



CUMBIA!

Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre

Edited by **HÉCTOR FERNÁNDEZ L'HOESTE** and **PABLO VILA**



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Para Elena Cogollo y Beatriz Escorcía,
for the love of culture.

Para Juan Enrique “Chango” Farías Gómez
and Luis Alberto “El Flaco” Spinetta,
two “turning-point” characters in the history of
Argentine popular music, for the love of culture,
Argentine-style.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction

HÉCTOR FERNÁNDEZ L'HOESTE AND PABLO VILA 1

CHAPTER 1. Cumbia Music in Colombia: Origins, Transformations,
and Evolution of a Coastal Music Genre

LEONARDO D'AMICO 29

CHAPTER 2. *¿Pa' dónde vas Marioneta? ¿Pa' dónde va la gaita?*

La Cumbiamba Eneyé Returns to San Jacinto

JORGE ARÉVALO MATEUS WITH MARTÍN VEJARANO 49

CHAPTER 3. Cumbia in Mexico's Northeastern Region

JOSÉ JUAN OLVERA GUDIÑO 87

CHAPTER 4. Rigo Tovar, Cumbia, and the Transnational *Grupero* Boom

ALEJANDRO L. MADRID 105

CHAPTER 5. Communicating the Collective Imagination: The Sociospatial
World of the Mexican *Sonidero* in Puebla, New York, and New Jersey

CATHY RAGLAND 119

CHAPTER 6. From *The World of the Poor* to the Beaches of Eisha:

Chicha, *Cumbia*, and the Search for a Popular Subject in Peru

JOSHUA TUCKER 138

CHAPTER 7. *Pandillar* in the Jungle: Regionalism and

Tecno-cumbia in Amazonian Peru

KATHRYN METZ 168

CHAPTER 8. Gender Tensions in *Cumbia Villera's* Lyrics

PABLO SEMÁN AND PABLO VILA 188

CHAPTER 9. *Feliz, feliz*

CRISTIAN ALARCÓN 213

viii Contents

CHAPTER 10. *El “Tú” Tropical, el “Vos” Villero*, and Places in Between:
Language, Ideology, Music, and the Spatialization of Difference
in Uruguayan Tropical Music

MATTHEW J. VAN HOOSE 226

CHAPTER 11. On Music and Colombianness: Toward a Critique
of the History of Cumbia

HÉCTOR FERNÁNDEZ L’HOESTE 248

References 269

Contributors 285

Index 289

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Héctor

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Map 1. The Americas and pertinent locations.

Introduction

Héctor

Like intelligence, education comes in many packages. Growing up middle class in Latin America, I was educated not only at home, in school, and at church but in the most unexpected ways and locations. At home, aside from what I may have learned from my relatives, a good chunk of my education took place in the kitchen, where I worked on my homework while women like Elena Cogollo and Beatriz Escorcía prepared our family meals. Always on in the background, tuned to their preferences, clearly indicating who ruled in the kitchen—most definitely, it wasn't my mother—was the radio. Those radio stations, in most cases, led me into a world despised by some of my more snobby acquaintances, but I found them strangely gratifying. In a world populated by characters like Arandú, Prince of the Jungle, and Toloamba, his black companion, and Kalimán, the Incredible Man, and Solín, his Egyptian sidekick, the soundtrack was incontestably *cumbia* and *vallenato*. While my instructors at school Anglicized me and revealed the complexities and joys of Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, and Supertramp, at home Elena and Beatriz reminded me how to be a “true” *costeño* (a coastal person), that is, an inhabitant of the Colombian Caribbean. And being *costeño* was, without a doubt, linked to more than the nasally Caribbean accent of my Spanish, quite different from what is habitually identified as Colombian Spanish: the various dialects of Andean provinces. In this sense, my culture was closer to Cuba's or Puerto Rico's than to those from the inner provinces of the country.

Like most cultures, food and music incarnated sizable factors in the operation of *costeñidad* (coastalness). Food incarnated a liking for *arepas con huevo*, *bollo*, *mote de ñame*, and *alegría*. In terms of music, though, Elena and Beatriz made sure that I knew what being a *costeño* was all about. Instead of the fancy, middle-class diet of U.S. and U.K. tunes played by some local radio stations, the radio in the kitchen was invariably tuned to frequencies that

blasted the latest in tropical music, appealing to the working-class sensibilities of my kitchen educators, who were bent on making me more than the spoiled brat that so many of my school acquaintances represented. In the eyes of Elena and Beatriz, this task involved making sure that, just as I could enjoy the sagas of many radio series, I could distinguish between the various versions of “La creciente” (The Swell), a local vallenato hit, and that I could judiciously discriminate between the contributions of Pacho Galán (a local hero) and Lucho Bermúdez (a *costeño* who had sold out to the *cachacos*, the inhabitants from the interior of the country). Being musically literate—in particular, with respect to anything related to *música costeña*—was a big part of this facet of my education. Genotypically speaking, as the darkest member of my family, I felt a certain kindred for the cultural products that both of these women defended with such fervor. While they ironed clothing, the radio would play *radionovelas* and music from all over the Caribbean, teaching me to distinguish between Dominican *merengue*, Cuban *son*, and *cumbia soledaña*. One thing, though: beyond Elena’s and Beatriz’s coaching, I still treasure rock. (Lately my son has learned about the complexities of *Breakfast in America*; so much for siding with music of the subaltern.) In fact, true to my generation, I see very little contradiction in this eclectic disposition. I’m quite sure that my love for tropical music nourishes my appreciation for rock and vice versa. In the end, it’s a matter of acknowledging and embracing multiple identities and hoping they will contribute to a more enlightened reading of experiences.

Many years later, the memory of Elena and Beatriz still haunts me. To them I owe—I can see clearly now—my ability to consume and enjoy Latin American cultural products with a relatively open mind, paying close attention to the social, racial, and gender aspects explored in their content, though never forgetting that their ultimate object is, most surely, to entertain, to lighten one’s heart, soul, and mind. As I grew in Barranquilla during the 1960s and 1970s, how was I to know that I was witnessing the evolution of a music that would come to define national identity? If I knew anything as a child, it was that people from elsewhere in Colombia talked funny and couldn’t dance. A quick exposure to Bogotá during my years of college took care of these prejudices. Nevertheless, how was I to understand that my *costeñidad*, challenged by the crisp sound of Spanish from the interior, would eventually debunk preconceived notions of what it meant to be Colombian? And that, even in Bogotá, while I attended college, I would witness the displacement of *música ranchera* by vallenato, a genre that, according to many

inhabitants of the interior, so unaccustomed to the problematization of racial difference, embodies a far better vehicle for national identity than cumbia? I listened to this shift take place before my ears. In 1980, when I landed in Bogotá, the airwaves ruling the public transportation system were owned by Mexican music (yes, some Bogotá buses do play music); by the time I left the capital a decade later, vallenato reigned uncontested.

However, aside from these two experiences, my adolescence as a *barranquillero* brought me into close contact with a cultural tradition that negotiates class, racial, and gender barriers in fashions unknown in Anglo latitudes. Endless sessions of practice for carnival *comparsas* at the local social club—a tedious, mind-numbing experience, at best—and many dances hosted by the local ensemble, the Orquesta de Pedro Movilla, which shifted easily from merengue to *merecumbé* to *porro* to cumbia, taught me quite well. This was all long before I even heard of political correctness. In Caribbean culture, quite clearly, there was no room for such Anglo distractions. Men were men, being white was better than being black, the rich tolerated the poor, and women knew their place, even if things were changing. In the music, however, aside from the beats, riffs, melodies, and harmonies, I recognized unexpected ways to deal with issues that were omitted in other circles. And cumbia, being so local, so close to my battered sense of *costeñidad*, served as a suitable vehicle to settle many differences. That is why, nowadays, when I listen to the lilting beat of Mexican cumbia played by a pickup that passes by, a smile lightens up my face, because in this music I recognize a distant though solid connection with my past and origin. It says volumes about how many of us have made the journey from cities by a warmer ocean, in the mountains, and by muddy rivers and eventually found homes in places harnessed by the winds of winter and twirling tornadoes. And this journey, I think, has taught many of us about difference and how to deal with it, how class, race, and gender are culturally determined and ethnocentrically appraised constructs with significant impact on our relation with modernity.

Not that this journey came without its travails. For the most part, amid a culture that, though generally tolerant, has grown increasingly uncomfortable with Latin(o) American presence, many of us ended up incarnating the Other and were left to embody difference, never mind issues of subjectivity. So, in a sense, I guess that I like to trace the evolution of cumbia because, to a certain extent, the evolution of my identity mimics its ways. As a child, without being aware of it (my ethnocentrism would not allow this), I incarnated a cultural norm that operated within the periphery of a national construct.

Once I moved to Bogotá and New York—and eventually to Atlanta—this peripheral quality remained, though it then operated closer to the interests of a hegemonic construct. In terms of class, I've replaced many of my Colombian ways with a more pragmatic U.S. middle-class mind-set, which, to be sincere, hasn't embodied much of a sacrifice. Genderwise, the intricacies of life have imposed single fatherhood on me, an aspect I also cherish. Thus, as I've lived, I've had to "recalculate" my ways. The journey of cumbia has followed a similar path. As a regional construct, it thrived as a Caribbean cultural practice. Traveling to the interior of the country, it turned self-conscious and assumed a more agreeable form, ornamented with hints of U.S. modernity. Eventually it left the country, adopting practical ways, adapting its makeup to local preferences, giving birth to multiple forms of the national kind.

Pablo

Growing up in Argentina seems to be a very peculiar way of growing up in Latin America. On the one hand, being middle class seems to be very different from the way Héctor experienced his middle-classness: when I was growing up, my family didn't have money to hire someone to prepare our meals. After all, Argentina is more socially equitable than Colombia. I am the typical product of the particularly amazing process of social mobility that characterized Argentina until, let's say, the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not only were my grandparents immigrants (some of them illiterates in any language, the others literate only in their original one), working-class folks who literally died at work, but my mother was an immigrant as well. Both my mother and my father worked from a very early age; my father from the age of six, my mother since she was twelve. Following family tradition, I started working at the age of fourteen.

But Argentina offered people with *inquietudes* (roughly speaking, people who wanted to better their lives, both intellectually and materially) the possibility of a free education all the way to college and even graduate school. My parents, with great effort, followed that route and became professionals. Trying not to forget their origins, they actually became "leftist professionals," lower middle class but highly educated, in Bourdieu's terms, people with low economic and social capital but with an enormous cultural capital. (We had a 10,000-volume library at home!) We had little money but lots of books. And some music.

As heirs of the Enlightenment (after all, they were Marxists, and Adorno was on their reading list), they loved classical music, and during my childhood that was the music we listened to the most. But we also listened to some popular music, above all music with social content, either Argentine folk à la Yupanqui and Horacio Guarani, or African American leftist singers like Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson. (When I came to the United States, I was surprised that so few people knew as much as I did about these singers.) Like others my age, I was highly influenced by the folk music boom that characterized Buenos Aires in the early 1960s. I played guitar and sang in many school combos a very sophisticated type of folklore, the one leftists like my parents and I enjoyed, a folklore highly influenced by either American jazz or the classical chorus tradition (or both). That was my musical environment when cumbia arrived to Argentina in the 1960s, and my reaction to it was linked to my well-learned “enlightened” musical education: I didn’t like it! Honoring Argentina’s penchant for its European roots, given the scant visibility of mestizo or mulatto presence in our culture (despite the New Song and tango’s African descent), cumbia seemed unacceptable.

To me, cumbia was *música mersa* (music for uneducated people). In my case (being a leftist), it didn’t mean “working-class music” but unpretentious music that appealed to people (of any class) who did not know what “good” music was all about. But it was irksome to me to acknowledge that, for some reason, cumbia was a type of music that especially appealed to working-class folks. Something similar happened with other types of “bad music,” and, as a matter of fact, my attempt to understand such an attachment was one of the reasons that, many years later, I decided to follow a career in the sociology of music.

In the 1960s what I (and many other “enlightened” people like me) considered “bad” music was epitomized by a television program called *El Club del Clan*, in which well-prepared musical characters deployed different popular musical styles. For instance, Johnny Tedesco played the role of “rocker” (Elvis style); Palito Ortega (a future governor) was the poor immigrant from the countryside; Jolly Land was the Doris Day character; and Nicky Jones played the part of the *cumbiero*. That Jones was the most clownish of this troupe didn’t contribute to my appreciation for cumbia at the time, or that he always appeared on the program with absurdly colorful Hawaiian shirts. Later on, I discovered that he was a very good jazz bass player who shifted his career to cumbia to survive, as did the more “sophisticated” cumbia singer of the period, Chico Novarro, a very well-known drum player in the jazz scene of the

late 1950s. That Novarro's most popular cumbia was "El Orangután" ("Estaba el orangután, meciéndose en una rama y llegó la orangutana, comiéndose una banana" / There once was a male orangutan swinging from the branch of a tree, when a female orangutan arrived, eating a banana) did not contribute to my appreciation for the genre either.

My love for the type of folk music that characterized the folk boom of the 1960s (what can be called "projection" or "fusion" folk because it mixed very modern musical elements: Los Fronterizos, Los Trovadores, Mercedes Sosa, Los Huanca Hua, El Grupo Vocal Argentino, El Cuarteto Zupay, and, above all, Miguel Saravia) was separating me from the musical taste of my parents and guiding me into a different political direction as well, because, through my contact with folk music, a process of nationalization started to grow within me that, eventually, led me to become what my parents hated the most: a Peronist! In other words, folk music, the music of the Argentine countryside and mestizo immigrants, made me aware that there were some elitist elements in the enlightened culture of my parents that did not allow them to understand how important Peronism was to the process by which those despised immigrants acquired political and social citizenship. Quite clearly, through their move from working class to lower middle class via a learned culture devoid of self-criticism, they had inadvertently internalized several elements of the Argentine elite's imaginary. Weirdly enough, having lived in extreme poverty, they couldn't really understand the reasons for the political preferences of other poor people (for instance, people like my own maternal grandfather, who, not knowing a word of Spanish, disappeared for two days from his household without further notice because he wanted to go to Evita's funeral). Becoming a Peronist allowed me to appreciate the musical choices of Argentine popular sectors in a different light and moved me away from the "false consciousness" hypothesis endorsed by my parents to explain why working-class folks liked cumbia.

Thus, while Héctor's ability to consume and enjoy cumbia and vallenato (that is, Colombian popular music) with a relatively open mind, paying attention to the social, racial, and gender aspects explored in their content, resulted from a sensible exposure to working-class cultural codes, my ability to understand the musical choices of Argentine popular sectors without conventional prejudices came after my conversion to Peronism (to the horror of my enlightened parents and friends, who, not surprisingly, rapidly became my ex-friends). In this way, deep in the southern part of the continent, the way I came into close contact with a cultural tradition that negotiates class,

gender, racial, regional, and ethnic barriers was not my participation in a particular popular culture device like Héctor's carnival *comparsas*, but my participation in a political movement that, historically speaking, had tried to incorporate not only working-class folks into the national project but also mestizos from the countryside and women as well. (Not only did Peronism institute women's right to vote for the first time in Argentine history, but it required women to be represented in the legislature as well.) Instead of moving from music to politics, as Héctor did, I made the opposite move: from politics to music. I didn't learn to appreciate, through music, that other, more egalitarian forms of human relationships were possible. Instead, through politics, I learned that social actors historically linked to Peronism used particular types of music (clearly cumbia since the 1970s) to advance their identitarian claims (which are always political).

All this came full circle in the early 1980s, when I started doing my research on rock *nacional* for my bachelor's thesis. At that time, discovering that rock was mostly a middle-class movement, I realized that, in a clear move toward "distinction" that Bourdieu would have loved, many *cumbieros* were portraying themselves as the "others" regarding rock *nacional*, that is, as the representatives of the Argentine popular sectors, not their middle classes. That was quite prominent in the work of one of the most popular cumbia combos of the period, Los Caú, who were called the "Kings of Chamamé Tropical," the cumbia-*chamamé* hybrid that was the most popular incarnation of cumbia at that time.

Even though the cumbia of the late 1960s and 1970s continued to be popular among Argentine popular sectors, it was so because it underwent a process of blending itself with native Argentine rhythms—prominently, the most danceable of them: *chamamé*. Out of this blend, "chamamé tropical" was born, a rhythm that reigned through the 1970s and early 1980s. Los Caú (the Drunk Ones), mimicking Kiss, painted their faces in black and white. Humor was their main characteristic, and they made fun of everything, especially the most important musical genre of the period, rock *nacional* and the middle-class culture it represented. When the epitome of popularity for *rockeros* was to perform on the "temple of rock," the Obras Stadium in Buenos Aires, Los Caú titled a record *Los Caú en Obras*, imitating the LP titles of many rock *nacional* bands recorded live in that stadium. Obviously, Los Caú never performed in Obras, and the photos on the cover make fun of the celebrity aspiration of rockers; they also evince class differences that separate cumbia musicians and rock *nacional*'s audience. This is so because, on the cover, Los

Caú were portrayed with all the attire and tools of masons, a working-class occupation, literally *in obras*, that is, building a house. They were playing with the name of the stadium, whose complete name is Obras Sanitarias de La Nacion (Argentine Sanitary Works).

My appreciation of cumbia grew exponentially in the late 1980s, when I was finishing my course work at the University of Texas at Austin, and I decided to write my dissertation on the *bailanta* phenomenon that was starting to grow in Buenos Aires at that time. I was really preoccupied by the neoliberal turn that the Peronist movement was experiencing under the leadership of Carlos Menem. If Peronism was turning neoliberal, who was going to defend the interests of its historical constituency, the *negros* from the countryside who, by that time, were the bulk of the working class? My hypothesis was that, considering that Peronism, in its Menem incarnation, was abandoning the representation of working-class interests given the neoliberal project embraced by the new president, somebody or something was going to occupy the representation of Argentine *negros*. Given what was going on in the *bailanta* scene, I thought that tropical music was going to offer identifications that Peronism was abandoning. For a variety of reasons, that dissertation never happened, and I ended up writing one on identification processes on the U.S.-Mexican border. But my respect for cumbia was already there, and, as soon as I had the opportunity, I returned to the subject with my research on gender issues in cumbia *villera* (coauthored with Pablo Semán).

In this regard, I see Argentine cumbia as cumbia from the “Deep South,” in the double meaning of the term. On the one hand, because Argentine cumbia is the southernmost incarnation of the Colombian style, it shows that the tropics can somehow be reproduced in much more temperate climates. But, on the other, Argentine cumbia is music of the “Deep South” because it’s *negro* music, music that Argentine *negros* (the mestizos who were baptized as *negros* by chauvinist Euro-Argentines in the 1940s) have been using since the 1960s to advance some of their most important identitarian projects.

And talking about identitarian projects, if I want to be consistent with my claim that we have multiple identifications and all of them have the traces of each other as the condition of possibility of their own existence, I have to identify those that have the possibility of undermining my analytical lens to comprehend cumbia (because I am assuming that my political identification is helping me to do so; I am sure the readers of this book will identify many other identifications I am completely unaware of). We are talking about the dark side of the moon here.

First of all, cumbia is not the music I listen to for pleasure. That music is jazz. Second, I don't dance! When roles were distributed in childhood and adolescence, I decided to play instead of dance; I played guitar. There is an old Argentine saying: "El que toca, nunca baila." At the same time, I am a sound freak. I have been involved in audio since the late 1960s, and over the years I was able to build a very good audio system. I have an acoustic-treated listening room at home and plenty of tube equipment: one preamplifier, one pre-preamplifier, three amplifiers, a tuner, a cassette player, two turntables, a CD player, a computer-based server, four speakers, and two subwoofers. There is nothing more distant from Argentine *cumbieros* than my meticulousness about sound equipment.

In terms of more "traditional" identifications that probably are affecting my capacity to understand the cumbia villera world, I have to mention that I am in my late fifties, and the audience of this genre is, in many cases, forty years younger than I. In terms of class, even though most of my life I considered myself lower middle class or marginal working class, I did much better than 99 percent of cumbia followers. And in terms of gender, even though for a while I tasted some of the roles women usually perform (I was the single parent of two very young children for more than ten years), that does not transform my subject position into a female one. Therefore, only the readers of this book can gauge how this other side of the moon has influenced my (mis)understanding of cumbia.

Both

Unlike human beings, music has the uncanny capability of crossing borders freely—even if it's occasionally persecuted and outlawed by authoritarian governments—settling in new places and, thanks to its malleability, eventually evolving into more culturally diverse forms. This is, most definitely, the case of cumbia during its travels throughout the Americas. Like many Colombian bands, the Corraleros de Majagual might have traveled to Mexico and popularized their music long ago, but it also helped that Colombian drug cartels developed links with Mexican organizations. Along the way, in the same planes that transported illicit substances, a few cassette tapes made the trip, sharing a common appreciation for Caribbean, accordion-based melodies. If northern Mexico bears a healthy tradition of regional music, so does the smuggling culture of the Colombian Caribbean, appropriated by many of the

reckless travelers who landed in Aztec latitudes with precious cargo. In turn, when Mexican laborers journeyed north, once they made a few dollars, music was a main staple, bringing much needed relief, given the distance from the homeland. With its happy lilting beat, so different from the melancholy of *corridos* and related genres, which encourage sorrowful nostalgia and hard drinking, cumbia was the ideal companion for a long day at work or a festive night at the local dance club. Hence in any of its Mexican incarnations, cumbia would travel back to the towns in the Michoacán, Guerrero, or Nuevo León countryside, completing a full circle and granting greater presence to the previously ignored inhabitants of working-class *barrios*.

Generally speaking, unlike other cultural exports, cumbia arrived lacking any hegemonic pretense. Colombia was — is? — conceived as a backwater eternally affected by internecine conflict, so who could imagine that one of its products would signify such an identitarian challenge to well-established national musical genres? Unlike Mexican or Brazilian music, which arrived with the support of an established nationalist scheme and a relatively efficient distribution network, or Argentine music, which cloaked itself with airs of superiority, given the profile of a Eurocentric project of culture, cumbia usually arrived through the back door and in the hands of the dispossessed. In the case of Mexico, aside from the Colombian bands that visited and toured working-class circuits, it was its very citizens, who, returning from the United States, contributed to and accelerated a massive diffusion of the music. For Argentina, internal immigrants from the countryside and recent Bolivian and Paraguayan migrants, usually despised as *bolitas* and *paraguas*, performed a crucial role in the development of the *bailanta* circuit in Buenos Aires. In Peru, it was *serranos*, the recent arrivals from the Andes, who developed an appetite for cumbia in the mid-1960s. In short, cumbia's initial arrival was so insignificant — by and large, it was consumed by people who didn't seem to matter and who, as a rule, were not even visible to the state — that cultural establishments barely registered its presence. By the time the music advanced, cornered the market — usually in bootlegged versions — and evolved in the hands of the corresponding social outcasts, it was too late. The scale of sales and events was usually beyond the control of members of the establishment. Even when cumbia came in through the front door — when Colombian orchestras like Bermúdez's or Galán's embarked on successful journeys to play abroad at high-society clubs — who could imagine that such happily infectious music would some day conceal a socially militant, culturally resistant agenda?

However, what happened to this music once it landed abroad was an en-

tirely different story. In Mexico, cumbia evolved into a number of versions, allowing greater visibility for the lower classes, though occasionally operating in the same way as other middle- and upper-class products, effectively concealing issues of race. In other words, in terms of class difference, cumbia performed swimmingly. When it came to race, though, it seemed as inept as other alternatives. Though cumbia was perceived as coming from a nation with a greater Afro presence, its Mexican variants made clear that the blackness of its content was purely a matter of imitation and not of an affirmative protagonism. After all, Mexican negritude had been effectively erased from the many narratives tracing national origin, and not by chance, most of the narrative identities of the people who liked cumbia had much more room for articulating class interpellations than for articulating race-based ways of addressing them (both of which were available in cumbia lyrics, sound, and performances).

In Peru, on the other hand, cumbia became a vehicle for the new immigrants from the Andes, who, according to most scholarship on the topic, wanted to celebrate their arrival to the capital. Along the way, its popularity mushroomed with such vigor that the more privileged classes were forced to contend with its presence. That is to say, the millions who crowded the *pueblos jóvenes* (the young towns, or slums) on the outskirts of the capital could be ignored, but their diabolically strident music, with a monotonous beat that drilled the mind, could not. Nevertheless once cumbia evolved into its *selvática* or *elegante* varieties, the approach was similar to Mexico's: a rehashing of autochthonous origin through the appropriation of traces of U.S. culture (cowboy gear in Peru, hip-hop bling in Mexico, just as Colombians had done decades earlier with big-band jazz) or the internalization of a condition of class, ethnic, and regional inferiority by way of Caribbean emulation (evidenced by a propensity for "fine" salsa-like arrangements in bands from provincial Peru, who argued for the technical superiority of less Andean-sounding arrangements).

And in Argentina, just as in Mexico (only in a different way), cumbia became the music of choice of *negros*—mind you, not the literally black ones; after all, it is Argentina. In this case, despite the presence of some Afro communities in the greater Buenos Aires area (Cape Verdean, Uruguayan, a few locals), in Argentina the label *negro* does not necessarily refer only to skin color or phenotypic features (which are a given trait); these characteristics also form part of a larger imaginary construction encompassing not only geographic, class, and political implications but moral ones as well. The end re-

sult is that Argentina is characterized by a very complex construction of racial and ethnic identities, a complexity that is behind the paradox that people who are phenotypically mestizos are nonetheless addressed as *negros*, where the label is used to name people of Native American heritage and people of African ancestry as well, depending on the situation. In a nutshell, the process behind this paradox started in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when a number of different demographic and political issues (the huge migration of people of Native American ancestry from the countryside to Buenos Aires, their political mobilization by the Peronist movement, and the animosity—personal and political—that such a migration generated among the mostly white population of Argentina's capital city) resulted in the labels *cabecita negra* (little black-headed one) and *negros* being (pejoratively) applied to the internal immigrants who became one of the most important groups of political actors in the Peronist project. In the last two decades or so, the increasing immigration from Bolivia and Paraguay added complexity to the picture, because the pejorative stance spread to the members of these communities as well, where racist connotations were combined with chauvinistic undertones. All of these *negros* (internal mestizo immigrants, Bolivians, and Paraguayans) adopted cumbia as their danceable music of choice, but, of course, the proto-racial discourse of cumbia lyrics, sounds, and performances (alongside the class, gender, age, and ethnic discourses also present in cumbia) entered the variegated narrative identities of Argentine internal migrants, Bolivians, and Paraguayans in quite different and complex ways.

In same fashion, other neighboring countries also fell to the spell of cumbia (Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela, out of sheer proximity; Chile and Uruguay, by way of coziness with greater *mestizaje* and a penchant for tropical beats among working-class sectors), which lent itself to dealing with issues of a national social nature through a cultural practice of unpretentious disposition. In addition, one must consider cross-fertilization between many of these varieties, as in the case of Argentine villera and Peruvian cumbia, as well as Mexican and Uruguayan varieties and villera. Thus it is not just a matter of tracing direct linkages between Colombian imports and local kinds, but of contemplating the multiple ways in which these many national varieties interact with each other. Brazil, with its distinct linguistic and racial context, stands as an eminent exception to this Latin(o) American phenomenon, although, within the Amazonian basin, a very interesting variety of cumbia has flourished as well. Cuba, with its eminent role as cultural actor, is another exception, given the rejection of tropical genres—music traditionally asso-

ciated with larger ensembles and oriented toward dance—embodied by the initial phase of the revolutionary regime. (By the time it embraced tropical varieties—witness the Buena Vista Social Club boom—cumbia was already thriving elsewhere.)

As a result, the general hypothesis of this volume is that the focused examination of cumbia as perhaps the most widespread musical genre of Latin American origin evinces some of the mechanisms through which eminent forms of identity, like nation, region, class, race, ethnicity, and gender (and all their articulations) are achieved, negotiated, and provisionally and locally enacted by its followers. Each of the different national cases examined in this book illuminates a particular way in which cumbia assists those different identification processes. Having said this, however, we want to clarify that we are not advocating any sort of “homology thesis” in this book, that is, that there is a strict correspondence between particular cultural practices (like cumbia) and determined social identities. Neither are we straightforwardly proposing the competing hypothesis, which claims that music by itself has the capacity to construct social identities instead of only reflecting them (like the homology thesis claims). The various contributors to this collection address this dichotomy in different ways and, linked to their own theoretical predispositions, tilt the balance between both differently, even though the tension still exists in most of the essays. This, we believe, is part of the healthy exercise of differing viewpoints in any academic collection.

Nevertheless we also want to add our own twist to this tension, introducing into the readings of the different essays—voilà—another tension. And we want readers to challenge themselves and read the essays beyond what the respective authors explicitly claim or implicitly state about their positions in the constructing/reflecting debate. We want readers to take into account that most debates between the reflection and construction theories that relate to music and identity do not take fully into account the fragmentary character of the processes through which people end up identifying themselves in terms of nation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, or age. At the same time, many of those theories also neglect the complex articulations that habitually occur within these different identifications. And finally, there always is the possibility that certain types of music “reflect” some of the narrative identifications people “use” to understand who they are, while others help (to different degrees) in the construction of such identifications. For this reason, we propose the term *to articulate* rather than *to reflect* or *to construct* because it encompasses both possibilities at once.

The fact that the reflecting/constructing debate tends to homogenize musical practice in the same way that it homogenizes identities does not contribute to the advancement of our understanding of the complex relationships people establish with music. Thus, more often than not, the attempted relationship is not only between wholly formed identitarian groups but also between these groups and musical practices in toto. If we change the focus of attention to the components of the musical practice instead of its end result, the analysis changes as well. In this regard, if we consider a musical practice as a complex combination of (at least) sound, lyrics, performance, and commentary about the music being performed, and we link this complexity to the fragmentary process of identity construction, we end up with the possibility of different identification processes being helped by different components of the musical performance, sometimes in a very contradictory way. We think that most of the essays in this collection open themselves up to a second reading, taking into account these different possibilities.

People do not encounter cumbia as a unified entity (youth, migrant, *sonidero*, *cumbiero*, *chichero*, working-class, male, etc.) in the different venues they attend and allow it to interpellate them as something that they accept because it either reflects who they believe they are or helps them in the construction of who they believe they will be from now on. When people engage in these encounters with cumbia, they bring along myriad narrative identities about who they are in terms of their different subject positions. If these encounters occurred before, certainly some of these different narratives are already influenced by cumbia itself, and the new encounter challenges the connection previously accomplished between the narrative identities and the cumbia performance being enacted at the current event. In any case, the multiple possible identifications of our fictitious *cumbier@* (using this term “under erasure” à la Derrida, to signify that we don’t agree with the term because it unifies and materializes an actor out of what is, *sensu stricto*, a social practice) enter into a process of negotiation with the multiple messages of the cumbia event (the sound, the lyrics, the performance of the musicians, the performance of other *cumbier@s* at the scene, what is said about the performance on the venue, what is written about the music in magazines and on YouTube, websites, Facebook, and the like). Out of that negotiation, situationally and provisionally, a process of identification (or disidentification, for that matter) takes place.

As Vila has written elsewhere (Vila 2001), music performance is part of privileged practical activities that, while condensing basic significations, con-

struct identities through the production of an imaginary effect of having an “essential” (which, of course, is a fiction) identity inscribed on the body (as an ethnicity, race, region, class, nationality, gender, or age). Thus musical performativity would be among the types of discourses that, through repetition and its inscription on the body, have the capacity to produce what it names. However, to finally move from the capacity (the realm of discursive offers) to the actual production of identity in specific actors, we have to reformulate the previous statement as follows: musical practices construct identifications anchored on the body through the different alliances we establish between our diversely imagined, diversely narrated identities and the imaginary “essential” identities that various musical practices materialize through their (often contradictory) different components (sound, lyrics, performances, etc.). In other words, we believe that, quite often, a particular musical practice helps to articulate (a word that, as mentioned before, we prefer over either *reflect* or *construct*) particular imaginary, narrative identifications when performers or listeners of this very music feel that it (complexly) resonates with (obviously following a complex process of negotiation between musical interpellation and argumentative storyline) the narrative plots that organize their variegated narrative identities.

In this regard, matters of regional, national, and transnational identifications are center stage in chapter 2, showing how cumbia, as a musical practice, allows musicians to negotiate their engagements with different geographical spaces simultaneously. Jorge Arévalo Mateus shows that those negotiations are highly contested by the different reactions of the public and the “guardians of tradition” regarding those complex musical performances.

The complex relationship between regional, national, and transnational forms of identification is brought back into the picture in chapter 4. But this time Alejandro L. Madrid, writing about the cumbia-based *onda gruper*a, emphasizes their overlapping with issues of class and migration status as lived by Central American and Mexican immigrants, prominent actors in the Latin American diaspora. Considering that he is also writing about Mexican cumbia in Monterrey, it is not surprising that José Juan Olvera Gudiño’s essay (chapter 3) deals with the way cumbia helped in the articulation of regional, class, and migration forms of identification, but he also illuminates the way cumbia provided symbolic resources to internal immigrants in Mexico as well.

The construction of a Mexican immigrant identity in the United States and how cumbia helps in that regard is the topic of Cathy Ragland’s essay (chapter 5), in which issues of nationality (being Mexican), migration status

(many immigrants are illegally working in New York and New Jersey), and class (most Mexican immigrants are working class) are complexly intertwined. Identifications linked to migration processes are also central in Joshua Tucker's essay on Peru (chapter 6), where they complexly mix with ethnic identifications (most migrants from the Andes are Native Peruvians) that, in turn, impinge upon national identification processes by the way such immigration deeply questions the meaning of being a "Peruvian." That cumbia mixed with Andean rhythms played a crucial role in this broadening of the idea of Peruvianness, shows, in general, how music is central in many processes of identity construction, in particular, the ubiquity of Colombian cumbia in that regard. While Tucker shows how people who move from one part of Peru to another use cumbia to navigate their migration process, Kathryn Metz (chapter 7) shows how Peruvians who decide *not* to migrate and remain in their Amazon enclave still use cumbia to carve out a legitimate and valued place in Peruvian society. Again issues of regional, ethnic, and national identifications are worked out using cumbia.

Gender identification topics are center stage in Pablo Semán and Pablo Vila's essay (chapter 8), as they show how cumbia villera complexly addresses the newly acquired sexuality of many young women belonging to the popular sectors. But those gender issues are intertwined with class (most cumbia villera fans and musicians are working class), age (they are young people), and region and ethnicity (they are also immigrants from the countryside and mestizos). Matthew Van Hoose's essay (chapter 10) moves us back to regional (living in the River Plate basin) and national (being Uruguayan) identification processes, showing how pronominal meaning—the use of *tú* and *vos*—is closely connected with spatialized forms of social identity. At this point, that cumbia plays a very important role in this regard shouldn't surprise the reader. National identification processes appear again in Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste's essay (chapter 11), but this time intersecting with regional (how a *costeño* genre, cumbia, displaced a mountain genre, *bambuco*, as the epitome of Colombian music) and class issues (showing how *tropipop* is an upper-middle-class offspring of cumbia).

That these contributors analyze particular sets of articulations (nation, region, and class; class and gender; migration status, class, and nation; etc.) and not others does not mean that the other possible articulations are absent in the phenomena they study. It means that they consider the ones they explore to be in the forefront and the others operating only in the background. In fact, more than operating in the background, all the other possible iden-

tifications are present through the echoes of their absences. That is, none of the main articulating identifications analyzed in these essays is present in the actual lives of the actors involved in and of themselves, referring only to themselves. Following Derrida, we can say that all of them have the traces of many of the other possible intersecting identifications as the condition of possibility of their own existence. If, as we mentioned earlier, gender issues are clearly intertwined with class, age, region, and ethnicity, in the case of Argentine cumbia villera this is so because they are part of a system of syntheses and referrals in which political identifications (being a follower of Peronism), educational subject positions (being mostly uneducated), and even moral considerations (being a *negro de alma*, that is, having a “black soul,” regardless of the color of one’s skin) are present (in their absence) as echoes that add thickness to the articulations that do appear. The same can be said about any of the other national cases, in which, for instance, issues of gender and class are the subject positions that, in their absence, make possible, as a trace, the clear appearance of regional, national, and ethnic identifications propelled by cumbia (in the two Peruvian cases) or the appearance of migration-based identities (in the case of Mexican cumbia). In most of the cases addressed in this book, age is the “invisible” and “unmarked” identification that plays in the shadows of the way people relate to cumbia, because it is usually the case that the audiences of this music are young.

An important aspect of the processes of identification that cumbia allows and is part of is that those processes are part and parcel of important symbolic struggles for recognition. This is so because most of the identifications cumbia propels are linked to social actors who, in different locales, are positioned in subordinated arrangements of different kinds in terms of class, region, migration status, gender, and the like. Of course, cumbia also offers identifications and participates in symbolic struggles in which its practitioners have the lion’s share regarding other subordinated groups. (Gender is a particularly ominous example of this possibility, as Semán and Vila show.) But that does not deny its importance for empowering particular actors, regardless of its role in disempowering others.

A very interesting characteristic of the popularization of cumbia all across the Americas is its role in buttressing some national projects. In some usages, cumbia allows people to embrace and use it for the advancement of national interest, regardless of its degree of geographical determination—or perhaps precisely because of cumbia’s fondness for it. Throughout this process, a beneficial feature of cumbia is its propensity to transgress social and geopolitical

boundaries, its marked mobility. Few national genres display such flexibility when it comes to engendering homegrown versions, blatantly ignoring historical, cultural determination. The context of tango, for example, is too particular to be reproduced effectively in other latitudes and serve as a vehicle of resistance or hegemony. Samba (even bossa) and ranchera, though imitated in other countries, ultimately fail to represent anything other than a Brazilian or Mexican cultural practice, never mind the actual nationality of its performers. The Orquesta de la Luz may play excellent salsa, but we doubt that, as an expression of cultural difference, it means much to mainstream Japanese. Even more contemporary forms like merengue and *reggaetón*, though vastly popular and reproduced in other places of the Americas—such as Colombia and Argentina—fail to engender alternate national conditions, speaking to a wider audience and thus achieving mainstream status. With the exception of Argentina, even rock, with its middle-class appeal, has failed to engender national varieties. Then again, it is true that Argentines can talk about rock nacional, but very few in Latin America can describe their rock production in monolithic terms as rock *mexicano*, *colombiano*, or *venezolano*, even if they actually exist. The failure of these productions to act as units has rendered futile any efforts dedicated to the further exploration of national identity.

Cumbia, on the other hand, has given way to forms that, though they proudly retain the name *cumbia*, are undeniable versions of national orientation: *cumbia peruana*, *ecuatoriana*, *chilena*, *argentina*, *mexicana*, and so forth, each one confidently different from its forebear, operating under distinct, locally determined circumstances, full of regional varieties and with a wider appeal to a home audience. That *cumbia mexicana* is a complex cultural artifact with plenty of regional variations is well described in Madrid's and Olvera's essays. Something similar occurs with *cumbia peruana*, covered by Tucker and Metz, and the *cumbia* followed by Mexican immigrants in the United States, described by Ragland. *Cumbia* in Argentina follows a similar path, in which regional varieties (*norteña*, *santafesina*, *villera*) are, paradoxically, showing the national complexity of the way Colombian *cumbia* became "Argentinized."

In a nutshell, *cumbia* is a fortunate example of transnationalism at work, mutating at will to engage its followers in a more effective manner. Generally speaking, what serves as an established vehicle of nationality and regional or ethnic identity in one place, once culturally determined and fixed, seldom works as the basis for a massive exercise of these types of identifications in another setting. In the case of *cumbia*, this axiom does not work. The essays

in this book have been closely vetted to highlight issues of this nature. In his contribution to this collection, “Cumbia Music in Colombia: Origins, Transformations, and Evolution of a Coastal Music Genre” (chapter 1), the Italian musicologist Leonardo D’Amico supplies the reader with a remarkable quantity of information, from a detailed description of the geopolitical context of cumbia to a summary of the various versions of the term’s etymological origin. D’Amico accounts for the difficulties associated with establishing periodization for a cultural construct as unstable and fragmentary as a musical genre, shying away from an actual endorsement of a theory in argumentative terms. Instead he chooses to review the multiple aspects of cumbia as cultural practice: its instruments, a formal analysis, the genres associated with its evolution and dissemination, and, ultimately, its relation to other relevant national and transnational genres. D’Amico’s informative style is motivated by the hope of providing a sensible context for cumbia as a seminal practice, so new genres and variants may be assessed in the greater light of their ancestry, that is, not only with the specific national context in mind but in relation to the actual shifts experienced in Colombia before and during the music’s transition to another latitude. In this way, he facilitates the tracing of an evolution for the genre in strict terms of positivist musicology, leaving the considerations of identity and nation to more culturally oriented approaches. From this perspective, though cognizant of the value of interdisciplinary schemes, D’Amico plays the role of a scholar predominantly interested in the actual circumstances of the musical practice, slightly detached from theoretical considerations more associated with a cultural studies agenda.

In chapter 2, “¿Pa’ dónde vas Marioneta? ¿Pa’ dónde va la gaita? La Cumbiamba Eneyé Returns to San Jacinto,” Jorge Arévalo Mateus chronicles his trip to the town of San Jacinto, epicenter of the world of *gaita* and home to the renowned *gaiteros*. Arévalo skillfully uses the journey to explore what happens to a musical practice when its followers and performers come from corners of the world that challenge habitual constructs of practice, in this case, the fact that Martín Vejarano and his ensemble, Marioneta, come from places like Bogotá and New York, which, nationally and transnationally, challenge the conventions of *gaita* music. Cosmopolitanism meets nationalism meets regionalism. For the judges at San Jacinto, it appears contradictory that Vejarano, who lives in New York but comes from the interior of Colombia (and thus qualifies as *cachaco*), excels at playing the *gaita*. But to followers of *gaita*, more accustomed to the eccentricities and vagaries of the music market, Vejarano and his friends make all the sense in the world. As cumbia evolves, it

is only sensible that the practice of gaita begins to reflect contacts beyond its habitual milieu. Arévalo describes the journey in detail and ponders what it means that Marioneta has landed the second prize at the Festival Nacional de Gaitas for two consecutive years. In the end, his essay helps us understand how is it that cumbia has managed to travel across the Americas and appeal to so many people, regardless of nationality or place of origin.

From cumbia in its country of origin, the collection then moves abroad to those countries in which, for different reasons, cumbia became popular. In chapter 4, "Rigo Tovar, Cumbia, and the Transnational *Grupero* Boom," the Mexican scholar Alejandro Madrid reviews the story of the Tamaulipas native Rigo Tovar and describes his importance in terms of the ascent of cumbia as a Mexican American cultural practice and its contribution to the visibility of previously ignored segments of national society. Most important, Madrid points out clearly how the Mexican cultural industry has enacted this "invisibility," in which the cultural offer of media exhibits acts that differ markedly from national reality (i.e., portraying versions of events that contradict, ethnically, socially, and in terms of gender, what is immediately apparent in daily life). Tovar's embrace of his condition of *naco* (a vulgar, uneducated person) speaks volumes about changes in Mexican culture. Within this context, the rise of the *onda grupera* embodies a first wave of change for the Mexican regional music market. It also describes how working-class acts have accumulated significant cultural capital amid challenging economic circumstances: the end of the so-called Mexican miracle and the collapse of the national economy during the 1980s. Madrid integrates the concepts of cultural citizenship and dialectic soundings to discuss the inner workings of this process of freshly gained visibility, in which migrants and their communities "negotiate sites of identification that ultimately allow for the recognition of their difference while still recognizing their rights to belong locally and transnationally." Overall, Rigo Tovar is proposed as the precursor of a wave of music that, using cumbia as its foundation, allowed Mexicans and Central Americans to establish a prominent position in a new map of the Latin American diaspora.

Continuing with the impact of cumbia in Mexico, in chapter 3, "Cumbia in Mexico's Northeastern Region," José Juan Olvera Gudiño describes the different cumbia styles that are popular in northeastern Mexico nowadays: *norteña*, *grupera*, *colombiana de Monterrey*, and *villera*. In the first part of the chapter, Olvera offers a historical explanation of the reasons Monterrey eventually became the "music center" par excellence of the entire northeastern Mexican region. Then he reviews a brief history of the introduction and even-

tual success of cumbia in the region and explores the various ways different audiences appropriate diverse cumbia styles. Olvera delves into issues of identity construction, relevance, and legitimacy concerning cumbia, as well as the peculiar dialogue that takes place between cumbia and other popular music genres of the region, above all *música norteña*. He aims to show that the most enduring and successful cumbia styles in northeastern Mexico are those that result from a hybridization that takes into account the elements that are peculiar to a specific group, be it rural, regional, or transnational. Furthermore he demonstrates that cumbia creates a space of dialogue and encounter between diverse audiences, turning the genre into one of the most popular expressions of music in northeastern Mexico.

Continuing with cumbia's route north, and closely associated with the migration of millions of Mexicans to the United States, Cathy Ragland addresses the popularity of cumbia among Mexican immigrants currently living in the United States. In chapter 5, "Communicating the Collective Imagination: The Sociospatial World of the Mexican *Sonidero* in Puebla, New York, and New Jersey," she discusses a social dance event that has become increasingly popular among the Mexican migrant and immigrant communities in New York City and nearby northern New Jersey. In those dances, *sonideros* (deejays) play the latest cumbia hits and, through voice manipulation, smoke, lights, and a variety of sounds, including music, create a "sociospatial environment" that is neither the United States nor Mexico but somewhere in between. Among the most powerful components of the cumbia *sonidero* experience studied by Ragland is the personal connection between the Mexican immigrants in the club and their friends and family back in Mexico. As the cumbias are played, the deejay reads into the microphone the personal salutations and dedications scribbled by the immigrants. These messages are recorded over the cumbia music, and at the end of the set, the dancers line up to purchase a recording of the cumbia with their dedications. The dancers then mail the music (initially, cassettes; more recently, CDs and, most likely, data files via phone or computer) to family and friends in Mexico.

According to Ragland, through the space-age travel sounds played by the deejay, the juxtaposition of American and Mexican musics, and the dedications of those present to those in Mexico, the experiential foreground and background of the *baile* shifts constantly between New York and Mexico. Ragland claims that by manipulating music and simultaneously reconfiguring time and place, the deejays and their public in New York and New Jersey turn feelings of displacement and marginalization into a collective sense of iden-