Specters of Maelo: An Ethnographic Biography of Ismael ‘Maelo’ Rivera

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ABSTRACT

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Ismael ‘Maelo’ Rivera (1931–1987) is a foundational Afro-Puerto Rican salsa singer. Known among his fans, peers, and contemporary researchers as *El Sonero Mayor* (loosely, The Greatest Singer-Improviser), Maelo’s voice became inscribed in the aural tapestry of barrios in Latin America and the Caribbean, beginning in the mid-1950s. After his death on May 13, 1987, Maelo has gained a sense of sacredness amongst fans and devotees who identify themselves as maeleros and maelistas in places such as Panama, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico. My interlocutors ascribe Maelo’s songs with a particular affective strength that for them differentiates him from other salsa singers. His music has become the medium for the creation of relational bonds that respond to their particular local contexts as well as their personal and collective histories. In both countries, maeleros and maelistas listen to his songs as stories where they find keys to endure the difficulties of day-to-day life in their respective socio-political, cultural, and economic situations. This dissertation studies the friendships and relational affinities maeleros and maelistas articulate through Maelo’s music and biography, examining the creative work they do in order to celebrate his presence in their everyday.

I argue that Maelo inspires a sense of secular devotion amongst his fans through the ways in which he mediates the crossing of the sacred and the profane through his repertoire and life by voicing multiple expressions from diverse Black Atlantic religions. I understand the sense of communion maeleros and maelistas share as a devotional sense of kinship in which friendship, and mainly male friendships, are central. I propose that such mediations of the sacred, and the
Maelo-centered sense of devotional kinship I study, must be framed in relation to larger histories of the political definition of life in Latin America and the Caribbean. In such histories, the spectrality of the voice has served both as a tool for casting Black and indigenous groups as unworthy of citizenship and as a means for these groups to endure such marginalization. By examining the context-specific ways in which Maelo connoisseurs reinterpret his music and life in Venezuela, Panama, and Puerto Rico in his afterlife, this dissertation proposes that maeleros and maelistas enact a political theology that dramatizes the contemporary stakes of larger biopolitical histories in which illness has long-been connected to delinquency as tools of power used to police and discipline modern citizen bodies. This is vital to one of the central theses of this dissertation: that Maelo’s stories of vocal illness, addiction, and imprisonment—what I call his wounded masculinity—are key to the sense of sacredness he has gained during his afterlife as a spectral figure whose songs, images, and myth accompany his fans, peers, and devotees in their everyday.
Contents

List of Figures ii
Acknowledgments v
Dedication ix
Specters of Maelo: An Introduction 1

*El Sonero Mayor*: Theorizing Song, *Soneo*, and Storytelling as Media of Mutuality 46

*Un Profundo Ecuajei*: Enmeshing Maelo within the Political Theology of *Chavismo* 90

*Cortijo se llevó la llave*: Narrating Public Secrecy Through a Story of Illness and Healing 141

*El Brujo de Borinquen*: Maelo’s Mutuality with *El Nazareno*, The Black Christ of Portobelo, Panama 185

Conclusion 249

Bibliography 254
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Maelista</em> meme</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Macropanas</em> group picture</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Luis Gooding and Pedro ‘Sorolo’ Rodríguez, Portobelo, Panama</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Detail from <em>La esquina de Maelo</em> of Maelo</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>YouTube screenshot of Maelo’s interview with Jimmy Dawson</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Maelo’s wake through the streets of Santurce</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tomasa Rivera and Eugenio Quijano</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Freddy Quintero’s portrait of Maelo</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Letter to Maelo and Doña Margot</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Macropanas in <em>El Gons Sous</em></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Luis Gooding in his archive/radio booth</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Album cover of <em>Bueno y qué</em> by <em>Cortijo y su Combo.</em></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Manifestation during the visit of the King of Spain to Puerto Rico in 1987</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Freddy Quintero standing in front of <em>El Gons Sous</em></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>Macropana</em>’s collage</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Program for the 19th edition of macropanas’ tribute to Maelo in 2006</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Jesús Campos, Jesús Hernández, and Freddy Quintero</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Professor José Adames</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Jesús Hernández channeling José Adames during our interview</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Portraits of Simón Bolívar and Maelo at Reina Tovar’s house</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Carbonero holds t-shirt with an image of Hugo Chávez and Maelo</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Maelo kisses Rafael Cortijo before his casket is closed</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 23. Maelo singing at the 8th Bomba and Plena Festival in Río Grande 157
Figure 24: Poster of Maelo and El Nazareno 187
Figure 25: El Nazareno at the Church of San Felipe 188
Figure 26: Maelo’s bust in Portobelo, Panama 188
Figure 27: Sorolo and Gooding at Gooding’s archive/radio booth 191
Figure 28. Album cover of Bueno y qué by Cortijo y su Combo 196
Figure 29: Gooding’s Facebook post relating his father and friends to Cortijo y su Combo 196
Figure 30: Luis Gooding as a young music collector and DJ in Panama, 1970s 200
Figure 31: Maelo with members of the Panamanian government circa 1970 203
Figure 32: 1969 Panamanian carnivals advertisement 204
Figure 33: Detail of 1969 Panamanian carnivals advertisement 205
Figure 34: El Nazareno shrine at the Church of San Felipe in Portobelo, Panama 215
Figure 35: The statue of El Nazareno with Simón Cirineo 218
Figure 36: Pilgrims arrive at the Church of San Felipe in Portobelo 220
Figure 37: Pilgrims stare at El Nazareno as they arrive at the Church of San Felipe 220
Figure 38: El Nazareno procession through the streets of Portobelo, Panama 221
Figure 39: Closer look at El Nazareno during His procession 222
Figure 40: U.S. Navy brochure promoting their participation in the Black Christ Festival 224
Figure 41: Detail of U.S. Navy brochure about the Black Christ Festival 225
Figure 42: Maelo carrying El Nazareno during the procession in the 1970s 232
Figure 43: Sorolo and Gooding at Gooding’s archive/radio booth 240
Figure 44: Sorolo with Maelo’s mother, Doña Margot, in Santurce, Puerto Rico 243
Figure 45: Sorolo in Portobelo, Panama 246
Figure 46: Friends wearing Maelo and El Nazareno t-shirts and caps  247
Figure 47: Friends wearing Maelo and El Nazareno t-shirts  247
Figure 48: Maelo’s bust plaque, Portobelo, Panama  248
Acknowledgements

This is a dissertation about friendship, listening, storytelling, and devotion. Also, it is a dissertation about illness, colonialism, empire, and endurance. But perhaps above all of this, my inquiry in the pages that follow is a means of honoring the life and death of Ismael ‘Maelo’ Rivera, a beloved Afro-Puerto Rican popular singer. Therefore, I begin by expressing my thankfulness to his spirit for blessing this research since the beginning. As the macropanas (macro-friends), a Maelo-centered collective in Caracas, Venezuela would say: Maelo, un profundo ecuajei para ti. Likewise, I must express my gratitude to Maelo’s family for supporting me throughout these years. Their trust and their belief has been key for me to feel at ease in conducting this inquiry. Thanks to Manguin, Heyda, Idenisse, Lehany, Ismael, Jr., Tomasa, Baby, and Ivelisse. Also, thanks to those family members that I don’t know personally. It is truly an honor.

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mi gente, for passing down to me the blessing of salsa devotion. You changed my life. You gave me a thing to endure my darkest days, a thing to hold dearly both in happy and sad moments, and a thing that shed light into my existence. This dissertation is in a way my form of sharing this thing, this devotion with others.

Speaking of family and speaking of light, I want to separate a special place here to thank my wife Lívia Galvani de Barros Cruz. Thanks for your support, thorough questions, intellectual challenges, and affective encouragement. Thanks for bringing so much peace and joy to my life. Thanks for so much love, for the healthiness and tastiness, and for dancing and singing with me. I too dedicate this to you, recalling our reinterpretation of Maelo’s verses: yo soy feliz mira pa’ ahí, yo tengo una caipira linda…

Since I finished this dissertation during the immediate aftermath of Hurricane María, I want to conclude by honoring the lives, deaths, and spirits of the Puerto Rican people. I offer this dissertation as a tribute to our histories of endurance amidst U.S. imperialism, forced migrations, and precariousness. To all of you I say, echoing Maelo, ¡Ecuajei!
To all the spirits that accompany me and take care of me, specially to my grandfather Augusto Montijo Miranda, who died in August of 2016 as I was writing this dissertation, I say, ¡Ecuajei!
One of the first memories I have about Ismael ‘Maelo’ Rivera (1931-1987) is the story of his death as told by my dear aunt Lulú Montijo, a hard-core salsera (salsa fan) who along with her siblings holds the key to my familial relationship to Maelo’s music since my childhood. In the afternoon of May 13, 1987, Lulú was listening to salsa in her room at my grandparent’s home in Ciales, our hometown in the Central Mountain Range of Puerto Rico. What appeared to be a typical Wednesday afternoon was abruptly interrupted by the brokenhearted voice of Lulú’s lifelong friend and neighbor Mimi shouting from next door, “¡Lulú apaga el radio, puñeta! ¡Se murió Maelo! (Lulú, turn off the radio, damn it! Maelo just died!).”¹ I don’t remember Maelo’s death in the way that I recall the deaths of so many salsa icons that passed. I was five years old.

¹ Puñeta is a multivalent colloquial expression used in Puerto Rico. In this case, I loosely translate it as damn it although this does not make justice to the deep significance of this word.
when he died, and it wasn’t until a few years later when I became quite a hard-core salsero that I began to study Maelo’s salsa. Even at five, however, I already had a favorite Maelo song at the time—“Comedia,” featured in the album *Esto sí es lo mío* (This is Truly My Thing) from 1978.² Lulú’s story of his death is what was initially inscribed in my memory. What remained with me about Lulú’s tale was Mimi’s cry for silence after hearing the news of Maelo’s death. For many years, I asked myself: Why silence? How could anyone prefer not to hear Maelo’s voice when facing his death? How did Lulú respond to Maelo’s death? How did she react to Mimi’s request? Did she actually turn off the radio? And if so, isn’t this against the tradition cherished by salseros of giving a musical farewell to our beloved musicians?

I always hesitated to ask my aunt these questions. Lulú, nonetheless, addressed these matters in an email she wrote me responding to an article I published in 2011 on the online Puerto Rican magazine *80 Grados*. In the article, I wrote about the fieldwork I have been conducting in Venezuela and Panama since 2006 concerning Maelo’s life, music, and myth as a foundational Afro-Puerto Rican singer. It was published on the 24th anniversary of his death, and in it I mentioned Lulú’s anecdote of this event and the questions I always had about her story.

This is how Lulú recalled the afternoon of May 13, 1987:

> What happened was that we were in a catatonic state. We were going through the first phase of processing loss, we were in denial, and my friend needed me to give her spiritual support. Afterwards, as many other salseros, we dedicated ourselves to let the world know that Maelo had not died. Death was not possible with so much music he left us to sing, and with his people willing to keep repeating and dancing his music” (Montijo 2011).³

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³ “Lo que pasó fue que estábamos en estado catatónico. Estábamos pasando por la primera fase de procesar la pérdida, estábamos en negación, y mi amiga necesitaba que le diera apoyo espiritual. Después, como muchos otros salseros, nos dedicamos a dejarle saber al mundo que Maelo no había muerto. Su muerte no era posible con tanta música que nos dejó para cantar, y con su gente dispuesta a seguir repitiendo y bailando su música” (Montijo 2011). See also Colon-Montijo (2011): [http://www.80grados.net/despues-de-tanta-salsa/](http://www.80grados.net/despues-de-tanta-salsa/)
In her thoughtful answer to my burning questions, Lulú provides a thorough explanation of the mourning process she and her friend endured, and then goes on to describe succinctly the ways in which Maelo’s fans devoted themselves to keep listening to his music. “Death was not possible with so much music he left us, and with his people willing to keep repeating and dancing his music,” she reflects, relating the immortality of Maelo’s voice to the will of his fans to keep sharing and enjoying his music in his afterlife.

Reading Lulú’s email repeatedly during the past few years has led me to a better understanding of the haunting presence and influence her story about Maelo has on my own relationship with Maelo. More specifically, I have become aware of the ways in which her story is reminiscent of the main ideas that guide my inquiry. This dissertation studies friendships and relational affinities that are articulated through Maelo’s music in ways that make me think of the “spiritual support” Lulú and Mimi shared when facing Maelo’s death. I conceive death as the event that further inscribed his voice in the aural tapestry of barrios throughout Latin America and the Caribbean where my interlocutors still maintain their will “to keep repeating and dancing his music.” If I were to think of my thesis as a documentary script based on my fieldwork, Maelo’s death would be the event that triggers the plots and subplots of the drama as well as the lives and relationships of the characters. Death, hence, is a threshold from where I begin to narrate this “ethnographic biography” (Herzfeld 1997) that examines how Maelo’s fans, which often identify as maeleros or maelistas, listen to, think about, and speak of his music in the midst of drastic experiences of social and economic abandonment.

My conception of the ethnographic biography as a genre comes from Michael Herzfeld’s (1997) Portrait of a Greek Imagination: An Ethnographic Biography of Andreas Nenedakis. In this book, Herzfeld both theorizes and narrates a biographical study in counterpoint with his
interlocutor. He combines anthropological and fictional storytelling strategies in order to portray a critical ethnographic study that takes friendship as an intellectual endeavor. Herzfeld aims to relate how “actors are enmeshed in a tangle of tracks connecting areas of our social lives that we ordinarily think of as discrete,” and proposes that “the tactic of ethnographic biography may offer one route—a trajectory through multiple social worlds—to an ethnography of transnational intellectual communities (Herzfled 1997, 14). In contrast to Herzfeld, however, my work traces such ethnographic friendship through the creative work Maelo's fans do in order to celebrate his presence in their everyday and the relational affinities they articulate through his songs and life. I understand this as a network of devotion to Maelo. One of the principal aims of my inquiry is to map this network of devotion—a multi-sited intellectual and affective community—created by maeleros and maelistas in his afterlife in places like Panama, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico.

**Maeleros and Maelistas**

My work maps a transnational network of devoutness arising in what I call “devotional afterlife”: a period in which Maelo’s music and biography have become a spectral presence that permeates the lives of my interlocutors. The title of this dissertation, *Specters of Maelo*, evokes Jacques Derrida’s foundational work on the so-called “spectral turn.” Nevertheless, my theorization of spectrality begins with Fabián Ludueña’s conceptualization of specters as “beings who survive (even if only under the form of a postulate) their own death, or who establish a point of indistinctness between life and death” (2010, 14). I relate this idea to Jairo Moreno’s (2016)

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4 See Del Pilar-Blanco and Peeren (2013) for an introduction and review of the spectral turn.

5 “entes que sobreviven (así sea bajo la forma de un postulado) a su propia muerte, o que establecen un punto de indistinción entre vida y muerte” (Ludueña 2010, 14).
theorization of what he calls the “sonorous specters” that haunt Afro-Latin Jazz’s performance and discourses. He argues that these sonorous specters contribute to the formation of relational affinities that are both epistemological and ontological, and that such affinities inevitably imply relations of difference amongst the living in their aim to “render the death as a social common” (Moreno 2016, 22). Such conceptions of specters as beings that produce a sense of blurriness between life and death are central to the ways in which Maelo seems to haunt my interlocutors’ lives as well as to the larger, otherworldly presence he has gained in his afterlife; his enduring aura, that is.

I focus on the work produced by specific groups of maeleros and maelistas in Panama and Venezuela, but these Maelo-centered collectives are not restricted to these two countries. Maelistas or maeleros can also be found in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, New York, and Puerto Rico among other places. Before describing in-depth the work Panamanian and Venezuelan Maelo devotees produce, it is worth commenting briefly on a meme (figure 1) recently posted on Facebook by two maelistas that I met online in 2017, Chris Montañez Delásperas, from Bogotá, Colombia, and Omar Córdova, from Lima, Peru. This meme defines maelistas by interrelating three keywords that ground their Maelo-centered communion:

1. **Maelista** is a militant of **Maelismo**.

2. **Maelismo** is the fellowship doctrine of those who love, preserve, and adore the marvelous singing, *soneo* (vocal improvisation), and feeling of their supreme leader, Ismael Rivera.

3. **Maelómano** is an obsessed music collector who investigates the life, oeuvre, and miracles of the **Sonero Mayor** (loosely, The Greatest Singer-Improviser, which is one of Maelo’s nicknames).
This broad description of a maelista fellowship even though not created by my Panamanian and Venezuelan interlocutors but by maelistas in Colombia and Peru, is helpful to begin framing the transnational devotional network I study. The type of religious ethos that one feels in this meme evokes the idea that Maelo is a spectral figure who blurs the distinction between life and death gaining a sense of sacredness among his followers. I, building on Timothy Brennan’s (2008) idea of a “secular devotion” that is key to Afro-descendant music, conceive the sense of communion shared by maeleros and maelistas as a devotional sense of kinship in which friendship, and predominantly male friendships, are central. I also argue that maelistas and maeleros produce a Maelo-centered “poetics of relation” (Glissant 1997) in which both stories and the acts of telling and listening to stories are taken as relational media. Such a poetics of relation arises from the counterpoint between Maelo’s songs and biography and the ways in which my interlocutors relate with and through his songs. My aim is thus to delve into the specifics of the work my interlocutors do in Panama and Venezuela in order to narrate an ethnographic biography of Maelo that begins from and emulates their respective enactments of such a poetics.

Figure 1. The maelista meme shared online.
My interlocutors in Panama and Venezuela ascribe Maelo’s songs with a particular affective strength that for them distinguishes him from other improvising singers in salsa. His music has become the medium for the creation of relational bonds that respond to their particular local contexts as well as their personal and collective histories. These relational affinities often take form through listening and storytelling. In both countries, my interlocutors listen to his songs as stories where they find keys to endure the quandaries of everyday life in their respective socio-political, cultural, and economic milieus. They produce their own stories about his songs, tales that enmesh his repertoire within experiences of sociality and intimacy. These stories take different shapes and are shared through different media such as TV documentaries, online radio stations, YouTube videos, academic essays, interviews, poems, songs, t-shirts, and paintings.

In Caracas, Venezuela the sociological and musicological collective of friends, known as the macropanas (macro-friends) infuse Maelo’s repertoire with political, religious, and affective significance specific to the political histories in their country. Macropanas also call themselves maeleros, describe what they do as maelerear, and conceive their Maelo-centered work as a way of life known as maelería or macropanía. They live in a soulful and political symbiosis with and through Maelo’s songs, which they hear as allegorical stories of their own lives (Hernández 2013). Some macropanas write essays analyzing the political, historical, and religious significance of Maelo’s music, while others write poetry incorporating fragments of his songs, or paint and exhibit idiosyncratic reinterpretations of iconic pictures of Maelo. Macropanas enmesh their relation to Maelo’s music within the larger histories of leftist political struggles in Venezuela, and more specifically within chavismo, the movement that supported Hugo Chávez. However, theirs is not the only politicized listening that Maelo’s music generates in Caracas. Venezuelan media personality and salsa researcher César Miguel Rondón, writer of the canonical
The Book of Salsa (2008[1979]), who interviewed and befriended Maelo during the 1970s, has said in interviews that Maelo’ music will resonate through the streets of Caracas the day when chavismo is overcome. Rondón, who has been an outspoken opponent of chavismo since its beginnings, seems to agree with the maeleros in one thing: he also highlights the allegorical potential of Maelo’s songs as media in which his listeners can hear stories that reflect their own everyday life experiences (Rondón May 2013).

Figure 2: Macropanas group picture. Some of the macropanas in the Pedagogic Institute of El Paraíso, the institution where they organized as a Maelo-centered collective. Jesús Hernández is at the center wearing a black t-shirt with and image of Maelo in front.

Such a conception of songs as stories resonates with the work produced by Luis Gooding, a Panamanian music collector. Gooding describes himself as maelista, an expert in Maelo’s life and music, but does not use the sort of religious language coined in the previously cited meme about maelistas and maelismo. Since the early 1980s, though, Gooding has researched, written, recorded, and produced radio and TV documentaries centered on Maelo’s music and legacy. In his creative ventures, Gooding uses stories about Maelo’s life and music previously recorded in documentaries, books, and videos that circulate online. His work, however, emphasizes the key

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6 See Rondón (2015), accessed on June 2016: http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/12/02/americ...724429.html
role Panama played in Maelo’s life and repertoire, particularly through Maelo’s belief in the Black Christ of Portobelo—a popular Afro-Panamanian spiritual and devotional practice that dates back to the 17th century. Maelo embraced this devotion as a healing tactic in his struggle with heroin addiction in 1969, and recorded the song “El Nazareno”7 praising Him in 1974. For Gooding, the work he does in documenting Maelo’s legacy in Panama became the medium for the creation of a profound friendship with Pedro “Sorolo” Rodríguez, one of Maelo’s dearest friends who introduced him to the Black Christ devotion. Both Gooding and Sorolo are devotees of the Black Christ.

Figure 3: Luis Gooding and Pedro ‘Sorolo’ Rodríguez. Gooding, were a purple polo shirt, and Sorolo, wearing a black t-shirt with Maelo’s signature expression Ecuajei written in front, in the Black Christ Festival in Portobelo, Panama. October 21st, 2014.

Figure 4: Detail from La esquina de Maelo of Maelo. Paintings of El Nazareno, song titles, and phrases.

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Sorolo has devoted a large part of his life to preserving the memory of his friendship with Maelo through a set of anecdotes he frequently repeats in conversations and interviews. Perhaps more importantly, he founded and administered *La Esquina de Maelo* (Maelo’s Corner) in the neighborhood of *El Chorrillo* in Panama City from 1995 to 2016. This restaurant functioned as a sort of sanctuary, a place of worship in which Sorolo, together with clients and friends, evoked his friend’s presence in their everyday life through songs played in the radio, personal stories, pictures hanging on the walls, and phrases from Maelo’s songs painted in the building’s façade alongside images of both Maelo and *El Nazareno* (see figure 4).

I conceive the work maeleros and maelistas do, imbuing Maelo’s music within individual and collective histories of sociality, their listening practices, and the creative work they produce about Maelo’s biography as modes of “knowing-in-action, as a knowing-with and knowing-through the audible” (Feld 2015, 93). Maeleros and maelistas listen to Maelo’s salsa as means of knowledge production. I theorize the Maelo-centered work they produce as a type of “song labor.” My notion of song labor builds on Jocelyne Guilbault’s (2014) concept of “labor of love” and on Louise Meintjes’ (2017) concept of “music laboring.” Guilbault uses her idea to describe the material and immaterial labor musicians do in order to earn a living, musical activities that are concomitantly modes of labor and causes of joy. Meintjes analyzes the work Zulu musicians and dancers do to perform masculinity in the face of severe conditions of illness. In this thesis, I use the idea of song labor to comprise the intellectual and affective labor maeleros and maelistas produce in Maelo’s afterlife (see Chapter One).

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8 The restaurant closed in 2016. Sorolo moved his business to a newly developed tourist area along the coast in Panama City near El Chorrillo called “Sabores de Chorrillo.” He still lives, as he has done for a few decades, some days of the week in the backroom of his restaurant, and rents the place to neighbors for community gatherings such as birthday celebrations.
Key to their song labor is the previously mentioned entanglement between Maelo and the Black Christ, which is enacted not only by Sorolo and Gooding in Panama, but additionally by the macropanas in Caracas. Most of my interlocutors believe “El Nazareno” is the song that holds the key to the transcendence of Maelo’s repertoire. Jesús Hernández, considered the engine of the macropanas collective, maintains that this tune is the most important one of Maelo’s oeuvre because it tells a story of race, friendship, and belief that relates to larger Caribbean and Latin American religious histories (Hernández 2013). Such a tale of friendship is condensed in its refrain—“El Nazareno me dijo que cuidara a mis amigos (The Black Christ told me to take care of my friends). “El Nazareno” is thus the song that links the different geographies of the multi-sited intellectual network I study, therefore adding more layers to the song labor and relational affinities my interlocutors cherish: the spectral relationship between Maelo and El Nazareno as a manifestation of the intersection between race, friendship, and belief.

A few words clarifying what I mean by Maelo’s salsa are appropriate at this point. Since maeleros and maelistas situate friendship at the center of their devotional sense of kinship, I will now briefly frame Maelo’s salsa in relation to the larger history of this musical genre. My focus, nonetheless, will be on thinking about how in its recent history salsa has been reified as a genre through very particular enactments of male friendships and mourning.

**Maelo’s Salsa: Articulating Genre, Male Friendships, and Wounded Masculinities**

My approach to thinking about genre formation is focused on how a genre takes shape not only through its formal features but additionally through the stories people share about its significance on their day-to-day lives (Martín-Barbero 1987; Ramos 1989). In other words, more than an analysis of "genres of popular music as fields of production and consumption, mediated
principally by the relationships of economic exchange they structure" my inquiry about Maelo’s salsa needs to be framed as a study about "genres of popular music as fields of popular practice, mediated primarily by ritualized forms of intimate social interaction (Fox 2004, 30). Therefore, rather than an analysis of salsa’s formation as a musical genre through the scrutiny of its formal characteristics (Berrios-Miranda 2002), my interest is in how local “histories of listening” (Feld 2015) shape and reshape salsa through the modes of knowing-in-action, knowing-with, and knowing-through songs shared by salseros in different places. To evoke Chris Washburne’s idea that we must think critically about how “salsa music-making and production [and listening]… represent[s] a multitude of diverse perspectives and richly signifies a diverse set of perspectives” (2008, 11), I approach the formation of salsa as a genre through a sort of generic perspectivism\(^9\) that results from the song labor and friendships my interlocutors produce about and through Maelo’s salsa. Mine, hence, is not an inquiry about salsa as an all-encompassing generic label but specifically about Maelo’s position within this genre. Even more specifically, my interest is to think about how his branch of salsa is transformed through my ethnographic archive. Hence, I evoke Ana Ochoa Gautier’s understanding of “genre as distributive and multiple, as emphasizing relations of exteriority and exchange rather than unity” (2014, 66), by studying how the type of masculine friendships my interlocutors share through their ritualistic forms of social interaction serve as relational media through which Maelo’s salsa is constantly made and remade as genre.

Before delving into a further theorization of their Maelo-centered means of articulating masculine bonds, it is worth describing what I mean by Maelo’s salsa. I refer to Maelo’s music as salsa while fully acknowledging the limitations this generic label ascribes to his oeuvre, style,

\(^9\) I reference the term perspectivism to playfully invoke the work of scholars such as Viveiros De Castro (2010) and Stolze Lima (1996) inspired by Amerindian perspectivism. More importantly, see Ochoa Gautier (2016) for a discussion about perspectivism regarding music studies.
and career. Briefly, the term salsa gained currency during the late 1960s in countries such as the
U.S., Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Panama, and Colombia as a means of naming hybrid musical
styles and music-making practices performed mainly by New York Puerto Rican and Latino
musicians who, while building principally on Afro-Cuban rhythms and performance practices,
incorporated jazz influences as well as other Latin American and Caribbean musics like bomba,
plena, cumbia, tango, and bolero.¹⁰ Maelo forms—together with Celia Cruz, for example—part
of a relatively small group of older musicians whose careers began before salsa emerged as a
generic label but who also were active during what is known as salsa’s golden age during the
1970s, and survived, in a variety of ways, to the demise of this golden age of the genre after the
1980s. His career and performing style shows a generational kinship with that of elder soneros
like Benny Moré, Abelardo Barroso, and Orlando “Cascarita” Guerra who along with Maelo—
and Celia Cruz—are collectively considered soneros mayores (elder singer-improvisers) among
salseros (see Chapter One).

I frame Maelo’s career within four main stages or periods. First, there is his time as the
lead singer for Cortijo y su Combo from 1954 to 1962. Even though he also recorded with La
Orquesta Panamaericana in 1954, his connection with Rafael Cortijo in this period was the key
to his transnational success (Quintero-Rivera 2009, 2015). Second, his reencounter with Cortijo
from 1966 to 1968 after a four-year hiatus due to imprisonment, a time when they recorded two
more albums (see Chapter Four for an extended discussion of his incarceration). Third, his period
as soloist from 1969 to 1979 in which he recorded one album with Kako Bastar’s orchestra, and

produced in Latin America and the Caribbean such as Duany (1984) Báez (1989), Ulloa (1989), Quintero-
Rivera (1998; 2009), Buckley (2004), and Quintero-Herencia (2005; 2014).
became the leader of *Los Cachimbos*\(^{11}\) with whom he recorded six albums. The key to this period was his connection with Afro-Cuban pianist Javier Vásquez as his musical director and the arranger of all his songs. Finally, there is what I call—playfully honoring the work of Edward Said (2007)—Maelo’s “late style:” the period from 1980 until his death in 1987, a time when he recorded one album, fought a severe vocal illness, and left a production unfinished because he could not record his singing parts due to his vocal ailments. This unfinished album had been arranged and produced by Louis García, a younger musician who played in this period a similar role to Maelo as that of Cortijo and Vásquez before him.

Maelo echoed the idea of a generational kinship with elder performers he considered his peers through a critique about salsa as generic label he posed in one of his last interviews. The footage of this interview is telling of the afflictions that marked his late style (see figure 5). Maelo seems to be exhausted throughout the conversation, which was recorded in the front yard of his house in his beloved neighborhood of Villa Palmeras, Santurce, and merely a few weeks before his death. Maelo was 55 years old at the time, but his demeanor makes him look older. His afflicted appearance shows his long battle with heroin addiction and vocal illness (of which I write in Chapters Three and Four). Friends sitting off-camera, colleagues and peers whom Maelo repeatedly addresses throughout the talk when he fails to recall a detail of his story, accompany him. Maelo’s voice is so hoarse he can barely speak. But still, he answers the questions asked by Panamanian journalist Jimmy Dawson with sagacity and candor.

Dawson seems overwhelmed throughout the interview by the aura of his interlocutor. His questions often become means to praise Maelo who in exchange tells him stories about his work as a bricklayer, his musical career, his Afro-Puerto Rican pride, his family, the vocal ailment that forced him to stop singing in the early 1980s, and his future plans.

\(^{11}\) The word *cachimbo* is used to refer both a smoking pipe and saxophones.
Dawson triggers Maelo’s critical conception of salsa when he asks candidly, “Ismael, what can you tell us about your personal appreciation of the state of Latin music today?”\(^{12}\) Maelo’s answer is a dense narrative about musical value, performance, and the formation of salsa as a musical genre that complements my brief contextualization of his music and career. He situates his music in time and names those performers whom he considers his peers. I cite Maelo at length,

> Well, I will tell you the truth. Things have changed a lot since I was with Cortijo. When [Latin music] was denominated salsa, you know, when everything was named salsa things changed, and nowadays all orchestras sound, with the respect of my colleagues, all orchestras sound alike. I cannot distinguish one from the other. Before, groups used to have a personal sound, you know. You listened to Cortijo and you knew it was Cortijo. You listened to La Sonora [Matancera] or [Tito] Puente, and without even hearing the singer you already knew which orchestra it was, you understand? That was lost with the concept of salsa. That personal sound was lost when different bands or singers were all labeled as salsa, and music lost a lot in the process, you understand? So, I believe that in order to avoid controversies, countries should take care of performing their own musics first before interpreting the music of other countries.\(^{13}\)

Such a dense critique of salsa could be taken in multiple directions. I, however, want to point out only a few things that speak directly to my aims in this section. I take his proposition that “countries should take care of performing their own musics first before interpreting the music of

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\(^{12}\) “Ismael, ¿cuál es tu apreciación personal de la música latina hoy día?”

\(^{13}\) For the interview video see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kugKHaQ3yY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kugKHaQ3yY)
other countries” as a call for the acknowledgement of the different local musical genres and histories of listening that coexist under the generic label salsa. I must mention that my interlocutors in both Panama and Venezuela praise him for consistently advocating during his visits to these countries for local musicians to play their respective musical traditions instead of merely performing salsa produced around Cuban and Puerto Rican rhythms (Chapter Four features a discussion about his influence on Panamanian music and Chapter Two a brief discussion of his musical influence in Venezuela). I take this aspect of his critique of salsa as key to my study because one of my aims as a salsa scholar is to counter what I consider to be hegemonic salsa narratives that are centered on New York, Puerto Rico, and Cuba through the perspectives of local histories of listening to salsa in Panama and Venezuela.

Another point I want to accentuate from Maelo’s critique of salsa is that, as mentioned previously, he voices a generational kinship that connects him to older musicians whose careers both preceded and coincided with the emergence of salsa as a generic label. I would add Celia Cruz to Maelo’s list of Cortijo, La Sonora Matancera, and Tito Puente as generational peers. I propose this mainly because Celia14 (as did Puente) openly shared a comparable critical stance towards salsa: both Celia and Maelo participated in salsa and praised it in multiple songs, but both of them also criticized salsa as a generic label in interviews. By adding Celia to this list of Maelo’s peers, I also aim to retake the reflection about gender in salsa by highlighting, even if too briefly, her position as salsa’s most important female singer; a sonera mayor whose life, music, and myth have gained hagiographical overtones that oftentimes surpass the aura of her fellow soneros in this generational kinship. Salsa is a heavily male dominated music in which

14 I use Celia instead of the formal reference to her last name “Cruz” similarly to how I use Maelo throughout this dissertation: to show the affective intimacy and devotion this type of popular performers generate. See Negrón-Muntaner (2007).
Celia alongside only a few other female performers such as La Lupe, Yolanda Rivera, and La India have disrupted such gendering hierarchies by asserting both their artistic and political agency. I invoke the names here as an insufficient effort to echo Frances Aparicio’s (1998; 2002) foundational call for a critique of salsa and salsa studies that confronts the hyper-masculine gendering of this genre, centers on female performers and listening practices, and acknowledges that masculinity as a gendered ideology and social construct is too often left untouched in inquiries about salsa. This dissertation is far from engaging profoundly with such a “feminist genealogy of salsa” (Aparicio 2002). In fact, I must highlight the lack in my study of an analysis of songs such as “Si te cojo (If I Caught You)” or “Mi Jaragual” in which Maelo voices overtly misogynist lyrics. However, my focus on the crossings between performances of masculinity and genre formation aims to add to this critical conversation about gender and salsa.

The performance of masculinity one sees and hears in Maelo’s interview with Dawson does not necessarily align with the overtly, stereotypically macho politics and aesthetics inherent to salsa. Maelo’s afflicted body and personhood takes center stage in this footage, and his consistent comments and glances to his friends seating off-camera resonate with the type of male affection commonly enacted by maeleros and maelistas. Such practices of “homsociality” (Sedgwick 1985; Hammarén and Johansson 2014) are central to my critical engagement with my ethnographic archive. One of the core theses I seek to develop in this dissertation is that Maelo’s

15 For additional studies on gender in salsa see Aparicio 1998 and Washburne 2008. See also Fiol-Matta (2017) for a study of gender and voice amongst Puerto Rican female singers.


17 Rivera, Ismael. 1973. “Mi jaragual” in Vengo por la maceta. TICO. CLP-1311. “Mi Jaragual” could be translated loosely as “My plot” or “My smallholding.” Jaragual is a localism not registered in the dictionary. The word “faragua” means grass for the cattle, which suggests that faragual or jaragual is a terrain for cattle feeding.
history of affliction, illness, and healing, which he voices in several songs, is a key factor in the intellectual and affective symbiosis my interlocutors feel with his music and myth. I frame these expressions of masculinity as expressions of what Francisco Ferrándiz-Martín (2003) deems as “wounded masculinities;” that is, performances of masculinity enacted by men living in barrios in Latin America and the Caribbean where they are often stigmatized as irremediable criminals through stereotypical contemplations of class, gender, and race. Maelo embodies this notion of a wounded masculinity that emerges from the tragic pressure placed on marginalized men not only in the interview footage where he is evidently ill and exhausted, but also, as it will become clear throughout the following chapters, in his songs and biography.

My incorporation of this concept of wounded masculinities into my analysis, though, calls for a couple of caveats. I want to emphasize that the effort to articulate a nuanced critique of masculinity should not open the door to an irresponsible negation of the permanently rising issue of gender violence in Latin America and the Caribbean, a phenomenon inscribed in the salsa repertoire through multiple songs. Nor should my analysis of masculinity, paying attention to how certain populations are gendered and criminalized, lead me to neglect the very real criminality problems neighbors in these marginalized communities face in their day-to-day lives. I must additionally emphasize that although my inquiry focuses on Maelo-centered homosocial relational affinities, these masculine friendships are always-already mediated by the intellectual, political, and affective strength of powerful female maeferas and maeistas such as Reina Tovar, in Caracas, Venezuela. Tovar was Maelo’s dear friend from La Bombilla, a barrio in Petare, a massive popular community in Caracas, and the organizer of an annual celebration of Maelo’s life after his death in 1987. Led by Tovar, this festivity was held for twenty-five straight years until 2012 when she stopped doing it due to personal reasons. Thereafter, Tovar and her family,
mostly her daughters, have joined the macropanas’ yearly celebration of Maelo. She has deeply influenced my fieldwork and life experiences in Caracas—sharing her wisdom and knowledge—since we met in 2009 when I participated of the celebration in La Bombilla together with some macropanas and with Ismael Rivera, Jr., who considers Tovar’s as his Venezuelan family.

Having these caveats in mind, I must point out that this notion of wounded masculinities, although truly important in the formation of salsa, is understudied in the salsa literature. Chris Washburne’s (2008) ethnography of salsa performance in New York City, through its study of the crossings between aesthetics, violence, drug trafficking, and drug consumption could be understood as somehow related to these matters. His study, however, is not centered on the theorization of masculinity, and it focuses mainly of male musicians rather than on fans and collectors, which are the focus of my analysis.18 To a certain extent, Wilson Valentín-Escobar’s (2002) discussion of masculinity in Héctor Lavoe’s death and funeral, which he describes as a transnational demonstration of mourning that stresses “male hegemony” in Puerto Rican popular music, and accentuates the “gendered construction of public culture and how masculinity constructs collective memory and national celebrations” (Valentín-Escobar 2002, 173), can be taken as a sort of precedent to my study within the salsa literature.19 I, nevertheless, take Lise Waxer’s (2002) ethnography of music collectors in Cali, Colombia, as a more kindred ancestor to my inquiry. As Waxer discusses, salsa connoisseurs commonly engage in highly gendered listening practices that give them different means of acquiring cultural capital and reaffirming

18 Washburne (2008,151-164) dedicates a chapter to a critical analysis of La India’s on stage performance as a challenge to established, binary gendering practices in salsa.

19 Héctor Lavoe’s devotional afterlife is understudied. It keeps growing with particular intensity in Lima, Perú, and more specifically in Callao, a popular seaport community where a bust of Lavoe presides over a square. For example, the fans of the Sports Club, Callao’s beloved soccer team, have incorporated his image into their team’s fandom. Additionally, Omar Córdova, whom I mentioned earlier as one of the collectors who posted the maelista meme on Facebook, often refers to Lavoe’s fans online as “el pueblo Lavoista (the Lavoista people).”
their masculinities in contexts of severe social and economic limitations. Salsa music collectors often treat their archives as means of worship and the places where they listen to their recordings as temples of sorts where they live in “direct communication with [their] musical gods and what they represent for [them]” (Waxer 2002, 122) not as an anachronistic thing of the past but rather as a vital matter of both their present and their futures. In this light, I take Waxer’s study about the intersection between music collecting, devotion, and the performance of masculinity as a key reference for the conception of the transnational network of Maelo-centered devotion I map in this ethnographic biography.

Her description of male music collectors also resonates with Jossianna Arroyo’s (2015) recent depiction of Maelo’s spectral presence amongst music connoisseurs, which she articulates on a chronicle where Arroyo mourns her late father. Arroyo’s text, moreover, emphasizes the ways in which her father identified with Maelo as fellow Afro-Puerto Rican men who shared the survival of the maelstroms brought by modernization, development, and precarization processes happening in Puerto Rico between the 1950s and the 1970s (see Chapter One). She describes the “methodical and obsessive rituals” his father created when listening to his beloved collection, and how such ritualistic listening “was an intense way of remembering and making connections” (Arroyo 2015, 250). It is worth citing her at length:

The difference of ten years between the life of Maelo and my father made them kind of brothers of economic change, although separated by a decade. The bomba, rumba and plena from the streets of Santurce symbolized his life... Maelo and Cortijo were at the time making their street rumbas, improvising on a changing everyday reality of a mulatto and artisan sector in Cangrejos, [Santurce]... My father and his twin brother were two drops of water. Mulattos with a darker skin tone than Ismael Rivera, with hard hair and a lot of attitude, they had already learned to imitate the swag of the neighbors of the area. Brave and full of energy—5’5 inches-small and thin, giants in their imagination, there was nothing that could be denied to them. The style of clothes and hairstyle that Maelo wore in those years—white buttons shirt, baggy pants, flat top hair and glitter, very clean cut, was what they had during those years...

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20 “… era un modo intenso de hacer memoria y establecer conexiones.”
Arroyo continues her description of masculinity by evoking a sense of mutuality between her father and Maelo,

On weekends we listened to Maelo, my father told me about these years and he told me that all his songs told real stories, that those plenas and bombas were for him a way of remembering life, violence and death… The music of Cortijo y su Combo and Maelo’s music, according to my father, taught us, above all, to see injustice from another point of view, to demand a particular respect and enjoyment against violence, and to understand the world from the possibility of play and negotiation… Today, when I look at his photos and listen to the music he liked, moving between the worlds of my memory and the multiplicity of remembrances that come to me through that living and changing archive that is YouTube, I see him similarly to how I see Ismael Rivera’s body and face… half a smile, naked chest, full of vibes and pauses, happy and full of life, and risky, because in the end death is, above all, a bet with life (Arroyo 2015, 250-256).

Arroyo’s description of her father’s devoted relationship to Maelo and Cortijo adds to the racial overtones that pervade my inquiry on wounded masculinities throughout the upcoming chapters.

Here, I specifically want to emphasize her description of them as half-smiling, bare chest, and risky Afro-Puerto Rican masculine specters that accompany Arroyo in her everyday through YouTube videos. Such a description resonates with the heavily masculine, Maelo-centered

21 “La diferencia de diez años entre la vida de Maelo y mi padre, los hacía un poco hermanos de cambio económico, aunque separados por una década. La bomba, rumba y plena de la calle santurcina simbolizó en su vida… Ya Maelo y Cortijo hacían sus rumbas de calle, improvisando sobre una realidad cambiante de día a día de un sector mulato y artesanal en Cangrejos… Mi padre y su gemelo eran dos gotas de agua. Mulatos de un tono de piel más oscura que Ismael Rivera, con el pelo duro y con mucho frente ya habían aprendido a imitar el swag de los vecinos del área. Bravos y llenos de energía-5'5 pulgadas-pequeños y delgados, gigantes en su imaginación, no había nada que se les negara. El estilo de ropa y de peinado que llevaba Maelo por esos años -camisa blanca de botones, pantalón baggy, pelo flat top y brillantina, muy clean cut fue el que tenían por esos años...

Lo fines de semana que escuchábamos a Maelo, mi padre me hablaba de estos años y me decía que todas sus canciones contaban historias reales, que esas plenas y bombas eran una forma de recordar la vida, la violencia y la muerte... La música del Combo de Cortijo y de Maelo, según mi padre, nos enseñaba ante todo a ver la injusticia desde otro punto de vista, a reclamar un respeto y gozadera particular ante la violencia, y de entender el mundo desde la posibilidad del juego y la negociación... Hoy cuando veo sus fotos y escucho la música que tanto le gustaba, puedo, entre los mundos de mi memoria y la multiplicidad de recuerdos que me llegan a través de ese archivo vivo y cambiante de YouTube, verlo como veo el cuerpo y el rostro de Ismael Rivera... una media sonrisa, el pecho desnudo, lleno de vibras y pausas, alegre y lleno de vida, arriesgado, porque al final la muerte es, más que todo, una apuesta con la vida.”
relational affinities that I study in this dissertation, and it also evokes the type of devotional listening studied by Waxer.

The tone of grief that marks Arroyo’s chronicle, moreover, evokes the song labor created and circulated—oftentimes online—by a transnational network of salsa collectors emerging after the 1980s, a period in salsa history that Jairo Moreno (2008) portrays as haunted by a specter of death that comes both from the demise of salsa’s commercial strength and from the passing of several iconic salsa performers. Maeleros and maelistas are enmeshed in this network of mostly male salsa connoisseurs whose modes of knowing-in-action, knowing-with, and knowing-through the audible have reshaped Maelo’s salsa through the lenses of death and worship. This is the period I call Maelo’s devotional afterlife, a moment in which these wounded masculinities have gained yet another layer: a mourning ethos amongst salseros that turns elder salsa fans into what Ana Teresa Toro-Ortiz (2015) calls “salsa widows” of sorts, men who cry desperately and create various forms of public grief in the face of losing their musical idols. It is not coincidental that his peers know Jesús Hernández, my main interlocutor amongst the maeleros in Caracas, as “Maelo’s Widow.” Framed as such, my inquiry regarding the recent shaping and reshaping of Maelo’s salsa through performances of wounded masculinities is a way of attending the above-mentioned call by Frances Aparicio for studies of salsa that look at masculinity as a gendered ideology and social construction that is prominent in the gendering of salsa. Additionally, my approach to such gender matters is informed by my reading of Jack Halberstam’s (1998) inquiries about “alternative masculinities.” Therefore, my notion of the spectral force that Maelo holds on maeleros and maelistas as they render him and his aura as a social common is also an attempt to consider the multiple “lines of identification [that] traverse the terrain of masculinity, dividing its power into complicated differentials of class, race, sexuality, and gender.”
(Halberstam 1998, 2). Having in mind this idea of an ethos of mourning and wounded masculinities that pervades the recent history of salsa, I can now return to Maelo’s death.

**The Enduring Aura of Maelo’s Death**

The affective strength of Maelo’s aura was in full display during his funeral, a massive outpouring of public mourning that echoed my aunt Lulú’s reflection that Maelo had not died because his fans would devote themselves to keep sharing his music. The wake was held on May 16th, 1987. Melo’s fans, peers, friends, and family filled the streets of his beloved neighborhood of Santurce (see figure 6). The event began in the *caserio* (public housing project) Luis Lloréns-Torres and ended in the cemetery of Ceboruco in Villas Palmeras, Santurce. In a spectacle of public sorrow that lasted three days, the grieving multitude articulated a poetics of mourning out of fragments of everyday life. Instruments, album jackets, cameras, pictures, live performances, and recorded music blasting on radios throughout the neighborhood were enmeshed as part of the musical farewell.

![Figure 6. Maelo’s wake through the streets of Santurce. Photo by Ricardo Alcaráz.](image)

Such a massive demonstration of grief evokes the idea of the mourning ethos that pervades the recent history of salsa. However, as will be discussed later in this dissertation, there
is a poetics of death and resurrection that is latent throughout Maelo’s repertoire (see Chapter Three). His wake in 1987 is actually reminiscent of Maelo’s Afro-futuristic narrative about his funeral in the song “Entierro a la moda (Fashionable Wake)” from 1971. In this tune, Maelo foresees the intensity of his wake by imagining it as the massive popular outburst it would be: the song tells a playful narrative about death, desire, and excess in which he would be offered “cigarettes and something stronger” to take with him to his afterlife. He maps, once again, a salsa kinship by calling for his peers—this time including both elder performers and younger ones—to perform in an imagined musical sendoff out of which he might even resurrect. He sings,

Que no falte Tito Puente,  
Tito Puente should be there,  
Roberto y su Apollo Sound,  
Roberto and his Apollo Sound,  
Willie Colón con su banda,  
Willie Colón and his band,  
Pacheco con su tumbao  
Pacheco with his tumbao,  
también Cortijo y su Combo,  
Also Cortijo y su Combo,  
Tommy Olivencia y su Orquesta,  
Tommy Olivencia and his Orchestra,  
Kako con su Trabuco  
Kako with his Trabuco,  
y Maelo quien les canta.  
And Maelo, who’s singing for you.  
Que vayan tocando mambos,  
I want them the to play mambos,  
sones, rumbas y guarachas  
Sones, rumbas and guarachas,  
pa' que todas las muchachas  
So all the girls  
con sus parejos vayan echando.  
can enjoy it with their partners,  
Y a lo mejor de la caja  
And maybe I’ll get out of the coffin,  
yo me levanto y salgo a bailar…  
I get up and go dancing…

Maelo’s vision of his resurrection in “Entierro a la moda” was fulfilled the moment he died. His voice, which had been basically absent from the “aural public sphere” (Ochoa-Gautier 2006) in Puerto Rico in the 1980s as he fought vocal illness and endured a relapsed into his addictions,

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came back to the radio during these days of grief. In his return, Maelo’s voice not only became a haunting presence for his fans; it also affected his family in particular ways.

His cousin, the late poet Dinorah Marzán remembered the shock she felt in the aftermath of his death, as we had a coffee at a bakery a few blocks away from Maelo’s house in June 2013. Marzán said, “Loosing him was a hard blow for the country. It was really terrible. Ismael was the only thing you would hear. In the taxi, in the streets, in the stores, his voice multiplied” (Marzán 2013). She voiced the struggle of listening to Maelo’s music in the immediate aftermath of his death when his voice seemed to gain an otherworldly strength through its newfound presence on the radio. The sudden return of Maelo’s voice to the aural public sphere in Puerto Rico during those days in 1987 created a similar challenge for Maelo’s sister Tomasa ‘Tommy’ Rivera. For her, the inescapable situation of having to listen to her brother’s recorded voice in his afterlife has been an enduring challenge. During a conversation at her house on June 2014, Tommy framed her reflection about Maelo’s death in relation to the death of another great Puerto Rican popular singer, creating a sort of kinship between them as sonorous specters. “When Tito Rodríguez died,” Tommy said, “I told his sister it must had been difficult to keep listening to his music and his voice in recordings, and when Ismael died it was our turn to keep listening to him (Rivera 2014).” When I visited her, it seemed like the struggle of having “to keep listening to him” was very much present for Tommy almost thirty years later. Maelo’s presence in Tommy’s life was evident throughout the afternoon we spent talking in her house together with

23 “Fue un golpe fuerte la pérdida para el país. Era bien terrible. Lo único que tú oías era a Ismael. En el taxi, en las calles, en las tiendas, era su voz que se multiplicaba” (Marzán 2013).

24 Tito Rodríguez was a famous Puerto Rican popular singer who was Maelo’s favorite interpreter.

25 “Cuando Tito Rodríguez murió yo le dije a su hermana lo difícil que debía ser escuchar la música de Tito, su voz en las grabaciones, y cuando murió Ismael nos tocó a nosotros seguir escuchándolo” (Rivera 2014).
her husband Eugenio ‘Baby’ Quijano. At some point that day, Quijano brought out from their bedroom a shirt Maelo wore shortly before dying (figure 7). Quijano showed me the shirt, then hung it close to where we were seating, and left it there accompanying us for the rest of our gathering. It felt to me as if that shirt embodied Maelo’s specter who was now “listening to us.”

Figure 7. Tomasa ‘Rivera and Eugenio Quijano. Quijano shows me their Maelo’s shirt while ‘Tomy’ stares at it.

In recalling Marzán’s and Rivera’s family stories about Maelo’s haunting voice, I almost always inevitably go back to the story of how my aunt Lulú recalls Maelo’s death. That is, her proposition that Maelo had not died because his fans would keep dancing and sharing his songs. In light of the heavily masculine fieldwork archive from which I construct this ethnographic biography, I consciously take the heartfelt narratives these three women shared with me about their respective reactions to Maelo’s death—together with the previously discussed theorizations by Aparicio, Wexer, and Arroyo, and my discussion of Ana Ochoa Gautier’s (2014) work in the following section—as offering the grounds for my conception of Maelo’s becoming a spectral presence who blurs the boundaries between life and death. As I hope is clear by now, my notion of Maelo’s spectrality is profoundly influenced by the work of several female scholars, as well as the song labor of maeleras and maelistas whose work has immensely marked my life and inquiry. In their stories, I also hear echoes of Amanda Weidman’s idea that,
Voices are constructed not only by those who produce them but also by those who interpret, circulate, and reanimate them: by the communities of listeners, publics, and public spaces in which they can resonate and by the technologies of reproduction, amplification, and broadcasting that make them audible. Individual voices are created, in this sense, by audiences, fans, critics, and cultural commentators as well as by the larger spirit of their times (2014, 45).

By placing Weidman’s theorization of voice in counterpoint with the stories of Marzán, Tommy, and Lulú, as well as in dialogue with the work of Aparicio, Waxer, Arroyo, and Ochoa Gautier, I theorize the aura of Maelo’s voice in his afterlife as something that is articulated collectively through the song labor maeleros and maelistas generate. To present another example of the strangeness that oftentimes characterizes how Maelo is praised as a specter, I want to also evoke the work of Roberta Singer, whose pioneering dissertation titled "My Music Is Who I Am and What I Do: Latin Popular Music and Identity in New York City" (1982), could also be seen as a precedent to my study about male music collectors. In her essay, “The Power of Plena” (1994), she describes a type of Maelo devotion amongst plena musicians in Puerto Rico and New York that is reminiscent of what maeleros and maelistas do. I cite her at length,

there was something "magical" about the relationship between Ismael Rivera and the Puerto Rican people that transcended the popularity of Mon Rivera and Rafael Cortijo. Photographs of him are still prominently displayed in homes, restaurants, gas stations, bars, and cafetines [coffee shops] in Puerto Rico; women still get teary when they hear one of his ballads; and T-shirts with his likeness are still being made and worn by musicians and fans. One avid fan can be seen around the San Juan area with a giant boom box, singing along to "music minus one" versions of Cortijo/Rivera tunes. Copying even the nonverbal sounds of Rivera, as well as his phrasing and vocal inflection this aficionado has created a following of his own (Singer 1994, 219).

The Maelo fan or devotee that Singer mentions in her description of what I take as an example of the type of devotional sense of kinship I study, is Luis Alberto Centeno Díaz, a maelero who is

26 Mon Rivera is an iconic plenero from Mayagüez, a coastal city on western Puerto Rico, who rose to stardom simultaneously with Cortijo y su Combo. See Colón-Montijo (2010) for an article and short documentary in Spanish about Mon Rivera: http://www.mayaguezsabeamango.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=61&Itemid=63
still active in Puerto Rico, and who can be seen every year in the cemetery of Villa Palmeras, playing Maelo’s music on his radio, and singing along exactly as Singer recalls him, for the anniversary of Maelo’s death and for his birthday. Also, what Singer describes as something “magical” that distinguishes Maelo’s relationship with plena musicians, and with Puerto Ricans more largely, is reminiscent of the mythical tones that his music and biography have gained within maeleros and maelistas as they reanimate and recirculate Maelo’s voice in his afterlife. This dissertation aims to portray how the Maelo-centered friendships my interlocutors create through their song labor speak about the spirit of their times, and mainly about the context-specific histories of listening they produce. A discussion about the political stakes implied in the formation of such a transnational network of Maelo devotion is appropriate at this point in order to further comprehend the aura of Maelo’s spectral voice.

**Listening to Maelo’s Spectral Voice**

My conception of spectrality has politico theological implications I have not addressed so far in this introduction. I take the concept of political theology, which is heavily used throughout this dissertation as a theorization tool, to evoke the crossing of the religious and the political in Maelo’s music and in how my interlocutors listen to, speak about, and relate through his songs and biography. I invoke here a notion of the religious that connects with the sense of devotional kinship maeleros and maelistas live through Maelo’s music, and to the various ways in which he mediates the crossing of the sacred and the profane through his songs. I take the multiplicity of devotions he inscribes through his repertoire and life (see Chapters One and Two), combining

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27 Centeno Díaz can be seen in this YouTube video singing Maelo’s song “El Mesías,” which I discuss in Chapter Four, together with the song’s author Johnny Ortiz: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IxaDesvEjg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IxaDesvEjg).
expressions from diverse Black Atlantic Religions (Matory 2005) such as *Regla de Ocha* or *santería*, and *espiritismo,* but also Catholicism (see Chapter Four) and Protestantism in the later years of his life, as central to the hagiographical overtones Maelo has gained in his afterlife.

Such mediations of the religious, I argue, need to be understood in relation to a broader history of the political definition of the person in which, as Ana Ochoa Gautier (2014) suggests, voice has served concurrently as a means of casting Black and indigenous groups as worthless of citizenship, a means of differentiating between humans and nonhumans, and a means for these groups to endure such histories of marginalization. Ochoa Gautier suggests, through a detailed reading—or detailed listening, I should say—of the colonial archive of 19th-century Colombia, that while elite Europeans and Creoles understood the “animal-sounding” voices of Black and indigenous groups as “the sign of a lowly human condition, used for processes of racialization through a politics of representation” (2014, 12), these marginalized groups understood the voice otherwise. For them, “voice was not understood as that which represented their identity;” rather, voice, “manifested or enabled the capacity to move between states of multiplicity or unity where a single person can envoice multiple beings” (Ochoa Gautier 2014, 12). Voice, should thus be understood here as a contested “medium of mutuality.” On one hand, it is used by the elites to cast those who could not speak “properly” as worthless of citizenship and personhood. On the other hand, Black and indigenous people utilize it to embody a notion of a “distributed self,”

28 For recent studies of *Regla de Ocha* or *santería* see: Mason (2002); Palmié (2002), and Ramos (2012). For studies on *espiritismo* see: Romberg (2003), Matory (2005), Román (2007), and Espirito Santo and Panagiotopoulos (2015).

29 For her discussion of the “distributed self” Ochoa Gautier builds on the work of scholars such as Marilyn Strathern (1998) and Marshal Sahlins (2008). She cites Sahlins, for example, “The individual person is the locus of multiple other selves with whom he or she is joined in mutual relations of being; even as, for the same reason, any person’s self is more or less widely distributed among others” (2008, 48).
understood as locus of multiple relations in which humans and nonhumans coexist through a sense of mutuality and spectrality.

I resonate with Ochoa Gautier’s inquiry about how, amidst the configuration of such a politics of life, “the spectral figuration of the voice and of the acoustic as an invisible yet highly perceptible and profoundly felt (im)materiality, which hovers between live entities and the world, became particularly important” (Ochoa Gautier 2014, 5). This understanding of a spectral voice that is profoundly imbricated in larger colonial histories of the political definition of the person in Latin America and the Caribbean is central for my understanding of Maelo’s voice as spectral. More specifically, this is vital to one of the main theses I present in this dissertation: that Maelo’s stories of vocal illness, addiction, and incarceration—his wounded masculinity, we could say—are perceived by maeleros and maelistas transnationally as a shared experience of socio-political and economic abandonment, and that their Maelo-centered devotion is imbricated within these broader political histories. To say it otherwise, I propose that the aura of Maelo’s spectral voice is grounded on a political theology in which his listeners relate to Maelo’s music and biography as dramatizing, through their devotional modes of listening and storytelling, the ritualistic, contemporary dimensions of larger macro-political and economic processes in which they have long-been cast as both unhealthy and evil; that is, as unworthy of citizenship.

In order to give specificity to this thesis, I relate the aura of Maelo’s spectral voice to context-specific biopolitical histories of illness, healing, and devotion in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Panama in which marginalized populations have been racialized as uncivilized, ill, and in need of hygiene. These histories are key to the idea of wounded masculinities I theorize, mainly through the ways in which illness has frequently been linked to delinquency as tools of power deployed in order to shape disciplined, modern citizen bodies (Ramos 1994). As Julio Ramos
discusses regarding the cholera outbreak that affected a transnational network of colonial enclaves in the 19th century—which as I discuss in Chapter Four directly impacted the rise of Black Christ devotion in Portobelo, Panama—, the constitution of citizenship in these contexts has frequently implied “strategies in which "health" designates both care for the body as well as submission to discipline and morality” (Ramos 1994, 188). I understand Maelo’s story of illness and healing (DasGupta and Hurst 2007), and his insistence on upholding a sense of agency when facing the disheartening circumstances of losing his voice, struggling with heroin addiction, and enduring incarceration, as profoundly imbricated within these larger colonial histories of illness, voice, and citizenship. I claim that the aura of Maelo’s spectral voice is telling of how such broader politico theological specters haunt his music and life, as well as the everyday lives of maeleros and maelistas.

As I discuss in Chapter Three, such histories of illness and healing are commonly voiced through manifestations of Michael Taussig’s (1999) idea of the public secret, which is a well-known, endured experience that people find hard to enunciate freely. Such expressions of the secret as an axis for the mobilization of politico theological knowledge (Arroyo 2013) generate a sense of the proverbial, understood as something that entails much more than what it appears to be saying (Adéèkó 1998), which has sacred connotations that are key to the spectral figuration of Maelo’s voice. This is crucial to what Singer describes as the “magical” thing plena musicians feel for Maelo, to what Arroyo describes as a sense of brotherhood between her father and Maelo, and to what Tommy describes as the struggle to keep listening to her brother’s music after his death. Maelo’s spectral voice, as reanimated by my interlocutors through their song labor, can thus be understood as a medium of mutuality; and his biography, as the story of a distributed self. My aim in the upcoming chapters is—paraphrasing Lila Ellen Gray’s (2013)
ethnography of Amalianos, or fado aficionados in Portugal who self-identify as devotees of this genre’s most iconic performer, Amália Rodríguez— to narrate the biography that maeleros and maelistas hear in Maelo’s voice.

**Painting an Ethnographic Portrait of Maelo**

In order to frame my research and storytelling methods, I take inspiration from the work of my interlocutors. Specifically, I want to evoke the song labor of two macropanas whose work allows me to describe the central role friendship has played in my research as a methodological matter. First, I imagine the act of narrating this biography as painting an ethnographic portrait of Maelo in ways that resonate with the paintings of Freddy Quintero, a maelero who at times has called himself ‘Maelo’s Painter.’ Quintero paints his own reinterpretations of pictures, album covers, and other images that have become canonical portraits of Maelo; images fans and music collectors cherish. He studies the ways in which others have portrait Maelo and then creates his own versions of these images or, we could say, his own versions of Maelo (figure 8). Quintero, I argue, paints idiosyncratic portraits of Maelo that resonate with the multiplicity of stories out of which I compose this ethnographic biography.

Instead of aiming to produce a fixed or definitive biography about Maelo, I seek to weave together the different reinterpretations my interlocutors produce about his life and music through their song labor. In this approach, I also follow anthropologist Mauricio Goldman’s proposition that “Ethnographers should articulate the different discourses and partial practices (in the double sense of the word partial, meaning both incomplete and also interested) they observe, without achieving any kind of totalization or complete synthesis” (Goldman 2013, 3). Mine is therefore a partial ethnographic portrait of Maelo, a biographical account that does not seek to achieve any
totalizing truths about his life and music but aims instead to relate the multiplicity of his spectral force. Coming out of the counterpoint between my work and that of my interlocutors, this study is the product of the affective, intellectual, political, and devotional investments that ground the intellectual friendships that have sustained my research since 2006.

Figure 8: Freddy Quintero’s portrait of Maelo.

My ethnographic inquiry spans between 2006 and 2015. Through all these years, I have maintained digital, virtual communications with my interlocutors in Panama, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico via email, Facebook, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. We have shared conversations, pictures, videos, and information about their celebration of Maelo’s life and music. I have done follow up interviews with them online. This research from afar has been complementary to several fieldwork trips that form the core of my ethnographic inquiry. I made three research trips to Venezuela between 2006 and 2013, and four journeys to Panama between 2009 and 2015. Throughout, I have also maintained an active conversation with Maelo’s family and close friends in Puerto Rico in person, on the phone, and on social media.
This project, therefore, has not followed the model of a “traditional type of Malinowskian ethnography” (Goldman 2013, 2) of an extended, concentrated period of fieldwork immersion. It is instead “an ethnography in motion,” the product of “a cumulative, long-term involvement with the people researched” (Ramos 1990; Goldman 2013). Even though the “official” fieldwork time frame for this research closed on October 2015, I have maintained an ongoing interaction with my interlocutors for twelve years, “amassing ethnographic material for years and never, really, cutting off the ties with them” (Ramos 1990, 459). Although these communications from afar are not letters in the “traditional” notion of this genre, these long-distance communication means are kin to the epistolary form. In saying this, I take inspiration from Jesús Hernández who several years ago used a letter as a means of communicating with Maelo.

In the 25th anniversary Maelo’s death on 2012, Hernández wrote a letter to Maelo and to his beloved mother Doña Margot. He titled the letter “13 de Mayo (May 13th),” which as I have mentioned several times is the date of his passing, and emailed it to me on May 14th, 2012 (see figure 9). According to Hernández, who is a practitioner of espiritismo, the spirits of Maelo and Doña Margot came down to him on the afternoon of May 9th, 2012, as he was listening to Maelo’s music in his home in Caracas. One of the things that strike me the most of his letter is how he addresses both of his interlocutors with intimacy. He writes as if he knew Maelo and his mother personally, using a friendly but reverential tone that evokes comradely. Hernández reifies in his writing stories that have naturalized the idea that it was Doña Margot who taught Maelo how to sing rhythmically. He writes, for example,

[It was] her who taught him apprehend la clave through the snap of her maternal fingers. Like a mother teaching her sons how to take his first steps in life. Do you remember, Maelo, when you and Margarita locked yourselves in the bathroom to sing? And Margot would tell you, ‘this is how you play clave, and immediately after such a percussive
action, the guttural sounds of Carabalí black ancestors would appear… uhm … uhm … uhm … clave … clave … Maelo.”

Figure 9: Letter to Maelo and Doña Margot. Emailed to me by Jesús Hernández.

30 “Quien lo enseñó a apprehender la clave, a través del chasquido de sus dedos maternales. Cual madre que enseña los primeros pasos en la vida de su hijo… Maelo, te acuerdas, cuando tú y Margarita se encerrabana en el baño a cantar… los dos… y Margot te decía, así Maelo, así es que se toca la clave… y seguida de esa acción percutiva, aparecían los sonidos guturales de Negros carabalí… uhm… uhm… uhm… clave… clave… Maelo” (Hernández 2012).
Hernández’ storytelling in his letter is reminiscent of a reverential tone that pervades most of the stories about Maelo shared by my interlocutors. It evokes the maelista meme briefly discussed above in which Maelo is referred to as a miraculous performer of sorts, and the idea of an ethos of mourning that characterizes the recent history of salsa. What I find peculiar is that maeleros and maelistas habitually relate to Maelo simultaneously as a friend whose songs voice histories that resonate with their own lives and as a sacred icon of sorts whose biography has gained for them a sense of mystique and magic. Such an elegiac sense, adds an additional analytical wrinkle to my work: painting the ethnographic portrait of Maelo that arises from my critical relation to my interlocutors’ song labor almost inevitably implies a critique about the intersections between ethnography and hagiography, the devotional account of the lives of saints (Werbner 2016), as a key critical means of grappling with the essentialist undertones that frequently pervade the song labor maeleros and maelistas produce.

In taking Hernández’s letter as an inspiration to think about my methodological approach, I also found a connection to David Scott’s (2017) recent theorization of friendship as a medium of intellectual production. Scott beautifully crafts his theorization in a book in which he writes each chapter as a letter addressing his friend, peer, and mentor Stuart Hall in the aftermath of his death. For him, the letter is a medium with a particular “capacity to honor friendship—to give friendship its measure and its due (Scott 2017, 8). I particularly resonate with Scott’s idea of an attuned awareness that is necessary for us to comprehend where our friends are coming from. It is worth citing Scott at length as he addresses Hall on these matters. He writes,

My suggestion is that what is relevant first and foremost to intellectual friendship is something more like an attitude of attuned awareness of the work of those we know and admire and honor—an attuned awareness, specifically, of something more than the substantive argumentative details of their intellectual contribution, an appreciative awareness, one might say, of something like the integrity of the ethos and style disclosed in their work. What intellectual friendship solicits, I believe, is an attitude of attentive
receptivity, a readiness to appreciatively hear where the other is coming from (Scott 2017, 13-14).

I read Scott’s critical tribute to Stuart Hall, his understanding of intellectual friendship as an affective praxis grounded on the need to truly appreciate where our interlocutors are coming from, as a vital methodological inspiration for my project. In what follows, I make an honest effort to work from and through a practice of attuned awareness and attentive receptivity. I thus take the song labor of maeleros and maelistas as forms of anthropological, ethnomusicological, and biographical theorization.31

**Chapter Overview**

Each chapter in this dissertation approaches a different expression of the song labor out of which comes this ethnographic biography. Additionally, each chapter examines a particular set of politico theological specters that pervade both Maelo’s repertoire and life as well as the lives of my interlocutors. Throughout, two main spectral concerns link the chapters: the gender conundrum of male homosociality discussed throughout this introduction, and, as importantly, the specter of race that concurrently haunts Maelo’s life and music and the lives of maeleros and maelistas. Given that mine is, in many ways, a study about the intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) between race and masculinity through Maelo’s music and biography, I would like to succinctly make clear my position as a researcher. I do this having in mind that handling race terminology with nuance can be a daunting task, particularly as a Puerto Rican and Latino “scholar of color” in the U.S. writing about Latin American and Caribbean countries with deeply complex, context-specific histories of racism.32 Still, I am a “white” Puerto Rican, heterosexual man, raised in Ciales, a countryside town in the Central Mountain Range of Puerto Rico, who in many ways fits

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31 I am also evoking Viveiros de Castro (2013).

the characteristics of a contemporary jíbaro, or peasant, as emblematic of the racial democracy myth that grounds the Puerto Rican nation. For many years, I must bitterly admit, I was oblivious of the constant, day-to-day racism Afro-Puerto Ricans experience. We could say that I “knew” or I “thought I knew” about it, but I didn’t really understood. Perhaps, I can now say, the profound affection I have felt since my childhood for Maelo’s music, and for plena, bomba, and salsa more broadly, made me believe in the fantasies of racial democracy, and made me reiterate the long-standing silencing of profound and violent histories of racism in Puerto Rico. Conducting this investigation about Maelo’s life and music, and about the song labor my interlocutors in Panama and Venezuela produce, has allowed me to see first hand contemporary racial hierarchies and racist experiences that I wouldn’t have “known” otherwise.

I became fully aware of my obliviousness about such racial matters during a cold winter afternoon on 2012 when I visited La Casita de Chema, a foundational Puerto Rican institution in the South Bronx, together with Ismael Rivera, Jr. At the time, I was doing research at La Casita so I was quite familiarized, already a friend of this community, and mainly with José Manuel “Chema” Soto, the founder and leader of this place. I had also already been a friend of Rivera, Jr. for more than four years. Hence, I was honestly shocked when, as we were singing plena, I heard Rivera, Jr. whispering to Chema complicity while looking at me, “¡Al jincho este le gusta la música de nosotros de verdad, ah! (This jincho really digs our music, right!).” I have been called jincho, a word used in Puerto Rico to name white or pale-skinned people, throughout my life. I actually use it when describing myself as different from the term blanquito, which has class-privilege implications I do not identify with. Yet, the way in which Rivera, Jr. used it and how Chema reacted laughing out loud while confirming that I indeed dig their music, caught me by surprise. I kept playing my pandero (plena hand-held drum) and singing along with them as we

spent the whole afternoon sharing music en familia, among your own as the people of La Casita like to say. However, I was immediately moved by the proverbial sense I felt in the jincho joke, and remained touched by the way in which both Chema and Rivera, Jr. embraced me while also fully acknowledging racial hierarchies and experiences that up until that point I thought I was fully aware of but was profoundly ignorant about.

Maelo was a proud Afro-Puerto Rican man who sang and spoke about racial matters, and heartened his younger family, friends, and peers to embrace their blackness with pride. Thus, race is necessarily a central concern for my study that appears and reappears in different guises through the upcoming pages. Nevertheless, I must clarify that mine is not a study specifically about racialization nor is it a detailed analysis about Maelo’s “racial imagination” (Radano and Bohlman 2000). Rather, race and racism appear in two ways in what follows: on a macro level, they are inherent, overarching specters in the politico theological histories I discuss on each chapter; and on the other hand, my interlocutors deal with race and racism both in overt and proverbial modes through their song labor and relational affinities. Hence, even though my focus is not on racialization I honor the centrality of race in Maelo’s music and life as well as in the lives of my interlocutors by thinking critically about the ways in which race and racism haunt my ethnographic archive. My critical engagement with such racial matters is deeply influenced by recent studies about race in Puerto Rico done by women intellectuals like Eileen Suarez Findlay (2000, 2014), Magali Roy-Féquière (2004), Jossianna Arroyo (2003, 2013), Rivero (2005), Isar P. Godreau (2006, 2015), Ileana Rodríguez-Silva (2014), Petra R. Rivera-Rideau (2015), and Licia Fiol-Matta (2017), amongst many others. The combination of these ethnographic and archival sources, I hope, should allow me to grapple with the specter of race in this ethnographic biography.
Chapter One is titled *El Sonero Mayor: Theorizing Song and Soneo as a Media of Mutuality*. In this chapter, I study how Maelo’s vocal performance has become a medium for the formation of relational affinities among maeleros and maelistas. Rethinking historical narratives of salsa that have naturalized the conception of Maelo as El Sonero Mayor or The Best Singer-Improviser in salsa in light of the theorizations three of my interlocutors create about Maelo’s songs and soneos, I argue that his innovative vocal performance is much more than a marker of musical innovation. Examined through the prism of my archive, I propose, his songs and vocal improvisations become media of mutuality and kinship. This chapter also discusses in detail my conception of song labor as a type of affective and theoretical work created through listening and storytelling. By examining the storied theorizations about Maelo’s songs and soneos three of my interlocutors in Panama and Venezuela produce, I theorize song labor as a three part endeavor: it is about listening to popular songs as stories, about creating and retelling stories that arise from popular songs, and about conceiving both stories and the act of telling stories as relational media. Finally, I propose that the hagiographical tone that marks many of the storied theorizations about Maelo shared by my interlocutors emerges from the ways in which Maelo voices in his music a sense of devotional kinship that mediates larger histories of religion in the Caribbean and Latin America.

In Chapter Two, entitled *Un Profundo Ecuajei: Enmeshing Maelo within the Political Theology of Chavismo*, I explore different politicized modes of listening to Maelo that exist in Caracas amongst different political actors in the chavismo period after the 1990s. I study the intellectual and affective symbiosis macropanas live through their relations to Maelo. Taking the haunting presence the word *ecuajei* has as a signature vocal expression in Maelo’s repertoire and in the song labor of macropanas as my entry point, I study how they enmesh Maelo within the
political theology of chavismo. My analysis consists of four main analytical moves. I situate Jesús Hernández’s description of Maelo’s spectral force in his life through his expression “Maelo is for me a profound ecuajei,” as well as his theorization of the sense of religiosity he feels in Maelo’s music, in relation to the specter of Bolivarian devotion that pervades chavismo. I also theorize the male relational affinities that dominate the Maelo-centered sociality of macropanas as enacting a type of wounded masculinities that abound in Latin American and Caribbean disenfranchised barrios. Such gender performances, I argue, are reminiscent of Maelo’s histories of affliction, illness, and hustling as voiced in his repertoire. In this chapter, I finally examine the sacred stakes of ecuajei as an expression used to praise the goddess Oyá in multiple Black Atlantic religions (Mattory 2005). My aim is to speculate with a poetics of voice as a medium mutuality that blurs the boundaries between the religious and the profane through the relation between Maelo and Oyá. In this light, I argue that Oyá’s feminine force spreads over the heavily male ethos of my inquiry, and multiplies the politico theological implications of the song labor I theorize throughout this dissertation.

In Chapter Three, entitled Cortijo Se Llevó La Llave: Narrating Public Secrecy and Pharmacoloniality Through a Story of Illness and Healing, I take my ethnographic journey back to Puerto Rico in order to present one of my main theses: that the sense of mutuality my maelero and maelista friends create transnationally through their song labor and relational affinities needs to be framed in relation to Maelo’s struggles with vocal illness, addiction, and incarceration as entangled specters of empire and colonialism in Puerto Rico. I analyze this through the lens of pharmacoloniality (Ramos 2010; Muñiz-Varela 2013), which proposes the need to understand addiction, drug trafficking, and incarceration as mutually constitutive elements in larger illness histories in which Puerto Rico has been utilized as a colonial laboratory and Puerto Ricans as
experimental subjects often deemed permanently ill. This chapter begins with an analysis of the phrase “Cortijo se llevó la llave (Cortijo took the key with him),” a mourning expression Maelo coined shortly after the death of his beloved friend Rafael Cortijo in 1982; during a time when he battled a severe vocal illness. I understand this phrase as telling a story of healing and illness: it is a poetic expression that enmeshes the loss of a friend with the loss of the possibility of singing. But perhaps more importantly for my study in this dissertation, the phrase “Cortijo se llevó la llave” serves Maelo as a means of countering the specter of illness by telling a story that resonates with how Puerto Ricans often endure the racist pharmacolonial specters that haunt their history and contemporary life. I argue that this is done through Michael Taussig’s (1999) notion of the public secret, which is a well-known, lived experience that people struggle to articulate publicly. Such a sense of public secrecy adds layers of mystique to Maelo’s biography and songs that I consider central to the reverential and hagiographical undertones that pervade the song labor I study throughout these chapters. Such pharmacolonial specters are also vital to the politicized listening of his music and biography maeleros and maelistas do in Venezuela and Panama. In Venezuela, these histories of pharmacolonialism are taken by macropanas as imbricated within the political theology of chavismo. Meanwhile, the Panamanian maelista friends with whom I work enmesh such histories within the political theology of the U.S. presence in Panama and the nationalist military government of Omar Torrijos and of Black Christ devotion.

Chapter Four, entitled *El Brujo de Borinquen: Maelo’s Mutuality with El Nazareno, The Black Christ of Portobelo, Panama*, builds on my theorizations in Chapters One and Two about the sense of devotional kinship maeleros and maelistas live through Maelo’s music. It studies the sense of mutuality between Maelo and The Black Christ of Portobelo, Panama emerging during
Maelo’s afterlife. I have three principal aims in this chapter. First, I examine the Maelo-centered friendship shared by Luis Gooding and Pedro ‘Sorolo’ Rodríguez through their song labor. I take their storied theorizations about both the impact of Panama in Maelo’s life and about Maelo’s impact in Panamanian culture as the entry points for my ethnographic analysis. Second, I situate Maelo’s devotion for El Nazareno in the context of both the intimacy of his struggle with heroin addiction and the larger political context of U.S. empire and militarism in Panama. I examine the ways in which the song “El Nazareno” added to the internationalization of this religious festival amid the populist government of Omar Torrijos and how devotees have made Maelo’s songs and image a part of their devotion in his afterlife. Third, I study the implications of the moniker El Brujo de Borinquen or The Puerto Rican Wizard, which Panamanians gave Maelo greeting the profound connection they shared. I argue that this epithet connotes a sense of mystique and devotion that echoes the significance of brujería or wizardry as a politico theological concept that mediates major forms of knowledge in Black Atlantic religions. My argument in this chapter is that the sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno that has emerge with particular strength during Maelo’s afterlife is telling of how Maelo’s personal story of illness and healing from heroin addiction is often understood as mirroring El Nazareno’s pain towards crucifixion. I argue that this sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno creates a parallelism between them and their devotees who perceive their suffering as a shared struggle based on experiences of enduring marginalization amidst social and economic abandonment. Ultimately, I propose that in this context Maelo is often praised as a Black Nazarene of sorts, an iconic popular singer and whose music, pictures, and myth have been incorporated by devotees into their ritualized forms of social interaction.

**Devotional Afterlives in the Age of Expediency**
The thirty years that have passed since Maelo’s death encompass a historical time that has been deemed as “the age of expediency” (Yúdice 2003; Luker 2016), a moment when the arts are called upon to address socio-political matters previously situated outside the domain of culture. This period has seen the advent of devotional afterlives for various popular singers in Latin America, the Caribbean, and around the globe. In recent years, a few music scholars have published biographical studies dealing in different ways with these spectral devotions. See for example, Virginia Danielson’s (1997) portrait of Umm Kulthum as the voice of Egypt, Deborah Páredez’s (2009) study about Latinx icon Selena, Lila Ellen Gray’s (2013) inquiry about fado’s most iconic singer Amália Rodriguez, and Morgan James Luker’s (2016) analysis of Carlos Gardel’s otherworldly presence in contemporary Argentinian musical culture.

In light of the 30th anniversary of his death in 2017, Maelo has been the object of a few biographical and sociological studies in recent years (Moreno-Velázquez 2010; Carrasquillo 2014; Quintero-Rivera 2015; Nina 2017). My dissertation seeks to contribute to this larger conversation as so far the only ethnographic-based study of Maelo. Moreover, mine is a unique inquiry because in mapping the transnational network of devotion shared by maeleros and maelistas I situate illness, healing, and religiosity at the center of Maelo’s music and life, and take his death as the event that triggered the affective strength of his devotional afterlife. This has for me vital political undertones. In a contemporary moment when Puerto Ricans are once again racialized as ill and unworthy colonial subjects amid a drastic situation of debt, disaster, and forced migration; and in the midst of a present-day context in which Puerto Ricans, Panamanians, and Venezuelans endure different extractivist capitalist endeavors producing environmental disasters that threaten their modes of life, this ethnographic biography aims to narrate Maelo’s mythical life as an Afro-Puerto Rican performer whose music and career echo
the lives of listeners who, like him, have long-been casted as undesirables, but who nevertheless encounter means of enduring their harsh everyday experiences frequently through listening, storytelling, and belief. *Specters of Maelo* is, in this light, my effort to honor critically the words of my aunt Lulú when she told me that Maelo had not died because salseros would always be willing to keep sharing and dancing all the music he left us.
Ismael ‘Maelo’ Rivera (1931–1987) is a foundational Afro-Puerto Rican singer in the histories of salsa. Known amongst his fans, peers, and contemporary researchers as El Sonoro Mayor (loosely, The Greatest Singer-Improviser), Maelo’s voice became inscribed in the aural tapestry of barrios in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in Latino and Caribbean communities in the United States beginning in the mid-1950s. For salseros (salsa fans and musicians), the title of El Sonero Mayor has become iconic. It is a moniker understood to index Maelo’s standing as a performer who set the standard for soneo (vocal improvisation) in salsa. This understanding is grounded on the idea that Maelo pioneered a new style for salsa singing and improvising: an approach to the call-and-response section of songs in which, instead of limiting his vocal improvisations to the spaces between the refrains, he would playfully sing non-stop over the chorus, frequently incorporating greetings, religious chants, and popular sayings into his improvisations. Maelo’s fans, peers, and experts consider this vocal improvisation technique, known as pisar el coro (stepping over the chorus), as his main stylistic contribution to soneo.

In this chapter, I rethink historical narratives of salsa that have naturalized the conception of Maelo as El Sonero Mayor in light of the theorizations three of my interlocutors create about Maelo’s songs and soneos. I argue that when examined through the prism of my ethnographic archive both the title of El Sonero Mayor and the practice of pisar el coro become much more than markers of musical innovation. Rather, his vocal performance becomes a medium for the articulation of relational affinities through song. In a nutshell, Maelo mixes modes of speech and song that resonate with his fans’ everyday lives. Thus, many of my interlocutors understand his songs as stories that voice modes of being, relating, and belief that are reminiscent of individual
and collective stories of sociability shared by his fans transnationally. Furthermore, coming from different spheres of musical knowledge production, they create different Maelo-inspired storytelling products such as songs, albums, books, poems, paintings, radio programs, T.V. documentaries, essays, t-shirts, photos, and stories. My research studies how and why my interlocutors articulate relational affinities through the work they create about Maelo’s songs, a topic this chapter will explore mainly through the lens of song and soneo.

Each of my four interlocutors for this chapter cherishes their profound musical affinity for Maelo’s life and legacy, and they produce different modes of theorizing song and soneo that are telling of their respective relations to Maelo: Panamanian salsa icon Rubén Blades speaks as a sonero and sort of Maelo mentee; Venezuelan César Miguel Rondón, author of the canonical *The Book of Salsa* (2008[1979]), speaks as a salsa historian and as Maelo’s friend; Venezuelan Jesús Hernández speaks as member of the *macropanas*, a Maelo-centered collective of friends; and Panamanian music collector Luis Gooding speaks as a *maelista* or an expert in Maelo’s repertoire and life. Their theorizations of Maelo’s vocal performance coincide in that they are expressed in the form of stories, often imbued with a reverential tone, which tend to give a sort of hagiographical and mythical undertone to their retellings of Maelo’s songs and biography.

I see the work my interlocutors do imbuing Maelo’s repertoire within individual and collective histories of sociality as enacting a type of “song labor” through modes of creating and sharing musical knowledge that generate relational affinities. My conception of song labor builds mainly on Jocelyne Guilbault’s (2014) concept of “labor of love,” which she uses to describe the material and immaterial labor musicians do to earn a living; musical undertakings that are both modes of labor and sources of enjoyment and fulfillment.34 I also ground my idea of song labor

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34 Guilbault grounds her theorization of labor on Friendson (1990), Hardt (1999), and Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004).
on Loiuse Meintjes’ (2017) concept of “music laboring,” which she uses to theorize the gender performances male Zulu musicians and dancers enact as a means of reasserting their wounded masculinities amidst drastic conditions of illness. My idea of song labor extends these concepts beyond the labor of musicians in order to also encompass the intellectual and affective labor music collectors, fans, and experts produce about Maelo’s songs. This form of labor produces “an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, and communication” (Hardt 1999, 94), which also generates relational affinities. Such labor makes us reconsider song and soneo as genres that need to be theorized not only with regard to their specific formal features, but also in relation to the stories people cherish about the meaning of these genres in day-to-day lives (Martín-Barbero 1987; Ramos 1989). In this chapter then, I take my interlocutors’ narratives about Maelo’s music in their quotidian lives as the grounds for proposing a conception of songs and soneos as forms of “storied knowledge” (Ingold 2009), knowledge conveyed through narrative. Song labor, in my view, is threefold: it is about listening to popular songs as stories, about creating and retelling stories that emerge from popular songs, and about understanding both stories and the acts of telling and listening to stories as relational media. Thus, my interlocutors’ articulations of Maelo-centered storied knowledge are a form of song labor.

The conception of songs as storied knowledge comes from my interlocutors’ depiction of Maelo’s music as telling allegorical stories of their lives. Key to my theorization is Edouard Glissant’s (1997) conception of relation as narration and Tim Ingold’s (2009) inquiry about kinship as storied knowledge. Glissant theorizes relation as narration, and as a political, aesthetic and philosophical project that “informs not simply what is relayed but also the relative and the related” (1997, 27). He theorizes both stories and storytelling as relational media, which also
become means for the creation of what Glissant describes poetically as the “accumulation of sediments” that marks the linked histories of Caribbean peoples (1997, 33). I hear Maelo’s vocal performance, as well as my interlocutors’ listening of his songs as allegorical stories, as indexing the presence of such an accumulation of historical sediments in everyday life.

I relate Glissant’s understanding of relation as narration to Tim Ingold’s (2009) notion of kinship as a form of storied knowledge. Discussing ethnographic research conducted by him and/or other anthropologists in Papa New Guinea, Alaska, and Russia, he also describes stories as media of relationality. It is worth citing him at length to further clarify this notion. He writes,

To tell a story is to relate, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, bringing them to life in the vivid present of listeners as if they were going on here and now. Here the meaning of the ‘relation' has to be understood quite literally, not as a connection between predetermined entities, but as the retracing of a path through the terrain of lived experience. Making their way from place to place in the company of others more knowledgeable than themselves, and hearing their stories, novices learn to connect the events and experiences of their own lives to the lives of predecessors, recursively picking up the strands of these past lives in the process of spinning out their own… And in the story as in life, it is in the movement from place to place—or from topic to topic—that knowledge is integrated (Ingold 2009, 200; emphasis on the original).

Ingold’s description of storytelling as a means for the mobilization of kinship and knowledge evokes Glissant’s concept of the accumulation of sediments as a key component of the political, philosophical, and aesthetic potential of relation as narration. By this I mean that both thinkers conceive stories and storytelling as media that can articulate, through their accumulation and reinterpretation, a sense of temporality in which past experiences become drawn into the present. I relate this to the type of everyday poetics emerging from the counterpoint between Maelo’s vocal performance and the multifarious ways in which my interlocutors both in Panama and Venezuela reinterpret his songs as allegorical stories of their lives.

My larger aim in this chapter is to build on my interlocutors’ storied theorizations about Maelo’s music in order to think critically about the title of El Sonero Mayor and the practice of
Building on their theorizations, I then present my own conception of Maelo’s vocal performance: I argue that the key to his role as a transformative sonero in histories of salsa is based on the type of “generic intertextuality” (Bauman and Brigs 1992) he creates through his vocal improvisations, which incorporate different genres of speech such as popular refrains, religious chants, vocables, and greetings to family, friends, peers, and deities. The religious undertones of some of these intertextual links are central for the affective relations some of my interlocutors articulate with and through Maelo’s songs. I argue that the reverential tone that pervades their storied theorizations of Maelo’s music and biography is grounded in how such intertextual relations mediate the intersection between the sacred and the secular in Maelo’s salsa. Riffing off Timothy Brennan’s (2008) conception of “secular devotion,” I understand my interlocutors’s storied knowledge as creating a devotional sense of kinship around Maelo. In order to further ground my discussion of such a sense of kinship, I evoke Marilyn Strathern’s (2005) understanding of kinship as a fruitful anthropological tool that comprises both conceptual and interpersonal relations. Therefore, my conception of kinship is twofold: I use it to describe the relational affinities created by my interlocutors through Maelo’s songs and to ground my argument that such a sense mutuality is created through listening and storytelling.

But what is it about Maelo’s songs that generate such a strong affective response amongst my interlocutors? Why is it that an Afro-Puerto Rican popular music singer became a spectral presence in the lives of people who relate his songs to racial and class histories across transnational borders? Why has Maelo become such a heroic and mythical icon (Carrasquillo 2008, 2014)? Is it the lyrics? Is it his voice? Is it due to their particular modes of listening to his songs as allegorical stories? How do song and soneo generate such modes of affective labor?

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35 In Hardt (1999), the discussion of “affective labor” is mainly centered on service jobs, but he also speaks of advertising and media as spaces in which labor is done with the intention to create and mobilize
This chapter begins with these questions in order to theorize the relationship between Maelo’s intertextual vocal performance and my interlocutors’ narrative mode of listening. I present a conception of song and soneo as media for the articulation of a “mutuality of being” that is grounded “on the basis of shared life conditions and shared memories” (Sahlins 2013, 8). The relational affinities created through such listening practices include the living and the dead as well as deities from Black Atlantic religions (Matory 2005). I propose, in the latter part of this chapter, that this mutuality of being emerges in great part from a central component of Maelo’s vocal performance: the ways in which it mediates modes of speech and belief from his beloved neighborhood of Villa Palmeras, Santurce that enmesh Maelo within larger Caribbean and Latin American transnational, multi-lingual histories of empire and colonialism (Díaz-Quiñonez 1993; Berrios-Miranda and Dudley 2008; Quintero-Rivera 2009, 2015; Arroyo 2015; Carrasquillo 2015). In order to begin my inquiry about these larger matters, though, we need to start by recalling how the title of El Sonero Mayor became synonymous with Maelo for salseros.

**A mí me llaman El Sonero Mayor: A Brief Story About a Mythical Naming**

Narrating an in-depth story about how Maelo came to be known among salseros as El Sonero Mayor escapes the aims of this paper. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the sake of my argument to at least acknowledge the mythical undertones that mark the account of how he acquired the title. Maelo embraced the title of El Sonero Mayor starting in the 1960s. He sang affects. As a mass-mediated product, salsa can be framed within this idea, and the work my interlocutors do can be thought as a mode of affective labor.

See Moreno-Velázquez (2010) for a detailed account of this story.
about it in several songs during the 1970s. For example, in his cover version of the standard tune “El Cumbanchero”\textsuperscript{37} he sings of his soneos:

\begin{quote}
A mí me llaman El Sonero Mayor
porque vacilo con la clave
y tengo sabor.
\end{quote}

I’m known as El Sonero Mayor
because I play with the clave
and I groove.

Additionally, El Sonero Mayor is the title of Maelo’s final album, which he released in 1980.\textsuperscript{38} The connection between Maelo and this title has become so naturalized that El Sonero Mayor is the title of the first two book-length studies of Maelo’s life and musical legacy (Pagano 1992; Figueroa-Hernández 1993).\textsuperscript{39}

However, both the meanings of the term “sonero mayor” and the stories of how Maelo was baptized as such indicate that this moniker is not exclusive to him. In Cuban music, the term sonero has long been used to describe the singer of son or sones, a foundational musical genre in salsa. This title is also used in Cuba to name different musical ensembles used to play son, such as a septeto sonero or a conjunto sonero (Acosta 2004). Meanwhile, in New York and Puerto Rican salsa the title sonero is used not only to name singers, but more specifically to emphasize the skills of those salsa performers who are virtuosic vocal improvisers. The label mayor is understood both in Cuban son and in salsa as a marker of greatness only assigned to a handful of special performers. There can be many soneros, one could say, but only a few of them are transcendental enough to be considered soneros mayores.

\textsuperscript{37} Rivera, Ismael. 1971. “El Cumbanchero” in Lo Último en la Avenida. TICO. SLP 1215.


\textsuperscript{39} For additional studies that include El Sonero Mayor in their titles see Flores (2004), a memoir article, and Quintero-Rivera (2015), a sociological study.
Maelo was indeed one of these soneros mayores because of his virtuosic improvisational skills, which I will discuss in the following section. But why has he become, for salseros, equal with the moniker of El Sonero Mayor? Central to this narrative is the acceptance of a sort of mythological tale about the origins of his naming. As the story goes, it was the paradigmatic Cuban sonero Benny Moré who baptized Maelo as El Sonero Mayor. This has created a sort of kinship or lineage between Moré and Maelo around a title shared by two foundational singers who are then connected perhaps forever through this act of naming. However, this mythological story has been recently desacralized. It has been confirmed that Moré used this title to praise other performers as well.

According to Puerto Rican musical researcher Elmer González, foundational Cuban musicians such as Juan Formell and Adalberto Álvarez confirmed during a socio-musical event in Havana that Moré also called Cuban singers Orlando “Cascarita” Guerra and Abelardo Barroso soneros mayores. González also recalls that Catalino “Tite” Curet Alonso—the preeminent salsa composer from Puerto Rico and author of several of Maelo’s most popular songs—also described Maelo, Cascarita, and Barroso as the triad of soneros mayores (González 2016). González’s testimony speaks to the testimonies offered by Elías López and Alfredo “Chocolate” Armenteros, two trumpet players who claim to have been present when Moré “baptized” Maelo not as El Sonero Mayor, but specifically as El Sonero Mayor de Puerto Rico. Such testimonies, moreover, resonate with Maelo’s own memory of this naming. During one of his final interviews in Puerto Rico, Maelo said,

40 Both have been influential performers in Cuban music since the 1970s—the late Formell as founder and leader of Los Van Van and Álvarez as founder and leader of different bands such as Son 14.

Cuban producer Antonio Maceda, who is no longer with us, told me an anecdote once in the Bronx Casino. He told me that Benny Moré had mentioned an Ismael Rivera who was the singer of Cortijo [y su Combo]. According to Maceda, Benny Moré referred to me saying that I was a ‘sonero mayor.’

Maelo’s remembrance in this interview aligns partially with the accounts of González, López, and Armenteros in that all of them recall Moré naming Maelo as “a sonero mayor” or El Sonero Mayor de Puerto Rico, a different type of naming that does not make this title exclusive to Maelo.

Beyond the controversy of the origins of this iconic title, the fact that Moré and Curet named other singers as soneros mayores adds a layer of significance to my discussion. The title is not merely a marker of who was the best sonero, but rather of a constellation of what Cuban musicologist Leonardo Acosta (2004, 43) deems “alchemist performers,” those who transform Caribbean music by creating nuanced changes to existing musical forms, thus making something already extraordinary into something of even superior impact. Maelo was entangled with this constellation as a sort of generational cohort that preceded and coexisted with salsa. To explain how the alchemy of Maelo’s vocal performance results not only from the innovations he produced through his soneos but also from how his songs voice ways of life that resonate with his listeners transnationally, I now turn my attention to my interlocutors’ song labor.

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42 “Fue un cubano ya desaparecido de nombre Antonio Maceda, en el Bronx Casino. El me hizo una anécdota. Me contó que Benny Moré le había hablado de un tal Ismael Rivera que cantaba con Cortijo, Según Maceda, Benny Moré se refirió a mi persona diciendo que yo era un ‘sonero mayor’.” Ismael Rivera in Ramón Luis Brenes, in “A Ismael Rivera un cubano le bautizó el sonero mayor” (Rivera 1981 as cited in Carrasquillo 2014, 74).

43 The controversy about this naming is more complex since a group of music collectors recently claimed to have an interview in which Maelo credits Maceda as the person who actually named him as such. See Moreno-Velázquez (2010) for a detailed account of this controversy.
Theorizing Maelo’s Vocal Improvisation: Song, Speech, and Storytelling

Most musical arrangements in salsa use a variation of the bipartite song-structure inherited from the Cuban son: a first part that “consist[s] of main themes or tunes, which have predetermined lengths and often are in a variety of standardized song forms, such as AABA or verse-refrain,” and a second “open-ended improvisatory section known as the montuno” (Washburne 2008, 168). It is during the montuno that “vocalists perform in a call-and-response fashion, alternating between a precomposed chorus and lead vocal improvisations” (Washburne 2008, 168). Here is where the tactic of pisar el coro intervenes. Maelo challenged the limitations of space and time typically reserved for the singer’s solo improvisations during the montuno. Rather than being confined to the customary slot, his voice would overlap with the voices of the chorus in different moments and manners. Sometimes he began his inspirations singing over the last part of the chorus, other times he extended his voice towards the initial part of the chorus, and other times he simply sang non-stop over the chorus, frequently including greetings, chants, and popular sayings in his improvisations.44

Even though Maelo brought new levels of skill to this practice of pisar el coro, this tactic was not entirely new in Caribbean popular music. In his vocal performance, Maelo played with elements that were very much present in the musical traditions he learned growing up in his beloved barrio of Villa Palmeras, Santurce in Puerto Rico. There, his musical education included street-corner, communal performances of the Afro-Puerto Rican music genres bomba and plena as well as the international repertoire that permeated through the radio. According to two

44 See Figueroa-Hernández (1993), Quintero-Herencia (2005), and Quintero-Rivera (2009, 2015) for different analysis of Maelo’s soneo and vocal performance. Also see Lapidus (2004) for an analysis of soneo that deals with the practice of pisar el coro amongst other stylistic elements of Cano Estremera’s improvisational skills.
maestros of the bomba and plena traditions, moreover, Maelo’s vocal style evokes the voices of lesser-known bomba and plena singers from Puerto Rico. Jesús Cepeda, an elder of these musical traditions and a dear friend of Maelo since their childhoods, told me in an interview conducted in 2012 that he could perceive stylistic traces of elder bomberos and pleneros from Santurce in Maelo’s vocalizations (Cepeda 2012). Cepeda’s idea gains specificity when one puts it in dialogue with the comments of Pedro Noguet, a plena musician and researcher who lives in New Jersey. Noguet’s expertise is the old-school performance plena practices of Mayagüez, a coastal city in western Puerto Rico. During a plena workshop on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 2015, Noguet described the practice of pisar el coro as a compositional technique characteristic of the old-school modes of performing plena not only in Mayagüez but in Puerto Rico more broadly. He stated vehemently that Cortijo y su Combo were particularly successful in inscribing these modes of performing plena into their recordings, specifically because of Maelo’s level of virtuosity (Noguet 2015).

Maelo is one of the relatively few soneros active in salsa whose careers began before salsa emerged as a generic label—Celia Cruz is another example. His performance practice then shows a generational kinship with that of improvising singers such as Benny Moré, Abelardo Barroso, and Orlando “Cascarita” Guerra who along with Maelo are collectively considered soneros mayores. I discuss all of this in order to emphasize that Maelo drew upon long traditions of vocal improvisation in Cuba and Puerto Rico—including bomba and plena, but also rumba, son, and décimas—while adding to these styles new levels of virtuosity that set the standard and precedent for soneo in salsa.

During an interview I conducted in Panama City on October 2015 with Ruben Blades, the Panamanian singer-songwriter restated that Maelo’s practice of pisar el coro was a key element
of his vocalization, and he added several nuanced analyses concerning Maelo’s style. In his storied theorization, Blades shows how Maelo’s blueprint for salsa singing and improvising can also be understood as an index of the larger histories of speech and song that I conceive as grounding the relational affinities my interlocutors create through Maelo’s music. Blades explains:

He basically established a mode of singing that was very rhythmic. Until that moment, singers performing in the musical forms of salsa, or guaracha, or however you want to call it… the song structure was usually: introduction, chorus, soneo, mambo, chorus, soneo, and chorus. That was the structure. When singers entered the call-and-response section they sang exclusively in the spaces after the chorus, which were reserved for the singer. For example, you had the chorus, let’s say, “Tú llevas amores con Dolores (You are having a love affair with Dolores),” and then after this phrase was over you had the soneo, “Dolores this, Dolores that,” then again the chorus, and then again the soneo, “Bla bla bla.” Ismael broke this clave, this organizational scheme; and he not only broke the structure of waiting for the chorus to end before starting the soneo. He also broke rhythmic schemes because he would get on top of the clave, hold back, wait for it to pass, and then get on top of it again. All this is what gives his soneo a percussive quality that makes it different and exciting (Blades 2015).

According to Blades, the key to the practice of pisar el coro was Maelo’s outstanding sense of rhythm and time, the ways in which he created rhythmic and melodic displacements built around la clave as the main rhythmic organizing principle in salsa. He also reiterates the significance of Maelo’s percussive approach to singing, which is another naturalized idea often shared in the

45 “Es que básicamente él estableció una forma de cantar que era una forma de cantar muy rítmica. Hasta ese momento cuando se cantaba en los formatos estos de salsa o guaracha o como quiera llamárse… O sea venía la canción, break una introducción, coro, soneo, mambo, coro, soneo, coro, esa era la estructura. Cuando los cantantes cantaban, eran espacios que solamente, que eran reservados solamente para la voz inmediatamente después del coro. Entonces venía el coro, eh, ‘tú llevas amores con Dolores’, pues terminaba, ‘tú llevas amores con Dolores’ y entones empezaba el soneo, ‘Dolores no sé qué, Dolores no sé qué’, otra vez el coro ‘tú llevas amores con Dolores’, venía el sonero, bla bla bla. O sea que todo era muy marcado. Ismael rompe el esquema de la clave esa y no solamente rompe el esquema del coro, perdón, de que yo tengo que esperar a que termine el coro para empezar a sonear, sino que rompe el esquema de la clave porque se encarama sobre la clave, se aguanta, la deja que pase, entra, o sea y todo eso lo que hace es que le da una percusividad a su soneo que lo hace distinto y lo hace excitante” (Blades 2015).

46 La clave has been described as the main rhythmic organizing principle in salsa (Singer 1982). See Acosta (2004, 45–52) and Washburne (2008, 178–83) for recent, thorough reflections about la clave.
salsa lore, although Blades’s statement differs from more typical statements in that he gives specificity to this idea by indicating that Maelo consciously grounded his voice in the sound of drums. Maelo was a mentor to Blades in New York during the 1970s amidst the commercial boom of salsa, and some of the first advice Blades received from Maelo was the importance of learning to play percussion instruments if he wanted to become a sonero. Such pedagogic guidance led Blades to learn how to play the bongos as a complement to his knowledge of the guitar. But Blades’s conception of Maelo’s voice as percussive also includes the relationship between accent, melody and improvisation, playing with and against la clave as a rhythmic organizing principle. Blades continues,

I bring up the song “Dolores” because many of Ismael Rivera’s great fans haven’t done a real musical analysis of his enormous capacity, not only in terms of rhythm and structure but also in terms of melody. In “Dolores,” for example [Blades sings recreating the melody and mimicking Maelo’s voice], “Tú llevas amores con Dolores berararirararararara… barararirararararara… barararirarorororiru… yo lo que le hago son favores (You have love for Dolores berararirararararira… barararirararararirara… barararirarororiru… I only do her favors).” You know, he is singing tones, and he is making accents that are very hard to do and that are very different from what other singers were doing at the time. Then when soneos come (Blades once again marks the clave and sings), “Tú llevas amores con Dolores, Dolores, Dolores son para que llores, ay pero mira… (You have love for Dolores, Dolores, Dolores that makes you cry, ay, but look…)” he steps over the chorus, he gets on top of the clave [Blades sings once again, “Eh Dolores, eh Dolores, tú llevas, Dolores, Dolores, Dolores” [Eh Dolores, eh Dolores, you have Dolores, Dolores, Dolores. Ismael broke schemes, and that immediately separated him from other singers and caught our attention. Additionally, his voice had a sound that for us sounded like the barrio, like it came from the streets, you know. There was something, a tono callejero (a street-wise tone)… Ismael’s intonation made us think a lot about the streets (Blades 2015).47

47 “Y yo te traje la canción esa de Dolores porque es una canción que muchos de los grandes fans de Ismael Rivera que no tienen la menor idea, que no han hecho un análisis real, musicalmente hablando, de su enorme capacidad, no solamente en términos de clave, de estructura, sino de melodía. En Dolores por ejemplo, (canta) ‘Tú llevas amores con Dolores berararirararararira… barararirararararara… barararirarorororiru… yo lo que le hago son favores’. Tú sabes, él te está metiendo unos tonos, te está dando unos acentos que no son fáciles y que son muy distintos a lo que se estaba haciendo en ese momento. Y cuando vienen los soneos (marca clave y canta), ‘tú llevas amores con dolores… Dolores, Dolores son para que llores, ay pero mira…’ Y se va por encima del coro, se va por encima de la clave… ‘Eh Dolores Eh Dolores, tú llevas, Dolores Dolores Dolores…” O sea rompe los esquemas Ismael y eso inmediatamente lo separa de todos los demás cantantes y llama la atención… Y aparte tenía un sonido,
Blades’s theorization of Maelo’s vocal performance emphasizes the deliberate use of melodic-rhythmic accents as a central experimental dimension of Maelo’s vocal performance. This is key because it highlights accent as a central stylistic element that simultaneously affects rhythmic and melodic dimensions of vocalization and as an innovative site in which Maelo “broke schemes.” His description of melody as central to Maelo’s vocal improvisation is also important because it deemphasizes celebratory understandings of rhythm in studies of Afro-descendant music, and in descriptions of Maelo’s performances more specifically. In such descriptions, rhythm is too often given preeminence over melody as a marker of race, therefore contributing to essentialist ideas about race and musicality (Ortiz 1994[1950]; Agawu 1995; Frith 1996; Radano 2000). Blades’s more nuanced interpretation of the complex interrelationship between time, rhythm, accent, and melody in Maelo’s vocal performance complicates these essentialist racial and musical notions. The emphasis on the relation between the melodic and the accentual as key to the experimental work Maelo does with his improvisations, moreover, calls for a rethinking of the very idea of soneo itself.

Blades, furthermore, relates Maelo’s transformative role in the histories of Caribbean popular music to the particular tono callejero he perceives in Maelo’s voice. I understand this concept as pointing in two interrelated directions. On the one hand, Blades is referring to how Maelo’s vocal timbre evokes modes of speaking and hustling commonly used in working- or lower-class barrios to endure the quandaries of everyday life. On the other hand, Blades is referring to Maelo’s aggressive way of using the voice in his improvisations through the practice of pisar el coro, as well as to his use of repetition as a means to create new melodic and rhythmic

que era un sonido que para nosotros era un sonido muy de barrio, muy de calle, tú sabes, había una cosa. Había un tono callejero… el de Ismael era un tono que nos recordaba muchísimo la calle” (Blades 2015).
lines in the soneos during montuno sections. This is what Blades points to when he mimics the work Maelo does through repetition in the verse “Eh Dolores, eh Dolores, tú llevas, Dolores, Dolores, Dolores.” In theorizing both Maelo’s timbre and his aggressive use of repetition in his soneos as evocative of street-wise modes of speaking and living, Blades indexes another shared idea in salsa lore: that soneros function as “the voice of the people.”

A conversation I had in Caracas with César Miguel Rondón, author of the canonical The Book of Salsa (2008[1979]), provides other keys to unlock understandings of Maelo’s soneos. Rondón repeats the narrative about pisar el coro, but eventually he brings a different perspective to this topic by highlighting a central component of Maelo’s vocal performance: the incorporation of popular modes of speech into his soneos. When I asked the author how he might describe Maelo’s soneo, Rondón responded,

“You have the Cuban soneo, right? The Cuban sonero does four lines [in his inspirations during the call-and-response section of songs]—and this is the example Maelo used to give—“Where the Cuban sings four lines I sing fifteen.” He was evidently exaggerating, right? But where was he going with this? If you compare Miguelito Cuní, for example, a sonero that fits the orthodox model of the Cuban soneo, Miguelito would sing perfectly rhythmically, would not create anything outside of the meter in which he is soneando. Soneando, which means improvising, right? Well, Maelo is one of the first soneros who started doing a very curious thing: he improvises not only with the lyrics he is singing but also with the meter and the melodies. I think that this is how he began breaking ground in very important ways. For him, doing this was not merely about showing off his musical skills. Of course there was some of that. This was about what he wanted to do as a popular musician. What did he do as a popular singer? He collected modes of speech he heard in the streets. He didn’t invent the expression “ecuaje” [a greeting to Yoruba goddess Oyá, which is considered Maelo’s signature vocalization]; that is a popular chant you can hear in the streets. He didn’t come up with the expression “¡fuera zapato viejo!” [“out with the old shoes”). This phrase is out there. The same happens with “bueno, y qué?” [“so, what’s up?”], which is another phrase that comes from the streets. In incorporating these phrases, he does two things: on one side, he has a direct contact with what is in front of him, and on the other side, he has an inventiveness based on the music he is singing. What happens when he combines these two things? When he mixes these elements he creates a direct bond with his audience that is listening, whether it is in a live show, on the radio, or dancing to an album. He also shows a type of musical spectacle

that differentiates him from other soneros. This is what made Ismael Rivera, since early on in his career, a unique being and paradigmatic reference for all (Rondón 2013).

Rondón’s perspective gives specificity to the idea that the sonero sounds the people’s voice by focusing on specific examples from Maelo’s vocal performance. His narrative is marked by the reverential tone I frequently encounter in my interlocutors’ descriptions of Maelo as a popular singer with almost magical effects on his audience, a tone that imbues narratives of his life with a hagiographic aura. Still, Rondón highlights an aspect of Maelo’s vocal performance that I find key to the sense of mutuality through song that many of my interlocutors articulate: the incorporation of popular expressions such as ecuajei, fuera zapato viejo, and bueno, y qué into his soneos. Even though the use of popular expressions and religious chants in soneos is not a practice exclusive to Maelo, I agree with Rondón that Maelo does this in particular ways that separate him from other soneros in salsa. In the next section then, I explore how such hyperbolic, reverential conceptions of Maelo as a sort of alchemist performer are constituted not only by these types of narratives but also by the use of popular expressions to convey a sense of mutuality and connection to different peoples and deities.

49 “Entonces, tú tienes el soneo cubano. El soneo cubano hace cuatro líneas, ponle, ese era el ejemplo que él decía. “Donde el cubano hace cuatro líneas yo voy a hacer quince líneas.” Evidentemente exageraba, ¿no? Pero a ¿dónde iba? Si tú comparas a Miguelito Cuni, por ejemplo, un sonero muy en el concepto ortodoxo del sonear cubano, Miguelito va a cantarte perfectamente acompasado, no se va a ir de tiempo, no va a inventar nada más allá en la métrica en la que él está en ese momento soneando. Soneando, ojo, improvisando, ¿ok? Bueno, el Maelo es de los primeros que empieza a hacer una cosa bien curiosa: no solo empieza a improvisar con la letra en lo que está diciendo sino que además empieza a improvisar con la métrica y las melodías. Y yo siento que allí es donde él empieza a hacer unas rupturas muy importantes. Por ejemplo, no era el alarde musical por el alarde musical. Claro que lo tenía. Era porque, ¿qué hacía él en tanto músico popular, en tanto cantor popular? El lo que hacía era recoger el habla que él tenía en la calle. El “ecuajei” es un grito popular que no lo inventa él, eso es un grito popular que está en la calle. El “fuera zapato Viejo” no es una frase que se le ocurre a él. Fuera zapato viejo es una frase que está en la calle. Y “bueno y qué,” está en la calle. Entonces, él toma esas frases y tiene por un lado un contacto directo con lo que él tiene por delante, y por la otra tiene una inventiva en base al son que él está haciendo. Cuando los mezcla, ¿qué logra? Cuando él mezcla ambos elementos tiene un vínculo directo con una audiencia, bien esté presente, bien, que lo esté oyendo por la radio, bien que lo esté bailando en un disco, y tiene un alarde musical que lo diferencia de todos los demás. Eso es lo que hace desde muy temprano a Ismael Rivera un ser único y un patrón referencial para todos” (Rondón 2013).
In his vocal performance, Maelo mixes refrains, aphorisms, vocables or *jitanjáforas*,\(^{50}\) verses, sacred chants, proverbs, and the names of family, friends, peers, places, saints, songs, myths, and deities. Refrains such as “echa caldo ahí que los garbanzos están duros” (“put more broth in the pot, the chickpeas are still raw”), “suéltame, negra” (“let me go, negra”), and “esto fue lo que trajo el barco” (“this is what the ship brought us”) as well as seemingly unintelligible and onomatopoetic expressions such as “Maribelemba,” “pituquipapirimbi,” “yeberecuyeyeo”\(^{51}\) are iconic vocalizations for Maelo. His skillful incorporation of such vocables into his soneos has been acknowledged by Arcadio Díaz-Quiñonez as a form of Spanish that connects Maelo to larger Caribbean transnational and multi-lingual histories of empire and colonialism (1993, 135-164).

The incorporation of these popular expressions into his soneos, furthermore, creates a “generic intertextuality” (Bauman and Briggs 1992) that is key to how my interlocutors relate to Maelo’s music. For example, the song “San Miguel Arcángel (St. Michael the Archangel)”\(^{52}\) tells the story of an encounter with a Catholic saint, San Miguel, who has been syncretized with a number of deities in different Black Atlantic religions (Matory 2005).\(^{53}\) Throughout the song,

\(^{50}\) Jitanjáforas can be described as playing with syllables, fragments of words, or unintelligible expressions not for their meaning but for their sonorous qualities. This is similar to the concept of vocables as words or utterances that are significant for their sound rather than for their meaning.

\(^{51}\) Maribelemba seems to be a nickname for the daughter of one of Maelo’s dearest friends and my interlocutor in Panama Pedro “Sorolo” Rodríguez. Pituquipapirimbi is an onomatopoetic expression emulating he uses in the song “Incomprendido” (1972). Meanwhile, Yeberecuyeyeo is an apparently unintelligible expression he voices in several songs.

\(^{52}\) Rivera, Ismael. 1972. “San Miguel Arcángel” in Esto fue lo que trajo el barco. TICO. CLP 1305.

\(^{53}\) See Testa (2004) for an ethnographic study in Cuba that features several ritualistic enactments of San Miguel Arcángel.
Maelo voices San Miguel Arcángel, greets multiple divinities of the Yoruba pantheon as well as Catholic saints and virgins, chants different refrains, and greets friends and family. This song, furthermore, relates a story about the co-presence of different modes of belief and devotion in his repertoire. Maelo sings,

Yo tuve una revelación  
I had a revelation,

ví a San Miguel que me hablaba  
I saw San Miguel talking to me

ya no tienes que temer  
You don’t have to fear anymore

yo te vine a proteger  
I came to protect you

y a quitarte esos fluidos  
and to clean you from the bad fluids

pues, te quieren envolver.  
someone wants to wrap you in.

Si tú quieres progresar  
If you want to progress,

y buena vida seguir llevando a  
nd keep having a good life,

reza a Dios y a San Bernardo  
pray to God and St. Bernard

que siempre te están cuidando  
they always take care of you,

reza a Dios y San Bernardo  
pray to God and San Bernard,

oye, que siempre te están cuidando.  
listen, they always take care of you.

Óyelo!  
Hear it!

In the call-and-response, Maelo greets diverse deities from the Yoruba pantheon such as Eleguá, Changó, Obatalá, Yemayá, and the author of the song, Henry Williams. In a later iteration of this refrain he adds the names of his lover at the time, Gladiola, and his beloved mother Margot.

Con Eleguá, Changó,  
With Eleguá, Changó.

Con Eleguá, Changó,  
With Eleguá, Changó,

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54 Ramos (2012, 229–47), describes these deities as follows: Eleguá (or Eshú Elegbá), “Orisha of the crossroads, controller of the world’s affairs;” Yemayá (or Yemojá), “Orisha of the waters and motherhood;” Changó (or Shangó), “Orisha of thunder, virility, and masculinity,” and Obatalá, “Orisha of creation, most senior among the orishas.”
Con Yemayá y con Obatalá
With Yemayá and Obatalá,
Henry Williams,
Henry Williams,
Oye la rumba a gozar
Listen to the rumba, enjoy.
Despójate Gladiola!
Free yourself, Gladiola!
Doña Margot!
Mrs. Margot!

In singing these names, he creates an interrelationship between family, friends, colleagues and divinities, which, riffing on Timothy Brennan’s (2008) notion of a “secular devotion” that is central Afro-descendant music, I am calling a devotional sense of kinship. Brennan defines this concept as “the resilience in contemporary popular music of African religious elements that are not perceived by listeners religiously, but to which they are, often unconsciously devoted” (2008, 4). I use this idea critically for two main reasons. First, instead of his reference to “African” religious elements I prefer Matory’s more nuanced idea of Black Atlantic religions. Second, contrary to what Brennan suggests, some of my interlocutors are very much aware of how these religious matters mediated through music relate to their everyday lives.

In May 2013, I interviewed Jesús Hernández, who is the engine of a musicological and socio-political Maelo-centered collective of friends from Caracas, Venezuela known as the Macropanas (macro-friends). For them, Maelo’s songs have become loci for the articulation of shared histories of sociability that they frequently imbue with religious and affective meanings amidst Venezuela’s long-standing political struggles. During our conversation, Hernández emphasized the significance of religiosity in his songs through a storied notion of Maelo’s music. He argues that Maelo voices a concrete and everyday sense of the religious that evokes broader

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55 Macropanas’ politicized listening to Maelo’s music specifically relates him to Venezuelan leftist histories that preceded chavismo, the political movement that supported Hugo Chávez. Theirs is not the only form of politicized listening to Maelo happening in Caracas. Coming from the opposite side of the political spectrum, César Miguel Rondón has said in interviews that that Maelo’s music will sound through the streets of Caracas on the day when chavismo is overcome. See Chapter Four.
histories of popular religiosity in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is what he calls Maelo’s “magical-religious world.” Hernández explains:

Maelo is for me, and you can ask my friends Oso and Freddy who are here with us today, or you can ask any of the macropanas… That man, Maelo, is for me a profound ecuajei. Maelo voices the belief, imagery, and religiosity cherished by the people of the Caribbean and Latin America without overt ritualization, elaboration or inquiry, but more out of inheritance. What he inherited, he transmitted through his songs (Hernández 2013).

Hernández’s concept, the ways in which he incorporates ecuajei, one of Maelo’s iconic chants, into his story, and the way he shared his ideas with me by opening the conversation to his friends as witnesses and partners of a common devotion, grounds my own theorization about the mediation of the sacred in Maelo’s salsa. I understand his storied theorization as exemplary of the type of intertextual links I show here to be central to the affective relations my interlocutors articulate through their song labor. The sense of mutuality they create is grounded on an intertextuality that draws upon cultural, social, and cosmological repertoires shared by some of my interlocutors both in Panama and Venezuela amidst drastic sociopolitical and economic conditions. It is in these contexts that Maelo’s music becomes for my interlocutors a locus of relationality and belief that generates the type of reverential, storied knowledge they shared about Maelo’s life and legacy.

Figure 10: Macropanas in El Gons Sous. Freddy Quintero, El Oso, Wether, and Jesús Hernández in El Gons Sous, Caracas, Venezuela. May 2013.
This sense of mutuality then is not only social—it is interwoven with the cosmological, as is frequent in the formation of kinship (Sahlins 2013), and more specifically in relational affinities between humans, deities, and other non-human entities in Afro-Caribbean everyday life (Ortiz 1994; Palmié 2002; Mason 2002; Matory 2005; Goldman 2007). Maelo makes song, specifically the soneo, into a site where this sense of kinship takes place. By incorporating naming practices as improvisatory icons that are inserted into the soneo, Maelo enables the possibility of relational affinities happening at multiple levels—from deities to neighbors, family, peers, friends, fans, and genres.

Juan Carlos Quintero-Herencia (2005) offers insight about the enunciation of belief in salsa that is complementary to my work about devotion in this chapter. He proposes that the enunciation of the sacred in salsa voices a utopian sense of community in which divinities are frequently invoked as immediate relatives. “In salsa,” Quintero-Herencia writes, “the formation of subjectivities emerges in the convening of languages, local conceptions, beliefs, and tones amalgamated by the improvisation of a sonero performing in the immediacy of friendship” (2005, 238). For him, the varied religious chants that abound in the salsa repertoire voice a broader ethics of friendship that is central to the genre, one which tells more about the significance of affective relations among salseros than about any sort of transcendental experience of the sacred. This idea converses critically with Hernández’s words and with the ways Maelo voices the sacred in “San Miguel Arcángel.” However, for some of my interlocutors the invocation of the religious in salsa is indeed related to transcendental, devotional experiences even when it is not strictly associated with specific religious practices.

These relational dimensions of song are not only heard but also related in counterpoint with and through Maelo’s repertoire. This is the type of song labor my interlocutors do: they
iterate and explicate the characteristics of song through narration, which generates a sense of mutuality that arises from the counterpoint between listening and storytelling. This takes shape through an everyday poetics they create in order to speak about and relate through Maelo’s songs. Such a mode of song labor, which understands song, soneo, and storytelling as sites for the creation of relational affinities, evokes conceptions of genre as a thing that exists, and is transformed, not only in the characteristics of the form itself but also in the intertextual relations that makes it significant for people (Ramos 1989, Martín-Barbero 2002).

Panamanian music collector Luis Gooding conceives Maelo’s performance as voicing a type of pregón de barrio (loosely, barrio speech-calls) that echoes the speech and lives of his neighbors in Panama. Gooding relates this conception through a personal tale of family and music he shared during an interview conducted in Panama City on November 2014. We spoke in a room in the back of his house that serves simultaneously as an archive and radio booth for his web radio station El Tren de la Salsa (The Salsa Train).

Figure 11: Luis Gooding in his archive/radio booth at the back of his house in Panama City. He holds a picture of Maelo carrying El Nazareno (The Black Christ) along with other devotees. Surrounded by boxes and shelves packed with CDs, videotapes, DVDs, LPs, books, and musical instruments, as well as several machines for recording, playing, and editing audiovisual material, Gooding’s story of a childhood encounter with Maelo’s music gains, at least for me, a sort of mystique. Gooding describes becoming enchanted by Maelo’s voice the day he got hold of his
father’s copy of Bueno y qué, an album released by Cortijo y su Combo in 1960.\textsuperscript{56} He was eight or nine years old at the time. Gooding says,

At a party in our house in San Miguelito [a neighborhood in Panama City], I listened to phrases like Tuntuneco\textsuperscript{57} or Bueno y qué, pues ahí, those pregones de barrios [street vending songs or calls] caught my attention. Then my family let the album run all night long in one of those old devices, and people danced all night to the same album because all songs were hits. The next day when the party was over I woke up and saw the album cover, which says Bueno y qué. That caught my attention, Bueno y qué, and then I saw puro negrito!\textsuperscript{58} I was used to those Cuban orchestras like The Riverside Orchestra, which were composed of white people. But here I see all these negritos together! Not only that. In the album Bueno y qué you see El Morro [a colonial fort in San Juan, Puerto Rico] but at that time I didn’t know what El Morro was. I then thought it was La Bóveda [a colonial fort] in Panama, which is a similar structure from Spanish colonial times. And then, I saw those faces that look like my neighbors (Gooding 2014).\textsuperscript{59}

Gooding’s storied analysis of the album Bueno y qué identifies Spanish colonial ruins as part of the cultural and social repertoire he shares with Cortijo y su Combo, or to put it more broadly, Spanish colonial experience as a shared transnational history. Gooding additionally brings the specters of race and class into this conversation by contrasting the all-black members of Cortijo y su Combo to the white musicians that often formed Latin music orchestras at the time.\textsuperscript{60} Gooding


\textsuperscript{57} This is the title of a song included in Cortijo’s album Bueno, y qué.

\textsuperscript{58} I keep the Spanish in this expression, using negrito as an affective expression that reinforces the idea of a pregón de barrio that Gooding is crafting here.

\textsuperscript{59} “En la casa ya en San Miguelito tenían una fiesta, yo escuchaba dique Tuntuneco, Bueno y que, pues ahí, esos pregones de barrio, me llamó tanto la atención. Cuando de repente el disco lo dejan correr, era un aparato de esos viejos, y era toda la noche bailando un LP, todos eran éxitos. Y al día siguiente cuando ya se pasó la fiesta yo me levanto y yo veo la portada, y dice Bueno y qué, eso me llamó la atención, “Bueno, y qué,” y cuando veo puro negrito. Yo estoy acostumbrado por lo menos a esas orquestas cubanas, la Riverside, esas orquestas que eran gente blanca, y veo tanto negro junto, y no solo eso me llamó la atención, sino que en el LP Bueno y qué atrás está El Morro, yo no sabía que era El Morro en esos tiempos, yo pensaba que era La Bóveda en Panamá, que era algo similar en El Casco Viejo, del tiempo de los españoles que era similar, y cuando veo las caras se parecían a los vecinos míos” (Gooding 2014).

\textsuperscript{60} See Moreno (2016) for a discussion about the specters of race in formation of Afro-Latino orchestras.
establishes a relation between the experiences of Afro-Panamanians and Afro-Puerto Ricans who for him not only look alike but also had similar life experiences. He confirmed this interpretation when he traveled to Santurce for the first time in 2011. For him, visiting Maelo’s neighborhood was like traveling back in time. Gooding makes a connection between Santurce and Chorrillo, the neighborhood in Panama City where his grandparents lived. He said, “Black Puerto Ricans are similar to Black Panamanians and that is why I think that the area of Chorrillo is similar to the area of Santurce. When I had the joy of visiting “La Calle Calma” [the street where Maelo grew up], I felt like I was seeing something from another time” (Gooding 2014). In making this relation, Gooding points to something several researchers have described as a central component of Maelo’s transnational impact: the voicing of local experiences from his beloved neighborhood of Santurce that seem to connect with the transnational experiences of his listeners (Berrios-Miranda and Dudley 2009; Quintero-Rivera 2009, 2015). Furthermore, as I will discuss in the following section, his music voices experiences of race and masculinity that were emerging in Santurce during and after the 1950s amidst colonial fantasies of modernization in Puerto Rico (Quintero-Rivera 2015; Arroyo 2015).

Figure 12. Album cover of Bueno y qué by Cortijo y su Combo (1960).

61 “El negro de Puerto Rico es parecido al de Panamá por eso es que yo creo que el área del Chorrillo es una área representativa a esa área de Santurce proque cuando yo tuve la dicha de ir a la Calle Calma sentí que era algo como que lo había visto en otro tiempo” (Gooding 2014).
For now, I want to stress that Gooding’s densely packed narrative, furthermore, relates directly to Rondón’s analysis of the popular phrases that Maelo incorporates into his soneos by mentioning the expression “bueno y qué”. Gooding calls Maelo’s vocal improvisation practice a pregón de barrio, highlighting a poetics of the street that pervades Maelo’s repertoire, in which he mixes the genre of pregón (street vending songs) with a sense of quotidian life in the streets (de barrio). As we read earlier in Rondón, such a mode of speech-song is central to Maelo’s poetics and as we see in Gooding’s narration, it is a “hook,” a means of establishing a direct connection between daily life and music through a specific stylistic element. The conception of Maelo’s pregón de barrio therefore relates in a variety of ways to my proposition that Maelo generates a type of generic intertextuality that is key to the transcendence of his vocal style.

Rondón concurs with my view of Maelo’s songs and soneos as media of mutuality:

When he sang, and he spoke about things happening in his life, you believed him, you identified with him. When he said, “Yo, yo, yo creo que voy a estar solito cuando me muera (I, I, I think I will be alone when I die),” you sympathized with him, you truly believed what he was saying. When the chorus [of the song “Mi Jaragual”] came on him, saying, loud as a fanfare, “Qué inmenso, qué inmenso (How immense, how immense),” and he said, “Con Gladys que es mi mujer y Pepe que es mi perro (With Gladys who’s my woman, and Pepe, who’s my dog),” you understood exactly what he was talking about. He is not a singer who sings the fashionable tunes. He was more like a brother or a friend who entered your home, which in effect happened when Ismael Rivera came to my house one day, without having met me before, and remained forever as memory and a presence in that house. He had that popular essence, he had the marvelous gift of being able to communicate with everyone without the need to brag or be sophisticated. He had an extraordinary intuition to say and sing his music, and perhaps more importantly, he had something that any publicist, politician, priest, preacher, or any other person seeking to address the masses would envy; that is, he was like a reflection of the masses, like a mirror. It was like when Ismael sang he put a mirror on stage and people saw themselves reflected in him; it was a direct connection (Rondón 2013).

62 “Cuando él cantaba y se ocupaba de las cosas de su alrededor, tú se las creías, tú te identificabas. Cuando él decía, “Yo yo yo creo que voy a estar solito cuando me muera,” tú te compadecías de él, tú se lo creías de verdad. Cuando el coro se le iba encima y gritaba como si fuera una gran fanfarria, “Qué inmenso, Qué inmenso…” y él decía “Y con Gladys que es mi mujer y Pepe que es mi perro,” tú
When Rondon says that Maelo sounds like a friend who enters your house only to remain there forever, his memory parallels Gooding’s story about his childhood enchantment with Maelo’s music during a party at his family’s house. Rondón’s concept of Maelo’s voice as a locus of belief where his listeners find some sort of affect, a direct relation to heartfelt personal experiences, helps clarify that this mode of listening to Maelo’s songs is autobiographical. By this I do not mean to propose that his songs—or any songs for that matter—should be appreciated as strictly autobiographical. Rather, my aim throughout this chapter has been to build on my interlocutors’ descriptions of his songs as stories in order to take these songs and soneos as entry points to think about Maelo’s life as well as those of my interlocutors. This is what I mean when I note that analyzing songs and soneos as forms of storied knowledge is a threefold endeavor: it is about listening to popular songs as stories, about telling stories that emerge from popular songs, and about understanding both stories and the acts of telling and listening to stories as relational media. The ways in which Blades, Rondón, Hernández, and Gooding listen to and discuss songs and soneos through narrative theorizations demonstrate how their shared storied knowledge is created and transmitted in ways that reify the affective relations they articulate with and through Maelo’s music.

entendías perfectamente de qué te estaba hablando. No es un cantante que está cantando el tema de moda. Es como un hermano, como un amigo que entra en tu casa, como en efecto Ismael Rivera entró un día en mi casa sin yo conocerlo previamente y se quedó como un recuerdo y una presencia en esa casa. El tenía la esencia popular, tenía el don maravilloso de poderse comunicar con todos sin tener que buscar alardes ni sofisticaciones. Para ello se valía de una intuición extraordinaria para decir y cantar este tipo de música, y lo más importante, algo que le envidiaría cualquier publicista, cualquier político, cualquier sacerdote, cualquier predicador, cualquiera que se quiera dirigir a una masa, y era que él tenía, él era como refractario con la masa, como si fuera un espejo. Como si Ismael a la hora de él cantar pusiera un espejo por delante y la gente lo que hacía era verse reflejada en él, con lo cual era directo lo que allí ocurría” (Rondón 2013).
In what follows, I build on these ideas in order to expand my own theorization about Maelo’s vocal performance. I argue that the type of generic intertextuality Maelo creates through his vocal performance mediates experiences of sociability emerging from the transnational histories of migration that coalesce in his beloved neighborhood of Villa Palmeras, Santurce, in Puerto Rico. To understand how he does this, we need to go into a longer history of Santurce.

**Voicing Santurce: Relating a Transnational Musical Geography**

Maelo was a proud son of Santurce and he made this clear in different songs throughout his repertoire. For example, in the song “Mi Música (My Music)” in which he chants, “Yo vengo de Santurce, Puerto Rico trayendo para ti linda música (I come from Santurce, Puerto Rico, bringing you beautiful music).” In this section, I argue that Santurce, because of its cosmopolitan histories, plays a central role in the ways in which listeners in various transnational settings oftentimes imbue Maelo’s music within personal and communal histories of sociality.

Santurce has a profound transnational history of migrations that dates back to colonial times and gained particular prominence during the mid-twentieth century when it thrived as a mecca for a burgeoning Puerto Rican entertainment industry. Originally known as San Mateo de Cangrejos, Santurce was the first municipality officially founded by free black men and women in Puerto Rico in 1773. It was already a cosmopolitan community at the time in great part due to a decree issued by the Spanish Crown granting asylum in the region to escaped enslaved peoples from English, Dutch, and Danish Caribbean islands. Such an early influx of Caribbean migrants along with a consistent pattern of maroonage in Puerto Rico, a wave of enslaved labor

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64 See Aponte-Torres (1985) for a history of Cangrejos.
migration after the Haitian Revolution, and a latter inflow of migrant West Indian workers
during the 19th century (Chinea 2005). According to cultural researcher and activist Lester Nurse,
the traces of such multilingual histories could still be perceived in the modes of speech and song
nurtured by the people of Santurce in the mid-twentieth century. Nurse remembers how during
his childhood in Santurce, specifically growing up in the barrio of La Parada 21, several of his
elder neighbors would speak in the creole or patois languages of their ancestors (Nurse 2014).

After the U.S. invasion in 1898, Santurce experienced a massive wave of migrants from
other parts of Puerto Rico. Looking at the census numbers, even if briefly, is key in order to gain
a better understanding of how massive the change was: Santurce’s population grew by 316%
between 1897 and 1910, and it grew by 1,647% between 1919 and 1936. Additionally, while in
1899 the population of Santurce represented the 18% of the total habitants of San Juan, in 1950 it
represented the 87% of the capital city’s inhabitants. As the census numbers indicate, Santurce
rapidly became an epicenter of the transformation of Puerto Rico into an urban society as well as
central hub of the booming entertainment industry that helped launched Cortijo y su Combo into
international stardom during the 1950s. It is worth stating in light of these numbers that Maelo’s
mother, Margarita Rivera, who wrote the lyrics of many several of his most important songs,
including the classic tune “Maquino Landera,” was one of these migrants who moved from the
countryside to Santurce during the early decades of the twentieth century.

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65 Santurce is organized as an urban space following the bus-stop numbers along its main avenues. Such
an organization of life has played out musically in the histories of bomba and plena, and is particularly
salient in the names of ensembles such as Los Pleneros de la 23 Abajo and Los Pleneros de la 21, a group
organized in New York but initially formed by musicians coming from La Parada 21 in Santurce.

66 See Quintero-Rivera (2015) for a thorough sociological analysis of these numbers in relation to Maelo’s
music.

See Aparicio (1998) for a discussion about Maquino Landera.
Ethnomusicologists Marisol Berrios-Miranda and Shannon Dudley (2009) coined the term “musical geography” to describe how, through its transnational histories, Santurce “links people through time and space—along paths created by escaped slaves and migrant laborers, traveling musicians, records, and radio, and the internet—to many other communities” (Berrios-Miranda and Dudley 2009, 124). Such a conception of Santurce as a musical geography that weaves together a transnational network of musicians and listeners speaks to the sense of kinship that my interlocutors create through Maelo’s music. Maelo, that is, links his listeners in time and space creating a transnational musical geography connected by shared histories of race, class, religion, music, and migrations in the Caribbean and Latin American.

Maelo voices modes of being in the world he heard in Santurce, which are telling of the social, cultural, and economic transformations happening amid the simultaneous modernization, secularization, and precarization of life in Puerto Rico. He does this not only by referencing such histories in the lyrics but also through his inter-sensorial labor as a sonero mayor. By this I mean that Maelo’s vocal performance can be taken as a means of inscribing into popular song deep layers of memory, ways of life, modes of speaking, and beliefs from Santurce that are telling of how people relate to each other through the relationship between the ear and the voice (Ochoa Gautier 2014). Hence, we could say following the work of Ana Ochoa Gautier (2014), that the above-discussed concepts of Maelo’s tono callejero and pregón de barrio are also telling of how his voice evokes the aural world of Santurce, a transnational community that can be conceived as a synecdoche of the “maelstrom of modern life”68 endured by Puerto Ricans.

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68 I borrow the phrase “maelstrom of modern life” from Sterne (2003) who takes from Berman’s seminary book All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity (1982). Sterne writes that the maelstrom of modern life is: “capitalism, colonialism, and the rise of the industry; the growth and development of the sciences, changing cosmologies, massive population shifts (specifically migration and urbanization), new forms of collective and corporate power, social movements, class struggle and the rise of new middle classes, mass communication, nation-states, bureaucracy; confidence in progress, a
Foundational salsa scholar Angel Quintero-Rivera (2015) claims in a recent sociological study of Maelo’s soneo, that his repertoire mediates the collective memory of Santurce through the voicing of particular modes of sociality this author describes as parejería. That is, a sense of swag or sassiness Quintero-Rivera associates with forms of relation and resistance “from below” that have profound racial overtones.\(^{69}\) Jossianna Arroyo (2015), as I discuss in the Introduction, adds specificity to this notion of a Santurce-based type of swag by linking it to a manifestation of masculinity emerging among Afro-Puerto Rican men in this community. Arroyo does this by enmeshing her father, his twin brother, and Maelo as “kind of brothers of economic change,” who endured the transformations bought by modernization through an attitude of toughness and sassiness. Her father, she recalls, used to say that Maelo’s songs “told real stories, that those plenas and bombas were for him a way of remembering life, violence, and death” (Arroyo 2015, 256); a way of enduring, I would add, the maelstroms brought by the modernizing fantasies of the time. All this is key to my discussion about wounded masculinities in upcoming chapters. For now, I want to stress that both Arroyo and Quintero-Rivera complement my proposition that Maelo’s songs and soneos evoke the aural world of Santurce amidst modernization.

According to historian Fernando Picó (2014), Santurce underwent an intense process of policing, sanitizing, and ordering of public spaces during these decades of intense urbanization and migration. This happened as Puerto Rico was transformed from a predominantly agricultural to an overwhelmingly urban and industrial society in the space of two decades. Picó’s portrayal universal abstract humanist subject, and the world market; and a reflexive contemplation of the constancy of change” (Sterne 2003, 9).

\(^{69}\) Quintero-Rivera borrows this concept from José Luis González’s (1980) essay titled “Plebeyismo y arte en el Puerto Rico de hoy.”
of quotidian life in Santurce provides a sense of the aural world Maelo transduced into popular song starting in the mid 1950s. Picó writes,

… the streets of Santurce are a big market that goes beyond the neighborhood’s marketplace. The street vendors who walk its calmer streets are in charge of this, the knife grinders, the broom and swab sellers, those who cambian chinas por botellas, those who carry on top of their heads plates with merengues and other candies, those who transit across Loiza street still using horse-drown carts chanting Fuerza! Fuerza!, the lottery sellers, the piragueros. Their street cries resonate through all the streets of the city. They all take and give news and rumors, they talk to maids, they foresee changes in time, they tell stories, sing, and enchant (Pico 2014, 158).

Picó relates such an aural world of economic and social interactions, voiced through street vendor’s cries or pregones as expressions of transgression amid the policing of life in Santurce, to the larger modernization and secularization of life. The Puerto Rican government focused urban development between the 1940s and 1960s on the eradication of slums and the construction of multiple-dwelling public housing projects. In the process, thousands of working-class and disenfranchised families were forced to live in these public housing projects that were purposely constructed beside upper and middle class residential communities in a failed effort to promote social integration. The process of ordering urban life simultaneously masked and fostered class and racial inequality in Puerto Rico (Dinzey-Flores 2013). It stressed a “particularly racialized, gendered, and class stereotype” of economically dispossessed Puerto

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70 I keep the Spanish in this phrase for lack of a proper way of translating it. Literally the phrase translates as “changing oranges for bottles.” Picó playfully uses a popular refrain in his description of the economy of street vendors maintaining a sense of ambiguity to his description. During these old days street vendors who bought and sold empty bottles going house by house would often give oranges to their clients in exchange for the bottles trying to make the exchange more appealing. This expression is popular in Puerto Rico as indicative of bad business, of coming out on the losing side of a business by changing something good for something empty.

71 “…más allá de la Plaza, todo Santurce es Mercado. De eso se encargan los revendones, que andan por las calles más apacibles, los amoladores, los vendedores de escobas y escobillones, los que cambian chinas por botellas, los que llevan en la cabeza las plateas con merengues y mantecaditos, los que recorren, todavía en carretas tiradas por caballos, la calle Loiza anunciando “¡Fuerza! ¡Fuerza!”, los vendedores de lotería, los piragueros. Sus pregones resuenan por todas las calles de la ciudad. Todos traen y llevan noticias y rumores, se requedan a conversar con las sirvientas, auguran cambios en el tiempo, cuentan, cantan, encantan” (Picó 2014, 158).
Ricans “as irreparable subjects in need of both tutelage and disciplining” (Fusté 2010, 55), which furthered social fragmentation.

The shattering of the social fabric becomes evident in the experiences, frustrations, and disparate worlds of local communities (Dinzey-Flores 2013) like Villa Palmeras, Santurce, and several of its neighboring barrios. For Picó, the voices of street vendors, broken families, and believers of diverse religious faiths that populated the streets of Santurce are emblematic of the changes brought by these larger socio-political, economic, and cultural processes. He specifically describes the voices that transgressed the policing and sanitizing of public spaces as voicing a sort of endurance to the fragmentation of familial relations also occurring at the time. He narrates such transformations situating these voices in counterpoint throughout his study. In doing this, Picó associates the street market, displacement, and the relationship between the living and the dead as central to a notion of the popular in which the miraculous remains key to modernized life. He narrates,

One of the most perceptible transitions between the 1930s and 1950s is the secularization of society. In the 1930s, the supernatural was part of the everyday landscape. The dead communicated with the living through signs, the miraculous and the quotidian intersected everywhere; there were sacred images that bleed, one could tell the Malign was present through the behavior of animals, there were possessed people, people with faculties who habitually transited between the sacred and the profane.

The Depression, the War, and modernization shrunk this world reducing it to specific times and spaces, tying it to verifications and fact checking. The miraculous did not fully disappear, but it was contained and categorized. Anthropologists and psychologists value when such a phenomenon is reported. Beyond that there remain the dreams, the premonitions, the predictions that escape critical analysis because they are only told or

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72 Oscar Lewis’ *La Vida: a Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (1968) and Helen I. Safa’s *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality* (1974) are ethnographic monographs based on studies conducted amidst these processes; and both were central in the articulation of anthropological debates at the time around about the concept of the culture of poverty.
informed about after the facts they predict have taken place. All this allows the world to remain marvelous despite the skeptics (Picó 2014, 207-208).  

If we are to think of Santurce as a sort of transnational musical geography that grounds the sense of kinship that Maelo’s music seems to generate amongst my interlocutors both in Panama and Venezuela, then this enchanting potential of everyday life that Picó describes has to be conceived as a spectral presence in the cosmopolitan, transnational histories that coalesce in Santurce. The poetics of relation Maelo voices in his music is thus telling of these modes of being in the world in which, paraphrasing Picó, the world remains marvelous despite the skeptics. Such histories of enchantment, however, are not merely about survival. Nor are they necessarily linked to larger, essentialized conceptions of magical realism frequently used to describe life in the Caribbean and Latin America (Ochoa Gautier 2005). I understand this idea of enchantment as a form of quotidian endurance that implies imbuing this world with a heightened poetics in which friends, family, and deities are often invoked. Or to evoke the storied theorization of Jesús Hernández, the engine of the macropanas collective in Caracas, Venezuela, this notion of enchantment is reminiscent of Maelo’s “magical-religious world.” Such a poetics relates to what I described in the previous section as a devotional kinship or as Maelo’s magical religious world, but is not limited to these sacred undertones. It is related to the transformation of genres of storytelling and

73 “Una de las transiciones más perceptibles en el periodo de 1930 a 1950 es la secularización de la sociedad. En los 1930 lo sobrenatural formaba parte del paisaje cotidiano. Los difuntos se comunicaban con los vivos por signos, por todas partes lo milagroso y lo cotidiano se confundían, las imágenes sagradas sangraban, los animales denunciaban la presencia del Maligno, había gente poseída, gente con facultades, gente que transitaba habitualmente entre lo sagrado y lo profano… La Depresión, la Guerra, la modernidad van achicando ese mundo, reduciéndolo a tiempos y lugares precisos, amarrándolo a verificaciones y constataciones. Lo milagroso no desaparece del todo, pero es contenido y categorizado. Antropólogos y psicólogos se cifran sobre los fenómenos reportados. Quedan los sueños, las premoniciones, los vaticinios que eluden análisis crítico, porque se informan después del hecho de su cumplimiento. Esto permite que el mundo siga siendo maravilloso a pesar de los escépticos” (2014, 207-208).

74 See Chapters Two and Four for discussions about different senses of magic and wizardry associated to Maelo.
song, and to the effect that new media have in how people relate to popular music. It additionally implies the vocalization of humor, irony, sarcasm, hustling, double meanings, hidden codes, and silences as narrative tactics of endurance. This is the type of enchantment I associate with the narratives that Blades, Rondón, and Gooding tell about the transcendence of Maelo’s vocal performance as a medium in which his listeners can recognize their own life stories. This is not only prominent in the relation between the aural world Picó describes and these narratives my interlocutors create. Key to my argument is that the aural world Picó describes is the world Maelo transduced into his popular songs beginning in the 1950s. It is this multi-layered relation what gives the poetic and improvisational details of his songs such a dense significance for my interlocutors across transnational spaces. To round up this section, lets discuss one final song in order to bring these different layers together.

The song “Traigo de Todo (I Bring It All)” allows us to further expand the theorization of Maelo’s vocal performance by imagining him as a sort of pregonero, a performer who echoes the voices of street-vendors that, according to Picó, brought a sense of enchantment to the severely policed aural world of Santurce. This song starts by naming Maelo as an alchemist performer, a sort of wizard street-vendor or alchemist sonero who offers the musical product that his listeners want: a particular brand of salsa that invokes friends, family, and genres through hidden codes, sexually charged lyrics, and a sort of picaresque tone. Maelo sings,

\begin{center}
Yo sí que traigo de todo. \\
Soy el mago de la copla. \\
Caserita no te vayas a dormir,
\end{center}

I am the one who brings it all. \\
I’m the wizard of song. \\
Caserita don’t go to sleep,

\footnote{I here invoke Michel de Certeau’s (1984) notion of tactics as quotidian practices of resistance crafted by marginalized peoples to disrupt and re-signify power relations in everyday life.}

Oíííí… Belén?
You hear me… Belén?
Oíííí… Belén?
You hear me… Belén?
Oíííí… Belén?
You hear me… Belén?
Caserita no te vayas a dormir.
Caserita don’t go to sleep.

Porque al son que me tocan bailo.
Because I dance to any son they play me.
Lo que yo quiero es prender el vacilón.
What I want is to light up the party.
Lo mismo canto un guapango,
I can either sing a guapango,
una conga, una guaracha y un rumbón
A conga, a guaracha or a rumbón.
Marcolina, pero mira,
Marcolina, look,
Yo pongo pongo pongo a bailar un cojo
When I sing even those that limp, dance.
Lo vacilo con la clave y el compás
I play with the clave and the beat.
El montuno se lo canto yo a mi antojo,
I sing the montuno as I want it,
se lo pongo como a usted le guste más.
I serve it how you like it better.
El son montuno se lo canto yo a mi anotojo
I sing the son montuno as I like it,
se lo pongo como usted le guste más.
I put it where you like it better.

Coro:
Chorus:
Yo lo estiro, yo lo encojo.
I stretch it, I shrink it.
Lo baila Miriam, lo vacila Gladys,
Miriam dances to it, Gladys enjoys it,
también lo baila Manolo…
Manolo also dances to it…
Caserita no te acuestes a dormir
Caserita don’t go to sleep
sin bailar la rumba que
without dancing the rumba
le gusta Manolo…
that Manolo enjoys…

One of the most evident features of “Traigo de Todo” is that it creates a generic intertextuality with the canonical Cuban son-pregón “El Manisero (The Peanut Vendor)” through the phrase “Caserita no te acuestes a dormir (Caserita don’t go to sleep).” In this expression the Caserita—which is the diminutive of casera, used in Cuba to name the maid—is called to taste the products offered by the pregonero. Both songs have sexually charged undertones: the peanuts in “El
Manisero” have a phallic connotation as well as Maelo’s chorus in “Traigo de Todo,” which says, “yo lo estiro, yo lo encojo (I stretch it, I shrink it).” This verse, which on an initial level can be taken as evoking the practice of pisar el coro and the ways in which Maelo “broke schemes” through his vocalization of melodic-rhythmic accents, is also a clear reference to sexuality and an assertion of his masculinity. Maelo reaffirms it singing “yo lo estiro, yo lo encojo, se lo pongo donde a usted le guste más (I stretch it, I shrink it, I put it where you like it better).” Hence, there is a playfully sexual connotation to the musical product the pregonero brings to listeners in these two songs. But there is much more to the sexually charged product Maelo is offering. This product in this case is also Maelo’s salsa, an interaction of the musical genres that inhabit salsa as a generic label and the incorporation of familial relations into his soneo through practices of naming. This, as discussed above, is a central vocalic tactic in Maelo’s performance as a means of creating rapport with his listeners. In creating such a musical recipe, Maelo also acknowledges the transnational musical repertoire that marked his life in Santurce; that is, the musical education that helped shape his vocal style as discussed earlier in this chapter.

May aim here is to conceive Maelo as a sort of pregonero in salsa, one that evokes these street-cries as aural marks of Santurce’s transnational histories in ways that resonate with my interlocutors’ lives. In other words, Maelo’s is a pregón de barrio that inscribes sonically genres of speech and song as well as modes of living and belief that echo the voices of residents of Santurce who experienced the transformations described by Picó. His songs often echo links that exist between past and present, thus becoming what my interlocutors oftentimes deemed allegorical stories of their own lives. In this sense, the generic intertextuality that characterizes his pregón de barrio and the sage-like qualities of his tono callejero relate to modes of

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77 Otero-Garabis (2015) presents a larger discussion about the presence of pregones in the salsa repertoire and the salsa singer as a sort of pregonero.
storytelling that are reveling of how people often endure the inevitable changes brought by the maelstroms of modern life through quotidian tactics of endurance. The poetics of relation Maelo voices and the everyday poetics my interlocutors create through their song labor are examples of such modes of endurance that often aim to imbue everyday life with devotion, humor, sarcasm, hidden codes, and picaresque narratives. This counterpoint gives rise to the sense of mutuality through listening and storytelling I investigate in this dissertation, a sort of network of relational affinities created in various local contexts through Maelo’s songs. In what follows, I further set the grounds for a better understanding of the idea of a transnational musical geography, which I use to describe not only Santurce but also the larger network of places I map in the upcoming chapters.

*A Bailar Mi Bomba: Mapping a Caribbean Musical Kinship*

In 1957, *Cortijo y su Combo* recorded a live version of the song “A bailar mi bomba” (Let’s Dance My Bomba) on Puerto Rican national TV. As Frances Aparicio (1998) and Yeidy M. Rivero (2005) discuss, *Cortijo y su Combo* profoundly marked the history of media in Puerto Rico with particular importance due their overarching presence as Afro-Puerto Ricans in both radio and television at the time. Their “televisual blackness” (Rivero 2005) was inscribed in the album *El Alma de un pueblo (A People’s Soul)*, which in addition to this performance of the song “A bailar mi bomba” also includes their version of the son-pregón “El Manisero.” I find his recording of “A bailar mi bomba” to be particularly significant because it was done amidst the deployment of the so-called modernizing policies and discourses discussed in the previous section. Written by Arsenio Rodríguez—considered by many to be a sort of Cuban paternal figure in the formation of salsa as a genre—during his time living in Puerto Rico, this tune

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narrates a story of Caribbean popular song as a simultaneously ancestral and modern endeavor. The performance begins with an introduction by the TV host, followed by a short interview to a female member of the audience, a woman from Santurce. I cite this introduction at length in order to emphasize the affective overtones of the conversation and its significance for the above-mentioned idea of the televisual blackness enacted by Cortijo y su Combo. The TV Host begins,

“For those who didn’t know, in yesterday’s show we announced that [Cortijo y su Combo] will travel to New York on the 15th of this month for his debut in one of the important theaters of the city. We want to publicly wish him luck for this coming trip… Now, we want to bring this young lady to the stage to ask her a few questions. Please young lady come closer to the microphone. Let’s see, what’s your name?

“Juanita Colon”

“What?”

“Juanita Colon”

“Good, Juanita Colón. Where are you from in Puerto Rico?”

“I am from Santurce.”

“From Santurce, Puerto Rico. And what made you come here this afternoon?”

“That I really like Cortijo y su Combo.”

“Ujum! Would you like Cortijo to dedicate any song in particular to you?”

“Yes, of course. I would like “A bailar mi bomba”.

“Well, let’s bring Rafael here to see if he has “A bailar mi bomba” in his repertoire today.

“Do you have it, Rafa?”

“Of Course I have it! It’s my pleasure!”

“OK, then, for you young lady and for all our audience out there here’s “A bailar mi bomba,” Rafael Cortijo y su Combo with Ismael Rivera!”

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80 “Bueno y para aquellos que no lo sabían, en el programa de ayer hicimos el anuncio. Rafael Cortijo sale el día 15 de este mes para Nueva York a debutar en uno de los importantes teatros de la urbe newyorkina, así que vamos a desecharle públicamente mucha suerte a Rafael Cortijo. Y aquí vamos a llamar a una jovencita a la tarima del estudio-teatro para hacerle unas preguntas. Adelante por aquí jovencita por favor acércate un poquito más al micrófono. A ver, ¿cómo te llamas? “Juanita Colón.” “¿Cómo?” “Juanita
I hear this conversation as enacting a type of everyday relationality in which performers and fans become entangled by a shared sense of belonging to Santurce expressed through Juanita Colón’s desire for “A bailar mi bomba” and Cortijo’s reaction, “Of Course I have it! It’s my pleasure!” I feel a sense of familiarity in the tone of the dialogue that, at least to me, evokes some of the ideas about song, speech, stories, and kinship discussed throughout this chapter. The conversation also, and perhaps even more importantly, is telling of how the voices of the same people enduring the maelstroms of modern life were also present in media often via Cortijo y su Combo’s impactful presence. Through their music, peoples whose lives were been cast as unworthy and in need of hygiene through the above-discussed modernizing policies and fantasies had their music and culture pervading what Ana Ochoa Gautier (2006) describes as the “aural public sphere;” that is, “a contested aural space characterized by sonic hierarchies that is itself a sphere of production of social differentiation and inequalities” (Ochoa Gautier 2006, 813). This is the aural world that Maelo inscribed in his repertoire and vocal style as sonero mayor throughout his career.

I hear these ideas appearing once again in the story about popular music genre that “A bailar mi bomba” narrates. After such an affective conversation between Juanita Colón, the host, and Cortijo, Cortijo y su Combo performs a powerful rendering of this tune. The song starts with an invitation to dance and enjoy bomba. The chorus says,

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{A bailar y a gozar mi bomba,} & \text{Let’s dance and enjoy my bomba,} \\
&\text{ay que bomba…(dos veces)} & \text{what a bomba… (twice)}
\end{align*}
\]

Colón.” “Bien Juanita Colón, ¿de qué parte de Puerto Rico eres?” “Yo soy de Santurce.” “De Santurce, Puerto Rico. Bien, ¿y qué te hizo venir esta tarde por aquí? “Que el Combo de Cortijo me gusta mucho.” “Ujum! ¿Te gustaría que Cortijo te dedicara un número especial?” “Sí, ¿cómo no? Me gustaría \textit{A bailar mi bomba}.” “Bien vamos a llamar a Rafael a ver si Rafael tiene en el repertorio en la tarde de hoy \textit{A bailar mi bomba}. Adelante Rafa, ¿tú lo tienes? “Claro que sí, con mucho gusto.” “OK. Entonces para la jovencita y para todo el público aquí está \textit{A bailar mi bomba}, Rafael Cortijo y su combo con Ismael Rivera.”
Maelo jumps over the chorus before it ends, his voice stepping over the word bomba further extending the invitation for audiences to enjoy this genre as they perform it on national TV. He invites listeners to dance both bomba and plena, once again entangling these two musical genres while portraying them as the source of ancestral memories coming from the times of “our grandparents.” Maelo sings,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bailen, bailen, pero bailen todos</th>
<th>Dance, dance, everyone should dance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>la bomba y la plena,</td>
<td>the bomba and the plena,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caballero, que nos trae</td>
<td>Gentleman, ‘cause it brings us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tan gratos recuerdos</td>
<td>such pleasant memories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esa era la música buena</td>
<td>This was the good music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>que alegraban a nuestros abuelos,</td>
<td>that cheered up our grandparents,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>que vacilaban mi bomba.</td>
<td>they enjoyed my bomba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This first section relates both bomba and plena to the ancestral musical traditions of Arsenio Rodríguez’s grandparents in Cuba, traditions that are commonly understood as descending from the Congo and being related to Palo Monte religion.81 According to some of my interlocutors in Puerto Rico, Rodríguez was fascinated by the crossings between the bomba and plena gatherings he experienced in Santurce and his musical heritage from Cuba (Nurse 2014). When listening to “A bailar mi bomba” in light of these accounts, I cannot but think about the above-described long histories of intra-Caribbean migrations that coalesce in Santurce. In the second stanza, the song extends the sense of kinship to speak not only about generic interaction but also about interpersonal bonds. As Maelo does in previously discussed songs like “San Miguel Arcángel” and “Traigo de Todo,” he creates a sense of familiarity with listeners by naming several people

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81 See Palmié (2002) for a study of Palo Monte religion.
who, in this case, dance to plena and bomba forming a sort of musical kinship that connects past and present in the midst of dancing.

Doña Inés, bailaba la plena,
que rico y que
Doña Elena, bailaba la bomba
Eeh, que ya la bailan Juanita y Carmela,
que Desiderio, Macato y Manuela,
también vacilan mi bomba.

Mrs. Inés, she danced the plena,
with flavor, and
Mrs. Elena, she danced the bomba
Eeh, it is danced by Juanita y Carmela,
and Desiderio, Macato y Manuela
they too enjoy my bomba

The last stanza becomes a statement about Caribbean popular music history. It relates bomba and plena to the wider histories of Cuban dominated, mass-mediated Caribbean popular music. The song acknowledges the commercial prominence of genres such as *mambo, merengue, guapango,* and *conga*—some of which are also mentioned in “Traigo de Todo”—while claiming a space for bomba to be reckoned among these, her cousin genres. In an expression that echoes *Cortijo y su Combo’s* protagonist role in the commercialization and popularization of bomba and plena, Maelo claims that they will form a *jelengue,* a big party to celebrate the arrival of these genres as recorded mass-mediated popular music.

Ya el mundo conoce el mambo,
el mambo,
pero que el merengue,
el guapango y la conga,
Maribelen,
que ahora vamos a formar un jelengue,
jelengue, jelengue
bailando plena, mi plena y mi bomba,
de Puerto Rico mi bomba…

The world already knows the mambo,
the mambo,
They know the merengue,
the guapango, and the conga
Maribelen,
But now we will form the jelengue,
jelengue, jelengue
dancing plena, my plena and my bomba,
from Puerto Rico my bomba…
The story of popular song narrated by Rodríguez, Maelo, and Cortijo y su Combo in this song is likewise telling of what Carpentier described as a regional “process of inter migration of rhythms and oral traditions” (1988 [1946]; as cited in Brennan 2001) that happened as people migrated throughout the Caribbean. The entanglement of bomba and plena within this broader Caribbean musical family echoes the work of scholars such as Algeriers León (1984), Rogelio Martínez-Furé (1997), and Leonardo Acosta (2004). They describe these histories of Caribbean generic interaction using the concepts of a cancionero del son (son songbook) or a ciclo del son (son cycle) that is related by un aire de familia (an air of family). That is, the idea that an aural familiarity that links the different genres of the region as part of a sort of continuum that predates and endures salsa. Martínez-Furé presents a relational understanding of genre that transcends colonial and imperial borders. He writes,

The Cuban son has its equivalents in the calypsos of Trinidad, Jamaica and Bahamas, in the Martinican biguin and lagghia, in the Puerto Rican plena, in the Haitian and Dominican merengues, in the round-dances from the Caiman Islands. The dances of the Cuban tumba francesa and its rhythms that have deeply influenced our folklore (tahone, coyuyé) came to us from Haiti, and are also present in Martinique and Guadalupe, and even in the so-called Dutch Antilles where one of their most popular rhythms is called tumba (Martínez-Furé 1997[1979], 279; emphasis on the original).

Such a narrative of generic interaction resonates with the transnational stories of genre, place, and kinship traced so far in this chapter as vital to Maelo’s vocal performance as a sonero mayor. In this song, bomba and plena are related to musical genres that precede and endure the golden age of salsa in ways that echo Maelo’s generational kinship to other soneros mayores. Framed as part of a cancionero del son or a ciclo del son, “A Bailar mi Bomba” tells a story about popular
music as imbricated in the type of intra-Caribbean migrations of genres, ideas, peoples, and traditions that make Santurce a transnational musical geography that links my interlocutors in time and space. Furthermore, I take the story of genre formation voiced in this tune as the ground for my understanding of musical kinship as a metaphor to describe the sense of mutuality I study throughout this ethnographic biography. With this idea of a musical kinship I invoke Marilyn Strathern’s (2005) discussion of kinship as a fruitful anthropological tool that entails conceptual and interpersonal relations. Therefore, my conception of musical kinship is threefold: I use it to conceive the relational affinities created by my interlocutors through Maelo’s songs, to ground my argument that such a sense mutuality is created through listening and storytelling, and as a poetic way of describing the generic interactions or the aire de familia that marks the aural public sphere in the Caribbean and Latin America as a contested space haunted by the voices of peoples whose lives have long been cast as undesirable. In other words, this version of “A Bailar Mi Bomba” is reminiscent of the transnational kinship network I map throughout in the following chapters.

**Conclusion: Sonero Mayor as a Politico-Theological Concept**

Paying careful attention to the stylistic elements of Maelo’s soneo has led us to explore the intimate relation between vocalic experimentation—in terms of his virtuosic vocal displacements, as well as the complex melodic-accentual patterns of his soneo through the practice of pisar el coro—and the use of speech-song (pregón de barrio) as an intertextual means of relationality through song. All these elements present a more detailed account of why Maelo is understood as a sonero mayor in reverential retellings of his life. My analysis of fans’ and experts’ stories about Maelo also shows us how stylistic features are understood as linked to a type of devotional kinship that is based on how Maelo’s soneo relates to people’s lives across a
broad spectrum of intimate and transnational experiences. The profound musical affect my interlocutors share for Maelo’s life and legacy, and their different modes of theorizing his songs and soneos, allow us to desacralize the title of El Sonero Mayor as exclusive to and synonymous with Maelo, as well as to re-enchant it through the prism of musical kinship, secular devotion, and the intertextuality of Maelo’s vocal performance. Therefore, the title of sonero mayor is much more than a mere marker of musical innovation. Rather, it is a politico theological concept that is telling of the type of secular devotion that emerges from the type of everyday poetics of listening and storytelling that my interlocutors create through their labor of song. I describe it as a politico theological term because of how it mixes political and religious matters. This chapter presented the basic, general stakes of this idea. I have emphasized the devotional overtones of my theorization. The upcoming chapters will further explore how such devotional endeavors cross with vital racial, gender, and class matters through the context-specific experiences of my fieldwork. In the following chapters, I explain more in-depth the concrete manifestations that this Maelo-centered musical kinship takes in Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and Panama, in order to map with more clarity the transnational musical geography I examine through my interlocutors’ song labor.
Maelo made the chanting of the expression *ecuajei* a signature mantra of his performance and recordings beginning with the album *Esto fue lo que trajo el barco* (This Is What The Ship Brought). Maelo voiced ecuajei in a variety of ways throughout his repertoire after this album. He would chant ecuajei at the start of a song, as a transition to the call-and-response section, amidst an instrumental part, or at the end of a tune. After Maelo’s death in 1987, ecuajei gained a life of its own. Today and ever since then, his friends, peers, and fans frequently use it to evoke Maelo’s presence in their everyday lives. It often stands in and for his persona in conversations, songs, poems, t-shirts, posters, newspapers, websites, and other Maelo-related iconography. Ecuajei, I argue, has become iconic of Maelo. This is particularly salient for a musicological and socio-political collective of friends from Caracas, Venezuela known as the *macropanas* (macro-friends). For them, Maelo’s songs have become loci for the creation of shared histories of sociability that they often imbue with political, religious, and affective significance. They use ecuajei creatively in conversations, essays, emails, flyers, poems, paintings, and songs, as if invoking Maelo’s haunting presence in their quotidian expressions. In doing this, they have transformed the significance of ecuajei turning it into a central expression of a sense of kinship they share through their particular reinterpretations of Maelo’s music. This chapter analyzes the haunting presence of ecuajei in Maelo’s repertoire, and in the lives of the macropanas in order to study the significance of this expression for the afterlife of Maelo’s voice.

*Macropanas* formed as a collective of mostly male students, faculty, employees, friends, and neighbors of the *Instituto Pedagógico de Caracas* (Caracas Pedagogic Institute) amid social

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and political turmoil during the 1980s. Their individual and collective histories are imbricated in the profound economic and political changes that deepened the precarization of life in Caracas at the time, particularly amongst disenfranchised sectors of the population. These macroeconomic and political processes created an intense socio-political uproar that exploded as a mass uprising on February 27th, 1989 known as the caracazo, which ended with a vast massacre executed by the military against protestors. This event is often acknowledged as key in the subsequent rise of chavismo—the political movement that supported Hugo Chávez—in the 1990s (Uzcategui 1999; Hawkings 2003; Coronil 2005). The caracazo and the ensuing escalation of chavismo are crucial to properly frame the emergence of the macropanas as a musicological and socio-political group.

In this chapter, I contend that the type of musical activism the macropanas create as well as the affective, devotional force with which they imbue their relation to Maelo, generate a sense of musical kinship that took shape amidst the macroeconomic and political changes that deepened the precarization of life, triggered the caracazo, and prompted the emergence of chavismo. I also argue that the ways in which macropanas use ecuajei as a relational expression and as key for the sense of kinship they live through Maelo’s songs, reveals the intersection between the political and the theological as constituted in and by Black Atlantic Religions (Matory 2005).

Ecuajei is an expression commonly used to praise the goddess Oyá by practitioners of what J. Lorand Matory (2005) has described as the transnational, transimperial, and transoceanic networks of Black Atlantic Religions. According to Judith Gleason (1987), Oyá is a multifarious deity linked in sacred contexts to ancestry, funerals, secrecy, and the transformation of life from

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84 This event is also known as sacudón or masacron. In other parts of the country that were very much involved in the protests, this is especially important because calling the event merely the caracazo reasserts a long-standing centralization political life in the capital. I use caracazo throughout this chapter for the sake of clarity and because my research is located in Caracas. See: http://gumilla.org/caracazo.

85 Throughout this chapter, I accentuate the names of the orishas following the work of Ramos (2012) who maintains the use of the accentuation even when the names are written in English.
one state of being to another. Oyá manifests in various natural forms such as tornadoes, strong winds, fire, lightning, and buffalo-woman. She also manifests as a wolf-woman and is known as a patron of feminine leadership. Oyá’s devotees voice ecuajei in diverse sacred rituals as a medium to communicate with her. Maelo’s reasons for embracing this chant remain uncertain, though. His family and friends describe ecuajei as simply one of many utterances he voices throughout his repertoire. His use of ecuajei, some of them suggest, was based mainly on the sonic and rhythmic qualities of its enunciation. They also acknowledge that voicing ecuajei was somehow Maelo’s means to honor the foundational Cuban singer Benny Moré, who also voiced ecuajei in songs. It is important to recall that Maelo and Moré are forever entangled in memories shared by many salseros (salsa fans and musicians) about the naming of Maelo as sonero mayor (See Chapter One).

Maelo recorded several tunes with religious content throughout his career, frequently praising diverse divinities from the Black Atlantic pantheon. He additionally lived a devotional multiplicity and simultaneity that is common in Caribbean and Latin American popular religious histories, thus engaging in diverse forms of devotion within the Black Atlantic Religions, often moving between one sacred register to another. In this chapter, I explore how the macropanas’ incorporation of ecuajei into their everyday speech and into the type of musical activism they create generates a common sense of kinship that can be traced to Maelo and to Black Atlantic devotional multiplicities. In order to do this, I analyze the ways in which the political and the theological intersect in the everyday lives of macropanas, and how these crossings are mediated in Maelo’s repertoire.

I claim that since Maelo’s death on May 13th, 1987 ecuajei has been reinterpreted as a politico theological concept. See for example, a picture of a manifestation held during the visit of
the King of Spain to Puerto Rico in 1987 (see figure 13). Protesters from Puerto Rican pro-independence groups carried a banner that read: “Our only king is King Maelo! Cultural Affirmation! Ecua Jei! Free Puerto Rico!” Framed within such a political background, ecuajei invokes Oyá, Maelo, and the struggle for Puerto Rican independence through a spectral politics of protest and activism that inscribes Maelo as a sonorous specter. It is the relation between these political and theological elements that I will explore in this chapter.

Figure 13. Manifestation during the visit of the King of Spain to Puerto Rico in 1987. The banner reads: Our only king is King Maelo! Cultural Affirmation! Ecua Jei! Free Puerto Rico!  
Photo by José Rodríguez.

This type of politicized interpretation of Maelo’s music is especially significant amongst macropanas. For them, the key to understand the significance of Maelo’s music lies in what they conceive as his “magical religious world.” This concept, which they theorize as the concrete and everyday sense of the religious and the political that pervades Maelo’s repertory, speaks to larger histories about the articulation of power in Venezuela. Scholars such as Gustavo Martin (1983), Fernando Coronil (1997, 2008), and Michael Taussig (1997) have described the formation and subsequent transformations of the Venezuelan state as a form of magical statecraft in which the workings of the nation-state cross with traditional magical beliefs, rituals of spirit possession, and colonial fantasies and fears. Such crossings, they all propose, conform a type of civil
religiosity and a political theology that pervades Venezuelan political histories, narratives, and contemporary everyday life. Such a political theology, which is articulated around the sacralized figure of Simón Bolívar as a divine icon (Pino 2003), has been re-enchanted as part of chavismo making Hugo Chávez, according to Fernando Coronil (2008) “the most magical of Venezuela’s presidents.” It is this context that generates the conditions of possibility for the ways in which macropanas conceptualize Maelo’s magical religious world enmeshing him within the political theology of chavismo.

This chapter situates macropanas’ interpretation of ecuajei as a central keyword in their everyday engagement with Maelo in relation to broader histories of Black Atlantic Religions and to the politico theological histories in Venezuela. I contend that the ways in which macropanas transform ecuajei into a medium for the articulation of a sense of kinship is revealing of how macroeconomic and political processes are endured in the ordinary. Their name, Macropanas, makes an ironic reference to these broader struggles that have marked their shared histories and reaffirms the friendship bonds created amidst this context. Maelo’s music, I argue, gathers their lives as a collective through "forms of activity in which persons come together on the basis of shared characteristics" (Strathern 1988, 48). Such a “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013) based on shared experiences of life constitutes the basis of what they call la macropanía (the macro-friendship) or maeleería, a mode of relation and political activism that is centered on how they listen to Maelo’s music. Ultimately, I argue that the creative work macropanas do with Maelo’s music and biography, and more specifically what they do with the expression ecuajei needs to be framed within longer colonial and racist histories in Latin America and the Caribbean in which, as Ana Ochoa Gautier (2014) proposes, the voice has been a central medium for the articulation of a politics of life used to decide and counter what lives are deemed as worthy or unworthy of
citizenship and personhood. I begin the ethnographic journey of this chapter by further exploring
the basis and practices of the relational affinities macropanas create with and through Maelo’s
voice, music, and life.

La Macropanía: Creating Relational Affinities Amidst Wounded Socio-Political Histories

In Caracas, Venezuela, the collective of friends known as the macropanas organizes an
annual artistic celebration for the anniversary of Maelo’s death. This self-described “bunch of
people merged viscerally, spiritually, intellectually, and in [their] souls with Maelo” (Hernández
2013) has celebrated this festivity for twenty-nine straight years since 1987. The first of these
gatherings was a spontaneous mourning outburst celebrated on the afternoon of May 13th, 1987,
the day Maelo died. Since then, it has grown as a festival that embodies the collective’s history
and composition. During the event, they give academic papers, journalistic and historical talks by
collectors and salsa performers, an art exhibition and a concert. It is held in the Instituto
Pedagógico de Caracas (Caracas Pedagogic Institute), the university where this socio-political
and musicological collective emerged as an association of mostly male students, faculty,
employees, and neighbors amidst social and political turmoil in the 1980s. The collective is made
of about thirty members—mostly men—plus friends and cultural associations with whom they
engage in diverse musical and political activities.

Macropanas have created different modes of aesthetic and political affirmation through
Maelo’s music. For example, some of them write essays that analyze the political, historical, and
religious, significance of his music, while others write poems that incorporate Maelo’s lyrics, or
paint and exhibit idiosyncratic reinterpretations of his iconic pictures. These different aesthetic
creations become the means by which macropanas live the relational affinity they conceive as the
macropanía, a mode of life in which they experience an intellectual and soulful symbiosis through their particular listening to Maelo’s songs. Macropanía, as will be narrated throughout this chapter, is revealing of how the political and the theological intersect in everyday life.

The late professor José Adames, founding member of the macropanas, traced the roots of macropanía in three essays he included in his book entitled Decir a tajos (To Say in Slashes or To Say in Wounds) from 1994. In one of them, the essay titled, “Los temas del cantar de Maelo (On The Themes Of Maelo’s Song),” Adames sustains that the key to understand Maelo’s significance is the song “El Nazareno.”86 This tune narrates the story of Maelo’s devotion for the Black Christ of Portobelo, Panamá –which Maelo embraced as a tactic for dealing with his struggle with heroin addiction– as a tale of friendship, belief, pain, and joy.87 For Adames, “El Nazareno” is an utmost tale of racial pride and solidarity. Its refrain, which says “El Nazareno me dijo que cuidara a mis amigos (The Black Christ told me to take care of my friends),” voices, according to Adames, a mode of “poetic solidarity” in which friendship, devotion, and class and racial pride become entangled. One of the central elements to be explored in this chapter then, is how such a poetic solidarity is central to the type of affect that moves the relational affinities and politics that constitute the macropanía. But this is not the only element to be discussed. For macropanas, Maelo also voices an evidently anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-racist message they relate to Puerto Rican pro-independence struggles. As will be discussed below, this particularly politicized interpretation of Maelo’s music is also revealing of recent histories of the political in Venezuela. One central component of the macropanía then how religious devotion is mixed by macropanas with larger anti-imperialist struggles.

87 See Chapter Three for an extended discussion about El Nazareno devotion.
The name macropanas makes a direct reference to the friendship bonds they cultivated amidst the endurance of the larger macroeconomic and political processes during the 1980s that led to the caracazo. The caracazo is then a key-framing event for understanding the ways that macropanas Maelo-centered emerged as a collective. It also has profound links to the subsequent emergence of chavismo, the political movement that supported Hugo Chávez since the 1990s. While macropanas imbricate their musical activism within chavismo, their political engagement precedes, endures, and seems to survive this political project. Macropanas’ musical activism, then, is telling of how complex macro-economic, political, and social processes are experienced through music and sound in everyday life.

The caracazo was a massive wave of protests in reaction to a series of macroeconomic adjustments deployed by the Venezuelan state in response to demands made by international financial institutions. The manifestations erupted in reaction to a sudden increase in the price of gasoline and transportation, as well as the shortage of food and other basic products. All this was imbricated in the broader implementation of an austerity plan. The first twenty-four hours of this event were lived as a type of controlled chaos in which the state intervene only to partially police the riots and looting. During the second day of protests, the government suspended constitutional guarantees and ordered the military to open fire against the protestors. Thousands of people were

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wounded and arrested. The official death toll reached 277, but unofficial reports estimated more than one thousand deaths.  

Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski (1991) describe this massive massacre, and the fact that hundreds of dead bodies were either lost or not even counted as dead, as the casting of these peoples’ lives as insignificant. “[D]eath was the occasion to imprint on the poor their marginality to civilized society,” they write, “the morgue was the site for the encounter between the poor and their own invisibility as people sought in vain to recover the bodies of their relatives and friends” (Coronil and Skurski 1991, 325). Teodoro Petkoff, a leader of the leftist political organization Movimiento Al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism) described the protests in ways that shed light on the profound economic abandonment and political disenfranchisement of those who took the streets during the caracazo; those whose lives were again deemed undesirable. For Petkoff, the people who "came down from the hills or up from the ravines" represented "a Venezuela of hungry people, of people who are not part of the conventional organization of society.” The voices of these protestors emerging from “a huge bag of wretched poverty," he continued, produced “the hoar of a wounded animal.” Dead or alive, these peoples were cast as an undisciplined and wild population. Their voices were imagined as animal-like, as the sound of a lowly human condition. Their lives were once again deemed unworthy through a violent event that exposed the weakness of the institutions that regulated Venezuelan political and social life.  

The caracazo, according to Coronil and Skurski (1991), speaks simultaneously about colonial legacies and the reorganization of worldwide capitalist relations. On one hand, it reified

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historically deployed discourses about civilization and barbarism at the core of the Venezuelan modernizing nation-building project. Thus the description of protestor voices as the sound of a wounded animal, the depictions of the uprising as the acts of a ferocious mass in need of discipline, and the reckoning of their lives and deaths as unworthy. All this challenges the myth of a racially inclusive and democratic stable Venezuela. On the other hand, this event should be understood as imbricated on the “worldwide reordering of body politics” (Coronil and Skurski 1991, 334) produced by the alteration of the global political and economic order at the time. In this context, Coronil and Skurski claim, the opposition between the modern and the archaic likened rationality with the free market and with austerity, while backwardness came to be likened with state protection and social upheaval.

The aftermath of the caracazo was marked by the intensification of social protest and by the additional weakening of social, cultural, and political institutions in Venezuela (López-Mayá 2002). Street protests proliferated with people from different social classes often resorting to violent demonstrations as a means to have their voices heard. Margarita López-Mayá (2002) argues that this transformation of the protest repertoire was a direct result of the caracazo, and of the low level of institutionalization that characterized the relations between the state and popular sectors. Other forms of violence also marked the aftermath of the caracazo; particularly, the worsening of drug trafficking and crime-related violence. Francisco Ferrándiz-Martín (2004) describes the confluence of these multiple forms of violence in Caracas by portraying the city as a “wounded space” that, \(^\text{91}\)

\[\ldots\text{evokes a tense sociological, geographical, corporeal, symbolic and existential space with ambiguous and surly traits; concurrently tough and vulnerable, traumatic and light, ordinary and extraordinary, tense and quotidian, and, finally, precarious, articulated in the}\]

\(^{91}\) Ferrándiz-Martín develops this concept from Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, 1986.
socioeconomic periphery and in the shadows of suspicion, poverty, criminalization, stigma, death, and mourning (Ferrándiz-Martín 2004, 188-189). Such a description of Caracas also resonates with the socio-political uproar I have observed in my four visits to the city since 2006. Although their intensity has varied in each trip—and even though this is lived differently in different parts of the city—Ferrándiz-Martín’s concept of a wounded space evokes contemporary harsh day-to-day life in Caracas. Macropanas emerged as a collective within such a context. Their individual and collective histories have been marked by the socio-political tension and the precarization of life implied by this idea of the wounded space. It is within this historical context that we can understand some of the modes of aesthetic and political expressions the macropanas create, as well as the profound affective dimension with which they imbue these creations.

Their aesthetic and political reinterpretations of Maelo’s music are enacted both through individual and collective activities. As mentioned above, some macropanas write poems that incorporate Maelo’s lyrics, others write academic essays about the racial, religious, ideological, and affective significance they ascribe to his music, and one of them paints idiosyncratic paintings inspired by iconic pictures of Maelo. Others incorporate his very gestures into their own form of embodied presentation of themselves. The devotional, anti-imperialist, and friendship traces that ground the macropanía pervade their modes of aesthetic and political creativity. Let us explore some of these textual strategies in more detail.

For example, Professor Omar Hurtado is considered the collective’s ideologue. He writes essays and speeches that voice his political interpretations of Maelo. Jesús Campos has written essays on the matter of love in Maelo’s music. Freddy Quintero paints his own reinterpretations

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92 “… evoca un tenso espacio sociológico, geográfico, corpóreo, simbólico y existencial de cualidades ambiguas y hoscas, al tiempo duro y vulnerable, traumático y liviano, corriente y extraordinario, tenso pero cotidiano, finalmente precario, articulado en la periferia socioeconómica y en las sombras de la sospecha, la pobreza, la criminalización, el stigma, la uerte y el duelo” (Ferrándiz-Martín 2004, 188-189).
of canonical pictures of Maelo, and likes to be called “Maelo’s Painter.” “El Gato” writes poems using verses from Maelo’s songs, and “El Oso” is a salsa singer who recorded a cover of one of Maelo’s tunes. Vladimir owns a tiny photocopies kiosk across the street from the Pedagogic Institute, right in front of *El Gons Sous,* the small bar where macropanas gather everyday.

Inside his kiosk, Vladimir has a picture of Maelo posted next to images of Simón Bolívar, Hugo Chávez, and Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara. This sort of political pantheon is not uncommon amongst the macropanas. My main interlocutor in this collective is Jesús Hernández. He writes papers in which he incorporates Maelo’s lyrics and the writings of fellow macropanas who have created their own papers or poems. When drunk, he channels Maelo by embodying gestures taken from different Maelo performances that circulate online and in documentaries. Hernández is known by several Maelo-related nicknames. His friends call him “Maelo’s widow,” a nickname he gained after crying heartbrokenly the day Maelo died. He is also known as “Ecuajei” and “Malandro Viejo.” Their multiple inter-textual creations are all pervaded, although in different levels, by the crossing of political and the theological as key to the relational affinity that is constitutive of the macropania.

![Image of Freddy Quintero in front of El Gons Sous](image)

Figure 14: Freddy Quintero, dressed in light blue, standing in front of *El Gons Sous.* May 2013.

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93 According to both Jesús Hernández and Freddy Quintero, the name of the bar references the last names of its founders. *El Gons Sous* thus comes from Gonzales and Sousa.
Macropanas also merge fragments of Maelo’s songs into their everyday speech. They use his words in essays, poems, emails, flyers, posters, and other media designed to promote their yearly festivity. During my second visit to Caracas for the celebration of Maelo’s life in May of 2009, macropanas gave me a collage they created with different images of Maelo (figure 15). Used to promote that year’s commemoration of his death, this poster exemplifies the type of aesthetics macropanas create as their means of praising Maelo’s legacy. The collage combines some of his album covers with several iconic pictures of his life. For me, this became a marker of friendship and belonging. This was one of the ways in which they officially acknowledged me as part of their collective. The messages written in the back of the poster inscribe a sort of treaty of macropania, of that poetic solidarity they seem to incorporate from Maelo’s music into their everyday lives. Some of the messages say,

“Con el sentimiento de hermandad que inspira la música en todo maelero.”

“With the feeling of brotherhood that music inspires in every maelero”

– Prof. José Iván

“A los camaradas de Puerto Rico Libre.”

“To the comrades of a Free Puerto Rico”

– Luis Alfonso

“El camino a la casa de un amigo nunca es “Lejos.”.”

“The road to a friend’s house is never too Far”

– El Burgos

“Con pasión y sabor, vamos al rumbón.”

“With passion and flavor we go to the rhumba.”

– El Gato

“Para mis Profesión Esperanza,”

“For my Profesión Esperanza,”


Hernández’s reference to the title of this song is another example of his incorporation of Maelo’s songs
These messages of brotherhood, camaraderie, and solidarity voice the modes of association and political relation that ground the macropanía. Phrases such as “With the feeling of brotherhood that music inspires in every maelero,” “The road to a friend’s house is never too Far,” and “To the comrades of a Free Puerto Rico” inscribe the affective and political basis of their relational affinity. Furthermore, the words “For my Profesión Esperanza, From the elder Macropana Jesús Hernández, Let go, let go, let go, Ecuajei…” are exemplary of the creative ways in which they incorporate fragments of Maelo’s songs into their everyday speech. Hernández uses “Profesión Esperanza,” the title of a song about brotherhood and Puerto Rican pride, to express a sense of kinship. In his voice, “Profesión Esperanza” becomes a means to entangle the macropanas with Puerto Ricans through Maelo’s music. He also incorporates the chant “suelta suelta suelta (let go let go let go), which Maelo voices in different songs. And, even more relevant for my argument in this chapter, he finishes his greeting words with the expression ecuajei.

95 Jesús Hernández is also known as Malandro Viejo. Even though I concentrate on his Maelo-related nicknames in this chapter, I engage this other moniker in Chapter Four when discussing Maelo’s devotion for the Black Christ of Portobelo, Panama, and the relation this devotion has with matters of malandraje. See Candido (1970), Arroyo (2005), and Matta (2009) for discussions on the concept of malandraje.
Ecuajei is a key vocalization of what macropanas do with Maelo’s words. They often use ecuajei, ecua, and jei as interchangeable greeting expressions. For example, I received an email from Freddy Quintero entitled “Ecua, from Venezuela for our Puerto Rican Brother Jei.” They created the verb ecuajeizar or “to ecuajei,” which in this context can be translated as to be aware or to relate. For this porous collective, Maelo’s songs have become media for conceiving a sense of kinship. Their reinterpretation of ecuajei as a relational medium is central to this mutuality that they describe as a spiritual and intellectual symbiosis they live through their specific
listening to Maelo’s songs. I hear what they do with ecuajei as enmeshed within the histories of
the caracazo and the imagining of Caracas as a wounded space I related above. Coronil and
Skurski argue, regarding the immediate aftermath of the caracazo, that even amidst such a state
of exception, “people spoke in lines of their own making, challenging the plot of a modernizing
project that was based on their silence” (1991, 331). I understand what macropanas do with the
collage they gave me, the words of macropanía they inscribed in the collage, their diverse modes
of aesthetic expression, and what they do with ecuajei more specifically, as different enactments
of their type of politicized listening that emerged within such a wounded space. Not surprisingly,
the late professor Adames titled the book where he maps the basis of the macropanía, “Decir a
tajos” or “To Say in Wounds.” I hear this title as evoking the relational affinities that macropanas
create through their listening to Maelo’s music amidst such wounded histories. Their particular
type of listening and the different textual expressions they produce, I argue, have given
macropanas a means of maintaining a sense of agency in the midst of such disempowering
circumstances. The emergence of the macropanía and its subsequent articulation as a form of
musical activism imbricated in chavismo needs to be framed within this long-standing context of
ongoing precarity96 and socio-political upheaval in Caracas; a precarious context that also
precedes and endured chavismo. The rest of this chapter further examines the relation between
the political and the theological in the work macropanas do with Maelo’s music, and, more
specifically, in what they do with ecuajei. In what follows, I describe what they conceive as
Maelo’s magical religious world, a concept that is key to the macropanía.

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96 See Neilson and Rediker (2008) for a discussion about the precarity as analytical concept.
Maelo’s Magical Religious World and Poetics of Solidarity

In May of 2013, I had a long conversation with Jesús Hernández at El Gons Sous, the small bar across the street from the Pedagogic Institute where macropanas gather everyday, or as they call it fondly “el aula 4” or classroom 4, a name that implies that this bar is an extension of the university as a place where they produce socio-musical knowledge. El Gons Sous is hence a key constitutive place for the type of sociability that grounds the macropanía. It is here where macropanas gather ordinarily to listen and about theorize Maelo’s music, and also to engage in political arguments and actions while having a drink. President Hugo Chávez had died a few weeks before my conversation with Hernández, and the strong sense of loss amongst the macropanas permeated the bar. I remember feeling the city as if enduring a sort of trance, as if people were experiencing in a permanent state of mourning amidst an intense socio-political polarization. The sense of loss among macropanas was so profound that their annual celebration of Maelo’s legacy was at risk. Nothing had been organized because of this profound sense of mourning, but, at the last minute, everything was put together in the last 48 hours before the event. The group gathered their own money to pay a local salsa band. A government agency provided a tent, a small stage, and a young officer for security. This was not considered enough by the macropanas; so extra security personnel were recruited from the surrounding community.

The event began in the afternoon with a panel on the significance of Maelo’s work. First, Professor Omar Hurtado, known among the macropanas as the group’s ideologue, presented on the importance of Maelo’s music for their relational affinity, especially amidst the heated socio-political context that intensified after Chavez’s death. Then, Orlando Watusi, one of Venezuela’s foremost salsa singers, who thinks of himself as a disciple of Maelo, gave an intimate anecdotal account of his personal and musical relationship with his idol. I gave a talk about my dissertation
research, and Jesús Campos served as moderator. There also was an art exhibition that consisted of Freddy Quintero’s paintings of iconic images of Maelo plus a few paintings donated by friend artists. Angel Méndez, founder and editor of *Swing Latino*, Venezuela’s preeminent salsa magazine in the 1970’s, was in the audience. Reina Tovar, Maelo’s dear friend in Caracas was also there with her daughters, as well as her friend Carbonero. Tovar and Carbonero are from La Bombilla, a barrio within the sector of Petare, a massive popular enclave in Caracas. They met Maelo during the 1970s, and organized their annual celebration of his life after his death in 1987. They held this celebration for twenty-five straight years until 2012 when they stopped doing it due to personal reasons. Thereafter, they have joined the macropanas for their annual festival. Community media organizations documented the panel, the exhibition, and the concert both during the afternoon and the evening. For the concert at night, an elder salsa singer sang several Maelo songs backed with a recorded audio track, and a salsa band made mostly of young musicians played classic tunes from the general salsa repertoire. A friend of the macropanas traveled from his hometown of La Guaira, where he left his ill mother alone for the day only because he had to honor to Maelo by singing “El Nazareno” on stage along the local salsa orchestra. Overall, around twenty-five people showed up for the paper presentation and art exhibition while around fifty people were present at the concert. For all those present as well as for the media organizations that documented the celebration, despite the fact that the event was organized at the last minute, the festivity was, once again, deemed a success.

Why is this annual celebration considered a success and so significant for those present? What is it that makes people come from other barrios and other cities to honor Maelo on the day of his death? Why is this annual gathering still a key event for the type of sociability that grounds

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97 Méndez befriended Maelo in Caracas during the 1970s, and even travelled to Puerto Rico at the time to interview Maelo for *Swing Latino*. 

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the macropanía almost thirty years after Maelo’s death? Some of these matters become clearer in the interview I conducted with Jesús Hernández, along with other macropanas who were also present at El Gons Sous, some days after their festival. Key for their relational affinity, which is reified annually during their celebration and lived ordinarily through their everyday musical and political engagements, is the concept of Maelo’s magical religious world that Hernández presents during the interview.

![Figure 17: Jesús Campos, Jesús Hernández, and Freddy Quintero. They pose in front of one of Quintero’s portraits of Maelo at Pedagogic Institute during the event on May 2013.](image)

Hernández and I had our recorded conversation at El Gons Sous a couple of days after their celebration. This is significant because what happened during the festivity permeated our dialogue, and also framed much of the conversation because he evoked the texts that had been read, the art exhibition, and the concert. Hernández was so proud of their event that at times it seemed as if their mourning celebration of Maelo’s legacy managed to alleviate his profound sense of mourning for President Hugo Chávez. This mixture of joy and grief was evident throughout our dialogue, as well as the importance macropanas give to the act of paying respect to their beloved departed comrades.
Hernández began the conversation by reading fragments from José Adames’s book, *Decir a tajos*. He told me, “I will act as a medium for José Adames... who we think is dead, but we know lives in a parallel world... I will read one of the chapters he dedicated to Maelo in his last book *Decir a tajos* from 1994.” With these words Hernández presented himself as channeling, through his voice, Adames’ written text. This was a means of paying respect to the macropana who initially conceptualized in his essays their collective affinity with Maelo. Hernández thus sets up the interview by using a key ritualistic practice common in Black Atlantic Religions: in many of these devotional engagements a person who is possessed by a deity or a spirit in a sacred context channels that non-human voice for other devotees. In a similar way, Hernández started the interview by channeling the main theorist of the macropanas as he read a fragment of Adames’ text. This sort of ritualistic action already places this mundane event, a recorded interview, in a politico-theological context that is quite revealing. Hernández is not just being interviewed. He is imbuing a quotidian secular event with the sort of political theology of the everyday that distinguishes the macropanía.

Moreover, since several of his fellow macropanas were present at El Gons Sous during our conversation, Hernández was enacting this vocal channeling of Adames not only for me. In voicing his friend’s written words, he finds a means of staging the interview as a site of their shared devotion for Maelo. The other macropanas who were at El Gons Sous that afternoon also participated in the conversation. Throughout the interview, many of them intervened sharing their experiences and reflections. Freddy Quintero was there from the start. Carlos Ramírez,

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98 “Voy a fungir como medium de José Adames… quien nosotros creemos que está muerto, pero sabemos que está en el mundo paralelo… Voy a leer uno de los capítulos que le dedicó a Maelo en *Decir a tajos*, el último libro que él publicó” (Hernández 2013).

known as “El Oso,” arrived later on his motorcycle, left his helmet on the table next to where Hernández was sitting, and sat next to me. Within a few minutes he joined the dialogue. At the end of the recording, he played the beat of the clave in his helmet as we all sang Maelo’s “Dueña de mi inspiración (Owner Of My Inspiration),” a song El Oso had recorded in his album titled, La Calle del Fugitivo (The Fugitive’s Street). Their presence and active engagement in the conversation was a means of sharing the devotion for Maelo and the deep friendship bonds that Hernández set from the start by paying respect simultaneously to Adames and Maelo. This type of sociability is at the core of what they conceive as Maelo’s magical religious world, a concept emerging from their particular listening to Maelos’s songs, their ongoing engagement in Venezuelan political struggles and in broader anti-imperialists histories, and their connections to Black Atlantic Religions.

Hernández continued in the interview emphasizing the significance of the religiosity Maelo voices in his music as key to their sense of mutuality. He claims that Maelo’s repertoire voices a concrete and everyday sense of the religious, which is reminiscent of larger histories of popular religiosity in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is what Hernández describes as “Maelo’s magical-religious world,” a concept he theorized during our conversation through a micro-story about Maelo’s affective significance in his life in which he coins the phrase that I use to title this chapter, “un profundo ecuajei” or “a profound ecuajei.” In Hernández’s, own words,

Maelo is for me, and you can ask my friends Oso, and Freddy who are here with us today, or you can ask any of the macropanas… That man, Maelo, is for me a profound ecuajei. Maelo voices the belief, imagery, and religiosity cherished by the people of the

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100 Ramírez, Carlos Julio “El Oso”. 2009. La Calle del Fugitivo. La Mirada. 25220081126. It should be highlighted that Jesús Hernández wrote the liner notes for this album. He closes the notes referencing Maelo with the phrase “suelta, ecuajei” and treats Ramírez as his godson. Hernández writes, “Bueno ahijado Carlos Julio tienes la llave, tienes el poder, “suelta”, ecuajei (Well my godson Carlos Julio, you have the key, you have the power, suelta, ecuajei).
His description of a religiososity that is not overtly ritualized and that arises from an inheritance, indexes a sense of the proverbial that pervades Maelo’s repertoire and vocal performance. Maelo voices a sense of the proverbial, of that which contains much more than its apparent meaning, through the combination of different genres of speech and song he creates through the generic intertextuality of his vocal performance. Such a style of vocalization inscribes modes of living and belief, as well as kinship relations that speak to the broader histories of Black Atlantic Religions evoked throughout this chapter. Concealment has been a means of both repression and endurance within such politico theological histories. As with the case of the caracazo and what macropanas do with Maelo’s music, the voices of peoples whose lives have been cast as disposable through modernizing projects, which also often aimed to secularize life, have frequently come back to pervade the “aural public sphere” (Ochoa Gautier 2006). These mediations of the political and the theological are frequently created through popular music. Timothy Brennan (2008) has coined the concept of “secular devotion” to describe these musical mediations of the divine. I take the centrality of concealment in such secular devotions as an index of wisdom and the sagely, and I take Hernández’s description of Maelo’s everyday type of religiosity as evoking these proverbial endeavors. The ways in which Maelo transformed ecuajei into his signature mantra, as will become clearer below, are crucial for such a conception of the proverbial. This has to do with the multiple devotions inscribed in Maelo’s repertoire.

Throughout his life, Maelo professed a multiplicity and simultaneity of devotions that he recorded in several songs. In 1969, he became a devotee of the Black Christ of Portobelo, and

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101 See Chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion of what I call the sense of the proverbial in Maelo’s music.
later recorded two songs honoring his newfound devotion—“El Nazareno and El Mesías.” He also made the religious pilgrimage to Portobelo every year from 1970 to 1980. At the end of his life, Maelo converted to the Baptist faith. All this is inscribed in multiple tunes and vocalizations throughout his repertoire in ways that inform his magical religious world as conceptualized by Hernández. Such a devotional multiplicity is key for the crossings between the religious and the political that ground the macropanía, which is crucial for the ways in which the macropanas imagine the magical religious in Maelo’s songs.

This is additionally important for the above-mentioned idea theorized by Adames that Maelo’s music generates a sense of poetic solidarity that enmeshes friendship and devotion. I take his notion of a poetic solidarity to be complementary to Hernández’s concept of the magical religious. Furthermore, I take these interrelated concepts of the magical-religious and poetic solidarity in Maelo’s music as central for the sense of mutuality I discuss throughout this dissertation. This is a mutuality of being that relates family, friends, peers, ancestors, divinities, and spirits allowing people to maintain a sense of agency amidst disempowering situations. Such a sense of mutuality, I argue, is based in how macropanas incorporate Maelo’s words into their modes of speech creating a poetics of relation that is charged with context-specific politico

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103 See Chapter Three for a discussion about Maelo’s devotion for El Nazareno.

104 As mentioned above, for Adames, the key song to understand this musical expression of affinity is “El Nazareno,” a tune he describes as tale of friendship, belief, pain, and joy I find truly compelling that both “El Nazareno” and “San Miguel Arcángel,” the song I chose to discuss the mediation of Maelo’s devotional multiplicity in song (See Chapter One), were written by Henry Williams. I have not been able to gather much information about Williams other than the fact confirmed by Javier Vásquez, musical director of Maelo’s band in an interview, that Williams was Maelo’s friend and that he was originally from some English-speaking island in the Caribbean but lived in Maelo’s neighborhood of Vila Palmeras, Santurce, and in New York.

105 For studies on the configuration of subjectivities in these religious practices see Palmié (2002), Mason (2002), and Matory (2005).
theological significance. This sense of musical kinship and poetic solidarity becomes even more haunting through the potential alchemy of the expression ecuajei as inscribed in both Maelo’s repertoire and in the work macropanas do ordinarily with this expression. To these matters I turn in the following sections.

Figure 18: Professor José Adames. Jesús Hernández took this picture from his computer screen, and shared it recently via email.

**The Alchemist Potential of Ecuajei**

During our conversation at El Gons Sous, Hernández also shared his interpretation of the potential sacred significance of Maelo’s embracing of ecuajei. His theorization echoes the sense of the proverbial that I ascribe to Maelo’s vocal performance in that Hernández is also playing with modes of popular wisdom which contain much more than their apparent meaning. As such, his words echo the politico theological specters that haunt both Maelo’s vocal performance and the lives of macropanas. He told me,

In the world of religious syncretism, Maelo is said to have been son of Oyá, the goddess of the cemeteries and the winds, right? So, that’s where that African religious expression ecuajei comes from, meaning, “don’t take me with you just yet,” right? Because it is Oyá who dominates the winds, she is in charge of life, and she takes care of us as our guardian angel. This is one of the ways Maelo explores religiosity through his music (Hernández 2013).
His conception of Maelo’s relation to Oyá, and his understanding of ecuajei as a relational chant that entangles humans to the goddess at the edge of death, is revealing of the popular wisdom and modes of belief that lie at the core of his concept of the magical religious. Also, and perhaps more saliently, it is revealing of the work Hernández does through his song labor in theorizing Maelo’s music.

![Figure 19: Jesús Hernández channeling José Adames during our interview.](image)

The type of everyday religiosity he ascribes to Maelo’s songs also resonates with Juan Carlos Quintero-Herencia’s (2005) reflection that the enunciation of the sacred in salsa voices a utopian sense of community in which divinities are commonly invoked as immediate relatives. For him, the varied religious chants often invoked by soneros in the immediacy of friendship and performance, (Quintero-Herencia 205, 238) voice a broader ethics of friendship that is central to the genre, and tell more about the significance of affective relations among salseros than about transcendental experiences of the religious. The quotidian way in which Hernández describes his understanding of ecuajei relates to Quintero-Herencia’s conception of an ethics of community that is voiced in the general salsa repertory in which divinities are often evoked in the quotidian.
Hernández invokes Oyá in his theorization similarly to how Maelo praises multiple deities in different songs throughout his repertoire.⑩ The relation between Maelo and the godess that Hernández narrates evokes the sense of kinship Maelo generates through his vocal performance. Such a sense of mutuality is voiced with a particular poetics in the phrase “Maelo is for me a profound ecuajei,” which Hernández used when describing his concept of the magical religious during our conversation. I hear this phrase as a key enactment of what Adames called poetic solidarity. This phrase entangles Maelo and Oyá as sort of immediate relatives who constellate Hernández’s everyday life and his relational affinity with his fellow macropanas. In doing this, Hernández transforms the alchemist energy of ecuajei into a constitutive medium for the musical symbiosis they live through their listening to Maelo’s songs. Hence, I argue that what macropanas do with ecuajei gives specificity to Quintero-Herencia’s idea of a potential ethics of friendship that is pervading throughout the broader salsa repertoire.

Maelo’s vocalization of ecuajei is also central for this relational understanding of his music, and for the creative reinterpretation macropanas do of this word. Maelo voiced ecuajei in a variety of ways throughout his repertoire. Enumerating all the songs and modes in which he used this expression falls out of the aims of this chapter. Suffice it to say that he made it a mantra in his recordings mainly beginning with the album Esto fue lo que trajo el barco (This Is What The Ship Brought) from 1972.⑩ Thereafter, ecuajei became a sort of signature vocalization he would chant sometimes at the start of a song, other times as a transition to the call-and-response section, or in the midst of an instrumental part, and other times at the end of a tune. For example,

⑩ See Chapter One for a discussion about this matter in the song “San Miguel Arcángel.”

⑩ This is evident starting with his 1972 album Esto fue lo que trajo el barco (This Is What The Ship Brought). There’s little recorded evidence of his live performance before this year, and his previous albums do not show any use of very limited use of this expression.
during a performance of the song “La Gata Montesa (The Mountain Cat)”\textsuperscript{108} in Panamanian National TV in 1974 Maelo chants ecua or ecuajei several times as a means to mark musical transitions. He uses ecua at the end of the introduction in which listeners learn of the irresistible force of “La Gata Montesa.” After presenting his object of desire, Maelo sings,

\begin{quote}
Mi destino es quererte, I’m destined to love you,
seguirte hasta la muerte. to follow you until death.
Pero querer por querer But to love how you love
no es amor. it’s not real love.
Eso se llama ilusión That’s called an illusion.
Eres historia vieja. You’re an old story.
Pero querer por querer But to love how you love
no es querer. it’s not real love.
Hay que poner You have to really
el corazón… ¡Ecua! put your heart to it… Ecua!
\end{quote}

The chant marks a heartfelt transition to the first call-and-response section of the song in which he sings romantic verses about the wisdom necessary to handle such intense love. Onomatopoeic expressions and rhythmic repetitions of words and syllables mark his improvisations. He chants ecuajei interrupting his last verse of the section signaling the movement towards an instrumental part. Throughout, he dances marking with his hands and body the different breaks played by the orchestra. The song says,

\begin{quote}
Coro: Chorus:
Cuida’o con doña Teresa, Be ware of lady Teresa,
viene la gata montesa the mounting cat is coming.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{108} Rivera, Ismael. 1972. “La Gata Montesa” in \textit{Esto fue lo que trajo el barco}. TICO. CLP 1305. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-FuMHWLnVQ.
Esa gatita montesa, That little mountain cat,  
siempre me gasta su viveza. she always tricks me.  
Ella sabe que está buena She knows she’s hot,  
y que es tremenda vampi… ¡Ecuajei! and she is a true vamp… Ecuajei!

At different points of the call-and-response, he greets Sorolo and Lamerito\(^\text{109}\) two of his dearest friends in Panama, making them characters of the gata montesa affair. He says,

\begin{align*}
  & \text{Esa negra sí es rareza.} & \text{That Black woman is a true rarity.} \\
  & \text{Esa negra sí es rareza.} & \text{That Black woman is a true rarity.} \\
  & \text{Le llaman la gata montesa.} & \text{She’s called the mountain cat,} \\
  & \text{Cuidado Sorolo,} & \text{Be ware Sorolo,} \\
  & \text{siempre tira a la cabeza.} & \text{she always swings for the head.} \\
\end{align*}

And also,

\begin{align*}
  & \text{Esa negra viene arrollando.} & \text{She comes sweeping along.} \\
  & \text{Esa negra viene arrollando.} & \text{She comes sweeping along.} \\
  & \text{Te digo, le llaman la vampiresa,} & \text{I tell you, they call her the vampire.} \\
  & \text{Cuidao Lamerito,} & \text{Be careful Lamerito,} \\
  & \text{que Cuqui tira a la cabeza.} & \text{That Cuqui strikes for the head.} \\
\end{align*}

Maelo enmeshes his relatives in his improvisations thus producing a sense of relation through his vocal performance. In addition to greeting Sorolo and Lamerito, he includes Cuqui, who was Lamerito’s partner, portraying her with an overtly misogynist, ironic tone also as a mountain cat. In this version of “La Gata Montesa,” furthermore, ecua and ecuajei serve as means to create movement between different sections of the song, and as manifestations of the affective outburst happening amidst the live salsa performance. Such a voicing of ecuajei as a relational expression

\(^{109}\) Sorolo and Lamerito are Maelo’s dear friends in Panama. They introduced him to the Black Christ devotion in Portobello, Panama in 1969.
between sections of the tune, and the relational voicing of his friends in the performance echo the type of everyday religiosity and poetic solidarity that macropanas ascribe to Maelo’s music.

Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz writes, in his monograph on Afro-Cuban poetry and song (1994[1950]), about the transculturation of sacred expressions through popular music. Such vocalizations, Ortiz argues, somehow maintain a sort of mystical efficacy even when performed in non-sacred spaces. The mystical value of these voices emerges from enunciation as a locus of belief. Enunciation, that is, as both the act of vocalizing these words and the sonorous aspects of their pronunciation. Frequently, the sound of these invocations is the key for their efficacy in a sacred context as a relational medium between humans and non-humans. When repeated through popular music, Ortiz seems to propose, these voices somehow transduce their alchemist potential countering clear-cut distinctions between the divine and the profane. Ortiz’s conception of the potential mystical efficacy of sacred invocations through non-sacred performance is useful to expand the theorization of the magical religiosity of Maelo’s music. We could say with Ortiz and Hernández that voicings of ecuajei in non-sacred contexts, such as Maelo’s performance of “La Gata Montesa” on Panamanian National TV or the creative ways in which macropanas use this chant, evoke its potential mystical efficacy in non-sacred situations. Such an alchemist force thus lies at the core of what macropanas do with ecuajei.

I also hear echoes of such a potential mystical efficacy of sacred expressions used in non-sacred settings in the way that Hernández channeled José Adames’ written texts about Maelo’s work during our interview at El Gons Sous on May 2013. Also, in Hernández’s theorization on the potential alchemy of Maelo’s embracing ecuajei as a signature mantra with which I began this section. In light of all this, a set of questions arises about the significance of the articulation of the macropanía as an ethics of friendship amidst the socio-political turmoil that pervades the
collective and individual histories of macropanas. How are their ideas about magic, religion, and music related to the broader macroeconomic and political processes discussed earlier in this chapter? How to think about their conception of Maelo’s magical religious world and poetic solidarity in relation to the crossings between the political and the theological in what was above described as a wounded space? What is the significance of their enmeshing of Maelo’s legacy within chavismo? And how do their particularly politicized re interpretations of Maelo’s songs relate to other interpretations of his music amongst other salseros in Caracas? In what follows, I speculate with multiple stories about the potential sacred significance of ecuajei in order to relate macropanas’ interpretation of this expression to the broader histories of Black Atlantic Religions and to broader politico theological narratives in Venezuela.

Voicing the Goddess

The work macropanas do with ecuajei evokes the sense of the proverbial that pervades Maelo’s vocal performance. Their transformation of this expression into a medium of mutuality speaks about the haunting presences of modes of being and knowing that are profoundly imbued with religious significance even if used in non-sacred contexts. What they do with ecuajei, and with Maelo’s music and biography more broadly, is an enactment of a secular devotion in which popular music serves as a means to mediate the political and the theological. In their creative use of ecuajei, they voice both Maelo and Oyá as sort of ancestral relatives who somehow constellate their lives. Relating some of the potential sacred histories of ecuajei as an expression used to praise Oyá will allow us to further delve into the affective force of this expression. The preceding sections have concentrated on macropanas’ incorporation of Maelo’s vocalizations into their everyday speech. Let’s now place the configuration of their relational affinity in
relation to broader histories of Black Atlantic Religions by tracing some of the sacred stories
macropanas mediate when they voice ecuajei.

Deities of Black Atlantic Religions manifest through multiple becomings and ritualistic
iterations. They are multifarious entities known for their multiplicity, or their intrinsic capacity to
become something else (Goldman 2007; Holbraad 2012). Oyá, for example, manifests in various
natural forms such as tornadoes, strong winds, fire, lightning, and buffalo. She is also known as a
patron of feminine leadership, and is linked to ancestry, funerary rituals, and the transformation
from one state of being to another (Gleason 1987). In her book, *Oya: In Praise of the Goddess,*
Gleason describes the divinity’s multiplicity and transcendence.¹¹⁰ She writes,

The goddess Oya, of African origin, manifests herself in various natural forms: the river
Niger, tornadoes, strong winds generally, fire, lightning, and buffalo. She is also
associated with certain phenomena among the Yoruba people (the first to worship her),
notably with masquerades constructed of bulky, billowing cloth—ancestral apparitions—
and with funerals. To the leader of the market women in Yoruba communities she offers
special protection and encouragement in negotiation with civil authorities and arbitration
of disputes. Thus, one may speak of Oya as patron of feminine leadership, or persuasive
charm reinforced by ayé—an efficacious gift usually translated as “witchcraft.” Although
Oya is associated with pointed speech, most of what she’s about is secret. Always
vanishing, she presents herself in concealment. More abstractly, Oya is the goddess of
dynamics, of the dynamic interplay between surfaces, of transformations from one state of
being to another. She is a jittery goddess, then, but with a keen sense of direction
(Gleason 1987, 1).

Oyá is then, as most Black Atlantic divinities are, a multifarious goddess capable of multiple
becomings. In Gleason’s description, Oyá appears as an elusive bundle of peoples, materialities,
geographies, social and cultural meanings, temporalities, economies, beings, voices, and beliefs.
Her speech is simultaneously piercing and opaque, her affective power is a feminine force, and
she is linked to ancestry and death. Her name, Gleason narrates in a different passage, originates

¹¹⁰ Gleason does not accentuate “Oya.” Throughout this chapter, I accentuate the names of all the Orishas
following the lead of Ramos (2012). In this section, I will not accentuate Her name only when citing
Gleason’s work directly.
out of a story about destruction and transformation that is additionally one of the sources for the emergence of the invocation ecuajei. Gleason writes,

Oya is her simplest name. It is a verb form conveying her passage as an event with disastrous consequences. O-ya, meaning, “She tore” in Yoruba. And what happened? A big tree (...) getting in the way of the storm, wildly agitated its branches. Perhaps its crown got lopped off. She tore. A river overflowed its banks. Whole cloth was ripped into shreds. Barriers were broken down. A tumultuous feeling suddenly destroyed one’s peace of mind. “Eeepa!” one exclaims, by way of homage. “Eeepa Heyi!” What a goddess! (Gleason 1987, 11, emphasis on the original).

According to this story, the name Oyá means “She tore” thus indexing the force of destruction and transformation triggered by the goddess. Her winds, one could reinterpret, create a wounded space that prompts the response of her devotees who in the midst of such uneasiness salute her in awe chanting “Eeepa Heyi!” or as Gleason translates this expression, “What a goddess!”

This mythical story resonates with tales narrated by Gleason and other researchers about the use of this invocation as a central means to praise Oyá in a variety of religious frameworks. Tracing some of the multiple uses and inscriptions of this expression in sacred settings is key for us to relate its mystical efficacy to the work that both Maelo and the macropanas do with ecuajei in non-sacred settings. According to Gleason, this vocalization is inscribed as Eeepa Heyi! by the Yoruba in Nigeria and Hepa Hei! by believers of Candomblé in Brazil.111 Devotees of Regla de Ocha and Ifá in Cuba, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and the United States inscribe it as Jekua Jey or Jecua Jei.112 The first part of the expression –Eepa, Hepa, Jekua or Jecua– is used by itself to reckon the force of a variety of deities. The second part of the phrase –Heyi, Hei, Jey or Jei– belongs exclusively to Oyá. This invocation is voiced with diverse ritualistic aims as a medium


112 See Hollbraad (2012) for an ethnographic study on anthropology and Ifá. See also Mason (2002) for an ethnographic study about santería. See also Love (2012), 102-106, for a discussion about different interpretations of Oyá amongst African American Yoruba communities.
to communicate with Her. In Regla de Ocha, for example, it is chanted in drumming rituals as a rhythmic mantra that produces a sense of trance, an altered state of consciousness in devotees who then and there become possessed by the goddess (González 2015).113 A sacred song collected in Nigeria by Awo Falokun Fatunmbi (1993) documents this expression inscribed otherwise. The song says, “E i ekua e i ekua Oya sile kunfoyanwo awode ara koyumariwo Oyade,” which is translated as, “The dead, the dead, In the house of the Spirit of the Wind She wears the palm fronds of the Spirit of the Wind [sic]” (Awo Falokun Fatunmbi 1993, 26). In this sacred song, the invocation E i ekua e i ekua translates as “The death the death,” thus reaffirming Oyá’s relation to death, mourning and ancestry.

Gleason narrates a story that helps us further imagine the “sonic transculturation” (Ochoa Gautier 2006) of ecuajei in Maelo’s voice, and its reinterpretation as a medium of mutuality amongst the macropanas. In describing Oyá’s appearance in a mourning ritual in Brasil, Gleason portrays Hepa Hei! as an oracular invocation that relates kinship, ancestry, and personhood. In this context, the voicing of Hepa Hei! comes from a person in trance when possessed by the goddess. Hence, the invocation of Hepa Hei! indexes the vocal appearance of Oyá embodying her devotee during a mourning ritual. Her oracular voice sounds, according to Gleason, like a guttural howling. She writes,

Oya in four different guises takes turns patrolling up and down in front of the door. If it is her whim to return to dance amid the throng of small-change-bestowers [sic], she does. Or she might be suddenly moved to rush out into the darkness, howling like an animal (…) the sound of her deep, guttural howling out there, like a wolf protecting its young from unimaginable horrors only she can keep at bay (…) The sound Oya makes when she howls is conventionally called Heyi! (Yoruba) or Hei! (Brazilian). It is a sound welling from inside a person in trance at the moment when the possession stabilizes itself and becomes recognizable. Other divinities announce themselves vocally in other ways.

113 Ramírez-Cabrera (2012) describes this expression as a conjure voiced in sacred santería rituals while devotees touch the floor with their fingers. He inscribes the expression differently as, Jekua, yeri, Yansá, jekua key. Yansá is another name for Oyá.
Oya’s visceral signature is *Heyi!* – a cry repeated in a stylized (nonguttural) [sic] way by acclaiming worshipers. *Eepaa* is a salutation heard in other contexts (…) The *Heyi!* part of the expression belongs to Oya alone. It is an echo, as we have said, of her own primary utterance (Gleason 1987, 249).

In Gleason’s description, Oyá becomes simultaneously a possessed devotee and a wolf-woman. Her guttural howling is a cry repeated in a non-guttural way by other mourners howling back. Oyá’s howling, whether inscribed as Eepa Heyi!, Hepa Hei!, Jekua Jey, Jecua Jei! or Ecuajei!, emerges in this description as a relational voice that connects humans and non-humans. On one hand, it voices a call-and-response between the goddess and her devotees in the midst of trance. On the other, it relates Oyá’s arrival at the sacred context and her role as a “vector of ontological motion” (Holbraad 2012, 146) between different modes of beings.

This analysis of ecuajei as an oracular howling relates to Ana Ochoa Gautier’s (2014) theorization of howling voices in the colonial archive as media for the configuration of different experiences of personhood. Descriptions of persons howling like animals abound in the colonial archive as Western travelers repeatedly characterized the voices of Africans, Afro-descendants, and indigenous peoples as howling voices (Tomlinson 2007; Ochoa Gautier 2014). Creoles and Europeans often used such understandings of voice in processes of racialization that deemed voices sounding like animals as symptomatic of a lowly human condition. Ochoa Gautier, nevertheless, explores the possibility that Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples understood these vocalizations differently. Such vocal expressions were frequently produced to mimic the sonority of animals, deities or musical instruments. Hence, Ochoa Gautier suggests, the sounds depicted as animal-like voices by Westerners conceivably allowed Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples to live multiple relations through the voice. These modes of vocalization she proposes, afforded them the possibility of moving “between states of multiplicity or unity where a single person can envoice multiple beings” (Ochoa Gautier 2014, 12). Thus conceived, voice
becomes the locus for both the deployment and contestation of different notions of personhood, as well as a medium for the production of different modes of kinship and inter-subjectivities. The politico theological histories of voice narrated by Ochoa-Gautier, one could say, relate the voices of Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples as vectors of ontological motion between different modes of being. Such histories of voice speak to Gleason’s portrayal of Oyá’s guttural howling as a relational echo between humans and non-humans in present-day sacred settings. Here rests, I speculate, the alchemist potential of ecuajei as a relational invocation that is key for the political theology of the everyday that characterizes the macropanía.

Returning to what macropanas do with ecuajei, one could say that the sense of mutuality they have crafted amidst the context of precarity that has marked their collective history evokes this imagining of Oyá’s voice as a relational howling cry. It is important to recall that the voices of protesters during the caracazo were described as sounding like the roar of a wounded animal. In the days when macropanas were forming as a collective, the rendering of protesters’ voices as the roar of a wounded animal restated the opposition between civilization and barbarism through the depiction of animal-like voices as marks of a lowly human condition. Such a description echoes the colonial histories in which Afro-descendant and indigenous ways of vocalizing have repeatedly been imagined as animal-like. Recalling once again Ochoa Gautier’s theorization of voice, we can say that the work macropanas do with ecuajei and the sense of mutuality they describe as a la macropanía or maeleería need to be framed within these longer colonial and racist histories in Latin America and the Caribbean in which the voice has been a vital means for both the deployment and countering of a politics of life used to decide what lives are casted as worthy or unworthy of citizenship and personhood. I understand what macropanas do with ecuajei in this light. Their transformation of this expression into a medium of mutuality thus enmeshes their
relational affinity and their politics within not only the histories of Black Atlantic Religions but also, and with particular importance within larger Caribbean and Latin American struggles of colonialism.

But this story about the mystical efficacy of ecuajei has yet another key layer. One that I will address briefly, but that is crucial for the type of affect mobilized by macropanas when they voice ecuajei. Let us recall that Oyá is considered a feminine force. According to Gleason, Oyá can be a wolf-woman, a buffalo-woman, or a patron of feminine leadership whose strong winds haunt the religious currents that transverse the Black Atlantic Religions. I find truly compelling the oracular howling of a goddess known for her feminine presence gathers such a principally masculine, “homosocial” (Kosofsky 1985; Hammarén and Johansson 2014) collective like the macropanas. Such a secular devotion for a goddess is not surprising, though, if one thinks of the cult of María Lionza, which has long-been the utmost manifestation of popular religion in the country; perhaps only second to the cult of Bolívar that pervades everyday live in Venezuela as will be discussed in the following section. Still, it is important to emphasize that ecuajei is a feminine howling force that lives in an ongoing transformation through the mostly masculine voices of macropanas.

Macropanas, I propose, have created their own relational echo in their transduction of a sacred howling into a medium of mutuality. Their use of ecuajei as key in their intellectual and spiritual symbiosis with Maelo—which, let’s not forget, took shape as a mourning outburst on the day he died and is celebrated yearly for the anniversary of his death—speaks about ancestry and about such relations between human and non-human beings. The mystical efficacy of ecuajei lies for them in its force as a medium for the articulation of inter-subjectivities that include

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114 See Martin (1983), Taussig (1997), and Ferrándiz-Martín (2004) for different studies about María Lionza.
different beings as key to their everyday life, whether they are feminine divinities like Oyá, death relatives like Maelo or José Adames, or sacred invocations like ecuajei. This exemplifies both the poetic solidarity Adames marks as central to Maelo’s legacy and the concrete religiosity Hernández identifies as central to Maelo’s magical religious world. This relational understanding of ecuajei evokes the broader histories of Black Atlantic Religions traced in this section, and indexes the ongoing socio-political upheaval that has characterized the histories of macropanas. In the following section, I narrate how their conception of the magical religious in Maelo’s repertoire is entangled in a broader mobilization of ideas about magic, religion, and the political that has long-been central in the histories of the Venezuelan state.

Magical Statecraft

The magical and the political have long intersected in descriptions of the formation and ensuing transformations of the Venezuelan state (Martin 1983; Coronil 1997, 2008). The spectral prevalence of the cult of Bolívar as a divine icon (Pino 2003) in political, social, and cultural institutions throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the concurrent strengthening and multiplication of the cult of Maria Lionza are revealing of the ways in which the magical, the religious, and the political have been entangled in the articulation of power in Venezuela (Taussig 1997; Ferrándiz-Martín 2004). In studying the cult of María Lionza, Ferrándiz-Martín proposes that although these modes of popular devotion have historically been casted as backward and its devotees have been wronged for engaging in these religious endeavors, these forms of devotion are profoundly imbricated in the modern petro-state. Taussig (1997) proposes a similar analysis in his study of the María Lionza cult and the Bolivar cult in which he relates traditional magical beliefs, rituals of spirit possession, and the workings of the nation-state. For
Taussig, these practices conform a type of civil religiosity and a political theology that pervades Venezuelan life.

The affective and symbolic power of the death is central in Taussig’s description of such a theological relation as a form of magical statecraft. For him, the worship of Bolivar is telling of a Venezuelan obsession with their dead heroes. This crystallizes through the spectral images of Bolivar that haunt school textbooks, public squares, government buildings, political campaigns, and official discourses transforming him into a sort of political deity. The mystical efficacy of such a spectral theology emerges, one could say, from the praising of the death as a source of political power. This is what Taussig calls “the magic of the state,” a form of statecraft that arises from the dialectical relation between the government and the people. Such a form of statecraft is, nonetheless, telling of longer histories of colonialism. As Taussig states in an online interview,

Magic, spirit possession, fast-track access of the occult, are heavily dependent on colonization and racist hierarchies as well as gendered ones (women are "intuitive," no good at science but are always the ones who find lost things...). The primitive is blessed with magic and is there as a resource to be tapped by the "civilized." This has existed, I think, since pretty much the beginnings of the human race, but was certainly boosted by the Enlightenment and modern colonialism. Crucial here is the way civilized/primitive is mapped onto metaphoric/literal.115

Key for this discussion about the crossings between the political, the religious, and the magical in everyday life, and particularly for my discussion of macropanas’ voicing of ecuajei, is one of the conceptions of magic in Latin America discussed by Taussig. He writes, "By magic it should be here plainly understood that we are talking about knowledge and words, words and their ability to effect things” (Taussig 1987, 262). This conception of magic as the ability of words to affect things relates to the above discussed ideas about the mystical efficacy of words. As such, I connect this concept of magic to the work macropanas do in transforming ecuajei into a medium

of their relational affinity, which is telling of how these broader political, theological and economic processes are endured ordinarily.

The alchemist potential of words, furthermore, is at the core of Coronil’s (1997) analysis of the Venezuelan state as a magical petro-state. He maintains that, as Venezuela became an oil-centered nation, the state was constituted as a unifying force through modernization discourses and development projects that produced collective fantasies of progress and social integration. “As a magnanimous sorcerer,” Coronil writes, “the state seizes its subjects by introducing a condition or state of being receptive to its illusions–a magical state” (1997, 5). This enchanting statecraft, according to Coronil, is deployed dramaturgically through awe-inspiring spectacles that have created a political cosmogony of modernity, democracy, and mestizaje as intricate to the Venezuelan nation. The efficacy of words is crucial for such a magical statecraft, which has long been centered on caudillo-like presidents who bring “realities out of a hat–cosmogonies, factories, freeways, [and] constitutions” (Coronil 2008, 4). Coronil portrays the deployment of such modes of govermentality as “tricks of prestidigation.”

The spell of these oil-funded fantasies was somehow altered during the caracazo and its aftermath of ongoing social and political turmoil. As Chavez arose to power in the late 1990s, the enchantment of the petro-state gained a different tone through the mobilization and mediation of modes of speech associated to persons whose lives had historically been casted as undesirable. It was not only that protestors took the streets and that their voices, which had sounded to many as the roar of a wounded animal, formed the core of the electoral wave that made Chavez president. Their howling voices were now echoed in Chavez’s own modes of vocalization. He channeled the modes of speech of those who took him to power, Coronil argues, through the production of new historical narratives that, amongst many other rhetorical maneuvers, re-enchanted the cult of
Bolivar. His magnificent verbal skills, which he displayed prominently in his weekly television show *Aló Presidente* (Hello, Mr. President), also exacerbated the old opposition between ideas about civilization and barbarism. Not surprisingly, Coronil (2008) describes him as “the most magical of Venezuela’s presidents,” and Uzcategui (1999) as a “wizard of emotions,” due to this proliferation of words that characterized both his rise to power and his presidency.

The work *macropanas* do incorporating fragments of Maelo’s music into their ordinary speech is enmeshed within this politicized proliferation of words. In doing this, they have created a poetics of relation that afford them a means to somehow navigate the histories of race, gender, and class that, as we have been discussing, are intertwined in these broader mobilization of ideas about magic, religion, and the political. What they do with *ecuajei*, more specifically, needs to be framed within the recent growth of Regla de Ocha or santería in Venezuela. This religion, which coexisted for decades alongside the cult of María Lionza and other practices of popular devotion, has gained more visibility during chavismo. The newfound presence of Regla de Ocha, which is evident in the streets of Caracas by the numerous people wearing sacred bracelets, necklaces, and attires, has brought back the colonial fantasies of otherness that Taussig (1987; 1997) describes in his studies about magic in Latin America.

Chavismo has been linked to different popular devotions through sensationalistic stories that portray, for example, *santería* and espiritismo as ritualistic techniques of governmentality. Chávez expressed an affinity for different modes of religiosity and a potential simultaneity of devotions, but his political theology was mostly associated with Christian imagery and belief. The portrayals of chavismo’s branch of magical statecraft regularly conflate different religious traditions, and depict these beliefs as archaic and uncivilized. Santería has lately been described,

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116 See López-Maya (2014b) for a reflection about the notion of “participation” central to chavismo as rooted in the histories of the theology of liberation in Venezuela since the 1960s.
nonetheless, as a recent Cuban import that is revealing of the political control that many believe Fidel Castro upheld over Chávez (Placer 2015). In a book titled *Los Brujos de Chávez* (Chavez’s Witches), journalist David Placer claims to have encountered the true foundation of chavismo’s power.\(^ {117}\) “It is not the loyalty to the political power,” Placer writes, “nor is it that the movement empowers the poor liberating them from the power of the oligarchs. The true cement of the Bolivarian revolution, what consolidates its sympathies and its convictions, is none other that the magical religious world.”\(^ {118}\) For him, this became utterly evident through the multiple healing rituals broadcasted during Chavez’s struggle with cancer, and even more palpable in the massive mourning outburst that happened during Chavez’s funeral. The tone in which Chavez’s magical statecraft is represented in these accounts as a dangerous spell over the population reaffirms the imagining of these religious expressions as uncivilized. This reasserts old colonial fears. Beyond its sensationalistic character or its potential truth-value, these narratives are reactions to the particular modes of speech and belief that Chavez mediated in his rhetoric. Such fears, one could also say, are reenactments of the old colonial fears regarding the howling voices of the politically and economically disenfranchised. And perhaps even more importantly for my argument in this chapter, this is also revealing of the pervading sense of the theological that seems to haunt the articulation of power in Venezuela. These are the conditions of possibility for how macropanas’ conceptualize Maelo’s magical religious world.

\(^ {117}\) I cite this fragment from a blog that features the introduction to this book. I ordered the book from Inter Library Loans but did not arrived on time. I will fix this reference as soon as the book arrives. For now, see Placer 2015, accessed on June 2016: http://elrincondeyanka.blogspot.com/2015/11/libro-los-brujos-de-chavez-de-david.html.

\(^ {118}\) “No es la lealtad al líder político, ni el movimiento que empodera a los pobres y los libera del yugo oligarca. El verdadero cemento de la revolución bolivariana, el que consolida las simpatías y las convicciones, no es otro que el mundo mágico-religioso” (Placer 2015).
Comrade Maelo

Macropanas enmesh Maelo within their political belief in the Bolivarian Revolution. Their reinterpretation of his legacy thus becomes part of a broader sense of the theological that pervades Venezuelan politics. They routinely call him camarada Maelo (comrade Maelo). As was briefly pointed early in this chapter, Vladimir has images of Bolívar, Chávez, Che Guevara, and Maelo adorning his photocopies kiosk in front of the Pedagogic Institute. This sort of politico theological pantheon is not uncommon amongst macropanas and their friends. Reina Tovar, who organized another annual tribute to Maelo in the neighborhood of Petare, in Caracas, is known very much part of the macropanas celebration, and is a passionate chavista, has images of Maelo and Bolivar adorning her house (see figure 20). Also, during the concert celebrating Maelo’s life in May of 2013, Carbonero and his son had t-shirts combining Chavez and Maelo with chavista and Puerto Rican pro-independence slogans (see figure 21). For them, his music voices a strong anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-racist message they associate both with the narratives of chavismo and to the histories of Puerto Rican pro-independence struggles. In doing this, they all entangle Maelo within the sense of politico theological kinship that grounds their musical activism. This became clearer to me during my visit to their annual celebration of Maelo’s life a few weeks after Chavez’s death in May of 2013.
During that visit, I interviewed César Miguel Rondón, author of the canonical *The Book of Salsa* (2008[1979]), who has quite a different understanding of Maelo’s political significance. Rondón, who identifies himself as *anti-chavista*, rejects the particularly politicized listening of Maelo’s music that macropanas do, but only to inscribe Maelo with different political overtones. He nurtured a friendship with Maelo in Caracas during the mid-1970s when they recorded what
has become, through the fragments included in *The Book of Salsa*, a canonical and rare in-depth interview with Maelo. Rondón also participated in one of the early editions of the macropanas’ annual celebration of Maelo’s legacy. Although he remembers macropanas fondly, he is critical of what he sees as a dishonest appropriation of Maelo’s voice. He understands their description of Maelo’s songs as allegorical stories of their lives (See Chapter One), but strongly disagrees with their incorporation of Maelo into this sort of chavismo pantheon of political deities. He also discards any connections between Maelo and Puerto Rican pro-independence struggles, claiming that Maelo never spoke or sang about these matters. For Rondón, this is more telling of the intense politicization of Venezuelan life during the rise and fall of chavismo than of any real political meaning in Maelo’s repertoire. I cite him at length,

This is related to the political interpretation of the person who interprets the song, and I mean the listener who reinterprets Maelo’s music. Maelo was never involved in those things. Maelo never gave an explicit political declaration. In fact, Curet\footnote{Tite Curet Alonso is the most prolific and influential songwriter in salsa from Puerto Rico.} gave him that beautiful song that says, ‘mi música no queda ni a la derecha ni a la izquierda, queda en el centro de un tambor bien legal’ (my music is not in the right, nor is it in the left, it rests on the center of very legal drum).\footnote{Rivera, Ismael. 1977. “Mi Música” in *De Todas Maneras Rosas*. TICO. JMTS-1415.} To say that one’s music is not located in the right or the left is a political position. Sure, that is a political declaration but it is very distant from what could be considered a traditional leftist position. What Ismael had was a very real connection with the people. Now, a political group might want to take advantage of this connection to apparent its own connection to the people, but that is a different matter… Hence I think it is not honest to Ismael’s real legacy to pass his art through such a political filter. I think it is more honest to think about why he had such a connection with the people who listened and idolized him, and then if you want, we can see the meanings that might coincide here and there through a political reading (Rondón 2013).\footnote{“Eso tiene que ver con la interpretación política del interprete, del que esta interpretando a Maelo. Maelo nunca estuvo metido en esas cosas. Es decir, Maelo nunca dio una declaración política profesa. De hecho, Curet le regaló aquel tema tan bello que decía Mi música no queda ni a la izquierda ni a la derecha que da en el centro de un tambor bien legal, no?... Decir eso mi musica no queda ni a la izquierda ni a la derecha, eso es una posicion plitica. Ojo, eso es declaracion politica, pero esta muy distante de la postura politica previa, digamos que se pueda concebir tradicionalmente de izquierda… Ismael lo que tenia era la vinculación real con el pueblo. A lo mejor un grupo politico quiere aprovecharse de esa vinculación para vincularse él politicamente con el pueblo, pero eso es otra cosa… Entonces creo que no es honesto con el legado real de Ismael pasar por un filtro politico la interpretación de su arte. Creo que es más honesto
Rondón’s critique of macropanas’ particular listening of Maelo’s music does not depoliticize his legacy. Rather, his attempt to separate Maelo from macropanas’ reinterpretation of his repertoire through the prism of chavismo ends up reasserting the political potential of Maelo’s music. In his effort to sanitize Maelo from the marks of chavismo, that is, Rondón ascribes his repertoire with political meanings that somehow echo—although from a different political stance—the relational histories narrated so far throughout this chapter. His reference to the song “Mi Música (My Music),” written by Catalino “Tite” Curet Alonso, which has been discussed in various scholarly reflections about Maelo’s politics due to its apparent centrist political message, is key in this analysis.¹²² In a personal interview conducted in Puerto Rico with Rafi Torres, a close friend of Maelo, he informed me that this song created tensions amongst Maelo’s closest friends who criticized Curet Alonso for the centrist politics of this tune. According to Torres, him and other friends recriminated the author for convincing Maelo about recording a tune that somehow challenged his long-standing commitment with pro-independence and nationalist causes in Puerto Rico. For example, in 1980 Maelo performed in a concert celebrated in New York to praise a group of recently liberated Puerto Rican nationalist political prisoners who had participated in an armed attack to the U.S. Congress in 1954 (Colón-Montijo 2015). These political histories, even though they are practically unknown in Puerto Rico, are vital to how macropanas reinterpret Maelo’s

¹²² See Aparicio (1998), Quintero-Herencia (2005), and Carrasquillo (2008) for discussions of the politics of “Mi Música.” In a personal interview conducted in Puerto Rico with Rafi Torres, a close friend of Maelo, he inform me that this song created tension amongst Maelo’s good friends who criticized Tite Curet Alonso for this composition. According to Torres, they recriminated Curet Alonso for convincing Maelo about recording a tune that somehow challenged his long-standing commitment with pro-independence and nationalist causes.
music as enmeshed within their own anti-imperialists political ideas as well as their solidarity with pro-independence struggles in Puerto Rico. My aim here, though, is to emphasize Rondón’s political listening of Maelo by placing it in juxtaposition to what macropanas do with their concept of Maelo’s magical religious world and their particular relation to Maelo as a comrade of chavismo. Therefore, a brief discussion of how “Mi Música” is revealing of these larger politico theological matters is appropriate here.

“Mi Música” challenges the dichotomy between left and right. Instead, it places the key to Maelo’s politics in the affective and relational potential of the drum. In doing this, it somehow echoes the above-narrated politico theological histories in which salsa works as the locus for the articulation of an ethics of friendship. Maelo sings,

Mi música no queda
ni a la derecha ni a la izquierda,
tampoco da las señas
de protesta general.

Mi música no queda
ni a la derecha ni a la izquierda,
queda en el centro
de un tambor legal,
queda en el centro
de un tambor bien legal.

Yo soy un pasaporte
para un viaje
sabrosón y musical.
Yo estoy contigo,
contigo y también contigo
para ponerte a gozar.
Y por eso yo canto música,

My music is not
on the left or the right,
nor does it give the signs
of general protest.

My music is not
on the left or the right,
it lays at the center
of a very legal drum,
it lays at the center
of a very legal drum.

I am the passport
for a trip
of flavor and music.
I am with you,
with you, and also with you
to make you have fun.
And that’s why I sing my music,
música pura música  music, pure music
para que todos puedan vacilar.  For everyone to enjoy.

Coro:  Chorus:
Por eso yo canto música,  That’s why I sing my music
mi música pura música…  my music, pure music…

According to Maelo’s close friends, he habitually used the expression bien legal (very legal) as a marker of friendship and trust when describing someone he truly liked.¹²³ Legality is thus here a metaphor of sociality that transforms the drum into a locus for the production and cultivation of relational affinities. Such musical relations gain a spiritual connotation in the call-and-response section of “Mi Música” when Maelo sings,

Mi música está en el centro  My music lays at the center
de un tambor que es bien legal,  of a drum that is truly legal,
espiritual.  spiritual.

This image of a legal, spiritual drum works as much more than a metaphor for the articulation of friendship. This is telling of the type of concrete religiosity and the poetic solidarity macropanas ascribe to Maelo’s music, but it also indexes sacred practices within the Black Atlantic Religions in which the drum serves as the medium for the communication between human and non-human beings. A sacred drum in ritualistic contexts has agency. The drum eats, speaks, and is inhabited by sacred entities.¹²⁴ Hence, the image of a legal, spiritual drum voices the sense of the proverbial that pervades Maelo’s music and his use of ecuajei in the above-discussed performance of the song “La Gata Montesa.”

¹²³ I take this information from personal conversations with Rafi Torres (2011) and Lester Nurse (2014).
¹²⁴ See Ortiz (1994[1950]) for a key study about the agency of drums sacred rituals in Cuba.
Even though “Mi Música” also inscribes sonically the sense of mutuality that sustains the macropanía, this song is problematic, to say the least, for the macropanas. It seems to unsettle their imagining of Maelo as a fellow comrade. In an email from September 2015, Hernández asked me to share with them my reflections and research about “Mi Música” because they were having a new and ongoing critical reflection about this tune. Yet, they still consider it significant in that, for them, it voices a denunciation of the imposition of bourgeois political ideologies that they associate both to their long-standing activism in Caracas and to histories of colonialism in Puerto Rico. This is the type of interpretation that Rondón condemns. He, nonetheless, invokes this tune to give Maelo’s voice his own political interpretation. For him, it voices the profound connection Maelo created with his audience beyond chavistas. This bond, Rondón proposes, transcends a specific political reading; and especially, it goes beyond the interpretation of Maelo’s legacy solely through the prism of chavismo.

My intention in juxtaposing Rondón’s listening of Maelo to what macropanas do with his songs is to describe how they all entangle Maelo within the above related politico theological histories of power in Venezuela. An interview with Rondón published by the Spanish newspaper *El País* in December of 2015, one the day before elections in Venezuela, sheds more light onto my reflection about these different political reinterpretations of Maelo. When asked what music would sound in the streets of Caracas on the day when chavismo is overturned, Rondón said “El Nazareno.” In doing this, he contributed his own politico theological interpretation of Maelo. He said,

> John Lennon will sound singing, “Imagine;” Ismael Rivera, with “El Nazareno”... “El Nazareno” speaks about friendship, about how things can be fixed in communion. People will even whistle in the streets. We will all be in tune... I once asked the maestro José
Antonio Abreu\(^{125}\) what being in tune means for him. His response was marvelous. He said, to be in tune is to agree.\(^{126}\)

Rondón’s selection of “El Nazareno” seems fitting. Let’s remember that macropanas believe that this song, which narrates a story about friendship and devotion, holds the key to understanding the transcendence of Maelo’s legacy. Coming from opposite sides of the political spectrum, thus, Rondón and the macropanas contribute in different ways to the politicization of Maelo’s legacy and to his enmeshing within the politico theological ethos that seems to pervade the articulation of power Venezuela. Amidst the intense political fragmentation that characterizes everyday life in this country, a social shattering that reifies the potential of imagining the city as a wounded space in which precarity has become tensely naturalized, both Rondón and the macropanas appear to somehow be in tune regarding Maelo’s mystical and political efficacy.

**Conclusion: Un Profundo Ecuajei**

I return to my conversation with Jesús Hernández at El Gons Sous on May 2013 in order to begin rounding this chapter. Specifically, I return to an expression I discussed briefly when relating his concept of Maelo’s magical religious world. “Maelo is for me a profound ecuajei,” were the words Hernández used to begin his theorization. This phrase entangles Maelo and Oyá as relatives who constellate Hernández’s everyday life and the sense of mutuality he shares with

\(^{125}\) José Antonio Abreu is the founder of *El Sistema*, an internationally prestigious musical education program originated in Venezuela. See Baker (2014) for a critical study of *El Sistema*.


"Sonará John Lennon, cantando Imagine; Ismael Rivera, con El Nazareno... El Nazareno habla de la amistad, de que las cosas se logran entre todos. Van a sonar hasta los silbidos. Vamos a afinar. Somos un país de músicos y los músicos necesitan un conductor. Cuando tienes una orquesta grande el concertino sale y levanta el arco de su violín para pedir el “la” y que toda la orquesta afinse. Una vez le pregunté al maestro José Antonio Abreu qué era para él afinar. Me dijo una maravilla: ponerse de acuerdo.”
his fellow macropanas. With these words, he transforms the alchemist energy of *ecuajei* into the medium of their musical symbiosis. In doing this, he gives specificity to the idea of an ethics of friendship that is key in salsa. The phrasing “a profound ecuajei,” moreover, is telling of the type of poetic solidarity that macropanas seem to incorporate from Maelo’s music into the relational affinities that ground them as collective.

However, in crafting their particular interpretation of Maelo’s legacy macropanas also create difference. The phrase “Maelo is for me a profound ecuajei” reminds me of yet another political listening Hernández does of Maelo’s transcendence. He describes Maelo, referencing the Gramscian concept of the organic intellectual, as an organic sonero.127 That is, for him, a sonero whose voice echoes the lives of his devotees and whose songs tell allegorical stories of their lives. The way in which he coins this term has serious essentialist undertones in that he describes Maelo as inherent to chavismo and/or to the underclasses. For him, Maelo’s mystical and political efficacy is so powerful that his voice affects even the lives of what he calls deceptively “inorganic intellectuals.” I cite Hernández at length,

One time I was talking to an inorganic intellectual; that is, a petit bourgeois intellectual. We were talking at a table in a little bar, and we started to talk about salsa. He told me, ‘I don’t speak about salsa because that is a marginal matter.’ Then I responded, ‘So, are you saying that Ismael Rivera is a marginal?’ And what did he say? ‘Wait a moment!’ And he stood up, ‘You are talking about *El Sonero Mayor.* That’s a different thing.’ And he sat again, ‘Now we are going to talk about *El Sonero Mayor,* let’s talk for hours. Bring me a bottle of whisky that we are going to talk about *El Sonero Mayor.*’ Maelo was such a transcendental individual that he affected even the lives of inorganic intellectuals in a positive way. They become filled with humanity, with a sense of “Calle Calma” [The street where Maelo grew up and lived until he died, now called Ismael Rivera street]… Maelo is such a transcendental individual in the Caribbean, my friend. Damn it, my friend, blessings for him in his afterlife! Ecuajei! Aché for you, kid! (Hernández 2013).128

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127 See Gramsci (1971), 3-23.

128 “En una oportunidad yo estaba hablando con un intelectual inorgánico, eso es un intelectual pequeño burgués. estábamos en una temática en una mesa en una tasquita y empezamos a hablar de salsa. Él me dijo, ‘Yo de ese tema no hablo porque ese tema es de marginales.’ Y llego yo y le digo, ‘Entonces para ti Ismael Rivera era un marginal?’ Y ¿qué me dijo él? ‘Un momentico,’ y se paró. ‘Tú me estás hablando
Hernández’s hagiographical words evoke the contrast between the particular, politicized reinterpretations that macropanas and Rondón do of Maelo’s legacy. His conception of Maelo as an organic sonero whose voice moves even those he deems as “inorganic intellectuals” is telling of macropanas’ specific type of politicized listening to Maelo as if he was part and parcel of chavismo. Their mode of listening to Maelo is articulated in opposition to the type of politicized listening Rondón creates, which is on his part an anti-chavista reinterpretation of Maelo. These different modes of locating Maelo’s music within the political theology of the magical state are forms of song labor, which are context-specific to Venezuelan musical-political histories. In this light, I argue that the relational echo formed by the multiple iterations of ecuajei related throughout this chapter voices the politico theological significance of Maelo’s enduring aura amongst Venezuelan salseros; that is, his transformation into a spectral presence that inspires the poetic solidarity that both macropanas and Rondón say to share through Maelo’s music and biography in their everyday lives. Or, as Hernández would perhaps say it, the ethnographic tales related throughout this chapter tell the story of Maelo’s becoming “un profundo ecuajei.”

del Sonero Mayor. Ese es otra vaina’. Y se sentó, ‘Ahora vamos a hablar de Ismael Rivera. Vamos a echarle bolas horas y horas. Traeme una botella de whisky que ahora vamos a hablar del Sonero Mayor’. Maelo era un tipo tan transcendental que hasta a los intelectuales inrogánicos los affect, coño los afecta de una manera positive. Se llenan de humanidad, se llenan de Calle Calma… Entonces Maelo es un individuo tan transcendental, pana, en el Caribe. Coño, pana, buen viaje para Maelo! Ecuajei! Aché pa’ ti, muchacho” (Hernández 2013).
Cortijo Se Llevó La Llave: Narrating Public Secrecy Through a Story of Illness and Healing

Maelo coined the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave* (Cortijo took the key with him) shortly after the death of his beloved friend Rafael Cortijo in 1982, a time in which Maelo was struggling with severe vocal illness. He used the phrase as a poetic expression of mourning Cortijo and his voice, and as a means of relating the loss of friendship with the loss of his possibility of singing. While Maelo also acknowledged publicly that he was suffering of polyps that affected his vocal chords, the expression *Cortijo se llevó la llave* became a mantra of sorts for him, for his family, and his fans. Over time, this phrase has gained an affective strength for *maeleros* and *maelistas* that is reminiscent of the ways in which Maelo’s songs and *soneos* (vocal improvisations) have become media for their articulation of a sense of mutuality.\(^{129}\) This phrase circulates online, is shared in conversations, and is studied in books and articles as part of the common mythical set of stories about his life; the type of hagiographical or alchemist accounts of his biography I study throughout this dissertation. In this chapter, I examine the significance of the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave*, its history, its poetics, and its implications for the mythical undertones that Maelo’s songs, soneos, and biography have in my interlocutors’ everyday lives.

I understand *Cortijo se llevó la llave* as a expressing much more than his vocal ailment and mourning for Cortijo. Rather, I take it as a story of illness and healing that allowed Maelo to maintain a sense of agency amidst disheartening conditions of life. My understanding of illness is based on Sayantani DasGupta and Marsha Hurst’s (2007) distinction between illness and disease. They write,

\(^{129}\) See Introduction for a discussion about the terms *maeleros* and *maelistas*, and see Chapter One for a discussion about song and soneo as media of mutuality.
While disease, a malfunctioning of biological processes in a patient, is usually the focus of traditional medical practices, illness represents that individual’s personal reaction to the disease or discomfort. Illness is shaped by subjective perceptions, symbolic meanings, and value judgments that arise from an individual’s culture, identity, and environment” (DasGupta and Hurst 2007, xii).

The conception of illness as shaped by culture is key to understanding Maelo’s insistence in telling his own healing story; a narrative that permitted him to endured not only his vocal ailments and experience of mourning but also to counter the stigma of pathological infirmity that has long been ascribed to Puerto Ricans—and to Afro-Puerto Ricans more specifically—as colonial subjects under U.S. imperialism. I reason that the significance of this poetic expression is the ways in which it evokes larger histories of illness in which Puerto Ricans have been deemed infectious citizens in need of hygiene, tutelage, and surveillance (Trigo 1999 and 2000; Suárez-Findley 2000; Duprey 2010, Garriga-López 2010). Therefore, Maelo’s story of healing and illness needs be framed in relation to these larger histories of illness, empire, and colonialism in Puerto Rico.

Specifically, I locate his story in relation to what Julio Ramos (2010) calls la condición farmacolonical de la modernidad (the pharmacolonial condition of modernity) and Miriam Muñiz-Varela (2013) calls el farmacón colonial (the colonial pharmacon). In a nutshell, these two concepts provide the grounds for a discussion about pharmacoloniality that understands the histories of addiction and drug trafficking as mutually constitutive, and as constitutive of larger histories of illness in which Puerto Rico has been used as a colonial laboratory, and Puerto Ricans have been transmuted into colonial, experimental subjects often deemed ill. Therefore, theorizing pharmacoloniality as constitutive of the histories of illness in Puerto Rico allows us the chance to relate Maelo’s vocal illness struggle to what seems to be an unrelated story of his life: his addiction and incarceration struggle. This analysis is feasible because the criminalization
of addiction and the development of the prison industrial complex are key to pharmacoloniality as population control tools.

This chapter thus conceives both Maelo's vocal illness and his struggle with addiction and incarceration as different yet related manifestations of these pharmacolonial histories of illness. I, furthermore, propose that these violent histories are frequently managed amongst Puerto Ricans through different expressions of Michael Taussig’s (1999) notion of the public secret, which is a well known, lived experience that people struggle to articulate publicly. Managed as such, the public secret becomes a spectral presence that haunts the everyday lives of those who endure its consequences but would not dare to name it in public. My use of this idea of the public secret is twofold: on a macro level I use it to conceptualize these larger pharmacolonial histories of illness that haunt Puerto Rican history and contemporary life; and on a micro level, I use it to describe Maelo’s vocal illness, addiction, and incarceration as experiences that contribute to the mythical undertones his life and music has gained among his fans, peers, researchers, and devotees. This, I am convinced, is key to the politicized listening and song labor that my interlocutors in Panama and Venezuela create with and through Maelo’s music.

Moreover, I propose that the key to the meaningfulness of *Cortijo se llevó la llave* as an iconic expression of Maelo’s biography is the multivalent symbolic and affective meanings of the image of *la llave* as a poetic expression in the salsa lore. La llave is a prominent poetic image oftentimes used by *salseros* (salsa fans and musicians), as synonymous of or in tandem with *la clave* (the key, the main organizing rhymic principle in salsa). As interchangeable expressions, both images imply secrecy and musical knowledge as well as a mode of being and making music that is constitutive of salsa. I argue that the tandem of la llave and la clave voices a sense of the proverbial, understood as that which implies more than what it is apparently saying (Adéékó
1998). Such sense of the proverbial has sacred connotations that play a crucial role in the mythical significance gained by the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave*. This is telling of the larger mythical tones gained by Maelo’s biography; a mythological tone that is not only voiced by my interlocutors, his fans more broadly, and his family but that is grounded in how he often told his life. Historian Rosa Carasquillo (2014) shows in her recent biography of Maelo that he frequently self-mythologized his vocal illness, addiction, and incarceration by creating different versions of how these events occurred. Maelo spoke openly about his vocal illness and about his addictions in many interviews, but rarely sang literally about these matters. Meanwhile, he sang openly about his incarceration, but barely spoke about prison in interviews. This chapter argues that Maelo devised the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave* as a part of narrative tactic of enduring the specters of illness and death, racist stigmas that he, as an Afro-Puerto Rican, faced throughout his life. This type of trickster, proverbial storytelling creates a spectral poetics that pervades his repertoire and biography, and is central to my study.

There is yet one more wrinkle to the story of illness and healing I relate in this chapter: war, militarism and anti-militarism as additional components of the larger histories of illness, empire, and colonialism in Puerto Rico. Maelo’s experiences in the military, similarly to that of so many Puerto Ricans, are also marked by illness and by the endurance of racism. As Mara Pastor (2014) discusses, there exists a continuum of sorts linking war, illness, addiction, and incarceration that has marked Puerto Rican life after World War II. Pastor proposes that his continuum has often been mediated through the arts, and specifically through poetry and music. Even though Maelo barely sang about war in these terms, his story about his experience in the military connects him to this continuum of colonial illness. Additionally, as will be discussed later in this chapter, his time in the military has been proved by Rosa Carasquillo (2014) as a
vital component of Maelo’s experiences of vocal illness. Such a continuum, which I understand as imbricated in pharmacoloniality, fostered the emergence of three social characters that have thereafter haunt Puerto Rican life: *el veterano* (the war veteran), *el preso* (the prisoner), and *el tecato* (the junkie). All these social characters haunt Maelo’s life, songs, and stories as specters that he embodies and whose presence is oftentimes very difficult for me to reckon as a researcher when studying and narrating his biography.

This chapter is my attempt to address matters that have so far been tough to articulate in my writing. That is, an attempt to inscribe the public secret of Maelo’s vocal illness, addiction, and incarceration as central to my study. It is common that upon hearing that I am writing a dissertation about Maelo people would immediately question the need to address these matters. For many salseros, writing about addiction and incarceration is offensive and they often warn me about the risk I might take of “damaging” Maelo’s legacy. Dealing with such “unspeakable” matters, though, is for me an urgent task. The ways in which drug trafficking, addiction, and incarceration intersect in salsa’s histories and repertoire are telling of the larger socio-political, economic, and cultural context where it formed as genre (Quintero-Herencia 2005; Washburne 2008). Yet, these matters have seldom been studied in the salsa literature. Maelo’s salsa, and the song labor and relational affinities my interlocutors create with and through his music allow me to deal with a central component of pharmacoloniality as theorized by Ramos (2010) and Muñiz-Varela: the need to study addiction and incarceration as entangled components of these larger bio-political histories.

In doing so, I seek to address abject matters in the salsa literature that are simultaneously pervading presence in the salsa repertoire. I aim to engage with addiction and incarceration as public secrets in salsa. I do not think that my inquiry into these topics diminishes Maelo’s legacy
at all. Instead, I believe doing this reaffirms his greatness by acknowledging how such struggles entangle him with fans and peers who endured similar experiences (in a micro level) and with larger pharmacolonial histories (in the macro level). The main question for me is, rather, how to write critically about such manifestations of the public secret in ways that also do justice to the sense of enchantment Maleo generates amongst maeleros and maelistas.

In this chapter, I do it by telling a story of illness and healing that understands the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave* as imbricated in a larger spectral poetics that pervades Maelo’s music and life. I explore Maelo’s vocal illness as part of a continuum that links the military, addiction, and incarceration as central components of pharmacoloniality. I relate the spectral poetics Maelo articulates in relation to what Juan Carlos Quintero-Herencia (2005) describes as the “*acústica carcelaria* (carceral acoustics)” that haunts the salsa repertoire and the voices of the multiple salseros that experienced imprisonment and addiction. I propose that this spectral poetics is also telling of an aesthetics of the “living-dead” that is key both to the historical construction of vice as illness (Carneiro Forthcoming) and to artistic expressions created within contexts of violence and death in the Caribbean (Arroyo 2015a). Framed within these multilayered and drastic political histories, Maelo’s spectral poetics voice multiple ways in which the spectral voices of social characters such as el preso, el tecato, and el veterano haunt the same “aural public sphere” (Ochoa Gautier 2006) where their lives have long-been deemed worthless. In other words, the story of healing and illness I narrate throughout this chapter adds another layer to my critical engagement with Ana Ochoa Gautier’s (2014) discussion of voice as both a medium of mutuality and a tool of power crucial in the articulation of a politics of life used to decide what lives are worthy of citizenship in various Latin American and Caribbean countries. I argue that the ways in which Maelo mediates such pharmacolonial specters through song and
storytelling are key to how maeleros and maelistas enmesh him within context-specific politico theological histories in Venezuela and Panama (see Chapters Two and Four, respectively). In order to start relating how these multiple stories of voice as a spectral force are key to the transnational network of maelería I map in this ethnographic biography, though, I must first discuss the story and significance of the poetic expression—and soneo of sorts—*Cortijo se llevó la llave.*

**Cortijo se llevó la llave: Relating Friendship, Mourning, and Voice**

As the story goes, Maelo voiced this phrase while talking with his mother Doña Margot at their house in Villa Palmeras, Santurce shortly after Rafael Cortijo’s death and while Maelo was enduring a harsh late period of his life. With these words, Maelo located the key to his vocal performance and to his capacity of singing in his profound friendship with Cortijo, which since the mid-1950s had represented arguably the preeminent musical *compadrazgo*¹³⁰ in Puerto Rican popular music. I understand the expression *Cortijo se llevó la llave* as a narrative of healing and illness that allowed Maelo to heal the sense of loss for both his friend and his voice. By telling his own story of loss, Maelo preserved a sense of agency amid such disempowering conditions of illness and mourning. When appropriated by his fans, peers, and family, this expression gained a mythical significance that contributes to how Maelo is often perceived as a sort of heroic popular icon (Carrasquillo 2008, 2014).

Rafael Cortijo died on October 3rd, 1982 after enduring several months of chemotherapy to treat pancreatic cancer that was diagnosed only three months before his death. Historian Rosa Carrasquillo relates that Maelo would visit his beloved musical partner continuously during his

¹³⁰ See Mintz and Wolf (1950) for a canonical article about compadrazgo as a form of kinship.
late period. Cortijo was living with his sister Rosa in the *caserío* (public housing project) Luis Lloréns-Torres. Maelo’s visits, however, soon became heated as Cortijo realized Maelo had relapsed into his heroin addiction (Carrasquillo 2014). As Ivelisse Rivera, Maelo’s sister, says to Carrasquillo, even when “bedridden, Cortijo tried to shake Ismael with the brutal honesty of a life-long friend” (Carrasquillo 2014, 172). Their friendship became sore during these latter days. “They insulted each other, got angry at each other;” Carrasquillo writes, “but their disputes poorly masked their painful realization that death was near” (2014, 172). Cortijo’s death shocked Maelo’s life. The funerary rituals coincided with Maelo’s birthday on October 5th. Thereafter, the specter of death that pervaded the late period of their long-standing musical friendship haunted Maelo’s life, contributing to how Maelo enmeshed the mourning of friendship and voice through the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave*.

Between 1982 and 1987, following Cortijo’s death, Maelo endured a litany of vocal failures. Physicians related his aphonic voice to vocal cords polyps. In 1983, he had surgery to remove the polyps. He was never able to perform again. Maelo, however, faced his impossibility of singing, among other things, by asserting the possibility of telling his own story. He made sense of such disempowering conditions by enmeshing the exhaustion of his voice with the labor of mourning his friend. His voiced had gone away with his friend; Maelo seemed to reason through the poetic expression *Cortijo se llevó la llave*, which relates the sacredness of friendship using the metaphor of la llave.

The significance of the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave* is manifold. The narrative implied by these words needs to be unpacked. This phrase became a mantra of sorts repeated not only by Maelo, but also appropriated by his family and by his fans. The idea that Cortijo’s death had a

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131 Citation appears in English in Carrasquillo’s text.
The profound impact in Maelo’s voice has clear mythical undertones that have contributed to its prevalence as the main narrative used to make sense of his vocal illness. For example, Maelo’s sister Ivelisse Rivera repeats this to historian Rosa Carrasquillo. Rivera says, “When Cortijo’s casket was closed and lowered into the ground, Ismael could no longer speak, his voice was hoarse” (as cited in Carrasquillo 2014, 174). By relating his vocal disappearance to Cortijo’s disappearance Maelo transformed their musical friendship into a spectral friendship. This narrative also evokes a musical secrecy or mysticism of voice that Maelo attached to his friendship with Cortijo through the metaphor of la llave.

I see the image of la llave as multivalent and “a sign that points in multiple directions at the same time” (Samuels 2004, 8). Our key to unpack the thickness of this phrase, which I perceive as producing an affect similar to what Maelo’s soneos seem to create amongst my interlocutors (see Chapter One), is to discuss how the metaphor of la llave indexes the idea of la clave as a central concept in the salsa lore. The tropes of la llave and la clave index each other in multiple ways. They are often used as interchangeable expressions among salseros to evoke mastery in musicianship, and also to signal matters of musical secrecy. For example, Chris Washburne describes la clave as “a dynamic and socially charged concept [that] encapsulates a continuum of ideas, beliefs, meanings, understandings, and interpretations” (Washburne 2008, 188). As such, la clave has been enacted, among other things, as a marker of history, tradition, and ethnic pride (Singer 1982), as the rhythmic foundation of salsa (Gerard and Sheller 1989), and as a central means of understanding and structuring time in salsa (Quintero-Rivera 1998, 2009). To be clear: in New York and Puerto Rican salsa when people speak of la clave they speak of the rhythmic organizing principle, which has also been used as an essentialist marker of cultural hierarchy and cultural difference among salseros (Washburne 2008).

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132 Citation appears in English in Carrasquillo’s text.
La clave is one of the central metaphors in Maelo’s repertoire. It is prominent in many of his most cherished inspirations as a *sonero mayor* (elder singer improviser) and in many of the refrains he used to speak about his music.¹³³ Let’s see two examples briefly: the verse “A mí me llaman el Sonero Mayor porque vacilo con la clave y tengo sabor (The call me el Sonero Mayor because I play with la clave and I groove),” and the phrase “Que el pueblo no pierda la clave (Let the people never loose la clave).” These two expressions, among many others, have become key to the maelero or maelista modes of speech and relation I study throughout this dissertation.¹³⁴ However, there are yet a couple additional stories that are telling of the centrality of la clave in Maelo’s life and music.

It was Maelo’s mother Doña Margot, who would later be the author of several of her son’s major hits, who inscribed la clave as a mantra in Maelo’s quotidian life. On one hand, Doña Margot used to say that it was her who taught Maelo the secrets of singing on la clave when he was a child.¹³⁵ Maelo would later say that he embodied the beat of la clave by snapping it with his fingers while singing early on in his career. On the other hand, according to Maelo’s sister Tomasa “Tomy” Rivera, Doña Margot would only open their house's door to those who would knock using the 3 x 2 clave (Rivera 2014). In other words, the sound of la clave was the key to open the door to their family’s house; it held the secret, la llave to access their home as a locus of a musical kinship. Additionally, according to Maelo’s other sister Ivelisse Rivera, whenever she would start singing in their house Maelo would immediately begin marking la clave with his hands asking her to sing *en clave* (in key). I find it truly compelling for the larger study of kinship in this dissertation that it was in this same house that Maelo coined the phrase

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¹³³ See Chapter One for a discussion about the term sonero mayor.

¹³⁴ See Introduction.

¹³⁵ See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcveyQSLfXc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcveyQSLfXc).
"Cortijo se llevo la llave" as a mantra of sorts in order to make sense of losing his friend and his voice.

La clave was for Maelo a metaphor of kinship and he turned la llave into a metaphor of friendship. But how and why did this expression gained the mythical overtones it has among maeleros and maelistas? In what follows I discuss what I see as the central role that Edgardo Rodríguez-Juliá’s (1983) book El Entierro de Cortijo (Cortijo’s Wake) has played in the naturalization of the narrative implied in the phrase Cortijo se llevó la llave.

**El Entierro de Cortijo: Narrating a Spectral Friendship**

Edgardo Rodríguez-Juliá portrays the massive mourning enacted by Cortijo’s fans, family, friends, and peers in his book-length chronicle El Entierro de Cortijo. Cortijo’s wake lasted three days and produced a national outburst in Puerto Rico. His music, which had also been almost erased from the radio by the 1980s in times when so-called salsa romántica (romantic salsa) and merengue dominated the radio frequencies, came back to pervade the airwaves for several days as people mourned. His fans, peers, friends, and family took over the streets of Santurce, carrying Cortijo’s coffin from Lloréns Torres to the cemetery of Ceboruco, in Villa Palmeras on October 6th, 1982. The mythical overtones gained by the phrase Cortijo se llevó la llave, I argue, are reminiscent of the way this author portrays Maelo’s farewell to his friend as a sort of spectral endeavor in which the image of la clave is used as a metaphor of friendship and secrecy. Rodríguez-Juliá portrays Maelo as if paying an existential debt to his friend throughout the book, and particularly in the scene where he describes Maelo’s farewell to Cortijo, a scene that has been taken as an allegorical representation of the whole book.

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 Canonical in Puerto Rican literature, *El Entierro de Cortijo* has become a central text in cultural, literary, and salsa studies in Puerto Rico, Latin America, and the United States. It offers a first-hand narration of the chaotic wake where Maelo appears as a sort of spectral character. Throughout, Maelo seems to be falling apart as he leads the procession carrying Cortijo’s casket at the tip of the march. His melodramatic labor of mourning, in the author’s words, “succeeded in having friendship take on epic proportions” (Rodríguez-Juliá 2004 [1983], 60). There are two scenes from this book that speak with particular strength to my argument in this section: the end of the funeral when Cortijo is buried and Maelo’s final goodbye right before Cortijo’s casket was closed. Each of these scenes relates to the above-cited narrative voiced by Ivelisse Rivera about the expression *Cortijo se llevó la llave*. Let us recall that Rivera said, “When Cortijo’s casket was closed and lowered into the ground, Ismael could no longer speak, his voice was hoarse.”

Towards the end of the book, as Cortijo is being finally buried to the sounds of plena, Maelo leaves the cemetery shirt-less, weak, and seemingly vanishing along with his voice. But Maelo began breaking apart earlier in the story. Rodríguez-Juliá’s portrayal of his final goodbye to his friend in the moment when his casket was about to be closed has become a synecdoche of

Figure 22. Maelo kisses Rafael Cortijo before his casket is closed. Photo by José Rodríguez.
the whole chronicle. The scene of Maelo’s heartfelt goodbye to his friend often seems to be taken as a historical record of Cortijo’s funerary rituals, and, more importantly for my argument in this chapter, as a historical record of the moment when *Cortijo se llevó la llave*. It is worth citing this narration of Maelo’s melodramatic farewell extensively. Rodríguez-Juliá manages to be standing next to Cortijo’s guard of honor in the caserío Luis Lloréns-Torres when Maelo arrives. He writes,

…”without the slightest warning or presentiment on my part, there appears Ismael Rivera, the great Maelo… he lifts the shroud and touches Cortijo’s face, and when he can’t stand it any longer, he pulls back the vaporous veil and wants to taste the flesh. He bursts into tears, his forehead pressed against that of his deceased buddy; he kisses his forehead, touches his stiff cheeks, he wants to devour him… to take with him, in the touch, in the very skin of his grief, something of his friend of a lifetime, something that time cannot snatch away from him. Maelo finds no consolation in memory. He wants to touch the life matter of his pain… Maelo has never been so strong: he had succumbed to drugs, alcohol, to total disorder, my friend, and now he again wants to abandon himself, like a black Dionysus, to the experience of perfect pain. Yet he doesn’t shout out, but moans with a muted pain that dares not emit a full proclamation for fear of shocking desperation itself (Rodríguez Juliá 2004 [1983] 36-38).”

Amidst the chaotic farewell, Maelo seems to be tearing apart with each moan, his self torn in a muted pain and dispersed in a burst of tears. Such a description of Maelo’s persistence on touching his friend intensely sparks yet another image related to my discussion of *la clave* as a metaphor of friendship. It makes me think of the above-mentioned story that Maelo used to claim that he internalized *la clave* in the snap of his fingers. Reading the farewell scene, I inevitably think of how in his insistence of caressing and biting Cortijo, it is as if Maelo was trying to get hold of *la clave*, the gift of friendship and voice that might had been escaping from him as his friend was about to be buried. But what strikes me the most from Rodríguez-Juliá’s scene is his description of Maelo’s speech. The author seems to be standing so close and yet so far from

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137 Juan Flores did the translation for English version of this chronicle. See Rodríguez-Juliá (2004[1983]).
Maelo and Cortijo. In his description, he struggles to grasp the intensity and meaning of Maelo’s words. He writes,

… [Maelo] raises his eyes toward the crucifix on the coffin and mutters an unintelligible prayer… What is he saying?... I'm standing squarely in front of Maelo, I'm looking at him from so close that I'm almost invisible, but I can't understand anything he's saying. It's like a private gibberish... perhaps some slang mixing African and Spanish from the eighteenth century, or an intimate, personal language whose codes were known only to the two of them. Now only the great Maelo remains, with the silent half of those understandings between them sleeping through the longest of pauses (Rodríguez Juliá 2004 [1983], 38).

When trying to grasp the intense affection expressed by Maelo towards the end of his passionate farewell to Cortijo, Rodríguez-Juliá once again fails to understand Maelo’s words. This time the conversation is not only between Maelo and Cortijo. This time Maelo talks to El Nazareno, his beloved Black Christ of Portobelo, Panama, who accompanies Cortijo in his coffin in the form of a stamp. When failing to comprehend the conversation between these three spectral characters, the author uses the metaphor of la clave to evoke what escapes his comprehension. He writes, “La clave was forbidden to us” (Rodríguez-Juliá 2004 [1983], 43), a phrase that entangles secrecy, friendship, and devotion as manifestations of the ineffable while taking us once again back to the centrality of la clave in the salsa lore. Rodríguez-Juliá’s scene, ultimately, adds to the sort of mystique that the phrase Cortijo se llevó la llave has gained, contributing yet another powerful description of the same instant that we see in figure 22 in this chapter, an image taken by photojournalist José Rodríguez. That is, the moment when, according to Maelo, Cortijo took with him the key to his vocal strength and theirs became a spectral friendship. Such a story of vocal disappearance, not surprisingly, has more layers we need to unpack in order to get a better comprehension of Maelo’s vocal illness.
Enduring Illness, Narrating a Public Secret

Maelo found in the metaphor of la llave a means to craft his own narrative on his vocal illness, a situation that by the 1980s had become an example of what Taussig (1999) deems the public secret. That is, the type of information that is generally acknowledged but cannot easily be articulated publicly. Acknowledging his impossibility of singing was an unavoidable task since his voice became very hoarse during his late period. Hence, the phrase Cortijo se llevó la llave served him as a means of narrating the public secret of his broken voice while simultaneously re-enchanting the aura of his voice with a touch of friskiness or a sort of trickster-style storytelling. This type of trickster narrative was not a rarity for Maelo who, as was mentioned before, often contributed to the self-mythologizing of his music and biography. Its mythical undertones are echoed in several testimonies about this matter that I cite below.

Maelo’s voice broke during the 1980s. He became dramatically aphonic during this latter period of his life when he also relapsed into his addictions. But he fought to keep singing, often using his mastery as a sonero mayor to mask the ailment of his voice. Such a vocal struggle was inscribed, for example, in “Ritmo Columbia (Columbia Rhythm),” a song he recorded in 1981. Also, in a live version of his standard tune, “Incomprendido (Misunderstood),” which can be heard on the website ¡Azúca Lola!, hosted by Colombian maelista Chris Montañez Delásperas. This is evident too in several appearances he made on Puerto Rican TV and in footage from live shows. In these recordings, Maelo looks clearly ill (see figure 23) and his voice vaguely recalls its brilliance from previous years. Furthermore, stories abound about his attempts

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to keep singing during the 1980s. In 1981, for example, he performed on stage for the first time with Cortijo and his son Ismael Rivera, Jr. in the Winston Salsa Festival in Ponce, a city in Southern Puerto Rico. An account of this performance can also be read on Montañez Delásperas’s maelista website ¡Azúca Lola!, including a rare recording of this event in which Maelo sings two songs—“Pa’ los de afuera y pa’ los de aquí (To those abroad and at home)” and “Ya lo verás (You’ll see)”—that were supposed be featured in an album he left unfinished recording due to his vocal illness. Later that year, he sang in the 8th Bomba and Plena Festival in Río Grande, a town in Eastern Puerto Rico. The story of this performance also has a hagiographical touch: according to the festival organizer Pedro ‘Capitol’ Clemente, Maelo was able to perform in this event, celebrated in his honor, only after being injected with cortisone to alleviate the inflammation of his throat. As Clemente recalls, Maelo’s physician told the event organizers that the injection would allowed Maelo to perform only two songs, but he somehow was able to sing six tunes that afternoon (Clemente 2013).

Figure 23. YouTube screenshot of Maelo singing at the 8th Bomba and Plena Festival in Río Grande.

According to Panamanian salsa singer Carlos “El Grande,” Maelo agreed to record an album as a duo in 1983 when they met in Caracas, Venezuela during one of Maelo’s final tours.

Maelo’s voice was very hoarse during this trip, Carlos remembers, but the idea of recording with *El Sonero Mayor* was a chance he had to take despite his vanishing voice. The album, however, was never recorded because later that year Maelo had surgery to remove the polyps from his vocal chords (Carlos El Grande 2015). In 1984, Maelo was honored in the First Edition of the National Day of Salsa in Puerto Rico; an event organized by Z-93, the main salsa radio station in Puerto Rico. Even though he was honored as the preeminent living legend in salsa, Maelo was barely able to speak to the audience due to his hoarse voice. Still, he insisted on planning the production of an album during these final years of his life. Louis García, his musical director in this period, even arranged the songs for him but Maelo was never capable of recording the voice. His son, Ismael Rivera, Jr., recorded these songs several years later by singing the parts that originally corresponded to Maelo in the album titled “Termina lo que su padre empezó (Finishes What His Father Started).”\(^{141}\)

Maelo’s vocal struggles first emerged in the mid 1970s, though his voice definitely gave out in the 1980s. César Miguel Rondón writes of this situation in his foundational work *The Book of Salsa* (2008[1979]). He writes, referencing the health of Maelo’s voice on 1976,

> By this time, people in the salsa scene were already talking about Ismael’s decadence. People spoke about his loss of vitality and effectiveness and of the supposed chaos of his private life. But above all, people were commenting that he was losing his voice, that he lacked his old vocal power. Ismael, perhaps moved by pride, or because he was aware that his enemies were spreading the rumors, insisted on denying his vocal disappearance. He once declared to a Venezuelan magazine, “I am a singer because I have a voice, and not because of any miracles.” However, despite his protestations, his vocal struggles were real, an unquestionable fact for his long-time followers. As the situation gradually worsened, it became painful to watch Ismael handle the pressure of a live performance. One felt anxious when watching such a legendary and mythological singer trying to save face in his live performances (Rondón 1981, 227-228).\(^{142}\)

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142 “Para esta época ya se comentaba con sobrada insistencia en el ambiente la decadencia de Ismael. Se hablaba de su pérdida de vigor y efectividad, de los supuestos desórdenes de su vida privada. Pero sobre todo, se hablaba de su pérdida de voz, de la carencia casi absoluta de su vieja potencia. Ismel, movido en
I find compelling that despite of his evident vocal struggles, Maelo insisted during this interview in reaffirming his voice as that which allows him to assert his personhood with the expression, “I am a singer because I have a voice, and not because of any miracles.” Yet, in an interview from 1977, Maelo seemed to acknowledge his vocal illness by saying that he was experimenting with a new style of singing. He described this new vocal style as singing *a medio pocillo.*\(^{143}\) This is a popular expression that translates literally as “half a cup of coffee” or “half a demitasse;” which means doing something at half your strength or capability. Thus, already in 1977 Maelo was consciously singing using only half of his vocal strength. However, even in the times when he confronted the harsh reality that his vocal force was vanishing, he did it keeping a sense of secrecy and playfulness.

Javier Vázquez, the arranger of Maelo’s repertory between 1972 and 1980, reaffirms the story of Maelo’s long-standing vocal struggles. In a conversation we had on May 2014, Vázquez assured me that Maelo was struggling with his voice since they started working together in the early 1970s. He even had to lower his arrangements a tone or a semi-tone in every album they recorded after 1972. “Cortijo got the best of him!” (Vázquez 2014), he told me with nostalgia in his eyes and voice. In yet another sort of reverential story about Maelo, he claims that by 1977, parté por su orgullo, y en parte también porque sabía que esos rumores eran regados por sus inevitables enemigos, se empeñó hasta la saciedad en negar la pérdida. Yo soy cantante, y no por milagro sino porque tengo voz, le declaró en una oportunidad a una revista venezolana. Sin embargo, muy a pesar de los alegatos de Ismael, la pérdida de su voz era un hecho cierto, una evidencia incuestionable para todos aquellos que desde muchos ante él habían seguido la pista. Progresivamente la situación fue empeorando; ver a Ismael en vivo, sometido a la presión de un baile, se hizo una experiencia muy cercana a la angustia, ante ese personaje, ya legendario e imbuido en la mitología, que a punta de pura veteranía trataba de salvas las apariencias (Rondón 1981, 227-228)

\(^{143}\) As cited in Carrasquillo 2014.
when they recorded the album *Esto sí es lo mío* (This is my thing), Maelo could barely speak but he somehow managed to record the voice for this album. It is important to emphasize that this production, which featured two of Maelo’s most iconic songs: “La Perla (which is a popular barrio in San Juan)” and “Las Caras Lindas (The Beautiful Faces)”, is considered by collectors and peers to be one of his best works (This is actually my favorite Maelo album). In spite of this vocal ailment Vázquez recalls, Maelo and him never discussed this problem, and it remained an unspoken secret between them. Vázquez told me he had two main reasons to avoid having this conversation. First, he didn’t want to offend Maelo by questioning his vocal capacity. Second, Maelo always surprised him in the recordings with his ability to improvise and make the best possible use of his vanishing vocal capacities. In Vázquez’s words, Maelo surprised him “putting his voice in unexpected places of the arrangement” (Vázquez 2014).

In October 2016, I asked Panamanian sonero Ruben Blades if he remembered Vázquez’s memory of Maelo’s vanishing voice during the recording sessions for *Esto sí es lo mío*. Blades sang the chorus for this album alongside two other Puerto Rican salsa icons, Héctor Lavoe and Adalberto Santiago. The Panamanian did not recall this situation but he took this matter quite seriously particularly because the information was coming from Vázquez, who is revered among salseros. After reflecting about it for a while, Blades told me that maybe Maelo was inspired to sing during the recording by having him, Lavoe, and Santiago as backup singers in the recording studio; that being a godfather-type figure for them Maelo might have found the force to sing in his desire to avoid the shame of vocal disappearance in front of his “disciples.”

At this point of my exploration of Maelo’s vanishing voice it is important to recall two things. First, that the story of the recording session for *Esto sí es lo mío* happened in 1977, which is the same year when Maelo acknowledged he was singing a medio pocillo. Second, that it was

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more or less during this time that he claimed in an interview with a Venezuelan journalist, “I am a singer because I have a voice, and not because of any miracles.” All these stories are telling of the aura of Maelo’s voice. Both Maelo’s reference to the possibility of the miracle and the memories of the recording studio open up the potential of belief in the aura of his voice, in the sort of magical strength that inspires the type of song labor my interlocutors create. That is, the aura of what in Chapter One of this dissertation was theorized as the generic intertextuality of Maelo’s pregón de barrio or tono callejero. These stories also maintain a sense of playfulness that is not foreign to how Maelo often narrated his personal life with the touch of a trickster.

Such a narrative strategy is consistent with how Maelo narrated other crucial events of his life during interviews, conversations, and other type of public interventions. Rosa Carrasquillo’s biography of Maelo, The People’s Poet: Life and Myth of Ismael Rivera, an Afro-Caribbean Icon (2014), demonstrates that Maelo would regularly play with his personal stories, masking crucial details, altering certain accounts, or creating alternate versions of certain events. In doing this, he added a sense of secrecy and mystique to his public persona.

**Maelo’s Honorable Discharge From the Military: Enduring Racism and Illness**

In one of Carrasquillo’s crucial contributions to the study of Maelo’s life, and particularly to the story of his vocal illness, the historian gained access to Maelo’s military records. Her study, which unmasks the trickster undertones Maelo had created around his time in the military, provides important contextual information for the story I aim to articulate in this chapter. Maelo was released from his military responsibilities with the Marine Corps in 1952 with an honorable discharge. This is the story he used to tell about this incident: that he received an honorable discharge because of poor English comprehension, which was a lie; and that the act of lying
about his inability to communicate in English was actually his way of protesting the racial humiliations experienced during in a military base in North Carolina. That is, claiming he could not speak English was his means of enduring racism amidst Jim Crow. He inscribed these racial experiences he lived first-hand in the South in the song, “El Negrito de Alabama (The Negrito from Alabama)”, an ironic tune in which tells the story of a Black man killed for marrying a white woman but whose assassination was silenced by the press. During the call and response section of this song, Maelo chants, “¡A correr que nos limpian! (Let’s run before they kill us!),” and sings “A Alabama yo no voy, va y me tumban la chaveta (I won’t go to Alabama, ‘cause they might cut my head off).” However, Carrasquillo, discovers in Maelo’s military records and in conversations with military doctors, that the story of Maelo’s honorable discharge from the military might be related to matters that include but go beyond the endurance of racism. She writes,

Private Ismael Rivera went to train at Parris Island, South Carolina, where in March 1952 he qualified for discharge on the grounds of impaired health. Ismael returned to Forth Buchanan in San Juan on March 4th where he awaited a full discharge. Military doctors had found scarring and calcification in his lungs, very likely caused by “pneumonia, lung infections due to bacteria (TB) and fungi (histoplasmosis); auto-immune illness (sarcoidosis); and, from occupational exposure to airborne contaminants (asbestosis). Being a mason, it is probable that Ismael’s scarring and calcification were caused by airborne contaminants; however, no conclusive evidence identifying a cause has been verified. Nonetheless, on April 4, 1952 Ismael was discharged “under honorable conditions (Carrasquillo 2014, 36).

Carrasquillo’s work opens the possibility that Maelo’s vocal illness—if connected to his lung illness—might have started as early as 1952. Granted, his voice was in full strength between 1954 and 1962 when he took over Puerto Rican media and toured Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States as the lead singer for Cortijo y su Combo. His voice sounds powerful in the two albums he recorded with Cortijo after his time in prison in the late 1960s, Bienvenido-

Welcome¹⁴⁶ and Con todos los hierros,¹⁴⁷ which featured “El Negrito de Alabama.” Also, in a lesser-known recording of a live performance from these years in which Maelo sings tunes from these two albums, treasured by Panamanian music collector and maelista Luis Gooding. But it is important not to forget Javier Vázquez’s memory of Maelo’s vanishing voice and the fact that Vázquez had to adapt his musical arrangements for each album they recorded after 1972 because of this. We should also consider that age also lowers singers’ voices and limits their range, and that this could have affected Maelo’s vocal capacity. By 1972, Maelo was barely 41 years old even though he had mistreated his health through his abuse of drugs, something that could have also played a substantial role in his vocal disappearance. Still, the significance of the medical information Carrasquillo has brought to light is manifold for my study about Maelo’s story of illness and healing. It is of particular importance to my inquiry into the political stakes of this story because when we entwined the different versions of his military discharge, it becomes a story about enduring both racism and illness.

My interest is to think about the conditions of possibility for the different versions of this narrative, and how this contributes to my exploration of Maelo’s vocal illness as a public secret as well as to my examination of how the aura of his voice is telling of larger histories of pharmacoloniality in Puerto Rico. In this light, several questions emerge. For example, was he enduring severing lung ailments throughout his career? Was all this related to his vocal disappearance? What about the chance that he got these sicknesses from exposure to asbestosis while working as a mason in his youth? Are all these crossing experiences actually one of the keys to the trickster, secret, and proverbial traces of his narrative about his vocal disappearance

¹⁴⁶ Cortijo, Rafael and Rivera, Ismael. 1966. Bienvenido/Welcome. TICO. LP 1140.

¹⁴⁷ Cortijo, Rafael and Rivera, Ismael. 1967. Con todos los hierros. TICO. LP 1158. “Con todos los hierros” is a popular refrain expression that could be taken loosely to mean something like “bringing it all.”
and existential quandaries? And, moreover, what about this information emerging from military records that portray his story of healing and illness also as a tale about the experiences of a Black Puerto Rican man enduring Jim Crow in North Carolina?

This story of illness, racism, and the military speaks about the larger racist biopolitical histories under study in this chapter in yet another specific way: the normalization of war and the military as quotidian components of Puerto Rican life under U.S. imperialism. The significance of this is multilayered. For example, even though Maelo's personal experience of militarism and illness is not directly related to addiction, his drug addiction struggles furthered during the late 1960s and the 1970s a period marked by the opiate consumption struggles among soldiers during the Vietnam War and among war veterans upon returning home. Additionally, Maelo's story about vocal illness needs to also be framed in relation to the imbricated history of militarism and antimilitarism in Puerto Rico. In many ways, by telling the story of his military discharge as a tale of racial endurance that omits his health problems, Maelo is resisting becoming what Silvia Álvarez-Curbelo (1999) calls the “citizen-solider,” a social character that has become a spectral presence in Puerto Rican life particularly after World War II. The citizen-solider became a moral reference deployed by the state as an example of respectability and citizenship, as one way to portray the involvement in warfare as a constitutive of the exemplary becoming of Puerto Ricans into U.S. citizens. The citizen-solider, it could be argued, was the antagonist of el veterano (the war veteran), a social character that became a reference of illness, addiction, and vagrancy as traces of war, but that also gained significance as iconic of anti-militarism.

Maelo’s story about the resistance to military authority emerges in a larger context of anti-militarist activism that gains particular strength amongst nationalist and pro-independence groups in Puerto Rico. His story is reminiscent of other stories shared by Puerto Ricans whose

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experiences of war and racism exposed them first hand not only to racism within the military but also to the violence of U.S. imperialism. This altered in many ways their political views. It is worth highlighting three prominent examples of these type of cases: Puerto Rican nationalist hero Pedro Albizu Campos, who after serving as a lieutenant during the First World War founded the Nationalist Party upon his return to Puerto Rico; the iconic popular singer Daniel Santos, who after participating in World War II became a member of the Nationalist Party; and Oscar López-Rivera, a Vietnam veteran who later became a member of a nationalist armed group and did 36 years in prison accused of seditious conspiracy. In Maelo's case, the experiences in the military did not radicalize him to the same extent as these other figures. He was indeed quite connected to pro-independence and nationalist struggles initially through his father, who was a member of Albizu Campos’ party, and would actually take Maelo and his siblings to visit Albizu Campos in his home, and later through his own participation in concerts in favor of the liberation of political prisoners during the 1970s (Colón-Montijo 2015). But Maelo's sense of Puerto Rican pride after his time in the military was expressed principally through his racial pride, which he voiced in several songs such as “Las Caras Lindas (The Beautiful Faces)”149 and “El Nazareno (The Nazarene)”150. His sense of racial pride, though, countered in many ways certain branches of nationalist ideology in the island that were also deeply racist. An example of this politics can be heard in the song “Mi Música,”151 discussed in Chapter Two as central to the politicized listening that Maelo’s music generates in Caracas, Venezuela. Let’s recall that this tune situates the key or la clave to Maelo’s politics in the affective, spiritual, and relational potential of the drum through the verses,


Mi música no queda
ni a la derecha ni a la izquierda,
queda en el centro
de un tambor legal,
queda en el centro
de un tambor bien legal.

My music is not
on the left or the right,
it lays at the center
of a very legal drum,
it lays at the center
of a very legal drum.

It is with this larger context in mind that we must think about Maelo's recollection of his military discharge: the conditions of possibility for his account were not only the violent racist histories in the U.S. he surely faced during his time in North Carolina, but additionally Puerto Rico's deeply racist biopolitical histories, which will become clearer in the following section. These are also the conditions of possibility for the information about lung illness uncovered by Carrasquillo in her biographical study of Maelo. Such conditions of possibility, I claim, made the story of him resisting racial discrimination as the reason for getting an honorable discharge from the military believable among maeleros and maelistas, or at least far more believable than a story about El Sonero Mayor struggling with lung or vocal illness throughout the peek of his singing career. It might have made more sense to tell a story about racial endurance than a story about illness in a colonial context in which Black bodies have long-been deemed as undesirable and unworthy carriers of pathological infirmity.

In what follows, I situate Maelo’s resolve to tell his own story about his illness as revealing of larger histories of social illness in Puerto Rico. Such histories of infirmity have biopolitical overtones that I find key to my larger aims in this chapter: to locate what I call Maelo’s story of illness and healing in the wider context of empire and colonialism in Puerto Rico. We now need to take a step back from Maelo’s personal story of vocal illness in order to examine the pharmacolonial specters that haunt Puerto Rican life. In doing this, I aim to set the
grounds for my discussion of Maelo’s addiction and incarceration in the latter sections of this chapter.

**Pharmaccolonial Specters: Pathological Infirmity, Addiction, and Incarceration in the Experimental Island**

Julio Ramos (2010) coined the concept of *la condición farmacolonial de la modernidad* (the pharmacolonial condition of modernity), amongst other things, to link the development of discourses about addiction during the 19th century to the long-standing circulation of sensorial stimulation of products such as rum, coffee, tobacco, sugar, and opium as key to the expansion of both global capitalism and European imperialism. Ramos describes with irony the centrality of such products in these global histories, proposing that they “stimulated” modernity and speeded the rhythm of life in European metropolises. He, moreover, theorizes the secularist stakes of such economic histories of modernity channeling the work of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his canonical study *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (2012[1940]). Ramos writes,

> The paradox is evident: modernity was stimulated through the introduction – initially prohibited or very controlled – of products that came from sacred, ritual histories, such as tobacco, opium or coca leaves. On another level, the paradox is even more implosive: commoditized, these products that came from millenarian non-European histories, contributed to the accumulation of capital, something that still happens today with the multimillionaire crops of marijuana, coca, or opium poppy as well as with coffee and tobacco, tea and chocolate (Ramos 2010, 22).

In other words, the erasure of the sacred undertones these sensorial stimulation products carry due to their millenarian ritual histories is vital to the histories of modernity and global capitalism.

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152 “La paradoja es evidente: se estimulaba la modernidad mediante la introducción -inicialmente prohibida o muy controlada- de productos que provenían de historias sagradas y rituales, como el tabaco, el opio o la hoja de coca. En otro nivel, la paradoja es aún más implosiva: convertidos en mercancías, esos productos provenientes de historias milenarias no-europeas contribuyeron a la acumulación capitalista, lo que ocurre todavía hoy con los cultivos multimillonarios de la marihuana, la coca o la amapola del opio, o del café y el tabaco, el te y el chocolate” (Ramos 2010, 22).
Or, to put it in Latourian (1993) terms: the purification of these sacred products created secular hybrids that are central to the modern histories of consumption and sensorial stimulation that Ramos calls la condición farmacolonial de la modernidad. These histories create the grounds for the discourses and policies of addiction deployed through the war on drugs by the United States starting in the mid-twentieth century (Ramos 2010). Key to Ramos’ concept is how he relates the histories of addiction and drug trafficking as mutually constitutive, as constitutive of modernity more largely. These pharmacolonial histories are also constitutive of Puerto Rican fantasies of modernization amidst colonialism.

Miriam Muñiz-Varela (2013) coined the term fármacon colonial\textsuperscript{153} to describe the ways in which the U.S. has used Puerto Rico as a colonial laboratory, transmuting the country into “the experimental island:” a place and a people used as colonial, experimental subjects.\textsuperscript{154} Muñiz-Varela proposes the farmacón colonial to analyze how recent governmental plans to make Puerto Rico an epicenter of biotechnological research amidst its contemporary economic and political crisis need to be understood as part of a longer continuum of medical and pharmaceutical colonial developments. Such pharmaceutical endeavors have been deployed mainly since the 1950s as part of the industrialization of the island under the program known as Operación Manos a la Obra (Operation Bootstrap). Key to Muñiz-Varela’s theorization of the farmacón colonial is the central role Puerto Rico has played in the pharmacological industry as an axis for the production of Advil, Prozac, Xanax, Viagra, Zocor, and Lipitor, among other medicines manufactured on the island.

\textsuperscript{153} See Derrida’s Platon’s Pharmacy as the source of Muñiz-Varela’s concept.

\textsuperscript{154} She borrows this term from Ana Maria García’s (1982) documentary La operación about the massive sterilization of Puerto Rican women.
Such industrial developments are central to Muñiz-Varela’s Derridean conception of the farmácón colonial as something that works concurrently as poison and remedy. Similarly to how Ramos identifies a paradox at the heart of la farmaccolonialidad, the idea of the farmácón colonial suggest an oxymoron: while making Puerto Rico into an epicenter for medicinal manufacture Operación Manos a la Obra intensified the island’s economic dependency on tax-exempted U.S. pharmaceutical industries. This also contributed to the growth of both prescribed and illegal drug dependency among Puerto Ricans, which led to what Muñiz-Varela calls a “Walgreenized bioeconomy” that is evident in the rapid expansion of transnational pharmacy franchises such as Walgreens and CVS in Puerto Rico. According to recent reports by the Center for Investigative Journalism, Puerto Rico has the highest concentration of these types of drug stores in the U.S.

I understand the histories of medicinal and economic dependence implied in the concept of the farmácón colonial as giving even more specificity to the longer histories of consumption, capitalism, and stimulation implied in Ramos’ theorization of la condición farmaccolonial de la modernidad. Such ideas about pharmacoloniality are complementary in their discussions about the transnational circulation of merchandises produced in colonial geographies that stimulate life in the metropolis. Both Ramos and Muñiz-Varela turn their attention towards the effects of these transnational economies in the colonial geographies and subjects oftentimes exploited by the production and consumption of such stimulating products. Together, their works suggest a clear imbrication between histories of addiction to illegal and prescribed drugs, and understand the

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production, consumption, and circulation of these stimulation substances as constitutive of the so-called modernization of life in Puerto Rico.

As Muñiz-Varela argues, such pharmacoloniality is part of a broader biopolitical project deployed by the U.S. in Puerto Rico as a means of controlling the life and death of a population deemed undesirable. On one hand, this connects to the histories of militarism and anti-militarism presented in the previous section of this chapter in that Puerto Ricans have long-been used as guinea pigs for the development of military technologies such as napalm and Agent Orange (Bosque-Pérez 2005; Torrez-Vélez 2007). On the other, such strategies of population control have included laws of vagrancy, hygiene, and surveillance including incarceration as a prominent component of Puerto Rican life since the 19th century (Picó 1993; Trigo 2000; Montijo 2011). I must highlight the massive sterilization of Puerto Rican women as arguably the more notorious population control strategy deployed by the U.S. in Puerto Rico (Ramírez de Arellano and Seipp 1983, López 1998; and Briggs 2002) together with the forced migration of millions of Puerto Ricans through different migratory waves. Muñiz-Varela includes the prison system and the more recent police/narco state as part of the histories of the farmacón colonial in Puerto Rico. She writes,

The “bare life” is installed on these populations that are deemed as leftovers, are caught in precariousness or are subdued to extermination politics dictated by drug trafficking economies in conspiracy with the police/carceral, narco-state... At the same time, these populations were abandoned, either by being confined in prisons, expelled through migration or destined to chronic ailments or even to death not only by drug trafficking wars, but also through other forms of experimentation with chemical substances and medical interventions (Muñiz-Varela 2013, 152-153).

157 “La ‘mera-nuda vida’ se instala en esas poblaciones que ‘sobran’ atrapadas en la precariedad o sometidas a la política de exterminio dictada por el narcotráfico en contubernio con el narcoestado policiaco/carcelario... A la misma vez que son desechadas poblaciones, ya fueran recluidas en las cárcceles, expulsadas por la migración o destinadas a enfermedades crónicas y hasta la muerte no solo por la Guerra del narcotráfico, sino en muchas otras formas de experimentación de sustancias químicas y de intervenciones médicas” (Muñiz-Varela 2013, 152-153)
Her work is again complementary to Ramos’ in that both of them connect drug trafficking and addiction to larger pharmacolonial contexts. In this light, the conception of Puerto Rico as “the experimental island” relates the use of Puerto Rican as “experimental quasi subjects” (Muñiz-Varela 2013) by the U.S. through medical and pharmaceutical experimentation to the histories of the prison industrial complex and the war on drugs as well as to larger histories of militarism; all of these as tools of colonial population control.

Similarly, Adriana Garriga-López (2010) studies addiction as part of the larger use of tropical medicine and public health as “two of the most important ways in which Puerto Rican bodies, proclivities, contagions, and behaviors have been approached, managed, contained, and addressed” (2010, 71). Hers is an ethnographic study about HIV/AIDS and colonialism in Puerto Rico, which pays central attention to the histories of addiction. Garriga-López studies how such biopolitical techniques are deployed as means of manufacturing Puerto Ricans into “modern U.S. citizens” through experimentation. She explains,

When the health of a population emerges as a central concern of government and one of the main factors of social organization, the production of scientific knowledge about that population becomes incessantly necessary and self-sustaining… The rapid modernization agenda of the United States in Puerto Rico required population surveillance technologies, and together with neo-Malthusian discourses of overpopulation, brought into being Puerto Ricans as techno-socio-scientific laboratory entities and test subjects to be observed and manipulated as possible models for what awaited the rest of the underdeveloped world as it, too, inevitably faced modernization” (Gárriga-López 2010, 71-72)

In her ethnography, Garriga-López discusses how such discourses and policies linked ideas on illness and vagrancy through the enforcement of a hygienic order in which confinement and incarceration became central tools of population control. In an urgent analytical move for the study of such colonial and empire histories, Garriga-López confronts the racial and gender factors of pharmacoloniality. Women had long-been subjected to the cruelest aspects of such
violent histories of hygiene and policing, and principally Black women whose bodies have been deemed as infectious since the nineteenth century (Trigo 1999 and 2000; Suárez-Findley 2000; Duprey 2010, Garriga-López 2010).

I want to underscore, for the larger purposes of my argument, the racial marks of these histories, which are too often left unspoken and which are central to Maelo’s life and songs. Race and racism have long been taboo in Puerto Rico, perhaps additional manifestations of the public secret. They are frequently silenced in quotidian life (Rodríguez-Silva 2012) or mentioned as an ellipsis in artistic expressions produced by Afro-Puerto Ricans (Santiago-Díaz 2007). My thinking engagement with race and racism, which is deeply impacted by recent inquiries about race in Puerto Rico by women scholars such as Magali Roy-Féquière (2004), Jossianna Arroyo (2003), Ilsa E. Alegría and Palmira N. Ríos González (2005), Isar P. Godreau (2006, 2015), Ileana Rodríguez-Silva (2012), and Petra R. Rivera-Rideau (2015), seeks to emphasize the racial stakes of pharmacoloniality by conceiving Puerto Rico’s racist histories and contemporary experiences of race through the notion of the public secret. Articulating publicly such traumatic histories of a population made into colonial, “experimental cuasi subjects” or “techno-socio-scientific laboratory entities” is not an easy task. Hence, these pharmacolonial histories become specters that haunt the contemporary lives of Puerto Ricans enduring its consequences but struggling to name them in public. Maelo faced these racist, pharmacolonial specters first hand.

The Narcotic Farm: Maelo’s Personal Pharmacolonial Experiences

These larger pharmacolonial histories gained a very concrete significance in Maelo’s life through his experiences of addiction and incarceration. Maelo spent 43 months confined in the United States Narcotic Farm in Lexington, Kentucky, an institution that was simultaneously
a humane hospital set on 1,000 acres of farmland where drug addicts could recover through
moral therapy, and an imposing federal prison used to incarcerate convicted addicts who did time
along volunteers who would checked themselves in for treatment (Campbell et al. 2008). Since
its foundation in 1935, The Narcotic Farm became

the epicenter for drug treatment and addiction research. For forty years it was the
gathering place for this country’s growing drug subculture, a rite of passage that initiated
famous jazz musicians, drug-abusing MDs, street hustlers, and drugstore cowboys into
the new fraternal order of the American junkie. But what began as a bold and ambitious
public works project was shut down in the 1970s amid changes in drug policy and
scandal over its drug program, which recruited hundreds of prisoners to volunteer as
human guinea pigs for groundbreaking drug experiments and rewarded them with bonus
doses of heroin for their efforts.158

As Campbell et al. 2008 discuss, this infamously institution has been immortalized in several
literary works such as: William S. Burroughs, Sr.'s Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug
Addict (1953) William S. Burroughs, Jr.'s Kentucky Ham (1973), Clarence Cooper's The Farm
(1967), and Helen McGill Hughes' The Fantastic Lodge: The Autobiography of a Girl Drug
Addict (1961). The Narcotic Farm promoted music and dancing as part of its moral and
recreational addiction treatment, and already in the mid-1950s it had become a mythical place
where jazz musicians struggling with addiction would sometimes voluntarily go for treatment.

Even though there are not known recordings of the different jazz ensembles formed at The
Narcotic Farm, figures like Chet Baker and Sonny Rollins are among the well-known jazzmen
who did time in The Narcotic Farm. The institution had a Latin Orchestra with which Maelo
performed. He was, nonetheless, far from being the only Puerto Rican doing time in The
Narcotic Farm during the 1960s. Furthermore, Maelo was not the only salsa icon imprisoned
there at the time. According to music collector and researcher Omar Torres-Kortright, Chamaco
Ramírez—who many salsa fans and experts deem as a sonero mayor that parallel Maelo in vocal

improvisation skills—was also incarcerated there during the mid-1960s, thus opening the possibility that both Maelo and Chamaco lived in The Narcotic Farm simultaneously or with very little time apart.\(^{159}\) Theirs is not an unusual experience amongst Puerto Ricans. On the contrary, by the time Maelo arrived The Narcotic Farm in 1963 already 262 Puerto Ricans had done time at The Narcotic Farm (Ball 1987).

This is key to my larger argument in this chapter because it connects the larger histories of addiction and incarceration to Maelo's personal experiences. The long list of Puerto Ricans taken to The Narcotic Farm for opiate addiction is an example of how the drug problem was key in Puerto Rico even before the so-called war on drugs. It also opens the possibility of thinking about what could be described as an “incarcerated diasporic community” seldom taken into account in historical narratives about Puerto Rican migration to the U.S.—the sizeable number of Puerto Ricans whose experience of diaspora and migration are imbricated in the prison-industrial complex.

Finally, this story adds to a more nuanced conception of music as a liberator force amidst confinement not only as an essentialized idea, but as a concrete experience of endurance: Maelo performed with the Latin Music Orchestra in The Narcotic Farm, he listened to recorded music while inside, and he wrote about this listening in letters he wrote to his family. Although he doesn't write about singing with the band while imprisoned, the Ismael Rivera Foundation which is a precarious institution led by his sister Ivelisse Rivera, has a photo of him singing at The Narcotic Farm and some letters he wrote from Lexington, Kentucky between 1964 and 1966. In these letters, Maelo avoids detailing daily life in the institution by almost always writing about his family and love life. He focuses on the economic hardships that he faces as an inmate as well as in the struggle of maintaining healthy relationships with his love partners and sons. He does

\(^{159}\) Omar Torres-Kortright in conversation with the author, December 2012.
write briefly about his health, his good shape, and announces that his detractors will be surprised
about how well he looks once he is finally out of the institution. For example, on a letter Maelo
wrote to his sister Ivelisse Rivera on January 25, 1966, he said,

I’m thinking, I look at myself at the mirror and I have to laugh (that sounds like a bolero). Ha, Ha—What I want to say is that when I look at myself at the mirror and I look so changed, I think that a lot of people would have a hard time recognizing me—Then I have to laugh at the paradoxes of life—Many people think that I’m going to get out [of prison] with a cane (Ha, Ha) but they’re going to fall back when they see me—(I look at myself and I don’t recognize me).  

This particular narrative is reminiscent of the story of resurrection he narrates in the song “Aquí estoy ya yo llegué (Here I Am, I Just Came Back).” Maelo sings,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algunos me creían muerto, pero qué va aquí estoy ya yo llegué Some took me for dead but I was not here I am I just came back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que me trancaron con siete llaves, con siete candados, y allí le formé un rumbón, porque la rumba estaba conmigo para aliviarme la pena con su hermanita la plena y su primo el guaguancó, belemba. Some took me for dead but I was not here I am I just came back.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coro: Chorus:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquí estoy ya yo llegué</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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160 As cited in Carrasquillo (2014, 113): “Me quedo pensando, me miro en el espejo y me tengo que reir (eso suena como un bolero) Ja, Ja—Lo que te quiero decir es que cuando me miro en el espejo y me veo tan cambiado, pienso que a mucha gente le va a dar trabajo reconocerme Entonces me tengo que reir de las ironías de la vida—Mucha gente piensan que yo voy a salir con un bastón (Ja, Ja) pero que, se van a caer de espaldas cuando me vean—(me veo y no me conozco).” I keep Carrasquillo’s translation.

This song tells a story both about his healing process and about the role that music played in his life amidst confinement, also describes generic interaction using a genealogical language in ways that relate to the sense of musical kinship I discussed in Chapter One. In general, the stories he shares in his letters blur the boundaries between the inside and outside of the carceral institution, as he also does in the song “Aquí estoy ya yo llegué.” When he actually writes about life inside the penitentiary he concentrates on its recreational aspects with particular emphasis on the quotidian role of music amidst incarceration. He wrote about this on a letter from May 22, 1966,

Well, here we are listening to the latest [hits]—(I received the recordings two days ago—Friday)—now we are listening to Joe Cuba (We Must Be Doing Something Chévere)—Migúelo and Chacho are here visiting (They always sneak in on Saturdays and Sundays)—They’re always talking about the day I’ll arrive in Puerto Rico Ha, Ha—They say that it’ll be “a party and a half”—and I think the same (Woof).162

There is also quite a lot of secrecy in these letters, a sense of the proverbial and the public secret that is common to how Puerto Ricans have often endured imprisonment and pharmacoloniality more largely. In spite of such public secrecy, or perhaps as part of it, as was suggested in the earlier parts of this chapter, popular music has repeatedly served as a locus for mediating and enduring these biopolitical histories. The specter of pharmacoloniality, for example, pervades the salsa repertoire, and Maelo’s salsa more specifically, through the song-stories of two social characters that emerged amidst these drastic political conditions: el preso (the prisoner) and el tecato (el junkie). Even though it is hard to name him as such, Maelo embodied both of these spectral characters in his life and music. In what follows, I briefly discussed the emergence of

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162 As cited in Carrasquillo (2014, 107): “Bueno pues, aquí estoy oyendo lo último —(me llegaron los discos antier- viernes)—ahora estamos oyendo a Joe Cuba (We Must Be Doing Something Chévere)—Migúelo y Chacho están aquí haciéndome la visita (Ellos siempre se cuelan para acá en sábado y domingo) —Se pasan hablándome de cuando yo llegue a Puerto Rico Je, Je —Ellos dicen que eso va a ser ‘party y medio’—y yo creo igual (Jau).” I keep Carrasquillo’s translation.
these social characters in Puerto Rican society as a means of grounding my latter discussion about Maelo’s carceral songs.

**El Preso, El Tecato, and La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña**

As social characters, el preso and el tecato should be understood as members of a larger genealogy of Puerto Ricans as “experimental cuasi subjects” or “techno-scientific entities” that includes the above-discussed character of el veterano. Their emergence disrupted the harmonizing, failed trope of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* (the great Puerto Rican family), as representative of an inclusive, racially democratic sense of nationhood in Puerto Rico. Both these social characters became pervading presences amongst Puerto Rican families mainly during and after the 1970s, the decade of the commercial explosion of salsa as a generic label. Their emergence as such, nonetheless, is rooted in long histories of incarceration and punitive drug policies that are imbricated in the so-called war on drugs but that even precede it. Both characters, also, have become intrinsic in the experiences of thousands of Puerto Rican families in the island as well as in its communities throughout the U.S.

By the 1970s, the precarization of life in Puerto Rico had fostered to the intensification of drug-related crime and social panic, which led to transformations in the penitentiary system during the 1970s (Picó 1993, Montijo 2011). Historian Fernando Picó writes about how these transformations created the conditions for the irruption of el preso as a social character common to most families in Puerto Rico. A study published in 1967 reveals that Puerto Rico had one of the highest rates of imprisonment in the world: one out of every 165 Puerto Rican men was incarcerated. Moreover, one out of every 85 men between the ages of 18 and 45 was imprisoned (Picó 1993, 50). Already in the 1960s, this study shows, a big part of the young male population
in many Puerto Rican working-class and impoverished neighborhoods was, or at least had been, in jail. *Ser preso* (being a prisoner), Picó argues, became a way of living for many Puerto Ricans in this context of social transformation as more and more peoples experienced imprisonment. These experiences came to embody how discourses of discipline and confinement became a prominent mark of Puerto Rican quotidian life thereafter (Pico 1993, 29-30).

The criminalization of addiction played a central role in these histories of policing and incarceration in which el tecato also became a spectral presence among Puerto Ricans. As Garriga-Lopez discusses, the term tecato has gained a multi-layered significance in its contemporary uses in Puerto Rico. Its pervading presence in Puerto Rican colloquial speech is telling of addiction's haunting, normalized presence in day-to-day life. I cite her at length in order to better contextualized the becoming specter of the term tecato,

Etymologically, it [tecato] might perhaps be alternatively derived from the second syllable of the colloquial Puerto Rican name for heroin- *manteca*, meaning lard (which is, in turn, an highly valorized ingredient in local, creole or 'criollo' foods that denote fullness, richness, flavor, deliciousness, slowness, and heaviness). Use of the word tecato is generalized in the informal Puerto Rican linguistic repertoire, and different valences of this word are discernible in its vernacular use as an adjective and conjugation as a verb. 'Tecato' is usually used as a noun, as a term that is roughly equivalent to the English term 'junkie', describing someone whose central life activity is to procure and inject heroin or opiates, one or mixed with other substances. Among speakers of Puerto Rican Spanish, however, the term is also used as an adjective, and to describe objects, compartments, or social strategies that are associated with subalterity, with the marginalized and the excluded; the poor, the compromised, the ad hoc, the contingent, the useless, and the infected" (Garriga-Lopez 2010, 201).

The prevalent use of the term tecato in popular culture is telling of the overarching presence of drug abuse or dependence amongst Puerto Ricans. A study published in 2017 stated that: 11.5% of Puerto Ricans have a substance abuse disorder, more than 170 non-profit detox programs work in the island, and seven out of every ten individuals in need of treatment lack the proper healing services (ASSMCA 2017). El preso and el tecato can thus be understood as spectral
figures who haunt the ordinary lives of many Puerto Ricans, spectral citizens whose lives are often deemed unworthy. Their addiction and incarceration struggles carry a stigma that haunts family and friends as a trauma that is frequently hard to articulate publicly. This stigma is linked to the casting of populations as ill, weak, or out of control, and thus in need of medical care or incarceration (Hansen 2004). As Helena Hansen (2004) argues, such histories of marginalization have overt gender stakes: for working class men, being labeled as either preso or tecato almost inescapably implies an incapability of fulfilling their expected roles in the racist, patriarchal, and heteronormative conceptions of the family that pervade the stories of illness narrated throughout this chapter. These stories, although often treated as public secrets, have long-pervaded the aural public sphere as inscribed in the salsa repertoire in ways that resonate with the larger critical discussion about wounded masculinities I articulate throughout this dissertation. In the following section, I begin rounding up this chapter by discussing how this is central to the spectral poetics that pervades Maelo’s music and life.

**Las Tumbas: Listening to Maelo's Carceral Acoustics**

The specter of these larger socio-political transformations pervades the salsa repertoire, which emerged imbricated within such an expansion of the carceral system and the furthering of addiction. These topics, nevertheless, are seldom studied and/or discussed in salsa studies. Only Washburne (2008) has done a profound analysis of the intersection between the illegal drug trade and the salsa recording industry in New York, as well as about the aesthetics and performance implications of drug consumption amongst salsa musicians. Meanwhile, Juan Carlos Quintero-Herencia (2005) has done what to my knowledge is the most in-depth theorization about the
pervading presence of incarceration in the salsa repertoire.\textsuperscript{163} His conception of what he
describes as an “\textit{acústica carcelaria} (carceral acoustics)” is central to my analysis in this chapter.
Through a reflection about several songs from the salsa repertoire, Quintero-Herencia conceives
prisons as spaces of in-betweenness that inevitably impose a sense of liminality upon the voices
of imprisoned salsa singers. For him, such an acústica carcelaria voices the “sonero’s lament in
his acoustic entrance into the obscene cruelty of the penal system” producing a ghostly presence
of imprisonment in the voices of soneros “even after surviving confinement” (Quintero-Herencia
2005, 309).\textsuperscript{164} Such a theorization about social death and the institutionalization of a carceral
mode of being amongst Puerto Ricans resonates with Picó’s idea of \textit{el preso} as a spectral
presence among Puerto Rican families after the 1970s. It also echoes with Daniel Fisher’ (2009)
work about kinship and carcerality in the context of Australia. Fisher argues that the mediation of
kinship through song and speech serves as a “counterpublic reclamation of persons from
stigmatized realities and experiences [as] expressions of familial affection and displacement”
(Fisher 2009, 299-301). He also proposes that media such as radio and songs often become the
sites for the reconstitution of familial and kinship affinities for different indigenous populations
in the midst of incarceration and disenfranchisement. Maelo voices a performativity of kinship
through musical genre through several carceral songs such as “Las tumbas (The Tombs),” which
invoke a sense of familial endurance that I hear as similar to what Picó, Fisher, and Quintero-
Herencia describe in their studies of incarceration.

\textsuperscript{163} See also Velásquez-Alcázar (2012) for a memoir about the song “El Preso (The Prisoner),” one of the
most iconic Colombian salsa songs.

\textsuperscript{164} “… lamento del sonero es una entrada acústica en la crueldad obscena del sistema penal… aún después
de haber sobrevivido el encerramiento ” (Quintero-Herencia 2005, 311).
Maelo recorded the song “Las tumbas” in 1975, at the pinnacle of the commercial boom of salsa when he had already become a revered figure among salseros in barrios throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. A dirge-like song, “Las tumbas” has become emblematic of his repertoire, embraced by the hundreds or thousands of salseros who have endured experiences of incarceration. Featured in the album *Soy feliz* (I’m Happy), this tune quickly became one of Maelo’s most significant pieces. The lyrics, written for Maelo by Puerto Rican popular music composer and performer Bobby Capó, provided Maelo with the words to communicate a feeling of distress and sorrow, and a longing for freedom in the midst of the everyday violence and monotony of confinement. A counterpoint of trumpet, trombone, and piano distinguishes the sonic tapestry of “Las tumbas”. The brass section plays repetitive lines that transmit an overwhelming sense of constraint in combination with the sustained rhythm of the piano. It sounds like a never-ending procession; a funeral march perhaps, that nonetheless, gives the sensation of being constantly about to end. Such an atmosphere is accentuated by Maelo’s interpretation of a polyphonic conversation between a prisoner who watches one of his fellow convicts walk out of jail, a prisoner who dreams in his cell of the possibility of freedom, and a prisoner who is walking out into the so-called free community. “Las tumbas” works as an extended and repetitive call-and-response between the soloist singer, the chorus, and the orchestra. Maelo sings,

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Recoge mijo               Get your things, bro
mira que vas pa' la calle you’re going to the street
dile a Pancho            tell Pancho
que me mande algo pa' la comisaria to send me something for the commissary
ave María titere, que "breike" What a break, you trickster
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Coro:
De las Tumbas quiero irme
no sé cuando pasará
las tumbas son pa’ los muertos
y de muerto no tengo na.

Chorus:
I wanna leave the Tombs
I don’t know when it will happen
Tombs are for the dead
And I’m not dead at all.

Solista:
Cuando yo saldré, de ésta prision
que me tortura, me tortura mi corazón
si sigo aquí, enloqueceré. Suelta!

Soloist:
When will I leave this prison
that tortures me, it tortures my heart
If I stay here I’ll go crazy. Let go!

Ya las tumbas son crucifixión
monotonía, monotonía, cruel dolor
si sigo aquí, enloqueceré
(repite)

The tombs have become a crucifixion
monotony, monotony, cruel pain
If I stay here I’ll go crazy.
(repeats)

I hear “Las tumbas” as a cry for freedom, a manifestation of mourning coming from the underground of confinement that blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, but also the boundaries between life and death. The title of the song is a direct reference to the infamous Detention Complex in Lower Manhattan better known as The Tombs where Maelo did some time for a different arrest. It is a song in which we don’t hear Maelo’s usually rapid, vocal improvisations, those taken as the main mark of his style (see Chapter One). It’s rather a more contained vocalization, one that suggest more than what it tells. It is, in other words, a proverbial interpretation of his experiences as a preso.

“Las tumbas”, moreover, voices a carceral acoustics that entangles el preso and el tecato as spectral social characters who coexist in the penal institution. In this light, the blurring of the

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166 See Moreno-Velázquez (2010) for a brief discussion about this arrest.

167 See Quintero-Rivera (2009, 2014) for analyses of Maelo’s soneos in “Las Tumbas.”
boundary between the living and the death in “Las tumbas”—as in “Aquí estoy ya yo llegué”—is also evocative of a sense of spectrality that marks Maelo's repertoire through a poetics of the “living death,” which is a central trope in the cultural and social narratives deployed as part of what the Henrique Carneiro (Forthcoming) describes as the historical construction of vice as illness. Additionally, this spectral poetics resonates with what Jossianna Arroyo describes as “the role of the living-dead, spectacular death, or death as collage” in artistic expressions produced in contemporary contexts of violence and death in the Caribbean used to by “the living [to] reflect contemporary realities of violence, postcapitalist market economies, and mourning” (2015a, 36).

Framed as such, the salient presence of death in Maelo’s repertoire, which comes back in “Las tumbas” and “Aquí estoy ya yo llegué” as constitutive of his carceral acoustics, needs to also be framed within the histories of pharmacoloniality—a struggle of day-to-day colonial endurance that is reminiscent of the story of healing and illness Maelo voices in the expression *Cortijo se llevó la llave*.

Hence, I understand Maelo’s carceral acoustics as a having pharmacolonial undertones in that he links addiction and incarceration as mutually constitutive elements of Puerto Rican history and contemporary life. These spectral presences are too often studied separately and/or treated as public secrets. However, as has been shown in this chapter they coexist in the salsa repertoire, and in Maelo’s music and biography more specifically, haunting the same aural public sphere where the spectral voices of social characters such as el preso, el tecato, and the above-discussed el veterano have long-been deemed unworthy. In other words, I argue that the spectral poetics Maelo voices throughout his repertoire, and particularly the story of illness, healing, and secrecy he voices in the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave*, served him to endure biopolitical histories in which illness has been used as a tool to cast the lives of Afro-Puerto Ricans—and of
Black and indigenous groups in Latin America and the Caribbean, more largely—as worthless. My analysis builds on Ana Ochoa Gautier (2014) suggestion that the voice has played a key role as a medium of mutuality in these broader histories of the political definition of the person. Thus, my critical discussion about Maelo’s story of illness and healing as a storytelling tactic used to endure the drastic conditions of life brought by pharmacoloniality Puerto Ricans grounds my understanding of the politico theological stakes of Maelo’s spectral voice. To recall my study about howling, social protests, and the goddess Oyá in Chapter Two, I hear a relation between the creative work maeleros in Venezuela do with the expression ecuajei as iconic of Maelo and the creative work Maelo does with the phrase Cortijo se llevó la llave. These two iconic phrases are part of the larger spectral poetics of maelería I theorize throughout this dissertation as an emerging, vital component of the multiple, politicized modes of listening and storytelling my interlocutors create through their song labor.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I took the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave* as the entry point to articulate an inquiry about illness, militarism, addiction, and incarceration in Puerto Rico through the lens of my ethnographic research and theorizations about Maelo's life and biography. I argue that these larger political histories, which I have theorized as pharmacolonial endeavors prevalent in salsa, are central to the type of mythological accounts Maelo's life seems to inspire among maeleros and maelistas. In doing this, I have also studied the poetics of la clave and la llave Maelo voices in the phrase *Cortijo se llevó la llave* as part of a larger spectral poetics prominent in his repertoire and in salsa more largely; and I have argued that as poetic images la clave and la llave imply secrecy, musical knowledge, and kinship. All this situates Maelo's life and songs as part of a continuum of illness, war, addiction, and incarceration that marked Puerto Rican life after the
1950s. This continuum has been mediated through the arts, and has had a particular prominence in salsa through the acústica carcelaria I have also theorized in this chapter. Ultimately, I see the histories of colonialism and empire related throughout this chapter as central to the politicized listening and song labor my interlocutors produce regarding Maelo's songs and life. His becoming a sort of heroic figure who is placed in diverse politico theological pantheons and whose songs are taken as evocative of racial and class struggles transnationally emerge from the ways in which his music mediates these public secrets in combination to his mediation of the sacred studied in previous chapters. All this is key to the notion of political theology I theorize throughout this ethnographic biography. As evident in our discussion about “Las Tumbas,” death plays a central role in all this and mourning is also crucial as a medium for the articulation of the type of relational affinities under scrutiny throughout this dissertation. Mourning, that is, taken as a medium of mutuality that is reminiscent to the story of illness and healing Maelo voiced in the expression Cortijo se llevó la llave. Studying all this in conjunction is not only urgent for Puerto Rican history and contemporary life but also as a means of gaining a better understanding of the transnational transcendence of Maelo’s music and biography.
Maelo was named *El Brujo de Borinquen* (loosely, The Puerto Rican Wizard) in Panama during the 1960s. Although this moniker does not have the same currency among *salseros* (salsa fans) who still refer to Maelo predominantly as *El Sonero Mayor*, it is cherished by *maeleros* and *maelistas* as an epithet that also evokes the alchemy of his vocal performance. The significance of the title *El Brujo de Borinquen* is particularly related to the ways in which Maelo mediates the religious and the profane through the “generic intertextuality” (Bauman and Briggs 1992) of his vocal style. In Panama, nevertheless, the secular devotion (Brenan 2008) that characterizes the aura of Maelo’s afterlife is about much more than his standing as a performer who transformed the art of *soneo* (vocal improvisation) in salsa. The epithet *El Brujo de Borinquen*, I assert, is grounded on Maelo’s devotion for *El Nazareno*, the Black Christ of Portobelo, Panama.

I maintain that a sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno has arisen with particular strength during Maelo’s afterlife, and that this is based on how Maelo’s personal story of illness and healing from heroin addiction is understood as mirroring El Nazareno’s pain towards crucifixion. Briefly, it is vital to stress that El Nazareno is a manifestation of Christ as “Jesus of Nazareth,” which in the Catholic Church’s imagery symbolizes a tormented Christ on his path to Calvary carrying His cross. His followers believe in His miraculous healing force, and make vows seeking that El Nazareno cures them or someone in the family from physical illness or that He protects them from social wounds produced by social and economic abandonment. In return, they do long pilgrimages annually to give thanks for the received blessings through rituals that include physical pain as a means of purge and cleansing. Yearly during the week of October

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168 See Chapter One for a detailed discussion about the generic intertextuality of Maelo’s vocal performance.
21st, more than 20,000 pilgrims come to Portobelo from all over Panama and other countries, commonly to walk more than 30 kilometers under a fierce, humid heat, dressed mostly in purple, with many of them wearing garments that mimic El Nazareno's ropes, and some carrying large wooden crucifixes or small Black Christ shrines. Their vows, in other words, seek to mimic El Nazareno's suffering. This has a great significance for my argument in this chapter: I propose that Maelo and El Nazareno are perceived as sharing the weight of tormented suffering, and that this generates a sense of mutuality between them that mirrors the quandaries of devotees who relate to both of them as one of their own.

![Poster of Maelo and El Nazareno](image)

**Figure 24:** Poster of Maelo and El Nazareno sold outside the Church of San Felipe, in Portobelo during the Black Christ Festival in 2015. His initials identify Maelo, I.R. for Ismael Rivera, and as El Brujo.

Maelo embraced El Nazareno's devotion in 1969 as a healing tactic within his life-long struggle with heroin addiction. He made the pilgrimage to Portobelo yearly from 1970 to 1980, a period when he was able to stop using heroin due in part to his faith. Throughout his period as a pilgrim Maelo developed such an affective connection with Panamanians, and more so with portobeleños (the people of Portobelo) that a bust of him presides over one of the town’s main squares (figure 26). This sculpture, I argue, situates Maelo as a devotional popular figure that in his afterlife has become praised as a Black Nazarene of sorts, an iconic singer and devotee of El
Nazareno whose music, pictures, and myth have become part of the larger festivities in Portobelo (figure 24).

Figure 25: El Nazareno at the Church of San Felipe on October 21st, 2015. Photo by César Colón-Montijo.

Figure 26: Maelo’s bust in Portobelo, Panama. Along with Maelo, the sculpture has the faces of Sorolo and Rosa Bonilla, two of Maelo’s dearest friends from Chorrillo, and the faces of two children. Photo taken by César Colón-Montijo. May 2013.
In 1974, Maelo recorded the song “El Nazareno,” which contributed significantly to the internationalization of this shrine during the 1970s. This song tells the story of his encounter with El Nazareno as a tale of belief, healing, and friendship condensed in the song’s refrain—“El Nazareno me dijo que cuidara a mis amigos (The Black Christ told me to take care of my friends). The first stanza sets the context of the encounter as happening amidst a hang out. It says

Yo estaba en un vacilón,
I was hanging out
fui a ver lo que sucedía.
Went to see what was going on.
Cuando ya me divertía
I was having fun,
y empezaba a vacilar
and was enjoying myself
no se de dónde
when, out of nowhere,
una voz vine a escuchar.
I heard a voice talking to me.

In the second and third stanzas, Maelo channels El Nazareno in the moment in which He gives him advice regarding his existential quandaries. His blessing comes as a call for Maelo to be aware of those “friends” who might be harnessing him and as a call for solidarity and devotion.

Maelo sings, voicing the Black Christ,

¡Qué expresión tiene tu rostro!
What an expression in your face!
se refleja la alegría
It reflects happiness,
y está rodeado de tanta hipocresía.
But is surrounded by so much hypocrisy.
Es El Nazareno,
This is El Nazareno,
que te da consejos buenos:
giving you His good advice:
haz bien, no mires a quién,
do good without looking to whom,
dale la mano al caído, y si acaso
give your hand to the fallen,
bien malo ha sido,
and even if they’ve been bad,
dale la mano también.
give them a hand too.
Hazle bien a tus amigos  
y ofrécéles tu amistad,  
y verás que a ti lo malo 
nunca se te acercará.  
En cambio todo lo bueno 
contigo siempre estará.  
¡Óyelo!

Do good to your friends,  
and offer them your friendship,  
and you will see that the bad  
will remain far from you.  
Instead, the good  
Will always be with you.  
Hear it!

Through this story about friendship and solidarity, this song connects the different geographies of my research. Although this chapter focuses on the localized conception of Maelo’s wizardry in Panama, I must emphasize that Maelo and El Nazareno are enmeshed transnationally. For example, the socio-musical collective known as the macropanas (macro-friends) in Venezuela describe El Nazareno as “un macropana de Maelo (one of Maelo’s macro-friends)” (Adames 1999, 19), and thus as one of their own. Macropanas, whose song labor I discuss extensively on Chapter Two, also consider the song “El Nazareno” as the most important tune in Maelo’s repertoire because it tells a political tale of friendship, race, and devotion in which Maelo’s suffering is forever entangled with that of the Black Christ. As the late professor José Adames, one of the founding members of the macropanas wrote, El Nazareno “invites the great Maelo not to put the other cheek when facing abuse but to engage in the most beautiful feeling cherished by human beings: solidarity and fraternity” (Adames 1999, 19).169 This idea is key to my argument about the sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno.

169 “invita al gran Maelo no a poner la otra mejilla cuando lojoden sino al más hermoso sentimiento que anidan los seres humanos: la solidaridad, la fraternidad.”
In this chapter, I examine the context-specific ways in which the Maelo-centered sense of mutuality through music, listening, and storytelling I explore throughout this dissertation, takes place in Panama. I do it through the lens of the song labor produced by Luis Gooding and Pedro ‘Sorolo’ Rodríguez, a pair of friends whose lives have been in great part dedicated to preserve the memory of Maelo’s legacy in Panama since the 1980s. Gooding has written and produced various radio and TV documentaries centered on the role that Panama and El Nazareno played in Maelo’s life and repertoire. For Gooding, the labor of documenting Maelo’s legacy in Panama became a medium to cultivate a friendship with Sorolo, who similarly has devoted a large part of his life to cherish the memory of his friendship with Maelo. Sorolo has done this mainly through the restaurant La Esquina de Maelo (Maelo’s Corner) in Chorrillo, in Panama City the barrio where he grew up, and by capitalizing on the space Gooding has given him through his media productions. These Afro-Panamanian friends perform proudly their respective roles as maelistas
in the Panamanian salsa scene: Gooding as a trustworthy connoisseur of Maelo’s biography and repertoire, and Sorolo as the friend who holds the key Maelo’s association with El Nazareno. I argue that their song labor has been instrumental in the articulating of the sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno I study in this chapter. Furthermore, I must say clearly that my analysis here emerges from a critical engagement with their song labor and from the Maelo-centered intellectual friendships\textsuperscript{170} I share with Gooding and Sorolo.

The first parts of this chapter frame the title El Brujo de Borinquen in relation to larger histories of magic and religion amidst colonialism in Latin America and the Caribbean. The aim of these parts is to situate critically the coining of the term \textit{brujo} as iconic of Maelo as being part of larger politico theological struggles in which this term has been mobilized with multi-layered meaningfulness. Brujo, that is, has served concurrently as a means of marginalizing Black and indigenous populations and as a “moral artifact” (Palmié 2002, 2011) used by these same groups to counter such disregarding. Key to the tale of wizardry I relate in this chapter is my discussion about the ways in which Black men have historically been criminalized amid these “spectacles of brujería” (Román 2007) as evil, ill, uncivilized, and unworthy. I argue that the story of Maelo’s devotion for El Nazareno needs to be understood in the context of these larger histories, and therefore I examine the theology and practice of El Nazareno devotion accordingly in order to argue that it is based on the ritualistic performance of a wounded masculinity that is common to men from Latin American and Caribbean barrios (Ferrándiz-Martín 2003, 2007).

Throughout, this chapter looks at two specific historical and political conjunctures. First, I follow Luis Gooding’s reading that the key to Maelo’s Panama connection is that he is not only entangled with El Nazareno, but that he is also associated with Omar Torrijos’ populist, military

\textsuperscript{170} See the dissertation introduction for a discussion about this idea of intellectual friendships that builds on David Scott’s (2017) recent theorizations about friendship as a means of intellectual production.
government. This idea is based mainly in that the period from 1969 to 1980, which comprises the time of Maelo’s pilgrimage to Portobelo parallels the rise and fall of Torrijos’ government between 1968 and 1981. By framing my study in relation to these larger political undertakings, I pay attention to how the tensions between Torrijos’ nationalism and the U.S. imperial presence in Panama impacted El Nazareno devotion and the lives of my interlocutors. Second, I locate El Nazareno devotion in relation to larger histories of religion and illness in Panama that both preceded and survived the Torrijos era. I argue that this healing shrine needs to be understood as imbricated in a long history of “colonial pathologies” (Anderson 2006) and “imperial medicine” (Sutter 2009) deployed by the U.S. throughout a network of colonial enclaves like Panama, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines used as colonial laboratories in which indigenous and Black populations were racialized as ill and in need of hygiene (Anderson 2006; Sutter 2009; Tomes 2009). By situating my analysis within the two historical and political conjunctures, this chapter aims to frame the moniker El Brujo de Borinquen as a concept that is simultaneously telling about Maelo’s alchemy as a sonero mayor and about the larger politico theological stakes implied in how he has become a popular singer who is entangled with El Nazareno as spectral presences that pervade the everyday lives of their devotees. I, moreover, propose that the epithet El Brujo de Borinquen works as a politico theological concept used as a means of enduring larger macro-political and historical processes in which Black and indigenous men have long-been racialized as both unhealthy and evil through colonial fantasies of otherness in Latin America and the Caribbean. This chapter, therefore, adds layers to the ethnographic portrait of Maelo I paint throughout this dissertation, giving specificity to the spectral poetics of voice, illness, devotion, and friendship I trace in previous chapters by relating the context-specific politico theological overtones Maelo’s music and biography gain in Panama. In this
light, I can now begin my analytic journey by theorizing together with Luis Gooding what I perceive as Maelo’s mutuality with Panamanian popular culture.

**Maelo’s Mutuality With Panamanian Culture As Tale of Wizardry**

Panamanian music collector Luis Gooding is an expert on Maelo's music and life who stresses Maelo's Panamanian connection through his song labor. Gooding identifies as *maelista*, and has devoted a large part of his life to documenting Maelo's legacy in Panama. Oftentimes, he presents his findings through storied theorizations in which he interprets Maelo’s repertoire and biography through personal stories that he frames through the prism of Panamanian history and contemporary life. As Gooding told me during one of the many conversations we have had in the archive and radio booth he maintains in a room at his house in San Miguelito, a working-class neighborhood in Panama City, his song labor consciously articulates Maelo’s biography from a Panamanian perspective. He says:

> You know, from a Panamanian perspective not from a Puerto Rican perspective. Puerto Ricans may have their own way of looking at Maelo because they are from there, from his neighborhood. So I, whenever I encountered a Puerto Rican I would ask questions, you know because no one like Puerto Ricans for this. But sometimes I would be disappointed because in Puerto Rico they don’t even know much about Ismael’s life. That’s something that caught my attention because HOW can we not know about the life of a man who was, for me, such an influential figure in music? I am *maelista*, and people tell me I am a bit crazy because of how much I would speak about Ismael. They used to tell me, ‘you’re crazy.’ Nowadays everyone calls me, now everyone asks me and speaks about Ismael. So many years after his death, they are remembering him, and all the work I did about Ismael, about all of what he left in Puerto Rico (Gooding 2014). 172

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171 See Chapter One for a detailed discussion on the ideas of storied theorization and song labor.

172 "Tú sabes, yo lo estoy viendo desde un punto de vista panameño, no desde un punto de vista puertorriqueño. El puertorriqueño tendrá su punto de vista de cómo ver a Ismael porque son de ahí, del barrio. Pero yo siempre donde veía a un boricua le preguntaba algo porque áas nadie que los boricuas, pero a veces me llevó una decepción porque en el mismo Puerto Rico no conocen mucho la vida de Ismael. Entonces es algo que por loa menos a mí me llamó la atención porque cómo no vamos a saber de un tipo que para mí, yo creo que fue muy grande para mí en la música. Yo soy maelista y la gente me dice que yo estoy medio loco porque yo le hablaba de Ismael y me decían tú estás loco, y yo, tu vas a ver que
One of the main elements of “all the work” Gooding has done as a maelista is voiced in his storied theorization that Maelo's pregón de barrio, or his vocal performance, is reminiscent of the modes of speech and belief of Panamanians from the underclasses. Gooding claims that Maelo’s pregón de barrio, which in Chapter One I theorized in counterpoint with Gooding as voicing a generic intertextuality through the combination of song, greetings, sacred chants, and popular sayings in his soneos enchanted him in his childhood. Gooding remembers listening to Cortijo y su Combo's album entitled Bueno y qué during a family party when he was nine years old as the moment he felt the “magic” of Maelo’s vocal performance. He also argues that in addition to the modes of speech and belief Maleo voices in his songs, the art in the cover of that album was for him reminiscent of Panamanian colonial history and contemporary life: when he saw the photo of Cortijo y su Combo standing in front of colonial ruins he thought it was a picture of an all-Black Panamanian music ensemble standing in front of Panamanian colonial ruins. That is, from the standpoint of his childhood ears and eyes Maelo’s voice sounded like the voices of his neighbors while also Maelo and his fellow members of Cortijo y su Combo looked like men from his barrio.

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hoy en día to le mundo me llaba to’ el mundo pregunta y habla de Ismael. Ahora, después de tantos años que Ismael tiene de muerto, se están acordando ahora, todo el trabajo que hice de Ismael, todo lo que dejó en Puerto Rico.”
Figure 28. Album cover of *Bueno y qué* by Cortijo y su Combo (1960).

Figure 29: Gooding’s Facebook post relating his father and friends to Cortijo y su Combo.

On a recent Facebook posting (see figures 28 and 29), he took these ideas about the similarities between the Afro-Puerto Rican musicians from *Cortijo y su Combo* and Afro-
Panamanians further. Gooding posted a picture of his father hanging out with his friends in San Miguelito, accompanying the image with the comment: “Remembrances of the good old-days in Panama. It is not an LP from Cortijo y su Combo. My father and his friends in the late-1950s.”

In our conversations, Gooding has claimed that at the time Panamanians copied not only Maelo's pregón de barrio but also his clothing style and hairdo. In other words, according to Gooding many Afro-Panamanians from the underclasses mimicked the vocalization and visual image of their idol.

It was during these years that Maelo was named El Brujo de Borinquen, an epithet that combines “Borinquen,” the indigenous name for Puerto Rico used by Taínos, and “brujo,” a concept with polyvalent and ambiguous significance amidst colonial histories in Latin America and the Caribbean. I take this polyvalent term as a marker of the sense of mutuality Gooding identifies between Maelo and Panamanians. It is telling, I propose, of how this sense of mutuality is based on individual and collective experiences of religiosity, masculinity, and illness lived both by Maelo and his Panamanian fans amidst colonialism and empire. On an initial level, the name El Brujo de Borinquen evokes the alchemy of Maelo's vocal performance, the "magical" effect his vocalization had in the style of vocal improvisation in salsa. That is, his alchemy as sonero mayor whose pregón de barrio concurrently mirrors and inspires modes of speech, belief, and relation cherished by his fans, and changed the way in which salsa was produced, consumed, and circulated.

173 “Recuerdo del Panamá del ayer. No es un LP de Cortijo y su combo. Mi padre con sus amigos a finales de los 50”

174 Taínos were one of the largest indigenous groups in the Caribbean region. Rouse (1992) provides an archeological study of Taíno culture while and Haslip-Viera (2001) is a collection of essays about the recent Taíno revival in Puerto Rico. See also Ortiz (1935, 1947).
Panamanian salsa icon Rubén Blades adds an important analysis about the transformative influence Maelo had in Panamanian popular music. Panama has an understudied but important place in the histories of salsa. It was particularly central for Maelo’s since he became famous as Cortijo y su Combo’s lead singer in the 1950s, and even more important as he became a revered performer amongst salseros during salsa’s eruption as a genre in the late 1960s and 1970s. Maelo’s link to Panamanian popular music and culture is one of mutuality: Panama influenced his music and life in ways that equal how he influenced Panamanian culture and music. During an interview I conducted with Blades in Panama City on 2015, he credited Maelo for transforming the way in which Panamanians appreciated the role of popular singers who were not soloists; that is, singers who rather than leading their own ensembles performed alongside well-known popular music orchestras during the 1950s and 1960s. Blades argues that up until Maelo’s emergence as the singer of Cortijo y su Combo, DJs in Panamanian radio would promote these orchestras only emphasizing the name of their musical directors while omitting the name of singers. Blades considers Maelo to be the first non-soloist singer whose vocal style was so impactful that the DJs began framing their songs on the radio as Cortijo y su Combo with Ismael Rivera (he was yet not widely known as Maelo). He also recalls that a multitude of fans received them at the airport when Maelo and Cortijo arrived for the first time in 1958.

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175 Of particular importance for this idea were the Panamanian carnivals as events in which orchestras from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and New York such as Los Van Van, Irakere, El Gran Combo, Típica 73, and Apollo Sound shared the stage in musical exchanges that challenge the U.S. embargo against Cuba. There is, unfortunately, a lack of historical studies about salsa in Panama. I must also mention, even if briefly, the importance of Vitín Paz, a Panamanian trumpet player who has had a prominent trajectory in New York salsa playing with Eddie Palmieri and many other performers. See Buckley (2004) for an account of Panamanian salsa.

176 See Introduction and Chapter One for a contextualization of Maelo’s emergence as a lead singer.
Imagined as having a transformative effect on the listening practices of Panamanians in how they related to popular singers, Maelo’s voice has connotations that evoke his role as what Leonardo Acosta (2004) describes as alchemist performers who changed the practice and history of Caribbean music. But the alchemist potential of this story, when framed through the lens of the name El Brujo de Borinquen, also evokes larger histories of magic and colonialism in the Caribbean and Latin America. It reminds us of Michael Taussig’s description of magic amongst indigenous populations in Colombia and Venezuela as something that is inherently related to words, knowledge, and relations. Or in his words, how magic is about “words and their ability to effect things” (Taussig 1987, 262). Amongst Maelo’s fans in Panama, his magical vocal style effected concrete transformations in how people listened to popular music and provided his fans a means of reasserting their cultural identities by mimicking his modes of speech, attitude, and relation.

Gooding argues that Maelo and Cortijo impacted Panamanian popular music in another remarkable way: the musical movement or generic label identified as “Combos Nacionales,” which gained currency in Panama principally between the 1960s and the mid-1970s, took inspiration for using the word “Combos” in its name from Cortijo y su Combo. Gooding, who other than being a maelista is an utmost expert in Combos Nacionales and who performed in these groups, claims that this happened because Cortijo y su Combo was an all-Black ensemble whose international repertoire was grounded mainly on the performance of Afro-Puerto Rican music genres bomba and plena. For the young Panamanians creating music as part of the Combos Nacionales scene, Gooding argues, Maelo and Cortijo became the inspiration to perform their own Panamanian musical genres instead of only performing a heavily Cuban or Puerto

177 See Chapter One for a discussion about Acosta’s (2004) notion of alchemist performers in the Caribbean.
Rican repertoire that characterize salsa. Cortijo y su Combo’s impact on Combos Nacionales arouse through musical exchanges that occurred during the Panamanian Carnivals where Maelo and Cortijo shared the stage with these groups. Maelo, additionally, would eventually record cover versions in salsa of Panamanian songs in the 1970s as he became even more enmeshed within Panamanian culture through his devotion for El Nazareno.

Figure 30: Luis Gooding as a young music collector and Dj in Panama, 1970s. Image provided by Luis Gooding.

Combos Nacionales also featured a street-wise aesthetics of hustling as a means of relation and endurance that is key to Gooding’s interpretation of Maelo’s mutuality with Panamanian culture. This has to do with another role Panama played in two vital elements of

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178 Gooding is an authority in the history and repertoire of Combos Nacionales. He even went back to school part time a few years ago seeking to write a book about its history. This generic label served as an umbrella term to group ensembles playing a variety of genres including calypso, soul, salsa, and típico. Some of these groups were Los Mozambique, Combo Panaswing, Pacific Combo, and Los Festivals, amongs many others. Gabino Pampini is one of the most known singers with roots in this movement.

179 For example, he included the song “Sacúdeme,” written by Armando Machores for his group Combo Panaswing as a 7” single.
Maelo’s life: his addictions and incarceration. Even though Maelo’s mutuality with Panamanian culture was centered on music, it was also heavily grounded on the intersection between healing, religion, and friendship he found through the devotion for El Nazareno. Panama marked Maelo in deeply transformative ways mainly because of two interrelated events that occurred in the 1960s paving the way for his prominent connection with Panama during the 1970s. In 1962, Maelo was arrested for drug possession at the Puerto Rican airport while coming from a tour in Panama.\textsuperscript{180} In 1969, meanwhile, Maelo found in Panama a healing tactic for his life-long struggle with heroin addiction through his faith in El Nazareno. Gooding proposes that the connection between Maelo and Panamanians from the popular classes got even stronger in 1969 because Maelo, in addition to encountering El Nazareno, that year performed during the first carnivals celebrated under Omar Torrijos’ government merely a few months after Torrijos took power through a coup d’état in 1968.

**Locating Maelo’s Story of Healing and Illness Amidst Torrijos’ Populist, Military Revolution**

Omar Torrijos (1929-1981) took control of Panama in 1968 by overthrowing Arnulfo Arias from the presidency, and challenging the old oligarchy that had long-controlled Panamanian political and economic life. He conquered power promoting a nationalist discourse based on a platform of social justice and on the inclusion of the disenfranchised into the body politic. His administration focused mainly on the working-class and rural campesinos (peasants), but additionally, although to a lesser extent, on both Afro-Panamanians and indigenous people. The Torrijos era was marked by ideological ambiguity; it did not align with either left or right wing movements arising in Latin America at the time. Torrijos launched Panama into a process

\textsuperscript{180} See Chapter Four for a detailed discussion about Maelo’s arrest.
of modernization and development heavily centered on road constructions that connected urban and rural areas. His government, deemed as a revolutionary process but remembered more as reformist than revolutionary, also implemented aggressive literacy, house-building initiatives, new labor laws, and educational reforms. Torrijos also transformed the Panamanian nation-state in its relations to the U.S. mainly through the negotiations and public campaign that lead to the signing in 1977 of the “Torrijos-Carter Treaties,” which ensured that Panama would gain control of the Panama Canal after 1999, finally ending the direct control of the Canal Zone the U.S. maintained since 1903. The reassertion of Panama’s sovereignty over the Canal Zone is widely considered Torrijos’ proudest achievement (Conniff 1992; Craft 2015) and it was at the core of the nationalist ethos that pervaded his era. Torrijos died (or was actually assassinated as this event is remembered in the collective memory of so many Panamanians) in a plane crash in 1981. Maelo’s period of pilgrimages to Portobelo, which spanned from 1969 to 1980, parallels the rise and fall of Torrijos government from 1969 to 1981.

\[181\] I evoke here the distinction Brazilian sociologist Renato Ortiz (2006) makes between collective memory and national memory. He writes: “The collective memory is of the order of the experience, the national memory refers to a history that transcends the subjects and is not immediately contained in their daily lives. The former sets the memories in their own bearers, being valid for those who share the same memories; oblivion is the fruit of the dismemberment of the group. The national memory is of another nature. It does not express the immediate experience of the particular groups; to the extent that it is intended as a national, by definition, it transcends social divisions, in principle it would belong to everyone. That is why it cannot be the prolongation of particular memories. The national memory is of the order of ideology, it is a product of social history, not just of the ritualization of tradition” (Ortiz 2006, 17). My translation.
In 1969, Maelo was the only international singer other than Dominican Johnny Ventura to perform in the carnivals. Maelo went as a soloist and performed for several days in a row with a Panamanian orchestra. As can be seen below in figures 32 and 33, Maelo was identified as El Brujo de Borinquen in the carnival advertisements in newspapers during that year. This reaffirms that he was named as such before encountering El Nazareno during that trip. It was in 1969, also during this visit to Panama, that Sorolo and few other newfound friends introduced Maelo to El Nazareno devotion. Gooding remembers that Maelo was very sick at the time, dealing with his heroin addiction publicly in his performances. Gooding recalls a specific televised show on that year,

The military had a television program called "Todo por la patria (Everything for the Fatherland)." It was done by the public relations department of the national guard where they put all the activities that the military did... There was the cultural part in which they presented artists. And I remember that when they presented Ismael Rivera, he looked bad,

\footnote{Gooding has not been able to identify the people in these images. This is a pending task we have for the future.}
but bad, you know, he looked like he was drunk, but I think there was something else there, too, you know. I remember that he sang "Mi negrita me espera (My negrita is waiting for me (Gooding 2014)."

Gooding claims that this larger political context is vital to understand the Panama links that inspired Maelo. His willingness to perform like this amid such a politically charged context in which nationalistic feelings were en vogue, according to Gooding, was key to the ways in which Panamanians identified Maelo as one of their own.

Figure 32: 1969 Panamanian carnival advertisement, which featured only Maelo and Johnny Ventura. Image provided by Luis Gooding.

183 En televisión, los militares tenían un programa que se llamaba “Todo por la patria”. Era el departamento de relaciones públicas de la guardia nacional donde ellos ponían todas las actividades que hacían los militares… Había la parte cultural en la que ellos presentaban artistas. Y yo recuerdo que cuando presentan a Ismael Rivera, se veía mal, pero malo, tú sabes, parecía que estaba borracho, pero yo creo que había otra cosa también ahí, tú sabes. Yo me acuerdo que cantó “Mi negrita me espera”.

203
For Gooding, there was yet another connection between Maleo and Panamanians. He claims that within this context Maelo did not feel judged or stigmatized for his addictions. When Gooding recalled these events from 1969 during our interview in 2014, he repeated a phrase that I take as central to his *maelista* theorizations. Gooding argues that while Panamanians embraced Maelo as he struggled with illness, in Puerto Rico, “Ismael was locked up because of the mistake he had and they threw away the key. And Ismael was forever imprisoned. Ismael leaves the jail and Ismael remains imprisoned” (Gooding 2014).184 With this phrase, Gooding evokes the stigma Maelo had to endure throughout his life due to his illness and incarceration. Additionally, such a storied theorization about Maelo’s connection with Panamanians links Gooding’s song labor to my discussion in Chapter Three about what Juan Carlos Quintero-Herencia (2005) conceives as the “*acústica carcelaria* (carceral acoustics) that pervades salsa, haunting the voices

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184 “A Ismael lo encerraron por el error que el tuvo y botaron la llave. Y Ismael quedó preso. Ismael sale de la cárcel y Ismael quedó preso.”
of soneros even after they survive imprisonment. The mediation of such a stigma is a central component of what in previous chapters I described as Maelo’s spectral poetics. Gooding claims that Maelo did not feel this stigma Panama because in 1969: he “supported” the Torrijos populist and military government, and second, he became a devotee of El Nazareno, who is known as “the Christ of the abandoned.” Gooding’s proposition about Melo not feeling stigmatized in Panama, though, implies a generalization about how Panamanian society sees El Nazareno devotion and His devotees. The fact that El Nazareno is known as “the Christ of the abandoned” is telling of a stigmatization that has long marked this devotion, one in which the people of Portobelo have long-been racialized as ill and unworthy. Such accusations, which have often been produced and reproduced widely in media, are also connected to one of the central analytical motives of this dissertation: the importance of linking my critical study about Maelo’s spectral force in relation to longer, violent histories in Latin America and the Caribbean in which voice has served as a means of casting Black and indigenous groups as worthless of citizenship and personhood, as a means of distinguishing between humans and nonhumans while also serving these groups as a medium of mutuality used to endure such histories of abandonment (Ochoa Gautier 2014). Thus, Gooding’s analysis about the socio-musical impact of Maelo’s imbrication with El Nazareno and Torrijos has politico theological implications that need to be understood in light of these larger histories. What follows provides additional context for my theorization of Maelo’s wizardry.

**Spectacles of Brujería and Colonial Pathologies**

The multiplicity of brujería as a politico theological concept oftentimes is lost in translation. It has long-maintained currency in the anthropological literature and in studies about
Black Atlantic religions, and it has been problematically translated as magic, sorcery, witchcraft, or wizardry. In order to further present my analysis of the title El Brujo de Borinquen, I use in this chapter the translation of brujería as “wizardry” coined by Stephan Palmié (2002, 2011) in his studies about Afro-Cuban and Afro-Haitian religions while conscious of the need to account for the context-specific histories of this concept. Palmié’s analysis focuses on how such a sense of brujería or wizardry articulates major forms of knowledge and modes of being in the world as a “moral artifact” that is historically enacted with wide-ranging political, legal, scientific, cultural, and disciplinary significance. His analysis of brujería also speaks of the criminalization of Black bodies, religions, and cultural practices more broadly, stressing the criminalization of spaces of sociality, community, and kinship amongst Afro-Cubans more specifically. Understood as such, the term brujo or wizard evokes a larger colonial history in which Black men and their mutual aid societies have long-been criminalized for religious practices that are deemed as evil and as the source of crime and illness.

It is important to highlight that these violent histories of brujería are not limited to the struggles of Afro-descendants but that they also include prominently the traditional practices of indigenous peoples. As Michael Taussig (2005) maintains, magic or wizardry is historically attached to the uncivilized, which is also simultaneously inherent to the lives of those who police these practices through colonization and racist hierarchies as well as gendered ones. I bring in Taussig, whose studies on these matters mainly focuses on indigenous religions in Colombia and popular religion in Venezuela in order to connect the idea of Maelo's brujería to the larger colonial context in which these ideas are often mediated through spectacular stories about


popular religiosity and illness that constantly deem these marginalized populations as unworthy and haunted.

The portrayal of Maelo as brujo for his vocal alchemy in the Panamanian media seems to be of a different type from the spectacular portrayals of other Black men as brujos that abound in the histories of Black Atlantic religions accusing these men of witchcraft and depicting them as delinquents who sacrifice children in their evil rituals. In Maelo’s case, the use of brujo, an epithet historically used by the powerful to marginalize Afro-descendant or popular practices, becomes a term appropriated by the disregarded as a means of reaffirming their identities in praising a popular icon they feel as one of their own. By naming Maelo El Brujo de Borinquen, one could say, his Panamanian fans embraced their own brujería. This is what Gooding is pointing at when he says Maelo did not feel judged by Panamanians. Still, the ways in which portobeleños are often portrayed in contemporary Panamanian media tells us that this centuries-long history of discrimination is far from over, and shows us that criminalizing uses of the term brujo are still mobilized when describing the Panamanian communities with which Maelo cultivated such deep affective bonds.

Portobelo is a place praised for its colonial history and glorious past but loathed for its impoverished present. It is a cosmopolitan enclave that has long been imagined as an abandoned community frozen in colonial times. It is as if the ruins of colonial buildings that entice tourists to this tiny community have become its sole attraction or possibility of existence as something of the past. Founded on March 20, 1597 under the name “Nombre de Dios (God’s name),” Portobelo became the first Atlantic-coast Spanish settlement in Panama, and was sacked by Sir Francis Drake in the 17th century. Already at this time, most of its inhabitants were freed and enslaved Black people. It served as one of the axis of trade for the Spanish empire mainly
through the Portobelo Fairs, huge commerce events that fascinated traders from throughout the colonial world until the 18th century. In the 19th century, Portobelo was abandoned as trade routes were restructured through its neighboring port of Colon leaving the town impoverished. During the 20th century, Portobelo received two important population inputs: one consisting mainly of West Indian Canal Workers early in the century and another consisting mostly of campesinos during the Torrijos era.\footnote{For historical and sociological studies about Portobelo see Arroyo (1946), Alba (1971), LaFeber (1979), Mc Gehee (1994), Nuñez and Molo (1987), and Lecumberry 2007. For studies specifically about the Congo traditions see Richard Smith (1976; 1994), Lipski (1987), Gavidia (2011), and Craft (2015).}

Portobelo is known as the home of the Congo traditions in Panama, a cultural identity that has long been at the core of racist state policies and discourses of nationalism. Briefly, the term Afro-Pamanian gained currency in recent years as an unofficial way for unifying two terms of racialism used previously to describe Black Panamanians: negros coloniales (Colonial Blacks) and antillanos (Antilleans). The negros coloniales are represented by the Congo traditions, have over five hundred years of presence in the country, and even though they often speak in local creole, they are regularly deemed as Spanish-speaking members of the Panamanian racial democracy since the early 20th century. Antillanos, on the other hand, is the term used for identifying migrant Canal workers from the West Indies whose roots in Panama date back only to the early 20th century, and who have long been deemed as English-Speaking foreigners. In sum, there exists a racial hierarchy in Panama in which being antillano means being a Black foreigner while being a negro colonial means being part of the all-inclusive Panamanian family.

Antillanos and negros coloniales have long coexisted in Portobelo but this community is mostly associated with the Congo traditions, particularly in recent years when these cultural practices have gained prominence as representative of the inclusion of Afro-Panamanians into
the Panamanian nation. This has happened through the same tactics of exclusive inclusion that
dominate discourses of racial democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean. By this I mean
that Afro-Panamanians are portrayed as belonging to the nation but only as a thing of the past, as
caretakers of a sanitized heritage. However, their contemporary reality of disenfranchisement
and poverty is neglected or, perhaps worse, it is attached in media to their “uncivilized” and
“backward” practices of brujería.

For example, in 2012 around 50 female students from a local school in Portobelo fainted
and suffered headaches and chest pain that doctors could not properly diagnose. Newspapers
described such diseases as “strange,” and even called the event a “spell.” An article published in
the website critica.com at the time was entitled “Sacerdotes: no hay posesión demoníaca en
Portobelo (Priests: there is no demonic possession in Portobelo). In an interview, José Ortega,
the parish priest of Portobelo linked the illness to “occult practices.” He said to have seen, “some
adults practicing santería and brujería (occult practices), which is not too good, and this is
growing.” Such a narrative of children as prey of witchcraft fits with the larger, mediatized
stories of brujería studied by Palmié in Cuba and Haiti in which particularly little girls have been
at the epicenter of these polemics. This additionally relates to the profound gender implications
of brujería. And more specific to my argument, this idea fits narratives about Portobelo as a
haunted and ill place; narratives that perpetuate the racist depictions of portobeleños as backward

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188 For discussions about race in Panama see: Senior (2006), Newton (2006), Lewis (2006), Clarke
2014, and Craft (2015). The oeuvre of Gerardo Maloney, an Afro-Panamanian sociologist and poet of
antillano descent is key on these matters. See for example Maloney (1989, 1991).

189 “que algunos adultos están practicando las llamadas santerías y brujería (prácticas oscuras), que no
son muy buenas y esto se está extendiendo.” See: http://www.telemetro.com/nacionales/Parroco-
Portobelo-bajar-temor-desmayos_0_510549056.html; http://www.critica.com.pa/sacerdotes-no-hay-
posesion-demoniaca-en-portobelo-234322; https://impresa.prensa.com/nacionales/Investigan-misterioso-
malestar-Portobelo_0_3441405994.html.
and uncivilized, as a population simultaneously deemed in need of tutelage and left abandoned as unworthy.

The contemporary representations of Portobelo as a community under a spell of illness evoke what Reynaldo Román (2007) describes as spectacular accusations of witchcraft published in media depicting Afro-Caribbean religions as “plagues of superstition.” Such accusations are key to my argument because they imbricate illness and devotion. This allows me to add another wrinkle to the contextualization of the nickname El Brujo de Borinquen as expressive of larger histories of colonialism and empire. Evoking my discussion of Maelo’s vocal illness, addiction, and incarceration in Chapter Three, we could say that this name needs to be framed as telling of the pharmacolonial (Ramos 2010) specters that pervade Maelo’s music and biography as well as the lives and listening practices of maeleros and maelistas. More specifically, the title El Brujo de Borinquen needs to be understood as imbricated within what various scholars describe as a continuum of colonial pathologies and bio-medical citizenship deployed through medical discourses and policies of hygiene as tools of population control throughout a network of colonial enclaves such as Panama, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Hawai‘i, the Philippines, and Guam used as public health and tropical medicine laboratories by the U.S. (Ramos 1994; Anderson 2006; Sutter 2007; 2009; Tomes 2009).

Panama was an axis of these histories of colonial pathologies in which different groups were racialized as ill and unworthy of citizenship. Key to these histories in Panama was the battle with yellow fever during the U.S.-led construction of the Canal Zone in Panama during the early 20th century (Sutter 2007, 2016). As Paul Sutter (2007) discusses, the battle against yellow fever was understood by the U.S. conquerors as a form of tropical conquest, and was frequently presented in media as a triumphalist story of empire. Nevertheless, this battle also served as a
means of reengineering Panama through the development of the Canal and other infrastructure endeavors. The yellow fever battle also served as a tool for disciplining Panamanians and for deeming them as ill and in need of tutelage. It is important to point out that Canal workers were at the center of this yellow fever melodrama when many of them moved to Portobelo early in the 20th century.

However, the biopolitical stakes of this history precedes these 20th century U.S. imperial endeavors. I must recall that the annual Black Christ Festival in Portobelo emerged as a way for people to thank El Nazareno for protecting them from a cholera outbreak that affected Panama, Cuba, and many other places transnationally during the 19th century. As Julio Ramos (1994) discusses regarding the Cuban context at the time, illness and hygiene were deployed as means of policing the body in order to shape disciplined, modern citizen bodies. In this context, Ramos claims, the constitution of citizenship was frequently policed through sanitizing strategies that often linked illness to delinquency, and related ideas about health and contagion to discipline and morality. This larger context of illness and bio-medical citizenship needs to be taken into account when tracing the politico theological significance of the histories of wizardry I relate throughout this chapter. We must keep this broader history in mind when discussing how Portobelo remains imagined as an isolated, ill, and haunted place of the past rather than as a community with a long, cosmopolitan history.

Such spectacles of brujería and colonial pathologies resonate in the ways the media and the Church referred to the recent disease outbreaks in Portobelo. These discriminatory depictions of portobeleños, moreover, are inherent to the naming of El Nazareno as “the Christ of the abandoned.” It is worth mentioning that the Church banned the annual Black Christ Festival from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s as something that did not fit its dogma. Devotees continued
fulfilling their vows and pilgrimages throughout this period even though they were denied access to the church. This banning only ended when Torrijos intervened with Church officials in order to have the festival regain ecclesiastic sponsorship. All this informs my understanding of the moniker El Brujo de Boriquen as a politico theological concept used to counter the colonial fantasies of otherness that mark these larger colonial endeavors of illness and religion. As Michael Taussig (2005) says, such histories of magic are often mediated through ritualistic dramatizations of how people endure larger macro-political processes in their quotidian lives. Therefore, the label El Brujo de Borinquen voices a political theology in which his listeners take Maelo’s music and biography as dramatizing the ritualistic dimensions of larger macropolitical and historical processes that have often cast them as both unhealthy and evil. In what follows, I discuss how the Maelo and El Nazareno centered devotions my interlocutors articulate speak about how people endure such bio-political histories through the crossing of healing and faith amidst histories of social and economic abandonment. I contend that the sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno, which is central to the transnational network of devotion I map in this dissertation, emerges from a parallelism devotees feel between their respective histories.

Theology, Praxis, and Origin Stories of El Nazareno Devotion

The mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno is based on a perceived parallelism between their respective histories of suffering and healing, which also evokes the stories of healing and illness experienced by their devotees at large. In other words, there is a connection between El Nazareno theology and practice and the origin stories of how both El Nazareno and Maelo arrived in Portobelo. Their respective origin stories, I argue, mirror the paths that devotees walk in their annual pilgrimage and the physical pain as penance they do through their vows. I
think all this produces the sense of mutuality between El Nazareno, Maelo, and other devotees; a sense of collectivity that is grounded on shared conditions of living and that must be understood in relation to the previously discussed spectacles of brujería and colonial pathologies.

El Nazareno is part of a larger network of Black Christ and Nazareno devotion in Latin America. These devotions are enmeshed by their belief in the possibility of healing miracles and arise from histories of race, colonialism, and empire (Richardson 1995; Miguel-Franco 1998; Návarrete Cáceres 2013, Ortiz-Prado 2014; Sullivan-Gonzalez 2016). Numerous pilgrimage-centered shrines exist in Panama, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru as manifestations of Christian faith that persist in tension with the Church. Although each of these pilgrimages is context-specific, they mainly consist of promesas, vows devotees make seeking, for example, that the Black Christ cure an ill child or parent, heals devotees’ existential quandaries, or protects them from social wounds like marginalization, economic abandonment, or social illness. In exchange, devotees journey long distances to give thanks for the received blessings through individual or collective pilgrimages that include physical pain as penance, a means of purge, devotion, and healing. These practices are generally deemed archaic from the perspective of the modern Church and secular morality (Asad 1993).
Believers of El Nazareno call their vows *mandas* and these mandas have mimetic aims: they emulate El Nazareno’s suffering march towards crucifixion. This is a key aspect of this shrine: El Nazareno is still human, a person in the midst of suffering as He walks towards death and resurrection. It is imperative to emphasize that Christ’s manifestation as “Jesus of Nazareth” is represented in the Catholic Church as a tormented Christ carrying His cross towards Calvary. Such physical suffering as penance is a central component of the theology and praxis enacted by El Nazareno devotees. The procession allows them to delve into their existential quandaries through physical suffering, thus embodying an idea of Christ that is as human as them. As I previously discussed, El Nazareno is known as “el Cristo de los desheredados” or “the Christ of the abandoned,” an epithet that according to Mónica Miguel-Franco (1998) has contradictory significance. It indexes both the marginalization of His devotees, most of who come from the underclasses, by the Church and Panamanian larger society as criminals, thugs, and vagrants. But it also signals the concurrent appropriation of such stereotypical ideas by His devotees as means
of reaffirming their social identities amid social and economic abandonment (Miguel-Franco 1998). Moreover, this is not an isolated event. El Nazareno is part of a network of Nazareno devotion that connects Portobelo to Afro-Colombian communities in the South Pacific coast of this country (Ortiz-Prado 2014) and to Manila in the Philippines where a Black Nazarene is the axis of a massive shrine (Zialcita 2016).

The affinity of El Nazareno with such matters of humanity and endurance, are key to the mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno. I also see a sort of poetic parallelism between the origin stories people cherish about how each of them arrived to Portobelo and about how their devotional stories are connected to illness. Even though this is not the space for a detailed account of these stories, it is worth summarizing them for the sake of my larger analysis of the intersections between healing and religiosity. The origin stories about El Nazareno have been repeated in different publications including tourism magazines, journalistic works, U.S. navy brochures, local academic journals in Panama, and books. What follows combines some of these versions but is mainly based on a pamphlet I bought in Portobelo during the Black Christ festival in 2014, which is adapted from the accounts collected in the town by Patricia A. McGehee in her traveler book entitled *Portobelo Chronicles* (1994).

The arrival of El Nazareno to Portobelo is the source of legendary accounts. His devotees cherish multiple stories about the ways in which He arrived during the 17th century, but all these tales coincide in that the miraculous statue decided to stay in Portobelo rather than continue His voyage towards other communities. For example, one of the stories claims that El Nazareno was destined to the island of Taboga located on the Pacific side of the Panamanian Isthmus where parishioners had ordered a statue of Jesus of Nazareth from Spain. According to this story, the parishioners of Portobelo had at the same time requested a statue of Santo Domingo. Due to a
labeling error, the statue of Santo Domingo was sent to Taboga and the figure of El Nazareno was sent to Portobelo. This error was discovered when El Nazareno arrived, and the people of Portobelo tried several times to ship Him to His original destination in Taboga. However, they were not able to remove El Nazareno from their Church because it became too heavy once they put it there. In awe because of their impossibility of moving Him from their Church, they thus decided to keep El Nazareno and compensate Taboga worshippers for the statue.

In the other cherished version of this story, a Spanish galleon traveling to Cartagena de Indias, Colombia took refugee in Portobelo after being caught by a storm in the area. After the winds calmed down, the ship went back out to the sea only to have the storm winds return even stronger than before, forcing them to take shelter again. This would happen several times until the captain decided to lighten up the boat by throwing overboard the huge wooden box containing the statue of El Nazareno. Afterwards, fishermen from Portobelo found the box floating on the bay and took it to the Church. The statue fascinated them and they were shocked by the lack of respect the captain showed in throwing the sacred figure out of the galleon. Still, for these fishermen this event signaled something else: the miraculous desire of El Nazareno to remain in Portobelo with them. Thus, they took the statue to their church. Some devotees add a wrinkle to this story: in this version, the statue was broken in pieces when the fishermen found it inside the floating box, they left the statue broken in the church that evening only to find it standing the next morning after El Nazareno put Himself back together overnight.

I find the latter version of this story as indexing the healing significance that El Nazareno would gain amongst his devotees in 1821, which is the date that marked the start of the annual celebration. That year, a cholera epidemic was spreading throughout Panama as Spanish soldiers
were leaving Portobelo after two hundred years of military presence. Endangered by massive illness spreading through Cuba and many other colonial enclaves in the region (Ramos 1994), portobeleños turned to El Nazareno seeking for protection and they were spared from the cholera outbreak. The epidemic did not affect Portobelo, and as a way of thanking Him for this healing miracle portobeleños celebrated a huge festival on October 21, 1821. This inaugurated the annual celebration that after the 1970s became the massive shrine visited by thousands of pilgrimages looking for healing miracles or thanking the Christ for His curative strength.

![Figure 35: The statue of El Nazareno with Simón Cirineo dressed in khaki helping Him carry the crux. Photo by César Colón-Montijo.](image)

Also central to El Nazareno is the ethos of solidarity and friendship that pervades this devotion is the figure of Simón Cirineo or Simon, the Cyrene that accompanies El Nazareno helping him to carry his crux (see figure 35). A light skinned man with a beard, dressed in a khaki-color suit, with boots, and cloth caps, devotees often ambiguously describe him as both a fellow working-class man and as the man depicted in the biblical story as having helped Jesus carry his cross in the region of Cyrene. El Nazareno devotees often make their pilgrimages in

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190 I must mention even if briefly that most of the Panamanian historical resources I have found tend to ignore the fact that at this point in history Panama was part of Colombia. This is pretty much silenced in the historical archives I have been able to study.
pairs as a means of reenacting this sense of shared suffering and solidarity through their annual mandas.

Every year during the week of October 21 an estimate of between 20,000 and 30,000 pilgrims take over the streets of Portobelo. People come from all over Panama as well as from other countries. Merchants selling El Nazareno-inspired souvenirs, candles, food, drinks and other souvenirs fill the streets. Most devotees often walk more than 30 kilometers from the neighboring town of Sabanitas under an intense, humid heat. They dress mainly in purple with many of them using togas that emulate El Nazareno's ropes. Some carry enormous wooden crucifixes; others carry pictures or small images. Pilgrims frequently walk using a particular step that comes from Catholic traditions from Spain: they move three steps forward and two steps backwards. This particular step is used more commonly as people get close to Portobelo in their walking. When entering Portobelo, many devotees stop walking and start crawling on the ground for the last three kilometers of the procession. Pilgrims often travel with friends of family who accompany their manda. These devotional partners often carry smaller shrines housing little statues of El Nazareno, which the devotees stare at as they roll on the ground. Other friends also walk together sweeping the floor in front of the main devotee whose eyes remain fixed in the saint’s eyes. These devotional partners often burn candles letting the hot wax fall on the devotees’ bodies. As we can see, this type of shared pilgrimage mirrors that of El Nazareno and Simon Cirineo in how carrying their crosses as well as their individual and collective sufferings becomes a form of devotional mutuality believers enact through their purging mandas.
Figure 36: Pilgrims arrive at the Church of San Felipe in Portobelo. The devotee standing, wearing purple, stares at El Nazareno out of frame. October 21st, 2014. Photo by César Colón-Montijo

Figure 37: Pilgrims stare at El Nazareno as they arrive at the Church of San Felipe. October 21st, 2014. Photo by César Colón-Montijo.

Once they get to the Church their goal is to get as close as possible to El Nazareno, trying to always stare at his eyes. El Nazareno’s eyes, due to how the statue is built, give the feeling of looking back at one’s eyes. When entering the Church, many devotees are covered by hot wax from candles that their companions burn on their backs and heads throughout the procession. Some people pin small relics called “miracles” on El Nazareno’s robe; these tiny presents are a
way of symbolizing the healing miracle they are either asking for or giving thanks for. After they complete the procession, thousands of devotees leave their purple togas in front of the church. A pile of clothing then forms next to a corner of the square where several barbers give haircuts and shave the beards of devotees who as part of their mandas had let their hair and beards grow for many months.

At 8:00 pm in the night of October 21st, El Nazareno is taken out of the Church by the side door carried by forty men towards a four-hour procession that takes Him around the town and back into the Church by midnight. The procession is led by barefoot penitents who carry wooden crosses while others roll on the ground, many of them having companions burn candles over their backs while crawling. Others carrying a smaller replica of El Nazareno follow these devotees alongside a brass band-type ensemble playing fanfares that mark the rhythm of the procession. Throughout the procession people chant, “¡Viva El Naza!” “¡Viva El Cristo Negro!” Others chant “¡Naza, agua!” or “Naza, water!” asking Him to send rain over the procession to appease the heat.

Figure 38: El Nazareno procession through the streets of Portobelo, Panama. October 21st, 2014. Photo by César Colón-Montijo.
El Nazareno moves amidst His chaotic multitude of worshipers, which marches to the rhythm of the drums and brass instruments. The multitude marches doing the traditional step of three paces forward and two paces backward. Such a rhythmic walk is felt by devotees as giving the impression that El Nazareno is navigating through the streets of Portobelo in a way evocative of the legendary stories about storms that allowed Him to stay in the town during the seventeenth century. The multitude transports El Nazareno every year throughout Portobelo escorting him with candles, chants, flowers, prayers, instruments, and relics in an entanglement of things and people reminiscent of a ship navigating the sea. Devotees claim that it never rains during the procession but that almost every year, as if it was another miracle, it rains as soon as the march ends, making people yell, with joy, “¡Naza, agua!” When it doesn’t rain, people feel strange. At exactly twelve o’clock at night, El Nazareno enters the church while fireworks erupt outside and the town is filled with devotees chanting “¡Viva El Naza! ¡Viva El Cristo Negro!”

The naming of El Nazareno as “El Cristo Negro” (the Black Christ) adds yet another layer to the historical contextualization of this devotion I aim to do in this chapter. It is telling of this history of popular religiosity and illness enmeshed in a larger struggle of empire and
nationalism in Panama that has profound racial implications. Discussing this even if very briefly it necessary in order for us to get a better understanding of how El Nazareno devotion evokes the larger political framework in which it has grown. This idea is twofold. First, it has to do with the role of U.S. soldiers in the naming of El Nazareno as The Black Christ and the resistance of portobeleños to this name. And second, it has to do with the tension between the U.S. empire and Torrijos’ government during the 1970s. Taken together these two stories shed light on the larger politico theological stakes that are implicated in the path that devotees walk to Portobelo every year.

The Path to Portobelo Amidst Panamanian Nationalism and U.S. Imperialism

The intersection between this nationalism and empire became evident through a national modernizing venture that had direct effects on El Nazareno devotion. This project was known as “the colonization of the Atlantic,” a road building and land distribution endeavor that secured land along the Atlantic coast to specific populations from the interior regions of the country who were willing to move there. 191 Through this project the government distributed “7,000 hectares of land among 61,300 families” (LaFeber 1979, as cited in Craft 2015) throughout the Atlantic coast, generating a network of intra-isthmian migration that exposed formerly isolated coastal communities like Portobelo to a sudden population influx. The building of this cross-isthmian

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191 During the Torrijos era this project was portrayed as a social justice endeavor that sought to include formerly annihilated populations. This project was retaken during the government of Martín Torrijos, the son of Omar Torrijos, who was president of Panama from 2004 to 2009. Since then, it has evolved as the extractivist project it always had the potential to be. A recent piece of investigative journalism portrays this project as a highway across indigenous territories that threatens one of the last primary forest reserves in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor whose investors are entangled in the Panama Papers scandal. One pending task of my research for the future is to do a clearer job of framing my study in relation to these environmental matters as part of the histories of illness, empire, and colonialism in which I locate my analysis. See Bilbao (2017): [http://pulitzercenter.shorthand.com/atlanticconquest/index.html#home-1](http://pulitzercenter.shorthand.com/atlanticconquest/index.html#home-1).
network of roads, and the movements of people to the Atlantic coast, gave visibility and more accessibility to the Black Christ Festival during the 1970s.\(^2\) This allowed El Nazareno devotees to have more access to fulfill their vows, which as will be discussed in the next section, often consist of long walking pilgrimages. The impact of such road-building endeavors had another layer of significance: it contributed to the pervading sense at the time amongst Panamanians to counter the U.S. cultural and political influence on their culture.

![Figure 40: U.S. Navy brochure promoting their participation in the Black Christ Festival.](image)

Up until the creation of these roads, the easiest way to get to Portobelo was often by the sea, and frequently El Nazareno devotees would have to use U.S. military ships in order to get there. The occupying forces took advantage of this situation for many years, making conscious efforts to get involved in the pilgrimage through the so-called “good neighbor policy” that the U.S. had long-used to assert their imperial power throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, see the brochure entitled “Portobelo Pilgrimage: A United States Navy Cruise in

\(^{2}\) See Alexander Craft, pages, for a detailed discussion of how portobeleños incorporated these West Indian workers into their traditions and quotidian life
Observance of The Festival of the Black Christ” from 1961 (figures 40 and 41). In this document, the Navy portrays itself as a kind institution enmeshed in Panamanian culture and history; it includes not only the invitation to participate together in the festivities but additionally historical texts in English that reify Portobelo’s mythical history of sorts as an isolated, colonial Afro-Panamanian community.

![Figure 41: Detail of U.S. Navy brochure about their participation in the Black Christ Festival.](image)

The intra-isthmian network of roads built under the Torrijos rule aided devotees in having better access to Portobelo thus providing (literal) paths to the overarching expressions of national pride prevalent during the 1970s in the midst of the negotiations that lead to the 1977 Torrijos-Carter treaties that would eventually transfer the control of the Canal Zone to Panamanian authorities. However, the specter of empire in the history of El Nazareno devotion is not limited to the use of Navy ships to complete the pilgrimage. U.S. soldiers played a central role in naming El Nazareno as “El Cristo Negro” or The Black Christ. A story that is widely known amongst portobeleños recalls a group of drunken U.S. military personnel who while partying in Portobelo after World War II during the annual festivities began yelling, in a mixture of Spanish and English, “Viva El Cristo Negro! Long live the Black Christ!” Portobeleños have historically
rejected calling El Nazareno like that because for most of them this name is racist. This idea needs to be framed in relation to the above discussed racial matters in Panama in which to be called Black is to be identified as Antillean in opposition to a negro colonial, and thus as not belonging to the Panamanian nation. In spite of most portobeleños initially rejecting referring to their beloved El Nazareno as Black Christ, this name has gained currency in recent years as the idea of being Afro-Panamanian has become more popular. I also think that the fact that the chants of “Viva El Cristo Negro!” have been incorporated into the celebrations relates to the other acts of re-appropriation of stigmatized ideas as a means of reaffirming social identities that I discuss throughout this chapter.

Maelo incorporated these chants into the songs he recorded praising El Nazareno. In one of these songs, a bomba tune titled “El Mesías” that is lesser known than “El Nazareno,” Maelo voices lyrics with biblical undertones that describe the pilgrimage by identifying El Nazareno as the path His devotees walk. Maelo sings,

**Yo soy la luz que brilla en la inmensidad**
*I am the light that shines on the immensity*

**soy el sol, no brilla en la oscuridad.**
*I am the sun, that doesn’t shine in darkness.*

**Hubo una vez un rey**
*Once upon a time there was a king*

**de amor y gloria**
*of love and glory*

**con su divina ley**
*That with His divine law*

**quedó en la historia**
*marked history*

**El mundo conquistó**
*He conquered the world*

**con su gran hazaña**
*with his great feat*

**y a otros asombró**
*and marveled others*

**con el sermón de la montaña.**
*with his speech of the mountain*

**Me dijo mi Nazareno.**
*My Nazareno told me*
In the call and respond section, Maelo creates a sort of theology of healing in which he provides the recipe for cleansing and describes the pilgrimage more specifically with several references to October 21st, the date of the annual celebration. Maelo sings,

¿Quién soy yo? ¿Quién será?  
Soy la ruta el camino por donde vas.

Who am I? Who would it be?  
I am the route, the path you walk.

Ha sido una vereda de Panamá  
caminando a Portobelo debe llegar  
esa es la ruta el camino por donde vas  
el Nazareno a cargar.

On October 21st, from Panama  
to Portobelo I should walk  
That’s the route, the path you walk,  
To carry El Nazareno

Haz bien no mires a quien  
si acaso haces mal, acuérdate  
esa es la ruta el camino por donde vas  
pa’ poderte arreglar.

Do good without looking at who  
And if you do wrong, remember,  
That’s the route, the path you walk,  
so you can fix yourself

Que lindo mi Nazareno,  
que lindo mi Nazareno  
El veintiuno de octubre,  
panameños nos veremos y cargaremos.

How pretty my Nazareno  
How pretty my Nazareno  
On October 21st,  
Panamanians we’ll get together to carry Him

Que viva el Cristo Negro de Portobelo!  
el Cristo de los Milagros!  
Y es la ruta del camino por donde va,  
yo te quiero cargar.

Long live the Black Christ of Portobelo!  
The Christ of Miracles!  
And He is the route, the path you walk  
I want to carry you

Que viva el Cristo Negro de Portobelo,  
¡que viva!

Long live the Black Christ of Portobelo  
He lives!
Towards the end of the song, Maelo voices the sense of kinship and intertextuality (see Chapter One) that pervades his repertoire by mixing the naming of friends who used to go with him to Portobelo and chants praising El Nazareno. He also voices El Nazareno offering him the chance of healing. He sings,

Ven caminando para acá
si cargado vas de estar
que esta es la ruta el camino por donde va,
yo te voy a aliviar, mijito.

Come walking here
if you’re overwhelmed
That this is the route, the path you walk
I will heal you, my son

Con la Janet y con el Cholo
caminando voy pa'llla, no ves
esta es la ruta del camino por donde va
y el Nazareno cargar.

With Janet and El Cholo
I’ll walk there, don’t you see
this is the route, the path you walk
to carry El Nazareno

Having discussed the historical and legendary origin stories of El Nazareno, and keeping the lyrics of “El Mesías” in mind, we can now return to 1969 in order to revisit the origin story of Maelo’s journey to Portobelo. The mythical undertones this event has gained amongst maeleros and maelistas contributes to the sense of wizardry with which Maelo is related in Panama, and to the sense of mutuality between him and El Nazareno. My aim in what follows is to narrate this story otherwise but only to re-enchant it through the prism of my archive and in light of the contextual discussion developed so far in this chapter.

*Yo Soy un Malandrito: Performing Wounded Masculinities as a Form of Brujería*

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, Maelo’s devotion allows us to think critically about the performance of masculinity amid the spectacles of brujería and colonial pathologies that give context to my analysis. When reexamined critically through the prism of my archive,
the story about Maelo’s encounter with El Nazareno as told by him both in song and stories, and as told by some of his friends, becomes a tale of wizardry in which illness, healing, friendship, and masculinity are entangled as means of enduring socio-economic abandonment. Maelo was well aware of these histories of abandonment and endurance as it shows in this account of the encounter in 1969, which is one of the better-known memories of this transformative event. He recalls it like this:

The first time I went to Portobelo, I cried my eyes out. I didn’t want to cry in front of all those people, because I am very macho, you know. But the more I wanted to hold back the tears the more they came out. It hurt me to see His face. And right then and there I knew what we did to Him. I cried for about seven minutes. It seemed forever. I thought everybody was looking at me, Ismael Rivera. But no, everybody was crying.

And when I looked at Him (the statue of the Black Christ) again the pain in his face was gone. He seemed to say, everything is all right. It was so real. But six months later, I was deeper into dope than I ever was before, and I couldn’t understand it. It was like like a test. So the next year I went up to Portobelo and six months after that I cleaned up. Some people don’t believe it, but that doesn’t matter because I know what I know. I say thanks to my Christ everyday because I’m still swinging.\footnote{See Carrasquillo (2014, 141).}

Maelo’s recollection of the encounter aligns with the story shared by Sorolo, one of his beloved friends who introduced him to El Nazareno mainly in proposing that it took Maelo two trips to Portobelo for El Nazareno to do its heal him. This idea is echoed in another account that music producer Richie Bonilla shares about his relationship with Maelo as they began working together in the late 1960s; or to be more precise during that gap year between Maelo’s first visits to El Nazareno. Bonilla remembers it like this:

Let me tell you a story about one of my biggest accomplishments. There was a beloved Puerto Rican singer who had a drug problem. It was Ismael Rivera. He would never fulfill his responsibilities, and when he arrived to work he would lose time; he would not work. One day he came to my office and I took him under my wings. Then he told me, “Richie I’m going to Panama to get better because my friends there are taking me to see the Black Christ.” So, he was taken to Panama, and they did many things to him. He was taken to the sea for cleansing baths, and then he carried a big and heavy cross. When he
came back to my office a month later he had no beard, he was completely clean-cut, and he had an aura on him. He seemed immaculate. He told me that when he was on his knees in front of the Black Christ he could see the marks [of drug injection] in his arms disappearing. That day he began fulfilling his job responsibilities and traveled the world again. He was marvelous and he had a great orchestra.194

Bonilla’s account has some magical undertones in how he recalls Maelo’s description of the erasure of the needle marks from his arms and the transformation in El Nazareno’s facial expression. But even more pertinent to my study of wizardry is that Bonilla also remembers that Maelo’s friends did “many things to him” including cleansing baths and other rituals. This detail evokes a story that is mostly overlooked in naturalized narratives about Maelo’s healing.

These cleansing baths, healing food, and natural drinks were given to him by a local curandero (healer) or “brujo” from Portobelo. The miraculous strength of the El Nazareno was thus complemented by the “magical” medicine of a traditional brujo. Throughout my fieldwork in Panama, I tried to confirm the details of this story with Sorolo and Gooding but both of them treat it as a sort of “public secret” (Taussig 1999), which means that they treat it as information that is known amongst Maelo’s friends but that one must be careful with how to articulate it publicly. This story connects this tale of wizardry to the above-discussed spectacles of brujería that have long been used to stigmatize this community as ill and uncivilized, and through that, it

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194 “Pero déjame contarte de uno de mis más grandes logros. Había un artista muy adorado de Puerto Rico, quien tenía un problema con drogas. El era Ismael Rivera. El nunca cumplía con su compromiso y, cuando llegaba, retozaba, no trabajaba. Una vez, vino a mi oficina y yo lo coloqué bajo mis alas. Entonces, él me dijo: “Richie, voy a ir a Panamá a curarme, porque me van a llevar a ver el Cristo Negro allá”. Así que lo llevaron a Panamá y le hicieron muchas cosas. Lo llevaron a bañarse al mar y después a cargar la grande y pesada cruz. Cuando volvió a mi oficina un mes más tarde, estaba sin barba, estaba completamente raso, y tenía un aura sobre sí mismo. Se veía inmaculado. El me dijo que cuando estaba arrodillado frente al Cristo Negro, que él podía ver las marcas en sus brazos desapareciendo. Desde esa fecha, comenzó a cumplir con sus compromisos y a viajar a través del mundo nuevamente. Estaba maravilloso, y tenía una gran aura… tuvo que ser tarde en la década de los sesenta o temprano en la década de los setenta. Luego, lo que le pasó a Ismael fue que no cambió sus amistades y sus amistades fueron los que lo derrumbaron otra vez. Luego, discutimos y no lo volví a representar.” See Bonilla (2002): http://www.herencialatina.com/Richy_Bonilla/Richy_Bonilla.htm.
is telling of the tension that is implicit in the above-discussed idea presented by Gooding that Maelo did not feel judge by Panamanians due to his addictions.

I managed to confirm this story on October 21st, 2014 during the annual festival when I was able to do an informal, not-recorded interview with Lamerito, another of Maelo’s dear friends in Panama. Lamerito was one the newfound friends he met in Panama who took him to Portobelo in 1969 together with Sorolo. Lamerito, who has ignored my many requests for a conversation throughout all these years of fieldwork since 2009, spoke to me for around two minutes right before he entered the Church to praise El Nazareno that day only after Gooding told him to talk to me. I took the risk of asking him about the local brujo who had helped Maelo heal in 1969. Lamerito smiled and confirmed the story without saying much. He confirmed the name of the curandero: Luis “El Mata” Tigres, a campesino from the interior of the country who used to live nearby Portobelo with his four wives, and who prepared detox food, beverages, and baths for Maelo during three days as a means of complementing the miraculous, healing force of El Nazareno. That was my only question and his only answer. For me, the fact that Maelo healed in 1969 through a combination of faith and traditional medicine brought to him by his newfound friends is crucial because it speaks of the intersection between magic, religion, and healing central to the ideas about wizardry at the core of the epithet El Brujo de Borinquen.
Furthermore, I take these stories of Maelo’s healing during his arrival to Portobelo as reminiscent of the origin myths of El Nazareno. Similarly to how El Nazareno arrived to the town in the midst of a storm, Maelo arrived during a tormented period of his life looking for a way out of his addictions. Similarly to how the figure of El Nazareno was broken in pieces in one of the stories but managed to miraculously put himself back together overnight, Maelo saw the immediate effects of His strength as he recalls the miraculous erasure of his injection marks. They both connected with Portobelo in ways that attached them long-term to this place and its people, generating the sense of mutuality I unpack in this chapter. Also, both of them are praised
for carrying the burden of their respective crosses and personal burdens towards crucifixion, and both of them receive help from friends. El Nazareno receives help from his partner, and Maelo from the friends who took him to Portobelo as well as from El Nazareno. This idea entangles Sorolo and Lamerito, for example, with Simon Cirineo and other devotees who share their vows. All of them are thus entangled in an idea I mentioned briefly at the start of this section: that Maelo’s devotion for El Nazareno allows us to think critically about the performance of masculinity in marginalized barrios throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and that this connects with the spectacles of brujería and colonial pathologies that serve as the context for this story.

As mentioned above, questions of gender were implied in Maelo’s testimony about his encounter with El Nazareno when he says he did not want people to see him crying because he is “very macho.” However, this becomes even clearer in another of Maelo’s accounts of this event, which he gave to Venezuelan salsa personality César Miguel Rondón. This testimony is part of one of the better-known Maelo interviews, an often-cited conversation from Rondón’s canonical The Book of Salsa. Most researchers, though, usually cite a fragment of the dialogue in which Maelo speaks about his music in relation to racial politics but most of them tend to overlook the section in which Maelo describes himself as a “malandrito” a word charged with a profound stigma in different Latin American and Caribbean countries. Maelo says:

Look, César, I have to say this and I pray to God this will not damage your program; I am a malandrito, I have always been a malandrito… But when I saw that in Panama, when I saw that Man who stared very fixedly at me, as if He already knew me, I felt something strange, as if I was being shaken from the inside… And I don't know, I changed, in my own way, you know, but I changed…. And I don't care if people believe me or not, but sometimes things like this happen to us in our lives and well … And that's why I sang to El Nazareno, who is a Black Christ, like me, and I sang that song, which is now famous,
but which is nothing more than a song of friendship honoring my people’s and my race’s brotherhood because I can only sing about things I feel and live.\textsuperscript{195}

Overall, this testimony maintains the main description of his encounter with El Nazareno cited above but giving it a more openly racial, gender, and class contextualization. In this version of the story, Maelo reflects much more openly about political stakes of his devotion by describing himself as “malandrito.” He is fully aware of the stigma that haunts both him and other Nazareno devotees as marginalized men from the underclasses who have long been classified as ill and unworthy, and frames his story from a positive, transformative perspective.

Such a framing evokes the work Francisco Ferrándiz-Martín (2003) has done about the mobilization of the term \textit{malandro} in Venezuela.\textsuperscript{196} He proposes that this term is used to describe the “wounded masculinities” enacted by men from marginalized barrios where they are often stigmatized as irremediable thugs through discriminatory considerations of class, gender, and race. As this author discusses, in contexts where youngsters and grown-up men are stigmatized, the act of appropriating and reaffirming the malandro label frequently becomes one of the main forms of masculine performance available to inhabitants of these communities. These men also frequently find refuge in popular religious practices that give them a sense of community and camaraderie.

\textsuperscript{195}“Mira César, yo debo decirlo, yo soy un malandrito y siempre he sido un malandrito, y Dios quiera que no se te dañe el programa… Pero cuando yo vi eso en Panamá, cuando yo vi a ese señor que me miraba bien fijo, como si me conociera, yo sentí algo bien raro, como si me estuvieran sacudiendo por dentro… Y no sé, yo cambié, a mi manera, tú sabes, pero cambié… Y no me interesa si la gente me cree o no, pero a uno, a veces, le pasan estas cosas en la vida y bueno… Y por eso le canté al Nazareno, que es un crísto negro como yo, y le canté esa canción que ahora es famosa y que no es más que un canto a la amistad, a la hermandad de mi gente, mi raza y mi pueblo, porque yo no puedo cantar más que estas cosas que son las que siento y vivo” (Rivera as cited in Rondón 1981, 226).

\textsuperscript{196}I limit this brief discussion of the term \textit{malandro} to the specific work of Ferrándiz-Martín in Venezuela. However, I must highlight the \textit{malandro} and \textit{malandragem} are key concepts in Brazilian culture, and that studies of this term abound. See Candido (1993) for a key study on these matters in Brazil. See also Arroyo 2003.
I must recall at this point two aspects from my research in Venezuela that I discuss in
detail in the Chapter Two: 1) Jesús Hernández, my main interlocutor in Caracas, where
Ferrándiz-Martín conducts his research on wounded masculinities, is known among many other
nicknames as “Malandro Viejo (Elder Malandro)”, and 2) maeleros in Caracas conceive the song
“El Nazareno” as holding the key to Maelo’s transcendence because if tells a story of friendship
and devotion that is also about race and solidarity. Consequently, in identifying as a malandrito
Maelo embodies this notion of a wounded masculinity arising from the tragic pressure placed on
marginalized men. In doing this, he makes himself part of the community of abandoned devotees
who through their mandas and devotion emulate the humane suffering of a Christ they perceive
as a mirror-like representation of themselves enduring their respective and shared existential and
health-related quandaries. The way in which Maelo begins his testimony to Rondón by telling
him he wishes not to do any damage to his program shows that he was very much aware of the
stigma and the moral risks of asserting himself publicly as a malandrito. He, however, proceeds
to announce himself as such and then gives a thorough explanation of his devotion that speaks to
the ways in which devotees of El Nazareno are considered uneducated and incorrigible thugs.

I take his appropriation of the term malandro as evoking the appropriation of the term
brujo used by Panamanians as a moral artifact to identify Maelo. Moreover, I understand these
terms as entangled politico theological concepts: both of them are telling of how Maelo and his
listeners often endure larger macro-political processes in which Black and indigenous men have
been criminalized as unhealthy thugs and vagrants through spectacles of brujería. Malandro and
brujo are thus entangled in Maelo’s music and biography as means of enduring such colonial
fantasies of otherness. This happens through a very specific practice enacted by men during the
annual Black Festival that became central to Maelo’s physical image and style during the 1970.
Recalling Richie Bonilla’s memory of Maelo’s trips to Portobelo, he describes Maelo as returning clean-cut from his trip, a detail that suggests that Maelo, as many other Nazareno devotees cut his afro and beard in front of the Church of San Felipe in Portobelo after completing his manda. He embraced this style in the 1970s both as part of his devotion for El Nazareno and as part of the larger “Black is beautiful ethos” of the time. But as Stephan Palmié discusses, throughout the histories of Afro-Caribbean religions Black men with a gray Afro and beard, have long-been identified as either brujos or criminals (Palmié 2002, 2011). The image of Maelo with his gray Afro and beard is the one mostly used in the memorabilia people create relating him to El Nazareno in posters, paintings, necklaces, t-shirts, caps, and coffee mugs. I find truly compelling that it is such a historically stigmatized representation of Black masculinity that devotees choose to visually represent their cherished sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno, a manifestation of belief and devotion enmeshed in the larger politico theological matters discussed throughout this chapter. I also understand this in relation to the previously discussed theorization by Luis Gooding about how Panamanians used to mimic Maelo’s style in the 1960s; through El Nazareno devotion this mimicking became reciprocated by Maelo when he enacted their shared mutuality through his mandas. In this light, we can now examine how the friendship between Gooding and Sorolo has played a central role in the popularization of Maelo as El Brujo de Borinquen during his afterlife.

The Mediality of the Maelista Friendship Between Gooding and Sorolo

Since the 1980s, Luis Gooding and Pedro ‘Sorolo’ Rodríguez have cultivated a friendship bond that in many ways revolves around their commitment to preserving Maelo’s legacy in Panama. Each of them performs their respective Maelo-related roles in the Panamanian salsa
scene with pride and bravado, reasserting themselves as authorities in these matters: Gooding as the utmost authority on Maelo matters among music connoisseurs, and Sorolo as the friend who holds the secrets of Maelo’s link to El Nazareno and to his Panamanian life more broadly. These two Afro-Panamanian men have cultivated a profound fraternal bond through the “mediality” of their Maelo-centered song labor. Mediality is, according to Jonathan Sterne, “a collectively embodied process of cross-reference” between media that we must unpack in order to understand how these media “represent, figure, and organize broader realities and relationships” (2013, 9). I argue that for us to better understand Maelo’s mutuality with El Nazareno in his afterlife it is necessary to examine how his biography in Panama emerges from the cross-reference stories and media that Sorolo and Gooding cherish about his life and music. Also, we must examine how they have narrated these stories in ways that make their song labor mutually constitutive. In many ways, my dissertation is a product of the mediality of their friendship; or maybe I should say, evoking my use of David Scott’s (2017) theorization about friendship in the dissertation introduction, that this study is the product of the mediality of the intellectual friendship I share with Gooding and Sorolo.

*Luis Gooding: Inventing a Maelo-Centered Panamanian Tradition*

The arch of Luis Gooding’s life could fit an archetypal narrative of an Afro-Panamanian man from the underclasses who achieved social mobility growing up during and after Torrijos era. Gooding’s grandparents are antillanos from Barbados, part of the larger Antillean migration of Canal Workers in the early 20th century, who lived in Chorrillo. His parents, though, raised him in San Miguelito, a community in Panama City that originated as an *ocupación de terrenos* or land occupation by people from the underclasses, and served as a space for social experiments...
of community organizing, which prominently included parish work during the Torrijos period.\textsuperscript{197} This is not the space for a detailed discussion of the history of San Miguelito, but I must at least mention it is intriguing that a community that served as an experimental ground for political and theological organizing is the same community in which Gooding claims he became enchanted by Maelo’s pregón de barrio and its inhabitants those who, according to Gooding, copied Maelo’s attitude of malandro. Continuing with Gooding’s life, he went to college to become an electronic engineer technician due to Torrijos’s populist policies that allowed social mobility to many Afro-Panamanians. Self-described as a Panamanian nationalist, he voted in favor of the Torrijos-Carter treaties from 1977 that seek to free Panama from the U.S. military presence by 1999. Gooding worked in the U.S. military zone in Panama after the U.S. invasion of 1989. In 1999, he lost his job in the military zone when the U.S. dismantled its military bases as a result of the Torrijos-Carter treaties. Gooding has worked in the Canal Zone as an engineer since 2000 when Panama took control of the Canal.

Gooding is a connoisseur of Latin and Caribbean popular music in general, and he has done radio and T.V. programs about iconic performers such as Benny Moré and Héctor Lavoe, among many others. Nevertheless, his main interest is Maelo. He prides himself of having given memorabilia to Maelo’s family for the precarious collection at the “Fundación Ismael Rivera (Ismael Rivera Foundation)” that some of them struggle to maintain in what was the family home in Villa Palmeras, Santurce in Puerto Rico. Gooding’s professional life has been marked by the labor he creates as a music collector. He began working in radio amidst the Noriega regime during the 1980s, and has been doing radio and T.V. documentaries about popular music thereafter. He is widely known in the Panamanian salsa scene as “El Capitán (The Captain)”

\textsuperscript{197} See Bravo 1966 and Priestly 1986 for historical discussions about political and religious organization in San Miguelito.
because his most well-known radio show, which he produced for several broadcasting stations throughout the years, was named *El Tren de la Salsa* (The Salsa Train). In recent years, Gooding has been devoted to launching a new multi-media platform under the name *El Tren de la Salsa Online* (The Online Salsa Train). This new online space has allowed Gooding to combine the multifaceted media work he has been doing for more than three decades now.

The story of how Gooding formally began documenting Maelo’s legacy in Panama is telling of the larger reverential tone that pervades the majority of the stories I include in this ethnographic biography of Maelo. In 1980, Gooding started attending El Nazareno festival with the parallel intent of fulfilling his devotion for the Black Christ and of conducting interviews with Maelo’s closest friends during the festivities. 1980 was the final year Maelo attended the festival, and Gooding had the opportunity to do an interview with Maelo together with a friend music collector. Instead of him doing the interview, Gooding allowed his colleague Manuel “Mañito” Robles to interview Maelo. In the interview, he remembers Maelo spoke about the healing he found through El Nazareno for his heroin addiction; a healing that allowed him, (Gooding tells me that Maelo told Robles), to stop doing intravenous heroin injection, which is what really affected him. According to Gooding, a copy of this interview exists and is placed somewhere in the boxes in the massive sonic archive he has in his house in San Miguelito. Since we first met in 2013, Gooding has mentioned the existence of this tape several times but has either never managed to found it, or maybe he has never been willing to share it due to the delicate matters Maelo voices in the interview.

The main contributions of Gooding’s song labor about Maelo can be described, for the sake of space and time in this chapter, as twofold. First, he invented the tradition that is now pretty much fixed on Panamanian radio, of playing only Maelo’s music during the days leading
up to the annual Black Christ festival on October 21st. Second, through his documentaries he mapped the friendships Maelo cultivated in Panama and that he voices in different songs, even making some of these friends into public figures of sorts whose lives are now permanently linked to Maelo’s life. This is predominantly the case with Sorolo.

Figure 43: Sorolo and Goodung Sorolo and Gooding at Gooding’s archive/radio booth. Gooding’s annual radio special for the anniversary of Maelo’s death, May 13th, 2015. Photo provided by Luis Gooding.

During the 1980s, Gooding started producing radio shows honoring Maelo during the week before the Black Christ Festival; productions he would eventually name “El Especial de Maelo (The Maelo Special),” and contributed strongly to the sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno that emerged in his afterlife after 1987. Other radio stations followed Gooding’s steps also producing Maelo-centered specials on the week of October 21st. He is particularly proud of a radio special he produced in 1988, one year after Maelo’s death, when he played Maelo’s music non-stop from 6:00 pm to 10:00 am the next day without, he claims, repeating a single song. He proudly says that this program became a record in Panamanian radio that no one has ever matched or broken. In his programs, Gooding would insert the interviews he recorded with Maelo’s friends as well as fragments of the interview that his friend recorded with Maelo in 1980 and fragments of other Maelo interviews. He would receive live phone calls from Maelo’s
fans and friends. He produced these programs until the 1990s for different local radio stations such as Estereo Azul, Universal Estereo, and FM 99, which is to him the best station he worked in. Gooding eventually added a second annual radio special programming for the day of Maelo’s death on May 13th, which he still produces on his web radio station El Tren de la Salsa Online.

In 1996, Gooding began producing a “salsa special” for a catholic broadcasting station in Panama, Channel 5, on New Years Eve. In collaboration with his friend and radio personality Rolando Vidal, he produced a televised version of his program El Tren de la Salsa for this station that gave him two hours of free TV space between 10:00 pm and 12:00 am on such an important date as December 31st. The first one was composed of different salsa clips united by a voice over that introduced each clip putting the performer and song in context using a voice over recorded by his dear friend Rolando Vidal. He describes this contextualizing of the music as a “culturally” mode of presenting salsa by talking about “the people, where the music came from, its roots and history” (Gooding 2014). The program was a success amongst the audience, and the Channel 5 chief producer Vilma Barbara gave them the chance to produce a monthly special. For the second episode Gooding remembers that he told them, “Let’s do one about Ismael Rivera, which is truly my thing” (Gooding 2014).

Gooding never studied journalism, neither was he ever formally trained to produced radio or TV. He is an autodidact in these tasks who has managed to create a repertoire of both radio and TV programs that have circulated widely in Panama as well as in a transnational network of salsa music collectors who exchange videos and audio recordings. The production of Maelo’s

198 “Culturalmente… los pueblos, por lo menos hablando de donde vino las raíces, la historia…”

199 “Vamos a hacer un especial de Ismael Rivera, que eso es lo mío.”

200 See Waxer (2002) for a study of music collectors in Cali, Colombia. I discuss her work in the dissertation introduction.
TV special sheds some light about the mediality of his song labor. It was produced using the available technology at the time: ¾ beta machine with an old computer system to put the titles on the screen. For creating the script, Gooding copied the format from another writer at Channel 5. He created the story based mainly on the book titled *Sonero Mayor* published in 1993 by Mexican ethnomusicologist Rafael Figueroa Hernández, and using any other credible source he could find. He structured the TV special as a play and narrated it through a quite melodramatic tone that seeks to emulate the trajectory of Maelo’s legacy. Perhaps more vitally for my argument, through these programs Gooding provided space for Maelo’s friends to appear in media, by tracing kindred bonds Maelo cultivated in Panama. More specifically, he made Sorolo into a public figure of sorts whose life have subsequently been linked to Maelo.201

*Pedro ‘Sorolo’ Rodríguez: Embodying Friendship and Devotion*

Sorolo has become a public figure of sorts whose life is entangled with Maelo’s life. I can give testament of this sense of mutuality between these friends through a set of very short, mundane anecdotes: a) a vast amount of taxi drivers in Panama City know who Sorolo is, know about his connection to Maelo, and know immediately where to take you when you enter say, “take me to Sorolo’s restaurant,” b) I have seen people greet Sorolo in supermarkets and on the streets by saying things like “Epa, Sorolo, El Brujo,” while making a reverential gesture, and 3) while accompanying Sorolo to interviews about Maelo during the week before the Black Christ festival, he has made the radio and T.V. journalist interview me as a Maelo expert studying at

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201 I only mention Rosa Bonilla here and early in the chapter when referencing Maelo’s bust. She is a key person, a beloved friend of Maelo in Panama. Their connection was more related to Maelo’s experiences in Chorrillo, which although are entangled with his experiences in Portobelo could not be fitted into this chapter. Writing in detail about Chorrillo and Rosa Bonilla is a pending task of mine that I will pursue for my book project.
Columbia University, a place where he actually worked as a security officer during the 1970s when he moved to New York to live with Maelo.

As mentioned earlier in his chapter, Sorolo was one of the friends who introduced Maelo to El Nazareno in 1969. The story of how they met adds layers of significance to the previously examined origin stories about Maelo’s encounter with El Nazareno. Long story short, Sorolo remembers that he received a calling from El Nazareno—of whom his family had been devotees for decades—in one of Maelo’s shows during the carnivals in 1969. Sorolo was a fan watching his favorite singer perform live and very ill due to his addiction when El Nazareno spoke to him, and ask him to take Maelo to Portobelo in order to help him heal. Sorolo says that he somehow ended up in the backstage of the concert and was able to connect with Maelo who immediately upon seeing him decided to leave his group of friends and go talk to Sorolo. That night he had to help Maelo get his cure to alleviate the physical suffering of needing to consume heroin before taking him to Portobelo in the next couple of days. Sorolo was present thus during the encounter that gave origin to the mythical sense of wizardry I analyze throughout this chapter.

![Figure 44: Sorolo with Maelo’s mother, Doña Margot, in Santurce, Puerto Rico. Screenshot taken from Gooding’s documentary as recently on the Facebook page of his online radio station El Tren de la Salsa Online.](image)
Sorolo has a set of anecdotes about Maelo he repeats in interviews and conversations. It is really hard to make him move away from these stories and share additional tales about their friendship. In all these years, I have managed to ‘interview’ Sorolo only a couple times, and both times the conversation was marked by ‘off the record’ information; by compromising anecdotes he worries would affect Maelo’s legacy. These anecdotes are often related to drug consumption. Out of all the anecdotes Sorolo cherishes, there is one that speaks directly to my argument in this chapter about how their friendship is based on a sense of mutuality that mirrors the link between Maelo and El Nazareno. Sorolo always tells it with a smile, and always ends up laughing. It was the early 1970s, short after Maelo had been introduced to El Nazareno, Maelo and Sorolo were hanging out in a corner of Chorrillo when an officer of the Panamanian military police asked them for their documents, which they did not have with them. When Maelo told the officer that he was Ismael Rivera, the officer got pissed and told Maelo, “Ya tú quisieras ser Ismael Rivera! (You wish you were Ismael Rivera!).” Insulted, thinking that Maelo was lying to him to avoid presenting documents, the officer proceeded to arrest both Sorolo and Maelo. However, when the three of them entered the military headquarters, Sorolo remembers, a sergeant who saw them coming in came immediately to them and ask: “Don Ismael, qué usted hace aquí? (Mr. Ismael, what are you doing here?)” Upon hearing their story of the arrest, the sergeant apologized to Maelo, and ordered the officer who had arrested them to free them immediately and take them back to the corner where he found them (Rodríguez 2014).

Their friendship, nonetheless, moved further through the transnational musical geography I map in this dissertation. In the early 1970s, Sorolo migrated to the U.S. with the specific intent of living there with Maelo. He went all the way through Central America, crossed the Mexico-U.S. border, got to California, and took a bus from San Francisco to New York only so he could
meet with his beloved friend. According to Sorolo he arrived as a surprise, knock on Maelo’s door and spoke with his partner at the time that directed him towards a street corner where Maelo was hanging out with some friends. They finally got together, Maelo got him a gig as his band boy, and their friendship took over. Since Sorolo did not have legal papers to be in the U.S. for many years, he could not make the annual pilgrimage to praise El Nazareno so Maelo would light a candle for him in Portobelo. When he normalized his residence status he would make the trip to Portobelo yearly (and got the security officer job at Columbia University), which is when him and Gooding met as Gooding was a young maelista starting to document Maelo’s legacy in Panama. Sorolo’s relation with Maelo became distant during Maelo’s late period when he relapsed into his addiction and lost his voice; struggles that Sorolo relates to the fact that Maelo stopped visiting El Nazareno for the annual pilgrimage.

Sorolo stayed in the U.S, living mainly in New York but also in California and Florida, until the 1990s when after the U.S. invasion he returned to Panama with the intent of opening a restaurant in his home neighborhood of Chorrillo. This is when he founded La Esquina de Maelo amidst the reconstruction of this community, which had been bombed down during the invasion. This was a period of harsh economic and political struggles in Panama that coincided with the beginning of Gooding’s T.V. specials. Their Maelo-centered bond was solidified as both of them struggled with the post-invasion economic and social upheaval: Sorolo trying to established his restaurant upon his return to Chorrillo and Gooding facing the loss of his job when the U.S. dismantled their military bases. Their Maelo-centered friendship and song labor persists as we can see in figure 43 of Gooding and Sorolo during their annual radio celebration of Maelo’s life for the anniversary of his death.
Sorolo embodies his friendship with Maelo on a daily basis, but this becomes even more overt during the Black Christ Festival. He always locates a camping tent on the left side of the Church where he sleeps during the festivities. This is a vital component of his manda: every year his brother Luis, his compadre José, and other friends from Chorrillo help him put together the tent. He sleeps either inside the tent or in a car parked nearby. During the day, he sits nearby and talks to friends, greeting devotees, and giving interviews to multiple media outlets that come to him for his now traditional anecdotes about Maelo. Every year Sorolo has his afro and beard cut by the barbers in front of the Church of San Felipe, takes a shower afterwards, and returns to his spot on the side of the Church to keep greeting devotees and hanging out with friends. Many of the devotees who pass by to greet Sorolo do it by saying expressions that almost always include mentioning Maelo as El Brujo while doing some sort of reverential gesture.

For example, on October 21st, 2014 a group of friends from Chorrillo who live in exile in the U.S. returned, as they do year after year, to Portobelo to give thanks. One of the first things they did after greeting El Nazareno was to walk straight out of the Church towards the lateral part of the building where Sorolo always hangs out (figures 46 and 47).
This group of friends that came to greet Sorolo near noon on October 21\textsuperscript{st}, 2014 was all dressed in yellow t-shirts with the image of El Nazareno in the front and the image of Maelo in the back. They also wore caps that had Maelo and El Nazareno side-by-side. In both images, Maelo appears with his gray afro and beard, and is identified as El Brujo. As discussed above, this is the image of Maelo that predominates the memorabilia sold during the festivities that features him and El Nazareno, and it is the image immortalize in the Maelo bust located in one of the town’s square. This sculpture furthers inscribes the mediality of Sorolo’s friendship with Maelo in that it features their faces together with that of Rosa Bonilla, another beloved friend of Maelo from Chorrillo, and a group of children.
The plaque that accompanies the sculpture, moreover, reasserts the idea central to my argument throughout this dissertation: that Maelo’s death was the event that transformed him into a sonorous specter that haunts the quotidian lives of maeleros and maelistas (see figure 48). It identifies Maelo as the “greatest performer of Caribbean popular song,” and names him El Sonero Mayor, not as El Brujo de Borinquen, thus entangling these nicknames within the histories of wizardry related in this chapter. As an offering from Maelo’s fans in Portobelo, the plaque that accompanies this bust, also restates Maelo’s immortality in how it inscribes the dates of his birth and death: it shows his birthdate of October 5th, 1931 but avoids giving a date to his death, substituting it, with a pentagram that suggests Maelo’s otherworldly spectral presence, by implying he is alive in his music. For me, finally, this sculpture reaffirms Maelo’s posthumous significance as a Black Nazarene of sorts, as an iconic singer and devotee of El Nazareno whose life and myth endure in his afterlife in counterpoint with that his beloved Black Christ.

**Conclusion**

My aim throughout this chapter has been to frame the sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno emerging during Maelo’s afterlife in relation to the larger context of empire,
colonialism, and illness in which their shared devotion has arisen. I argue that Maelo is seen as a Black Nazarene of sorts whose existential quandaries due to his heroin addiction parallels the suffering of Christ walking towards crucifixion, and that El Nazareno devotees mimic their shared anguish through the painful rituals they perform as part of their annual pilgrimage to Portobelo. Furthermore, I propose that this sense of mutuality based upon shared conditions of life amidst socio-economic abandonment is telling of larger histories of religion in the Caribbean and Latin America; histories in which ideas about brujería have served both as a tool to marginalize indigenous and Black peoples and as a tool appropriated by these groups to reassert their social identities. Thus, a central objective of this chapter has been to situate the epithet El Brujo de Borinquen, given to Maelo by Panamanians, as being imbricated in these spectacles of brujería. Ultimately, my analysis in this chapter emerges from my critical engagement with the song labor produced in Panama by Luis Gooding and Pedro ‘Sorolo’ Rodríguez, two maelistas with whom I have maintained an intellectual exchange since 2013 and 2009 respectively. Throughout, my aim has been to further theorize the politico theological stakes of Maelo’s music and life that are key central to the ethnographic biography I articulate in this dissertation.
Conclusion

One of the main problems I confront throughout this dissertation is the need to articulate in my writing matters that are often hard to voice publicly. A sense of secrecy and concealment has pervaded my fieldwork since day one. For many of my interlocutors, their painful and beloved memories of Maelo are stories to be shared privately rather than publicly. Salseros (salsa fans and musicians) would at times question the need to include his illness and incarceration or other matters that could “damage” his legacy. Therefore, a central question for me has been how to write critically in ways that acknowledge the stigma these histories imply. I have taken great care to articulate such “unspeakable” things in ways that do justice to Maelo’s aura and attend to the sense of concealment that is common among my interlocutors.

In this dissertation, I mainly use notions of spectrality, haunting, and secrecy in order to narrate aspects of Maelo’s biography and repertoire that some would deem as unspeakable. I claim that such unspeakable, proverbial things are key to the sense of mutuality that maeleros and maelistas articulate through their Maelo-centered song labor. To recall my theorization of song labor in Chapter One, I conceptualize a threefold mode of affective labor: listening to popular songs as stories, creating and retelling stories that emerge from popular songs, and understanding stories and the acts of telling and listening to them as relational media. Maeleros and maelistas recognize themselves in Maelo’s songs and biography. They produce various ways of listening to, speaking of, and relating to him and his music such as documentaries, radio shows, poems, t-shirts, memes, essays, letters, songs, YouTube videos, paintings, interviews, and concerts. These multi-media modes of song labor allow the shaping and reshaping of Maelo’s salsa and biography. They also allow the formation of the types of intellectual friendships I study. My work traces these friendships paying attention to the creative song labor Maelo's fans
produce as a means of celebrating his presence in their day-to-day lives. One of the aims of my inquiry is the mapping of this Maelo-centered, multi-sited intellectual, affective, and devotional community.

Timothy Brennan’s (2008) notion of “secular devotion” is a staple concept to this ethnographic biography. I build on his idea that there is a sense of religiosity and sacredness inherent to Afro-descendant music even when listeners don’t necessarily relate to it consciously, in order to theorize the sense of community between maeleros and maelistas as a devotional sense of kinship. I take the hagiographical and mythical overtones that characterize many of the stories I weave together as profoundly grounded on the secular devotion Maelo inspires. He has become a spectral figure who has a sense of sacredness among his followers. This is vital to the affective force Maelo has gained in his afterlife and to the politico theological stakes of my argument.

The concept of political theology I use throughout this study as a theorization tool, evokes the crossing of the religious and the political in both Maelo's music and in the song labor my interlocutors create. It comes from an understanding of the religious as linked to the various ways in which Maelo mediates the crossing of the sacred and the profane through his repertoire by voicing multiple expressions from diverse Black Atlantic religions (Matory 2005). I argue that such mediations of the sacred need to be framed in relation to a much broader history of the political definition of life in Latin America and the Caribbean. Amidst these histories, voice has served as both a means of casting Black and indigenous groups as worthless of citizenship and a means for these groups to endure such histories of marginalization (Ochoa Gautier 2014). This is central to one of my main theses: that Maelo’s vocal illness, addiction, and incarceration—his wounded masculinity—is perceived by maeleros and maelistas as a shared experience of socio-
political and economic abandonment. I claim that the song labor that maeleros and maelistas produce enacts a political theology that dramatizes the contemporary stakes in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Panama of larger biopolitical histories in which illness has long-been connected to delinquency as tools of power used to police and discipline modern citizen bodies (Ramos 1994). Ultimately, I propose that people often use secrecy as a means of narrating well-known, endured experiences they find hard to enunciate freely in their day-to-day lives (Taussig 1999; Arroyo 2013). This secrecy creates a sense of the proverbial (Adéèkó 1998), which has sacred connotations that are key to the spectral becoming of Maelo’s voice as well as to the secular devotion he inspires in his afterlife.

Throughout this ethnographic biography, I articulate this idea using a narrative arch that begins and ends with analyses of how Maelo’s most iconic nicknames speak about the sense of secular devotion maeleros and maelistas share with him. Beginning with the storied theorizations some of my interlocutors create about Maelo’s alchemy as a pioneering sonero who changed the art of soneo, Chapters One and Chapter Four study, respectively, the meaningfulness of the terms El Sonero Mayor and El Brujo de Borinquen as iconic of Maelo. The former voices my idea that Maelo’s songs and soneos have become media of mutuality that inscribe the aural world of his neighborhood of Santurce, Puerto Rico as a transnational musical geography. The latter voices the ways in which the aural world Maelo inscribes in his soneos has been re-made in Panama into a story about the criminalization of Black men as ill, backward, and dangerous brujos and malandros. Taken through the lenses of my archive, the epithets El Sonero Mayor and El Brujo de Borinquen become enmeshed as politico theological concepts. Framed as such, these iconic Maelo nicknames resonate with my analysis in Chapter Two about the work macropanas do in Venezuela with the expression ecuajei, another word that has become iconic of Maelo in his
afterlife. Macropanas use ecuajei creatively in conversations, essays, posters, and paintings. In doing this, they transform a phrase with diverse sacred significance into a key expression of their devotional sense of kinship. Through their particularly politicized reinterpretations of Maelo’s music they embed him within the political theology of chavismo. Throughout, mine is a study about how Maelo in his devotional afterlife has been enmeshed within a spectral pantheon that includes salsa icons such as Celia Cruz, Marvin Santiago, Cheo Feliciano, Tite Curet Alsonso, and Rafael Cortijo; political icons such as, Simón Bolívar, Hugo Chávez, Omar Torrijos, Ernesto “Che” Guevara; and sacred entities such as Oyá and El Nazareno.

Perhaps the utmost manifestation of the secular devotion that grounds Maelo’s aura is that my interlocutors coincide in understanding the song “El Nazareno” as the tune that holds the key to Maelo’s transcendence. I propose in Chapter Four that the sense of mutuality between Maelo and El Nazareno arising during Maelo’s afterlife is based on how their devotees perceive both of them as relatable sacred icons. Their devotees observe them as sharing the weight of tormented suffering that mirrors their own quandaries. This occurs because both Maelo and El Nazareno embody mythical stories of illness, healing, and devotion in which their devotees can identify themselves. In this light, I claim that Maelo has become a Black Nazarene of sorts, a popular performer who has gained a sense of sacredness through the mutuality he shares with El Nazareno as devotional icons with whom people relate as one of their own.

It took me twelve years of research and several years of dissertation writing, struggling with how to narrate a life that is pervaded by unspeakable matters to finally articulate this idea that Maelo is perceived as a Black Nazarene whose stories of illness and healing are central to the secular devotion he inspires. As I conclude this dissertation, I must confess that my struggle to articulate these ideas comes not only from the sense of concealment that pervades many of the
stories I collect but also from the fact that, as a maelero and researcher, I have walked a fine line between my own Maelo fandom and scholarship. Consequently, using the notions of spectrality, haunting, secrecy, and secular devotion as my main theoretical tools and narrating this biography in counterpoint with my interlocutors’ song labor, have been my ways of dealing with the public secret. I have done this consciously trying to encounter ways of narrating the unspeakable while doing justice to it and re-enchanting it through the prism of my ethnographic archive.
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