepared for the audience. The first figure to emerge, the man, stands in contrast to the audience by threatening them with the entrails. Many accounts of the group's performances and installations highlight the smell introduced into the space through the series of substances and objects they utilize, thus intervening into all sensorial realms. Yet the audience stands at a remove. The introduction of the female body into the area further throws the audience into disarray. She moves in sudden, jerking movements, clashing at times with the male figure. Their trysts are violent and sexual. He drops her and pretends to fuck her while on her knees. Yet her body is not victimized. By wearing the visible pig snout on her strap-on and matching the male's actions, she challenges the role of the female body in performance. Most saliently, her final action of sitting as she cuts the snout with a razor blade draws from male anxiety and ultimately functions as a symbolic castration.

²³ Leñero, Estela. "La Teatralidad del Performance" *Unomásuno*, 10 April 1990. Rpt. in *SEMEFO 1990-1999: From the Morgue to the Museum*. Ed. Mariana David. Mexico: El Palacio Negro y Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011. 100.

The group's second major performance in 1990, *Imus Cárcer*, once again employed the metal band as a structuring element of the piece. Marco Antonio Rueda, writing a review of the piece for the newspaper *El Universal*, sums up the piece:

Suddenly, a nun with a torch appeared on stage; where she started to walk, repulsively. Heavy and sharp notes from the musicians roared in our ears. The multitude surrounded the nun, who dangerously threatened them with fire. The executioner arrived dragging what we later knew was a convict. He kicked him, whipped him with a belt, dragged him, and trampled right in front of the blazing eyes of the nun, who took off her habit revealing a chastity belt and a brassiere with pointy ends, ready to destroy anyone who embraced her.²⁴

The unsuspecting audience knew very little about the piece, only that the members of the band had previously formed Caramelo Macizo, one of Mexico's most influential metal bands, and the title of the piece, taken for the name and idea of a medieval prison. The performance's intensity kept growing, culminating in the following scene, as further described by Rueda:

The executioner, the nun, and the tortured man began to take out chicken entrails throwing them everywhere, no matter where they fell... Compared to other audiences, these spectators integrated themselves into the show. One of them even began to beat the floor with a chain, while others accompanied the nun in her nymphomaniac, lesbian dances. Everything happened in fractions. The music continued beating down on us, not only in our ears but in all our other senses, producing a great existential exasperation. The climax came when they placed the tortured victim on the chair and pretended to behead him with the axe. The executioner focused his instincts on the nun; he sullied her, beat her, tortured her, hung her and she gutted an animal from up above and spilled the blood all over. The act ended with her beheading.²⁵

I wish to highlight two major elements that Rueda recounts. First is the sound itself. Action in the piece is not so much accompanied by, but a reflection of the sonic thrust provided by the musicians. The activities on stage are extended to the viewer's body, which results in the audience becoming a part of the scene, participating in their destructive acts, and what Rueda describes as the existential exasperation produced by the performance. Jairo Calixto Albarrán gives further sense of the sonic elements of the performance in his review for the daily newspaper *Excelsior*: "Then begins the thundering of two smashing metal rods, the fierce growl of a guitar accelerating elliptically and racing off towards unknown places, of the strings of the bass that controls, digitally, the rhythms crashing in psychotropic stampedes, beyond the reach of the force

²⁴ Rueda, Marco Antonio. "SEMEFO: Performance Art Must Convey Unique Sensations." *El Universal*, 28 August 1990. Rpt. in *SEMEFO 1990-1999: From the Morgue to the Museum*. Ed. Mariana David. Mexico: El Palacio Negro y Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011. 217.

²⁵ Rueda, 217.

field of the ruling mechanisms of melody.”²⁶ Albarrán closes his review by calling this “the longest fifteen minutes in the history of Mexican rock.”²⁷

In the introduction to their anthology *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*, Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene explain, “Metal around the world has become a viable mode of resistance, of identity assertion, and of self-empowerment, often in the face of powerful, totalizing, and even life-threatening forces.”²⁸ Framing their discussion through the paradigm of globalization, they argue that, “metalheads around the world are responding to [...] globalization in ways that reject both conformity to a new global capitalist order *and* narrow fundamentalisms based on ethnicity, religion, or locality.”²⁹ Indeed, metal cultures may be observed in many “turbulent” parts of the world. Although the genre itself has been associated with suburban and non-urban spaces in the U.S., throughout the world many people have turned to metal music in times of crisis. The editors identify metal’s “affective” overdrive, produced primarily through the sonic specificities “through heavy guitar distortion, volume, speed, tendencies toward atonality, and distorted vocals, metal explores extremes of human expression, gesturing toward escape, empowerment, or transgression.”³⁰

Yet also essential to the provenance of the sound, what makes it in equal parts reprehensible and seductive is its relationship to teenage alienation. Although SEMEFO’s work would increasingly find a home in the museum and with newer venues grow in sophistication, eventually leaving their performance practice behind in favor of installation, what attracts me to SEMEFO’s early performances is their teenage petulance and despair. Both of these performances have desecration as their central theme: of the space, of the audience, of the female body, of the phallus.

A short video made after the opening of SEMEFO’s *Lavatio Corporis* (1994) begins with a quote from French philosopher Georges Bataille: “After the Aztec sacrifices, the violence of the conquest.”³¹ Although enough has been written about Bataille’s central misunderstanding of sacrifice, particularly its “proof” as the root of excess as a principal of the social organization of the Aztecs, the video ignores these clarifications and surrenders to Bataille’s assertions. We could perhaps call this nihilism. While SEMEFO’s critique is certainly directed most specifically at Mexican society and politics, what the metal music in their performances allow is for the group to situate

²⁶ Albarrán, Jairo Calixto. “Forensic Medical Service.” *Excélsior*, 9 September 1990. Rpt. in *SEMEFO 1990-1999: From the Morgue to the Museum*. Ed. Mariana David. Mexico: El Palacio Negro y Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011. 217.

²⁷ Albarrán, 218.

²⁸ Wallach, Jeremy, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene. “Affective Overdrive, Scene Dynamics, and Identity in the Global Metal Scene.” *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*. Eds. Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger, and Paul D. Greene (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 3.

²⁹ Wallach, et al. 7

³⁰ Wallach, et al. 13.

³¹ *SEMEFO*. (*Juan Zavaleta*). *Lavatio Corporis*. *Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil*. Mexico. 1994. 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cd-k3dO7DMg&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

violence within a continuum of human action. Through their early performances SEMEFO aims to near the viewer/listener into a historical continuum to annihilation as the appropriate response to the social climate that pretends to draw a clear line between violence/non-violence. In his book on Bataille's philosophy, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, Nick Land proposes that, "Bataille tells us that the universe is energetic, and the fate inherent to energy is utter waste. Energy from the sun is discharged unilaterally and without design. That fraction of solar radiation which strikes the earth resources all terrestrial endeavour, provoking the feverish obscenity we call 'life.'"³² It is this attachment to the solar that allows us to re-read Bataille's misunderstanding of Aztec sacrifice as an exaltation against the doxa of religion: "If the culture of the Aztecs had been rooted in an arbitrary mythological vision [a critique of Bataille's reading] might be sustained, but for Bataille the thirst for annihilation is the same as the sun. It is not a desire which man directs toward the sun, but the solar trajectory itself, the sun as the unconscious subject of terrestrial history."³³

I can't help but both be critical of and surrender to the petulance of such an extravagant claim toward annihilation. But what if we allow for a second, to follow in Bataille's and SEMEFO's lead, to think of violence as the basis for human interaction? What relational claims could be done instead? In the following section, I explore the answer to this question at a moment of crisis, the unending drug violence in Tijuana.

Que Violentao Tu: María y José and the Sounds of El Futuro

It's January 4th, 2014, and there's a party happening in Tijuana. It's called "El Futuro"—or, as it's written on some of the flyers plastered up around town, "El FUTUROOOOO!!!." The event is organized by members of Ruidosón, a collective of musicians and artists whose parties, visual aesthetics, and music have defined Tijuana's underground music and dance scenes over the past several years. Ruidosón is not a large or very well-know scene outside of Tijuana, especially in comparison with Nortec, another musical movement—also a hybrid musical culture—that began to draw international attention to Tijuana's underground music scene in the early 2000s. In the intervening years between Nortec's and Ruidosón's emergence the city has become subject to ever more extreme and systematic outbursts of violence. For most of the last fifteen years, the uncontrollable drug war that has claimed over a hundred thousand lives throughout Mexico since 1990 has descend with particular brutality on the border city in Baja California.

And yet, despite its playful title, the party this night is no simple call for a politics of futurity. Ruidosón has always distinguished itself as particularly "dark" dance music: as an article in the *San Diego Reader* notes, in Ruidosón, "suspicion and doom lurk beneath every beat."³⁴ Indeed, Ruidosón's blend of electronic dance music and traditional Latin

³² Land, Nick. *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*. (London: Routledge, 1991) xviii.

³³ Land, 32-33.

³⁴ Deal, Chad. "Dystopia You Can Dance To." *San Diego Reader* January 22, 2014. Accessed January 10, 2015. <http://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2014/jan/22/crasher-dystopia-you-can-dance/>.

American rhythms drawn from cumbia, grupero, and banda would seem hardly capable of presenting a felicitous account of exactly what the “future” might look like. But *el futuro* it is, and the party will rage on until the early hours of the morning, inviting Tijuana’s underground dance club denizens—most of whom until a few years ago were afraid to leave their houses due to the out of control murder and violence—to come out at night, and stay, and dance, and pretend as if there might be a different future.

This party is my starting point to trace the petulant futurity of Ruidosón. Petulant futurity is the aesthetic and political strategy employed by Ruidosón’s artists and listeners to reshape the conditions of what it has meant to be young and live in Tijuana over the past few decades. I focus in particular on the work of Tony Gallardo, one of the movement’s originators and perhaps its most well-known member. Gallardo describes himself as “*El Príncipe del Meh*,” a nod to José José, one of Mexico’s most famous songwriters, commonly referred to as “El Príncipe de la Canción.” But this “meh” is infused with the bitter irony of living in a place saturated with so much quotidian violence that it would seem to possess no real possibility for a peaceful or sustainable future. Instead, it traces a minor form of indifference against this ongoing brutality. Gallardo’s musical output includes music produced as Tony Gallardo II, as well as music created under the moniker of María y José. It was in this incarnation that Ruidosón first came to gain prominence in underground music circles in Mexico and eventually internationally, though the movement itself emerged at parties at clubs, bars, warehouses, and galleries. The doom in Ruidosón’s beats, its disgruntled tones, grew out of the necessity of the electronic sounds that could be produced in the bedroom and thus shared remotely. In moving from the bedroom to the dance floor, these sounds enabled nightlife, which had become a prohibited space of congregation to become the driving force of imagining a future that may never arrive. Tony Gallardo’s music and lyrics are especially reflective of this. He mixes dark humor with complex dark beats as an attempt to re-appropriate narcoculture and ultimately disengage the relationship between hope and futurity. There is no hope in Gallardo’s sound, only the possibility of dancing away to survival.

My discussion of Ruidosón is informed by what Miguel A. Cabañas has identified as “narcoscapes,” a transnational imaginary in which the varied elements of the drug trade collide as “an everyday topic of conversation and study, appearing in newspapers, academic publications, and cultural products such as literature, film, music, telenovelas, blogs, online videos, performances, and popular art in Latin America. A new vocabulary to describe these phenomena now punctuates journalistic discourse: narcoculture, narconovelas, narcodemocracies, narcoaesthetics, and narcoreligion.”³⁵ The narcoscape, and the narcoculture that forms around it, exists beyond the representational schema of the drug traffickers themselves, encompassing “the complex network of cultural practices and representations, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory, that has become our ‘truth’ about that world.”³⁶ Cabañas highlights the ways in which narcoculture seeps into everyday life. Indeed, the very fashion in which “narco” itself has become a consuming prefix points to the drug trade’s ability to affix itself into the fabric of existence. Yet this

³⁵ Cabañas, Miguel A. “Imagined Narcoscapes Narcoculture and the Politics of Representation.” *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (March, 2014) 4.

³⁶ Cabañas, 7.

very integration, premised at its very core by the threat of violence, also demands that we understand how the very conception of everydayness is altered not through a constant state of shock, but rather to invoke Gallardo's appellation, a state of "meh" that allowed a subculture rooted in petulance and boredom against that threat of violence to emerge.

It seems particularly fitting that Ruidosón would emerge in Tijuana, which for decades had been a central place in the development of industrialized globalization. In their recently published collection *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*, Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo note the contradictions that have defined Tijuana since the 1960s "as a city of both assemblage and deassemblage, a city of internationally bankrolled industrial parks and three-story, binational chop shops where stripped luxury scrap parts are given new life in the automotive Frankensteins (German-Italian mechanical mutts) that swerve across Tijuana's rotary circles."³⁷ Tijuana over the last few decades has received much attention for being a "test-lab" of globalization, and it is indeed here where the logics of capitalismo gore have emerged most powerfully. Although there are endless myths and historical trajectories that surround the city, the most germane ones for me are relate to the city's place in the imaginary of Mexican political violence.

My first introduction to Tijuana's everyday violence was during my childhood, when I received news that an aunt who worked at a maquiladora (making uniforms and wetsuits for the U.S. military) had been violently beaten on her way home from the factory. Although I was too young at the time to understand the structural conditions that had allowed for such a thing to happen, it marked the beginning of my understanding of the relationship between feminized maquiladora labor and the political violence that has continued to consume the city. Over the past decade and a half, this relationship has only intensified as drug cartels invaded and created chaos in the city. Living away from Tijuana, I would sometimes receive news through friends that another acquaintance had been murdered, that another friend had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, that somebody's father had now been kidnapped. Each missed phone call with a Tijuana number became an anxious question mark that I hesitated to answer. To my shock, the first time I returned to Tijuana after a few years away revealed a transformed city from the one I remembered. Avenida Revolución, the site of my first explorations of urban life as a teenager, was now almost completely shut down due to fear of violent confrontation. The everyday reality of Tijuana had become defined by a pervading sense of precarity and fear. That during this time, the international press, and particularly the U.S. press, portrayed Tijuana a place devoid of everyday citizens going about their business and instead as a war zone for those on the outside only enhanced my questions about how the persistence of sustainable life can be possible under such conditions.

In his essay for *Tijuana Dreaming*, Josh Kun mournfully recounts his experiences with this violence through the story of his brother-in-law, who was kidnapped by a drug gang and eventually murdered. Kun's painful essay captures the response of the city's citizens in the face of such uncontrollable violence. He catalogues this retort through his own anger at the situation:

³⁷ Kun, Josh, and Fiamma Montezemolo. "Introduction: The Factory of Dreams." *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*. Eds. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 3.

For the cops who let it happen, for the cops who let the cops let it happen, for the military troops who let the cops let the cops let it happen, for the mayor and the governor and all the lawyers who look the other way. I was angry at globalization. I was angry at free trade. I was angry at capitalism [...] I was angry with my colleagues for romanticizing the border, for refusing to admit that it's a violent place, a criminal place, that horrible things do happen there. I was angry with friends who wrote off narco violence as U.S. media myths.³⁸

But Kun realizes that the trajectory of the drug wars along the border has been primarily premised upon the United States' own drug enforcement policies, which have simply shifted the ports of entry from Colombia and Miami to Mexico and its borders while managing to increase criminal power.

Kun ends his essay by shedding a light on the narco-corrido, the subgenre of norteño music in which bands play folk tribute to the gangsters and cartels that largely control the nation. He writes:

instead of corridos about the mafiosos, instead of corridos about the women who dress up as nuns to smuggle cocaine, instead of the simulated AK-47 gunshot blasts, instead of Los Razos holding rifles next to young girls in bikinis and cowboy hats, how about we hear a corrido for the missing, a corrido for the dead, a corrido for the mourners, a corrido for a lost country, a corrido for inequality. I know, I know, they're hard to find [...] But you'll hear them in living rooms and churches and community centers, melodies shaped in sighs and sobs, choruses sculpted by cries.³⁹

This impassioned plea is well taken. Kun understands that in the sonic glorification of narco-culture we implicitly allow ourselves to give in to the logic of violence, and we accept our impotence. However, these sounds of hope that Kun makes the case for still rely on a particular ability to understand the crisis of capitalismo gore as a personalized struggle. The cries of pain do not account for the ways in which the very premise of sound can be utilized to envision another narrative, one descended from the acoustic histories of Mexico and its long and storied relationship to death.

But before arriving at that moment, I wish to lay the groundwork for understanding the Ruidosón movement, which emerged out of the rubble of this brutal historical, geographic, and political context. Since the 1960s Tijuana has been a primary site bringing foreign musical forms into the rest of Mexico. As Tijuana based writer and DJ Ejival points out, "The strongest countercultural impact for a new generation of Tijuana residents occurred at the end of the 1970s, with the arrival of British and American punk and postpunk. Although punk was an underground movement, beyond doubt, it was on the border, in Tijuana, where the first punks were seen roaming the streets near Boulevard Fundadores"⁴⁰ The city's close proximity to San Diego, and its access to U.S. airwaves and concert venues made sure that, "from rock (La Cruz) to heavy metal

³⁸ Kun, Josh. "The Kidnapped City." In Kun and Montezolo. 359.

³⁹ Kun, 368.

⁴⁰ Ejival, "Counterculture, Rockers, Punks, New Romantics, and Mods in Tijuana." *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border*. Eds. Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezolo. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 333.

(Armagedón), punk and reggae hybrids (Radio Chantaje, Chantaje, No!, and Tijuana No!) and electronic pop ensembles (Vandana, Synthesis, Artefakcto, Lapalce, and Ford Proco), the second half of [the 80s] saw a large increase in these musical projects that managed to dominate the local scene.”⁴¹ My own musical education happened in the aftermath of this scene, as some of these bands continued to perform and be played at local parties—but it was only that, an aftermath. Throughout the 90s, these scenes remained dormant, as musicians would often try their luck in Mexico City, knowing that this was the place to seek a major label contracts and distribution.

However, by 1999, “thanks to the persistence of independent promoters, writers, graphic designers, and a dedicated group of people who had been working in different aspects of the Tijuana music scene since the 1980s, the Nortec collective managed to take shape out of the emerging culture of Mexican electronic music.”⁴² Led by the DJs Bostich and Fussible, Nortec music merged the traditional sounds of norteño banda with electronic beats and sounds of global electronic dance music. In his comprehensive history *Nor-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World*, Alejandro L. Madrid describes the movement as “a border site, a contact zone where distinctly different elements meet to produce a new form of expression. Thus, Nor-tec works as a perfect metaphor for the exploration of a large variety of issues of liminality and border life, from the stylistic and aesthetic to social, personal, and political boundaries.”⁴³ During the first few years of the decade, Nortec seemed to embody the spirit of what Néstor Garcia Canclini has called the “hybridity” of the U.S.-Mexico border. Although Nortec during its first few years achieved new forms of distribution through the Internet, which made it popular the world over, the rising violence in the city would quickly put an end to its promise.

During the early aughts, Tijuana saw a booming culture industry of large festivals and public events where DJs would play into the night. However, I wish to take issue here with the prevailing discussions of Nortec and hybridity. Nortec received international attention partly because it managed to be a synthesis of the perceived sounds of the border. Fans and critics often highlighted the collective as an example of the ways in which the industrial sounds of the maquiladora factories could be incorporated into traditional musical forms. Yet most of these discussions remained largely uncritical of the structural conditions that facilitated the emergence of this music. Still, Nortec came to represent for Tijuana the opportunity to show itself to the world, earning the city a place in the world music lexicon. As Madrid explains, Nortec provided Tijuana the possibility to articulate its relationship to modernity and globalization in largely positive, integrationist terms. But this relationship was premised upon a distinction between modernity and tradition that I critique in the first chapter of this dissertation. Even its producers imagined the “contradictory and complex character” of this relationship as “a type of kitsch and camp sensibility [that] was indispensable in the development of the

⁴¹ Ejival, 333.

⁴² Ejival, 336.

⁴³ Madrid, Alejandro L. *Nor-Tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 4.

hybrid Nor-tec aesthetic.”⁴⁴ Madrid further highlights that the norteño sounds in Nortec were hardly monolithic; norteño, banda, and onda grupera each arose from particular cultural and social circumstances. His useful analysis draws attention to how the musical arrangements are produced through hybridity itself. Madrid recognizes that this transnational hybrid is a slippery subject, which is the music’s ability to “perform a self-conscious political move and a simultaneous marketing strategy.”⁴⁵ Indeed, Nortec’s popularity and visibility was so high that in 2006 they received three Grammy nominations for their album, *The Tijuana Sessions*.

Ruidosón, by contrast, deviates sharply from this tradition. The term itself was the result of an MSN Internet chat that took place in 2009 between Moisés Huerta, bassist for the band Los Macuanos, and Gallardo. The movement’s name is derived from a portmanteau of “ruido” (noise) and “son” (a traditional folk song). Unlike Nortec’s search for hybridity, the name already appeals toward noise as detachment. Los Macuanos and María y José first played together under the Ruidosón moniker in March 2009. As music critic Kamren Curiel describes it in a piece for MTV Iggy, this was more than a musical movement. It was the beginning of a subculture that helped to revitalize Tijuana’s underground music and dance scene. In particular, Curiel points toward the revival of la Calle Sexta in Tijuana’s infamous Avenida Revolución: “La Sexta is the poppin’ street in TJ that houses most of the ruidosón parties. Young, hip Tijuanaenses were inspired to reclaim their land and create spaces that catered to locals, giving them a place to dance in their own ‘hoods. Bars like La Chupiteria, a small past-meets-future drinking hole, started cropping up.”⁴⁶

One of the major sonic differences between the Nortec and Ruidosón movements lies in their production values. Nortec’s international acclaim both spawned and was the result of its elaborate sound. Bostich and Fussible *sound* professional, mirroring in some ways the very mode of production of the maquiladora. Nortec speaks to a Tijuana in concert with neoliberal modes of capitalist global production. And while one could certainly argue that Nortec’s music was not devoid of a critical take on the harms that maquiladoras did to Tijuana, its sonic approach points toward a naturalized and even productive relationship to the factories. Ruidosón, on the other hand, emerges from the aesthetics of the bedroom. Like the conversation that generated their moniker, Ruidosón’s early aesthetics were particularly rooted in a “DIY” mode of production. Many of their early recordings were made precisely in the participants’ bedrooms, and in their quest to revitalize Tijuana’s local nightlife they sought out galleries, abandoned industrial spaces, and escape from the crowds of the city streets. Curiel recounts a sharp contrast as Nortec and Ruidosón intersected in May 2010, when the members of Ruidosón organized a two-day music festival called Guacamole Fest, which was attended by just over fifty people, “a few days later one of the Nortec guys drew over 200 people

⁴⁴ Madrid, 50.

⁴⁵ Madrid, 78.

⁴⁶ Curiel, Kamren “‘Sigue La Violencia!’ Meet the Kids of Mexico’s Ruidosón Nation.” *MTV Iggy*. Accessed January 10, 2015. <http://www.mtviggy.com/articles/sigue-la-violencia-meet-the-kids-of-mexicos-ruidoson-nation/>.

to Don Loope in downtown TJ.”⁴⁷

That Ruidosón emerged at the margins of the margins (alongside another musical revival in Tijuana of garage music) serves to underscore the sharp generational contrast between the youth cultures of Tijuana. Although I am generationally situated in the middle of the two movements, I can identify much more closely with Ruidosón. Los Macuanos, María y José, Santos, Matilda Manzana, El Hijo de la Diabla, and others favored modes of distribution and aesthetics that needed to account for the erosion of public safety in Tijuana. Indeed, even now, Gallardo maintains a Tumblr, rather than any sort of traditional artists’ website. While Nortec produced albums and art books through traditional modes of distribution including major labels, much of Ruidosón’s works are easily available, many of them for free, through self-distribution on the Internet. Perhaps most importantly, the movement’s ethos was always firmly rooted in the idea of the party, the show, the afterparty, the night that one wishes would never end.

Although the core circle around Ruidosón has expanded and benefitted from its ability to include new members at a rapid pace, Tony Gallardo is usually regarded as the genius of the group, its creative center. Gallardo and María y José’s aesthetics are based upon the frenetic visual and sonic vocabulary of Internet sites like Tumblr, Soundcloud, and Facebook. Perusing through his Tumblr, the background wallpaper is an animated .gif of floating pizza, Gallardo’s often referred to food of choice. The site collects mostly Gallardo’s projects, many of them available for free, alongside posts about other artists whom he admires.⁴⁸

Gallardo himself, however, offers a performance style that matches both his dark humor and DIY aesthetics. I first came across a video of María y José recorded for the national cultural magazine *Reporte Indigo*.⁴⁹ Accompanied by his laptop, Gallardo wears a jean shirt and coyly smiles as he sings “Rey de Reyes,” a song about a drug lord who announces that his enemies will never claim his head. There is no showing off. This is not because Gallardo lacks the performance wherewithal of a major music star. But Ruidosón’s aesthetics are not invested in creating a vision of futurity that upholds the hopeful gesture of performative affirmation or joy. Gallardo favors a deadpan expression, a kind of “holy shit” smile that fuels and is aided by the music’s looping tones. This lack of affective engagement refuses to be shaken by the ironic horror of the lyrics. Gallardo’s movements and arch smile summons the viewer/listener to enter that same affective space, to share in the “meh” of a performance already situated within the threat of death.

Made up of 11 tracks, *Club Negro* was María y José’s major breakthrough upon its release in 2013. While not explicitly a concept album, the record tells a multiplicity of stories Tijuana’s narcotic conflict. Although I will not explore each of the tracks in this chapter, it’s worth pointing out that the album vacillates between the playful and the mournful. The songs are at times disturbingly playful narratives in the life of youthful drug lords. In some ways, it is a record of Gallardo imagining himself as a deadpan drug baron. While I will explore the musical relationship between this album and the

⁴⁷ Curiel.

⁴⁸ “SIR TONY G.” 2014. Accessed April 29. <http://sirtonyg.tumblr.com/?og=1>.

⁴⁹ *María Y José En www.ReporteIndigo.com*, 2011.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btq8oWavyFU&feature=youtube_gdata_player

narcocorrido in the latter part of this chapter, I am most presently drawn to the album's narrative approximations of death and violence. These approaches differ from the heroic tales of narcocorridos or the tearful laments of victims. They are crafted from the uneasy clash between keeping inside and being fully aware of the violent world outside. The songs are lyrically and sonically sustained by an imaginative turn necessitated by a world filled with everyday violence. Indeed, although the Western narrative of a world elsewhere in disarray where life is unlivable is filled with stories of escape, in a city like Tijuana (and many others) when escape is not an easy option, one learns to live within it.

"Violentao" was María y José's first single from *Club Negro*. Described in the press release for the album as a "violent mambo," the song mixes a brutal, exaggerated mambo beat with an electronic pulse courtesy of Monterrey-based electronic musician Sheeqo Beat. The song, as Gallardo describes it, was written after the album's fictional protagonist María y José was shot 8 times in a "noche Tijuana." The morning after, María y José returns to his mansion, where he writes the song as a protest not against the violence in Tijuana, but for his "right to kill without being killed and having to use a bullet-proof vest in all his shows (something that has made him even more handsome, according to him)."⁵⁰ The songs lyrics exclaim:

Campos de mina rodean mi vida. Esquivar las balas, pan de cada día Rios de sangre corren en la vida Mata a tu padre, seguro es espia	Mine fields surround my life. Avoiding the bullets, everyday bread Rivers of blood run in life Kill your father, he's surely a spy
Que violentao tu (x 3)	What violence, you (x 3)
Si quieres Guerra vete a la milicia Llena a tu ego de supermalicia Deja las calles llenas de violencia Y a tu pueblo con mucha impotencia	If you want war go join the militia Fill your ego with supermalice Leave the streets full of violence And your people with much impotence
Liberenme desto los del movimiento A un contrapeso Seo van aumento Seo van aumento Seo van aumento!	Free me from this, those of the movement To a counter weight This is increasing This is increasing This is increasing!
Siga la violencia Siga la violence	The violence remains The violence remains
Me siento preso Un poco obsoleto Ya no voy tan recio	I feel imprisoned A bit obsolete I'm not going as fast I won't be a skeleton

⁵⁰ "Violentao EP." 2014. Accessed April 26. <http://cocobass.net/post/2330313511/violentao-ep>.

No quedo esqueleto

Te quedas en la prision
 Y no sientes emocion
 Te ponemos cinturon
 Y no es el de orion
 Soy el rey de la nacion
 Siempre causo conmocion
 Seguirá la represion
 Larga vida la opresion

You stay in prison
 And don't feel emotion
 We put a belt on you
 And it's not Orion's
 I'm the king of the nation
 I always cause a commotion
 The repression continues
 Long life the oppression

The song begins with a series of disjointed rhythmic layers: horns, a mambo beat, and repeating electronic beats. The distorted echoing voice sings in an inexpressive tone, “*Siga la violencia, siga la violencia*” until it comes into audibility. The lyrics are delivered in a blank tone. The first verse pairs quotidian violence and paranoia. Bullets and rivers of blood are rendered ordinary, before segueing into the paranoia of turning against the father/spy. The second verse takes a clear critical tone: “*Si quieres guerra vete a la milicia/Llena a tu ego de supermalicia/Deja las calles llena de violencia/Y a tu pueblo con mucha impotencia.*” Like the first lines, this verse is delivered at a rapid, monotonous pace. María y José’s voice has a narrow melodic range, almost reciting the lyrics. This critical shift, chronicling the aftereffects of the violence, highlighting how violence begets impotence, is delivered similarly to the tone of the first verse.

The song’s final segment marks a sonic departure from the rest of the song. The music’s beat slows down as it gets down to the lines “*Te quedas en la prision/Y no sientes emocion /Te ponemos cinturon/Y no es el de orion/Soy el rey de la nacion/Siempre causo conmocion/Seguirá la represion/Larga vida la oppression.*” The stark conclusion of these lines affords a view of violence untethered from the will toward life. Life emerges as an oppressive force that imprisons the subjects of violence.

The track is punctuated by Jimenez’s heavy northern accent, signaling the place where the drug violence has occupied most of the cultural imagination in Mexico. The recursive “*que violentao tu*” tethers a Caribbean and Northern Mexican accent together. The chant sounds like an exclamation between neighbors: “Hey you, how violent IS everything!” The irony here is in that in María y José’s story the impetus for the song is precisely the “right to kill without being killed.” Yet the lyrics vacillate between the imagery of violence and the nonsensical. Perhaps another tune would didactically aim to critique violence, yet such a song would have to render violence spectacular. Accentuating the everydayness of violence, sonically translated through Gallardo’s expressionless delivery, invites the listener to a modified response. This rejoinder lies in the different valences that the very idea of life has between the United States and Mexico. Gallardo creates the tension in the number through the interplay between the indifference of the tone and the reality exposed by the lyrics.

Throughout *Club Negro*, María y José disengages futurity from life. His protagonists die, come back to life, and die again. The electronic and folkloric beats that tell the stories refuse to promise safety. For example, “Cripta Real” recounts a young drug dealer’s attempt to escape by resorting to help from “the pigs.” This only leads to

betrayal, ending up “*boom boom boom/lleño de huecos*” (boom boom boom/full of holes). The song tells the story of the protagonist’s murder in a loop, centering around his meeting of a girl in whose house he hides, only to be found and “*boom boom boom/estoy muerto*” (boom boom boom/I’m dead). The chorus intones “*Ya no hayo donde escondermella cripta real esta sellada*” (I can’t find where to hide/the royal crypt is sealed). Yet Gallardo does not betray desperation so much as resignation in the track. Underlined by a synth line that impels its danceability, we find ourselves in the temporal loop of escape. The song’s lyrics are claustrophobic in their refusal to give a simple resolution. This is how María y José invites us to dance to capitalismo gore.

The lyrical inspiration for María y José’s songs is playfully but critically derived from the narcocorrido. Originally a genre of Norteño music, in particular the corrido, narcocorridos are ballads that detail a particular incident, the life of a drug lord, or some other story related to the drug trade. In their sonic figuration, the narcocorrido’s polka (the kind of music Kun asks for a respite from) has at its heart the celebration of drug traffickers as folk heroes. María y José writes from the disenchantment of the drug trade’s victims by inventing his own exaggerated figures of the drug world. This split is delivered not only through the lyrics, but also through the disavowal of norteño sound in favor of Caribbean rhythms and electronic music. It is precisely the electronic component of the music, I argue, which lends Ruidosón and Tony Gallardo’s oeuvre its claim toward futurity.

The history of the corrido itself harkens back to the Spanish corridor, which was adapted to become a national genre during the Mexican revolution, “lauding the heroism of all the generals and giving details of virtually every major battle.”⁵¹ Although there is some debate as to the actual provenance of the music, Elijah Wald notes that, “since the rise of Los Tigres [del Norte] in the early 1970s, the narcocorrido has been taken up by thousands of bands and singers, first in Mexico and the United States, but now as far afield as Colombia and wherever the Latin American drug traffic thrives.”⁵² A main issue in thinking about this genre is its fraught relationship to class, violence, and history. As Kun points out, the narcocorrido has served in some ways to make the violence of the drug trade legible to a mass audience, as the songs cover the events of the drug trade as heroic ballads. When Kun asks for the DJ to play another song, he wishes for a direction that points against this romanticization. As Wald points out, narcocorrido singers feel slighted by “intellectuals and writers who have dismissed their work as *música naca*, music for hicks.”⁵³ This division extends to Mexican middle and upper classes, which see narcocorridos and Norteño music in general as outdated, if popular, genres. But as José Manuel Valenzuela points out, “Through the corrido the popular masses have seen their desires, passions, frustrations, and joys portrayed, and it has served as a creator of heroes, antiheroes, myths, and legends.”⁵⁴ This is partly due to the fact that in spite of the billions

⁵¹ Wald, Elijah. *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*. (New York: Rayo, 2002) 3.

⁵² Wald, 2.

⁵³ Wald, 6.

⁵⁴ Valenzuela, Jose Manuel. *Paso Del Nortec/North Paths: This Is Tijuana!*. (México: Editorial Océano, 2004) 13.

of dollars at stake, for many Mexicans the drug trade represents a legible alternative to neoliberal policies that have left most of the country in poverty, particularly in rural and non-metropolitan areas. If narcocorridos find heroes, it is partly because drug gangs and traffickers have ostensibly taken on the social welfare of many of their communities that used to be shouldered by the state—albeit through fear and intimidation.

Club Negro stages a meeting between the lyrical content of the narcocorrido and Tijuana's underground youth subcultures, critiquing this mainstream working class musical form by turning it into an adolescent journey of adventure and tragedy. "Rey de Reyes," the third track in *Club Negro*, stages this encounter by alluding in the title to "Jefe the Jefes," the massive Tigres del Norte hit from their eponymous 1997 album which solidified the group's popularity in the United States and garnered them a Grammy nomination. Although "Rey de Reyes" does not refer to a single drug lord, only the fictional character of María y José. The track by los Tigres begins with a spoken ode to the corrido as "singing the truth of our town." It tells the story of a drug lord at the very top. The lyrics report, "Many chicks that have barely been born/already want to fight the rooster/if they could reach my height/many years would have to pass/and I don't plan to leave the place/where I give my orders from." The song doesn't detail particular forms of criminality, by alluding to "El Jefe de Jefes" power is rendered pervasive, knowable beyond specific acts. This power, of course, sits at the heart of the criminal experience. Virtually every national cinema in the world has a gangster genre, usually based around a figure that inspires fear and sympathy. "El Jefe de Jefes," by maintaining an unnamed protagonist, tempts listeners with the promises of power. "Rey de Reyes" begins with the sound of a trumpet as an alarm and a driving tambora beat. The lyrics are as follows:

Soy el rey de reyes	I'm the king of kings
todos me odian, todos me adoran	Everyone hates me, everyone loves me
con letras de oro graban mi nombre	With golden letters the mark my name
y de un puente cuelgan a un hombre	And from a bridge they hang a man
soy el rey de reyes	I'm the king and kings
todos me buscan, nadie me encuentra	Everyone looks for me, nobody finds me
la policia toda comprada	The police all bought
siempre atentos cuidan mi espalda	Always attentive they guard my back
soy el rey de reyes	I'm the king of kings
todos me envidian y me idolatran	They all envy me and idolize me
tengo diamantes en mis pistolas	I have diamonds in my guns
con las que esquivo todas las olas	With which I dodge all the waves
soy el rey de reyes	I'm the king of kings
todos me rezan, me santifican	All of them pray for me, they sanctify me
alla en el cielo alguien me cuida,	In heaven someone looks out for me
pa' que en la tierra siga con vida	So on earth I still have life
soy el rey de reyes	I'm the king of kings
todos esperan a que yo muera	Every waits for me to die
buscan mi trono y mi riqueza	They search my throne and my riches

mas nunca tendran mi cabeza

But they will never get my head

Again in a deadpan, monotonous voice, María y José begins, “*Soy el rey de reyes/Todos me adoran/Todos me odian/Con letras de oro/Graban mi nombre /Y de un Puente /Cuelgan a un hombre.*” The lyrics here both exaggerate and critique the narcocorrido by both heightening the violence and keeping the anonymity of the gang leader. The material excess celebrated in the other song is here transposed into an act of violence favored by drug cartels. Jean Franco calls these forms of killing “expressive crimes” which serve to “publicize the ideology and power of rogue groups.”⁵⁵ The symbolic violence enacted by hanging corpses from bridges alongside signs that claim responsibility are shocking yet reproduced endlessly through a variety of media. They have become part of the everyday visual culture of the cartels. But the forms of intimidation in the narcocorrido are here turned around. If the narcocorrido’s ability to be taken up as an anthem relies on its capacity to embody everyday violence as the promise of power, María y José presents his lyrics at a remove, highlighting their absurdity. The lyrics are delivered not as a demonstration of power, but rather as a clear exaggeration of the figure of the drug lord. In invoking these images, Gallardo lays bare the absurdity of idolatry of the narcocorrido. The arrogance of power is pushed to the point of absurdity, while at the same time pointing toward involvement on the part of the police as complicit in this handling of power.

The dissonance between forms is achieved sonically, by switching from the “popular” instruments of the narcocorrido to the electronic beats of Ruidosón. The song relies on a polyrhythmic aggressive drive contrasted against the recitative tone of Gallardo’s voice. A vibrating synth stretches elastically throughout the song, clashing against the drums. In some ways this is the album’s most danceable track, but again, Gallardo does not rely on a grandiose delivery to match the exaggeration of the lyrics. In his performance of the song for *Reporte Indigo*, for example, he delivers each line with a half smile, his left hand keeping the beat against his leg. Adopting this performative mode evacuates the threat of the hanging body. By denying the simple shock and combining it with boredom, María y José threatens the masculinist power of the corpse. What may seem as a dismissive response is instead loaded with the possibility of self-creation.

The aesthetic response of Ruidosón, and Tony Gallardo’s projects in particular, can in part be understood through what Sianne Ngai refers to a “stuplimity,” which she defines as “a response to encounters with vast but bounded artificial systems, resulting in repetitive and often mechanical acts of enumeration, permutation and combination, and taxonomic classification.”⁵⁶ Stuplimity is for Ngai the meeting of shock and boredom, utilized in aesthetic practices as “responses that confront us with the limitations of our capacity for responding in general.”⁵⁷ If stuplimity lays bare systems of production, whereby, as Ngai argues, “the shocking and the boring prompt us to look for new

⁵⁵ Franco, 225.

⁵⁶ Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) 36.

⁵⁷ Ngai, 261-262.

strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible,”⁵⁸ Gallardo’s music seems quite aligned with this form of aesthetic engagement. However, in my reading of *Ruidosón* I also depart slightly but significantly from Ngai’s understanding of the term. Although Ngai finds her examples at moments of intense and unfettered repetition, shock and awe produced by the sublime and the endlessly repetitive, the shock and boredom in *Ruidosón* arises from the shock of violence, along with the boredom produced by its constant presence in Tijuana and throughout Mexico. I argue that stuplimity in this sense can be understood as a *strategy* of petulant futurity, as when Gallardo describes himself as “*Principe del Meh*” and attempts through his music to conjure an aesthetic state he calls “deep wow.” Ngai finds the motif of repetition in two objects particularly useful to this essay: the slasher film and electronic music. She writes, “[Repetition] can likewise be found in the contemporary slasher film, which continually using a limited number of trademark motifs replicates the serial logic of the serial killer (while also, of course, producing thrill, and in the pulsating, highly energized, yet exhaustively durational electronic music known as techno, which generated new musical subcultures in the 1980s.”⁵⁹ Ngai’s interesting pairing of electronic techno music with the violence of the slasher film in her discussion of stuplimity can illuminate how violence and electronically controlled sonic repetition are dually conjured in María y José’s music. The repetition here is not only produced by electronic music, but endlessly by the cycles of violence that make it commonplace. Stupefaction is then a form of living without the certainty of a normative future. If Ngai’s project is in relationship to the ways in which modes of production alter affective engagement, for María y José, per Valencia, what’s being produced endlessly is the corpse. But the shock, repeated endlessly, turns into boredom. Not a boredom that negates the horrors of this sadism, but a way of thriving beyond them when the apparatuses that would stop it are no longer in place. Returning to Valencia, the corpse as a commodity is not the extraordinary excess of capital, but its very mode of production.

Vuela Vuela: María y José from Tijuana to New York

I conclude with an encounter between the dance floors of Tijuana and the basements of New York. On October 14, 2014, María y José made his New York debut at Home Sweet Home, a bar and nightclub on the Lower East Side. A Latina DJ duo, Las Nenas Rudas, opens the set with a series of tropical dance beats. Tony Gallardo walks about the space before he goes on, nervously but excitedly. I introduce myself, sharing a moment of conviviality over our shared hometown. The audience is small but enthusiastic. There is no stage, just a DJ booth where a laptop awaits María y José’s stewardship.

He begins his set with a sample from the chorus of *West Side Story*’s “America.” This is of course a wink to the audience, enacting Gallardo’s visit to New York through a historically problematic representation of Latinos in the U.S. It’s a humorous recognition of his visit here, as Gallardo becomes the always-foreign Latino. The sound on his vocals is off, and he apologizes to the audience. He then launches into “Violentao” and the few people at the club are elated. We dance, we sweat, and even with the terrible sound we all know the words. We sing along. But the set takes a turn to Gallardo’s most forceful

⁵⁸ Ngai, 262.

⁵⁹ Ngai, 263.

invocation toward a new kind of futurity. The opening beats of “Vuela Vuela” begin as Gallardo throws his arms in the air in pop star abandon. “Vuela Vuela,” recorded by Gallardo in collaboration with Matilda Manzana, was originally performed by the extremely popular boy band Magneto, and is perhaps their greatest hit. The song itself is a reworked version of “Voyage, Voyage” by 1980s French singer Desireless. The French version of the track climbed to the top of many charts across Europe and Asia, although it is largely unknown in the U.S. Magneto changed the lyrics to the Desireless original, and in true boy band fashion, transformed the song into a response to the loneliness of teenage despair. The mostly Latina/o audience at Home Sweet Home recognizes the song and sings along to María y José’s ironic pop posing.

In Magneto’s version, the verses are traded between band members. Accompanied by an 80s synth beat, the 1991 hit scaled the top of the charts all over Latin America. Resembling a mix between Menudo and the New Kids on the Block, the recording made Magneto a household name, going so far as to spawn a film, *Magneto: Cambiando el Destino*. For anyone with memories of this time, Magneto, like many other teenage idols, were inescapable. But tonight in New York, the bedroom synth moves at a languid pace, before Gallardo’s voice begins. The major change is of course there are no five boys trading off lyrics. Gallardo sings by himself. Instead of the boyish desire of Magneto, Gallardo croons at a stultifying pace. He sings, “*Cuando pienses que el amor/se ha olvidado de que estas ahí/vuela vuela con tu imaginación/si no puedes ser feliz/no te rindas puede ocurrir/vuela vuela con tu imaginación/volando encontraras/un mundo nuevo*” (When you think that love/has forgotten that you’re there/fly fly with your imagination/if you can’t be happy/don’t give up it might happen/fly fly with your imagination/flying you will find/a new world). The lyrics are once again repurposed by Gallardo. In some ways Gallardo’s voice retains the youthfulness of Magneto’s original. But these are very different kinds of youth. The first “Vuela Vuela” is sung by the popular boys in school, the recipients of a still hopeful form of futurity expressed in the popular Latin American music of the 1980s and 1990s. Gallardo and Matilda Manzana’s version, on the other hand, conjures the school weirdo, the bedroom dancer trapped indoors for fear of what might confront her on the city streets outside. In these divergences, we can also glimpse a radically different way of imagining the suspended life constructed by capitalismo gore. Gallardo leads the crowd in pop star poses, raising his hand, leading us to sing along, as if we were a crowd of thousands rather than a dozen.

As Gallardo elongates the “vuela vuela,” his voice cracks slightly, goes off tune almost unnoticeably. The original’s synth is replaced by a wobbly bass. He sings, “*vuela vuela/no te hace falta equipaje/vuela vuela/nadie controla tu imagen/vuela vuela/veras que todo es posible*” (Fly fly/you don’t need luggage/fly fly/no one controls your image/fly fly/you will see everything is possible). The lyrics are sung barely above a whisper, giving off a feeling of depressed teenage resignation. But in this resignation there’s the specter of running off, of flying away from the exigencies and violence of the present moment into an elsewhere. Gallardo almost ironically elongates the aas of each vuela vuela. This flying away enabled by dreaming, enacted in the bedroom toward the outside. But this is precisely the splendor of a future that no longer needs hope. It’s a form of survival that doesn’t need to tether itself to the promise that things will be fine. It promises instead a new form of being in the present, from the bedrooms in Tijuana to a

sweaty New York basement cast as a plaintive and defiant “meh” that thrusts all of us, at least for the short length of the song, into a “deep wow.”

Conclusion.

This chapter has attempted to trace the sonic strategies that Mexican subjects living in violence have employed not only to make that life bearable, but also productive, flourish, beyond the scope of the elements that seems uncontrollable. In refusing futurity’s hope, SEMEFO and María y José mock the state and the drug gangs that threaten the very fabric of everyday existence. These performances are joined by the dispossessed that have resulted from the United States’ continuing exploitation of Mexico. Yet the subjects of this brutality remain persistent.

I have demonstrated that aggressive and petulant sound gave Mexican populations a form of escape that was rendered as a form of refusal. This lies at the core of this dissertation, that when the brutality of global capitalism subjected Mexican citizens to seek hope, these artists offered a form of being that resonated against the false promises of both the United States and the Mexican government. From here, new forms of community sprouted, outside of the official narratives of the nation and media. This suicidal drive, as I will explore in the next chapter, animated fantasies that unchained forms of desire that allows Latina/o subjects in the United States to negate the pledges of global capitalism on the other side of the border.

Chapter 3
Dyke Chords:
Latina Screams and Ethical Becoming in the Punk Boleros of Las Cucas



Nao Bustamante performs in Las Cucas, San Francisco, 1999
 (Photo Courtesy of Nao Bustamante)

This chapter continues and expands upon the previous chapter's discussion of the aural dimension of suicidal longings in Latina/o aesthetics to consider how sound may draw us to an ethics of self-annihilation anchored in queer feminist desire. Here, though, I shift the focus of my analysis to the Latina/o United States, where contestations around the management of life, belonging, and national inclusion have been decidedly different—even if intimately interconnected with—those in Mexico. The chapter arises from the an attempt to give an account of what a consideration of the sounds of Latinidad can bring to discussions of queer ethics, and more specifically how performances of lesbian desire—still underexplored in queer theory—can allow us to engage with questions of transnational Latina identity and aesthetics.

I endeavor to make an intervention into debates around lesbian sexual ethics through a discussion of a series of performances and musical recordings that emerged at historical moment and geographic locale filled with political challenges and possibilities, San Francisco and the Mission District in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the recordings of the short-lived “mariachi-punk” band formed there, Las Cucas, comprised of Latina performance artists and musicians Nao Bustamante, Marcia Ochoa, Cheryl Tesh, and Gigi Otalvo Hormillosa. I read the Latina queer punk scream that Las Cucas perform through the language of pain of the *bolero*, and investigate the possibilities that the excessive, melodramatic, and often self-annihilating longings of lesbian feminist desire affords to this dissertation's discussion of Latinidad's negative sonic affects.

The drive to self-annihilation through sound is found in Las Cucas's short life as a band. Although their recorded output only comprises five songs, their live repertoire

included punk versions of classic Latin American songs like “Guantanamera” and punk standards like the Ramones’ “I Want to be Sedated.” The recordings remain commercially unreleased, and circulate through informal networks of friends and in the memories of those who attended their legendary performances. I came upon this archive accidentally, when band member Marcia Ochoa shared their few recorded songs with me after a conversation about the understudied importance of lesbian punk in queer cultural formations in Latina/o America.

Las Cucas played their first show in San Francisco on April 27, 1999 at the (now defunct) York Theater, “en la Michón”—San Francisco’s historically Latina/o Mission District. Indeed, it’s hard not to delve into the Cucas’ archive without being thrust back into the vibrant moment of queer life in San Francisco in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In some ways, that the band would come to exist at this moment in the history of queer and Latina/o San Francisco seems indicative of the changing demographics of the Mission at the time, a period of coexistence between Latina/o families that had resided in the area for decades and a new wave of largely white queer denizens who were abandoning the Castro in search of cheaper rents. That their archive is also filled with reminders of places in the Mission now lost to the forces of urban renewal and gentrification also seems fitting for this chapter’s discussion of the bands’ lesbian aesthetics, and ethics, of self-annihilation. What I identify as the group’s exploration of the melodramatic, near-suicidal thematics of Latina lesbian desire came out of a specific temporal and cultural milieu. Even El Rio, one of the last remaining Mission stalwarts, is referred to on the Cucas website as “your dive.” Las Cucas’s sound emerged at the intersection of the queer punk and the Latina melancholic that could perhaps uniquely flourish at this geographic and historical conjunction, while also defying the limitations and dictates of both traditions.

According to their (long dormant) website, [cucarific.com](http://www.cucarific.com)¹, Las Cucas were extremely active in San Francisco’s Latina lesbian punk scene their few years of activity. The site recounts many of their performances, capturing their excitement, tongue firmly in cheek: “Mea Culpa whirled through the show in a white satin organza extravaganza, replete with flowing scarves. The rest of us wore seasonally-appropriate, post-Memorial Day white pants and baby blue & mint green shirts. Topped off by a sky blue cowboy hat & black feather boa, the effect was, er... hypnotic” (Mea Culpa is Bustamante’s pseudonym, tasked, according their website, with providing “high drama” to the band). A series of polaroid photographs sent to me by Nao Bustamante show the artist singing (perhaps) atop a pool table in one of their performances. In the photograph, Marcia Ochoa stands on the table next to her, acoustic guitar in arms. Bustamante’s hair is disheveled, she holds a beer bottle, each photograph catching a different point in her gyration. It is such messy, incomplete, and largely ephemeral elements of the queer archive of a band that was too briefly on the scene that animates my reading.

The queer Latina archive documenting Las Cucas’s performances provides the basis for this chapter’s discussion of how not only death but self-annihilation and suicide can be potentially playful tropes and forms of expression that offer the Latina subject an

¹ The band’s website [cucarific.com](http://www.cucarific.com) is now defunct. But it is archive through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine and is accessible through <https://web.archive.org/web/20050212125201/http://www.cucarific.com/#band>

alternative repertoire of responses to the politics of ethnic and national identity and belonging. The punk intonation in this chapter aligns with Juana María Rodríguez’s exploration of a lesbian sexual ethics in which she argues for “a theory of queer gesture that works in the interstice between sexual desires and political demands, between discipline and fantasy, between utopian longings and everyday failures.”² The Latina lesbian punk scream, I argue, is such a gesture—placing us as listeners in the midst of the tensions between sexual desire, politics, utopia, and failure. Additionally, my reading of Las Cucas Latina lesbian punk gestures enables an understanding of Latinidad that challenges what Sandra K. Soto identifies as the way in which “contemporary Chicana subjectivity [...] continues to be circumscribed by the heteronormative *virgin/chingada* (virgin/whore) sexual framework set in motion by the hegemonic deployment of miscegenation and religious conversion in Mexico in the sixteenth century.”³ To Soto’s formulation I would add the “mother” as an additional signifying marker that is often employed in critical readings of Chicana and Latina feminist cultural production. For example, in their introduction to *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader*, Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez turn to Gloria Anzaldúa’s assertion in *Borderlands/La Frontera* that Chicana feminist thought must include gay men to read an “[expression of] grief over the isolation imposed on jotos by a certain kind of lesbian separatist politics, but also associates the cultivation of such sharp and policed divisions with personal and political loss.”⁴ Throughout their introduction, Hames-García and Martínez attempt to leverage Anzaldúa’s work to support a separate critical-political project for gay Latino men. In this assertion I find a troubling—if generative—invocation of Anzaldúa and other Chicana feminists into performing the role of protective mother who guards against the threat of the punitive machismo of the Latino father. By doing so, Chicana feminist thought is enlisted in order to reinforce what Richard T. Rodríguez has identified as Chicano nationalism’s appeal to “La Familia” as its central political trope.⁵ Although unintended, the byproduct of this reading evacuates the possibility of Chicana feminists emerging as sexual subjects in their own right.

It is not my attempt here to critique the material realities of the Chicana mother. Poor mothers, single mothers, racialized mothers, find themselves under attack far too often. But I critique here the discursive construction of woman-Chicana-mother, and by extension, woman-as-caretaker and guardian of vulnerable gay Latino men, as a trope that often demands Latina female figures to take on the affective labor of nurture and care to the detriment of their own sexual autonomy and self-assertion. As Elisabeth Bronfen argues in her study of portraiture of dead women in Western art, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*:

The maternal body can be conceived as an interstice for various moments of

² Rodríguez, Juana María. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. (New York: NYU Press, 2014) 7.

³ Soto, Sandra K. *Reading Chican@ like a Queer the De-mastery of Desire*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) 10.

⁴ Hames-García, Michael and Ernesto Javier Martínez. “Introduction.” *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 1.

⁵ Rodríguez, Richard T. *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

prohibition. Culture's law against incest literally forbids the maternal body as an object for sexual desire in order to assure a social bonding among families. But the maternal body is also forbidden in a figural sense, as a trope for the 'soma' which must be restrained or renounced by the child as it moves from the position of primary narcissism to that of the speaking subject bound by symbols and laws of the community. This maternal body must concretely disappear as an object of libidinal investment and be replaced with substitute love objects, while it is simultaneously 'sacrificed' as metonymy for the pre-symbolic state of pleasure, of unstructured and unrestrained instinctual gratification, outside the negating economy of society and the reality principle.⁶

My discussion of the lesbian punk scream of Las Cucas, then, attempts to evacuate the Latina female body from its central relationship to "motherhood" as a mechanism through which the child, especially the male child, comes into being. It is, rather, an attempt to highlight how queer theory and Latina/o studies must make room for the possibility of imagining and accounting for the female subject in ecstasy, in crisis, in pangs of love, in the quest for desire, and even in suicidal self-annihilation. Indeed, I argue for the centrality of punk, and punk sound, as a sonic methodology that allows us to unlock and manifest how lesbians long, and want, and desire. Las Cucas's combination of punk and the bolero allow for the unruliness of dyke desire to explode outwards in ways that are instructive for the still unaccounted for possibilities of queer of color critique. Sound offers an escape from the limits of Latina feminist and lesbian representation and attunes our ears into that desire. If the female voice so often is expected to teach gay men about heartbreak and reconciliation, the female voice that can be easily projected into because its object of desire is the male body, what does it mean to remove that male body? What happens when the dyke voice sings about *her* own romantic loss?

Although I will be engaging with Las Cucas's recorded output as well as other notable Latina punk screams, the driving heart of this chapter is Nao Bustamante's vocal performance in the band's punk rendition of Mexican composer Álvaro Carrillo's classic bolero, "Sabor a Mí." Listening to Las Cucas cover the song is both a deeply disorienting and endlessly rewarding experience. For anyone versed in Latin American music, "Sabor a Mí" is an instantly recognizable standard. Written by Carrillo in 1959, it has been covered by some of Latin America's greatest luminaries of the form. Los Panchos with Eydie Gormé, Olga Guillot, Pérez Prado, Lucha Gatico, José Feliciano, Luis Miguel, El Chicano, and Lila Downs have all offered their own interpretation of Carrillo's haunting melody and heartbreaking lyrics. The song is a luxuriously sad bolero about a lover who must carry the leftover taste of the beloved's lips on his or her tongue after having been abandoned. Each of the performers who have interpreted it invests the song with their own signature approach to the bolero as a distinctive Latin American form, yet they all tap into in the song's resigned, almost calm mournfulness. From Los Pancho's original take on the bolero guitar, to La Guillot's Cuban inflection, to the song's now-canonical recording by Luis Miguel, to Lila Down's neo-folkloric rendition, each cover adds to the song's status as a sonic icon of of Latina/o love and loss. "Sabor a Mí" has now become a song that couples dance to at weddings, that lovers dedicate to one another over the radio,

⁶ Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. (New York: Routledge, 1992) 32.

that one expects to hear on world music compilations.

Las Cucas, however, do not adhere to the sonic legacies outlined above. Through their punk inflection, the band recuperates the lyrics' desperately sensorial longing, sound and taste collapsing into each other. Their version brings to the fore affective possibilities found in longing, loss, desperation, desire, depression and jags of crying. But the sonic reawakening of the song is indebted to more than punk. The sound of Las Cucas is leveraged through the specificity of what I call dyke desire. Dyke desire is the affective and erotic excess of a queer cosmology that integrates and leaves room not only for lesbian sex between women-born-women, but also trans, cis-gendered, and other queer bodies. If I insist on the "dyke" moniker, it is because I aim to locate it as a slippery term. In this discussion, I am informed by Karen Tongson's discussion of what she terms the "dykeaspora" as an attempt to unsettle the place of queer men "at the center of the action in desirable and desire-drenched cities while relegating female queers to potentially mundane and reproductive homonormative existences in unspecified elsewhere."⁷ This chapter's focus on the sonic affects of dyke desire directs us toward the specificities of lesbian sexuality in Latina/o cultural production. The dyke erotics of Las Cucas function in excess of identitarian demands: in the six minutes of their performance of "Sabor a Mí," the interaction and play between bolero and punk illuminates a critical approach to Latina and queer desire that privileges negative affects to provide an alternative to the dominant structures of feeling of Latina/o ethnic and national belonging.

Queer Studies, Lesbian Sexuality, and Latina Dyke Desire

Desire and sex, we are often told, make up the very substance of queerness. The unruliness of queer sexual practices, so goes the story, lies on its ability to take over space, particularly public space. Cruising cultures, hidden affairs, fleeting encounters, and other moments dominate much of our thinking of queer sex and sexuality. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have influentially argued that heteronormativity relies on the institutionalization of private sex to create other normative acts indebted to the state. For them, the ability of queers to create bonds that refuse the couple form allow for "sex [to] open a wedge to the transformation of those social norms that require only its statics intelligibility or its deadness as a source of meaning."⁸ Yet, as Juana María Rodríguez points out, lesbian desire has often found itself excluded from the cruising utopias of sex, "a subject position that remains vacated of erotic possibilities."⁹ Rodríguez goes on to further emphasize that racialized and minoritarian female subjects are also often disciplined out of sexuality by their own communities. She reminds us that particularly for women of color, notions of family and "community" often represent the space of collectivity premised through the labor of reproduction and care-taking.

However, my interest in lesbian sexuality in this chapter is not limited to the relative invisibility of female sexuality in accounts of queer theory. An unspoken premise within queer theory in particular and queer cultures in general is what I call the "achieved

⁷ Tongson, Karen. *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*. (New York: NYU Press, 2011) 18.

⁸ Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner "Sex in Public" *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 24, No. 2, Intimacy (Winter, 1998) 548.

⁹ Rodríguez, 21.

encounter.” Berlant and Warner’s argument takes as a given the felicitous affect of desire as unproblematically transitory. It assumes that bodies will find other bodies in a moment of unchained desire, in which the negative affects that often accompany longing, desire, and love will not follow. In Las Cucas’s performances of sonic negation, I argue that we can find resources for an alternative trajectory in queer theory, one which is not necessarily premised on the causal chain of the achieved encounter.

In *Are the Lips a Grave?: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*, Lynne Huffer notes the “oft-noted, aegis-creating persistently repeated splitting of queers away from feminists.”¹⁰ Though she overlooks the way in which queer of color critique has attempted to bridge this divide, Huffer’s point is well taken. To rectify this splitting, Huffer turns to the work of French feminist Luce Irigaray to “articulate an ethical dissolution of the subject: this dissolution is also, oddly, that which binds us, each to the other, through the ethical force of relation.”¹¹ Huffer uses Irigaray to reread Leo Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” She writes that while for Bersani, the rectum and the specter of gay male sexuality, feminized into oblivion by the phallus, represents the dissolution of the self as an end of politics, taking the *lips* as the grave offers queer theory an ethical proposition. Huffer turns to the lips, both facial and vaginal, to “articulate an ethics of relation that differentiates them from the pure negativity of queer antisociality. For it is in the catechistic, heterotopian attempt to speak otherwise that the lips are simultaneously here and elsewhere, now and not now: not a pinned down figure of the Other of the Same, but a hovering, catachrestic Other’s Other.”¹² For Huffer, Irigaray’s attempt to enunciate the primacy of sexual difference and its link to the reproductive female body provides the basis for a politics of sexual difference that breaks us from the attempt to link sex with morality.

Indeed, there is something surprising about how “queer” desire in queer theory, that figure of the antinormative subject who disrupts heterosexual worlds through his non-adherence to the norms of sex is achieved through an instinctively sexual ability to perform these acts in view. In another lesbian appeal to the lips, the poet Nicole Brossard, in “The Idea of Your Lips,” a short poetic text, recounts the simple experience of being among other lesbians, from which she concludes that:

- 1) being among lesbians is already erotic;
- 2) eroticism can be triggered by details as well as by major movements of the soul;
- 3) words are always good erotic start whether they are written or spoken;
- 4) though lesbians through time and space share some erotic approaches and sexual practices, there are some social-cultural environments which make us value differently what is erotic or aesthetic;
- 5) eroticism is at the heart of lesbians’ life.¹³

This lesbian desire, for a poet like Brossard, lies at the heart of creativity itself. The aesthetic and the erotic can hardly be separated. Lesbian desire is shifting, distributed

¹⁰ Huffer, Lynne. *Are the Lips a Grave?: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) 6.

¹¹ Huffer, 33.

¹² Huffer, 43.

¹³ Brossard, Nicole. *Selections*. (Berkeley: UC Press, 2010) 127.

across bodies, “Because of that our desire goes in her direction. She arouses our desire which is curious, fascinated, eager to approach her in her most intimate reality. We want something of her: her thoughts, her story, her ideas. We want her attention. We want more. We want to get closer, as close maybe as to share her *jouissance*. Her attention, her pleasure are really and symbolically meaning to us.”¹⁴

I cite these invocations to the lips to gesture toward the some of the essential queer investments and contexts that Las Cucas’ performance of “Sabor a Mí” invokes. The play of the lips, in the song’s mention of the “taste of me” that lingers once the moment of love has ended, is echoed in the theoretical gambles that Huffer and Brossard offer for conceptualizing lesbian desire. The idea of the other’s lips, and most importantly, the aftertaste of absence, offers a point of entry to understand the sonic negations of Latina lesbian desire.

Reading the Lover

Las Cucas’ lesbian punk fragmentation of the bolero can be read through a series of texts that explore the relationship between fragmented language and desire. In this section, I read two theoretical French from the 1970s alongside two Latin American responses to the influential reflections on queer erotics that were characteristic of French thought during this period: Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* alongside Tatiana de la Tierra’s bilingual text *Para Las Duras: Una Fenomenología Lesbiana*, and Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* with Rafael Castillo Zapata’s *Fenomenología del Bolero*. In their insistence on the fragment as a mode of articulation for lesbian (dis)identity and the lover’s protestation, these texts prove generative guides to read Las Cucas’ performance of “Sabor a Mí.”

Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* is an difficult and generative text. In its writing, Wittig practices both the possibility of cataloguing the very idea of lesbian soma, as well as its dissolution within it. The text is generated through the singular, addressed to an unnamed other, the subject of unruly desire, the direction of another woman. Wittig writes in a series of fragments:

I discover that your skin can be lifted layer by layer, I pull, it lifts off, it coils above your knees, I pull starting at the labia, it slides the length of the belly, fine to extreme transparency, I pull starting at the loins, the skin uncovers the round muscles and trapezii of the back, it peels off up to the nape of the neck, I arrive under your hair, m/y fingers traverse its thickness, I touch your skull, I grasp it with all m/y fingers [...] I hold all of you silent immobilized every cry blocked in your throat your last thoughts behind your eyes caught in m/y hands, the daylight is no purer than the depths of m/y heart m/y dearest one.¹⁵

Although ostensibly a novel, Wittig’s pursuit is hardly narrative. Instead, she accumulates moments of physical encounters to create non-masculine language. For Wittig, the fragmented and chaotic disarticulation of lesbian desire from narrative drive shapes her linguistic play to this violent and always erotic encounter.

This form is echoed in Colombian-born, Miami raised, Los Angeles-based poet Tatiana de la Tierra’s *Para las Duras: Una Fenomenología Lesbiana*. A bilingual text

¹⁴ Brossard, 128.

¹⁵ Wittig, Monique. *The Lesbian Body*. Trans. David Le Vay. (Boston: Beacon, 1986) 17.

written twice (once in each language) likewise returns to the body in a series of poems. I find her in concert with Wittig in the poem “A Lesbian, by Parts” as she writes, “the hands: representing pleasure, they should invite with softness and shine. the style and décor of the nails depends on intimate desires; lesbians unite through the finger nails.”¹⁶ Like Wittig, de la Tierra nullifies the separation between physical interior and exterior. To invoke an encounter between lesbians is to eradicate identity itself. It’s a surrender, a dissolution, and ultimately—I will suggest—an ethics that I hear in the tremble of Bustamante’s voice.

Reading *The Lesbian Body* alongside *For the Hard Ones* illuminates their proximity to two other texts that inform my discussion of Latina dyke desire, Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* and Rafael Castillo Zapata’s *Fenomenología del Bolero*. All of these writings attempt to index the possibilities of desire by speaking to the Other, an address in which utterances becomes central. Although each is deeply invested in the literary history of desire, it’s worth mentioning that all these realizations often come through as not only writing, but in the shift from the written to the sonorous. One may write to the lover, but the act of interjection, the moment in which one risks loss, is when the lover is addressed or when their name is uttered. Later in this chapter, I will read the latter texts to illuminate Las Cucas’s lesbian desire as the site of a queer ethical practice responsive to both queerness and Latinidad.

Las Cucas and the Enunciation of Desire

Las Cucas was founded in 1998 as a Latina punk band. They took their name as a tribute to Mexican composer Cuco Sánchez, whose songs they originally covered, although they would soon expand their repertoire to include a mix of traditional and popular Mexican and other Latina/o songs. Each of the songs they covered was “punkified,” yet remained recognizable to the ears that knew them. The band was comprised of Nao Bustamante, Marcia Ochoa, Al Lujan, Cheryl Tesch, Rene Mercado, and Devil Bunny. The band played a number of shows in the San Francisco Bay Area as well as in Los Angeles. While they only recorded five songs, their performance repertoire spanned many more Latin American classics, from the Mexican bolero “Sabor a Mí” to the Cuban “Guantanamera.” They also composed and performed one original song, “Muñequita.” On the band’s website, Bustamante is credited under the name “Mea Culpa”; she is the one who supplies “vocals, maracas, tambourine, and high drama.” It is precisely this “high drama” that I’m interested in exploring for the purposes of my argument.

In an essay on famed Cuban bolero singer Olga Guillot, José Quiroga refers to her specialty of performing “the bolero of despair and eros, the song that produces the erotic charge of steamy sex under a red lightbulb, or the one sung by the woman after the man has left her panting, and she hides a knife under the pillow on a creaking bed where the sheets are wet.”¹⁷ It should come as no surprise that La Guillot is one of the many artists who have covered “Sabor a Mí.” Her version is accompanied with lush strings and performed in a trembling, quivering voice that is saturated with a defiant sense of

¹⁶ De la Tierra, Tatiana. *For the Hard Ones: A Lesbian Phenomenology*. (San Diego: Calaca Press, 2002) 19.

¹⁷ Quiroga, José. *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*. (New York: NYU Press, 2000) 145.

longing. Quiroga describes her voice as “deep but not exuberant, all timbre and no inflection, embodied rather than ethereal.”¹⁸ La Guillot’s “sentimental performance” brings together several listening publics in the thrall of her voice, but Quiroga notes that in particular straight women and queer men have found solace in her voicing of the song. When listening to her recording, it is clear that the singer’s attention is directed toward a man. Yet the power of the bolero lies in its ability to stretch outward, to touch the audience’s body through the sonorous drive of strumming guitars and sultry vocals, to stage a clash of genders that spills over from the heterosexual orientation of the song’s lyrics. As Quiroga further argues, the soundscape of the bolero illustrates that “there is love and there is sexual abandon; there is love as tragedy; infidelities are legion; one may be married and have a lover; there may be a razor blade somewhere for the suicide or the murder.”¹⁹ It is these queer excesses that dictate the gender politics of the bolero, transformed by many men and women into the sound that embodies their failed longings.

Yet if the bolero is deeply heterosexual in its origins, and in the 90s we find a host of artists “who voice boleros [...] via the melancholic homosexual as a polemical figure of mourning and celebration,”²⁰ how to attune to sounds of dyke longing that Las Cucas provide? The band answers this question by producing a version of the song that takes on the aggressive push of punk. In their cover, Las Cucas use the cacophonous properties of punk, and in particular the scream of Nao Bustamante’s lead vocals, to place this song in particular—and perhaps also the bolero as a genre—within a lesbian performance and musical genealogy that unabashedly embraces the affective excesses of desire.

The song’s lyrics are as follows:

Tanto tiempo disfrutamos de este amor
nuestras almas se acercaron tanto así
que yo guardo tu sabor
pero tú llevas también, sabor a mí.

We enjoyed this love for so long
And our souls got so close that now
I save your flavour
But you also, taste of me

Si negaras mi presencia en tu vivir
bastaría con abrazarte y conversar
tanta vida yo te di
que por fuerza tienes ya, sabor a mí.

If you were to deny my presence in your life
I'd just need to embrace you and to talk to you
I gave you so much life
by force now, taste of me

No pretendo, ser tu dueño,
no soy nada yo no tengo vanidad
de mi vida, doy lo bueno,
soy tan pobre que otra cosa puedo dar.

I don't intend to be your owner
I'm nothing, I don't possess any vanity
Of my life, I give the best
I'm poor, what else could I give?

Pasarán más de mil años, muchos más
yo no sé si tenga amor, la eternidad
pero allá tal como aquí,
en la boca llevarás, sabor a mí.

A thousand years will pass, many more
And I don't know if love exists in the eternity
But there, just like here
In your mouth you will carry, taste of me.

¹⁸ Quiroga, 146.

¹⁹ Quiroga, 149

²⁰ Quiroga, 149

Las Cucas' recording begins with a simple strum of the electric guitar plunking out the recognizable first notes of the song. Even though this is punk, the strings play gently, followed by the soft tone of Bustamante's voice intoning the song's gentle opening words: "*Tanto tiempo disfrutamos de este amor.*" Bustamante elongates each of these opening words, leaning into them while the guitar strums and the rhythm of bass and drums gently unfurl in the background. The only jarring sonic element in these early moments is the electric buzz of the guitar and the jangly, slightly "off" beating of the snare drum. The eloquence of desire remains at a melancholic pace, both slow and drawn out. As the first verse comes to an end however, Bustamante's voice begins to quiver, cracking in her intonation of "sabor a mí." The song takes a turn as the drawn out "mí" invokes the shifting instrumentation that shifts to the aggressive tone of punk rock. With barely a second between this last word, Nao begins to yelp a dramatic and exuberant "oi, oi, oi." Here the song gains a dramatic and excessive melodramatic quality unrealized by the many other singers who have performed it. Bustamante's moan is harsh and grating. In it we hear not just the longing, but the sexual lust and tragedy of the lover's abandonment. Yet this is only the beginning of the excessive heights the performance will reach. While the backup singers begin to sing the chorus (*no pretendo*), Nao follows them (*ser tu dueño*), with a desperate, high pitched, and defiantly sexual scream. The razorblade is not under the bed or the pillow, but in her throat. She reaches the last words of the chorus (*soy tan pobre, ¿Que otra cosa puedo dar?*) as the final "dar" is elongated into the shape of a mournful final cry.

In Bustamante's voice, the sonic thrust of the song takes on the melancholic tone of the verses, which attempt to balance the languorous pace of the bolero against the punk explosion of the chorus. The connecting tissue between the final "dar" of the chorus and the "pasaran" of the following verse is an asphyxiating sigh. We have shifted back from the punk scream to the tender exhale of the bolero. Her voice once again gives us the sweet longing of the missing lover. Her beckoning toward eternity is sweet, a flirtatious promise of that flavor of the lips. But once again, as she ends the verse, the earlier deep "ois" become tortured "ay"s. The difference between that earlier and this second bridge is telling. Whereas the "oi" of the first transition betrayed a deep pain, this "ay" unites the pain with an orgasmic tone. The repetition of the second verse abandons the first's flirtatious tone. The abandonment has gone from the hope of return to one of resignation. The eternities in each of them are now different, the sweetness of the first accompanied by a violent orgasmic cry.

A heterosexual reading of the song as performed by its many singers gives a much different view than Las Cucas's version of it. It recalls in its older iterations a gentle romantic longing often found in the Latin American song tradition, what Rafael Castillo Zapata describes as the genre's "symbolic plot of representing the amorous phenomenon, the bolero, as it manifests this figure, possesses the extraordinary capacity to serve as constant support to the Latin American lover when it's time to elaborate all of the adventures that characterize their experience."²¹ Castillo Zapata, who in *Fenomenología del Bolero* attempts to rewrite Barthes's lover into the Latin American sonic imaginary,

²¹ Translation mine. Castillo Zapata, Rafael. *Fenomenología Del Bolero*. (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1990) 23.

imagines the gamble of any bolero to give language to the attempt to enunciate the substance of love. But if the song as filtered through heterosexual longing gives a glimpse of the drunk lover stumbling through the words, Bustamante's singing sees her dragging on the floor, hand extended, asking to not be left behind.

But perhaps most key for my argument is the cover's ability to traffic not in the heterosexual histories of the song (even when they have been queered), but in the explicit potentiality of the lesbian body. Monique Wittig's reflections in *The Lesbian Body* are punctuated by interruptions, written entirely in capital letters, expanding upon the sexual act between two women as all consuming. Wittig imagines lesbian sex as a violent interaction of bodies:

THE CORPORI CAVERNOSA THE VAGINAL BULBS THE SKELETON
THE VERTEBRAL COLUMN THE CLAVICLES THE RIBS THE STERNUM
THE HUMERI THE RADII THE ULNAE THE CARPALS THE
METACARPALS THE PHALANGES THE ILIAC BONES THE PELIVS THE
SACRUM THE COCCYX THE FEMORA THE PATELLAE THE FIBULAE
THE TIBIAE THE TARSALS THE METATARSALS²²

Bustamante's intonation of "*sabor a mí*" launches us precisely into this mode of corporeal, disjunctive, and interruptive performance. The leftover taste of the departed lover that the singer must carry comes from both lips, an incorporation that connects bodies, orifices, and organs. This departs importantly from the discourse of the racialized body and ingestion, an important literature that nonetheless tends to imagine race as the site of consumption. In lesbian sex, as Wittig argues and Bustamante's performance affirms, there is no ingestion but a dissolve in which the political histories of the body merge in an erotic, sonic embrace.

The meeting of bolero and punk in Bustamante's performance invites reflection upon other histories of the lesbian and Latina vocal growl. For Bustamante, the growl hinges between orgasmic and desolate moan. The growl negotiates the space between the bolero and punk, between Chavela Vargas and Alice Bag. Vargas, the legendary ranchera singer whose voice has been described as "the rough voice of tenderness," perfected a desolate rasp in her oeuvre. Vargas was also a lesbian. Although she never attempted to fit within a framework of the closet or of being "out," Vargas's sexuality was well known throughout the Latin American cultural contexts in which her music traveled. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano describes the lesbian appeal of Vargas's butchness, in relationship to the writer's own femme-ness. The erotic codes Vargas furnishes enter Yarbro-Bejarano's femme desires, linking Mexican cultural practices to mestiza longings.²³ Alice Bag was the lead singer of legendary Los Angeles punk band The Bags, who in their few recordings would come to define a burgeoning Chicano punk scene in East Los Angeles in the 1970s. Michelle Habelle-Pallán, exploring the intersections between Chicana feminism and punk, writes that Bag "found no recourse in the myth traditional Mexican

²² Wittig, 115.

²³ Yarbro-Bejarano, Yvonne. "Crossing the Border with Chabela Vargas: A Chicana Femme's Tribute." *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*. Eds. Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy. (New York: NYU Press, 1997)

family to discuss the domestic violence she witnessed as a child.”²⁴ The Bags’s sound is as preoccupied in questioning Chicano cultural norms as it is in mining punk music as a site for alternative modes of Chicano self-creation. In songs like “Violence Girl” and “We Will Bury You,” Bag’s punk scream creates a brown staining, a vocal racialization that escapes the normative codings of Chicano nationalism and opens up the force of brownness as a sonic and bodily performance of collectivity.

Bustamante’s growls recall both of these trajectories: she draws from the brown lesbian legacies of Vargas and Bag in her vocal gesture toward the self-dissolving force of erotic abandonment. All of these brown lesbian singers move away from melodrama and camp as dominant paradigms of queer expressions of excessiveness. Tears of abandonment soak Bustamante’s increasingly desperate snarl, as the lover moves further away in each repetition of the chorus. The razor inches ever closer to the wrist. In *Listening in Detail*, Alexandra Vazquez follows mambo musician’s Damaso Pérez Prado’s (another of the song’s major interpreters) grunt, and finds that “these sounds do not abide by protocols of bourgeois comportment. They betray potential overindulgence or an inability to self-control.”²⁵ Part of this power is in the grunt’s ability to shift, its inability to remain static, and thus legible. “Sabor a Mí” is told in this recording through the growls, grunts, and screams as the increasing overindulgence in Bustamante’s voice shifts and transforms the meaning of the song into a register of brown dyke desire.

Bustamante’s growl shifts in each repetition of the chorus, accumulating the earlier verses. The first chorus retains composure, every word building toward the moment of complete abandonment. Bustamante’s elongation in “Que otra cosa puedo daaaaaar” functions as the realization, the tonal switch that will drive the following choruses. The second chorus begins on the vocal pitch the previous one has ended on. Bustamante is now the abandoned lover, and each word takes longer to sing, and her breathing is increasingly restless. Toward the end of the song, the singer’s desperate performance has absorbed more words: the lyrics “*soy tan pobre que otra cosa puedo daaaaar*” hover on the edge of unintelligibility. The third and final chorus begins from that emotive incoherence. Each of the lines is delivered in a desperate scream—the lover’s last stand. Yet as Bustamante’s voice chokes further, she is not alone. The backup voices of her band-mates swoop in to sustain her through the desperate moans. The abandoned lover may be consigned to solitude, but the sonorous accompaniment of these vocals work to hold Bustamante in the embrace of brown dyke collectivity forged from a sense of sorrow, pain, and rage.

Toward a Lover’s Scream: Barthes with Bustamante

Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* is a deceptively simple text that has for these reasons remained interpretively unwieldy. Ostensibly it is a fragmentary address to the beloved from the abandoned lover, rendered in a series of short chapters that mine the affective archive of the desolate speaker. In the first pages, Barthes signals that “the

²⁴ Habell-Pallán, Michelle. *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture*. (New York: NYU Press, 2005) 226.

²⁵ Vazquez, Alexandra T. *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music*. (New York: NYU Press, 2011) 134.

lover's discourse is today *of an extreme solitude*.²⁶ This solitude necessarily renders the language of the lover as a disavowal from the larger culture: this language "is completely forsaken by the surrounding languages: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts)." But Barthes follows this assertion with an important distinction: "Once a discourse is thus driven by its own momentum into the backwater of the 'unreal,' exiled from all gregariness, it has no recourse but to become the site, however exiguous, of an *affirmation*."²⁷ In Barthes's notion of this affirmation, I find an idiom for describing the queer ethical practice I suggest punk affords the bolero in Las Cucas's performances of dyke desire. In other, more putatively heterosexual versions of "Sabor a Mí," the *tristesse* of the song leaves the lover abandoned next to a bottle of mezcal, lingering on the table. Bustamante's scream detaches the song from this scene of desolate betrayal. Instead, the brown lesbian punk singer destroys the bar, crawls on the street, and begs her lover to stay until she has gone mad.

We could perhaps stage a polemic here, to claim that affirmation has indeed been one of queer theory's principal concerns. This could be an imagined encounter between the Foucault of the *History of Sexuality* and the Barthes of *A Lover's Discourse*. Throughout the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault uncovers speech as the act that has historically produced sexuality at the nexus of power and knowledge. Sex became key to the will-to-know the inner truth of the modern subject, mediated by medical, religious, and psychoanalytic discourse. In Foucault's final lectures, he turns toward an account of *pharresia*, or truth-telling, which emerge as ethical acts of self-care. Foucault points us toward an *ars erotica*, or the act of learning sex, as an art rather than a technique of power.²⁸ Yet Barthes tells us that the desolate lover's speech provides another way out of Foucault's conundrum, and thus perhaps offers an alternative trajectory for queer theory that I am interested in tracing through my reading of Las Cucas's sonic performances of brown dyke desires. As mentioned above, I take issue with queer theory's inability to imagine romantic desolation as an exemplary site of queerness. Yes, queer theory may in fact embrace many melancholics as exemplary figures, but rarely ever the reason for their melancholia. Even when the queer subject refuses "visibility," the subject of queer theory is always-already content with *his* loneliness. The lesbian punk scream, however, makes this melancholia inescapably present, vital, and heard.

A key concept throughout *A Lover's Discourse* is the notion of becoming engulfed. In the first fragment, titled "I am engulfed, I succumb..." Barthes writes, "Either woe or well-being, sometimes I have a craving *to be engulfed*. This morning (in the country, the weather is mild, overcast. I am suffering (from some incident). The notion of suicide occurs to me, pure of any resentment (not blackmailing anyone); an insipid notion; it alters nothing ("breaks" nothing), matches the color (the silence, the desolation) of this morning."²⁹ Las Cucas's cover of "Sabor a Mí" ends precisely on this note. Bustamante's final "*sabor a mí*" is delivered in a resigned sigh, one that has been building upon the

²⁶ Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978) 1.

²⁷ Barthes, 1.

²⁸ See, Foucault, Michel *History of Sexuality* volumes 1 and 3.

²⁹ Barthes, 10.

suicidal tendencies of the bolero itself. To become engulfed, Barthes reminds us, is to break away from the burden of the “I.” While it certainly is “I” who realizes and expresses these desires, love itself “from happiness this time, the same outburst of annihilation sweeps through me. This is how it happens sometimes, misery or joy engulfs me, without any particular tumult ensuing: nor any pathos: I am dissolved, not dismembered; I fall, I flow, I melt.”³⁰

I’m drawn to how Barthes’s notion of *engulfment*, equally murderous and suicidal, is woven throughout Wittig and de la Tierra’s, Castillo Zapata and Barthes’s literary evocations of erotic desire, and how it is in turn sonically appropriated by Bustamante and her bandmates. In the fragment on engulfment, Barthes proceeds to describe how the suicidal longing of the desolate lover is rather “death liberated from dying.” Death for Barthes signifies a separation from the subject driven by longing: “I conceive of death *beside me*: I conceive of it according to the unthought logic, I drift outside of the fatal couple which links life and death by opposing them to each other.”³¹ After all, the goal is to “dilute myself, I swoon in order to escape that density, that clogging which makes me into a *responsible* subject: I come out: it is ecstasy.”³²

This ecstasy is precisely the emergence that renders Bustamante’s desire productive against nihilist calls toward the non-relational. Suicide surfaces as fantasy, which as Rodríguez reminds us, “allows us to make queer racialized female sexuality if not visible, then imaginable, as a site of polymorphous perversity, a place of pleasure and danger.”³³ I take *A Lover’s Discourse*, alongside the writing of Wittig, de la Tierra, and Castillo Zapata, as a guide to Bustamante’s performance (and vice-versa) to illuminate the pangs of desolate love in each of their scenes of failed erotic connection—a pang that has no proper resolution. If I wish to step away from the model of melodrama, there are terms in Barthes that draw close to seriousness. Perhaps the “Catastrophe” is instructive here, where Barthes identifies “Two systems of despair: gentle despair, active resignation (‘I love you as one must love, in despair’), and violent despair: one day, after some incident, I shut myself in my room and burst into sobs: I am carried away by a powerful tide, asphyxiated with pain; my whole body stiffens and convulses: I see, in a sharp, cold flash, the destruction to which I am doomed.”³⁴ Bustamante aurally mirrors and matches this desperation.

But must the brown lesbian be doomed to failure, erotic frustration, and self-dissolving desolation? Indeed, why must the Latina lesbian bear the labor of pain? Haven’t queer characters been fated to die enough? Yet to survive, to be happy, to love and let go are forms of queer orthodoxy that participate in erasing the scars of love. As Barthes suggests, “By releasing his tears without constraint, he follows the orders of the amorous body, which is a body in liquid expansion, a bathed body: to weep together, to flow together.”³⁵ The invitation that the song extends toward its audience to weep and moan and scream alongside Bustamante offers a performance of brown lesbian desire that

³⁰ Barthes, 10.

³¹ Barthes, 12.

³² Barthes, 12.

³³ Rodríguez, 26.

³⁴ Barthes, 48.

³⁵ Barthes, 180.

might offer a queer ethics that celebrates neither non-relationality nor queer sexual perversity for its own sake. Perversity here lies in the too-muchness of love, a too-muchness that Latina/o queers are perhaps too familiar with. Indeed, tears beg for a response, not only from the lover who has departed but from us as the listeners.

Nao Bustamante's career is filled with moments of punk tears. José Esteban Muñoz discusses how Nao Bustamante's performance and installation art engages with the depressive position occupied by many brown subjects. In his reading of Bustamante's sculptural installation *Neapolitan*, Muñoz finds "a feeling of brownness that transmits and is structured through a depressive stance, a kind of feeling down."³⁶ Bustamante's performance art, while often comedic, rarely offers a pleasing, complementary, or celebratory account of brown queer female sexuality. Laura Gutiérrez calls this Bustamante's "bad girl aesthetics": racialized and sexualized unsettling of avant-garde aesthetic norms; Bustamante's bad girl art and performance trouble our notions of experimental praxis by situating the brown female body at the center of the gaze.³⁷ Much of Bustamante's work is saturated in an extravagant sense of melancholia. *Neapolitan*, for example, consists of a television playing a video of a close-up shot of Bustamante, in tears, while watching the Cuban film *Fresa y Chocolate*. In her performance piece, *America the Beautiful*, Bustamante repeatedly fails at normative standards of white femininity as she wraps herself in increasingly grotesque layers of costuming, fabric, and even plastic wrapping tape. In another performance, *Gravity*, the artist tapes a plastic bag filled with water around her head. The piece only lasts a few seconds, with Bustamante eventually cutting the bag open to let the water out, allowing her to breathe. Yet the power of *Gravity* lies in its aftermath, as Bustamante visibly goes from the exaggerated projection-like enhancement of her face into a desperate gasping for air. While these pieces are often funny, they are also situated within an affective oscillation between humor and despair.

I propose Barthes and Bustamante as partners in tears. Not the tears that one hides, afraid of being seen, but the tears one chokes on. Bustamante and Barthes choke on their tears. They choke on their queerness. This queerness is exemplified not only by their abberant sexual desires, but by their inability to enter the promised futurity of proper queer (and, in the case of Bustamante, brown) subjecthood. They each occupy a too-muchness that queerness rejects; they love too much, in the wrong ways; they fail at the normative compartments of desire. Bustamante's queer Latinidad will not be a joyful, but instead too extravagant, too steeped in failure, begging for dissolution.

Súbete a Mi Moto

So what is a desolate lover to do? Where is the ethical ground for the brown dyke desire in this performance? Neither Wittig, Barthes, nor Bustamante would be so easily consoled if the lover were to come back. On the contrary, both the lover's absence and presence form the source of pain. In our current political moment, in which queer politics

³⁶ Muñoz, José Esteban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position" *Signs*, Vol. 31, No. 3, New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture (Spring 2006) 676.

³⁷ See, Gutiérrez, Laura G. *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas Y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

have stagnated into the opposing poles of pro- and anti-marriage debates and Latina/o political imaginaries on both sides of the border are consumed with the trope of familial belonging, is there room for the queer desolate lover? Throughout this conclusion, I argue in the affirmative by turning to a reading of the butch playfulness of another Las Cucas song, “Súbete a mi Moto,” first performed by the Puerto Rican boy-band Menudo in 1981. The song topped the charts in all of Latin America upon its release, and is still widely known and loved throughout Latina/o America. Las Cucas turn this pop ditty into another punk anthem of lesbian desire. Marcia Ochoa sings lead vocals in this song, lending it a butch intonation decidedly different from the boyish flirtatiousness of Menudo’s original. (Of course, it also helps that the motorcycle that the song conjures has been one of modern lesbian culture’s most persistent icons.) Yet all of the boyish flirtatiousness is not completely devoid of romance. The original song’s lyrics are as follows:

Paso día y noche	I go around day and night
Corriendo por ti	Running for you
En mi moto doy mil vueltas	In my motorcycle I go a thousand times
A tu casa, buscando ser feliz	To your house, expecting to be happy
Y hago mil piruetas	And I do a thousand pirouettes
Por llamar tu atención	To call your attention
Y del ruido	And because of the sound
Los vecinos y tu padres	The neighbors and your parents
Ya no pueden vivir	Can no longer live

Súbete a mi moto,	Climb on my motorcycle
Nunca haz conocido	You’ve never met
Un amor tan veloz.	A faster love.
Súbete a mi moto,	Climb on my motorcycle
Ella guardara	She will guard
El secreto de dos	The secret of us two
De los dos.	Of us two.

Siempre inmaculada	Always immaculate
La llevo por ti	I keep it for you
Tanque lleno	Full Tank
Si decides cual gaviota	If you decide like a seagull
Volar tras de mí.	To fly after me.
Tanto que he soñado	So much I’ve dreamed
Tenerte junto a mí	To have you next to me
Ya no hay freno	There’s no break
Que detenga este amor	That will stop this love
Que siento por ti	I feel for you

Súbete a mi moto,	Climb on my motorcycle
Nunca haz conocido	You’ve never met
Un amor tan veloz.	A faster love.
Súbete a mi moto,	Climb on my motorcycle

Ella guardara
 El secreto de dos
 De los dos.

She will guard
 The secret of us two
 Of us two

In the Cucas performance of the song, the chorus, “*subete a mi moto/ella guardara el secreto de dos/de los dos*” functions as a promise in Ochoa’s voice cleverly hinting at their secret. Her singing replaces even the motorcycles as the site of erotic longing. In the original 1980s music video made for the song, Menudo rides fancy colorful road bikes. When one hears Ochoa, one hears in the revving of the motorcycle something more seductive. Although the original music video sees the girl won over, the lyrics never say so. It’s an expression of desire that, as far as we know, goes unanswered. Las Cucas’ punk reworking of this unanswered desire turns it into a celebration as promise, gesturing toward the possibility of ecstasy of which Barthes writes in his discussion. Las Cucas’s sonic performance of brown dyke desire allows us to dwell in the most painful stages of love, offering a powerful instance of sonic performances of negation that refuse the normative scripts of belonging and identity demanded by the exigencies of queer and brown identity formations. Yet as “*Súbete a Mi Moto*” shows, this can sound like punk teenage love, full of promise. A queer love that is fast, perilous, and edging—even joyfully—ever toward doom.

Chapter 4
Years of Refusal:
Latina/os, Morrissey, and the Joys of Melancholia.

On May 26, 2012, British singer Morrissey made what would be his only appearance in Northern California that year, performing a concert at the Bob Hope Theater in Stockton. At some point during the show, Morrissey handed his microphone to a girl in the audience. The girl's voice carried the inflection of Latinidad in its cadence, its pronunciation, its very timbre. She did not have an "accent" per se, but rather a certain recognizable trace in the grain of her voice. Her speech was almost too formal, too melodramatic for the moment. It's a formality many Latina/os learn to adopt when adjusting to life in the U.S. to assert seriousness, education, maturity. She begins by acknowledging Morrissey's birthday, which is only a couple of days away, "the beginning of your 53rd year on this miserable planet." Morrissey kneels above her on stage. His expression is bashful, if studied. But the girl's voice is sincere. She thanks him for "exposing your exquisite heart" and for "giving hope to so many people who just can't find their place in this world." The rest of the crowd cheers along loudly to everything she's saying, sharing in her sentiments. But the girl's reference to "this miserable world" in her speech is no exaggeration. This is Stockton after all, a city named by Forbes Magazine in 2011 as "the most miserable" in the United States. Other studies have ranked Stockton as the most illiterate city in America, as well as one of the two most obese. So when the girl speaks of misery, of those who don't belong, she means it, she *knows* it, she *feels* it, she *lives* in it. Morrissey's presence in Stockton would be an otherwise unremarkable event given his status as a constantly touring musician who performs all over the world. But it is significant that during this short North American tour his only three concerts were in Stockton, Bakersfield, and San Diego, this final one on his birthday itself. Each of these cities in California is racially marked. In Stockton Latina/os make up the majority of the population, at 40%. Bakersfield does not lie far behind in the demographic dominance of Latina/os, and for that matter, neither does San Diego, especially given the city's proximity to Tijuana, another home of many a Morrissey fan. A quick perusal through comparable artists' upcoming concert schedules shows that Stockton and Bakersfield are not cities often visited by popular touring musicians or any other sort of traveling spectacle. The good acts are usually reserved for Los Angeles and San Francisco, with other stops in California here and there. Even more curious is that Moz, as he is affectionately known to fans, has time and time again cancelled dates in San Francisco and Oakland, managing to never once honor any of his scheduled concert dates there over the past five years. So why *does* it matter that Morrissey did play Stockton, Bakersfield, and San Diego? Why does it matter that the most miserable city in America, populated mostly by Latina/os, for one night welcomed one of the most miserable singers in pop music? How do geographic, psychic, and musical misery connect at this junction?

This chapter takes this matrix of readings, meanings, and affects to investigate the possibilities found in the world created by Morrissey's Latina/o fanbase. I follow the persistent and productive lure of negative feelings—in particular "misery," "melancholy," and "depression"—within Latino/a cultural production, reception, and spectatorship. These feelings, I argue, are essential to expanding our understanding of the

physical and psychic landscapes in which Latina/o subjects dwell. How are the negative feelings that characterize these landscapes accessed through the excessiveness of Morrissey's voice and lyrics? At stake in this chapter is how Latina/o subjects engage with aurality through performances of *listening*. Listening appears throughout this discussion as an act that opens the self up to others: listening to Morrissey's music is a deeply intersubjective, socially formative activity for Latina/os and other minoritarian subjects. Melancholy remains an understudied analytic in relationship to Latina/o subjects in particular, and if I choose Morrissey's music to explore the potentialities of Latina/o melancholia it is not because of the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the artist and his Latina/o fans, but because of the obsessive devotion on the part of these fans. This devotion, I argue, emerges because Morrissey's music allows Latina/os to articulate their depressive feelings through and beyond the cultural confines of "Latinidad" itself.

Indeed, what seem now like an ever expanding number of magazine articles, TV news stories, and blog posts about this phenomenon all attempt to locate it within some cultural "truth." Catholicism, Norteño music, telenovelas have all been pointed to as potential reasons as to why Latina/os, particularly around Los Angeles, love Morrissey. Simon Goddard's massive compendium of everything Morrissey, *Mozipedia*, devotes an entry to Latina/o fans. In a handy summary, Goddard writes, "Various magazine articles investigating Morrissey's 'Latino appeal' [...] have all arrived at the same demographic conclusions: Latinos, and especially Los Angeles Mexicans as an ethnic minority subject to prejudice and exclusion, immediately identify with his gospel of outsiderdom; their love of his music is a conscious rebellion against the prevalent hip hop culture as a means of asserting their own identity."¹ This general sentiment, as Goddard indicates, has been the main focus and conclusion of the many pieces on Morrissey's Latina/o following. One of the earliest articles about the phenomenon in 2002, "Viva Morrissey!" by Chuck Klosterman, asserts, "To argue that Morrissey's contemporary audience skews Hispanic would be inaccurate; Morrissey's contemporary audience *is* Hispanic, at least in LA."² But his Latina/o following extends far beyond the borders of Los Angeles. Latina/os make up the vast majority of almost any Morrissey concert, Smiths tribute night, and Morrissey/Smiths convention in the United States, and indeed his following extends throughout Latin America. There are club nights devoted to his music in places ranging from Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, a predominantly Latina/o area, to Porky's Place, a bar in Tijuana, Mexico, which throws a party to celebrate Morrissey's birthday every year. In his recently published autobiography, Morrissey devotes the final section to his relationship to Mexico, highlighting that "Nothing the world holds could match the love awaiting me in Mexico City—two sold out shows where my own voice goes unheard above the singing from the hall."³ This is not to deny the centrality that Los Angeles has occupied in the public appearance of this phenomenon, but rather to call attention to the fact that this extension of fan base throughout Latin America and the Caribbean tests the limits of the demands of subcultural knowledge and research.

¹ Goddard, Simon. *Mozipedia: The Encyclopedia of Morrissey and the Smiths*. (London: Ebury, 2009) 218.

² Klosterman, Chuck. "Viva Morrissey!" *Spin* August 2002: 90.

³ Morrissey, Steven Patrick. *Autobiography*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2013) 453.

If we step away from such social explanations Morrissey perhaps troubles the category of “Latinidad” itself. As Christina Beltrán argues in her conclusion to *The Trouble With Unity*, Latinidad is too often conceived in relationship to an imagined political urgency that forces us into “the pragmatics of crisis.”⁴ Instead, following work by Latina/o cultural theorists, she argues for a “reimagining *Latinidad* as a rhizomatic form of resonance.”⁵ Perhaps this resonance can be found in the affective traces that depression and melancholia open, a resonance found in what Antonio Viego argues that instead we gain by turning to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s conception of the subject. As Viego writes, “Lacan understands the inscription of the subject in language as constituting a loss, a loss of hypothesized fullness prior to the impact of language that he will refer to as belonging to the order of the Real.”⁶ In this Lacanian reading of the Latina/o subject, the idea of fullness, or fullness indeed even as a goal of how the subject comes into being, becomes secondary to another project in which subjectivity itself is structured by a racially marked inability to enter language or the language of wholeness and instead, “one alive to the effects of language on the human organism.”⁷

José Esteban Muñoz refers to this attention to loss in his later work as “the sense of brownness.” He writes that writes that “Feeling brown [...] is descriptive of the ways in which minoritarian affect is always, not matter what its register, partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects.”⁸ For Muñoz, brownness becomes possible as an ontological condition that begs for radically altered forms of relationality: “this relay of responses is once again knowable to us as a kind of affective performativity, which is to say a kind of feeling which is a mode of doing.”⁹ Throughout this project, Muñoz turned from psychoanalysis to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy to delineate an ontology of brownness that was always indebted to negative feelings.

Departing from this notion of the Latina/o listener’s intimate relation to melancholy and loss, this chapter investigates the crevices, the in-between of melancholia. Even as Latina/os are diagnosed in ever greater numbers with clinical depression, signaling through its diagnosis its own kind of welcoming into the diagnostic American vocabulary, I linger here in the aesthetic and creative spaces of melancholia, what Jonathan Flatley, through Walter Benjamin, refers to as “melancholizing.”¹⁰ I

⁴ Beltrán, Christina. *The Trouble With Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 158.

⁵ Beltran, 159.

⁶ Viego, Antonio. *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 51.

⁷ Viego, 59.

⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position” *Signs*, Vol. 31, No. 3, New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture (Spring 2006) 679.

⁹ Muñoz. “Wise Latinas” *Criticism*. Vol. 56, No. 2. (Winter 2014) 250.

¹⁰ Flatley uses Benjamin’s theories of melancholia to revise Freud and give an account of the political uses of melancholia in modernist writing. See *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

approach this wallowing through William E. Jones's photographic and documentary film project *Is It Really So Strange?*, and through the work of Latina/Asian-American artist Shizu Saldamando, whose drawings chronicle through technique the boundaries between self and other. This chapter listens to melancholia via other means, allowing readers and viewers to insert their own soundtrack of depression. Morrissey will be our facilitator throughout the following sections, but ultimately I wish to tease out the performative dimensions of Latina/o listening in the fullness of its sensory complexity, an aural punctum that grows onto our other senses.

I also find my own methodological grounding in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and his notion of listening. In *Listening*, Nancy posits aurality and the sonorous as essential in activating intersubjectivity. He wonders, "What secret is at stake when one truly *listens*, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?"¹¹ To listen, contends Nancy, is to open oneself to the other beyond the bounds of identity, "on the edge of meaning."¹² To occupy this edge is partly what's at stake in listening to the depression in Morrissey's music. Nancy specifically points to sound as "tendentially methexic (that is, having to do with participation, sharing, or contagion)."¹³ For him, hearing, out of all the senses, has the capacity to expand our relationship to the social world without resorting to representational models of being. This is not to say that listening is thus opposed to other forms of knowing, but can function as an enhancement that operates beyond visual or even linguistic registers. Throughout this chapter, I listen to the static, to the photographic, to that which appears to have no sound. Yet, as I will show through Jones and Saldamando, a methodology of listening instills its own soundtrack upon the visual.

On Morrissey

Steven Patrick Morrissey first came to cultural prominence as the lead singer of the British rock band The Smiths in the early 1980s. The band was active between 1982 and 1987, recording four studio albums and one live album before disbanding. While relatively unknown outside of England during much of their time together, the adoration of The Smiths has led to the emergence of a large international cult following in the years since their breakup. Morrissey launched a successful solo career that spanned from the late 80s until the mid 90s, after which he entered a period of relative obscurity. The legions of Morrissey's followers have only expanded since. Even though the other members of The Smiths have enjoyed successful careers, their fan bases pale in comparison to the kind of devotion and following Morrissey generates. This has to do as much with the singer's carefully cultivated public persona as much as with his lyrics and music. The combination of persona and lyrical output has garnered Morrissey his cult following, perhaps unmatched by any popular artist of the last several decades.

Any scholarly essay or fan interview about Morrissey will inevitably focus on his lyrics, both gloomy and humorous, as a determining factor that draws listeners to the singer. As Michael Cobb affirms in *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled*, "[Morrissey's] lyrics create a soundscape offering a luxurious melancholy, a delicious *tristesse*, that

¹¹ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007) 5.

¹² Nancy, 7.

¹³ Nancy, 10.

needs no specific content. Specifics might interrupt the easy transferability of the melodrama of the anxiety of self-pitying adolescence, or even the glib and clever snideness of postadolescence.”¹⁴ Indeed, the excessive melancholy of Morrissey’s lyrics is arguably without equal in modern music. From “I was happy in the haze of a drunken hour, but heaven knows I’m miserable now,” to “last night I dreamt that somebody loved me, no hope, no harm, just another false alarm,” to “all your friends and your foes, would rather die than have to touch you,” Morrissey sings of an extravagant sadness. The lyrics are theatrical in their overindulgence in sad feelings. But it is these lyrics that allow listeners to project a sense of alienation articulated by an external voice that nonetheless is felt as deeply personal. Many listeners recount their first experience of listening to Morrissey as a moment of finding a voice that explained and gave presence to their own feelings.

My methodological focus here is not primarily trained on fan cultures, or the more general question of “subculture.” While those are indeed the lenses through which Morrissey’s Latina/o fan base has been fleetingly discussed in scholarly literature, the question that largely motivates approaches that use these frameworks is, precisely, “Why?” In my own experiences researching the topic that is inevitably the question that follows in a discussion of the subject of the Latina/o worship of Morrissey. “Yeah! Why is that?” Yet the immediate call to answer the why brings to mind, “why not?” Rather than dismiss the question so handily, I want to explain some reasons the “why” is not the focus of this writing. For many, the relationship between Morrissey and Latina/o fans throughout the United States and Latin America seems quizzical to say the least. After all, Morrissey seems to be such an eminently *British* figure that it would be nearly impossible for Latina/os to identify with him. While I will develop this in the paper later on, the problem that this initiates is the idea that Latina/os can only have one relationship when imagining the space of nation: the United States. Indeed, to highlight Morrissey’s Britishness as an impasse would deny not only the transnational flows of music distribution and reception, but also the possibility that Latina/os may listen to much more than the music with which they are regionally or ethnically identified. Rather, “fan” in this chapter is most indebted to José Esteban Muñoz’s use of the word. Muñoz considers fandom beyond the scope of subcultural practice, and instead as a way of listening that attempts to affectively breach a temporal or physical distance. In discussing his own fandom of 80s L.A. punk band The Germs, Muñoz submits that “*Fan* is also meant to mark that I was not “there” in the time and place of the Masque club where the Germs performed [...] But I was there through the affective mode of being and feeling I call fandom.”¹⁵ The fan in this chapter occupies the same affective world as Muñoz, although with a different band.

With this in mind, I pause for a moment of critical disclosure. I have been a fan of Morrissey since my teenage years, in Tijuana, after being introduced to The Smiths by a friend in high school. As is the case for many teenagers, discovering Morrissey felt special, intimate. Listening to “How Soon is Now?” or “There is a Light that Never Goes

¹⁴ Cobb, Michael. *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled*. (New York: NYU Press, 2012) 160.

¹⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban. “Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That’: Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons” *Social Text* 116. (Fall 2013) 98.

Out” felt as if Morrissey was directly singing to me, as if he had captured my own emotions. This is not just a personal experience. After all, The Smiths and Morrissey are so popular in England and in many other parts of the world precisely because of this: the feeling that a particular artist is singing just to *you*, has somehow captured *your* feelings. At the same time, both in Tijuana and later when moving to the United States, I never knew another fan base for Morrissey’s work. It wasn’t until 2004, upon the release of *Is It Really So Strange?* that I realized that my listening to Morrissey could somehow be construed as abnormal. Even now, at clubs and parties, classrooms and conference presentations, the utterance of Morrissey’s name amongst Latina/os and many other minoritarian subjects will produce the call of recognition amongst us. Indeed, these affective ties exist beyond the coordinates of national boundaries and cultural belonging, tracing instead alternative routes of identification, longing, and sociality.

But Is It Really So Strange?

Is It Really So Strange? first began as a photographic series by Los Angeles based artist William E. Jones. Trained as a filmmaker, by 2004 Jones had published a book of the photographs and a full-length documentary directed and narrated by him. Jones came upon an ad for a Smiths/Morrissey night in Los Angeles in 2001, a time in which Morrissey lacked a recording contract and had become largely forgotten within mainstream music culture; even original fans of The Smiths, like Jones, thought of Morrissey as a nostalgic figure of a youth gone by. But Jones encountered a thriving subculture in which nostalgia was absent. In the film’s narration, Jones recounts being taken aback by the crowd, Latina/os mostly in their 20s. He decided that night to start documenting the scene across several locations, from the original club in Los Angeles to Porky’s Place, a popular rock music bar in Tijuana. Jones eventually began interviewing subjects for the documentary to examine the scene further.

My analysis of *Is It Really So Strange?* encompasses both its photographic and motion picture incarnations. First, I will look at some of the photographs in the series, contextualizing them along with some information found in the documentary; I will then turn to the speaking subjects in the film in an attempt to provide a reading of their own performative relationships to Morrissey. I negotiate these readings through my own relationship to the project. Of course, such an attempt begs the criticisms that have dogged photography and documentary from its beginnings. What does it mean that Jones, a gay white artist, documents this scene? Is this once again Jeannie Livingston’s (or Robert Flaherty’s) gaze? While I do not mean to discount such well worn criticisms my approach to both incarnations of the project is indebted to Roland Barthes’ notion of the punctum as articulated in *Camera Lucida*, as the element of a photograph that haunts its viewer after the image has left her line of sight.¹⁶ In what follows, I chase the punctum through the ears, in which my sensorial memories of Morrissey’s music invite me to read not only the photographs, but also the way in which listening to the documentary’s subjects allows a refocusing of one’s eyes to aurally capture those moments hidden from simple view.

The book is organized chronologically from a Smiths/Morrissey convention in April 2002 through a New Year’s Eve celebration on December 2003. Jone also includes

¹⁶ See Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

portraits, dating the month in which they were taken, alongside stills from the film and photographs from another project, *Golden State*. Making several appearances throughout the book is the Smiths/Morrissey cover band “Sweet and Tender Hooligans” fronted by José Maldonado, who has been one of the faces of the phenomenon, appearing in almost every article, documentary, and news piece. There are candid portraits, snapshots captured at shows and tribute nights, and intimate portraits in bedrooms that double as altars to Moz. Jones shot every photograph for this project in black and white, lending a melancholic accent. The arrangement of the photographs throughout the books seems to almost mirror the psychic landscape of the Morrissey fan. For example, Chris S., who I will be returning to in this chapter, appears twice in the series. The first time in his bedroom, with a blank, sad expression, flanked by posters of Morrissey and James Dean, holding a pillow almost as if to protect his large body from the multiplicity of gazes that will encounter him. 60 pages and almost a year later he reappears, this time at a Sweet and Tender Hooligans show in El Paso. This time he is at the right of the frame, staring off, tongue sticking out upwards. He’s flanked here by two girls, identified as Vero and Mary, both with cameras. Vero’s camera is pointed at Jones, a return of the gaze that also signals a certain familiarity and trust to the photographer who has after all traveled to Texas from Los Angeles with Chris S. And Mary. But in this contrast in the photographs lies the disjunction between one’s bedroom and the club. It is music that makes them equally a place of escape from an unnamed outside.

A motif that reappears throughout these images is a focus on hands and arms. Jones’s camera zeroes in on these body parts as they are mostly adorned with tattoos dedicated to album titles, cover art, and sometimes the traces left by Morrissey’s signature. The tattoo serves a performative action in the fan’s body, in which the intimacy of listening is translated and recorded through a physical marking pledging allegiance. I want to linger for a moment on one such image titled “Brigette and Joel Show Their New Tattoos.” This photograph displays two fans’ outstretched forearms, displaying tattoos of Morrissey’s signature on their wrists. The image is both melodramatic and melancholic, steeped in sensorial markings of teenage despair. It conjures in equal amounts the melodramatic visual iconicity of teenage suicide and the all too familiar sight of brown wrists stretched out before handcuffs. These are the subtleties and excesses of Latina/o adoration. The writing on the wrists becomes hyper-visible as they not only take up most of the photographic frame, but are also a prominent part of the fans’ bodies.

We find out the story behind these wrists in the documentary. They belong to Brigette and Joel, a young couple who recount the time they waited for Morrissey outside his home in Los Angeles. They had parked their car behind Morrissey’s driveway, blocking his exit. During this encounter, they introduced him to their 3-year old son, who upon seeing the singer immediately exclaimed, “Mommy, it’s Morrissey! Look mommy, it’s Morrissey!” Brigette recalls Morrissey’s somewhat shocked expression at being recognized by such a young child, and his slight hesitation at being asked for his signature on the couple’s wrists. This signature is the tattoo the couple shows in the photograph, and it becomes not simply an indulgence of a melodramatic adolescent gesture, but an inked defiance of the overderetermined meanings ascribed to their brown bodies. The visibility of the singer’s name on their wrists produces a shared affect between this encounter and the many other tattoos on other bodies. The name becomes a proud marking, a recognition of the weight of racial difference and the words and sounds

that sanction Latina/os to wallow in racial melancholia as a sort of teenage angst. As many a Latina/o teenager knows, a tattoo is often a mark of disobedience against one's culture and especially one's parents. But this isn't about the cultural or familial allegiance so often ascribed to Latina/o subjects. This is about creating an affective network of melancholia that speaks out to how one feels.

The photographs of audiences singing, dancing, and moshing along to this music further allow us into this melancholia's slippery negotiation between the abject loneliness of the music and joyful relationality that it enables. For Latina/o viewers, the overabundance of brown bodies in the frame recalls other moments just like these, surrounded by others just like us. The lyrics to the song float into our consciousness, sometimes by the titles given, sometimes just from memory. Lyrics from "How Soon Is Now?" in which the speaker yearns for a moment of recognition that results in going home alone and crying oneself to sleep; or the lyrics to "Ask" which warn us that "shyness is nice/and shyness can stop you/from doing all the things in life you'd like to." In these ears, Morrissey's gloom and doom is transformed from the sonic aches of a Mancunian pop star to the taxonomies of racial difference that graft themselves to these subjects. The loneliness of minoritarian feeling need not be felt alone, these images suggest.

In her book on the power of black and white images and their relationship to memory, Carol Mavor refers to photography's ability to produce in its viewers a "bruising passion." Expanding from Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, one of critical theory's most exquisitely melancholic texts, Mavor writes that "When race meets the photograph desire (punctum) resides in the shadows."¹⁷ Race thus appears in the photograph as its punctum, what Barthes describes as the photograph's "sting, speck, cut, little hole."¹⁸ In other words, race exceeds the bounds of the photograph by alluding in these figures to racialized histories that we may otherwise want to ignore. In Jones' depictions, Latinidad emerges both through its silences and as the punctum which exceeds the studium: a greaser haircut, a tattoo, crooked teeth, pinup girl lipstick, and many other small but bruising details. But the bruise itself is not neutral. Mavor's analysis departs from the simple observation that a bruise is made up of the two colors of melancholia, black and blue, of which she says, "Black is not the opposite of blue: it is its lining. Both are sad colors."¹⁹ To allow ourselves to be marked by these snapshots, by paying attention to the wounds they may inflict in us, also invites an opening to other relational possibilities for thinking about the performance of Latinidad.

The photographs are, of course, silent. This may seem contradictory in a chapter whose theoretical gamble lies on the act of listening to melancholy. Yet the photographs invite us to attend more carefully to the way sonic dimensions can be hinted at within the visual registers. In translating our spectatorship from the eyes to the ears, Jones' photographs invite us to provide our own soundtrack, and perhaps our own experiences of loneliness, to the images of his subjects.

Documentary Longings.

¹⁷ Mavor, Carol. *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima Mon Amour*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 39.

¹⁸ Barthes, 27.

¹⁹ Mavor, 15.

The documentary itself becomes a melancholic reflection. Structured as a series of meditations not only on the part of Jones but also the interviewees, the film mulls over several aspects of the Latina/o Morrissey subculture. Jones asks fans about their first time listening to Morrissey, the times they have actually met him, their own sense as racial subjects in the Los Angeles area, and their thoughts about Morrissey as a person. At the conclusion of the film, however, Jones reflects upon the short temporality of this group of fans. As Morrissey reclaimed his fame beyond his Latina/o fan base by the mid 2000s, the autonomy of the Los Angeles scene began to erode. Jones concludes his film by saying that Morrissey's return to celebrity marked the end of a golden era unmarred by the marketing demands of the music industry. While I do not dispute this charge in relationship to the specific subculture that surfaced around Southern California, this chapter looks at this subculture as emblematic of the psychic structures of listening that make Morrissey such an icon for Latina/o listeners in Southern California and beyond. But the documentary's melancholic undertones allow me to engage it within the same relational structures of Latinidad that I will expand upon in the final section of this chapter.

The documentary is filled with speaking subjects. Many of the Latina/o interviewees are at once forthcoming and ambivalent about their participation in the film and being on camera. Several of them uncomfortably admit to having been featured in magazine articles and other news stories about the Latina/o Morrissey phenomenon. Jones makes clear when mapping out the territory of Southern California that the Los Angeles these subjects inhabit is at the margins of the metropolitan area, encompassing the precariously defined Inland Empire. They are not a part of the glamorous Los Angeles that occupies so much of the California imaginary, but rather the outskirts, the regions that have been overlooked by the driving forces of economic development that have reshaped parts of the city over the last several decades. The population in these areas is predominantly Latina/o and their economic situation mirrors the aforementioned circumstances in Stockton and other impoverished areas of California. Jones highlights that his participants exist in alienated relationship to the Los Angeles of popular imagination in which Beverly Hills and Hollywood stand in metonymic relation to the city as a whole. Southern California, rather than the Latina/o homeland of the United States, materializes as a "here" that is not "elsewhere." In essence, the geographic boundaries here are Pomona and Riverside, San Bernardino and Chula Vista, names that don't often appear in the representational map of the West Coast. The "elsewhere" craved by so many of the interviewees is England. Inez, a young Latina with crooked teeth, pink hair, and generous amounts of makeup, puts it thusly, "I hate the sun, and that's all that L.A. is, the sunshine all the time." In this utterance, she resists the prevailing mythology of Los Angeles and Southern California. The sun she wishes to escape is not only the physical sun, but the normative affect demanded from racialized subjects.

The sonic punctum I most often identify arises from the vocal grain mentioned in the introduction: the tonal play minoritarian subjects negotiate between self-expression and the world that seeks to ignore them. Unlike prevailing representations of Latina/os and Latin Americans in U.S. media as effusive, happy, and loud, the speakers here are reserved, soft-voiced, shy. Yet their expressions of fandom are passionate, articulated within an insecurity gained from the precarity of a culture that so often silences them. Many of them often seem uncomfortable in front of a camera, but Jones's questions put

them at ease. Jones shoots most of the participants in their own homes, mostly in their own bedrooms. For the younger participants, their bedroom walls are extravagantly adorned with posters of Morrissey and the Smiths. These posters help us see the singer as indeed among the “saints and gods” for his adoring fans. In my viewings of the film, I return often to the aforementioned Chris S., revealed here as a heavysset, shy, and slightly cynical fan. Jones shoots him against a backdrop made up of one of his bedroom’s blue walls, with a collage of Smiths/Morrissey memorabilia to the right of the frame. He is especially ambivalent about the interest on Morrissey Latina/o fans from outsiders, which, as he insists, tends to identify this following as primarily Mexican, whereas he is Peruvian. This further places him outside of the cultural narratives of a Mexican Southern California. But when asked about what the fans have in common, Chris responds that “it’s the teenage angst we all have, and Morrissey just sweats that all out of his body and his music [...] and we get drawn to that.” That he refers to the “we” and not the “I” reveals some of the communal characteristics of this audience. Although he has previously stated his dissatisfaction with being so easily identified as “Mexican,” he recognizes his place in the same racial matrix. In an even more telling moment, Chris says, “of course the Morrissey scene has to be more dramatic because we’re labeled as the horrific children.” What I find striking about this admission is the low affect with which it is expressed, Chris’s downward gaze, and his shyness before the camera as he situates Latina/os as the outcasts of US culture. Morrissey’s Latina/o fans become united under the sign, of “horrific children” and “teenage angst,” images that arguably resemble the social position of marginalized Latina/os in the Los Angeles area and beyond. They are the horrific children of an ever-developing area that overlooks the ways in which Latino/a residents and newly arrived immigrants struggle to find their place, despite the integrationist ideology of the city’s Latina/o political establishment. But Morrissey’s voice and music unites them and makes it possible for them to exteriorize their alienation.

A persistent sentiment expressed throughout the documentary is the feeling that Morrissey is an ally, a figure who has been there to accompany these subjects through experiences of insecurity and depression. Melissa, part of a lesbian couple featured in the documentary, relates that Morrissey has “been there” at each important moment in her life. The point here is not whether Morrissey cares personally about his Latina/o fan-base (even though he has made several gestures toward their inclusion in his mythology), but that his voice and lyrics activate and in fact even sanction the ability to express these feelings outwardly, to others. For each of these fans, the devotion to Morrissey is unrestrained; many of them recount breaking into tears when going to a concert or meeting him, but these feelings are belied by their physical affect, which is often shy and reclusive.

The Sweet and Tender Hooligans, a Smiths/Morrissey tribute band, show how the desire to create a connection between the past and the present can be enabled through these practices of listening. In Jones’s documentary, José Maldonado, the lead singer, speaks of the band’s loyal following. For people who attend Sweet and Tender Hooligans shows, the possibility is to experience a temporal displacement that seems to allow concertgoers to feel as if they have entered the original space of a Smiths show in the 1980s. The documentary shows footage of the band playing (without sound, since obtaining all the music rights would have been prohibitively expensive), and Maldonado describes how the audience gets absorbed in the space, reacting just as if they were at a

Smiths/Morrissey show, going so far as to go on stage to hug him and in some cases rip off his shirt, a common practice in Morrissey concerts since the days of the Smiths. The trick of course is that almost none of the people at these concerts would have been at an original Smiths show, either because of age or location. Yet to be an audience member at a Sweet and Tender Hooligans performance carries no irony or nostalgia, and instead forms a recreation, a way of touching the past through the reenactment of the music. Yet we cannot forget that the audience in this case is made up of Latina/os sharing in the same depressive mood that turns into ecstasy.

In a brief foray into a discussion of Sweet and Tender Hooligan's shows in her recent book *How Soon Is Now?* (titled after The Smiths' song), literary scholar Carolyn Dinshaw exclaims that "Smiths fans know that desire can—and sometimes must—create its own time."²⁰ Dinshaw continues, "How to describe the *now* of a show [...] where audience members hug lead singer José Maldonado as they would Morrissey? It's not that they actually believe the Hooligans are the 'real thing,' but rhythm guitarist Jeff Stodel speaks of 'this sort of ritual thing' wherein 'people will come up and people will do the same things they would do to Morrissey at a live Morrissey performance.'"²¹ Through her analysis of the song, Dinshaw teases out the complicated temporalities involved in listening to Morrissey's melancholia. Dinshaw writes, "For the voice in this song this situation is unbearably wearisome, each moment more hopeless than the last, opening onto a future that is nothing but one newly empty *now* after another. The word *soon* only makes things worse, shifty and resistant as it is to fix a definite time."²² Dinshaw neglects to mention the racial specificities of the audience at a Sweet and Tender Hooligans show, but her analysis is particularly relevant for my reading. By attending the show, Latina/o fans are able to open up and, perhaps, seem to enter a temporal mode that is different than their own. Yet, the point of this temporality is *not* to forget, but to encounter a *now* that is also a *then* that never was.

Drawing Outward.

I switch from the promise of photography to another visual form, drawing. Shizu Saldamando's work, much like Jones's, captures the queer Latina/o scenes of nights at bars, in friends' backyards, waiting in-between sets at concerts. In her introduction to Saldamando's catalogue for an exhibition at the Vincent Price gallery in Los Angeles in 2013, Raquel Gutiérrez writes, "Shizu presents a visual record that explores the nocturnal meanderings of youthful discrepancy—the social experiments gone sublimely awry. That is probably why you, the silent receiver of Shizu's images, bob your head: there is music there, of course, and recognition."²³ Gutiérrez's introduction to these images goes beyond the customary academic approach; she writes from the place of friendship, the relational ethics of two Morrissey listeners. She refers to Saldamando by her first name, Shizu, allowing the gesture of friendship to occupy the tone of her essay. It gives us an intimate access to the worlds depicted in these drawings. Saldamando's work traces these relations

²⁰ Dinshaw, Carolyn. *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 4.

²¹ Dinshaw, 4.

²² Dinshaw, 5.

²³ Gutiérrez, Raquel. "What Is Revealed When You Sleep." *When You Sleep: A Survey of Shizu Saldamando*. (Los Angeles: Vincent Price Art Museum, 2013) 11.

through a variety of techniques, materials, and surfaces that bring her subjects into a relational becoming. Beyond the adage of the visual's capacity to immortalize its subjects, Saldamando's work approaches them from sonic temporalities. The music of which Gutiérrez speaks is never too far off, in the background of the clubs, from a boom box at a friend's backyard, or from the car stereo. Gutierrez continues, "Let's bring it back to the state of fandom, of being fanatical, of being the number one fan. The set of feelings that come with gushing, twitching, and stalking the object of our admiration and affections. Have you ever seen early Morrissey live performance videos where fans bumrush the stage as though they were seeking absolution? Seeing the people in Shizu's work makes one cognizant of how we make good, rabid fans, especially since, as adolescents, we tend to offset our outsider feelings of robust alienation with quiet desperate longing."²⁴

I first encountered Saldamando's work through a drawing of Morrissey on a paper napkin using a ball-point pen. The image is part of *The Holy Cuatro* (2005), which depicts, as its title suggests, the four holy figures of 80s British pop for Latina/os: Morrissey, Robert Smith of The Cure, Dave Gahan of Depeche Mode, and Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees. It's telling that according to the catalogue, *Siouxsie* now sits in a private collection in Guadalajara, Mexico. But these faces and names will make other appearances in Saldamando's work. *Sandy and Siouxsie* (2007), exhibits a girl holding a cigarette, the singer's face tattooed on her arm, with the band's font and multiple red and blue stars occupying the space from the shoulder to the elbow. Her face stares in the distance, past the viewer. She is wearing a Bauhaus t-shirt, another 80s British band. The technique of colored pencil, collage, and glitter on paper distinguishes yet blends each element of the figure. Saldamando's work is full of texture. Siouxsie songs parade through the mind, connecting Sandy to the other drawn figures. Gutierrez aptly describes that "Shizu's project relies on magnifying her subjects by way of creating a negative space around the individual(s). More information can be gleaned from the absence of spatial context than the environment they occupy. Shizu creates an oblique portraiture that is about the people who surpass their contexts, inviting the viewer to activate their own queries and conjecture onto the subjects—maybe mutual friends—in the work."²⁵ Gutiérrez notes that Saldamando derives her images from snapshots, so we haven't left the realm of photography quite yet. Herein lies the sonic as our unifying thread between the photograph, the moving image, and drawing. While each retains its own formal elements, the soundtrack of Morrissey and others joins them, allowing the viewer to recognize or to inquire.

Some of Saldamando's most striking pieces belong to her *Embrace* series. Using a ball-point pen to draw on bed sheets, the series depicts her subjects in various moments of embrace across contexts. Gutiérrez points out that the bed sheets in these pieces return us to the adolescent bedroom, where "A first foray into fandom takes place in private—by pushing play on the CD deck, the iPod, or even the turntable. For many of us, this experience began in the bedroom with a Kenwood system and headphones handed down to us by older siblings."²⁶ Her description here encapsulates the Morrissey listener, and

²⁴ Gutiérrez, 12-13.

²⁵ Gutiérrez, 11.

²⁶ Gutiérrez, 13.

thus the promise of what I will call the possibilities of idleness. The images of Morrissey's Latina/o fans are punctuated by a form of idleness through the hang-out, or in the *Embrace* series, between the laying in bed and the hanging out.

Idleness, which I differentiate here from boredom, although the two can be closely related, points toward non-productivity. Although certainly technically prodigious, drawing and doodling are two of our most common forms of idleness, or retreating into the self in a public space, of finding a moment that seeks nothing but itself. Jones's photographs and Saldamando's drawings invite us into the many shifts that wallowing in depression can take in its route to signify a form of idling. Indeed, many of her drawings use a ball-point pen, one of doodling's most consistent aids.

I want to read the *Embrace Series* as inviting us into this idleness. The use of the bed sheets also serves to locate the joy of listening. *Embrace Series, Morrissey Night, Underground LA* (2009), uses a flower patterned sheet. Drawn over it are two figures, a lesbian couple perhaps. A long-haired femme looks at her nails, holding a butch lover in embrace. Her forearm has Morrissey's name tattooed. We are not sure if the butch partner stares off, or is perhaps about to whisper something, but in the embrace and the pattern of the sheets they become united, their whole bodies grafted onto the pattern, the flowers becoming their own shared tattoos, both becoming engulfed into the pattern and arising from it. The embrace need not be only a lover's embrace, but our displaced memory of it, always in the process of becoming, a faint line that recalls the many nights before. Saldamando never gives us the names of the couples in embrace, simply where they were. This serves in some ways to retain the intimacy of the embrace, maintaining our exteriority to it, while at the same time inviting our placement onto it via the space. *Embrace Series, Ripples, Long Beach* (2009), shows two Latino gay boys embracing at the Long Beach gay club. There is no context for the embrace; it could be on the dance floor, a broken stumble, or in the midst of a kiss, the rose patterns again marking their bodies, breaking the separation between drawing and canvas. If the sheets recall for its viewers a queer appeal to memory, they enshrine minor memories.

But allow me to return to our guide in listening to think about drawing. Jean-Luc Nancy, in *The Pleasure in Drawing*, ruminates on "drawing" as the beginning of form, as a basic possibility of aesthetic practice, "there is the singularity of the opening—the formation, impetus, or gesture—of form, which is to say, exactly what must not have already been given in a form in order to form itself. Drawing is not a given available, formed form. On the contrary, it is the gift, invention, uprising [*surgissement*], or birth of form."²⁷ In the original French, Nancy plays the word *dessin* in close approximation to Heidegger's *dasein*, or coming into being. Throughout the book, drawing stands partly as the possibility of bringing being itself into form. In Saldamando's work, this possibility of being, or rather, the possibilities of many beings, are brought into contact by the form itself.

But Nancy also understands the connecting tissue within drawing's idleness and the possibility of becoming. I suggest here an idle Latinidad, which in its very shape remains queer and brown, unproductive in the best of ways. For Nancy, the line of drawing is involved in "showing the infinity of becoming visible [...] just as all lines in all drawings

²⁷ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Pleasure of Drawing*. Trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) 3.

include the same infinity of points, so together they all respond with the same, endlessly modulated gesture, opening to infinitude.”²⁸ But this is precisely the methexic quality of drawing. In surrendering to its pleasures one opens up unto an infinitude of forms. Listening or drawing, do not come before each other, they are co-produced through their own practices.

Conclusion.

The end of Nancy’s book seems particularly apt. In his final lines he writes, “In all its forms, in all its allures and ways—graphic, sonorous, dancing, or others—drawing designates this design without a project, plan, or intention. Its pleasure opens onto this infinitude.”²⁹ Saldamando’s drawings are a way to approach Morrissey’s Latinidad, one settled on a relational plane rooted in melancholia, in idleness, in affects that negate the promise of inclusion.

So what is the promise of listening to Morrissey? I do not want to advocate for a simple solution in which listening to Morrissey automatically allows access to an intersubjective realm of alternative racial feeling. Rather, understanding Latinidad from the starting point of depression and loss, idleness and melancholia, allows us to construct racial imaginaries that resist the two teleological lines of assimilation or resistance. Saldamando’s drawings point us away not only from the nation, but also its traditional site of resistance in Latina/o politics: the family. So, I want to close by arguing instead for friendship. After all, although in his songs he may never find romantic satisfaction, Morrissey often finds friends, other misfits like him. Agamben, in a short article of friendship, argues via Aristotle that friendship itself is what might afford existence its very pleasantness. He writes, “The friend is not another I, but an otherness immanent in self-ness, a becoming other of the self. At the point at which I perceive my existence as pleasant, my perception is traversed by a concurrent perception that dislocates it and deports it towards the friend, towards the other self. Friendship is this de-subjectivization at the very heart of the most intimate perception of self.”³⁰ So friendship arises as the possibility of understanding the self in relationship to another who is explicitly separate, a relationship that for me arises in the sharing of a cigarette, a piece of gossip, or a dance floor. It is the moment of being without aim, without nation, without family, simply existing in itself.

I conclude on a moment of friendship that stretches out. It’s New Year’s Eve, and I’m dancing at Marrakech, a gay bar in Mexico City that plays a mix of music, from current pop hits, to cumbia, to 80s Mexican divas. At some point, between the sweat and the dancing, The Smiths’ “There is a Light That Never Goes Out” starts playing, and the bar erupts. We jump, dance, and sing along, “and if a ten-ton truck, kills the both of us, to die by your side, well the pleasure the privilege is mine.” At that moment there is a linkage, a shared affect decipherable between those of us in the same place singing along, but also along the lonely queer Latino singing in his room, or the girls driving along in their own car, thinking that indeed, if it were all to end right now, the pleasure, the

²⁸ Nancy, 93.

²⁹ Nancy, 105.

³⁰ Agamben, Giorgio. *What is an Apparatus?* Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 34-35.

privilege, is *ours*.

Conclusion:

Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now

William E. Jones concludes *Is It Really So Strange?* with a melancholic reflection. We have reached the end of an era, he tells us, as the ever-increasing attention brought to the phenomenon cannot help but reveal it, turning these fans into just another consumer culture to be marketed to. The almost secret link between Morrissey and his Latina/o fans has been desecrated, perhaps even due to Jones's own presence in the scene. Upon first viewing, I rejected this reading. And even now, I remain insistent on the possibilities of enjoying depression that Morrissey and other music affords Latinidad.

But I must admit, Jones's declaration was not completely off-mark. 2015 was declared by Britain as "the year of Mexico," just as Mexico would declare 2015 "the year of England." This co-declaration of fandom culminated in March of that year, as Queen Elizabeth held a state dinner for Enrique Peña Nieto, the embattled Mexican president who through the first years of his administration has aggressively privatized the energy sector, education, and other essential social services. This meeting was leveraged through *Mexrrissey: Mexico Goes Morrissey*, a show made up of Mexican musicians who played Morrissey's songs in Spanish. The concert toured throughout most of England, with final stops in New York and Los Angeles, heralding a sonic re-appropriation of the songs through their Mexican audience. Yet there was something missing in the sound. The doom and dreariness of the music that had found its aural vocabulary in the battle of the working class against Margaret Thatcher's early neoliberal policies was replaced by arrangements that owed much more to the genre of World Music than the British guitars that originally scored Morrissey's sound. Hybridity once again reared its head, this time in the service of a corrupt presidency and monarchy, bodies of power that the sonic practices I have highlighted throughout this dissertation always opposed.

I conclude this dissertation then, on a similarly melancholic note. As I have shown, non-culturally locatable sound became a powerful strategy to oppose the calls to inclusion that were leveraged in the years surrounding the signing of NAFTA and the Latino Boom. Mexican and Latina/o subjects resisted the siren's song of inclusion by choosing the sonic call of annihilation. To say that these forms of sonic negation could ultimately not circumvent appropriation only shows that in fact there was a need to appropriate them, to lay claim to them by the forces of the market. Even if as I write these concluding sentences the moment in which they were most effective has passed does not mean that they will not survive in other forms or that there are no lessons we can gain from them. Latinidad's relationship to negativity has perhaps for now found other realms, other aesthetic forms, other places of escape. Taking a cue from performance studies' attention to ephemerality, the relatively short life of my objects only points to their potential power.

It is my hope now that future research will find several directions. First, although the sonic practices I explored in this dissertation owe much their power to their origins in Britain and the United States through primarily white oppositional subcultures, there are other forms of non-culturally locatable sound throughout Latina/o America that served different purposes and remain to be studied. In particular, hip-hop, r & b, and other sounds derived from the Black diaspora have served different means throughout the continent at different times. If the genres I have favored in this dissertation allowed for

negativity, other non-culturally locatable sounds have at times facilitated powerful forms of protest and contestation in different places. As the field of Latina/o sound studies continues to grow in size and depth, we find that there are an endless number of stories to be uncovered, histories to be mined, moments to be explored, attentive to the complex joys and challenges of listening. This project represents but a drop in that bucket.

Secondly, my findings throughout this project may serve to remind us of the centrality that aesthetics must occupy to any consideration of Latina/o American culture and life. Although often enough placed in opposition to the social and the political, aesthetic preoccupations have endured in the political and social trajectory of the American continent. The aesthetic has been the site where local, national, and transnational political battles have been fought. Art is never an afterthought of the social, but rather, central in its articulation. In this territory too I find a rising number of works that attempt to figure out the relationship that performance, visual art, music, and other forms bear to the public articulations of Latinidad. The aesthetic is never adjacent to politics. It is central to its formation.

Finally, and in tandem with the first two trajectories, I hope this dissertation serves as one of the many starting points to rethink the role of negativity in expanding our conceptions of Latinidad. As the challenges facing the uncertain future of the Latina/o American subject continue to unfold in uncertain ways, from the Feminicides in Mexico to the current uprisings against state power in the United States led by the Black Lives Matter movement, we must remain vigilant that something we may still call Latinidad never aligns with the side of power. Negativity beckons us to adopt a critical stance, a Bartlebyan “I would prefer not to” against the ever-increasing attempt to recruit the transnational Latina/o subject onto the logics of whiteness. As many scholars have pointed out, Latinidad is often restricted by our ability to imagine it in close relationship to the affects of joy and extravagance. Yet negativity presents a series of affects that remain central to how Latina/o American subjects relate to the world. Future research into this topic may highlight the endless registers that make Latinidad more complex, beyond the instrumentality of a future of belonging into an order that at its very core fosters inequality.

I conclude by bringing these three areas together to help me once again rethink the moments I began this dissertation with, the performance of *Phantom Power* by Christina Ochoa and the man dancing alone at the club in Chicago. In the minor shape of these moments an encounter happens. As with a club in Mexico City, a bar in Los Angeles, a basement in New York, a bedroom in Tijuana, I hope I have shown, in essence how to do things with sound when told it isn't yours. But listening, which has continuously been at stake in this dissertation, pushes us forward, beyond the bounds that tie sound to its origin. We listen, for ourselves, to each other, beyond the self. And even if its most powerful moment has passed, for now, it sits in the wings, waiting to rouse the audience once more.

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