Sounds that Fall Through the Cracks, and Other Silences and Acts of Love: Decoloniality and Anticolonialism in Puerto Rican *Nueva Canción* and *Chanson Québécoise*

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ABSTRACT

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Mario R. Cancel-Bigay

_Sounds that Fall Through the Cracks, and Other Silences and Acts of Love_ tells the story of a dozen cosmopolitan socially aware singer-songwriters, poets and musicians of different racial, ethnic and national backgrounds who developed their political consciousness by thinking within/through the colonial problematic of Québec or Puerto Rico in the 1960s and 1970s. Five interrelated claims give coherence to this work: a) grasping the decolonial import of socially aware repertoires needs to attend to the meeting point among sound, music, lyrical content, and the interlocutor’s perspective on the musical object; b) understanding the historical contexts which shaped each interlocutor’s life is necessary to fully comprehend her political-aesthetic choices; c) when incorporating the interlocutor’s way of imagining the past one must pay attention to the ways in which that past has been historicized d) reflecting on how the other is inscribed in sound and word needs to account for how that other envisions herself and; e) these critical assessments must be developed “theorizing with your interlocutor” in a relentless back and forth informed by love and friendship that takes seriously the critical import of the interlocutor and considers his needs and desires. Combined, these claims are conducive to a critical analysis that is historically rigorous, ethical and fair to the interlocutor and the other to the extent that the unavoidable limitations of the researcher allows for.

By departing from spaces where the eye meets the ear, logos and phono entwine, the historical context shapes the musical object and vice versa, fieldwork and life are fused, and the
interlocutor is treated not only as a producer of culture but as a thinker in her own right, I problematize four major categories: Puerto Rican *nueva canción* (PRNC), *chanson québécoise* (CQ), the related anticolonial narratives that frame these musics, and the category “the decolonial.” Regarding the latter, I pay careful attention to the relationship between bodies of knowledge around the colonial, such as postcolonial, Latin American decolonial, settler colonial and anticolonial studies.

Edouard Glissant has argued that “generalization” is one of the manifestations of a “totalitarian root” because “from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by exporting as a model” (2010 [1990]: 20). Inspired in part by the Martiniquais philosopher and poet, my overall argument is that decolonizing knowledge must involve a collective praxis of “theorizing with your interlocutor” that in addition to assessing how colonial logics are reproduced and proposing ways to contest them, must challenge the “totalitarian” and individualist “root” of academic discourse. In order to develop this collective praxis, I walk hand in hand with my interlocutors/friends Américo Boschetti, Frank Ferrer, Bernardo Palombo, Jesús Papoleto Meléndez, Hilcia Montañez, Oscar Pardo, Sandra María Esteves, Suni Paz, Sylvain Leroux, Marie-Claire Séguin, Rouè Doudou Boicel, Lise Vachon and Georges Rodriguez, and other decolonial and anticolonial thinkers.
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To Eleguá.

To the women who I love
and whose love
made this possible:

my mother
my wife
my daughter
Introduction

Sounds that Fall Through the Cracks, and Other Silences and Acts of Love: Decoloniality and Anticolonialism in Puerto Rican Nueva Canción and Chanson Québécoise tells the story of a dozen cosmopolitan socially aware singer-songwriters, poets and musicians of different racial, ethnic and national backgrounds who developed their political consciousness by thinking within/through the colonial problematic of Québec or Puerto Rico in the 1960s and 1970s. Five interrelated claims give coherence to this work: a) grasping the decolonial import of socially aware repertoires needs to attend to the meeting point among sound, music, lyrical content, and the interlocutor’s perspective on the musical object; b) understanding the historical contexts which shaped each interlocutor’s life is necessary to fully comprehend her political-aesthetic choices; c) when incorporating the interlocutor’s way of imagining the past one must pay attention to the ways in which that past has been historicized d) reflecting on how the other is inscribed in sound and word needs to account for how that other envisions herself and; e) these critical assessments must be developed “theorizing with your interlocutor” in a relentless back and forth informed by love and friendship that takes seriously the critical import of the interlocutor and considers his needs and desires. Combined, these claims are conducive to a critical analysis that is historically rigorous, ethical and fair to the interlocutor and the other to the extent that the unavoidable limitations of the researcher allows for.

By departing from spaces where the eye meets the ear, logos and phono entwine, the historical context shapes the musical object and vice versa, fieldwork and life are fused, and the interlocutor is treated not only as a producer of culture but as a thinker in her own right, I problematize four major categories: Puerto Rican nueva canción (PRNC), chanson québécoise (CQ), the related anticolonial narratives that frame these musics, and the category “the
decolonial.” Regarding the latter, I pay careful attention to the relationship between bodies of knowledge around the colonial, such as postcolonial, Latin American decolonial, settler colonial and anticolonial studies.

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“Theorizing with your interlocutor” does not only mean negotiating the object of analysis, keywords, the bibliography but writing together (see chapter two, and seven through ten). It also means blurring the dichotomy informant/friend and fieldwork/life, and building knowledge together from a shared space. This shared space from which one theorizes together, in turn, is a mix of consensus and divergence, peace and tension, comfort and unease, understanding and frustration, joy and sadness, fulfilled and unfulfilled expectations. Because I am theorizing with my interlocutors, the reader will be ill-advised to find one overarching theoretician who holds this project together. If my interlocutors oppose neat categorizations and univocality; if they are different on account of their idiosyncratic way of thinking, their backgrounds, and their intellectual interests; if they exceed social and aesthetic expectations in many ways; and if I have made it a point to diffuse the theoretical powers with which I have been invested among them, why would I give this power back to any given theoretician however insightful? There are many scholars who have been invited to this tertulia (gathering), but it is a
collective voice which this project aims to sound out. In this regard, I am inspired by myriad anthropologists whose works are characterized by a theoretical multivocality that listens to its interlocutors (see Ahmed 2006; Navarro-Yashin 2012; Schein 2000; Stevenson 2014).

Following in the footsteps of various decolonial thinkers, I also seek to decolonize knowledge by interrogating the scientific method by accounting for the acts of “randomness” and luck that have informed my fieldwork (see chapter nine) and developing a writing strategy that alternates between the “expected” academic voice of objective and detached analysis and a more intimate voice immersed in poeticity (see Tuhiwai Smith 2012; Anzaldúa 1987; Glissant 2010 [1990]; Lorde 2017 [1977]; Dubois 2008 [1903]; Wynn 2015).

Before I unpack these claims, I must introduce my interlocutors, and specify how it is that they relate to PRNC and CQ.

While some of my interlocutors are recognized by the extant literature as having contributed to these musics, several are not. Regarding CQ, only two of them, singer-songwriters Marie-Claire Séguiin (chapter seven) and Lise Vachon¹ (chapter two), are discussed in this literature. Doudou Boicel and Georges Rodriguez, Black migrants to Québec from French Guiana and Haiti, respectively (see chapters one and three), and Québécois Sylvain Leroux (see chapter nine) are not a part of this corpus. Furthermore, the cultural objects that I discuss regarding all three, are books, instrumental pieces or their speech about music (Feld 1982; Fox 2004), whereas CQ literature’s key object of analysis tends to be song, and its lyrical content. Still, they are connected to these musics in significant ways. Regarding PRNC, two of my interlocutors are Jesús Papoleto Meléndez and Sandra María Esteves. These Nuyorican/Puerto Rican poets, foundational figures of the Nuyorican Poet’s Movement along with Pedro Pietri and

¹ Previously known as Lise Cousineau.
Miguel Algarín, exceed PRNC. But they were part of El Grupo, a New York City-based band of Puerto Rican-Argentinian *nueva canción*, described as the cultural arm of the pro-independence Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP). El Grupo included Puerto Ricans from the Island, such as Hilcia Montañez and José Valdés, and the Argentinians Bernardo Palombo, Oscar Pardo and Suni Paz2 (see chapters four, five and six). Moreover, while I engaged in fieldwork with Frank Ferrer (see chapter ten) and Américo Boschetti (see chapter eight), both of whom are regularly mentioned in PRNC studies, my approach is rather unconventional. My chapter on Boschetti focuses largely on his home recordings and the impact that his released songs have had in my life, though I also discuss his lifetime commitment to Puerto Rico’s decolonization and socialism throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. My chapter on Ferrer centers around our co-composing songs together in New York City during the past four years, though, as with Boschetti, I highlight Ferrer’s own contributions to Puerto Rican musical culture and anticolonialism during the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, only my analysis of “¡Coño, despierta boricua!” popularized by Andrés Jiménez “El Jíbaro” echoes somewhat the expectations of PRNC scholarship3 (see chapter six). Still, as with CQ studies, my emphasis on sound, music, and speech about music, runs counter to PRNC studies’ focus on lyrical analysis.

Though several of my interlocutors and objects of analysis lie beyond the purview of CQ and PRNC studies, they are nevertheless in conversation with these musics and their underlying anticolonial discourses. By listening to them with CQ and PRNC I aim at unsettling how we understand these musics and resistance writ large in the Québec and Puerto Rico of the 1960s and 1970s. By including Black migrants, in the case of Québec, and non-Puerto Ricans and

2 I only met with Suni Paz once briefly when she was passing through NYC. Regarding PRNC singer-songwriter José Valdés, he unfortunately passed away before I began my research.
3 See Ochoa (1996) for a somewhat similar approach to Colombian *nueva canción*. 
Nuyoricans in the case of Puerto Rico, and underlining diasporic experiences in both cases, I am also disturbing the nationalizing tendencies of both PRNC and CQ studies. As I show, it is not the history of Québécois and Puerto Rican anticolonialism which is overdetermined by nationalism, it is the discourses about these histories which are. Puerto Rican and Québécois struggles for decolonization and social justice have always been multiethnic and global in scope. Acknowledging this is important insofar as it shows that despite an “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 2004: 17) that is inexorably entwined with colonial and settler colonial logics, cross-cultural acts of solidarity were and are possible.

I do not idealize these cross-cultural encounters and collaborations, though. I explore as well their shortcomings, contradictions and tensions. I know that some of my interlocutors felt a certain unease regarding some of my critical assessments. But if we cannot assess our limitations—mine included—how can we possibly begin to remedy the social injustices that are generated by a global regime of epistemological and material violence that is still with us? There is much to be commended in my interlocutors’ lives and their works. But the lessons need to be drawn from what they got right, what they got wrong and what lies in a gray space that is neither one or the other. By revisiting some of my interlocutors’ legacies with an open-ended creative mind, a politics of caring, and an ear willing to listen to the sounds that fall through the cracks, I hope to make audible, what Esteves might call the many “acts of love” that they “committed” for one another, their relatives, their communities, their homelands and myself and my family.

Overall, I call for what Mohammed Abed al-Jabri described as an “epistemological break”: for a change in the ways in which we treat knowledge and “the mental tools utilized; the problematics dictated by this activity and the cognitive field where it becomes organized” (1999: 23).
What are PRNC and CQ, and how can we rethink their political import raising the volume to some of the “silences of the past” (Trouillot 1995)? What kinds of “musicking” (Small 1998) did my interlocutors engage in, that is, how did their interactions with others (family members, friends, historical figures, ethnic others, and partially imagined others or people whom they know about but do not know personally) inform their works? How did my interlocutors inscribe in sound their decolonial and anticolonial critiques while nevertheless reproducing tropes of coloniality? What do I mean by “the decolonial,” anticolonialism and coloniality? How do my case studies problematize bodies of knowledge around the colonial? Why is listening for “the decolonial” important, and what can an ethnomusicological approach offer? How is “theorizing with your interlocutor” a site of contention and conciliation, and what is the emotional toll that this involves?

Before addressing these questions, let me explain in some detail the reasons that led me to think about Puerto Rico and Québec together.

**Why Puerto Rico and Québec?**

My interest in Puerto Rico and Québec responds to personal, pragmatic and intellectual reasons. Firstly, Puerto Rico is my homeland, part of my wife Edline’s Haitian family lives in Québec, and while Spanish is my native language, I studied French at the University of Puerto Rico as part of my undergraduate studies, an indispensable skill for doing research in a largely Francophone Canadian province. Secondly, because I have had the fortune of being the father and primary care-giver of Gabriela for the past seven years, picking fieldwork locations that were not too far away from our home in New York City was fundamental. The cost of travelling was relatively low, and hence, I could go back and forth and stay in these locations for stretches of two to three weeks when travelling alone, and longer when travelling with Gabriela. Arriving at places
where we had family was also important: it gave my daughter an opportunity to connect with her Puerto Rican and Haitian families. Never mind that my Haitian family graciously hosted me in several of our trips thus significantly lowering my fieldwork expenses.

While PRNC and Puerto Rican anticolonial history is an old interest of mine dating back to my childhood (see Cancel-Bigay 2014, 2015) that stems from my mother’s love for both, my interest in Québec is a more recent passion. Indeed, when I began my doctoral degree in Ethnomusicology at Columbia University in 2014, I was pretty determined to research only PRNC.

In the summer of 2015, however, Fortuna, taking the form of my wife, intervened. Edline insisted that we go to Longueuil, Québec, to stay with her cousin—my future host—Marie Cam. This family vacation was a revelation to me. Why was I, despite being fluent in French and Portuguese, doing research only in Spanish? Why was I opting to remain a “cultural insider” when my linguistic skills could potentially allow me be an effective “cultural outsider”? Was I pushing myself hard enough in my graduate studies or had I become too complacent? Was I scared of change? Wasn’t PRNC about change?!

Back at this place that I now call home, I went online and googled “ethnomusicology and Québec.” A book by an ethnomusicologist named Gérald Côté popped up: Les 101 blues du Québec (1992). Based on extensive archival research, Côté had identified one hundred and one songs from Québec, released between 1965 and 1985, that were either blues or had been heavily influenced by it. If Côté’s love for LP records resonated with me—by that point I had acquired the near totality of PRNC albums released around the same time period—it was his dedicatory which captivated my imagination. Côté had dedicated his book to Pierre Vallières, a Québécois anticolonial revolutionary who, I would soon learn, had written the classic Nègres blancs d’Amérique (1968). There, Vallières described the Québécois as “nègres blancs” on account of
their “colonial” subordination to Anglo-Canada and the United States. Soon, I had read the fascinating five-hundred-page autobiography/pamphlet/political treatise, which in turn tapped into my fetishistic impulses leading me to buy innumerable Québécois anticolonial pamphlets from the 1960s and 1970s, and CQ literature and albums. By the time the new semester started in September 2015, I had become obsessed with Québécois anticolonial discourse, an obsession that had me pestering with questions my friend Patrick-André Mather, a Québécois based in Puerto Rico who had been my French professor.

Confused by this newly found passion, and uncertain as to what this meant for my research on PRNC, I approached Professor Ana María Ochoa asking her for advice. I must confess that I was fearful. For the past two years I had been pretty clear that my object of study was PRNC. Would I be regarded as being inconsistent? Even irresponsible perhaps? I will never forget that meeting. Ochoa encouraged me to read as much as possible so that the following semester, during our research design seminar, I could actually begin to articulate my new project. My mentor Kevin Fellezs’s enthusiasm for my new interest, and Alessandra Ciucci’s introducing me to Amílcar Barreto, who had investigated the relationship between nationalism and linguistic policies in Puerto Rico and Québec (1998), only confirmed that I was not lost. With this boost of confidence, I continued my research.

The more I read, the more I was intrigued by the many historical-political parallelisms that I saw between Puerto Rico and Québec during the 1960s and 1970s. Both Puerto Rico and Québec share a rich history of anticolonial activism against Anglo domination (the US in the case of the former, and Anglo Canada and the US in the case of the latter). While these are far from being the only non-independent nations in the Americas (see Ramos 2016; Bonilla 2015), their shared non-independent status immediately caught my attention, as it has that of others. Since at least the
1980s, Puerto Rican artists and scholars have thought about Puerto Rico and Québec together. Miguel Algarín, for example, one of the founders of the Nuyorican Poet’s Movement, compared Puerto Rico with Québec in a poem written in English, Spanish and French entitled “Je me souviens” (I remember), a Québécois nationalist slogan (see Barradas and Rodríguez 1980: 40-46). French professor and author Ana Lydia Vega, for her part, described the PRNC pro-independence anthem “Verde luz,” composed by Antonio Cabán Vale, as being analogous to CQ singer-songwriter’s Gilles Vigneault’s “Mon pays” (see Vega 2008: 21-26). Scholars have also pondered upon the colonial parallelisms. José Igartúa (2010: 35), for example, “compares the history of Puerto Rico and Quebec to demonstrate a similarity in evolution from the first European settlements to the present day” (see also Barreto 1998; Bernabe 2003: 25; Rodríguez Orellana 1998). Nationalist/communist poet and political leader Juan Antonio Corretjer—whose poems have been set to music by many PRNC singer-songwriters—also saw the “quebecuás” as somewhat akin to Puerto Ricans (see Corretjer 2008 [1982]: 9). Québécois authors too have thought about Puerto Rico. Vallières, for instance, noted the high level of political consciousness of Puerto Ricans who lived in New York City (1994 [1968]: 109-111, 118-119) and sociologist Michel Arbour mistakenly views Puerto Rico and Québec as the last two colonies of the Américas (2015: 42). Despite the parallelisms, Puerto Rico and Quebec’s colonialism are distinct in significant ways.

Puerto Rico’s colonial relation to the United States is manifest in its political status as an unincorporated territory of the United States, which has led to gross violations of human rights.

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4 Lawyer and member of the Pro-Independence Party (P.I.P.) Manuel Rodriguez Orellana highlights the political similarities between Puerto Rico and Québec, describing them as two “solitudes” in the Americas.
5 Corretjer would actually declaim his poetry in the “Place des Poétes” in Québec (see Medina 2008: 6).
6 Political scientist Michel Arbour, similar to Rodriguez Orellana (1998), mistakenly views Puerto Rico and Québec as the last two colonies of the Américas.
The list is long so I will mention only some of the highlights: the invasion of Puerto Rico by the United States in 1898; the imposition of English as an assimilating tool (Iranzo Berrocal 2015); the politics of sterilization and experimentations with the contraceptive pill (Preciado 2016 [2008]: 185-215); the passing of the gag laws during the 1950s red scare in order to subdue pro-independence sentiment (Acosta 1989); the torture of political prisoners (Aponte Vázquez 1998); the surveillance and persecution and at times assassination of anticolonialists (Agosto 2009; Bosque-Pérez and Colón 2006; Laboy Gómez 2015 [2016]); the encouragement and support of terrorist acts by right-wing Cuban organizations (Díaz 2014; Arboleya Cervera et al. 2016); the exploitation of natural resources or extractivism (Colón, Córdova and Córdova 2014; Klein 2018; Lloréns and Stanchich 2019); and the complete political, economic and geopolitical subordination of Puerto Rico to US markets and foreign policy since 1898 (Silén 2001 [1978]: 157; Grosfoguel 2003; Rodríguez Cancel 2007; Dietz 1989).7

In 1952, Puerto Rico became an Estado Libre Asociado or a Commonwealth, a status of “autonomy” that claimed to have solved Puerto Rico’s colonial dilemma in fact exacerbating Puerto Rico’s dependency on the US. In order to stress the colonial dimension of this regime of material and epistemological colonialist violence, throughout this dissertation, I refer to the Commonwealth by its literal translation from the Spanish: Free Associated State. Neither a state—and thus lacking representation in the US Congress with the exception of a Resident Commissioner who does not have the right to vote—nor a Republic—and thus lacking the powers that would enable the country to engage in significant commercial exchanges with other nations—Puerto Rico has been “associated” with the US by being a captive market for its multinationals and serving as

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7 As the PSP thesis of 1974 stated: “foreign capital [largely from the US] controlled nearly 81% of manufacturing assets, 85% of the sales of commercial retail, and 100% of aerial and maritime transportation. . . and 90% of the industrial products for exportation were created by foreign companies” (16; my translation).
base of operations for its militaristic imperial policies in the region (see Grosfoguel 2003). As I explore in chapter eight, the Free Associated State and Operation Bootstrap were also key in transforming Puerto Rico from a rural/agricultural country to an urban/industrial one, a transition that would shape PRNC in significant ways.

Québec’s colonialism is clearly different. For one thing, as a province of Canada, in theory, it has had the same rights as the other nine provinces of the Confederation, a point celebrated by Federalists, that is, those who have opposed independence—Pierre Trudeau being the most vocal defender of this point of view (but see also Jean-Charles Harvey’s 1962 Pourquoi je suis antiséparatiste). Furthermore, as a settler colonizing country that is home to ten First Nations, Québec sharply contrasts with Puerto Rico where there are no surviving Indigenous peoples. Still, during the 1960s, Québec was often described as a colony of Anglo-Canada and US interests. Indeed, from an economic standpoint, in the 1960s “the incomes of French-Canadians average[d] at 80 percent of those of Canadians of British origin within Canada; but, looking just at Québec. . . the proportionate revenues of the French-Canadians [were] even less, only 65 percent of those of British origin” (Milner and Milner 1973: 56), a fact that according to the authors, made Québec a colony. As noted by David Austin French-Canadians also earned two percent less than African Americans (2013: 51).

From a cultural perspective the situation was also dire. Echoing Vallières’s Nègres blancs d’Amérique (1968) in her classic poem “Speak White,” Michèle Lalonde noted how Anglo-Canadians would humiliate French-Canadians by telling them to “speak white,” thus racializing

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8 These are: the Abénakis, Algonquins, Atikamekw, Cree, Malecites, Huron-Wendat, Innu, Micmac, Mohawks, and Naskapis. It is also home to the Inuit and the Métis who are not recognized as nations in Québec (see https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/quebec-metis-court-case-powley-test-1.5103869). Métis are considered a Nation in the rest of Canada (see: https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/metis/Pages/introduction.aspx).

9 This, of course, does not mean that there is no Indigenous influence in Puerto Rican culture. For recent discussions see Castanha (2013 [2011]) and Haslip-Viera (2014).
them as Black, a colonial practice that dates back at least to the nineteenth century when newspapers would Blacken and animalize French-Canadians (see Scott 2016). As happens with Puerto Rico, the list of items that are mobilized in order to confirm Québec’s status as a colony, is long. I mention some of the highlights: the British Conquest of 1759-1761; the suppression of the 1837-1838 French Canadian rebellion against Anglo Canada and the discrimination against Québécois based on their language and religion, a “new world” replay of the “old world” wars between Catholic and Protestants (see Vicenthier 1979; Bernard 1983); the 1838 Durham Report where Lord Durham described French Canadians as not having a history; the War Measures Act of 1970 whereby civil liberties and judicial rights were suspended in Québec after the Front de Libération du Québec kidnapped British trade commissioner James Cross and Québec Labor minister Pierre Laporte (see Bouthillier and Cloutier 2010); and the passing of the Constitution Act in 1982 against Québec’s will (see Arbour 2015). Though the trope of Québec as a colony had dwindled by the late 1970s, it has not completely died off. Québécois sociologist Maurice Arbour, for example, entitled one of his most recent books Cessons d’être des colonisés!: le colonialisme canadien? Feutré, déguisé, subtil et insidieux. Bref, un colonialisme de gentlemen et de bonne compagnie (2015).

While these are some of the grievances typically mentioned by Québécois scholars and anticolonialists,10 Québec was also perceived as a colony by non-Québécois, and not only by Puerto Ricans but by Québec-based Haitian and Anglophone scholars11 and Third World anticolonial theoreticians, as well.12 Albert Memmi, for example, dedicated his 1966 edition of Portrait du colonisé to “mes amis canadiens français,” and in an interview conducted in Montreal

in 1967 at L’école des hautes études commerciales, argued that French-Canadians were “dominated” even if they were materially better off than most colonized people—as African Americans were vis-a-vis Africans—and despite their complicity with settler colonialism (1968: 86-87). Edouard Glissant, for his part, in Caribbean Discourse (1981), described Québec as part of the Caribbean, and thus as belonging to a colonial landscape, both on account of its geography and the Haitian presence, thus evoking, avant la lettre, Antonio Benítez Rojo’s notion of the meta-archipelago or the repeating island (see Benitez Rojo 1989). Glissant linked the way of speaking of Québécois 1960s writers/poets Jacques Ferron and Gaston Miron to what he called tactics of diversion (1999 [1981]: 152), a form of contestation that does not emphasize single origins and that “is the ultimate resort of a population whose domination by an Other is concealed” (1999 [1981]: 20). He further argued that the use of joual (urban French from Québec), and ruralization “have had the same effect that the plantation and Creole have had on us” (1999 [1981]: 153). More recently, literary critique Catherine Den Tandt has built on this trope by detecting Glissantian sensibilities in the works of Ana Lydia Vega and Québécois writer France Théoret (2000).

Despite Glissant’s inscription of Québec within a Caribbean/colonized geography, though, he also noted that:

In practice, colonizers who appear to be chasing each other off are in fact replacing each other and even supporting each other. A number of rich people from Montreal have acquired property around Anse-Mitan and Anse-à-l’Ane in Martinique, and it is not the Martinicans who gave them the right to administer the area. (1999 [1981]: 173).

13 Memmi’s notions of Québec had been informed by his friendship with Québécois poets, writers and anticolonialists linked to the Rassemblement pour l’Indépendance Nationale and the Parti Pris journal.
14 Glissant claimed that “it is valid to introduce into our vision of Caribbean landscape—mountains and seas, sand flats, contorted hills—the same swirling movement of the Quebecois landscape” where “you lose a sense of direction and have no sense of moving forward” (1999 [1981]:172-173).
Like Memmi, he highlighted how the Québécois Left had ignored the First Nations (1999 [1981]: 153)—thus positing the Québécois both as colonized and settler colonizers. While Memmi and Glissant were perceptive enough to notice Québec’s complicity with settler colonialism—a subject utterly ignored by Québécois 1960s and 1970s anticolonialists—this critique has been made more poignant by First Nation scholars and communities within Québec.

Mohawk leader Louis Karoniaktajeh Hall in his 1979 *Warrior’s Handbook* manifesto, for instance, highlighted the ironies—and hypocrisy—behind Québécois claims for an end of colonialism. He described Premier René Lévesque, the most prominent figure of Québécois independence efforts in 1970s and leader of the *Parti Québécois*, as a “ripping conqueror and plunderer of Québec” (36). The Grand Council of the Cree, for its part, recalled how in 1977: “the separatist Parti Québécois . . . sent riot police to Kuujjuaq (formerly Fort Chimo) in northern Québec, after Inuit demonstrated against Québec’s proposed Charter of the French Language, which would force them to use French” (Grand Council of the Crees 1998: 76). First Nations have continued to make these critiques in more recent works (Simpson 2014) highlighting Lévesque’s role in the colonial enterprise (see Nangak 2017).

Indeed, Lévesque’s “plundering” of the First Nations dates back to the years of the *Révolution Tranquille* (1960-1966) when a series of reforms “led, not by social forces confronting the government, but by the state itself” were enacted (Cuccioletta and Lubin 2011: 193). The Quiet Revolution saw Québec transition from the conservative Catholic policies of Premier Maurice Duplessis to the more progressive and laic government of Premier Jean Lesage,

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15 Aimé Césaire too had drawn Québec to the Caribbean by quoting Gaston Miron, a poet who he had influenced (Austin 2013: 57-58; Brière 2003), in a speech about Martinique that he gave in 1972 during a visit to Québec’s *l’Université Laval* (see Césaire 1973).
and from a rural/agricultural country to an urban/industrialized one. But it also saw Québec reaffirm its settler colonial powers, and Lévesque played a key role in this process as the Minister for Natural Resources (see chapters seven and nine). Today, organizations such as Idle No More continue to ensure that the Indigenous consciousness is heard loud and clear.

Fascinated as I was with the anticolonial struggles, discourses and musics of Québec and Puerto Rico, I soon began to be drawn to the silences that lied within. Why were foreigners and diasporic others generally excluded from CQ and PRNC studies and related anticolonial studies and pamphlets? Why did Québécois anticolonial texts ignore settler colonialism? Were these struggles only about achieving national independence or were they also about something deeper? What was the relationship between anticolonialism and decoloniality, and how might researching the sounds that fall through the cracks, and other silences, help me answer these questions?

While I will engage in a literature review that specifically attends to PRNC and CQ studies, first I find it pertinent to define some of the key terms used in this work.

**The Decolonial, (Anti)Colonialism and Coloniality**

Eduardo Restrepo has called for understanding colonialism as a process that goes beyond the “political-administrative subordination” of one nation to another and that entails “epistemological and ontological” forms of oppression (2010: 69-70). He has noted how Colombian postcolonial elites have tended to maintain, strengthen and deepen “dimensions of the colonial relationship” via their Eurocentrism and the “subalternization” of Blacks and Indigenous peoples (2010: 69-70). Restrepo’s “epistemological and ontological” colonialism is what Nelson Maldonado-Torres—and Latin American decolonial studies (see Dussel 1985 [1980]; Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011)—calls coloniality. By this, Maldonado-Torres means the

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16 For an important nuanced take on the continuities involved in this transition see Jonathan Livernois’s *La révolution dans l’ordre* (2018).
“long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration.” It is different from colonialism which he defines as “a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation” (2007: 243). Thus, while Restrepo, following Frantz Fanon (1961), uses the same term (colonialism) to describe two different forms of subjugation (administrative, epistemological/ontological), 17 Maldonado-Torres uses two different terms (colonialism, coloniality).

Despite these differences in lexicon both scholars envision the relationship between colonialism and coloniality in similar ways. Though Maldonado-Torres hails from Puerto Rico, a US colony where “the strict limits of colonial administration” are still present, and not from an independent nation-state like Restrepo, colonialism is posited as a thing of the past. As Maldonado-Torres notes, coloniality refers to “the long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism. . . [and that go] beyond the strict limits of colonial administration. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism” [my emphasis]. In this regard both Maldonado-Torres and Restrepo depart from a postcolonial standpoint, that is, they write from a space where “the shift in global relations which marks the (necessarily uneven) transition from the Age of Empires to the post-independence or post-decolonisation moment” (Hall 1996: 246) has already taken place.

I do not posit that Restrepo and Maldonado-Torres are mistaken. Their analyses hold true for their objects of analysis. Maldonado-Torres’s opus Against War: Views from the Underside of

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17 Restrepo implies that his decision to use the word “colonialism” with these two meanings is inspired by Fanon (see 2010: 170). A claim that Maldonado-Torres, despite his decision to use the term coloniality, would seem to agree with (see Maldonado-Torres 2008: 93-162).
*Modernity* (2008) after all, does not reflect on Puerto Rico. But it is fairly obvious that when analyzing non-independent nations, the relationship between colonialism and coloniality cannot be understood temporally. Coloniality or epistemological/ontological colonialism in non-independent geographies such as Puerto Rico and Québec—and the Caribbean and Oceania are rich in such countries (see Ramos 2016; Bonilla 2015)—did not emerge from colonialism. It *emerges* (in the present tense) from it, and it is most certainly not “beyond the strict limits of colonial administration.”

Though I agree with Restrepo and his understanding of Fanonian anticolonialism as already decolonial (hence why differentiate?) throughout my dissertation, I follow Maldonado-Torres, and Latin American decolonial studies. I do so, in part, in order to facilitate the reading process and to avoid any confusions. Using the phrase ontological and epistemological colonialism when I could simply use “coloniality” seems unnecessary. Hence, for the purposes of this dissertation, “anticolonialism” will be used to refer specifically to histories/discourses that stress the importance of national independence as a means to achieve social justice.

Decoloniality or “the decolonial,” on the other hand, will be used to refer to any challenge to Eurocentrism, racism, capitalism, monotheism (specifically Christianity) or patriarchy. My inclusion of antipatriarchal within the “decolonial” deserves some clarification.

It is often acknowledged by Latin American decolonial studies that “the decolonial” is meant to question racism, Eurocentrism, capitalism and Christianity as articulated in the Americas after the Conquest (see Quijano 2000; Dussel 1992; Mignolo 2011) although the role

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18 I later explain in detail the similarities and differences regarding Québec and Puerto Rico’s colonialism.

19 Of course, the “limits” imposed by “colonial administration” will vary from country to country. As Albert Memmi noted, remarking on Québec’s colonial subordination during the 1960s “toute domination est relative; toute domination est spécifique” (1968: 86-87)

20 I explain below why I include patriarchy within coloniality despite the fact that it precedes the latter.
played by the Late Middle Ages or the long sixteenth century (1450-1650) has also been explored (see Quijano and Wallerstein 1992; Grosfoguel 2013; Dussel 2015) and Maldonado-Torres has gone even further back in time by looking at these dynamics from the consolidation of the Catholic Church in the fifth century forward (2014a, 2014b). More recently, though, the relationship between colonality and patriarchy has become central as well (see Montanaro Mena 2014a, 2014b; Grosfoguel 2013). María Lugones (2010), for instance, has argued that prior to the Conquest of the Americas, Indigenous peoples had no concept of gender. Rita Segato (2018: 69-100), for her part, less inclined to reproduce what strikes me as the trope of the noble savage, has counterargued that notions of gender, did exist among Indigenous peoples before the Conquest. They were just more malleable and diverse. According to Segato, Indigenous peoples practiced a “low intensity patriarchy” which was significantly altered (for the worse) when Native men were forced to engage in unequal relations with the colonizer. Lugones and Segato’s understanding of patriarchy impacts their view of coloniality. Whereas Lugones implies that in the Americas patriarchy follows colonization, Segato subscribes to the feminist claim that posits patriarchy as the first form of oppression (see Lerner 1986). Here, it is worth adding that Marxist analyses, despite reifying class, also acknowledged the importance of gender oppression. This is made plain not only in Friedrich Engels’s The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1886), which my interlocutor Hilcia Montañez had me read, but in Karl Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 (1988: 100-102) and The German Ideology (1845-1846). In the latter, for example, Marx described “wife and children” as the “slaves of the husband” arguing that this “latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first property” (1978: 159).

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21 Ramón Grosfoguel (2013: 85) writes about “the conquest and genocide of women in European lands [in the late Medieval era] who transmitted Indo-European knowledge from generation to generation.”
While I agree with Segato, arguing that patriarchy precedes coloniality leads to a theoretical contradiction. If patriarchy existed in the Americas before 1492, then patriarchy is not a consequence of coloniality. If this is so, decolonizing a form of oppression that predates coloniality, is anachronistic. Furthermore, if as noted by Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba in *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation* (2009) and Lucia Birnbaum in *Dark Mother: African Origins and Godmothers* (2002) acts of antipatriarchal resistance can be traced back to the Stone Age (see chapter seven), why should we subsume this under the category “decolonial”? Insofar as such acts of resistance were taking place before the emergence of coloniality or “the modern world system” of European hegemony that has come to define post 1492 world history (Wallerstein 2004; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992), they were not acts of decoloniality. Still, patriarchy is informed (and altered) by coloniality (and colonialism).

As Segato illustrates the precolonial “low intensity patriarchy” emblematic of Indigenous peoples, characterized by gender fluidity, and a less rigid gender hierarchy, was negatively impacted by coming into contact with the high intensity patriarchy of the colonizer (2018: 82-99). In this regard, including antipatriarchal critiques within the category “the decolonial” makes sense even if the colonization of the Americas is not the cause of patriarchy in the “new world.” And yet, by including the antipatriarchal within “the decolonial,” are we not colonizing antipatriarchal struggles by subjecting them to decolonial discourse?

Keeping these caveats in mind, in this dissertation I describe any antipatriarchal critique raised by my interlocutors as decolonial. By antipatriarchal critiques, in turn, I simply mean any statement that challenges gender conventions (regarding what is the appropriate way of being a man or a woman) or a male-centric gaze (see hooks 2004). Of course, much has changed since the 1960s and 1970s. Hence, historical contextualization plays a key role in this work. What
today might be deemed as conservative gender-wise may have been considered as progressive in the 1960s and 1970s.

Ultimately, I see “the decolonial” as a challenge to coloniality, a polymorphic form of oppression that though indissociable from the sixteenth century colonization of the Americas and material violence as underlined by anticolonial studies (see Fanon 1961; Memmi 1957) and settler colonial studies (see Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014), is informed by patriarchy and other forms of oppression predating 1492 that are addressed throughout the chapters. If coloniality is intwined with European, non-European and pre-1492 forms of oppression thus being crisscrossed by multiple geographies and temporalities; if, as Marx stated, “alongside of modern evils, a whole series of inherited evils oppress us, arising from the passive survival of antiquated modes of production, with their inevitable train of social and political anachronisms” (1978: 296); if the decolonial must also depatriarchalize knowledge and social praxis, it follows that decolonizing is a tremendously complex process.

Since this is the case, I understand the decolonial as always being partial and aspirational. As becomes apparent throughout my chapters, an interlocutor may be critical of one form of oppression while nevertheless upholding another. For example, he may challenge racism or capitalism while reproducing patriarchal values, or she may contest patriarchy while reproducing Eurocentrism. Such contradictions and limitations are emblematic of broader social discourses. Feminists of color, for example, have emphasized how white feminist discourse often reproduces Eurocentrism and racism (see Lorde 2017; hooks 2004; Lugones 2010; Segato 2018; Hamid 2006; Williams 1997). To further complicate matters, decolonial critiques can often be partial, and reproducing coloniality can be unintentional. White feminists who reproduce Eurocentric and racist logics, often act in solidarity with the other (see for example, Wollstonecraft 2008
[1792] who opposed the enslavement of Blacks while nevertheless affirming her middle-class white privilege). Marxism, despite its invaluable lens vis-à-vis class relations, often reproduces a Eurocentric gaze, though as Kevin B. Anderson has shown in Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies, Marx himself was less Eurocentric than we have come to know him (2016).

Reifying non-Western or partially Western cultural manifestations as absolutely and unambiguously decolonial or liberating should also be guarded against. Presumably decolonial practices, such as vodou—which is indissociable from the Haitian Revolution (see Buck-Morss 2009; Trouillot 1995)—can be politically oppressive. As I note in chapter three Haitian dictator François Duvalier was anti-Eurocentric insofar as he embraced vodou but this act of “decoloniality” only served to torture and kill the opposition. For the purposes of this dissertation, then, an act of decoloniality, need not contest every aspect of Modernity/Coloniality (Mignolo 1996). It can challenge some aspects or only to a certain extent. Decoloniality, then, is relational; not fixed. It is impossible, in my estimation, for any one culture, body of knowledge or individual to develop a “sound proof” decolonial artifact or way of living and knowing. One can only aspire to it.

Before concluding this section, it is important to stress that by separating “the decolonial” from the “anticolonial” I do not wish to imply that one is worthier than the other. Challenging the subordination of one nation to another is a praiseworthy cause whether it confronts coloniality or not, and I have the deepest respect and admiration for anticolonialists whose commitment to justice often led them to endure censorship, persecution, incarceration, and/or torture and death. These figures are also dear to most of my interlocutors as well. But respect is not synonymous with a blind faith that uncritically celebrates such figures and that leads to hagiographic
anticolonial studies that emplot this history as a romantic and heroic narrative of liberation (Scott 2004). Still, rather than focusing only on how pro-independence anticolonial discourses reproduce coloniality, a necessary task pursued by Latin American decolonial studies and postcolonial studies, I also analyze that ways in which pro-independence discourses took issue with coloniality.

Having explained how I use some key terminology, I will now engage in a literature review of PRNC and CQ literature focusing on its nationalist/anticolonial frameworks, and the silences that this engenders. This is followed by a reflection on how my work bridges bodies of knowledge around the colonial (i.e. postcolonial, anticolonial, settler colonial, and Latin American decolonial studies), and the repositioning of my work within an ethnomusicological corpus that I call “decolonial sound studies.”

**Reimagining PRNC, CQ and their Attendant Anticolonial Discourse**

Because PRNC is in many ways an offshoot of Latin American nueva canción (LANC), a few words on the latter are pertinent before addressing one of its Caribbean iterations. Studies on LANC—largely dominated by Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba and Brazil—have privileged two major intertwined narratives. First, there is the understanding of the singer-songwriter as producer and preserver/protector of a national culture threatened by Anglo imperialism. Second, there is the representation of the singer-songwriter as the embodiment of social justice and equality—i.e. socialism, internationalism, Third Worldism—expressed by her socio-political commitment to national and global causes as manifested in song lyrics and activism and articulated...
through the musical creolization of Latin American folkloric musics and/or American or British influences such as rock and protest song. Overall, LANC scholarship\(^\text{23}\) has focused on documenting a history of often censored, persecuted, exiled and at times executed singer-songwriters\(^\text{24}\) who defended the rights of their people against national right-wing dictators supported by the US. This occurred in a Cold War context where revolutionary Cuba threatened the United States’ political, economic and geopolitical hegemony. Ultimately, the musical repertoire and the experiences of the musicians are read primarily as the acts of resistance of a nation that, while in conversation with other Latin American nations (i.e. the Pan-Latino trope) and other nations (i.e. internationalism, Third Worldism) is nevertheless conceived as geographically-bound and the product of only the dominant ethnic group nationals. Thus, this corpora has downplayed or effaced the contributions of non-national and diasporic others to the different national iterations of LANC. This lacuna, along with the hagiographic nature of much of this literature, has had the nefarious effect of reducing this music’s political import to that of opposition to US imperialism and capitalism, ignoring the myriad ways in which it articulated other forms of contestation (vis-à-vis gender, race, and aesthetic expectations).

There is, however, a small if important lineage of LANC literature (and the related Brazilian *tropicália*) that avoids reifying this music as exclusively one of national resistance by critically engaging the relation between song/voice and gender (Carrillo Rodríguez 2014; Otero Garabís 2000: 165-222), song, race, ethnicity, and class (Ríos 2008; Dunn 2001), and by focusing on the role of intersubjectivity and transnational relations (see Ochoa 1996; Rodríguez Aedo 2014; 23 See Peralta Idrovo 2003; Milstein 2007; Ramos 2011; Almeida and Urbizagastegui 1999; Morris 1986; Pring-Mill 1987; Luft 1996; Neustadt 2004; Cánepe Hurtado 1983; Reyes Matta 1988; Carrasco Pirard 1982; Ojeda 1979; Moore 2006; González 1991, 2005, 2016; Figueredo 2001; Vilches 2004. 24 Such was the case of Chilean singer-songwriter Víctor Jara.)
Verba 2013). These scholars sound out a LANC that is rich, complex and contradictory insofar as it is shown to simultaneously challenge and reproduce a variety of dominant tropes.

Studies on PRNC have followed a similar trend to that of dominant LANC studies. According to the standard narrative, PRNC is a Puerto Rico-based movement of (absolute or near absolute) opposition to colonialism, capitalism and US imperialism25 born in the University of Puerto Rico in the late 1960s in the struggles against the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and the Vietnam War. The impact that diasporic experiences, non-Puerto Ricans,26 and Nuyorican in shaping PRNC is largely ignored. Musically, we are told, Puerto Rican singer-songwriters were influenced by LANC, prior traditions of protest musics in Puerto Rico (e.g. Rafael Hernández and Daniel Santos’s patriotic songs, among others), US/British counterculture and protest song (e.g. Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Pete Seeger) and Catalonia’s nova canço (e.g. Serrat, Pi de la Serra)—as has been more recently emphasized by PRNC singer-songwriter and anthropologist Zoraida Santiago (2008: 7; see also Medina 2008: 7). Though it is commonly acknowledged that they creolized myriad Puerto Rican musical genres, Puerto Rican jíbaro (peasant) music is often overemphasized at the expense of reflecting on its creolization of Afro-Caribbean musics, such as salsa. Interestingly, it has been salsa scholars who have noted, mostly in passing, how salsa was in conversation with PRNC (see Aparicio 1998: 25; Quintero Rivera 1998: 104-115, 123; Quintero Rivera 2009: 177-179).

25 See Centeno 1996; Marrero 2018; Pagán 2019; McCoy 2015; Shaw 2013; Murphy Nazario 2016; Rojas (2013). Aixa Rodríguez-Rodriguez (1995) is one of the few authors who gives some thought to the “internal limitations” of PRNC among which she names “the possible contradictions between the cultural images, political rhetoric, dogmatic messages and [use of] sophisticated language, and the needs and preferences of the majority of Puerto Rican popular classes” (1995: 337). See also Ramírez Ruiz (2007), my previous theses (Cancel Bigay 2014; 2015), and Eddie Pesante González’s Bachelor’s thesis (2020), which announces a much-needed research regarding the relationship between PRNC and ecological concerns.

26 Italian-born Argentinian singer-songwriter Tony Croatto is perhaps the only non-Puerto Rican to be widely recognized in PRNC literature although a critical study around his work remains to be written.
By entering PRNC through the work of my interlocutors I explore the aforementioned silences. I show how, not unlike Puerto Rican jazz (Serrano 2015), salsa (Quintero Rivera 1998, 2003; Washburne 2008), bomba (Dufrasne 1985; Flores 2000), reggaetón (Rivera et al 2009; Flores 2000), trova (Bofill-Calero 2013; Ruiz-Caraballo 2015; Fiol-Matta 2016: 121-171) and the Puerto Rican patriotic song of the 1930s (Glasser 1995), PRNC can be more accurately described as emerging in the interstices between the Island, the diaspora and the world, in the encounter between Puerto Ricans and non-Puerto Ricans.

PRNC studies have also tended to overlook how, despite its anticolonialism, PRNC reproduced coloniality. In this regard, they can be described as a subsection of Puerto Rican celebratory anticolonial studies. These studies are rich in archival research but often hagiographic in nature. While they engage in in-depth critiques of US imperialism and colonialism, they tend to celebrate the anticolonial subject for being on the right side (or rather the left side) of the colonizer/colonized divide paying little attention to how he (it is mostly a he) reproduced coloniality as part of his anticolonial theory and praxis. Not unlike these studies, PRNC has been overdetermined by the colonizer/colonized dichotomy, and nationalism. As I stress, it is not PRNC which is overdetermined by the colonizer/colonized dichotomy and nationalism (the role played by these variables varied from artist to artist and album to album). It is rather the discourses around PRNC which are overdetermined by these factors.27

One of the ways in which I disrupt this approach is by paying attention to the role played by gender, a keyword that is absent in PRNC scholarship with the notable exception of Licia Fiol-Matta’s chapter on PRNC-related singer Lucecita Benítez (2016: 172-225). This absence is particularly disturbing when one considers that the colonized is almost universally feminized in

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27 This is also true for Puerto Rican anticolonial struggles of the 1960s broadly speaking—where the category “class” was central.
the eyes of the colonizer as is her music (see Fellezs 2019: 122 vis-à-vis Hawaiian music).

Furthermore, whether gender is explicitly discussed or not in a song, it is always there—through ideas of masculinity, femininity, and the relationship between both often inscribed in the metaphors utilized. In this regard, I am in conversation with LANC scholarship that has moved in this direction (see Carrillo Rodríguez 2014; Otero Garabís 2000: 165-222) as chapters five and eight illustrate.

While I write against (but with) the dominant narrative of PRNC, and related celebratory/Island-centric Puerto Rican anticolonial narratives, I also write against (but with) Puerto Rican decolonial studies. These studies, though having a keen eye to how anticolonialism reproduces coloniality, tend to neglect the Puerto Rican historical archive, and the many nuances that historical research provides.28 Furthermore, not unlike Puerto Rican celebratory anticolonial studies, they reify the Island/diaspora dichotomy. While the former tend to reduce the Puerto Rican nation to the island neglecting the diaspora, Puerto Rican decolonial studies tend to do the opposite. My case studies underline the blurriness of this dichotomy putting into question the Island-centrism of Puerto Rican celebratory anticolonial studies, and Puerto Rican decolonial studies’ tendency to portray “Island-based” anticolonialism as retrograde while enshrining the diaspora as more enlightened and radical. If Puerto Rican anticolonialism is the result of the interactions between islanders, the diaspora, those who come back and forth and myriad non-national others, then, such a stark dichotomy does not hold.

28 See Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997; Grosfoguel 2003; Negrón-Muntaner 2017: 274-275; Martínez San-Miguel 2014. I also include Pabón 2003 and Ferrao 1990 in this category, although, they are not exactly decolonialists. That is, they are not influenced by Latin American decolonial studies but by postmodern studies. Still, their approach to Puerto Rican anticolonial history and their conclusions are similar to those of the aforementioned authors. Investigating the overlap between postmodern discourses and Puerto Rican decolonial is beyond the scope of this work.
Walter Mignolo has noted that one of the key characteristics of decolonial thinking involves the articulation of different forms of “border thinking.” Border thinking is informed by “local histories ‘within the modern world system (e.g. the local histories of the ‘metropolitan centers. . . ) and the local histories of its margins” or colonial and postcolonial countries (2012: 64). It entails “thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies” (2012: 85).

In this regard, the decoloniality proposed by Puerto Rican decolonial studies is to say the least paradoxical. On the one hand, these studies undo the dichotomy PR/US by looking at diasporic experiences and locating the Puerto Rican experience in a global context beyond (the expected) Latin America context. Either via comparisons with colonial territories of France, the Netherlands and Great Britain (see Grosfoguel 2003; Martínez San-Miguel 2014)\(^2\) or the settler colonized world (see Negrón-Muntaner 2017). On the other hand, they “order” the Puerto Rican world in dichotomies by pitting the anticolonial “local histories” of one of the US’s margins (the Island) against one of the US’s internal “local histories” (the diaspora). Whereas the former histories are reduced to one of “Island-based” anticolonial elitism characterized by a frustrated yearning for reproducing unrestrained coloniality (thankfully curbed by a US colonialism, that although criticized, provides, so we are told, spaces where the masses can articulate alternative—mostly pro-Statehood—forms of decoloniality), the latter are projected as fully decolonial and barely anticolonial (or anticolonial only by mistake). The “real” people in Puerto Rico (the Black and the poor), have always been, so goes the narrative, those who oppose independence (see Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997, particularly, Negrón Portillo’s contribution to the anthology: 39-56). Furthermore, that leaders who oppose independence are often white, wealthy

\(^2\) But for an important precedent in this kind of comparison see Morales Carrión 1952.
and directly benefiting from the colonial regime—via contracts, corruption and decades of wielding political power; and that it has been precisely the “elitist” anticolonial nationalists and socialists—particularly the 1960s MPI/PSP and the *Liga Socialista Puertorriqueña* led by poet Juan Antonio Corretjer among other organizations, and the pro-independence communists of the 1930s (see Pujals 2017: 61-80)—who have sought to contest the US’s economic hegemony over Puerto Rico while condemning Puerto Ricans’ exploitation by multinationals, is seemingly not important. The fact that members of these organizations have been persecuted, incarcerated, censored, surveilled, tortured and subjected to terrorist attacks by the colonial state and US imperialism (see Acosta 1989; Aponte Vazquez 1998), are at best “details,” footnotes or silences in Puerto Rican decolonial studies.³⁰

It is not that these studies deny the role played by US imperialism in Puerto Rican history (the economic critique of US imperialism by “Island-based” nationalists and socialists from Pedro Albizu Campos to Juan Mari Bras has clearly shaped their views even if these are denied). But in this new scheme, the Island (the margin) is projected as a sort of small (but outdated) Goliath invested in attacking a US diaspora enlightened by its US experiences, a sort of even smaller, yet very (post)modern David.

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³⁰ Grosfoguel (2003: 67, footnote 6), for example, claims that PSP leader Juan Mari Bras can afford the “revolutionary” luxury” of renouncing his US citizenship because he is wealthy, and hence, does not depend on the welfare state as poor Puerto Ricans do. Grosfoguel’s assessment of Mari Bras’s purported “elitism” fails to mention that he was persecuted by the colonial state—his police files by the local and federal government consist of 19,232 pages written from 1947 forward (see http://juanmaribras.org/escritos/sobre-juan-mari-bras/259-las-carpetas-de-juan-mari-bras.html); that the PSP was subjected to state-sponsored terrorist attacks led mostly by Cuban exiles (see Arboleya Cervera, Jesús et al. 2016); and that his son Santiago “Chaguí” Mari Pesquera was assassinated by the colonial state in 1976 are other facts that he also effaces. Might this not explain why Mari Bras does not want US citizenship? Negrón-Muntaner applies a similar technique of elision, when in a comparison between Ana Lydia Vega’s short story “Pollito Chicken” and KMX Assault’s rap song “Puerto Rican in the U.S.A.” she portrays the latter as more progressive than the former positioning both objects as being in direct opposition to one another. She fails to mention, though, that among the lines rapped by the group (which she quotes) is “Despierta boricua, defiende lo tuyo,” a slogan of the “Island-based” MPI/PSP (1997: 273-274). I do not necessarily disagree with her main point though but raise this issue to point to the lack of nuance and the erasure of anticolonial histories that have been consistently censored and distorted by the colonial state, scholars and journalists.
By blurring the borders between the Island and the diaspora, though, I do not wish to deny the discrimination endured by Nuyoricans—and diasporic Puerto Ricans in general—at the hand of Puerto Ricans “from” the Island. Anti-diasporic discrimination has been widely documented both as a lived experience (Hernández 1997: 1-17) and as a literary manifestation where writers “from” the Island tend to judge a largely impoverished diaspora based on middle class moral values (see Mohr 1982: 25-42). As El Grupo band-member Sandra María Esteves told an interviewer, when she went to the Island in the 1960s Puerto Ricans called her “gringa”—a derogatory term that marked her as “foreign” and assimilated (in Hernández 1997: 52-53). (Not unlike the term Nuyorican which was then positively resignified by the diaspora). But as I show through El Grupo and other PRNC experiences, more respectful and productive encounters between Nuyoricans and Puerto Ricans also took place, and these too are a part of Puerto Rican (anticolonial) history.

Overall, I call for an approach to PRNC and Puerto Rican anticolonial history that borrows from the strengths of both sets of studies: a decolonial critique that is not oblivious to the Puerto Rican historical archive of the island and the diaspora, and that avoids reifying the aforementioned dichotomy. Ultimately, though, my approach follows in the footsteps of pro-independence anticolonial studies that have simultaneously critiqued colonialism and imperialism without failing to critique how coloniality was reproduced within anticolonial discourse or independent Latin American nation-states. This genealogy includes Eugenio María de Hostos’s nineteenth century critique of how Latin American Republics reproduced the logic of the ex-colonizer (Spain) in Mi viaje al sur (My trip to the South) (1939); his contemporary’s Ramón E. Betances’s condemnation of how Indigenous peoples were still colonized in independent Mexico (see Ojeda Reyes and Estrade 2017: Vol IV, 316); the twentieth critiques of
Isabelo Zenón Cruz’s regarding how literature and Puerto Rican anticolonial discourse reproduced antiblack racism (1974), and José Luis González’s (1980) critique of Pedro Albizu Campos’s version of nationalism on account of its Catholicism and anticommunism—a critique previously articulated within Pedro Albizu Campos’s Nationalist Party in the 1930s and 1940s by José Monserrate Toro Nazario31—and his call for a multilingual Puerto Rico reflective of an Afro-Caribbean sensibility, among others. As stressed by Rafael Bernabe (2003) such critical pro-independence discourses have continued to shape Puerto Rico social reality from the 1990s forward.

Not unlike PRNC and LANC studies, CQ studies have tended to portray this music as a geographically-bound form of resistance produced by nationals. These narrative tropes represent the singer-songwriter as someone who is influenced by but not creating with musicians who “belong” in uneasy ways to the nation—i.e., Indigenous Peoples, diasporic subjects, immigrants.

CQ literature, which includes countercultural music,32 can be divided into three main categories. Category one explicitly links CQ to anticolonial politically-inflected discourse by theorizing with Fanon, Memmi and/or Vallières. This category is heavily influenced by the notion of Québécois as “nègres blancs.” The “nègre blanc” concept is a racial/social metaphor that emerged in the 1960s as French-Canadians from Québec began to self-identify as Québécois. It described Québécois as second-class citizens, colonial Third World-like subjects, and therefore, as a kind of “black.” This notion was made popular by Vallières, who in Nègres blancs d’Amérique, theorized Québec with and through Fanon, Césaire, Memmi, the Black

32 CQ literature more often than not discusses countercultural musics as well although there is a vast literature dedicated to Québécois counterculture in and of itself (see Warren and Fortin2015; Brouillard et al. 2018). The latter often includes CQ artists.
Panthers, Chicanos and Puerto Rican diasporic revolutionaries\(^{33}\) (Vallières 1994 [1968]).\(^{34}\) Category one posits CQ as the “reflection” of a Québécois people that is part of (or partially part of) a Third World geography: the Québécois are Black and/or colonized —vis-a-vis Anglo-Canada and the US.\(^{35}\)

The degree to which these qualities are believed to apply to the Québécois varies from author to author, and from book to book. Given that Québec is a province of Canada (and thus not a “political” colony: it did not lack equal rights vis-a-vis its metropolis), Québec’s colonialism is described as economic and cultural. Often, Québec is described as doubly colonized. Anglophone residents of Québec and supporters of the Québécois anticolonial cause Sheilagh Hodgins Milner and Henry Milner, for example, argued in *The Decolonization of Québec* (1973) that Québec was colonized by Anglo-Canada, which in turn, was colonized by the United States. Category one tends to emphasize a similar narrative.

Category two frames CQ as a pro-independence nationalist manifestation that seems to subscribe to what Puerto Rican sociologist Jaime Lluch (2014) in his comparison between Québec and Catalonia defines as pro-independence substate minority nationalism. The texts under this category delink Québec from Third Worldism, blackness and colonialism. Instead, they emphasize France’s “pioneering” role in the “discovery” of Canada. It is worth noting though, that most texts under Category one, also begin by narrating the “arrival” of Jacques Cartier to Canada (an arrival that is never framed as an invasion). While category one implies that part of the national humiliation of Québec lies in the fact that the French conquerors were

\(^{33}\) Vallières doesn’t mention a specific radical group (see pages 109-111; 118-119). Interestingly, while at first he describes Puerto Ricans as “white slaves” who inhabit the north of the United States along with the Italians, the Irish, the Polish and the German (109), later on he claims that almost all Puerto Ricans are “bruns ou noirs” (118).

\(^{34}\) It is worth noting that Vallières did not invent the “nègre blanc.” See chapter two for an exploration of its genealogy.

conquered by the English conquerors in 1759-1761, it diminishes its importance by repositioning Québec in a broader contemporary Third World context. The contradiction that emerges between a CQ portrayed as an anticolonial manifestation and its colonizing “origins” is never solved nor problematized, though, which is not surprising given the erasure of French colonialism.36

By eliminating a Third World/anticolonial political imaginary, category two makes the 1759-1761 British conquest and the 1534 “French discovery” central to its claims of independence. Under category two, that the descendants of the French should continue to be subjugated by the conquering descendants of the British is untenable. Category two’s position is a historical aberration whereby the earlier conqueror/discoverer (the French) has been conquered by the Anglo other, who is also—and this is implicit—culturally inferior. Thus, while category one views Québec (and CQ) as intrinsic to the geopolitical space of the Americas and Africa—a discourse that it contradicts by not questioning the French Conquest of Canada and its consequences for the First Nations, and by disregarding French and Anglo-Canada’s role in the enslavement of Blacks and the First Nations (Trudel 1960; Mackey 2010)—category two represents the Québec/Canada divide as a continuation of the European wars between Great Britain and France.

While categories one and two do not argue that CQ is French music, it is clear that category two sees it as closer to France than the former. For category two, CQ is a sort of variation of a white French “fact” in the Americas. These categories do not argue that all French-Canadian singers/songwriters were pro-independence (though they come close). Rather, they subscribe to what Lluch calls the “national consciousness thesis” (2014: 94), a teleology whereby the development of a national cultural consciousness leads unavoidably to political

nationalism. That is, these scholars imply that Québécois cultural nationalism equals Québécois political nationalism or a desire for an independent nation-state.

Contrary to category one and two, category three avoids a pro-independence discourse. It celebrates CQ as cultural nationalism. Here CQ represents the survival of French cultural traits despite the threats of a surrounding Anglo world. Like the prior categories, it goes back to the French “discovery.” All three categories, though, partake of what Jean-Charles St-Louis (2010) called “la thèse du reflet.” This “reflet” is manifested in “le cadrage principal à l’œuvre dans l’institution de la chanson, » an institution that « organise sa production dans les écrits sur la chanson au Québec” placing “la création chansonnaire au Québec. . . sous le signe d'une écoute québécoise, collective et largement consensuelle. La sanction ‘nationale’ apparaît presque comme une mission; l’expression du nationalisme, comme le seul univers de légitimité possible” (2010: 65; see Trottier 2012 for a similar critique).

While I have divided CQ literature in three categories, there is much overlap, and some theses/essays on CQ deal with subjects/frameworks that do not necessarily fit into my categories. While works of all three categories are invested in discussing post-1960s CQ, most begin their story either in the 1500s with the arrival of Jacques Cartier or in the 1600s with the arrival of Samuel de Champlain.

It is worth emphasizing that this is one of the key ways in which the category CQ differs from the category PRNC. The term “Puerto Rican” dates back to at least the nineteenth century. The term “Québécois,” par contre, emerges in the 1960s. If in 1962 singer-songwriter Claude Gauthier sang “je suis de nationalité canadienne-française,” by the 1970s he had changed it to: “je suis de nationalité québécoise-française.” It is worth noting, though, that Félix Leclerc’s

38 https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2017/06/06/claude-gauthier
1943 composition *Le Québecquois* points towards earlier uses of the term (see Leclerc 2010: 123-125; 16). While PRNC studies often offer a genealogy of prior musics that inform PRNC, these are not called PRNC. In CQ literature, on the other hand, the label “CQ” stands simultaneously for post-1960s French-language Québec-based music, and French-Canadian songs of the colonial period.\(^{39}\) That is, while the Québécois identity was consolidated in the 1960s—before there were only French-Canadians in Québec—French-Canadian songs composed before the 1960s, are retroactively transformed into Québécois songs. This nationalist strategy is even more fascinating when one considers that, as highlighted by the Grand Council of the Crees, in “1867, when Canada [the Confederation] was established, Québec was only one-third of its present size”; its boundaries would be extended again in 1898 and, finally, in 1912 (Grand Council 1998: 98-99). Thus, the nationalist framework of CQ literature unites French-Canadians of the past under the Québécois nation (whether they were actually in one of the aforementioned Québéc or not) while excluding French-Canadians of the present if they live beyond the borders of a post-1912 Québec. While efforts have been made to open up the Québécois to non-French Canadians—the official page of *La fête nationale du Québec*, for instance, invites “*Québécoises et Québécois de toutes origines*”\(^{40}\) to attend the national festivity—I remain skeptical of its success. Having attended *La fête nationale* in 2016 and 2018, I barely saw people of color, and my interactions with Haitian family members born and raised in Québec, seemed to confirm this: they did not identify as Québécois nor Haitian-Québécois.

\(^{39}\) Another key difference between PRNC and CQ is that the latter, despite its parallelisms, is not considered part of Latin American *nueva canción*. CQ is influenced by counterculture and is narrated as being “North American” (see Roy 2008), though, studies of North American counterculture, presumably because of the French language, do not include CQ. Hence, Québec is excluded both from LANC studies and North American countercultural studies on account of its language.

\(^{40}\) [https://www.fetenationale-montreal.qc.ca](https://www.fetenationale-montreal.qc.ca)
Indeed, as noted by Scooter Péram “in previous studies involving Haitian youth, it was found that young Haitians overwhelmingly identified themselves either as being ‘Haitian only’ or ‘Haitian first, Québécois second’ while avoiding full identification with the majority culture” (2012: 61). This is in part due to the fact that “Haitians have a higher poverty rate than the Québec average and they are more likely to live in cramped, substandard apartment housing in crowded neighborhoods located far from the downtown core of Montréal, perhaps spatially disconnecting them from the majority culture” (51). I should clarify, though, that my Haitian family leads a middle-class life in the suburbs, and the Haitians that I interacted with, including my interlocutor Georges Rodriguez, are all middle class.

And yet, redefining who gets to be Québécois is not necessarily a solution. Why should non-whites born in Québec, Anglophones, Allophones and the First Nations accept this designation when the history of Québec, and its struggles, is largely framed as that of white Francophones against Anglophones? Would this not represent a form of coloniality through “inclusion”? In this dissertation, I do not answer these questions which would entail a deeper knowledge of contemporary Québécois society that I simply do not possess but I do raise them in order to problematize the category CQ, and complicate discourses around resistance, Québécois nationalism and solidarity.

Still, when compared to PRNC and LANC studies, CQ studies have been more open to investigating the presence of the other by paying attention to the contributions of the First Nations and immigrants, interethnic relations, and the impact of transnational experiences on musical aesthetics (see Alarie 2008; St. Louis 2010; Warren and Fortin 2015; Villefranche and Bernard 1989; Roy 2008). Moreover, recent 1960s studies about Québec, have been largely invested in re-imagining that time period by countering dominant Québécois nationalistic
narratives that pit a nation of white French-Canadians against a colonizing empire constituted by an English-speaking Canada and the United States. As such these studies seek to erode the Québécois/English-Canadian binary by: looking at Caribbean and Latin American influences in Québécois anticolonial thought (see Brière 2003; Nareau 2014); drawing comparisons between Québec and the Caribbean/Latin America (see Den Tandt 2000; Hastedt 2008); highlighting Third World influences more broadly (Meren 2011; Mills 2010); and unearthing the history of Blacks (Afro-Canadians, Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans) in Québec, and documenting their relations with the Québécois (see Austin 2013; Warren 2014). I am also inspired by Myrtho Ouellette (2006), who has explored the role played by gender in CQ and Jacques Julien who has reflected on the role played by the voice in CQ (1984: 126-150).

Ultimately, though I am indebted to the research found in all three categories, I see my work as being more aligned with the Third Worldist orientation of category one. In the end, similar to my approach to PRNC, I do not want to do away with the anticolonial history of Québec nor be dismissive of its social justice component. I want to interrogate it, open it up to non-national others, pay attention to gender, and allow the ear to unveil decolonial critiques that are less obvious to the eye.

**Postcolonial, decolonial, settler colonial and anticolonial studies**

How do we think about a group of colonized Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican musicians from Puerto Rico who meet in New York City with English-speaking Puerto Rican/Nuyorican poets and diasporic "postcolonial" Argentinians in order to create a band that supports independence and socialism for Puerto Rico? How does my co-composing a salsified PRNC with one of my interlocutors in New York City further erode the nationalist boundaries that frame this

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41 See Handler 1988 for an approach to Québécois struggles that is dismissive of its positive attributes and potentialities.
music? What does it mean when a “postcolonial” Haitian master vodou drummer joins a band of white Francophones in Québec, a 1960s Canadian and US “colony” that was reaffirming its settler colonial power vis-a-vis the Cree and the Inuit? How do we think about a feminist song by a Francophone Québécois woman, that challenges patriarchy by partially reproducing settler colonial tropes? Or about the work of a Black man from French Guiana, a “department” of France, who dedicated much of his life to promoting jazz in Montreal, a music perceived as “Anglophone” and thus as a threat by a Québec invested in affirming its Francophone identity?

A major goal of this project is to bridge the distance that often characterizes schools of the colonial and to question some of their tenets. As noted by Ana María Ochoa, the “postcolonial debate” has largely ignored decolonial studies and decolonizing discourses from Latin America and the Caribbean “beyond the Ibero-American world” or “provincialized” them (2014: 10). Latin American Decolonial studies (from now on LADS) and Postcolonial Studies (PS), for their part, have tended to “provincialize” Caribbean and Latin American anticolonial discourses—a category under which I include figures that predate the “postcolonial” and the “decolonial” (see Fanon 1999 [1961]; Césaire 2014 [1939] but also the anticolonial literature of Puerto Rico and Québec). This “provincialization” entails, in part, downplaying these theoreticians’ critiques of the material violence of colonialism and failing to recognize that their philosophies were informed by their own experiences as Black and colonized subjects (see Maldonado-Torres 2008 for a classic example). Furthermore, although LADS have key allies in Latin America, their position of privilege as part of the Global North has been critiqued—in Spanish—by scholars living in the Global South such as Bolivia- based Aymara mestizo Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2014: 55-86). Settler colonial studies (SCS), on the other hand, deal largely with an Anglophone geography, avoiding theoretical conversations with LADS and anticolonial
studies from Latin America and the Caribbean (for exceptions, see Coulthard 2014). Though, just like LADS and PS, they are located in the Global North, in general, they occupy the lower echelon of the triad.

Given my case studies, I rely on all four bodies of knowledge on the colonial. I rely on LADS because of their emphasis on modernity as a sixteenth century phenomenon linked to the Conquest of the Americas (a discourse, that implicitly informs anticolonial discourses of Québec in Puerto Rico via French and Spaniard colonization, though Québec, despite being “discovered” in 1534 is excluded from LADS). I also use this corpus because of its attempt to carve a theoretical space on the colonial that transcends the Anglophone geography emblematic of postcolonial and settler colonial studies (see Quijano 2000; Dussel 1992; Mignolo 1996, 2011). Still, I stray from LADS insofar as they emphasize “a theoretical global standpoint and grand historical meta-narrative about injustice” that neglects the importance of empirical approaches to knowledge and the particularities of local histories (Pappas 2017) (for exceptions see Ochoa 2014).

Although PS anchor their notion of modernity and the colonial in the British industrial revolution—often reduced to the nineteenth century despite its imbrication with the colonial history of the Americas (see Williams 1944)—they still offer indispensable insights for my project. First, contrary to LADS, PS have addressed Québec’s anticolonial discourse (see Mills 2010, 2016). Second, although Stuart Hall has highlighted the chronological dimension of the postcolonial by arguing that it “describe[s] or characterize[s] the shift in global relations which marks the (necessarily uneven) transition from the Age of Empires to the post-independence or post-decolonisation moment” (1996: 246), there is a rich array of works by historians and anthropologists within postcolonial studies that focus on the non-independent Caribbean, and
“the new relations and dispositions of power” that emerge (Hall 1996: 246) as colonial countries enter a postcolonial time without necessarily dismissing pro-independence narratives (Wilder 2015; Scott 2004). Also, PS tend to deal in depth with the analysis of cultural artifacts and their relation to the colonial (Said 1978; Bhabha 1994; Gilroy 1993), and embrace the national/local historical archive more forcefully than LADS (Chakrabarty 2000). Still, as Fanon’s biographer David Macey has noted, PS, not unlike LADS, by focusing on epistemological and ontological critiques, have “inverted [the] image of the ‘revolutionary Fanon’ of the 1960s” downplaying the role that violence played in his theorization and life (2000: 25-30). Though my work is clearly invested in investigating how the epistemological is sounded out, by not neglecting anticolonial studies and their material concerns, I am hoping to achieve a better balance regarding how coloniality is manifested in still-colonial locations. I am aided in this effort by incorporating SCS.

SCS, after all—like anticolonial studies from the Caribbean, Puerto Rico and Québec—are keen to highlight that there is nothing “post” about the colonial: colonialism remains a current reality even in these “postcolonial” times. They also emphasize the material day to day violence of colonialism (see Grand Council of the Crees 1998 and Nungak 2017). Finally, they are heavily invested in claiming the right to land while defending the right to decide how modernity ought to be conceived and lived by indigenous groups of the Americas (see the aforementioned sources but also Reed 2009; Richardson 1975; Coté 2007; Fellezs 2019). Though none of my interlocutors are Indigenous, reading these studies along with Québécois and Puerto Rican anticolonial literature is paramount, particularly for Québec, a settler colonizing country.

42 For more on the differences between LADS and PS see Bhamba 2014 and Castro-Gómez 2008.
While my work partakes from and contributes to these bodies of knowledge, the way in which I do so is informed by ethnomusicology, and, particularly, sound studies.

As noted by Jonathan Sterne, sound studies “is a name for the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival. By analyzing sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that describe them, it redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world” (2012: 2). An offshoot of soundscape studies (see Schafer 1977; Ihde 2007), according to Sterne, sound studies is also about contesting the narratives of: a) technology as autonomous and independent from culture; b) sound as transhistorical and natural; and c) the “audiovisual litany” that links seeing and hearing to cliched attributes of interiority/exteriority, deep/superficial, spherical/directional and so forth (Sterne 2003). My dissertation partakes of “b” and “c,” but I do not really dwell on the relationship between sound and technology, which is so central to sound studies (see Novak 2013; Brady 1999). Within sound studies, though, I see my work as being aligned with a particular and rather marginal strain of this body of knowledge. In his edited volume The Sound Studies Reader (2012), Sterne includes Ana María Ochoa, Michael Veal, and Frantz Fanon—all scholars of color invested in thinking sound and the decolonial—and white scholars engaged in similar approaches to knowledge (see Meintjes 2003; Feld 1982). But I also think about sound with ethnomusicologists not typically associated with sound studies whose works, nevertheless, focus on sound (see Washburne 2008; Dauphin 2018; Guilbault 2007).

My work is also in dialogue with sound studies insofar as it is enriched by the feminist approach to sound developed by Mladen Dolar (2006) and Adriana Cavarero (2005)—authors who are also included in the Sound Studies Reader—and scholars who, despite not belonging to Sound Studies have made invaluable contributions to the study of sound/voice, gender and
colonialism (see Fiol-Matta 2016). In this regard, my work is part of on-going ethnomusicological tradition that since at least the 1980s has blended music analysis and feminism (see Koskoff 1987; Sugarman 1997) at times paying attention to how these are impacted by postcolonial realities (see Weidman 2006: 111-149). Thus, in the end, I think with/through what could called “decolonial sound studies” (see also Jiménez 2014; Kheshti 2015).

Thinking the decolonial with the ear is important for myriad reasons that are made obvious throughout my work and in the following section. Suffice it to say that the information that arises from an analysis of sound and music differs from the one offered by the analysis of the written word. As noted by Marx “to the eye an object comes to be other than it is to the ear” (1978: 88). While I focus both on logos and phono, my key site of intervention lies in the encounter between the two and the critical mind of the interlocutor (see below). The human being, after all, “is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with all his senses” (Marx 1988: 108).

**Methodological-Theoretical Considerations**

In addition to archival research in the Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec, Lázaro Library at the University of Puerto Rico, the Tamiment/Wagner Archives Main Collection at New York University, the Smithsonian Institute, Le Centre International de Documentation et d'Information Haïtienne, Caribéenne et Afro-canadienne and the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, my project is informed by dozens of oral history interviews and my own collection of PRNC and CQ LPs.
While historical research has been central to my work, two ethnomusicological/anthropological methodological techniques have been key to my work: bi-musicality and theorizing with the informant.

Mantle Hood’s method of bi-musicality, a technique whereby one acquires knowledge about a culture by learning to play a musical instrument with one of the members of that culture, was fundamental to my fieldwork though I have applied this technique with significant alterations. While Mantle Hood, a white ethnomusicologist, used bi-musicality in order to learn about the musical universe of “traditional” “authentic” “ethnic” others, I have applied it to explore the cosmopolitan worldview of musicians interested in creolizing traditions often not of their own. For instance, with Québécois multi-instrumentalist Sylvain Leroux, I took lessons on how to play the tambin, the flute of the Fulani people in West Africa, in an effort to understand his take on Black music and culture and Vallières’s notion of “nègre blanc.” In a sense, then, I reversed Mantle Hood’s logic insofar as here, it is was an “ethnic” Puerto Rican “other” who was applying bi-musicality in order to understand the worldview of a white man or at best a “nègre blanc” (see chapter nine). I also applied this technique when working with PRNC and salsa singer-songwriter and producer Frank Ferrer. In this case, bi-musicality involved composing songs with him, an exercise that required that I learn how to compose songs following the logic of the 3-2 son clave that is so central to salsa. This, in turn, allowed me to better understand how Ferrer had entwined music, poetry and politics in the 1960s and 1970s (see chapter ten).

Working with Nuyorican poet Jesus Papoleto Meléndez, on the other hand, involved another variation of bi-musicality. Here, we set music together to one of his poems. This gave me a better understanding of the relationship that he saw between music, sound, poetry and
politics; an understanding that informed my analysis of “Superpig,” a poem that he recorded with Puerto Rican-Argentinian *nueva canción* band El Grupo in 1973 (see chapter five).

These acts of bi-musicality were not only intellectually enriching: they also contributed towards creating spaces of intimacy that led to blurring the dichotomy interlocutor/friend, a fact that I emphasize in several chapters. In this regard, and considering my decolonial approach, my “desire” has not been to play music with others in order “to comprehend a particular Oriental musical expression” so that my “observations and analysis as a musicologist do not prove to be embarrassing” (Hood 1960: 58). Despite my idiosyncratic application of this technique, though, I acknowledge that I follow in a long tradition of ethnomusicological studies (see Feld 1982: 232-233; Stokes 1992; Washburne 2008).

Other fieldwork “techniques” that I associate with bi-musicality include: my setting of music to poetry written by my interlocutors and sharing these songs with them (this was the case with Boicel and Meléndez); playing music with them (true for Boicel, Meléndez, Leroux, Ferrer Palombo, Montañez, and Pardo); sharing my own songs and the Puerto Rican *cuatro* (true for all); listening to music recommended by them and sharing music back (true for all); and listening to their songs together as a means to better comprehend the formal aspects of a piece and what these songs meant to them. The latter is particularly salient in my chapters on Boicel, Ferrer, El Grupo, Rodriguez, and Marie-Claire Séguin, though it informs all chapters. Showcasing my role as a musician and singer-songwriter played a pivotal role. Most of my interlocutors were suspicious of scholars. Showing them that I was also an artist who shared similar musical-poetic-political sensibilities was fundamental in overcoming this suspicion.

Finally, sharing my own life played a pivotal role. Often my daughter Gabriela, today seven, would be in the “field” with me. This often led my interlocutors to reminiscence about
their role as parents back in the 1970s when their children were around her age. Suddenly, I was not only Mario the researcher and singer-songwriter but Mario, the father of a cute and well-behaved Puerto Rican-Haitian girl. Those interlocutors who lived in or visited New York City (Ferrer, Meléndez, Esteves, Palombo, Montañez, Pardo, Leroux, Vachon) all came to my home in Morningside Heights at least once. Then, Gabriela would show them her toys or they would ask about books and toys that they had gifted her, and my wife Edline would engage in lively conversations with them as I cooked some typical Puerto Rican dish. But Gabriela was also my fieldwork assistant in Montreal, where she met Boicel and Rodriguez.

Though this expansive notion of bi-musicality was central to this project, the key methodological technique applied consisted in “theorizing with my interlocutors,” as noted at the beginning of this introduction. An approach taken by myriad anthropologists and ethnomusicologists albeit in their own ways, this is inexorably linked to my central argument: “theorizing with your interlocutors” means empowering your interlocutors as much as possible and refusing to reify any given theoretician or theory. Because my interlocutors are widely read and intellectuals in their own right—most of them hold undergraduate and graduate degrees and those who lack these credentials are autodidacts—theorizing with them was quite literal.

Throughout my fieldwork, my interlocutors recommended books of poetry and literature, history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and religion/spirituality, that they believed would help me to better understand them or the 1960s and 1970s. Among the authors that they recommended were Carl and Emma Jung, Engels, novelist Enrique Laguerre, sociologist Angel Quintero Rivera, Québécois anthropologists Serge Bouchard and Marie-Christine Lévesque, literary critic

44 Boicel has even published several books that I discuss in chapter one.
Carmen Dolores Hernández, First Nation poet Joséphine Bacon, Leon Gontran-Damas, and the Puerto Rican poets Clemente Soto Vélez and Angelamaría Dávila, among others. All of this informs my dissertation at times quite explicitly. By talking about these books with them (bi-literacy?), I learned more about them and was able to demonstrate just how seriously I took them. Of course, it was impossible to read everything but it is no hyperbole to say that the reading load of the last two years, was no less than the one that I had during my graduate studies.

As I narrate in detail in most of my chapters, the object of study selected, and the ways in which I approached it, was largely the result of a negotiation with my interlocutors. Writing about your interlocutors should not be a one-way avenue. To the extent possible one should strive to write with one’s interlocutors. As Anthony Seeger has noted, “researchers must respond to the desires, or demands, of the group with whom they are doing research” (2004: 138). The researcher should be open to his interlocutors’ concerns, and try to meet them somewhere in between. Of course, where one meets will depend on the objective of the research and the capabilities/training of the researcher. For instance, my chapter on Boicel dwells largely (but not only) on a book that he published in 1979. Boicel was adamant that I should write about this book, and I agreed that doing so was important. But during our conversations Boicel insisted that I should write about how his book had contributed to pedagogy, communication studies and music/arts therapy, and my training in ethnomusicology/anthropology was not conducive to this. While, as previously noted, throughout my fieldwork I was eager to read my interlocutors’ reading recommendations, what Boicel was asking from me was tantamount to changing my degree. And so, while I wrote about this book, I focused on how Boicel sounded out the decolonial, linking it to his contributions as a composer and a jazz producer.
Theorizing with my interlocutors has also meant that I take into account their own critical views and put these in dialogue with my own and those of other scholars. That is, I treat them not only as music-makers but thinkers. Throughout, I either build upon their ideas, nuance them, critique them, outright reject them, partially accept them, or mobilize them in order to problematize scholarly discourse. Neither a hagiographic approach nor a destructive deconstructionist approach, I engage in friendly constructive criticism allowing their own ideas to impact my own even showcasing at times my own limitations.

Finally, “theorizing with my interlocutors” has involved having them read drafts of my chapters and incorporating their feedback (see chapter two and seven through ten). At times, this has led to significant alterations as I try to negotiate my expectations, those of my interlocutors and those of my mentor. I cannot say that I have been always successful at satisfying all three parties. At times, I have let go of some things that were dear to me but that did not make sense in the light of new information provided by my interlocutors. In other occasions, the information provided only confirmed my analysis even if my interlocutor’s intention was to challenge it. More often than not, though, these exchanges led to much nuance; it was also a humbling experience as I realized how much more I still needed to learn about my interlocutors, even those whom I have known since 2013. Some of my critical assessments stung; I got lost in translation with some of my Québécois interlocutors; I made interpretative mistakes; I rewrote and asked for their comments again; I incorporated new insights; I treated them with respect, which is how one should treat one’s elders, but kept my ground when unconvinced. At that point, I could only hope that our friendship would outlast our differences. I believe that this is the case. But only time will tell.
Though I think that my interlocutors are more satisfied than not with the end result, I know that I have fallen short of their expectations in one way or another. I find this to be logical and unavoidable. My chapters are quite biographical, and there is a distance between how my interlocutors see their lives and listen to their works, and how I see them and listen. I have not written from their end of the bridge (it is impossible). I have not written from my end of the bridge (how would I see or hear them?). I have written from different points of that bridge making sure to look left and right, up and down, taking note of the things that they see when they look in the “same” directions. In the end, I have aimed for a balance to the best of my abilities. But I have also made peace with the fact that, as with all good songs, some degree of dissonance should be welcome.
Chapter 1: Listening to Québec’s 1960s and 1970s with Rouè Doudou Boicel: Sound, Jazz and Decoloniality

To Yolande Lessard and Barbara Gapmann

On October 24th, 2018 I met jazz promoter and producer Rouè Doudou Boicel at his home in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, a middle-class district of Montreal with a major Anglophone population. My encounter with the multifaceted French Guyanese Francophone (he is also a painter, a poet, and a composer) was rather fortuitous. A few days before, I had stopped by Le Centre International de Documentation et d'Information Haïtienne, Caribéenne et Afro-canadienne (CIDIHCA), an archive and publishing house dedicated to the documentation of Black culture and history in Canada. My goal was to learn more about the history of interactions between Black and Québécois musicians throughout the 1960s and early 1980s. As I began to articulate my thoughts in a heavily Spanish-accented French, I was promptly interrupted by the director of CIDIHCA, Haitian scholar Frantz Voltaire, who—in nearly flawless Spanish—began to provide me the names, emails and biographic sketches of Black musicians and music scholars in Montreal.45 He then handed me a book by Haitian-born writer Stanley Péan entitled Toute la ville en jazz (1999).

Skimming through its pages, I came across a paragraph that caught my attention. According to Péan, “a Montrealer of Guyanese origins called Rouè Boicel” had founded the jazz club the Rising Sun in 1975 five years after he arrived in Montreal (35; my translation). Boicel, he continued, had learned about “one of the most dynamic Francophone communities” thanks to Gilles Vigneault—the prolific and well-known singer-songwriter of the anthem-like chanson québécoise classic “Mon pays”—whom he met in Paris in the 1960s. Péan concluded: Boicel

45 Among the music scholars was musicologist Claude Dauphin whose help was fundamental in my understanding of Québec and the Black experience in the province. See chapter three for more on Dauphin.
“debarks in Montreal during the October Crisis of 1970\(^{46}\) and immediately feels in solidarity
with the ‘Nègres blancs d’Amérique’ whose aspirations to national sovereignty correspond to his
own” (35; my translation).\(^{47}\) While Boicel’s relationship with the Québécois—or what
revolutionary Pierre Vallières (1968) called nègres blancs in order to highlight their colonial
subordination vis-à-vis Anglo-Canada and the US—was more complex than Péan granted, he
had succeeded in piquing my curiosity. Eager to learn more about this Afro-Caribbean/South
American’s relationship with Québécois anticolonial history, I went to La Bibliothèque nationale
du Québec, where I discovered that Boicel was also a prolific author. And so, I sent him a
message through Facebook.

I had expected a brief meeting with the octogenarian founder of the Festijazz, the first
international jazz and blues festival of Montreal celebrated in 1978—and a precursor to the
Montreal International Jazz Festival. I imagined myself explaining my dissertation project,
buying his books and playing some songs with my cuatro, Puerto Rico’s national guitar, as a
way of making the encounter less transactional—and fingers crossed—perhaps even friendly.
Instead, the meeting lasted over and hour and a half. During the rendezvous, Boicel showed me
pictures of African American jazz and blues stars, such as Ray Charles and Nina Simone
performing at his club, the Rising Sun, stressing his Pan-African pride. He explained several of
his paintings, which adorned the walls of his apartment: some a commentary on colonialism,
others representations of naked women; read out loud selections from his books on sexuality and
on his life as a polygamist—according to Boicel, God first created three lesbians: one white, one

\(^{46}\) During the crise d’octobre the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnapped British trade commissioner James
Cross and Québec Labor minister Pierre Laporte. As a consequence, the War Measures Act of 1970 was passed
whereby civil liberties and judicial rights were suspended.

\(^{47}\) All translations, unless indicated, are of my authorship. This includes Boicel’s comments during my fieldwork
which are largely based on my fieldnotes.
yellow, one red (2003:1); underlined how Blacks in Montreal tended to dislike the sexual explicitness of his writings—ascribing this prudishness to the legacies of colonialism; and highlighted how, despite Québécois nationalism and anti-Black racism, just that year, in 2018, the city of Montreal had named him Chevalier de l’Ordre de Montréal.48

Towards the end, I proceeded to take out the cuatro. I was about to play when Boicel, commenting on the appearance of my cuatro, remarked that it belonged in a museum. I was immediately struck by his visual acumen. According to my friend, artisan/luthier Miguel Acevedo, my cuatro was made in the 1970s. In this regard, it was in effect a museum piece: an object worthy of preservation. I had barely played one note when Boicel was again “interrupting” me and commenting on the unique quality of the steel-stringed sound and on the unexpected sound projection of the instrument—considering its size, my cuatro is indeed pretty loud. Finally, after these preambles, I got a chance to perform. I sang “Negro,” a poem by Langston Hughes that speaks to the oppression of African Americans and that I set music to in a rock-blues style: “I’ve been a slave/Mama told me to keep your doorsteps clean/I brushed the boots of Washington. . . I’ve been a singer/All the way from Africa to Georgia/I carried my sorrow songs/I made ragtime.” As I sang, Boicel closed his eyes taking in the sounds. When I finished, he asked me: “What are you doing here?! You should be pursuing a career!” Luckily for me and my dissertation, it was a rhetorical question.

Next, I played an instrumental version of the seis mapeyé, a Puerto Rican folkloric piece, part of the jíbaro (peasant) repertoire. While I had expected to connect ideologically and musically with Boicel when I played “Negro,” the ways in which the seis mapeyé resonated with him were rather unexpected. Boicel fell in love with this flamenco-sounding tune for reasons that

were unclear to me. Only later would I learn why. As it turned out, Boicel had composed a song entitled “Boléro Boléro,” which happened to be in the same key (A minor) and whose part A followed the same harmonic progression (Am, G, F, E7) of the Andalusian-inflected *seis mapeyé*, whose organizing rhythmic cell is the Afro-Caribbean *habanera*. (Currently, the song is being orchestrated by Chilean arranger Victor Duran—the conductor of Boicel’s 1980s band The Rising Sun Afro-Jazz Orchestra—based on my transcription). As my fieldwork year unfolded, I set music to five poems written by Boicel, among them “Poème pour Yolande,” which he wrote for his wife Yolande Lessard, often credited as a collaborator in Boicel’s books (see Boicel 2017, 2015, 1979). So enthusiastic was he about this song, that he had me sing it over the phone to her. Hence, my first encounter with this Québécoise was through sound. Only later, on January 27th, 2019 would I have a visual experience of Lessard when I had the honor of performing this song during a homage to Boicel at *La Maison d’Haïti* thanks to the kind invitation of Haitian-Québécoise Maguy Métellus.49

As I had hypothesized in my dissertation proposal, bringing my *cuatro* into the “field” had played a significant role in what, as time passed by, turned into a friendship. Contrary to my assumption, though, the *cuatro*’s efficacy was *not only* due to its mediation of melodies, lyrics and decolonial ideas—as manifested in “Negro”—*but also* to its qualities as a visual and sound-producing object. As I left Boicel’s apartment—knowing that I would return—I gave him ninety-five Canadian dollars, and he handed me five books of his authorship: one on poetry, two on sexuality, one on jazz, and another one that he was particularly proud of, *La Visosonie: une nouvelle approche pour réussir*.

49 Maguy Métellus describes herself as a Haitian-Québécoise Afro-feminist and pro-Québec independence activist. Along with Frantz Voltaire, Claude Dauphin and Québécois ethnomusicologist Gérald Côté, she was central in shaping my fieldwork experience. She was animating Boicel’s homage.
Published in Montreal in 1979, La Visosonie is a reflection on Boicel’s experiences as the director of the Centre de Visosonie—a drop-in centre for the disadvantaged Francophone youth of Montreal between the ages of eight and seventeen (2015: 21) that operated between 1971 and 1974. Reminiscent of Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth (1961) and Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968), and influenced by Marshal McLuhan’s Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964), La Visosonie proposes the application of creative arts therapy in order to help this youth heal/communicate, challenging in the process Western epistemologies (particularly pedagogy and psychology) and a capitalist société technologique. Based on these experiences and his own positionality as a Black colonized man of humble origins, Boicel articulates a decolonial theory that is largely mediated through sound and jazz, the word “visosonie” being a composite of “vision” and “sound” (son in French). Contesting the “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration” (Maldonado Torres 2007: 243), Boicel’s decolonial theory both overlaps and contests dominant Québécois anticolonial discourses of its time. For example, while Boicel, not unlike Pierre Vallières (1968), projects the white Francophone youth that attends the Centre de Visosonie as part of the “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) of the Third World, contrary to Vallières the Third World is not envisioned as the coming together of a series of nation-states: Boicel is concerned with the city of Montreal, not Québec as a nation. Furthermore, contrary to Benedict Anderson, Boicel’s “imagined community” is not mediated through print culture, but primordially through sound and jazz.

In this chapter, then, I engage in a detailed analysis of La Visosonie drawing links between it and Boicel’s more recent works and experiences related to over a year of fieldwork
with the author. How did Boicel sound out decoloniality? What was the role of jazz? Because *La Visosonie* is inextricably intertwined with Boicel’s ideas about sexuality—as a lived experience and as a topic of reflection (see Boicel 2003, 2017)—I discuss as well how this shapes his sonic decolonial imaginary. Having established the links between *La Visosonie* and jazz—and the Black Arts Movement more widely—I then proceed to show how Boicel’s role as a producer and promoter of jazz in the late 1970s, right around the time he published *La Visosonie*, led him to clash with Québécois nationalism. This, in turn, helps us to understand why he “effaced” Québec as a nation from *La Visosonie*. I conclude by calling for a revisitation of the musics of resistance of the Québec of the 1960s and 1970s in the light of Boicel’s (and other marginalized) sonic experiences. My overall argument is that Boicel’s sounds and jazz, and his decolonial critiques, open the door towards rethinking what it meant to resist in the Québec of that time period.

**Anticolonialism and Decoloniality in *La Visosonie***

*La Visosonie* is a rallying call against Eurocentrism. It specifically takes issue with Western education and psychology. Not unlike Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968)—and its redefinition of the relationship between student and teacher with the goal of achieving social justice—*La Visosonie* is a critique of Eurocentric pedagogy, particularly “banking education.” According to Boicel the *visosonie* seeks to “end the repression of sensorial sensibilities” reproduced by an educational system that imposes a limited and homogenous framework upon children (53; my translation). In the *avant-propos*, Québécois anthropologist Gilles Bibeau, argues that *La Visosonie* also challenges the disciplinary constraints of the university where the human being is broken up into pieces, each piece being assigned to a different discipline (16). In this regard, *La Visosonie* is an interdisciplinary approach to the study
of the human being, and an implicit critique to how a nineteenth century scientific paradigm has continued to inform the social sciences and humanities (see Wallerstein 2008 [1991]).

Boicel’s critical views on the academy are intertwined with his own positionality as a Black man of humble origins born and raised in French Guiana, a colony-turned-department of France in 1946, where he was taught that his “ancestors were the Gauls” (1979: 24; my translation). Not unlike many of my interlocutors, Boicel views the academy as supporting and reproducing Eurocentric/colonial ideas. In fact, establishing a rapport with Boicel, consisted in part, in proving my “anti-academic credentials.” For this, my skills as a musician and singer-songwriter were key. Sharing “I Got My NYU Card,” an original song where I mock the snobbishness of an academic bubble in which we “rebel against society and oppressive forms of speech” hoping to be “rewarded” with our “own private beach,” persuaded him of my shared sympathies with him. Amidst laughter, Boicel exclaimed, “That’s me!” meaning that he agreed with my biting critique. Of course, as a scholar myself, I was compelled to tell Boicel that there were a host of scholars who had been (and are) engaged in making decolonial critiques and who are concerned with social justice.

Not unlike Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth (1961)—an anticolonial theorization informed by the Martinican’s psychiatric case studies from war-torn Algeria—La Visosonie is also a critique of Western psychology based on Boicel’s case studies. According to Boicel, liberation takes place through healing/communication (I will return to this later). Similar to Fanon, for Boicel an individual’s subjectivity is better understood in the light of his socio-cultural context (84). But the socio-cultural context that Boicel constructs for the white Francophone youth that attends his Centre de Visosonie, is quite idiosyncratic. Paying attention
to it allows us to see (and hear) how this construct overlaps and collides with dominant Québécois anticolonial discourses of its time.

Published three years after René Lévesque and the pro-independence Parti Québécois had come to power, and amidst the propaganda for and against independence related to the upcoming 1980 referendum, not once in La Vissonie does Boicel use the word “Québécois” (or French Canadian for that matter). To the largely white Francophone youth that arrives at the Centre de Vissonie Boicel refers to as “individus”, “enfants”, “jeunes”… That Boicel was aware of the term “Québécois” seems to be indisputable. One of the posters used in his jazz club, the Rising Sun, in 1976 to promote the group Quintonal Jazz, for example, described the band as “les meilleures talents québécois” (2015: 34). The absence, then, represents a disavowal of Québécois nationalism that is reaffirmed in the fact that the word “Québec” is only mentioned once, and as a province of Canada (62). This contrasts with his later works, where the categories “Québec” and “Québécois” are recognized, although Boicel remains critical of Québécois nationalism, and against independence—a stance mostly related to his own experiences enduring discrimination in Montreal, as I will later show. The preferred category in La Vissonie is not the nation of Québec but the city of Montreal. But insofar as Montreal is envisioned through the experience of vulnerable white Francophones, it is narrated as belonging to the Third World, which in turn brings it very close to Vallières’s Nègres blancs d’Amérique. Boicel writes:

Je suis originaire de la Guyana française où j’ai vécu pendant vingt ans. Dans ce département français greffé à un système colonialiste, on m’a appris que mes ancêtres étaient des Gaulois. On nous faisait chanter la Marseillaise à l’arrivée et au départ de l’école. . . Mon enfance fut confrontée à des restrictions imposées par l’origine sociale; je ne pus pas par exemple avoir accès à des cours de théâtre, ceux-ci étant réservés aux

50 Boicel’s assessment of French Guiana being a colony of France despite being a department, is similar to his take on Martinique. Having visited the Caribbean island in 1964, he wrote: “Je n’imaginais pas trouver d’une façon aussi flagrante les vestiges de l’esclavage dans la vie des Martiniquais” (Boicel 2003:40). Indeed, as various Caribbeanists have shown, France’s Caribbean departments are rather colonial even today (see Ramos 2016; Wilder 2015; Bonilla 2015).
Boicel’s attempt to help the marginalized Francophones of Montreal by drawing on his own experiences as a Black colonized Third World subject, implicitly posits them as analogous. He reaffirms these links later on by stating that his experiences at the Centre de Visosonie could contribute towards changing educational and psychological approaches in the “developing countries” (84). In the preface of La Visosonie, the prolific writer from the Central African Republic Makombo Bamboté, makes the connections between young “Montréalais” and Third World colonial subjects even more forcefully. Bamboté writes that “the young Montréalais [my emphasis] thrown in the arms of criminality” were not “notoriously different” from the African American youth who were sent to the electric chair or hung for committing “minor sins” (20; my translation).

Such views are reminiscent of Vallières, who developed his anticolonial theory thinking with Third World theoreticians such as Fanon and Césaire, and who, not unlike Boicel, emphasized his childhood poverty. Although Vallières is not mentioned once in La Visosonie, Boicel was most likely aware of his ideas. In 2015 Boicel remembered that upon his arrival in Montreal he “got the impression that Québec had been living like a hippie for a good number of years; it was the Third World of North America”, adding that “the title of Pierre Vallières’s famous book, White Niggers of America, says it all” (2015:15). It would be a mistake, however, to read La Visosonie as an offshoot of Nègres blancs d’Amérique. For while Vallières eschews

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51 His findings “obligent spécifiquement les Occidentaux à une réflexion et à une remise en question des matériels éducatifs qu’ils offrent aux pays en voie de développement (y compris les tests psychologiques et les manuels scolaires)” (84).


53 All translations related to Boicel 2015 represent the labor of Barbara Gapmann.
cultural nationalism, particularly Catholic influences (see 1994 [1968]: 74), choosing to embrace instead political nationalism as a means to end colonialism in Québec, Boicel disavows nationalism in general. As noted, “Québec” as a nation, is absent in La Visosonie. There is only Montreal. Moreover, whereas Vallières views Montreal as a largely homogenous city that is a part of a largely homogenous nation to be decolonized in solidarity with the nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America, and oppressed peoples such as African Americans, diasporic Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos, for Boicel, Montreal is a multiethnic space that exists in and of itself. While those who attended the centre were overwhelmingly white Francophones, the city’s multiethnic composition is affirmed not only in the author’s origins, or those of Bamboté, but in the inclusion of photos of African American jazz and blues musicians who performed at the Rising Sun. Finally, while childhood poverty is central to both Boicel’s and Vallières’s anticolonialism, which in turn leads both to engage in a critique of capitalism, Boicel—contrary to Vallières—refrains from embracing socialism. Rather, he posits his ideas as being beyond both the left and the right:

Je veux encore rappeler que ce travail sur la visosonie informationelle est le fruit d’une analyse personnelle. J’entends signifier par là que je refuse les étiquettes, je refuse qu’on de toute idéologie politique, qu’elle se situe à droite ou à gauche Ma recherche ne relève pas du désir d’appuyer ou de renflouer une ‘école’ ou une idéologie… (85-86)

Clearly, then, Boicel is not really concerned with Québécois anticolonialism—or with the founding of the independent nation of Québec. As it pertains to “the province of Québec,” he is rather concerned with social class inequality and decoloniality. For Boicel, the white Francophone youth that attends the centre is oppressed not because they speak French or were conquered by the British in 1759-1761—as anticolonial Québécois would argue; nor only because of their social class. They are oppressed because of the combined forces of Western colonial epistemologies and an environnement technologique that, mediated through a capitalist
society, leads to the consumption of superficial “gadgets” (85). This brings us to another major influence in *La Visosonie*: Marshal McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964).

If Fanon, Freire, and Vallières are implied in the text, the Canadian media theorist is actually quoted by the author. Boicel begins Chapter One by stating that “*les médias sont le prolongement de l’être humain*” (31).\(^{54}\) In this regard, *La Visosonie* is concerned with reestablishing the communication that the *société technologique* has destroyed with the complicity of capitalism, pedagogy and psychology. According to Boicel, the use of modern technology “unconsciously” destroys humanity (28). As an example, he notes how, because of speculation in urban development, families are forced to relocate and “*trois ans après, le quartier entièrement rénové et automatisé est proposé au public ignorant tout ce changement auquel il est entièrement étranger*” (27-28). Those who are able to must then totally change their way of life, their customs and their modes of communication, letting the banks, credit lenders, supermarkets and *les centres de loisirs ‘lucratifs’* think for them (28). But *La Visosonie* is not anti-technological. Both theory and practice at the *Centre de Visosonie* are informed by technology in myriad ways.

Trained as an electrician, Boicel calls *dynamoshomme* the interactions or forms of communications that take place within an individual,\(^ {55}\) between individuals, and between the individual and the environment (which includes nature and technology). According to Boicel (1979: 32), an individual’s full psychological, spiritual, cultural and socio-political development

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\(^{54}\) In fact, Boicel’s inscription of Montreal as part of the Third World might be a McLuhan influence as well: “But with electric media Western man himself experiences exactly the same inundation as the remote native. . . We are as numb in our new electric world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture” (1994 [1964]: 16).

\(^{55}\) Boicel designates them as: *le moi-média, le moi-culturel, le moi-absolu, le moi-constructif, le moi-destructif, le moi-protecteur, le moi-medium and le moi-génétique.*
is dependent on the opening-up of these channels of communication. Drawing an analogy with an electrical motor, he describes the environment as the stator, and the human being as the rotor. Whereas the former is “fixed,” the rotor (human being) moves in the interior of the stator. In order for electricity to emerge, there must be communication between the stator and the rotor (31-32). It is this communication which leads to the development of the human being and which is being threatened by the “société technologique” and its allies, capitalism and Western/colonial epistemologies. The “fixed” nature of the stator (environment), however, would seem to be relative given the Centre de Visosonie’s decolonial investment in altering the environment for the better. Boicel’s analogy shouldn’t be understood neither as a mechanistic understanding of the human being. According to Boicel, there are three types of communication: inter-individual, free, and artificial. Whereas inter-individual communication refers to communication between individuals, free communication involves a form of communication that is not affected by technology, and where those involved engage in a rapport that “does not produce a brutal modification of nature” (43). It can be between humans, humans and nature, or nature and nature. Artificial communication refers to that between objects created by technology (cars, buildings) or between those objects and humans (45). Since recorded sounds are central to the therapies provided at the Centre de Visosonie, the case studies discussed by Boicel fall under the category of “artificial communication”.

But what exactly was the role of sound and jazz at the centre?

**Sound and Jazz in La visosonie**

During the therapeutic session, the child—the “induit”—is exposed to pre-recorded sounds or a “source of induction.” Boicel describes these sounds as long, short, high-pitched, low-pitched, of “medium intensity” and with varying frequencies (72; my translation); they are
related to nature, technology, and humans. The interaction between the “induit” and the “source of induction” is meant to produce creativity: having perceived the sound, the child “tends to identify it and associate it with a producer of sound” (70; my translation). For example, the sound of a hammer hitting a surface will be related to a hammer, the cooing of a pigeon will be related to a pigeon, and so forth. Boicel acknowledges that some sounds may be alien to the child’s cultural environment, and that these can create confusion at the interpretative level. Still, he underlines that if they do not generate stress, they can motivate the child’s creativity by tapping into his psychological life and making him aware of his connection to nature and technology (the environment) and other humans (73). Later on, the child is expected to talk about his family life and to “transpose” this sonorous information into an “interpretation” that helps him or her heal. This interpretation can be vocal, gesture-based/bodily, or graphic. The child is given crayons, paint, audio and videotapes, so he can engage in a creative process.

In this scheme, sounds that are technologically mediated are portrayed as “healing.” “Healing,” in turn, means to communicate. And communication is achieved through “transposition”: by transforming creative objects and experiences into different sonorous, visual or bodily objects/experiences. McLuhan’s influence is palpable here:

In this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness. That is what is meant when we say that we daily know more and more about man. We mean that we can translate more and more of ourselves into other forms of expression that exceed ourselves. (1994 [1964]: 57)

While Boicel calls this “transposition” (73), that this is more or less equivalent to “translation” was revealed to me on February 5, 2019. Having sung for him and his official translator and close friend Barbara Gapmann two poems of his authorship that I set music to, Boicel said approvingly, “Only a poet could translate my works like that.” The implication was that setting
music to his poetry was an act of translation or transposition. (Gapmann added, “Well, I guess that makes me a poet too! Right, Boicel?”). Boicel’s painting Mathieu Da Costa (1994) exhibited in Victoria Hall’s gallery in 2005 (see the Westmount Times Magazine 2005)—and which hung on his living-room wall as we spoke—is also a testament to this. In the painting the “mulatto or freed black man” and interpreter Mathieu Da Costa, who “apparently came to New France in 1603. . . with Samuel de Champlain” (Voltaire 2007: 15-17), is portrayed translating a conversation between an Indigenous man and a European colonizer. Boicel has continued to apply these techniques throughout the decades, including in his own compositions.

On March 5th, 2019 Boicel played a home recording for me that I would soon learn was inextricably tied to La Visosonie. In the piece, a harmonica and the clave (the two-stick percussion instrument emblematic of Afro-Caribbean music) accompany a female voice that, in a lower register and rather piano, “sings” sounds of sexual pleasure. Some measures later, the voice moans in a steady crescendo. As the minor percussion, now mainly congas, becomes more intense, the voice moans in a higher pitch and forte. Presumably reaching her climax, the woman then exclaims, in English, “Oh darling” and begins to scream, exhale, and cry. Then the voice goes silent, and an instrumental interlude takes place. A male voice emerges talking gibberish as the instruments quiet down. The female voice begins to moan again, and a male voice sings “Soleil”—the melody of another composition by Boicel, and a word that evokes his jazz club the Rising Sun. She exclaims, “Moi, je t’aime” and concludes her musical intervention with a final cadenza of orgasmic vocalises as a male preacher’s voice in the background leads to a brief “polyphony.” As ethnomusicologist Claude Dauphin kindly noted, having read a prior draft of this chapter, it is impossible to listen to this «sans penser à la célèbre chanson de Serge Gainsbourg ‘Je t’aime… moi non plus’ interprétée par Gainsbourg lui-même en duo avec
l’actrice Jane Birkin, en 1966, une scène d’amour en chanson qui a autant scandalisé qu’enthousiasmé» (pers. comment July 20, 2020). Though Boicel did not mention this influence, the similarities are striking. Moreover, according to Dauphin, Boicel was a fan of Gainsbourg.\textsuperscript{56}

Once the female voice goes silent, the preacher’s voice comes to the forefront. It reads from Luke 24: 45-50, a passage concerning Jesus’s resurrection:

That the Christ would suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this, and now I am sending down to you what the Father hath promised. Stay in the city then until you are clothed with the power from on high. Then, he took them out as far as the outskirts of Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. Now, as he blessed them, he withdrew from them, and was carried out to heaven. They worshipped him and then went back to Jerusalem full of joy, and they were continuing in the temple praising God. This is the gospel of the Lord.

Following the sermon, the percussion returns, along with some whistling.

After we listened to the seven-minute recording, Boicel explained that it was a montage consisting of a musical performance that took place in Saint Patrick’s Basilica in Montreal in 1972—entitled La Messe (The Mass)—, and a recording of himself “fucking” (baiser) one of his sexual partners a decade or so later. (To avoid confusions, I will refer to the montage as La Messe montage). That is, while the musical instruments and the preacher’s voice were part of the Saint Patrick’s performance, the female voice had been added later on. Whenever we would talk about La Messe montage, however, Boicel would bring up a happening that had taken place at the Centre de Visosonie around 1973. So adamant was Boicel in underlining this memory that I mistakenly thought that La Messe and the happening at the centre were one and the same thing. While technologically speaking, then, La Messe montage consists of two audio-recordings, it also consists of the “absent” sounds of the happening at the centre as remembered by Boicel. Just

\textsuperscript{56} To access Gainsbourg’s piece go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3Fa4lOQtfA. Particularly after minute 2:30 where Jane can be heard moaning, and saying “Je t’aime.”
as Boicel’s students were asked to “transpose/translate” sound into other sounds or art forms, Boicel transposed/translated the sounds of his remembrance—the happening at the centre—into the technologically mediated sounds of La Messe creating a new object/experience: La Messe montage.

If La Messe montage is linked to La visosonie via the happening, it is also connected to it insofar as it articulates a decolonial critique. Boicel’s juxtaposition of sexual intercourse and Judeo-Christian discourse—as represented in the preaching—proposes a decolonial critique that simultaneously challenges the puritanism of Judeo-Christian faith (see Carr 2002), and sacramalizes sex. Boicel has verbalized these connections in more recent works. In the Beginning, writes Boicel, “before he created man, God created plants, animals and woman. He created three women: one white, one yellow and one red. They discovered their first sexual impulses and pleased themselves and each other, saying, ‘No one but God can see me.’” (2010: 1). He follows this by stating that “The Old Man saw that there was something incomplete about the pleasure being generated among the women, so He created another being. . . born on the African continent.” Queer theorists and feminists would—rightfully so—take issue with the purported “incompleteness” of lesbian sex and Boicel’s reaffirmation of male power—epitomized by a male God and man’s role as “completing” humanity (see Lorde 2017; Preciado 2002). Still, his notion that women were created before men, and that cross-racial lesbianism was God’s original plan, is a queer decolonial call to free ourselves from Judeo-Christian mythology.

But it is also decolonial insofar as it is an indictment of Western imperialisms, and given Boicel’s subjection to French colonialism, an indictment specifically of France’s mission civilisatrice, which stressed monogamy as being representative of being “civilized” (Saada 2012: 112). In this regard, Boicel, has not only written about sexuality as decoloniality, but also
practiced his theory as a proud polygamist (see Boicel 2003, 2017). However, Boicel is careful to nuance the decolonial implications of his polygamous life, recognizing that in his case, polygamy is also a result of trauma. As he narrates in one of his books (2003: 18), at age ten he was raped by an eighteen-year-old woman, an experience that nearly led him to engage in an incestuous relationship with his aunt. After this, “Je me suis mis à baiser toutes les filles du voisinage sans arrêt” (2003: 18). Boicel remembers how “la fille se couchait dans un hamac et me faisait m’allonger entre ses jambes en m’enseignant le b-a ba de la sexualité. J’étais très embarrassé, j’avais peur . . . j’éprouvais énormément de honte, de sorte que je n’ai jamais osé en parler ni à ma mère ni à la voisine [la mère de la fille] ” (2003: 17). When I asked Boicel whether he thought his sexual life would have been different had he not been raped, he answered in the affirmative, adding, “That’s why we must protect our children” (personal comment December 1st, 2018). While female sexual abuse of girls is significantly higher than female sexual abuse of boys (Elliot 1994: 9) and “90% of sexual abusers are male” (Young 1994: 104), Boicel’s example puts into question “the academic feminist belief that [posits that] all sexual abuse is always about the abuse of power. . . a theory [that] requires us to accept that women are not ‘powerful’ enough to initiate abuse” (Young 1994: 104). It also shows how age can be a factor that displaces the violence of patriarchy from women to men (see hooks 2004).

I am far from suggesting that Boicel is a feminist. In fact, when I asked him about feminism, he was largely dismissive of it, although he maintained that feminists played a positive role in Québec insofar as they were key to the sexual liberation of the 1960s, and “taught us to

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57 Boicel narrates how this woman, the daughter of a friend of his mother, would invite him into her bed where she would lie without wearing panties and with her legs wide open. She would pretend to be asleep and Boicel would penetrate her while she continued to pretend to sleep. One day, she pretended to wake up and accused Boicel of being “polisson” (mischievous, dirty). Later on, seeing his aunt sleeping without panties and believing that it was perfectly normal, Boicel tried to do the same to her. Stunned, she told the eighteen-year-old woman about the incident, and the latter accused Boicel of doing the same to her. Hence, the rapist (the eighteen-year-old woman) turned Boicel into the rapist.
share, take care of the children, and become more human” (personal comment December 1, 2018). Boicel’s dismissiveness of feminism as theory is based on his understanding that it reifies gender at the expense of other variables (race, ethnicity, language, nationality, age). As noted by Québécois feminist scholar Diane Lamoureux, while feminists were right to critique Marxism’s reductionism of social struggles to the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, they nevertheless tended to reify the antagonism between men and women as “la condition de l’émancipation universelle” (1986: 96). Boicel’s knowledge seems to be restricted to “Western hegemonic feminisms,” strains of feminism that have been elaborated largely from the perspective of white middle-class women in the Global North (see Montanaro Mena 2017: 95-100; Vergès 2019 for a critique). Although he is proud to have met Angela Davis—a photo of whom he includes in La visosonie—he seems to be unaware of 1970s African American, Chicana, Third World and lesbian articulations of feminism (see hooks 2004; Lorde 2017 [1977]; Lugones 2010; Anzaldúa 1987). Neither does he seem aware of the Montreal Regional Committee of the Congress of Black Women—an organization founded in 1974 and “composed both of Black Anglophones and Francophones [that] sought to eliminate racism in Québec, create a consciousness about the role of slavery in Canada, and defend global causes such as the end of apartheid in South Africa” (Small and Thornhill 2008: 427-442). The latter feminisms, not unlike Boicel, emphasized “intersectionality” (see Crenshaw 1991) and decoloniality.

If La messe montage serves as an entry point into exploring Boicel’s decolonial gender politics, and its limits, it also allows us to explore other decolonial critiques related to this. La messe montage blurs the frontiers between music, sound, and noise. As Boicel states in another book, a woman’s orgasmic sounds are not extra-musical: “Sometimes a woman’s orgasm can be an exciting musical extravaganza. She may go completely wild. Some women scream like a fire-
engine siren, howl like a lost wolf, laugh like a clown or weep like a widow. Others sing or repeat nonsense (fuck talk) over and over, like a broken record” (2017: 23). This aspect of *La messe montage* reminds us of Anthony Seeger’s *Why the Suyá Sing: a Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian people* (2004). In a revealing ethnographic vignette, Seeger shares that he recorded the Suyá using a directional microphone that allowed the melodic material to be highlighted. When he played his recording for the Suyá, however, he learned that what he had heard and recorded as background noise—shouts, giggles, irreverent calls—was, according to the Suyá, central to the “melody” (77). It is also reminiscent of John Cage’s composition “4’33” where a pianist sits at a piano without playing a note for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, an act that questions the concept of silence, suggesting that the public’s noise and sounds are also music. And yet, this decolonial challenge to Eurocentric binaries that delimit what is and is not a musical object is built upon a male/female binary. In Boicel’s sonorous sexual imagination, women are loud and men are either silent or less noisy. Indeed, in *La Messe-montage*, Boicel’s voice as a lover is barely audible, if at all. Whether men can be “loud” too is unclear from his books on his life as a heterosexual polygamist (2003, 2017). Curiously, despite its silence, to the extent that *La Messe montage* represents his critical point of view, Boicel’s voice is the one that is truly audible.

If *La Messe montage* shows us the connections between the *centre* and Boicel’s creativity, and its relationship to decoloniality, it also allows us to hear how he used sound and jazz at the *centre*. It is to this that I now turn my attention.

**Boicel’s Jazz and Québec’s 1960s and 1970s Sonic Resistance**

According to Boicel’s recollection—as published in *The Rising Sun: The True Story of Montreal’s First International Jazz & Blues Festival* (2015)—during the happening at the *centre*:
Sayyd Abdul Al-Khabyyr played the flute while the legendary drummer Tony Bazley and an American percussionist whose name I don’t recall provided percussion and scat singing. There were a number of people participating in the experiment; some of them were banging on kitchenware with whatever objects were handy. The sounds created a diabolical, rhythmic music that got everyone dancing in a kind of euphoric voodoo trance. . . A girl of eighteen, whose name was Johanne, also fell into a trance; she cried out for someone to make love to her. . . She flung herself to the floor, flailing about and visibly acting out her erotic fantasy, all the while weeping with rage. We helped her to calm down. . . The sounds had brought the girl’s inner frustrations to the surface. A year later. . . she went into a store and bought herself new clothes. . . [and] she threw herself in front of an oncoming train. She died of her injuries. (58-59)

Despite the unfortunate reproduction of the colonial prejudice that equates vodou music with the Devil, jazz, sound and noise are portrayed as inducing a trance through which the patient—here the eighteen year-old—is supposed to communicate her emotions, and heal. Unfortunately, the awareness of her internal issues, apparently of a sexual nature, does not lead to healing but to a violent suicide a year later. Sexuality, in fact, while not central to La visosonie, is however mentioned on a few occasions (1979: 50-51, 83-84) and linked to la sensibilité sensorielle and the dynamoshomme. This vignette, in turn, reminds us of Fanon’s remarks regarding the relationship between dance, possession, sexuality and decolonization:

> Tout est permis [dans le cercle de la danse] car, en réalité, l’on ne se réunit que pour laisser la libido accumulée, l’agressivité empêchée, sourdre volcaniquement. . . un pas de plus et nous tombons en pleine possession. Au vrai, ce sont des séances de possession-dépossession qui sont organisées: vampirisme, possessions par le djinns, par les zombies, par Legba, le Dieu illustre du vaudou. (1991 [1961]: 58)

But whereas Fanon reads these experiences as a form of escapism/alienation that is overcome during “la lutte de libération” when “après des années d’irréalisme. . . le colonisé, sa mitraillette au poing, affronte les seules forces qui lui contestaient son être: celles du colonialisme” (58), Boicel implies that there is already something potentially liberating within
the dance/possession experience. Also, contrary to Fanon, Boicel points towards how sound might lead to personal (and social) liberation.

In this regard, *La Vissonie* is part of a body of literature that could be labelled “decolonial sound studies.” It investigates the relationship between the production of knowledge, sound and decoloniality (see Ochoa 2014; Meintjes 2003; Jiménez 2014; Feld 1982). It also resonates with sound studies focused on the relationship between technology and sound (see Schafer 1993; Novak 2013; Sterne 2003). What distinguishes it from these works is its attempt to “heal” us from coloniality and its emphasis on the 1960s and 1970s. Boicel implies that in order to achieve decoloniality we must be aware of the multiplicity of the self and how it is shaped by the environment; recognize our interconnectedness with one another, with nature and with technology; and, not unlike anthropologists, base our knowledge on fieldwork.

While Boicel’s 2015 recollection of the happening links *La vissonie* to jazz, this connection is also made explicit in the *avant-propos*. There Gilles Bibeau links Boicel’s “concepts and words” to his compositions which in turn are influenced by French Guyanese “tam-tam rhythms”, “the cry/shout of trumpets of black singers from New Orleans and Harlem”, and *musique concrète* (the sounds of nature and of the city of Montreal). The connection to jazz is also reaffirmed by including photos of some the stars who performed at Boicel’s club and during his Festijazz. These include Dizzy Gillespie, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, John Lee Hooker, and McCoy Tyner. Boicel is, in turn, visually linked to resistance in the first two images in the book, which are photos taken with Angela Davis and Mohammed Ali. But the influence of jazz—and jazz as a signifier of resistance—is also perceptible in less obvious ways.

Boicel’s praxis at the *centre* was no doubt impacted by the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and its articulation of a form of Black empowerment. At the center of this effort was the poet,
playwright and anticolonial activist Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, a figure admired by Boicel. Baraka often came up in my conversations with Boicel, and part of my “homework” entailed reading *Blues People* (1963). Boicel’s relationship to Baraka, I would learn, was personal. In 2005 he co-presented a panel entitled “The Music and the Musicians—the State of Black Arts Today” at the Central Brooklyn Jazz Consortium with Baraka and Donald Sangster (see *Daily Challenge* 2005).

The connections between the *Centre de Visonsonie* and BAM were materialized in other ways. Musicians key to BAM performed at the Rising Sun and the Festijazz throughout the 1970s and 80s, among them Yusef Lateef (2015: 145-147), Randy Weston (2015: 148-150), and Dizzy Gillespie (2015: 85-90). Gillespie, in particular, was central to Boicel’s musical-political awakening. When Boicel was fifteen years old, his mother gave him an album of the Spanish-French singer and actor Luis Mariano, which Boicel promptly exchanged for one of Gillespie, a transgression that cost him a maternal beating. Eventually, he would record and produce the album *Dizzy Gillespie & Friends Concert Of The Century Tribute To Charlie Parker* (1980).

Finally, it is worth noting that in the late 1960s, Boicel’s love for jazz led him to Harlem where his “dream” to visit the Cotton Club, the Apollo Theater and 125th street, “quickly turned into a nightmare” when he discovered the “dilapidated state of the buildings,” the “piles of garbage,” the “gutted bodies of abandoned cars,” “a number of down-and-out African Americans [that] were standing around an oil drum” to keep warm and a saxophone player whose “fingers were trembling” (2015: 12). After two days, he left “the left lung of America” whose “blood…helped to build the United States and give it its pre-eminent position in the world” (Boicel 2015: 13).

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58 A year before, in 2004, the Central Brooklyn Jazz Consortium presented Boicel with *The Founders Award.*
Boicel’s profound love and respect for jazz and African American musicians did not prevent him, however, from having Québécois artists perform in his club the Rising Sun (see Boicel 2015: 43, 47, 48-50). Curiously though, the only white person featured in La visisonie (excluding the white Francophone children and his wife, who worked with him at the centre) is French composer Michel Legrand. What led Boicel to erase Québécois musicians? How is this connected to his rejection of Québécois nationalism? What was the role played by jazz in the discrimination that Boicel encountered in Québec?

Boicel’s effort to found his jazz club, the Rising Sun, was met by resistance by a Québec where nationalism was on an all-time rise and where jazz had a bad reputation. In The Rising Sun (2015) Boicel elaborates:

> When I went to the court of the liquor control board, the lawyer asked me the following question: Why do you wish to obtain a license to sell liquor?” I naively replied: “To finance my jazz club.” The lawyer immediately replied, “Jazz has a sad history in Montreal.” I understood right away what he was getting at; he was talking about Rockhead’s Paradise. The owner of that club was a Canadian of Jamaican background. The lawyer was labelling the club as a disreputable place full of whores and black pimps. I knew enough to think carefully before speaking; I then continued my statement by telling this legal beagle that I planned to present concerts featuring Québécois music and occasionally Dixieland or Charleston-style jazz. I told the authorities what they wanted to hear, in order to assure them that I was going to attract a white audience, with all the sophistication this implied. (30)

If, as Alfred Schutz has noted, foreigners generate discomfort in the society that hosts them merely by asking questions about the hosting culture and history—thus challenging the taken-for-granted of that society59—Boicel, who arrived in Montreal as a 32-year old man, created further discomfort by striving to actively impact the hosting culture. Given the long history of

59 “Yet the stranger, by reason of his personal crisis, does not share the above-mentioned basic assumptions. He becomes essentially the man who has to place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group. To him the cultural pattern of the approached group does not have the authority of a tested system of recipes, and this, if for no other reason, because he does not partake in the vivid historical tradition by which it has been formed” (Schutz 1971 [1964]: 96-97).
anti-Black racism that informs Québec (and Canada), the fact that he was a Black man did not help either. But Boicel’s remembrance also points towards how the discrimination that he endured was not only a consequence of his own personal Blackness and foreignness, but of how jazz was conceived by white Francophones and Anglophones in Québec.

Sandria B. Bouliane (2018) documents how, between the First and Second World War, the nationalist French-Canadian intelligentsia and French-Canadian musicians tended to reject jazz on the grounds that it was foreign, Black, Anglophone and unsophisticated particularly vis-à-vis classical music. Anglo-Canadians residing in Montreal also rejected it, one critic describing it as a “sort of syncopated noise” (qtd. in Bouliane 2018: 75). Other jazz critics believed that the white American Paul Whiteman was paving the way for the music’s redemption from its inherent Black mediocrity (see Bouliane 2018: 84-85). In the 1960s and 1970s this understanding of jazz began to co-exist and clash with another view. At the center of this was the emergence of Le Quatuor du nouveau jazz libre du Québec, a group of white anticolonial Francophone Québécois, who, influenced by Free Jazz and counterculture, conceived of jazz as a means of promoting revolution and Québec’s independence (Fillion 2019). Created in 1967, this band performed at a time when Montreal mayor Jean Drapeau’s policies to curb organized crime and prostitution had negatively impacted the jazz scene (Fillion 2019: 42). Though some jazz clubs survived well into the 1950s, among them Jamaican-Canadian Rufus Rockhead’s “Rockhead’s Paradise,” jazz was in decline. The “new free jazz” of Le Quatuor not only contributed to jazz’s survival in Montreal, but re-signified it with a new subversive meaning that challenged the idea of the Canadian Confederation. Performing through the 1970s, the band allied itself ideologically with Vallières’s Third Worldist philosophy (1968) and supported the Front de libération du Québec during the 1970 October crisis. It is in this context, in 1975, roughly a year after having
closed the Centre de Visosonie for lack of funds (1979: 82), when Boicel opens his jazz club the Rising Sun, using the slogan “Jazz is not dead” (Boicel 2015: 28).

Given the history of jazz in Québec, Boicel’s promotion of it was no doubt an uphill battle. There is no doubt that Boicel’s intervention in the history of jazz in Montreal led to a revival of the genre both as the owner of the Rising Sun—which closed in the 1990s—and as the founder the Festijazz, the First International Jazz and Blues Festival of Montreal and a precursor to the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal. For three consecutive years, Boicel celebrated this festival before his network of musicians was “stolen” by Québécois entrepreneurs (Boicel, personal comment March 2019). But it was also a battle with a history. When Boicel started asking African American jazz and blues stars to perform in his club and the Festijazz for relatively low salaries, they agreed to do so not only because they wanted to support a “Black brother,” as Boicel’s transcriptions of his conversations with them testifies to (Boicel 2015). They were also willing to perform because they were familiar with Montreal’s importance in the history of jazz. Montreal had been known for decades as “the Harlem of the North” (see Gilmore 1988). Moreover, many of the roadblocks that Boicel encountered as he strived to promote jazz had precedents. If in the 1970s Boicel confronted anti-Black racism and a Québécois government that, purportedly anxious about Anglophone cultural assimilation, did not want to support cultural events that relied on showcasing African Americans, Black Canadian musicians in the 1930s were pressured by the federal government to not hire “American” musicians but rather Canadian ones (Gilmore 2011 [1988]: 69).

Boicel’s articulation of jazz thus represents both rupture and continuity. By bringing African American stars such as Ray Charles and Nina Simone, among many others, to perform in Montreal, he pressed for a Pan Africanist decolonial agenda largely articulated in English that
collided with Francophone/Québécois self-assertion. As a Francophone, however, he pleaded for this in French. Boicel also questioned the premise that only white Francophones should shape Montreal (and Québec’s) history and culture while simultaneously critiquing coloniality as manifested in Québec. But Boicel’s use of jazz as both jazz promoter and producer—and as a therapeutic tool in the Centre de Visisonie—also articulates a form of musical resistance that challenges dominant 1960s and 1970s Québécois discourses around music. That is, it opens the doors towards rethinking what it meant to “resist,” through sound, in the Québec of the time.

When one reads literature about chanson québécoise (CQ)—signified more often than not as the ultimate music of resistance in Québec—one is struck by the near absence of foreigners, people of color and cross-cultural musical interactions (for exceptions see Alarie 2008; St-Louis 2010). Not unlike Québécois anticolonial literature from the time period widely speaking, Québec’s role in settler colonialism, the enslavement of Blacks and discrimination is excluded from the context, thus construing an anticolonial discourse vis-à-vis Anglo Canada, the US, and at times France, that portrays Québec as oppressed and endangered ignoring its reproduction of coloniality. As noted in my introduction, one strain of CQ literature portrays CQ as an anticolonial pro-independence discourse that is aligned with Third World causes—although it is only purportedly performed by white Francophone Québécois (see Gagnon 1966: 35-49; Roy 1991; Côté 1992). Another strain distances it further from people of color by describing it as a pro-independence discourse detached from anticolonial Third Worldism (see Aubé 1991; Chamberland and Gaulin 1994; Piroth 2008). Yet another reduces it to a cultural nationalist discourse meant to assert and celebrate the survival of the French “fact” in an Anglo-dominated North America thus delinking it from Québec’s political status (see L’Herbier 1974; Guérard 1996; Norman 1981; Giroux, Havard and LaPalme 1996).
It may be claimed that listening to Boicel’s “jazz” vis-à-vis CQ is unfair on the grounds that these are two different genres. But CQ is not really a genre insofar as it includes a vast array of musical genres, including jazz and blues (see Roy 2008; Côté 1992). It may also be claimed that CQ is about the Québécois people and that Boicel was a French Guyanese promoting African American musics in Québec. But if, as John Gilmore has shown, jazz has been a part of Montreal for more than a century (1988), and if, as demonstrated by Québécois ethnomusicologist Gérald Côté, blues has been central to the CQ archive since the 1960s (1992), these musics are also “Québécois.” Furthermore, while the Rising Sun saw the performance of Anglophone bands such as The Stephen Barry Blues Band and Anglophone Black jazz musicians born in the province such as Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones—which presumably exceed the Québécois nation—several Francophone Québécois artists such as Diane Tell, Toubabou, Quintonal Jazz and Nébu also performed in the venue (Boicel 2015). Hence, the Rising Sun is a part of the sonic history of Québec that overlaps in significant ways with CQ.

It could also be argued that CQ is about singer-songwriters, and that Boicel was mostly a jazz promoter. But this only illustrates to what point a significant amount of CQ literature revolves around a lyrical analysis of songs and performances (see Roy 1978, 1991, 2008), ignoring the contributions of promoters, producers and sound engineers (for exceptions see Côté 2007; 2018). Furthermore, Boicel’s club featured Québécois singer-songwriters. It could be argued too that Boicel was against Québécois independence and that this should effectively foreclose listening to him alongside CQ. But the discourse about CQ—influenced as it is by musicologist Marius Barbeau’s documentation of French-Canadian folklore (1925)—is more often than not narrated as going back to the first French-Canadian songs to survive since Jacques Cartier arrived in Canada in 1534 (see L’Herbier 1974: 14). Thus, it transcends a Québécois
identity (which was born in the 1960s) and even a French-Canadian identity (which at best is an eighteenth century phenomenon). Moreover, it is not clear whether all the singer-songwriters referenced in the CQ archive were for independence or whether some were “drafted” to the cause by the authors (see chapter seven).

Conclusion

Nationalism has played a key role in Québécois anticolonial discourses of resistance. In my estimation, seeing liberation through this lens was a necessary step for French-Canadians—as it was for other Third World subjects—to assert themselves in the light of colonial injustices. Acknowledging this, however, should not blind us to the limitations and the injustices that this nationalism engendered. While identifying as Québécois in the 1960s and 1970s was largely restricted to white Francophones, today the province seeks to emphasize the multiple “origins” of the Québécois. The official page of La Fête nationale du Québec, for instance, invites “Québécoises et Québécois de toutes origines”\(^60\) to attend what was, prior to René Lévesque’s 1977 renaming, Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day. But these efforts are not new. They too are anchored in the history of the Québec of the 1960s, when, contrary to what dominant discourses around CQ and Québécois anticolonialism teach us, other histories of resistance were articulated. Such was the case, for example, of the Centre Monchanin, an inter-religious and inter-cultural center that functioned in Montreal between 1963 and 2012. Blacks, the First Nations and other ethnic groups met there, and it was an important space for CQ singer-songwriters such as Marie-Claire Séguin (see chapter seven). Such was also the case of the Centre de Visosonie and the Rising Sun.

\(^{60}\) https://www.fetenationale-montreal.qc.ca

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Opening up the Québécois identity in order to make it more inclusive, of course, carries with itself another set of epistemological, ontological and potentially material forms of violence. Why should non-whites born in Québec, Anglophones, allophones and the First Nations accept this designation, particularly when the history of Québec and its struggles is largely framed as that of white Francophones against Anglophone oppression? Is this possible? Is it desirable? Would it not represent a form of coloniality through “inclusion”? I cannot answer these questions. But it seems to me that revisiting that past through untrodden routes forces us to rethink the many assumptions that inform what it means to resist in Québec, potentially shaping what it can mean in the future. Listening to CQ with Boicel’s sounds and “jazz” (and the marginalized sounds of others) and reading Québécois anticolonial literature with La Visosonie (and other marginalized works) might offer one way of answering these questions.

Coda

Your hands are tied to the hospital bed with a soft white cloth. I am too busy playing the cuatro and too focused on your respirator to notice. As I play your beautiful Boléro Boléro that reminds me so much of my seis mapeyé, you move your head in my direction and try to say something. Your sounds are wordless. You can barely breathe. You become agitated. Your son Mandougou calms you down. You sleep. Or so it seems. I play for four and a half hours. I take a break. I come back and play for another three hours: boleros, mazurkas, seises, aguinaldos, jazz standards, bossa novas—anything that I believe you liked or would have liked. The Jewish General Hospital is enveloped in the sounds of this strange instrument; this strange instrument that is nevertheless so familiar to you and me.

Your wife Yolande and one of your daughters demands that your hands be freed. An Afro-Caribbean man like yourself in shackles after a lifetime of breaking chains? It is too much
to bear. These women will not have it. You want to communicate, and unwittingly, your hands threaten your life. Their strong hands will make sure that you do not take off your respirator as you attempt to find your voice. You want to live. But to live is to communicate. And to communicate is to end your life. The doctor, another woman, hugs Yolande. You will die at any moment.

The following day, on March 6th 2020, I return to the hospital. I play for four hours. Unable to articulate any words, I have said my “goodbye” in music and in thought. I have played Boléro Boléro so many times in these past two days that I have lost count. My fingers hurt.

Forgotten memories resurface: I haven’t played for so many hours in a row since I started learning the cuatro with my mentor/father Emilio “Millito” Cruz at age twelve. He died a year and a half ago. I cry for you. I cry for him. I cry for your family. I cry for myself.

On March 10th, at nine in the morning, your daughter-in-law Chakira tells me that at 3a.m. you died peacefully in your sleep. Or as you wrote about the many jazz legends who had played at your club and since passed away, you “took the spaceship to the great rendezvous in the city of the blues and jazz immortals” (2015: 250). But you also stayed, Doudou. Be certain of that. Your voice will be forever heard in those who love you. We hear you loud and clear. And we will make sure that your sounds continue to shape the world.
Chapter 2:  
Lise Vachon and «Octobre au mois de mai »:  
Relistening to the Québécois Revolution

To my daughter, Gabriela

On March 15, 2019 Lise Vachon and her partner Vito Ricci performed at the Centre Phi, “a multidisciplinary arts and culture organization. . . at the intersection of art, film, music, design and technology” located in Old Montreal. During an eclectic, and seemingly paradoxical performance entitled “We All Play Folk Music: an Electronic Set,” Vachon and Ricci shared pre-recorded compositions to which Ricci added sounds manipulating Vachon’s voice through an effect device. He also played an electric guitar and sang. Vachon, for her part, enriched the pieces with her virtuosic vocal improvisations and her stage presence. While this accounted for the electronic part of the show, the folkish aspect was manifested in the lyrical content of the majority of the songs which were concerned with social and racial justice.

The evening opened with the classic Negro spiritual “Motherless Child,” and “closed,” at least according to the program, with the upbeat Québécois song “Marie-Madeleine,” a traditional reel. Hence, the sadness of the spiritual—sung in a daunting arrangement where each syllable of the phrase “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” was extended in notes so long that the despair of the words was effectively heightened—was juxtaposed to the playful nation-grounding sounds of “Marie-Madeleine.” Perhaps in order to provide some comic relief after the intensity of such a serious set, Vachon and Ricci added another of Ricci’s pieces entitled “I’m At That Party Right Now.” As Vachon elaborated: “the piece was part of an 80’s play [where] Ron Vawter, an actor pillar of the N.Y.C. avant-garde theater Wooster Group, sings that he’s got to boogie and you should dig yourself” (pers. comment Jan. 8, 2021). Vachon and Ricci added it to

61 https://phi-centre.com/en/about/
their set as “a satiric smile at the late mid 1970’s disco music” (pers. comment Jan. 8, 2021). Indeed, as Vachon lip-synced the piece, the public burst out laughing.

If by “closing” with “Marie-Madeleine” Vachon was paying tribute to her own musical traditions as a Québécoise, and tapping into the national pride of a public that was pleasantly surprised, “Motherless Child” alluded to a more contemporary Québécois identity. Along with the omnipresence of the blues and jazz throughout the set, the spiritual evoked the birth of a 1960s Québécois identity that is indissociable from African American culture (see Côté 1992; Roy 2008). These African American musical genres evoked the presence of anticolonialist Pierre Vallières and his notion of the Québécois as a “nègre blanc.” In fact, Vallières often appears in chanson québécoise and Québécois counter-cultural literature. Gérald Côté, for example, in 101 Blues du Québec described him as a bluesman “à sa manière” because, even if he did not sing the blues of the “nègres blancs d’Amérique; il l’a crié du fond de sa prison sociale” (1992: 7). And in no other song that evening was Vallières’s presence more strongly felt than in the anticolonial blues “Octobre au mois de mai.”

A recurring song throughout Vachon’s fifty-plus year career, the first version of “Octobre au mois de mai” (from now on OMM) was recorded in Cousineau (1972). In 1973 Vachon recorded it with the Ville Émard Blues Band in the album Minute! Ville Emard Blues Band S’en Vient Is Coming, and yet again with the same band, this time live, in Ville Émard Blues Band Live à Montréal (1974). In the 1980s Vachon moved to New Orleans, and later, to New York City but OMM has continued to accompany her. In 2006, she recorded yet another version of it in New York City, this time with Ricci.

I first heard OMM in its original version having bought Cousineau on eBay on February 5, 2018, nine months before I met Vachon. Just like in the live performance, I got goosebumps.
Because the main subject is the revolution as imagined in the context of Québec’s October Crisis of 1970, when civil liberties were suspended in Québec in response to the anticolonial actions of the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ)—of which Vallières was a member (more on this later)—I could not help but remember the October Revolution that took place in my country in 1950. Known as the Grito de Jayuya, at that time, revolutionaries attached to Pedro Albizu Campos’s Nationalist Party, led by Blanca Canales, violently and courageously rose against US colonialism only to meet death or incarceration (see Jiménez de Wagenheim 2016: 51-90). At a rational level, I knew that the two Octobers were quite different. Puerto Rico was (and is) an actual colony of the US: an unincorporated territory. Québec’s colonialism has always been somewhat ambiguous both on account of its role as a settler colonizing country and its status as a province of Canada (the equivalent of a state in the US). And yet, I was emotionally overwhelmed. The blues of Vachon’s October sounded out not only the defeat of the Québécois revolutionary dream, but a defeat that was closer to home. Not unlike what had happened to other Puerto Rican scholars, anticolonial politicians and writers, Québec’s history of resistance had resonated with me.  

Calling for a definition of composition that is not limited to the words, harmony and melody, Rob Bowman (2003: 103-130) has emphasized the role played by timbral variation,

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rhythmic articulation, pitch gesture and musical arrangement. These are not added elements, Bowman argues, but rather intrinsic to the song itself. At times, continues Bowman—who is reflecting upon African Americans singers’ interpretation of popular music—a singer can be said to compose a song when her interpretation comes to define a significant portion of the song’s appeal and meaning. A good example of this is Whitney Houston’s version of Dolly Parton’s “I Will Always Love You,” a song that would barely be what it is without Houston’s powerful melismatic singing and vocal virtuosity. Vachon’s voice is just as intrinsic to OMM, and in this regard, she is a co-composer.

While Bowman correctly envisions a composition as a collective affair rather than an individual one, in this chapter I would like to expand his notion of the “collective.” Inspired by Christopher Small’s notion of “musicking” (1998), I will show how the collective is not necessarily limited to the musicians, singers, arrangers, or producers involved in a given song as Bowman maintains. In political songs, there are other indirect co-authors such as the surrounding historical figures without whom the song would not exist. In the case of OMM this would be Vallières and the FLQ. It was their actions, after all, which precipitated the October Crisis, and it is around this crisis that OMM revolves. More importantly, and as I will show throughout this chapter, his anticolonial-racial imaginary is being recreated and repurposed in the song in myriad ways.

All songs have a historical context. But political songs, such as OMM, are not only embedded in a historical context but offer a musical-poetic translation of this context. This translation is not literal but free: music and poetry evoke multiple significations. Furthermore, because OMM is a band experience, it sounds out disparate musical and political discourses that overlap and contradict one another in myriad ways. OMM does not only “reflect” its historical
context. Like most poetically-political repertoires such as Latin American nueva canción and chanson québécoise/Québécois countercultural musics, it also reimagines it. And Vachon’s voice plays a major role in this. Showing how OMM does this is one of the central goals of this chapter.

I begin by providing a brief historical context of the Québec of the 1960s and 1970s that is directly related to OMM. In the second section, I analyze the original recording of OMM, putting its lyrical and musical content in conversation with the aforementioned context, highlighting Vachon’s critiques of settler colonialism. In the third part, I focus on Vachon’s wordless voice (her vocables and vocalises) and her speech about voice exploring how the latter add meaning to OMM. My overall argument is that the real revolution in OMM is not so much to be found in its call for Québec’s decolonization but in how this call is entwined with multiple more subtle revolutions that are musically and poetically inscribed. I also argue that understanding Vachon’s voice as a “thinking voice” that “consciously or not” provides a “response to the cultural moment” of its time through sound, word and the body (Fiol-Matta 2016: 7-8) is indispensable in order to grasp the complexity of the revolution as proposed in OMM. It is in these spaces of contact where the decolonial import of OMM is to be found.

My analysis is based on fieldnotes taken during a dozen meetings with Vachon at her home in Queens between 2018 and 2019, three audio-recorded interviews, my attendance to several of her performances, archival research in Montreal and Vachon’s own feedback having read earlier drafts of this chapter.

“Octobre au mois de mai”:
A Brief Historical Background of an Anticolonial Blues

Indissociable from the pro-independence discourses of the Québec of the 1960s and 1970s, OMM is a homage to the FLQ, urban guerrilla organization that espoused an anticolonial,
Third Worldist and socialist political program. Between 1963 and 1972, the FLQ engaged in tactics of resistance that included peaceful protests but also acts of sabotage, robberies at military armament facilities and the bombing of innumerable locations that it deemed strategic, at times leading to the loss of innocent lives (Laurendeau 1990: 310-320). The FLQ’s actions reached their climax in early October 1970, when some of its members kidnapped British trade commissioner James Cross and the Québec Labor Minister Pierre Laporte. This led to the enactment of the War Measures Act on October 16th with the suspension of civil rights, which, in turn, led to the arrest of 450 people and the search of more than ten thousand homes, often in the middle of the night (Bouthillier and Cloutier 2010: 14-15).

The War Measures, though extreme, had precedents in Québec (and Canada). They had been enacted during the First and Second World Wars in order to intern communists, fascists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Italians, and, on the West coast, 22,000 Japanese Canadians (Bouthillier and Cloutier 2010: 14-15). According to Guy Bouthillier and Edouard Cloutier, the October Crisis “resulted from the combined effect of the two [FLQ] kidnappings and the federal government’s anger at seeing the independence movement constantly gain momentum” (2010: 14). Indeed, the 1960s saw the rise both of a Québécois identity—in contrast to a French-Canadian one—and myriad social changes related to the liberal and reformist Quiet Revolution led by Jean Lesage (1960-1966). At the same time, there were the additional pressures on the status quo coming from the emergence of pro-independence organizations such as the Rassemblement pour l’Indépendance Nationale, and the Parti Québécois, among others.

The most renowned member of the FLQ was Vallières, whose Nègres blancs d’Amérique (1968), written in New York in the Manhattan House of Detention for Men, remains the “deuxième essai québécois le plus diffusé au Québec après Les Insolences du Frère Untel de
1960, mais le plus important à être distribué à l’étranger” (Samson-Legault 2018: 182).

Translated into several languages, in the autobiography/pamphlet, Vallières portrayed Québécois as colonized Third World subjects whose liberation would be achieved via the establishment of a socialist republic.

Though Vallières claimed that he “invented” the “nègres blancs” metaphor, this is only partly true. Contemporaneously to him, Abbie Hoffman in Revolution for the Hell of It (1968), described American hippies as “white niggers” and escaped slaves (Hoffman 1970 [1968]: 75-79). Previously, American writer and journalist Norman Mailer used the phrase “white Negro” to describe the hipsters: “So there was a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man’s code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro” (1957: 105). And before them, Thomas Carlyle had described the Irish in nineteenth century America as white blacks (see Côté 2011 [2006]: 27-28).

In Québec the tendency to compare French-Canadians to Blacks also had precedents. In 1936, “le frère Marie-Victorin avait employé les mêmes termes pour déplorer le retard des Canadiens français en sciences” (Samson-Legault 2018: 177). In 1958, André Laurendeau referred to Maurice Duplessis, the conservative Catholic premier who led Québec roughly from the mid 1930s throughout the late 1950s, as a “roi nègre” because, according to Laurendeau, Duplessis played a role similar to that of African leaders in British dominated colonies insofar as he was as a collaborator with Anglo economic interests (1999: 524-27). Also, in 1959, Raoul

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63 Duplessis had a brief hiatus when he was defeated in the elections of 1939 by Adélard Godbout.
64 Comparisons between Québec and Africa’s decolonizing struggles had also been drawn by 1961 (see Chaput 1961: 27-29). For an interesting analysis on how Québécois transitioned from “blackness” to “whiteness” in the 1960s, see Scott 2016.
Roy, founder and director of La Revue Socialiste referred to exploited Québécois as “nègres blancs” (Samson-Legault 2018: 177).

But Vallières’s metaphor, though not original, is unique in some ways. First, his notion of Blackness does not only rely exclusively on an African American experience but on an Afro-Caribbean one as well. Throughout Nègres blancs d’Amérique one finds references to the Black Panthers side by side with Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Puerto Rican revolutionaries, and Chicanos. While Vallières’s understanding of Blackness is at times more or less conflated with Third Worldism, Blackness is also often reduced to the African American experience. As Vallières wrote in his 1979 preface, he was hoping to “percer [le] mur d’indifférence et de mépris” of the United States vis-a-vis the Québécois’s plight (1994 [1968]: 31); that is, he was seeking to make Québec audible to the US by appealing to African American political culture.

Vallières’s strategy speaks to the economic power wielded by the US in Québec. But it also speaks to the power of African American Blackness as a sort of revolutionary microphone that could amplify peripheral white voices, and to Vallières’s willingness to potentially alienate Black allies by equating second class white citizenship to slavery in the name of political expediency. And yet, the “nègre blanc” metaphor was not simply an act of misguided appropriation. Québécois, after all, were told to “speak white” by Anglo-Canadians and had been racialized as Black throughout the nineteenth century (see Scott 2016). Nor was it merely a rhetorical tool based on shared readings of Fanon, Césaire, and Memmi. FLQ members and Black revolutionaries did at times engage in joint action. In the mid-1960s, for example, FLQ member Michelle Duclos “s’était embarquée dans un complot du Black Liberation Front pour faire exploser la statue de la liberté” (Samson-Legault 2018: 151). Although, having pled guilty, she testified “against three American associates linked to the plot . . . [and] was released on
probation after spending only a few weeks in jail.”65 This “nègre blanc,” thus, literally embodied the ambiguity of her political identity.

Vallières’s “nègre blanc” metaphor, was an ambiguous category at multiple levels. Despite its obvious subordination to Anglo-Canada—a consequence of the British Conquest of 1759-1761—Québec was, nevertheless, a settler colonizing “country” of European descent that, at least formally, shared the same rights with the other nine largely Anglo-Canadian settler colonizing provinces of the Canadian Confederation. Furthermore, Québec had also participated in the slave trade though slavery was never central to its economy (see Mackey 2010; Trudel 1960). Not surprisingly, the notion of Québécois as “nègres blancs” received an ambiguous reception by African American activists. Stokely Carmichael, for instance, when informed of Vallières and his comrade Charles Gagnon’s arrest in 1968, expressed solidarity with their cause (Samson-Legault 2018: 170). And during the 1968 Congress of Black Writers celebrated in Montreal, he went so far as to say that “it is indeed a fact that not one Western power today achieved its power without raping Africa. . . except for the French Canadians” (my emphasis). Still, Carmichael quickly revised his statement and added “but they are still part of white Western [colonialism]. . . and they did rape West Africa because my friends in Guinea speak fluent French” (qtd. in Austin 2018: 214). Carmichael also believed (or charged) that a “nègre blanc,” in the “right” context, could easily become simply a “blanc.”

While Vachon was not directly implicated in the events surrounding the October Crisis—unlike singer Pauline Julien and playwright Denise Boucher, she was not arrested (Samson-Legault 2018: 226)—she was not peripheral to these events, either. Her father Jean-Paul Vachon, like Sylvain Leroux’s (see chapter nine), was a member of an anticolonial organization: the

Mouvement Souveraineté-Association (MSA). Formed by Rene Lévesque in 1967, MSA became the Parti Québécois (PQ) a year later. Though there is much debate regarding whether Lévesque was for independence or for a renewed Canadian Confederation that would grant Québec more powers (see Vacante 2011), and though Lévesque opposed the violent tactics of the FLQ, during the October Crisis, anti-FLQ propaganda associated the guerillas’ actions with the PQ (Lagacé 2001: 36-37). Furthermore, Vachon became the voice of OMM, a song, that as we shall see, is unequivocally tied to the October Crisis and the FLQ.

«Octobre au mois de mai »: Sounding Out the Revolution

Written by playwright Claude Levac, OMM is a homage to the FLQ as is made clear in the reference to October in the song’s title. But it is also evident in the emphasis on the need for change (“quand y faut changer tout ça”); the celebration of the people’s uprising (“quand c’est un peuple qui se soulève”) which in turn is described as an awakening (“quand c’est un peuple qui sommeille/quand c’est un peuple qui se réveille”); and by statements that posit that the people will succeed despite the police, the kings, money and “valets” (those who serve the powerful; e.g., the comprador class). All of this is linked to the act of building a country (“quand c’est son pays à bâtir”). Despite the cold winter, the rain, the thaw of spring, and the nice summer weather, the lyrics state, it is always October (or a good time to revolt): “c’est octobre en février, c’est octobre au mois de mai, c’est octobre en octobre, c’est octobre toute l’année.” The October revolution shall last all year long until the Québécois nation-state is established.

The music, credited to Luc Cousineau and Red Mitchell, tends to reaffirm the meaning of the lyrical content. As noted by Côté (1992), OMM is one of hundreds of blues-based songs that became a part of the Québécois repertoire between 1965 and 1985 (1992: 149). Though Côté documents how the blues was used in Québec to address the end of a love affair as well, he
stresses its political import. As noted, he dedicates his book to Vallières highlighting how 
the blues was used to assert the relatively new Québécois identity. Up to the early 1960s, Québécois 
largely self-designated as French Canadians, though singer-songwriter Félix Leclerc’s 1943 
composition “Le Québécois” points towards earlier uses of the term (see Leclerc 2010: 123-
125; 16). Such a political emphasis on the blues resonated with African American culture. One 
need only remember B.B. King’s “Why I Sing the Blues,” an indictment of white supremacy as 
manifested throughout the centuries from the enslavement of Africans to the prison industrial 
complex that Angela Davis eloquently and forcefully condemned (see Davis 1971).

By inscribing Levac’s lyrics in a blues, then, Cousineau and Mitchell are linking the song 
even more closely to the FLQ, and subscribing to a Third Worldist anticolonial view regarding 
Québec’s independence. Whether or not they or Vachon believed in violent revolution as 
envisioned by the FLQ is unclear but that they shared the ultimate goal seems indisputable. As 
Vachon told me, she only sang what she believed in (pers. interview Jan. 22, 2019). But it is not 
only the use of the blues which links OMM to the FLQ and the “nègre blanc” metaphor. The 
way in which Vachon conceives the blues also links it to the latter. Vachon associates the blues 
with a general feeling that is informed by the African American experience but also goes beyond it. For her, for example, the Portuguese fado, is a blues. She has a similar take regarding what it means to be a griot. In a letter sent to negritude poet Leopold Senghor, then president of Senegal, 
on September 21st, 1974, Vachon thanks Senghor for allowing her and Michel Séguin, then 
members of the Québécois fusion band Toubabou, to visit his country and discover Senegalese 
musical folklore. She refers to herself (and Toubabou) as “des griots québécois,” a sort of 
variation on the “nègre blanc” trope.66

66 For more on Toubabou see my chapter on Georges Rodriguez.
In this regard, OMM’s blues is reminiscent of the “nègre” in Vallières: Blackness transcends Blackness. Like Vallières’s understanding of “nègre,” Vachon’s understanding of “blues” and “griots” is highly metaphorical to the point of almost losing sight of the specificity of the terms. While this borrowing/appropriation is not ill-intentioned—it is borne out of love for Black culture—it is nevertheless problematic: it tends to empty these concepts of their historical specificity. The level of unease that it generates, though, depends on whether you consider the Québécois to be “nègres blancs” or simply white. But this borrowing/appropriation also shows how musical creolization is not only about the enmeshment of musical genres and sounds but about developing a poetic-political imaginary that, despite its shortcomings, aims at cross-racial solidarity. If Vachon’s understanding of the blues and Blackness resonate with the socio-racial imaginary of an FLQ-type revolution, what might the musical arrangement tell us about this revolution?

A song in strophic form, in 6/8, the key of E minor, and based largely on a four-chord progression (Em, Em/D, A, B7), OMM begins with four measures of arpeggios by a solitary electric guitar that, to my ear, is using either a flanger or chorus pedal. Then, the bassist René Hébert and drummer Chris Castle join for another four measures of the introduction. After the introduction, the background voices of Vachon, Cousineau and Mitchell join in, accompanied by Mitchell’s blues-inflected electric guitar playing, characterized by the use of blue notes and pentatonic scales reminiscent of Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton. This goes on for eight measures before Vachon begins to sing the lyrics. As the instrumental introduction reaches its end, the soloing electric guitar hands over the lead to Vachon whose first note (“E”) overlaps with the guitar’s last (also E). By the time Vachon’s voice enters conveying the lyrical message (which can be summarized as “despite the odds, we shall overcome”), the musical introduction has thus
already announced the revolution which is conceived of as a build-up. The revolution begins with one person (solitary electric guitar) followed by a few others (bass and drums) until it finally becomes massive (all musicians join).

During the first four measures of Vachon’s lyrical intervention, the soloing electric guitar drops out and one hears only her voice (characterized by its vibrato), the accompanying guitar playing arpeggios, the bass (which for the most part plays the first note of each bar), and a rather subdued drum set. This section is built upon the same four-chord progression of the introduction; its lyrical content always involves the clause “even if” (e.g. “even if it is cold,” etc.), a clause which will be answered towards the end of the stanza (the revolution will succeed). Before we learn that the revolution will succeed, though, there is a clause that stresses the “when” (e.g. when things must change, etc.). This “when” leads to a change in the chord progression which up to this point is based on the repetition of the chords Em, Em/D, A, B7. We now transition to a chord pattern that goes from Am to Em and which is repeated once (four measures). This transition is preceded by Vachon’s singing of the vocables “do do de di di do do di dom” for a duration of four measures. It is Vachon’s wordless voice which marks this musical and lyrical shift from “even if” to “when” and from the four-chord pattern to the alternating Am/Em progression.

At this point, Vachon’s voice briefly explores her lower register, starting the new melody on “A4” (a 5th lower). Through this section, and not unlike what happened in the introduction, a build-up unfolds. As Vachon sings “Quand y faut plus qu’ça dure/Quand y faut changer tout ça” there is a call and response between her and the electric guitar (Mitchell begins to solo again). The climax is reached when she sings “C’est octobre en février” (that is, the revolution is all year long). Harmonized with a newly introduced C major chord while Vachon sings “c’est,”
this, along with the addition of a background chorus, gives the song a feeling of victory. After Vachon repeats this phrase twice, she begins to sing vocables again (lo lo le lo le le a a ah) while the electric guitar solos. The introduction returns, in a heightened form (that is, without the build-up), and the same general structure (with slight variations) is repeated three more times.

In order to emphasize the victory of the revolution, the last stanza repeats “c’est octobre…” four times. Then, towards minute 7.30, after a lengthy solo of the electric guitar and Vachon’s voice (which now rather than vocables sings vocalises), there is a shift from 6/8 to 3/4. The pace of the revolution becomes faster as Vachon and the guitar continue to solo, though now the relationship is less polyphonic. They come together more often, creating a monophonic texture, as if their on-going dialogue has led to unity. Still, they diverge periodically thus keeping their independence. A slight ritardando ends the song with a lick by the guitar, a long-held note by Vachon and a final drum beat.

In this regard, the music inscribes the revolution as a space of unity (monophony) and divergence (polyphony) and as an event that can run at different tempos/temporalities. Furthermore, to the extent that blues and rock inform the song, OMM also highlights the centrality of the counterculture in order to achieve the Québécois Loud Revolution therefore suggesting that Vallières’s Third Worldist Revolution is incomplete without it. Though Vallières was influenced by the counterculture (see Samson-Legault 2018: 275), this is clearly an added meaning to his revolution given that the latter was rather absent in Nègres blancs d’Amérique.

And yet, despite the openness of OMM and global sense of Québécois nationalism, the lyrical content of the song leaves aside the fact that the battles for Québécois national liberation were taking place on lands stolen from the First Nations. In this regard, it reproduces (again) Vallières’s own views in the late 1960s, and that of most left-wing Canadians. As noted by Ian
McKay reflecting on the Ontario of the 1960s, “back then one could be a teenaged leftist and never really think about First Nations issues at all” (2009: 26). Without seeking to absolve the Québécois anticolonial movement of the historical responsibility of addressing this contradiction (e.g. affirming national decolonization by tacitly supporting settler colonialism), it is worth noting that this silencing was emblematic of Third Worldist ideology writ large as well. As Vine Deloria Jr. noted in his preface to George Manuel and Michael Posluns’s *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* “during the recent occupation at Wounded Knee when the Lakota protestors were surrounded by federal officers” the “Third World was either nowhere in sight or busy making speeches on behalf of the Palestine Liberation Front” (1974: x). Because this was the case, Manuel, a member of the Shuswap Nation (located in the interior of British Columbia, Canada), called for the materialization of the Fourth World. A term suggested by a Tanzanian diplomat of Julius Nyerere’s government, the Fourth World was conceived as a way of giving “political muscle” to an “Aboriginal World” that “finds its strength above and beyond Western ideas of historical process” such as the nation-state (1974: 5-6).

Hence, while it is unfortunately not surprising to find this silence within OMM, and the notion of revolution that gave birth to it, it is rather surprising to discover that, by the time Vachon recorded OMM, she was quite aware of the role played by settler colonialism in Québec. A fact, that I would argue, has an impact on how we should understand OMM.

Before her first recording of OMM, Vachon, as part of the duet *Luc et Lise*, had participated in a play/musical by Léandre Bergeron and Robert Lavaill where settler colonialism played an important role. Based on this performance *Luc et Lise* released the album *Tout le monde est heureux?!* in 1971, that is, a year or so before recording OMM. Contrary to Vallières’s *Nègres blancs d’Amérique*, the main concern in the play and the album was not Anglo-Canadian.
and American colonialism vis-a-vis Québec but the French colonization of Canada. Although in
the album Anglophones are associated with capitalism, and militarism (it is “le businessman”
who exploits others, not l’homme d’affaires; and the cannons say “fuck you, fuck you” in
English), the Jesuits, the Catholic church and the French empire take a heavier blow. The song
“Maria,” for instance, criticizes the church’s reduction of women to a reproductive role “pour le
salut de la patrie.” “Vive le roi,” for its part, describes a variety of calamities (death, war,
devastation) highlighting how in order to survive one must even sell one’s wife and children;
each complaint is followed by the sarcastic “Vive le roi.”

Settler colonialism is specifically addressed in “Les p’tites pinottes.” In the characteristic
joual language of the album, sarcasm is used to convey the oppression of the First Nations: “Lui,
l’sauvage y travaille ben’y fait soixante pour cent d’l’ouvrage/mais les sauvages c’est des
sauvages/tout c’qui mérite: des p’tites pinottes!” This song is particularly interesting given that it
unites the First Nations, “les coureurs de bois” (independent French-Canadian traders) and
“l’gars qui fait les belles pelisses” against “le businessman.” The comic book L’histoire du
Québec, related both to the play and the album,67 was even more forceful in its condemnation of
settler colonialism. There the plea is for the unity between First Nations, workers/peasants and
women based on a shared sense of exploitation; the authors imply that this should supersede
ethnic, linguistic or gender-based differences. Whether there were any First Nation individuals
involved is unclear to me.

67 I am basing my analysis on this comic book also entitled “Petit manuel d’histoire du Québec” which is the title of
a history book by Bergeron published in 1970. Unfortunately, the comic book, which I bought on e-Bay, has no
date. Because the cartoons are the same than the ones that appear on the cover of Luc et Vachon’s album, released in
1971, I am led to believe that the comic book, like the album and the play, were offshoots of the more formal history
book. It might have been published in order to promote the play or as an item that would accompany the album. I
cannot, however, confirm that this is the case; I am only speculating.
Engaging these materials gives the reader the sense that he is being exposed to a Québécois articulation of Friedrich Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Engels had, after all, sown the seeds of a Marxist feminism largely based on the ethnographic findings of Lewis Morgan’s research on the Mohawks. The resonance becomes even louder given the presence of the Iroquois Nation in the comic book—and its overall importance throughout Québec’s significantly shorter history as a settler colonial country (see Simpson 2014). In this regard, not unlike Vallières, Bergeron and Lavaill’s proposal reifies class as the key entry point. Contrary to Vallières, though, and this is important, it does not ignore settler colonialism or gender.

How much of this came to define Vachon’s own political positioning back in the 1970s was unclear to me. But having read a prior draft of this chapter, Vachon elaborated:

> As early as elementary school, I remember not believing in our history books. The extinction and ravages of the First Nations did not leave me indifferent. The growing into adulthood in the mid-sixties brought me to see the pressing need to turn away from the cultural imperialism of France, the British and the Anglo-Canadian economic exploitation as well as the political, cultural and linguistic oppression. Later, when I really understood English, I listened to [Indigenous Canadian-American singer-songwriter] Buffy Sainte-Marie with much interest and consideration. I always believed that everyone should be at the table together. OMM was a testament to the urgency, the pressing needs of making radical changes within settlers of this confederation once and for all. (pers. comment Jan 8, 2021)

Regarding why OMM did not specifically address or even allude to the First Nations, Vachon added: “I am not the lyricist of OMM. Claude Levac is. I think he was concentrating on one battle. Maybe it would have had too wide of a range for one song.” As a singer-songwriter myself, Vachon’s aesthetic explanation makes perfect sense. If one is writing a song about racial justice or gender equality it is likely that other struggles will be left out. Those struggles are picked up (ideally) in other songs. And yet, if as Vachon says, *for her* OMM was/is about “the
pressing needs of making radical changes within settlers of this confederation once and for all,” she had effectively added settler colonial “battles” to this song.

In the light of this, Vachon’s example shows that even at a time when the Fourth World lived under the shadow of its more famous cousin, the Third World, bridges between these worlds were more than simply possible, they were actively built. And to the extent that Québec was not quite part of the Third World, though it most certainly was not part of the First—particularly if one considers that it belonged to Canada, a country often described as being a part of the Second World (see Fellezs 2011: 167)—it also unveils bridges between other worlds. These bridges were no doubt fragile. More often than not, they were one-way, and they tended to collapse. But as histories of cross-cultural solidarity, they are worth remembering: both to faithfully document the past and imagine more productive and deeper ways of solidarity in the present.

If, as I have been stressing, OMM is an anticolonial Third Worldist Québécois song that suffers from a rather expected if unfortunate lack of attention to settler colonialism, and ambiguous articulation of Blackness, Vachon’s voice adds other meanings. Her awareness of settler colonialism opens the song to the subject insofar as her own career as a singer led her to support the First Nations through song.68 Vachon’s voice thus adds political meaning to OMM beyond the lyrics. Exploring in which other ways Vachon’s “thinking voice” (Fiol-Matta 2016) accomplishes this is the topic of the following section.

Vachon’s Thinking Voice

A few months after attending Vachon and Ricci’s performance at the Phi Center, Vachon asked me if I could write a paragraph or so on how I thought she had contributed to the world of

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68 For more on Québécois/Indigenous encounters see my chapters on Marie-Claire Séguin and Sylvain Leroux.
music. She was eager to upload my impressions to her new webpage. Going through my fieldnotes of the day of her and Ricci’s performance, on October 26th, 2019, I wrote the following reflection (with some slight alterations)⁶⁹:

*Lise Vachon is a virtuoso singer. It is not so much that her technique is impeccable—although it is. It is rather that her virtuosity unfolds so seamlessly that you might be deceived into thinking that her talent is only natural and not the fruit of hard work as well. I remember attending one of her presentations with her partner, composer and singer-songwriter Ricci, in Montreal on March 15, 2019. The silence that she was able to gently impose upon the public as she sang words about social justice, racial equality and freedom before transitioning to sounds reminiscent of percussive and wind instruments (sounds that, as I knew from prior conversations, expressed similar feelings beyond words), was eerie. It was as if her voice had brought us all together into an intimate space of reflection. Vachon does not move much on stage: it is her voice which captivates and keeps you in her orbit.

Up to that point, I had admired Vachon for her work as a singer-songwriter (she is a great composer), her keen intellect (she is an avid reader who, in addition, holds a Master’s degree in Music pedagogy from the Aaron Copland School of Music),⁷⁰ and for her lifetime engagement in respectful cross-cultural relations that have led her to travel throughout Latin America and West Africa (I am still at awe when I read her 1970s’ correspondence with Senegalese President and world-renowned poet Léopold Senghor as she tried to have her band Toubabou perform in Senegal).⁷¹ That as part of Toubabou she had also played and recorded with Haitian vodou master Georges Rodriguez had also caught my attention.⁷²*

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⁶⁹ To see my original statement, visit Lise Vachon’s website: http://www.Vachon-vachon.com/index.html
⁷⁰ From the City University of New York.
⁷¹ For more on Vachon’s experiences in West Africa see: Provost 2016.
⁷² For more on Georges Rodriguez see chapter three.
Up to that point I had also assumed that Vachon and I had met months before: the day we sat down in her and Ricci’s house in Queens, NYC, to have a conversation around her decades-long commitment to music. But it was only when I listened to her voice that evening in her native country, Québec, along dozens of spellbound spectators, that I realized that it was through her voice where these multiple experiences came together in order to make Vachon audible, and that it had been only then and there that Vachon and I had actually met.

Vachon embodies what Fiol-Matta calls a “thinking voice” (2016). Associated with divas who “from the straightforwardly political to the more conservative” unleash and provide answers through their voices “consciously or not—in response to the cultural moment of their times,” the thinking voice is not reducible to notational analysis, intuition nor “the widespread notion that a singer trades not in conceptual thinking, but only in spontaneous execution” (2016: 7-8). As Fiol-Matta makes evident in the analysis of her case studies, particularly that of Puerto Rican nueva canción-related singer Lucecita Benítez, the “thinking voice” thinks through the words (e.g. ideological contents of a particular song), the timbre, and the body (hairstyle, stylistic statements, gestures). It is a “thought producer” (Fiol-Matta 2016: 8). Entwining Fiol-Matta’s insights with Bowman’s approach to song—understood as a complex object where the messages of the lyrical content, the music, the arrangements, the timbre of the singing voice and speech about music can coincide but also contradict one another—I argue that properly assessing the complexity of OMM must also take into account Vachon’s “thinking voice.” While I have already shown how Vachon’s voice contributes to the musical arrangement of OMM and how it adds a critique to settler colonialism, in which other ways might it be a “thinking voice”? According to Amanda Weidman “attributing voice to nonhuman entities (the collective, the mechanical, musical instruments) is a powerful way of making them intelligible, of endowing
them with will and agency” (2015: 232). But Vachon suggests that the opposite is also true: that attributing a musical instrument quality to the voice, makes the voice intelligible and endows it with will and agency. Vachon associates the singing voice (which, it should be stressed, is a musical instrument), with other musical instruments: “At times I want to sound more like a trombone. Other times, like a cello because I love it too; in other occasions I want to sound percussive” (pers. interview May 14, 2019). As she commented later, she engages in such practices if she believes that it will “serve the music, the lyrics or the story” of the song (pers. comment Jan 8, 2021). Listening to Vachon’s repertoire, though, it becomes clear that she does not intend to imitate the timbre of any given musical instrument but merely evoke a general feeling that she associates with the instrument. In this regard, it is a highly subjective association: there is nothing in the sound of her voice that tells you which instrument she is evoking; only her speech about music will reveal this.

Vachon’s idea of the voice as a musical instrument, and not only as a medium for the sung word, is in part related to how she came into contact with the blues. Vachon emphasized that she learned to sing the blues by listening to Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans and Yusef Lateef, among others, and not blues singers. Although, once she moved to New Orleans in the 1980s, where she pursued a Bachelor’s degree in music therapy at Loyola University, the latter shaped her musical imaginary as well (pers. interview May 14, 2019). When Vachon sings OMM, a blues, her “thinking voice” is thus entwined with thinking musical instruments. Or are we to argue that Miles Davis did not play a thinking trumpet or Lateef a thinking oboe?

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73 As Vachon stresses, though, she was influenced by woman singers such as Mahalia Jackson, Amalia Rodriguez and Umm Kulthum (pers. comment Jan 8, 2021). Furthermore, she eventually came in direct contact with the blues: “When I came to the US, I wanted to listen to all those great blues guys, and I did, those who wrote those great blues that the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton took [from]; I wanted to get to know [the roots of the blues] better, and also, Taj Mahal” (pers. interview Jan. 22, 2019)
While Vachon did not link her voice to any specific musical instrument in OMM, towards the end of the song it is clearly imitating the electric guitar. Or is it the other way around? Moreover, as noted, she owes her knowledge of the blues to instrumental renditions of the genre. Ultimately, for Vachon, the “thinking voice” is indissociable from the “thinking instrument.”

Vachon’s reflections point towards the inextricable relationship between musical instruments and the voice, a relationship that might not be that obvious at first. For instance, bongo and conga players in salsa performances are often told to “speak” (“¡habla, habla!”) when they solo; that is, by being told to “speak” they are being encouraged to get in the zone, to improvise in a meaningful way. The same minor percussion instruments are said to “sing,” insofar as they have tones: as Haitian percussionist Georges Rodriguez told me, a salsa band sings a lot! (pers. interview March 14, 2019).74 This kind of anthropomorphization, where a musical object is given a human voice, is not restricted to “non-Western” or partially Western cultures. Alfonso X of Castile (1221-1284), for instance, described music as “the art that teaches all the ways of singing, including those of the instruments, the voices and any other ways in which sound may be produced” (qtd. in Martínez 2016: 282; my translation).75 For him, even non-musical instruments seem to “sing” insofar as they produce sound. And yet, considering how heavily influenced medieval Spain was by Islamic culture, and taking into account Alfonso X’s admiration for Islamic culture (Martínez 2016), it is unclear whether this is a “Western” or “non-Western” conception. Furthermore, considering how medieval Islamic culture was key to the translation and preservation of the great Greek classics, Islam’s non-Western status is debatable as well.

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74 For more on Rodriguez see chapter three.
75 “Et ésta es art que enseña todas las maneras de cantar, tan bien delos estrumentos como de las voces et de cualquier manera que sean de son.”
Unknowingly building on Alfonso X, Don Ihde has noted that “the mute object does not reveal its own voice, it must be given a voice. . . one thing is struck by another, one surface contacts another, and in the encounter a voice is given to the thing” (2007: 67). This voice-in-relation is analogous to the one that emerges between a musical instrument and the person who plays it. That is, the voice of the musician is neither that of the instrument nor that of the musician. It is the voice that emerges in the encounter between the two. When Vachon plays the musical instrument of her singing voice, it is the encounter between different body parts (larynx, lungs, abdominal, back and face muscles, and so forth) and her breath which one hears. Having imparted singing lessons since the 1990s, Vachon is fully aware of the physicality involved in singing. Singing is about “breathing, resonating, where it resonates, not just in your head, its attached; [it goes] from the vagina to your brains; [it’s about] all the sinuses; all kinds of vibrations; [about] making room; yawning” (pers. interview May 14, 2019). Hence, when Vachon uses her singing voice with the goal of evoking a musical instrument, what one hears is the encounter between the aforementioned (the body parts and breath) and an imagined musical instrument based on Vachon’s concrete listening experiences of these instruments and her subjective interpretation of what they mean. At this more abstract level as well, Vachon’s “thinking voice” is indissociable from the “thinking instrument.”

If Vachon’s voice forces us to think the “thinking voice” and the “thinking instrument” together, she also leads us to reflect on the relationship between wordless sounds and meaning. Adriana Cavarero has noted how in Homer’s original myth of Odysseus and his encounter with the Sirens, the latter did not only emit pure sound (as later interpretations of the myth would have it) but actually sang and narrated. Thus, they inextricably linked the “irresistible charm of the song” to “the charm of the tale” or the epic (Cavarero 2005: 114). Only later, would the stark
opposition between “pure voice and pure semantic,” where the former is rationalized as feminine and the latter as masculine, would emerge in the West leading to a logos “that tends to split into a presemantic vocality and a devocalized rationality” (2005: 113). Vachon’s voice is reminiscent of the original myth. Her vocables and vocalises in OMM are not pure sound. As we will see, they contain within themselves “the charm of a tale.”

When I asked Vachon what her wordless sounds in OMM were meant to convey, she smiled and answered:

It’s the whole difficulty of the French-Quebecker living in the city, my grandparents never felt that because they lived in the countryside and there was not one English person there. The only two English persons were beggars, my mother said. One was a very bright British man, my grandma… there was a bed for them, they would feed them. There were three that were regulars. But she never felt that she was being badgered in some way. In the city it was different. I remember my godfather was working at the CN railroad station, and he would always ask me “how is your English, are you studying, you need English to work.” It was kind of weird. There was an English family who spoke French. I didn’t speak English until I was an adult. And even then… It was only when I came to the US, and [before] when friends and jazz players would come to my house in Montréal when I started to speak better English. My father could see through all the bullshit of the politics. He was really sad that things were how they were but he spoke English well. He would speak English to Ricci [Ricci], he wouldn’t say “oh I won’t speak English to you.” (pers. interview Jan. 22, 2019)

Having read a prior draft of this chapter, Vachon elaborated:

I started speaking [English] slowly as I was finding summer work [in Montreal]. I lied on applications to get my first job. To be told “speak white” or to be assaulted was very insulting. To feel and see that all major posts were given to English Canadians was problematic, to hear my dad so afflicted and mad in front of such inequality and lack of respect, following politics, volunteering for the party québécois [Parti Québécois] but also always friendly and courteous with everyone regardless of their language and color. He would say: “Why can’t we co-inhabit, get ahead and share the same advantages?” My English improved with my American studies and friends but I still think of myself as a Québécoise.

The story that Vachon encodes in her vocalises and vocables are not about the October Crisis or the FLQ, though they are related. Instead, it is a deeply personal story where the socio-linguistic injustices and economic inequalities that led to the crisis are narrated from her own lived
experience. It is also a nuanced take that complicates the Anglo-Canadian/French-Canadian dichotomy. As Vachon notes, political subordination to Anglo-Canada worked differently in the city than in the countryside. Indeed, per Vachon, it was non-existent in the latter. Though, it is obvious that if the province of Québec was in general economically subordinated to Anglo-Canada, this would have had an impact on the countryside too. Still, it is nevertheless true that the October crisis was largely a Montreal phenomenon.

Vachon is also keen to note that although her father was for independence, he was not a puritan when it came to the use of the French-language; he also spoke English. Here Vachon is distancing her father (and herself) from a notion of Québécois nationalism that has been reduced to the affirmation of French as an act of chauvinism. While her father was in favor of Bill 22 (1974) and Bill 101 (1977) which led to the use of French in public signs, the importance of such struggles was tied to their social-economic implications. After all, these bills were “written specifically to augment the power of Francophones in the workplace, both in the private and public sectors, by mandating the use of their language” (Barreto 1998: 133). Vachon further stresses that she had nothing against the English language per se by talking about her love for jazz and her hosting of jazz musicians in her home in Montreal. These musicians, as she noted, played a role in her mastering of English. Ultimately, the struggle in which Vachon and her father were involved in, was one where the “English person” would not “be on the top,” where one could “co-inhabit, get ahead and share the same advantages” and no one would be told to “speak white.” It went beyond language.

When I asked Vachon, “What does singing without words give you that singing with words does not?” She replied:

It takes me to places. It’s a very physical thing also. The ideas don’t take the shape of words. They are ideas. It’s more like a graphic idea. It’s waves, it’s large, or its vertical or
horizontal and it inhabits my body, I feel it like this or like this [moves her hands]. And of course, singing ‘Octobre au mois de mai’ has always been something very important to me. (pers. interview May 14, 2019)

Maurice Merleau Ponty has argued that “psychological motives and bodily occasions may overlap because there is not a single impulse in a living body which is entirely fortuitous in relation to psychic intentions, not a single mental act which has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological tendencies” (2002 [1945]: 101). Vachon’s reflection of OMM as a song of social justice that takes her to places (the Québec of her childhood and youth; her relationship with her father) and that is, moreover, shaped by her body, shows how these connections are manifested in music.

In the light of Vachon’s reflections, OMM exhibits an anticolonial critique through semantic valence and wordless sounds that, at one level are semantic (her memories) and at the other are “pure” sound (the voice as the sound of a musical instrument and in its manifestation as vocalises and vocables). Her “thinking voice” thus adds a significant political dimension to the Québécois revolution proposed in OMM.

**Conclusion**

Mladen Dolar has noted how within Western and some non-Western cultures,76 “music, and in particular the voice should not stray away from words which endow it with sense; [for] as soon as it departs from its textual anchorage, the voice becomes senseless and threatening—all the more so because of its seductive and intoxicating powers” typically associated with femininity (2006: 43). In Vachon’s vocables and vocalises one can hear a series of anticolonial and decolonial critiques (e.g. her condemnation of settler colonialism). But as the narrative content of Vachon’s vocal sounds makes clear, recognizing this does not entail getting rid of the

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76 He specifically mentions Chinese culture.
importance of words. OMM, as the complex artefact that I have shown it to be, suggests that the revolution is only possible in the interaction between both. The revolution is incomplete without the “seductive and intoxicating powers” of Cavarero’s (and Homer’s) sirens.

When Vachon sings OMM, then, she is simultaneously affirming the importance of logos and of the voice beyond logos—beyond words (Dolar 2006: 58)—in the imagining of social justice and freedom. Her creolization of a “senseless” voice, pure semantics (the text of the song) and fuzzy semantics (her memories as inscribed in the vocalises/vocables), leads to a complex form of resistance. Vachon’s voice calls for the return of the original song of the Greek Sirens, a song where the epic—now of national and personal liberation—has semantic and phonic dimensions. Ultimately, the revolution proposed in OMM is found in the interplay between the lyrical content, the music, the musical arrangement (Vachon’s voice included) and Vachon’s “thinking voice.” The revolution, understood as a deep act of decoloniality, cannot be heard in its complexity, unless we listen to the point of encounter of all of these elements.

Coda

It is November 19, 2018. My five-year-old daughter Gabriela is wearing a pink Minnie Mouse pajama, a Superman cape, a pink tutu with some blue and green stripes, and a Día de los Muertos paper mask painted yellow, green, purple, blue, and yes, pink. She is running around and dancing, intermittently banging a tambourine and a toy bongo. In the background, Vachon is singing the reggae version of “Octobre au mois de mai” that she recorded with Ricci in Vocalise (2006). If Gabriela is excited, so am I. It has only been a few weeks since I actually met Vachon, on November 3, during one of her performances with Ricci in Sisters, a restaurant and bar in Brooklyn.
When I wrote my dissertation proposal, I mentioned Vachon’s band Toubabou as one of my potential case studies. But how (or whether) I would be able to meet Vachon, I did not know. Still, I began buying her used albums on eBay. A few months after having defended my proposal, on October 2, 2018, I was in the middle of having my first formal interview with Sylvain Leroux (see chapter nine) when Toubabou came up. Leroux tells me that he actually knows Vachon who, furthermore, lives in New York City! I am ecstatic. Could it be? He emails her. She agrees to share her email with me. I email Vachon on October 4. She is heading to Guatemala. Vachon speaks Spanish too! I am beyond myself. Might it be possible that I will actually meet the person who, up to this moment, has been but a voice in some old records? Shortly thereafter I am visiting Vachon at her home, eating her delicious food, sharing my songs with her and Ricci and joining them with my cuatro during these informal gatherings.

On June 7, 2019 I visit who by now, is simply Lise, bearing gifts. I have just returned from Puerto Rico where I have brought some coffee beans from Lares. She offers to pay. I refuse. She asks: “How is Gabriela?” My answer and my feelings are not documented in my fieldnotes. But as I read her question in my notes, I am moved and left wondering. How many times did my interlocutors/friends asked about Gabriela? I have lost count. What role did Gabriela play as she accompanied me in my fieldwork in Puerto Rico, New York City and Québec? I realize now that Gabriela made me connect with my interlocutors/friends in a special way. In their eyes, I was not only a researcher, a musician or a singer-songwriter. I was also the father of a magical and excessively multicolored being who would come to see most of my interlocutors as talented grandmas and grandpas.

During our encounter on June 7, Lise gives me several books for Gabriela. One is about Duke Ellington; another is by Rabindranath Tagore; one is about African American poetry;
another is by Pete Seeger. These are beautiful gifts. I cherished them then as I do now. But Lise’s real gift to my daughter was being in her life. One day, Gabriela will be old enough to realize what a gift it was to be in Lise’s presence. In the meantime, I thank Lise in her name, and my own.
Chapter 3:
Georges Rodriguez:
When Haitian Drums “Meet” Québécois Fusion

To my wife, Edline

In 1972, twenty-year-old Haitian minor percussionist, composer and choreographer Georges Rodriguez arrived in Montreal. Part of a wider wave of immigrants that by 1974 had made of Haiti the main source of migration to Québec (Déjean 1978: 16), Rodriguez would become a key contributor to the reshaping of Québec’s cultural landscape. Widely recognized as a master drummer by the multiethnic community of percussionists of Montreal (see Beaudry 1983: 125-140; Provost 2016), by 1973 Rodriguez had founded *Mapu Guinin« un groupe de musiques et danses folkloriques haïtiennes qui contribue encore aujourd'hui à l’expression culturelle traditionnelle de la communauté haïtienne de Montréal»* (Provost 2016: 171).

According to Villefranche and Bernard this was “la première troupe de danse officiellement reconnue [in Québec]. . . qui s'inspirait de la musique rituelle haïtienne” (1989: 19-20). Mapu Guinin was followed by Rodriguez’s creation of an «un ensemble de musique qui porte le nom d’EsSpécial» in 1979, and of *Rada*, a group «qui interprète les chants et musiques folkloriques haïtiens en ajoutant les couleurs locales montréalaises par des arrangements plus modernes, mais surtout, par l’intégration de musiciens différents qui s’appropriaient les mélodies haïtiennes» founded in 1980 (Provost 2016: 171).

A year after founding *Mapu Guinin*, in 1974, however, Rodriguez had become a member of the Québécois fusion band Toubabou, contributing one of his own compositions to their album *Attente* (1975). Rodriguez’s “*Yanvalou Rada (la nature en personne)*,” an instrumental piece, spoke largely to his memories of his life in Haiti, and his understanding of Haitian

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77 The authors also highlight the importance of institutions such as the *Maison d’Haïti* and the *Bureau de la Communauté Chrétienne*. For more on how Haitians shaped Québec see Mills 2016.
musical-political culture. But it also spoke to the Québécois band members’ interest in West African and Afro-diasporic musics. The name Toubabou, after all, was a West African and Central African term used to designate whites and/or foreigners. Furthermore, Toubabou members Michel Séguin and Lise Vachon (then Cousineau)\textsuperscript{78} had briefly travelled to Senegal and Mali in 1973, and Séguin had spent several years playing “Afro-Rock” and the djembe (Villefranche and Bernard 1989: 19; Provost 2016). Despite a shared love for Black culture, though, Rodriguez’s composition, a creolization of a presumably sacred vodou rhythm and a secular Haitian folk melody, contrasted markedly with the rest of the repertoire of the album, which was more akin to fusion: a mix of jazz, blues, rock and funk with West African influences. Indeed, as noted by Monique Provost, “le fait ‘haïtien’ de la percussion du groupe Toubabou ne faisait pas l’objet d’une mise en valeur lors des prestations» of Toubabou; Séguin « privilégiait l’Afrique » (2014: 175).

In this chapter, I focus on this understudied moment of Rodriguez’s professional life. Throughout, I take “Yanvalou Rada (la nature en personne),” from now on YR, as an entry point into exploring Rodriguez’s views on Haitian and Québécois musical-political culture. In particular, I analyze the ways in which Rodriguez links the aesthetics of his piece to multiple Haitian pasts (some related to his own life, others to the birth of the Haitian nation and the Haitian Revolution), and to his present in Québec during the 1970s. How did YR’s arrangement come about? What memories did Rodriguez strive to inscribe in it? How did Toubabou sound to Rodriguez? And what might this teach us about the encounter between Québec and Haiti in the 1970s?

\textsuperscript{78} See chapter two for more on Vachon.
Reconstructing Rodriguez’s pasts, just like reconstructing the pasts of anyone, is fraught in many ways. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has noted how even if “the consciousness of my past which I now have seems to me to cover exactly the past as it was, the past which I claim to recapture is not the real past, but my past as I now see it, perhaps afteraltering it” (2002 [1945]: 80). Rodriguez, though honest and sincere, is not immune to altering the past. Hence, in addition to my fieldnotes, taken during a dozen encounters with Rodriguez at his home in Montréal, and several audio-recorded interviews, I rely on archival research regarding Québec’s musical-political culture during the 1960s and 1970s, and Haiti’s history. Regarding the latter, I specifically draw on ethnomusicological/anthropological, historical and historiographic literature that touches upon Rodriguez’s historical musical references, thus enriching, questioning or complicating his views. The story that the reader will read, then, emerges from these intersections and multiplicity of views. After all, as Aristotle put it: “a multitude is a better judge of many things than any individual” (2000: 137).

In the first part I explain why it is important to study Rodriguez’s contributions to Québecois musical culture. I also reflect on the methodological, ethical, personal and intellectual considerations that led me to Toubabou and to Rodriguez, sharing how I met Rodriguez and explaining what led me to choose YR as my object of analysis. In the second part, I discuss YR in detail analyzing the Haitian pasts that it evokes for Rodriguez, and underlining the myriad decolonial critiques that arise from our conversation about it. In this section, I also discuss how Rodriguez hears his piece in relation to Toubabou’s aesthetic pondering upon whether anti-Black racism played a role in Rodriguez’s relation with Toubabou. I conclude by briefly reflecting on what it means to play music together when musicians can hear one another but are utterly unequipped to listen to one another. If listening “requires acquired competence to judge the
music’s particularity as the music that it is” (Gracyk 2007: 146), Rodriguez was not listening to Toubabou and vice versa. My overall argument is that revisiting Québec’s 1960s and 1970s through Black-Québécois musical collaboration significantly alters our understanding of Québécois musical-political culture of the time unveiling in the process particular decolonial critiques.

Why Toubabou? Why Rodriguez? Why YR?: a Reflection on Methodology and Ethics

The path that led me to Toubabou’s album *Attente* (1975) as an object of interest, and to Rodriguez and YR in particular, lie at the intersection of intellectual, personal, and ethical considerations. I was fascinated by the album’s fusion aesthetics and its political import. According to Kevin Fellezs “by the early 1970s, jazz, rock, and funk were positioned in diametrically opposed ways, and by mixing them together, fusion musicians participated in a larger shift, not simply in the categories but in the categorization process itself” (2011: 5). If Toubabou and Rodriguez had participated in this “larger shift,” they had done so not from the United States and Anglo Canada (the geographies discussed by Fellezs 2011), but from Québec, a Francophone periphery of the Americas that at the time was often described as a colony of the aforementioned countries. Québécois were, in the words of Pierre Vallières “nègres blancs,” where “nègre” indexed their colonial and political subjection to Anglo-Canada and the US.79 Hence, in addition to musical categories, Toubabou was also clearly problematizing another category: that of North America as an Anglo geography. If this, and the sheer joy that the album gave me, led me to Toubabou, my focus on Rodriguez responded to other considerations.

Upon “discovering” Toubabou, I was immediately struck by Rodriguez’s presence. What did it mean for Rodriguez, a “nègre noir” as David Austin (2013) playfully called Blacks in

79 See chapter two for more on this.
Montréal in *Fear of a Black Nation*, to be a part of Toubabou, a band of “nègres blancs”? The only Black member of the band, Rodriguez was one of very few Black musicians to have recorded with Québécois musicians in the 1970s. Or so I was led to believe having read *chanson québécoise* and Québécois counterculture literature. However, my research would soon lead me to discover other Black musicians in Québec such as music entrepreneur Doudou Boicel.80 While scholars of *chanson québécoise* and Québécois countercultural literature are keen to highlight how African American musics such as blues, jazz and rock shaped Québécois identity in the 1960s, at times even subscribing to Vallières’s notion of the Québécois as “nègre blanc” (see Côté 1992; Roy 2008), the silence around Québec-based Black musicians and their collaborations with Québécois is rather deafening. There is little mention that the Québécois, despite their evident oppression by an Anglo-Canadian power structure—as a consequence of the British Conquest of 1759-1761—were also, for the most part, the descendants of French settler colonialism, which had enslaved Indigenous peoples and Blacks, though in smaller numbers than the British in the US (see Mackey 2010; Trudel 1960). Similarly, the history of Black (Anglophone or Francophone) resistance in the province, particularly Montréal during the 1960s receives scant attention (see Austin 2013).

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), reflecting on Haitian history, noted that there are certain pasts that are silenced because “the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals which have unequal access to the means for such production” (xix). Rodriguez’s “uniqueness” as a Black musician in Québec responds to a “silencing” of a past overdetermined by Québécois nationalism. The “oversights” of *chanson québécoise* and countercultural literature regarding Blacks and the First Nations are unfortunate

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80 See chapter one.
if seemingly understandable insofar as these are not the subjects of inquiry. And yet, they are intrinsic to the story being told and to the anticolonial theoretical framework that is often developed by these music scholars. For how can one critically address the notion of the Québécois as “nègres blancs” without putting this in conversation with Québec’s complicity with slavery and settler colonialism?81

Rodriguez’s experiences with Toubabou, thus, offered me a site to investigate Québécois-Black histories of musical collaborations in order to sound out these silences. But it also allowed me to sound out other silences: those of Black musicians whose cultural contributions are not reducible to those they made to their ethnic/national groups (not that there is anything wrong with that) but to Québécois society broadly speaking.

My interest in Rodriguez also had to do with Haiti’s presence in my life. Even before I met my wife Edline, a fiercely proud Haitian-American, I had felt deep admiration for Haiti. When I still lived in my homeland, Puerto Rico, I had avidly read about the Haitian Revolution and Haiti’s resistance against the US invasion of the early twentieth century (see Renda 2001). Their fierce opposition to French colonialism and slavery and American neocolonialism resonated with my country’s own struggles against Spanish and American colonialism. I was also an admirer of Edwidge Danticat whose novel The Farming of Bones became a part of my literary imagination thanks to Maritza Stanchich, an anticolonial American professor at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), who remains a close friend. In addition, I got a glimpse at Haitian music when one of my French professors at UPR had me sing “Papa Damballah,” a classic Haitian song dedicated to the loa (spirit) Damballah, during a school event. While I do not speak Kreyòl to this day, my skills as a musician allowed me to sing pretty well in Kreyòl

81 To see how this relates to settler colonialism chapter seven, and to a lesser degree, two and nine.
according to this professor. I felt quite proud of this achievement. Finally, as a doctoral student at Columbia University, I had the opportunity of being Christopher Washburne’s teacher’s assistant for his “Salsa, Soca and Reggae” course during the Fall semester of 2015. Part of my training included teaching two full classes with one of them on Haitian musics.

Ethical considerations were also central to my interest in Rodriguez. Throughout most of my fieldwork between 2016 and 2019, Marie Cam, a cousin of my wife, had generously hosted me (and my five-year-old daughter Gabriela) in her home in Longueuil, Québec, a thirty-minute bus drive away from Montreal. Indeed, it had been thanks to a prior family vacation trip to her home in 2015, that I had rediscovered Québec as a topic of inquiry and a fieldwork possibility. While I was already somewhat familiar with Québec on account of one of my ex-French professors at UPR, Patrick-André Mather, being Québécois, Marie Cam, made it concrete. How could I not engage with Haiti when my research on Québécois political-musical culture was facilitated in such a significant way by Haitians?

And yet, I almost did not meet Rodriguez. When on October 17, 2018, I arrived at “Le Centre International de Documentation et d’Information Haïtienne, Caribéenne et Afro-canadienne,” Frantz Voltaire, the chairman and founder of this archive/library, informed me that Rodriguez had suffered a stroke. While Voltaire did not have Rodriguez’s contact information, he made me aware of Doudou Boicel (see chapter one) and put me in touch with Professor Claude Dauphin, a prolific Haitian ethnomusicologist whose expertise revolves around Haitian musics, Western classical music and the encounter between the two (see Dauphin 2017; 2014). I must confess that when Voltaire dialed Dauphin’s phone number impromptu, I was shocked, nervous and embarrassed. I had no idea who Dauphin was and was overwhelmed by the

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82 I am grateful for Patrick-André’s friendship throughout the years, and for the informal conversations about his country which have helped me more than he can imagine.
warmness of an unknown voice that generously offered to meet with me in the following days. I spent the next morning at the Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec getting acquainted with Dauphin’s scholarship in a general sense, and reading his Musique, poésie et créolité au temps des Indigènes (2018). How fascinated was I by a book that explored the intellectual profile of Haitian poet Émile Roumer, a key member of the of the radical literary-political “Indigéniste” movement of the 1920s and early 1930s. Dauphin’s analysis of how Roumer viewed the relationship between Haitian Kreyòl, Latin, music and the development of an anti-imperialistic consciousness—as I wrote to him in an email that very same day—presaged Fanon and Glissant (via Roumer’s emphasis on Haitian culture as an amalgamation of roots and routes). It also reminded me of the 1920s Atalayista literary-political movement in Puerto Rico—a corpus of literature with which I was familiar thanks to my exchanges with my friend/interlocutor Frank Ferrer and Yarisa Colón Torres (see chapter ten). Eventually, Dauphin gave me a tour of the music departments of l’Université du Québec à Montréal and l’Université de Montréal, where he worked, and welcomed me into his home. I soon learned that he knew Rodriguez. Still, uncertain as to whether I should approach someone who had suffered a stroke (would I not be bothering Rodriguez and negatively impacting his health with my research?) I avoided putting pressure in that direction. Furthermore, the more I read Dauphin’s works and conversed with him—among other things, we had both read François Noudelmann’s Édouard Glissant: l’identité généreuse (2018)—the more I realized what a privilege it was to be in his presence.

But just as I put on hold my objective of meeting Rodriguez, Rodriguez came to me, so to speak, via Maguy Métellus.

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83 I later learned that Dauphin had actually briefly reviewed Rodriguez’s CD Tambours “rada” de Georges Rodriguez traditions No 1 (1993). In the inner sleeve he wrote: “Les arrangements folkloriques de Georges Rodriguez sont attachants à plus d’un titre. D’un point de vue culturel ces pièces recréent l’organisation sociale haïtienne.”
I came across Métellus as I did some online research. Métellus is a Haitian activist who described herself as a “militante afro-féministe et animatrice” and a supporter of Québec’s independence.84 Intrigued by this description, I contacted her via Facebook and met with her on December 6, 2018 in a small coffee shop. My initial hope was that she would become one of my interlocutors but Métellus had other plans. Having explained my project to her she began to suggest people that I could talk to. Among them was Rodriguez. Upon hearing his name, I expressed my interest in meeting him but also my concerns regarding his health. I learned then that his stroke that had left him paralyzed on one side of his body. Shortly thereafter, I took out my cuatro, my fieldwork “partner,” singing two of my compositions: “Housewife,” in which I describe my life as a proud stay-at-home dad who supports his wife’s role as the main provider, and “Negro,” a Pan-Africanist poem by Langston Hughes where he takes a stand against white supremacy and colonialism. Given Métellus’s long-life commitment to feminism and to combatting anti-Black racism, her enthusiastic reaction was not surprising. What was surprising was that she immediately dialed Rodriguez’s phone number. And two days later, on December 8th, 2018, Métellus and I were in his apartment.

Because Métellus had told me that it had been a long time since they had seen one another, during this first encounter I limited myself to listening to their conversation. I was also shocked into silence: though I knew he was partially paralyzed I was not ready to see him in a wheelchair. At one point, though, Rodriguez asked me what I wanted to talk about. Leaving my anxieties aside, and taking comfort in the welcoming soft-sounding warmth of his voice, I expressed my interest in learning more about his life as a musician, and his work with Toubabou. Rodriguez was very enthusiastic when he spoke about his life in Haiti and his experiences

84 See: https://madmimi.com/s/a0a3eb
playing Haitian and Afro-Caribbean musics in Québec. This *joie de vivre*, however, contrasted greatly with how he spoke about Toubabou. Then, the tone was rather somber and distressed, and the few comments that he made revolved around personal and aesthetics differences that he had had with band member Séguin. Uncomfortable with the idea of upsetting someone who had literally opened the doors of his home to a total stranger, I dropped the subject. Instead, I took out my Puerto Rican *cuatro*, and shared a few songs: the aforementioned “Negro,” and the *seis mapeyé* and *seis chorreao* emblematic of Puerto Rican jíbaro (peasant) music.85 To my astonishment, Rodriguez was familiar with the *cuatro*, an instrument barely known beyond Puerto Rico. Indeed, with the exception of my Argentinian friends/interlocutors Palombo and Pardo (see chapters four, five and six), none of my non-Puerto Rican interlocutors knew the instrument. As I would later discover, he was familiar with jíbaro singer *Chuito el de Bayamón* as well as with the more Afro-Puerto Rican genres of *bomba* and *plena*—thus showcasing an expertise of Hispanic-Caribbean musics that went beyond the more widely known genres of *salsa, son* and *merengue*. After a two-hour encounter, Métellus and I left as Rodriguez waved goodbye from his wheelchair.

The following day I called him to thank him for his hospitality and ask if he would be willing to continue our conversation. I stressed that, as a non-percussionist, I could really learn quite a bit from his expertise. Rodriguez was happy to hear from me, and when I mention that I would love to purchase some of his CDs, he insisted that his music was “free for musicians who wer as good” as I was “and for people who are really going to appreciate it” (fieldnote Dec. 9, 2018). And so, on December 11, this time without Métellus, Rodriguez and I met again. Remembering our prior meeting and how Toubabou was a non-starter, but also genuinely

85 The *seis*, along with the *aguinaldo*, is one of the styles of singing/playing within *trova* (Puerto Rican peasant music).
interested in learning more about his expertise in Haitian musics, I asked him first about his experiences playing music with his groups Mapu Guinin and the troupe Rada (leaving a discussion about Toubabou for the end). Rodriguez decided then to play one of his CDs.

As we listened to Tambours “rada” de Georges Rodriguez traditions No 1 released in 1993, he explained the musical qualities and the lyrical content, sharing some of his experiences as a vodou master drummer and a percussionist of secular Afro-Caribbean musics in general. Noticing that at times, some of these songs sounded Cuban or Puerto Rican to my ear, we engaged in a conversation around how musics from these islands overlapped, and how they had informed his own work. Rodriguez would often tap with his right hand the different rhythmic patterns illustrating how they spoke to one another, and I made an effort to write these down in order to be able to follow. After the CD ended, I brought up Toubabou. Like in our prior meeting, Rodriguez criticized band member Michel Séguin for his lack of deep knowledge of African and Afro-diasporic musics. It should be noted, though, that Séguin made significant contributions to Québécois musical culture: since 1965 he has been performing “Afro-Rock” exerting “un profonde influence sur le développement de nouveaux rapports musicaux dans la métropole québécoise” throughout the 1970s (Villefranche and Bernard 1989: 19). Moreover, Séguin’s performance during the Superfrancofête in 1974, attended by more than 50,000 people, was no small feat, and his fusion band Toubabou (and before that the Ville Émard Blues Band), were among the best countercultural experiments in Québec (see Provost 2016).

Noticing again that this was not a topic that Rodriguez was eager to discuss (he would lower the volume of his voice and the experience was clearly overdetermined by Séguin) I did not insist on it.
That cold winter afternoon, I left Rodriguez’s apartment curious to learn more about him but uncertain as to whether we would ever be able to discuss Toubabou in any depth and beyond Séguin. Furthermore, I felt a certain unease about writing about Rodriguez only in relation to Toubabou. Since Rodriguez was an outstanding musician in his own right and a band leader who had made invaluable contributions to the Haitian diaspora in Québéc, should I not just write about him in that context? Did I not risk reducing him to a moment in time of which he was neither proud nor fond of? Could I find a way of writing both about Toubabou and Rodriguez in an ethical way that respected both Rodriguez’s inclinations and my research interests?

Several more enjoyable and fruitful encounters followed between Rodriguez and myself where he would play some old cassettes of Haitian music, explain the lyrical and musical content, and where we would talk about the enmeshment of Afro-Caribbean musics. Here, my workshop with my friend/interlocutor Frank Ferrer was again fundamental, given his expertise on Afro-Caribbean rhythms (see chapter ten).

While these meetings seemed to be “off topic” (I did not bring up Toubabou again), this was only so in appearance. Throughout our conversations I had been able to grasp Rodriguez’s aesthetic preferences. In addition to being an expert on Haitian musics, I had learned that he was a musician/choreographer who had spent a lifetime performing and listening to a variety of musical genres that transcended those of his homeland and that included Western classical music. As he proudly stated, he was a big fan of Vivaldi, so proud that he had named his daughter Valdi. Furthermore, Rodriguez never spoke about rock, jazz, blues, funk or fusion, precisely the musical genres central to Toubabou, which suggested that these musics did not appeal to him. Moreover, these meetings also taught me that Rodriguez loved talking about his compositions, which in turn, led me to realize that YR, his only compositional contribution to
Toubabou’s album, was the ideal entry point into having a discussion around Toubabou that would also be important to Rodriguez.

Finally, Rodriguez possessed a historical consciousness that was both deep and quite idiosyncratic, and indissociable from his musical discourse as I show in the following section. Our conversations often led to political conversations around the Haitian Revolution, the Duvaliers’s dictatorship (1957-1986), Québec’s *la Révolution tranquille*—Rodriguez had voted for independence, in part, because he had married a Québécoise—and the Cuban Revolution. Regarding the latter, he had performed in Cuba in 1978 during the XI World Festival of Youth and Students. He had fond memories of his performances there, and spoke approvingly of the country’s political regime which he compared favorably to that of the Duvaliers’s. Rodriguez’s positive view of the Cuban Revolution was based, in part, on the educational achievements of the Revolution; achievements that he found lacking in Haiti.

By the time we spoke about Toubabou, then, as part of a more formal audio-recorded interview held on March 14, 2019, we were both ready to have an insightful conversation around Toubabou that attended to Rodriguez’s interests and my own. Ultimately, my choice of YR reflects my intellectual capabilities as shaped by my research project and prior knowledge, and a negotiation between Rodriguez’s interests and mine. This, in fact, has been a constant facet of this dissertation project in which I am invested in theorizing with my interlocutors. What follows is the story of YR how it was composed, how it became a part of the album *Attente*, how it sounds out Haiti, Québec and the encounter between the two, and the myriad decolonial critiques that emerge by listening to these sounds in the light of Rodriguez’s musical-political imaginary.
**Yanvalou Rada (la nature en personne)**

YR is based on the rhythm called *yanvalou senp* (simple). The *yanvalou senp*, in turn, belongs to the *yanvalou* family of rhythms, which according to Dauphin, has at least eight variations; though, as Dauphin cautions, it is “impossible d’étudier de manière exhaustive toutes les corrélations de battements rythmiques avec les danses et les dieux qui leur sont assignés” (2014: 63-64; 68). The *yanvalou* is played as part of the *Rada*, one of three vodou rituals in Haiti (and its diaspora) along with *Petwo* and *Kongo*. Played at the beginning of the vodou ceremony (Wilcken 1992: 11-12), according to Nicole Beaudry, some of these rhythms are dedicated to vodou gods Damballah and his wife Aida Ouedo (1983: 126), and at least one is dedicated to Legba, “le gardien du monde des loas [the spirits] et sorte d’intermédiaire entre les humains et les loas” (1983: 128).

In the Rada ritual, which “largely derive from Dahomean and Yoruba religions” (McAlister 2002: 87) three drums are played: the *manman* or *adjountò*, the *segon* or *ountò/outògi*, and the *boula*, known as well as *boulaye, boulatche, katani* or *piti* (Dauphin 2014: 95-98).\(^\text{86}\) The *manman* (“mother” in Haitian Kreyòl) is the lowest pitched drum and is played by the master drummer. It is this drum which leads the other two (the *segon* and the *boula*). As such, it is in charge of coordinating the drumming and the vodou ceremony or rather, it mediates the relationship between the drumming, the *loa* (spirits), the possessed, the priests and the congregation. While the *boula* maintains a steady rhythm, and the *segon* might engage in slight variations, it is the *manman* which has the most liberty of all (Manuel 1995: 124). These drums and the *yanvalou*, then, are entwined with the vodou ritual.

\(^{86}\) Dauphin also mentions a fourth drum, the bas; its use is optional.
If Rodriguez had borrowed the rhythm of YR from vodou, the melody of YR had a different origin story.

When Rodriguez was twelve years-old he was wandering around his neighborhood in Haiti when the sounds of a “flit bwa,” a “flûte traversière champêtre” made out of “une jeune tige de bambou” (Dauphin 2014: 108), caught his attention. As Rodriguez searched for the source of the sound, he saw that it came from a man who, sitting backwards on a donkey, was playing the flute. Eager to memorize the melody, he followed them until he had committed it to memory. After humming the melody to me, Rodriguez sang the beat of the walking donkey which seemed to mark the appropriate tempo. When ten or eleven years later, having migrated to Québec, Séguin asked him to provide a piece for Toubabou’s album, Rodriguez remembered this melody, and proceeded to add to it the yanvalou senp rhythm.” While we will have occasion to see to what extent “nature” informs this piece later on, it is worth noting that what Rodriguez heard that day, was not only a flute, but a flute being accompanied by a rhythm “played” by a donkey. Nature is a part of the song in this and other ways. For now, though, let us follow the thread of how YR was shaped by Rodriguez’s experiences with Toubabou.

Rehearsing and recording YR was characterized by a series of negotiations between Rodriguez and the band members. One set was related to the melody; the other, to the rhythm. I address them in that order.

For Rodriguez, preserving/reproducing the appropriate timbre of the original melody was a major concern when it came to recording it with Toubabou. As he told me:

*Lise [Cousineau, today Vachon87] a essayé la mélodie avec le hautbois mais le son du hautbois ça correspond pas avec le son de l’Afrique de bambou de roseau, de petit bambou; la sonorité n’est pas pareille; le timbre c’est pas bon; c’est la flûte traversière qui m’a donné le son que j’attendais.*

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87 See chapter two for more on Vachon.
In Rodriguez’s estimation, the oboe’s timbre did not “correspond” to that of the flit bwa. Indeed, as noted by Walter Piston, the oboe’s double-reed tone has been described as “pungent, tangy, nasal, penetrating, biting, piercing, and raspy,” qualities that distinguish it “sharply from the flute” (1957: 151). And yet while Rodriguez claims that the transverse flute “gave him the sound he was expecting” this is only true to a certain extent. Piston has noted that the emergence of “modern flutes” made out of “silver, gold, and even platinum” led to a “pure, clear, and serene” timbre that contrasted with that of its predecessor, the wooden flute (1957: 128). If such distinctions are perceptible within the European classical music tradition, it is clear that the timbres of the flit bwa and the transverse flute are quite different, particularly to a trained ear such as that of Rodriguez.

And yet, one should be careful to not reify these differences in sound as being representative of a Western/non-Western binary. Insofar as the flit bwa is a creole instrument, it is not entirely delinked from Western musical traditions: it lies both within and without. Indeed, as Dauphin has underlined, the flit bwa is a variant of “la petite flûte traversière en bois” that was played in the European-inspired orchestras of King Christophe, the ruler of the northern part of Haiti between 1811 and 1820 (2014: 109). Furthermore, in the Southern part of the island, it is used to play European dances such as “contredanses, quadrilles, menuets, gavottes, [and] mazurkas” by the descendants of Africans and the descendants of the Polish who supported the Haitian Revolution (Dauphin 2014: 109). In the light of this, and considering Rodriguez’s love for classical music, then, it may very well be that the transverse flute indeed “gave him the sound he was expecting.” The flit bwa, after all, does not only sound somewhat like a transverse flute but partakes of a repertoire typically played by that European instrument. But the transverse flute may have also become an acceptable option for Rodriguez out of necessity. Rodriguez and
Toubabou may simply have not had access to this wooden flute, though “au Québec, depuis les années 1970, il y a plus d’une douzaine d’orchestres de musique ancienne (médiévale, renaissance, baroque, préclassique) internationalement reconnus où l’on joue des instruments anciens comme le traverso qui est la flûte traversière en bois » (Dauphin, pers. comment Feb. 18, 2021). In the end, Rodriguez, wielding his power as composer and arranger, had Gerry Labelle play the flute in YR and Lise dub the same melody with her voice.

Rodriguez’s decision to turn down Lise’s suggestion of creolizing the piece by introducing the oboe responds not only to his desire of accurately representing the memory of a sound but of faithfully evoking (to the extent possible) a moment that marks the beginnings of his musical career. It was right around then when his mother, a devout Catholic, allowed him to play the vodou drums which she considered “Satanic.” It would take the intervention of a local priest, Joseph Augustin, to change her mind. Noticing Rodriguez’s talent, Augustin encouraged him to play the drums during mass. Migrating to Montreal during the 1970s, Augustine and Rodriguez would continue to collaborate for years to come (Provost 2016: 172-173). Thus, the transverse flute serves as a medium through which Rodriguez can translate Haitian childhood memories and sounds of the past into an acceptable, if not ideal, sound of his Québec-based present.

An analysis around YR’s rhythm, and how this was negotiated with Toubabou, highlights again, a deep connection between memory, aesthetic preferences, necessity and politics. But,

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given that the *yanvalou* rhythm (contrary to the melody of YR), is linked to the vodou ritual, there is also a religious component to consider.

When I asked Rodriguez to describe the process of teaching Séguin how to play the *yanvalou*, he told me:

*Je lui ai montré [à Séguin] comme jouer le yanvalou. Je ne voulais pas mettre une mélodie de vaudou parce que c’est yanvalou nature, c’est naturel... il n’y a pas de vaudou avec la flûte; normalement il n’y a pas de choses comme ça, il n’y a pas de guitare ni de flûte.*

Here Rodriguez stresses that the *yanvalou* that he taught Séguin, though played in vodou rituals, was not religious. He makes this clear by stating that he was unwilling to teach Séguin/Toubabou how to play a vodou melody (one that in a vodou ritual might be accompanied by a *yanvalou* rhythm). His unwillingness to do so is based, in part, on the fact that there is no flute or guitar in vodou music; hence, as he implies, playing a vodou melody in this context does not make sense. But Rodriguez’s resistance may also respond to other considerations. According to Dauphin in the vodou ritual it is the melody or the chant which contributes “à la régulation des passages de l’univers socioculturel à l’univers spirituel. Par les sens des paroles d’abord, ces chants dévoilent leur appartenance à tel ou tel esprit” (2014: 71). By not sharing a vodou melody, one that following Dauphin would evoke any given spirit, Rodriguez is thus keeping to himself a sacred knowledge that he deems Séguin unworthy of. As previously noted, in Rodriguez’s eyes, Séguin lacked a deep knowledge of African and Afro diasporic musics, and was not really committed to understanding their socio-cultural complexity.

In this regard, Rodriguez’s arrangement of YR can be described as an exercise consisting in detaching the *yanvalou* from its sacredness: YR is detached from vodou insofar as it is not

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89 Ironically, it is plausible that the presence of the flute in Toubabou was precisely what led him to propose the childhood melody as his contribution to the album.
performed in a religious context; then, it is further detached by having the flute, a non-vodou-related instrument play the melody; and this melody, insofar as it is a secular, is delinked from the sacred word. Rodriguez’s detachments do not end here.

As noted earlier, in the Rada ritual where the yanvalou is performed there are three drums: the manman, the segon and the boula. In YR, there is no boula. Furthermore, the manman is played not by the master drummer (Rodriguez) as would occur in a Rada ritual but by Séguin. Rodriguez plays segon (substituted by a conga). When I asked him why Séguin, and not himself, played the manman, he told me that the rhythm performed by the manman was easier to play rhythmic-wise. That is, the patterns were easier to assimilate. But they were only easier to play in the secular context of Toubabou: played it in the context of Rada, where it would be in charge of coordinating the changes in rhythm of the other drums based on ritual considerations, and where is has the most liberty of all (Manuel 1995: 124), was a different matter. Thus, interestingly, in YR Rodriguez remains in control by presumably ceding control to Séguin, who plays the manman or the lead drum. Rodriguez, in turn, plays the more complex rhythms (in this context) of the segon (conga). Ultimately, Rodriguez gives Séguin an empty shell, an isolated rhythmic pattern, barring him from access to a deeper knowledge. He gives Séguin not power through sound but only the appearance of power. Why Rodriguez simply did not choose a secular rhythm is unclear. But given the title of the piece, it seems that he wanted to engage in a musical experiment that incorporated some degree of sacredness.

Rodriguez’s use of the conga (instead of the segon) requires some explanation. While at first it might seem to be an attempt to further detach the yanvalou from vodou, such an interpretation would be inaccurate. The absence of the segon responds to other reasons. As noted by Louis Wilcken “cold weathers slacken the heads [of Haitian drums], and pitch tends to slide
downward, even as musicians are playing the poor performance” (1992: 39). Congas, which are more readily available and whose “metal screws tighten the head for a more secure tuning than the Haitian drums are capable of” (1992: 40) become a viable substitute. While Wilcken is writing about vodou drumming in New York City, his remarks ring true for the even harsher and longer winters of Québec. The absence of the third drum, the *boula*, in YR might respond to a similar reason. The fact that it is not substituted by another conga, though, might be explained by the fact that Rodriguez is not trying to recreate a vodou ritual but merely using one of its rhythms.

Having explained how YR is transformed in the encounter with Toubabou, and how Rodriguez detaches the sacred from YR, it is worth highlighting that, contrary to what might be expected, Rodriguez’s hesitance to share vodou knowledge with Séguin/Toubabou is not based on his religious beliefs. Rodriguez, who describes himself as a non-practicing Catholic, does not believe in vodou or the spirits. In fact, during our meetings he often joked about having been possessed. The first time he did this, I could only detect that he was being sarcastic after he started laughing at the absurdity of such a proposition. I found this unexpected form of irreverence most amusing and ironic: because I am so fond of the orishas, I actually do believe that people can be mounted by African gods. But here I was with a master vodou drummer who, having performed in innumerable rituals, was convinced that this was not possible. Eager to better understand Rodriguez’s musical-political-spiritual imagination, on June 18, 2019, I proceeded to ask him questions about the title of YR. What did he mean by “*Yanvalou Rada (la nature en personne)*”? What role did nature play in this?

When I asked Rodriguez these questions, he replied: “*nature et culture c’est la même chose; c’est Dieu qui a créé les hommes, les arbres, les animaux; de nature à nature; le tambour*
Vodou was natural because vodou drums were made out of nature (the trees, animal skin). But vodou was also natural because it informed Haitian culture widely speaking. As Rodriguez told me: “All Haitians, whether Catholic or Protestant, and when they deny it, practice vodou; but they call it customs and traditions. Vodou is part of Haitian life” (my translation). By this Rodriguez meant that vodou was so natural—so pervasive—that even those Haitians who rejected it practiced it. In order to stress this point, he added that specifically in the Haitian countryside where there were no cinemas or concert halls, “vodou was a divertissement,” a way of enjoying yourself. Vodou was also natural because it was related to God—which he described as a force of nature, an intelligence or intuition that guides you.

As our conversation made clear, though, vodou was also natural because it was at the heart of the Haitian Revolution. Throughout our interview Rodriguez underlined that one could not play vodou music well without knowing the history of slavery and colonialism in Haiti. Indeed, as has been widely documented, vodou was central to the Haitian Revolution: the first cry of liberty was signaled by vodou priest Dutty Boukman in 1791, though there are historical debates regarding how central vodou was for the Revolution (see Geggus 1991:41-57). Rodriguez then illustrated the relationship between sound and Haitian histories of resistance by sharing his knowledge of the Ibo. Rodriguez mentioned how the enslaved Ibo, known for their rebelliousness, played and danced a rhythm that was “très saccadé.” Rodriguez was implying that if you did not know this about the Ibo, you could not possibly play well this rhythm. For Rodriguez, then, playing well was not only about the technical aspects involved and the discipline of practice—though these were key for him—but about being cognizant of the

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historical and spiritual contexts of the instruments and the rhythms performed. But you did not have to believe in vodou to grasp this.

Still somewhat at a loss regarding what made vodou natural for Rodriguez, I asked him if Catholicism was natural in Haiti. He responded, “Non.” Then I asked him if Catholicism was natural in Europe. He responded in the negative as well. When I asked why it was not “natural” in the European context, he said that Catholicism had been adopted by the French, whose ancestors were pagan. I then asked him if Islam and Judaism were “natural” religions to which he replied that monotheism was not natural. Rodriguez related monotheism to imperial expansionism, one that had done much harm in the Americas and Europe. Ultimately, he was using “natural” as an antonym for “artificial.” Following Rodriguez’s logic, vodou is a natural religious culture (as he said, all Haitians practice it regardless of their beliefs) whereas monotheism is an artificial religious culture, closely linked to imperial expansionism.

Though in my view all religious cultures are “artificial” (they are, after all, created by humans)—and thus I remain skeptical concerning Rodriguez’s notion that some are more natural than others—I was fascinated by Rodriguez’s statement. Implicitly, Rodriguez was proposing a bridge between the religious beliefs of pre-Christian Europe and vodou. He was evoking the history of a Catholic Church, that since the fifth century onwards, had been rehearsing forms of oppression against pagans, heretics, apostates, Jews and Muslims (see Díaz Martínez et al. 2007), before applying these skills to the Haitians, and their African and Taino Indian ancestors during the colonial period. Ultimately, Rodriguez was proposing a decolonial critique based on a cross-temporal solidarity where pagans of the Old and the New World were part of a united anti-monotheistic front. Rodriguez’s critique, was not restricted to the Conquest of the Americas or to what Latin American decolonial studies have called the long 16th century (1450-1650) (see
Quijano and Wallerstein 1992; Grosfoguel 2013). Rodriguez was implicitly highlighting how certain aspects of coloniality (Eurocentrism, anti-Black racism, monotheism) were developed in the transition from a Pagan Antiquity to a Christian Medieval Period around the fifth century. In this regard, he was actually more aligned with Latin American decolonial studies scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2014a, 2014b), who has called for paying attention to how histories prior to the long sixteenth century, and religion, shaped racism and the colonial logics of the Americas.

The reader may think that my use of Haiti in order to critique Latin American decolonial studies is misplaced given that Haiti is not generally considered a part of Latin America. Indeed, in Philosophy of Liberation (1980), Enrique Dussel, a founding member of this body of knowledge, highlighted how “the process of emancipation from colonial mercantilism” began in New England in 1776 and continued “in Luso-Hispanic America from 1810 to 1898. . . and thence to the Caribbean” (11; my emphasis). Dussel’s genealogy of liberation effectively silences Haiti. And yet, Haiti had a significant impact on the decolonization of Latin America shaping “Bolívar’s attitudes toward emancipation and republicanism” (Garrigus 2000: 272), and served as an inspiration for slave revolts and conspiracies in Latin American Puerto Rico (Baralt 1982; Rosario Rivera 2015) and the anticolonialism of Puerto Rican criollo/mulatto revolutionary and abolitionist Ramón Emeterio Betances (see Ojeda Reyes and Estrade 2017, Vol. IV: 181-206; 215-238). At times, Haiti has even been described as a “Latin American nation” (see Garrigus 2000: 274). Furthermore, Rodriguez himself is connected to Spain. He was actually born in Valencia in 1953 to a Spanish father and a Haitian mother moving to his native Cap Haïtien by the age of five (pers. comment March 16, 2021).

Despite Rodriguez’s decolonial rationale, though, it is worth pointing out how it reproduces coloniality: it reaffirms boundaries between the West and the Rest erected by the
former. European Catholicism, after all, is not as pure as Rodriguez presupposes it to be. It is crisscrossed by pagan traditions. That is, Catholicism did not only supplant pagan traditions. In the process of striving for this it was shaped by those traditions. Christian holidays, for instance, are often celebrated during sacred pagan holidays. And at the level of its ideological constructs, Catholicism did not only supplant pagan traditions. In the process of striving for this it was shaped by those traditions. Christian holidays, for instance, are often celebrated during sacred pagan holidays. And at the level of its ideological constructs, Catholicism is also in debt to paganism. St. Augustine’s ideas, for example, are permeated by Manicheanism, a “system of thought and belief” spread by “Mani and his Persian missionaries. . . into Asia Minor and thus onto the Roman Empire” (Evans 2003: xxiii-xxiv). Among the views shared by both was a religious tradition based on fundamental dualisms, including, for example, the division of the world in good versus evil, the equating of the body/matter with evil and the spirit with goodness, and asceticism in opposition to hedonism (Evans 2003: xxiii-xxiv).

Moreover, as liberation theology scholar Samuel Silva Gotay has argued, Christianity ceased to be truthful to its values when Jesus’s social justice agenda was syncretized with Platonic/Hellenistic (and hence pagan) views, which led to a sacred/secular binary that allowed the Church to forsake the search for justice on Earth (1989 [1981]: 75-76). It was this syncretism, emphasizes Silva Gotay, which allowed Constantine “to transform Christian faith in an ideology that would legitimate imperial power and that of the dominant classes” (1989 [1981]: 76).

If Rodriguez had come to rationalize his love for vodou through a non-religious/critical framework, this framework had been born out of his love for the sounds of vodou. As Rodriguez told me, during his childhood in Cap Haitien he would escape from his house in order to go listen to (and play) the vodou drums; this, before Joseph Augustin made it possible for him to play at church.

Though Rodriguez claims that «Le tambour est entré dans l’église en Haïti avec moi» (qtd. in Provost 2016 :170) in the early 1960s, Rodriguez was actually partaking of a tradition
that dates back to at least the 1940s when “bowing to the tenacity of African traditions, many parishes [in Haiti] have brought the drum into Sunday worship” (Wilcken 1992: 19). While the tenacity of African traditions no doubt played a role in the history of this musical manifestation, outright violence against the oppression of the Catholic church played a role as well. As noted by Elizabeth Abbot “the defeat of the anti-vodoun vendetta came on February 22, 1942, when unknown assailants riddled a Catholic church with gunfire as its priest celebrated an anti-vodoun mass” (2011: 70).

Rodriguez’s embracing of vodou, though, should not be read as an absolute act of decoloniality. Not if we define decoloniality as not only a challenge to Eurocentrism and racism but also the search for social justice. One should not forget that the Haiti in which Rodriguez spent most of his childhood and youth was led by Francois Duvalier (1957-1971) whose repressive paramilitary force, known as the Tonton Macoutes, included houngans (vodou priests). As noted by Abbot, houngans played a major role in Duvalier’s dictatorship “for few knew better than Duvalier how crucial are vodoun priests to the Haitian people” (2011: 101). During the twenty-eight years reign of Duvalier and his son Jean-Dauphin’s reigns, they “killed between 30,000 and 60,000 Haitians, and raped, beat and tortured countless more” (Henley 2010).90 This, of course, does not mean that Rodriguez supported Duvalier (in fact, he told me during our first encounter with Métellus that he was neither for nor against). Rather, it means only that things mean different things in different contexts. Decoloniality is relational, not fixed; and one should be careful not to reify non-Western or partially Western cultural manifestations as absolutely and unambiguously decolonial or liberating. This, again, is particularly true if decoloniality is to be associated with social justice, which is how I understand the term.

90 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/14/haiti-history-earthquake-disaster
Conclusion

In 1976, shortly after having recorded with Rodriguez, Séguin gave an interview in which he spoke about Rodriguez: “Ti-Rodriguez c’est un haïtien, il joue ses folklores haïtiens, je veux dire, on fait des swings ensemble, des choses comme ça, on se monte différentes affaires, mais c’est un gars de folklore. Il peut rentrer pis faire, avec son feeling, plonger dans du rock & roll ou du swing ou du jazz, tsé, c’est juste une question de bit.” While it is true that Rodriguez played folkloric musics (“folklores haïtiens”), as we have seen throughout this chapter, he was doing much more than this; he was combining, rather, secular and sacred musics by mixing sounds from both traditions. Moreover, his musical background included Western classical music, and Afro-Caribbean musics widely speaking, i.e. he was not limited to Haitian musics.

When I asked Rodriguez if he thought that Séguin understood the complexity behind YR, I was not surprised when he said “Non.” I was surprised, however, by his answer when I asked whether anti-Black racism had played a role in his relationship with Séguin and Toubabou. He was just as forceful: “Non.”

The fact that Rodriguez did not endure racism in his collaboration with Toubabou, speaks to the humanistic values of the Québécois musicians with whom he played. These values were also manifested in Québécois society broadly speaking. Particularly during the 1974 campaign against the deportation of 1,500 Haitians, nearly all of whom were non-professional workers. This campaign was massive: it included state institutions, newspapers, churches, community organizations and individual acts of solidarity both from Quebec and beyond. In December 1974, for example, a First Nation resident from Attawapiskat, in Ontario, sent a check and a letter in solidarity with the threatened Haitians (Dejean 1978: 166).
Still, anti-Black racism against Haitians has also been a part of the history of Québec. As Québec-based Haitian scholar and priest Paul Dejean noted, though, forms of racial discrimination against Haitians in Québec were not as explicit as those practiced by the “Western Guards qui font régner la terreur chez tout ce qui n’est pas Blanc, aux cris équivoques de ‘Keep Canada White’.” Nor were they as recurrent or violent as those perpetrated “dans certaines villes des États-Unis” (1978: 97). Nevertheless, racism permeated the province during the 1970s and 80s (and today) manifesting itself in police brutality (1978: 96), economic exploitation (1978: 53), and racist assumptions that negatively impacted the education of Haitian youth in Quebec (1978: 123-139). In the 1980s, Haitians carried the stigma of being carriers of AIDS (Mills 2016: 205), and Haitian taxi drivers were accused of stealing the jobs of Québécois. Furthermore, this racism could be selective: Haitians who had a higher education and were fluent in French were welcomed and accepted in Québec whereas does who spoke only Krèyol tended to be despised (see Mills 2016). Rodriguez, though from a lower-class background, was fluent in French (pers. communication March 16, 2021) and his cultural capital clearly allowed him to navigate the anti-Black racism of his time.

Indeed, contrary to what I had assumed, race had not played a role in Rodriguez’s brief history with Toubabou. Rodriguez left Toubabou because he was not into the band’s fusion. He disliked rock because of its noisiness (amplification, electric guitars, yelling, etc.) and because he associated rock with drug abuse (though he readily agreed with me that drugs also permeated the music scene in general). When I asked him about his participation in other songs of the album, he said that he would play “n’importe quoi” because it was largely nonsense. His critique was not so much about the quality of the musicians—other than Séguin. He actually praised some of them. It had to do with the music itself or rather, the way in which Séguin approached music.
Speaking of Ville Émard Blues Band (VEBB), Séguin’s prior band, for example, he told me “c’est pas du blues qu’ils jouaient.” Rodriguez is correct, it wasn’t “really” blues, but then again, it is unlikely that Séguin was trying to play “real” blues. VEBB, like Toubabou, was a countercultural experiment.

Why then had Rodriguez joined Toubabou? Rodriguez’s answer could have not been simpler: he needed the money because his daughter was on the way. Ultimately, Rodriguez’s presence in Toubabou, just like his substitution of the segon for the conga and the transverse flute for the flit bwa, was an act of adaptation and survival.

In “Making Music Together” Alfred Schutz, reflecting on what it means to play classical music, writes:

The player approaching a so-called unknown piece of music does so from a historically—in one’s own case, autobiographically—determined situation, determined by his stock of musical experiences at hand in so far as they are typically relevant to the anticipated novel experience before him. This stock of experiences refers indirectly to all his past and present fellow-men whose acts or thoughts have contributed to the building up of his knowledge. (1951: 86)

Toubabou’s “stock of musical experiences,” was very different from those that informed Rodriguez. The band could hear Rodriguez’s sounds but could not listen to/understand them. Rodriguez’s way of challenging aesthetic expectations through the interplay of the presumably sacred and the secular, as noted, was read as “folkloric” by Séguin. His decolonial critiques were simply inaudible to Toubabou. But the same is true of Rodriguez vis-a-vis Toubabou. He could not listen to the many ways in which Toubabou challenged aesthetic expectations and musical-political categories through fusion. For him, it was just (mostly) noise.

In the end Rodriguez and Toubabou played together (there is an album called Attente) but insofar as they could not listen to one another, the deeper meanings of their sounds were
drowned in the encounter of the Québécois fusion and Haitian music. And yet, as I have shown, one can make these deeper meanings audible by raising the volume of the silenced past.

**Coda**

On March 16, 2021, I call Georges. It had been my hope to visit him with a copy of this chapter, get his feedback, and re-write. Unfortunately, Covid-19 prevents me from doing so. Georges does not use email or Zoom and he does not know much English, so mailing him a copy is not a solution either. I feel terrible. But what can I do?

Georges is ill. He has not been able to eat properly in the last two months. I offer to help in any way that he can think of. But again, what can I possibly do?

I tell him that I finished his chapter, that I wanted to see him but… He understands. Covid-19. I summarize some of the main points of the chapter, and read back to him some of his own quotes concerning Séguin, and he iterates that he is fine with them. Noticing that his cough is getting worse, I offer to hang up. He refuses. He reminisces about YR, narrates the origin story of the song, talks about Toubabou, about his life in Haiti, about his mother. When I ask him how come his last name is in Spanish, he tells me that his father is from Spain. It is then that I learn that Georges was born in Valencia, something that he emphasizes, he hasn’t shared with many people. Indeed, that I know of, this fact is not mentioned in any of the works where Georges is referenced. He adds that he has childhood memories of flamenco music and that he loves the rhythms of Andalusia. Still, Georges says, he is a proud Haitian.

What else do I not know about this gentle soft-spoken man who so generously received me at his home? Will I get to know more?

Throughout our conversation Georges’s cough worsens. But he insists on talking; he sounds animated and happy despite what is now a relentless cough. We speak for forty-three
minutes until his voice breaks down. In fact, for the last ten minutes I can barely understand his words. I say goodbye promising him that before my thesis becomes a book, we will sit down together and rework his chapter.

But just like with Doudou, I honestly do not know if this is a promise that I will be able to fulfill.
Chapter 4: The History of El Grupo: Reimagining Puerto Rican Nueva Canción, and Revisiting the Island/Diaspora Dichotomy

To Heriberto González

In December 1973, a New York City-based band of Latin American and Caribbean singer-songwriters, musicians and poets recorded the album Canciones y poesía de la lucha de los pueblos latinoamericanos/Songs and Poetry of the Latin American Struggle. Known simply as El Grupo (The Group), the band was composed by the Nuyorican poets/declaimers Jesús Papoleto Meléndez and Sandra María Esteves (Puerto Ricans born and raised in NYC); Puerto Rican singer-songwriters/musicians Hilcia Montañez and José Valdés (born and raised in Puerto Rico); and Argentinians Bernardo Palombo, Suni Paz and Oscar Pardo. Not unlike their Puerto Rican counterparts, the South Americans had arrived to the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s. Considered the cultural arm of the NYC branch of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), and counting on PSP leader Rafael Rodríguez Abeillez as “director” and party liaison, between February 1973 and 1975, El Grupo performed in prisons, universities, block parties, concert halls, events for the Chicano and Puerto Rican communities, and protests throughout the US in support of the Party’s call for Puerto Rico’s decolonization. One of its most important performances took place at Madison Square Garden during “The National Day of Solidarity with Puerto Rico” which drew more than 15,000 spectators in support of Puerto Rico’s independence from the US. In that occasion El Grupo shared the stage with the secretary of the PSP Juan Mari

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91 This term is generally used to designate Puerto Ricans born and/or raised in New York City in the context of the great migration of the 1940s and 50s. In the album, Meléndez and Esteves are not designated as Nuyorican but rather as “North American poets.”
92 Nuyorican poet Américo Casiano was also briefly part of El Grupo. By the time they recorded their album he was no longer a part of the band.
93 This is the date provided in the back side of their album.
94 Band members Paz, Montañez and Palombo also performed in Puerto Rico (see Marrero 2018: 185-186) and provided the soundtrack for the film Don Pedro o la vida de un pueblo (Don Pedro or the life of a people), a film about the hardships behind Puerto Rican migration from the rural areas to the city and from there to the US.
Bras, Angela Davis, Pete Seeger, salsa icon Ray Barreto, Puerto Rican nueva canción band Taoné, and Luz Esther “Lucecita” Benítez and Danny Rivera (singers closely linked to this music), among others (see “Puerto Rican Independence Rally”).

El Grupo’s album Canciones y poesía de la lucha los pueblos latinoamericanos, released under the label “Canto libre” (Song of Freedom), was supported by the PSP and produced by the Center for Cuban Studies, a pro-Cuban Revolution political-cultural “library and resource center” located in Midtown. Founded in 1972 by American militant Sandra Levinson, the Center sponsored “film showings, forums and concerts” related to the Cuban Revolution, in addition to offering Spanish classes.

El Grupo’s album included original Spanish-language songs of Puerto Rican-Argentinian nueva canción plus the cover songs “¡Coño, despierta boricua!,” a classic of PRNC (see chapter six), and the Argentinian nuevo cancionero classic “Canción con todos.” Four out of the eight songs were composed or co-composed by Puerto Ricans, all evoking Puerto Rico in one way or another, and “Te digo hermano,” while composed by Argentinians Palombo and Damián Sánchez, would later become popularized by Lucecita Benítez as part of the PRNC repertoire.

The album also included Nuyorican poetry—largely in English but with its attendant code-switching between English and Spanish—and an emphasis on life in El Barrio (“Spanish

95 Inspired on Levinson’s trips to Cuba during the 1969/1970 ten million ton harvest with the multiethnic Venceremos brigade, the center—which is still on-going—has been dedicated to supporting Cuban arts and the Cuban Revolution (see Levinson and Brightman 1971; and https://dumbo.is/blogging/q-a-sandra-levinson-from-center-for-cuban-studies).
96 Quoted from the backside of El Grupo’s album.
97 Benitez recorded this song in Traigo un pueblo en mi voz (1987).
98 Code-switching refers to the back and forth between Spanish and English in Nuyorican poetry. It can occur in various ways in a continuum that goes from the more or less equal use of words in English and Spanish in the same poem—where words from each language are alternated and English-language words are Hispanicized—to more subtle forms where an English-language poem is informed by the cadence/rhythms of Spanish. It is the latter form which characterizes the poems in the album although this does not represent the totality of the works of the poets studied.
Harlem”), an epicenter of the Puerto Rican community still today. Calls for the independence of Puerto Rico and socialism, community organizing and revolution, and ending Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile, were combined with a condemnation of gender inequality, racism, drug abuse, police brutality and an alienating mass media. The musical creolizations, not unlike those of other coetaneous albums of PRNC were myriad. The album evoked Puerto Rican and Argentinian folk musics, blues, rock, the bolero, ballad and salsa. The foreshadowing of hip hop was also perceptible via the Nuyorican poets’ declamations.

In this chapter, I take the history of El Grupo as an entry point into questioning two sets of studies around the colonial: celebratory Puerto Rican anticolonial studies—of which PRNC studies are a subsection—and Puerto Rican decolonial studies. Celebratory Puerto Rican anticolonial studies are rich in archival research but largely hagiographic and blind to the ways in which anticolonialism reproduces coloniality. They also tend to reduce the Puerto Rican nation to the island neglecting the diaspora and non-Puerto Rican contributions to the anticolonial cause. Puerto Rican decolonial studies, for their part, highlight how anticolonialism reproduces coloniality but they do so at the expense of oversimplifying nationalist anticolonial histories. Furthermore, as highlighted by Shalini Puri in her critique of Puerto Rican Jam, an emblematic anthology of this school of thought edited by Ramón Grosfoguel and Frances Negrón-Muntaner, “the hybrid diasporic Puerto Rican becomes the most authentic Puerto Rican subject, the supreme example of internal rather than external resistance” while “the Island of Puerto Rico is . . . constructed as the site of an exclusivist purism” (2004: 34). A critique that

99 More recent migrations have been reshaping El Barrio. Among them: Mexicans, and a new wave of Puerto Ricans.

100 See PRNC studies (Centeno 1996; Rodriguez-Rodriguez 1995; Pagán 2019; Marrero 2018); and broader anticolonial studies (Santiago Santana 2013; Sánchez Martínez 2019; Arboleya Cervera et. al 2016)

can be extended to other works.¹⁰² In this regard, this corpus has something in common with celebratory Puerto Rican anticolonial studies: it too reifies the dichotomy Island/diaspora. With the key difference that whereas celebratory Puerto Rican anticolonial studies ignore the diaspora, Puerto Rican decolonial studies reify it as progressive, positing Island-based anticolonial (pro-independence) struggles as retrograde¹⁰³ (see introduction for more on this).

In this chapter, as I do in others albeit from different angles, I question the Island/diaspora dichotomy erected by the aforementioned studies. By looking at El Grupo and similar PRNC experiences, I show how Puerto Rican anticolonial history is the result of the interactions between islanders, the diaspora, those who come back and forth and myriad non-national others, showing how such a stark dichotomy does not hold. By blurring this dichotomy, I do not wish to deny the discrimination endured by Nuyoricans—and diasporic Puerto Ricans in general—at the hand of Puerto Ricans “from” the Island. Anti-diasporic discrimination has been widely documented both as a lived experience (see Pérez 2004: 107-110; Hernández 1997: 1-17) and as a literary manifestation where writers “from” the Island tend to evaluate (and dismiss) the works of diasporic authors whose lives were marked by precarity and survival, based on middle class moral values (see Mohr 1982: 25-42). As El Grupo band-member Sandra María Esteves

¹⁰³ See Grosfoguel 2003: 43-77; 1997: 57-76. Grosfoguel notes that: “The cultural hybridity of Puerto Ricans in the United States is not tolerated by nationalist intellectuals on the Island and by Puerto Rican middle classes” (2003: 142). As if there were no nationalist intellectuals in the diaspora or no nationalist intellectuals on the Island with alternative views. Alberto Sandoval Sánchez, a contributor to Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel’s Puerto Rican Jam (1997: 189-208), claims that “being gay with AIDS and having death around the corner, does not convince me . . . to return. . . . to a homophobic and chauvinist society” (204) as if homophobia and chauvinism were absent in the US and among the diaspora. Furthermore, it ignores the anti-homophobic activism of Leftists in Puerto Rico (see Bernabe 2003: 26). While enduring homophobia and chauvinism “at home” no doubt sharpens the blow (being marginalized or persecuted by “family” is distinct from being marginalized by “strangers”), this nevertheless reproduces the same oversimplistic binary. Cristina Pérez Jiménez (2019: 50-68), who mentions Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel as key influences, also reproduces this view (albeit implicitly) in her fascinating article on the relationship between Puerto Rican nationalists and American communists in NYC during the 1930s and 40s; as does Fernández 2020: 345-368 in her study on the Young Lords. That is, they both imply that diasporic practices of resistance are more enlightened than Island-based ones.
told an interviewer in 1997, when she went to the Island in the 1960s Puerto Ricans called her “gringa”—a derogatory term that marked her as “foreign” and assimilated (in Hernández 1997: 52-53). Not unlike the term Nuyorican which, contrary to “gringa,” was positively resignified by the diaspora. But as I show through El Grupo, and other PRNC experiences, more respectful and productive encounters between Nuyoricans and Puerto Ricans also took place, and these too are a part of Puerto Rican (anticolonial) history.

If as the slogan goes “en la unión está la fuerza” (“in unity there is power”), narrating some of these histories of unity—without failing to address their many fractures—is indispensable in order to reassess the anticolonial struggles of the past, and move in more productive directions. Michel-Rolph Trouillot has noted how “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly” (1995: 27). My overall argument is that raising the volume to some of the silences that lie within the anticolonial history of Puerto Rico, though not sufficient, is a necessary step in the decolonization of Puerto Rico. How we imagine and hear the past has a bearing on how we envision and sound out the present.

This is particularly important in the light of the new massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the US in the last decade, of which I am a part. According to Jennifer Hinojosa and Edwin Meléndez, “one year since Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, nearly 160,000 residents of the island [had] relocated to the United States;” an “exodus” that represented “one of the most significant movements of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. mainland in the island’s history in terms of both volume and duration” (2018: 1). Indeed, it is an echo of the migration that took place between 1940 and 1970 when more than 800,000 Puerto Ricans relocate in the US.
El Grupo and PRNC:  
Emerging in the Interstices of Puerto Rico, New York City and Other Geographies

Based in NYC, but emerging in the interstices between the city, Puerto Rico and other geographies, El Grupo was inextricably linked to the NYC-branch of the PSP. Founded in 1973, it was an off-spring of the “Island-based” PSP, founded in 1971, which had previously been known as the Movement Pro-Independence (MPI), founded in 1959. Indissociable from the PSP, but not reducible to it, the history of El Grupo is also entwined with the history of PRNC band Taoné, the “cultural arm” of the PSP “in” Puerto Rico. According to Grupo band-member Esteves, Taoné band-members:

Roy Brown and Andrés Jiménez . . . came to New York, to Rutgers [around 1973]. I had just started writing, I had been writing for maybe six months when I met them in Rutgers; me and Jesús Papoleto Meléndez and Américo Casiano [a poet who was briefly part of El Grupo]. They invited us to tour with them. They were touring the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts areas. So we did that for the next two weeks. When they left, we decided, ‘Well, let’s continue this on our own’. (qtd. in Hernández 1997: 57)\(^{104}\)

Taoné had come into existence in 1970, as the MPI transitioned into the Marxist-Leninist and hence internationalist, PSP. At that moment, singer-songwriters Brown and Noel Hernández founded the PSP label *Disco Libre* which led to the creation of Taoné (Ramírez Ruiz 2007: 41-43). The band included singer-songwriters “from” the Island such as Brown (born in the state of Florida to an American father and a Puerto Rican mother), Noel Hernández, Antonio Cabán Vale, Andrés Jiménez, and Carlos Lozada. It also included singer-songwriters raised in NYC such as José Pepe Sánchez and Flora Santiago.

As noted by Aixa Rodríguez-Rodríguez (1995: 223), though, Taoné was not the first manifestation of PRNC. Most, if not all of the band members had already begun their careers or

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\(^{104}\) I wish to stress that these are Esteves’s memories. Other band members, such as Hilcia Montañez, do not remember meeting Taoné members that day at Rutgers College (pers. interview March 14, 2020). Still, Montañez does not put into question Taoné’s influence. She only disagrees regarding the specifics of Esteves’s narrative.
composed *nueva canción*, then known as *canción protesta* (protest song), prior to their coming together as a band. Sánchez and Santiago, for example, had sung in protests in NYC and released at least two albums as the duo Pepe y Flora while supporting the NYC chapter of Albizu Campos’s Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and the Young Lords;\(^\text{105}\) Cabán Vale had composed “*Verde luz,*” the unofficial anthem of Puerto Rico in 1966—he had also published several poems in the groundbreaking 1960s literary magazine *Guajana*; Brown had released *Yo protesto (I Protest)*, which included several of his most canonical songs, under the Cuban-owned label *Vanguardia* in 1969 before releasing it again with *Disco Libre* a year later (Ramírez Ruiz 2007: 78); and Hernández had been singing his songs since at least 1968 (Ramírez Ruiz 2007: 42).

But though Taoné was not the first manifestation of PRNC it was nevertheless the first organized collective effort to sound out anticolonialism and socialism through song. And this effort, it should be stressed, was sounded out by Island-based Puerto Ricans and diasporic ones.

If the “Island-based” Taoné was a key inspiration in the creation of El Grupo, the Island was also “present” in El Grupo in other ways. Not only were band members Montañez and Valdés born and raised on the Island band but El Grupo’s album credited two Taoné band members: minor percussionist Cuqui Lugo and Brown, who was described as “tecnical advisor” [sic]. The album also credited Brown’s bassist in *Roy Brown III* (1973) singer-songwriter Rodolfo “Rucco” Gandía. The fact that among the few cover songs recorded by El Grupo was Taoné-band member Jiménez’s "¡Coño, despierta boricua!"\(^\text{106}\) also testifies to Taoné’s (and the Island’s) impact on the band. The Island’s impact was also manifested in El Grupo’s close

\(^{105}\) Their first album was entitled *Pepe y Flora* and it was composed of mostly popular cover songs and two songs by Sánchez. The second one was *Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón* which contained protest music/nueva canción.

\(^{106}\) The lyricists of this song were Francisco Matos Paoli, Andrés Castro Ríos and Guarionex Hidalgo Africano; but Jiménez and Juan de Matta also contributed (see chapter six for more details).
relationship with the NYC branch of the PSP, mediated by Rafael (sometimes spelled Raphael) Rodríguez Abeillez.

The “artistic director” of El Grupo, PSP leader Rafael Rodríguez Abeillez was one of the few gay men in a position of power in the PSP and Puerto Rican anticolonial parties widely speaking, a prejudice that was not specific to the Left or the Island but that informed the society of the time widely speaking. Founder of “one of the first and best programs of Puerto Rican studies. . . in Queens College” (Barradas 1998: xxiv), Rodríguez Abeillez was in charge of booking and MC’ing for El Grupo. By 1980 he had co-edited with Efrain Barradas Herejes y mitificadores, one of the first Nuyorican poetry anthologies, and perhaps the first one to offer Spanish translations of the Nuyoricans’ poems. The anthology included texts by Esteves and Meléndez. Rodriguez Abeillez’s passion for Nuyorican poetry was steeped in a love for Puerto Rican poetry that seems to have emerged in Puerto Rico during the 1950s. In 1961, in the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus [located on the West side of the Island], Rodríguez Abeillez was working on the publication of a “new pamphlet of poetry” with the “goal of sending it to literary magazines in the exterior and universities interested” (see Campus 1961: 5; my translation).107

Though it was an offshoot of the “Island-based” PSP, the NYC branch of the PSP developed an anticolonial-socialist program that seriously took into consideration the social reality of Puerto Ricans in the US context. As noted by José E. Velásquez, in their founding pamphlet Desde las entrañas (1973)—a title inspired by nineteenth century Cuban revolutionary José Martí’s condemnation of US imperialism having lived “in the belly (entrails) of the monster”—the NYC branch of the PSP posited a “dual priority thesis.” This dual thesis called

107 It is unclear whether this book was in fact published.
both for achieving Puerto Rican independence and socialism and “developing the democratic-rights struggle of Puerto Ricans in the United States” (Velásquez 1998: 53). El Grupo inscribed this “dual thesis” in their album in songs such as “Comunidad” (“Community”) by Alberto Vals and Valdés, and poems like “Superpig” by Meléndez, and “María Cristina” and “Act of Love” by Esteves, all of which focused on the struggles of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Songs such as “Pedro Pueblo”—inspired, in part, by nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos—by Palombo and Valdés, and "¡Coño, despierta boricua!"—a celebration of the 1868 Grito de Lares Revolution against Spaniard colonialism and slavery—purportedly respond to Island-based concerns (see chapter six for a problematization of such a read of “¡Coño, despierta boricua!”).

While Velásquez is right to highlight the “dual priority thesis” proposed by the NYC branch of the PSP, the Party’s pamphlet also proposed a third thesis. One related to the broader global context of these struggles. Desde las entrañas described the struggle for Puerto Rican independence and socialism as being part of a Third World struggle that included Latin America, Vietnam, and Africa. In this regard, it echoed the pamphlets of the “Island-based” PSP. But Desde las entrañas also emphasized another kind of Third Worldism, one that spoke to the realities of internal colonialism. In the pamphlet, the Puerto Rican community’s struggles were linked to those of other oppressed minorities such as African Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans and Dominicans.108 In addition, the pamphlet sought the solidarity of white progressives, and described Puerto Rican women in the US as enduring “a triple oppression, as Puerto Ricans, women and workers.” In the light of this, a third thesis seems to emerge: inter-

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108 Why Dominicans, being the largest minority in Puerto Rico were not mentioned in the Island-based PSP’s pamphlets, is worth researching. But ascribing this to a xenophobic nationalism (see Pabón 2003) is clearly reductionist considering that Puerto Rican anticolonial discourses often take pride in Dominican Republic’s struggles for independence, and have actively supported Dominican twentieth century national struggles for social justice (see Bernabe 2003: 31; Ojeda Reyes 2019).
ethnic solidarity in the US, Third Worldism—understood as solidarity among Third World nations—and gender justice, are indispensable in order to achieve the goals of the dual thesis. The pamphlet rather articulates a “triple thesis.”

Interestingly, El Grupo also inscribed this “third thesis” in their album. The album includes songs of Third World solidarity such as Paz’s “Chile, paloma herida” (“Chile, Wounded Dove”)—a condemnation of Pinochet’s dictatorship—and Palombo and Sánchez’s “Canción por la flor y el fusil” (“Song For The Flower and The Rifle”), a call for world revolution if social justice is not achieved through peaceful means. But several of the songs and poems previously mentioned were also Third Worldist in orientation. Esteves’s “Act of Love,” for instance, quoted Ernesto Che Guevara and Malcolm X. And to the extent that this poem and Meléndez’s “Superpig” are shaped by the Black Arts Movement (as I explore in depth in the following chapter) they were not—despite the subject matter—only about the Puerto Rican diaspora. They were also about the diaspora’s ties with African Americans. As Nuyorican Piri Thomas had put it in his autobiography Down These Means Streets (1967), both communities shared the same mean streets of racial discrimination. And insofar as “¡Coño, despierta boricua!” was crisscrossed by global histories of resistance and transnational dynamics (see chapter six), it was also Third Worldist in orientation. Regarding gender justice, which plays an important role in this “third thesis,” the issue is addressed in Esteves’s “María Cristina” but more so in Palombo and Sánchez’s “Te digo hermano” (see chapter five).

That these resonances between the pamphlet and El Grupo’s album were not merely coincidental but responded to deep affinities between El Grupo and the PSP was confirmed to me by Montañez. During an interview conducted on March 14, 2020, at her home in Cupey (San

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109 As Thomas notes, though, the streets were meaner for Black Puerto Ricans, and a shared sense of oppression between Puerto Ricans and African Americans did not always lead to solidarity between the two groups.
Juan), I mistakenly referred to this pamphlet as *En las entrañas* (in the belly). Montañez immediately corrected me by saying “No, it was called *Desde las entrañas*” (from the belly). That Montañez would remember the correct preposition nearly fifty years after the pamphlet’s publication while impressive is not surprising. As several of the band members told me, they were required by the PSP to take political capacitation courses in Marxism-Leninism, a requirement that they “tolerated” (Montañez, March 14, 2020). As Montañez clarified, though, the issue was not that they disliked the literature but that they were told to read materials with which they were already familiar. Montañez, her lifetime partner Pardo, and other band members, also complained about the dogmatism involved in these courses.

By stressing the links between El Grupo and the PSP, I do not wish to imply that the former was merely a reflection of the latter. Nor that El Grupo’s album was only a musical echo of a political discourse. El Grupo’s experience, and that of PRNC widely speaking, cannot be reduced to a “reflective theory of culture” that sees “everything as a reflection of the politics of the times” (Street 2006: 55). PRNC was a palimpsestic musical-literary expression\(^{110}\) influenced by theater, literature, the plastic arts and Third World cinema\(^{111}\) developed by cosmopolitan and independently minded intellectuals who often, but not always, had earned a college degree. In this regard, PRNC always exceeded, contested, nuanced and contradicted the socialist/anticolonial political discourses of the political parties that it was linked to. Something that I have explored in my Masters’ theses (see Cancel-Bigay 2014, 2015), and that will become clearer in the following chapters. Reducing PRNC to a reflection/echo (see Centeno 1996, for

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\(^{110}\) I am borrowing here from Eileen Karmy y Martín Farias (2014) who describe Chilean *nueva canción* as a palimpsest.

\(^{111}\) A study on how PRNC was influenced by its coming into contact with other art forms has yet to be written. Though by analyzing the art of the LPs some studies come close (see Ramirez Ruiz 2007; Cancel-Bigay 2015). For an analysis of how such points of encounter shaped Chilean *nueva canción*, Argentinian *nuevo cancionero* and Cuban *nueva trova*, see Juan Ramos’s dissertation (2011).
classic example), offers an oversimplistic take of a tremendously complex musical-poetic-political social practice.

Just like the members of *Taoné*, prior to their encounter with the PSP, the members of El Grupo had already begun their artistic careers and awakened their social consciousness. Paz, for instance, had lived in California where she performed in events supporting Chicano causes before arriving to NYC (see “Suni Paz Sings” 1977; Reyes 1971a: 26). She had also released several albums\(^{112}\) where she sang about women’s and minority rights, and Puerto Rican anticolonial struggles,\(^ {113}\) and by 1971, she had visited Puerto Rico where, during an interview for PSP newspaper *Claridad*, she spoke about the struggles of the Mapuche Indians in Chile, and Salvador Allende (see Reyes 1971a: 26-27). Palombo, for his part, had been a member of the Communist Party in Mendoza, Argentina, and performed with Pete Seeger (pers. interview May 11, 2018). While Pardo, Palombo’s childhood friend, had been a “nihilist and a communist” before joining El Grupo (pers. interview March 30, 2019). Meléndez had already published three books of socially aware poetry: *Casting Long Shadows* (1970), *Have You Seen Liberation?* (1971) and *Street Poetry & Other Poems* (1972). Montañez, for her part, had gone to Cuba in 1969 with the brigade Pedro Albizu Campos in order to express her solidarity with Fidel Castro’s Ten Million Ton Harvest. She had arrived there via her connections with a movement of Christian students\(^ {114}\) led by theology of liberation pastor and sociologist Samuel Silva Gotay\(^ {115}\) (pers. interview March 30, 2019). In Cuba, Montañez actually met Angela Davis and a group of Americans and African Americans. Eventually, both groups were detained in Guadeloupe as they

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\(^{112}\) Paz had released an album entitled *Brotando del silencio/Breaking Out of the Silence* (1972). In 1963, she had compiled and recorded with Carlos García Travesi *Cantos de las posadas and other Christmas Songs*.

\(^{113}\) As evidenced in her songs “Albizu Campos, sembrador” and “Canto a Culebra,” recorded in NYC in 1972 in the album *Brotando del silencio/Breaking Out of the Silence*.

\(^{114}\) El Movimiento Estudiantil Cristiano/Fraternidad de Universitarios Evangélicos.

\(^{115}\) The history of this movement has yet to be written, so I was told by Silva Gotay—who has published several books on theology of liberation—when I reached out to him in 2019.

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tried to return to Puerto Rico and the US. As Montañez remembered, and as Davis put it in her autobiography: “an old French colonialist” weary of communism infiltrating Guadeloupe detained them, ripping “open another box, discovering this time something that sent him soaring to new heights of rage: posters depicting Jesus Christ, with haloed head, wielding a carbine on his shoulder” (1973: 212-214).

The band member with the least political experience seems to have been Esteves who claimed that El Grupo “began politicizing” her and making her “aware of what it means socially and politically to be Puerto Rican” which, in turn, led her to write “María Christina” her “first poem in a social context,” and one of her contributions to El Grupo’s album (qtd. in Dick 2003: 57). Yet even Esteves had prior political experiences. In the early 1970s she had attended a “community poetry reading at the National Black Theater in Harlem” after which she wrote her first poems (1997: 54-55). Among the African American poets that influenced her were Ntozake Shange, Michael Harper, Amiri and Amena Baraka, and Sekou Sundiata (Esteves 1989: 119). Esteves also credits an “‘ethnic writers’ conference in Wisconsin,” where she met Chicano, Asian American and Native American writers in 1973—right around the time she met band members of El Grupo—as key to her formation (1997: 55). In addition, Montañez, Palombo and Meléndez, as had Sánchez and Santiago from band Taoné, had all interacted to different degrees with the NYC-based anticolonial organization known as the Young Lords.

Still, it is fairly obvious that El Grupo sounded out the PSP’s “triple thesis,” as I have stressed. But it did so in its own way as I show in the following two chapters, contributing its own meanings through sound, music, poetry, “speech about music,” lived experience and the enmeshment of all.
If the “triple thesis” was sounded out by El Grupo, in its own idiosyncratic way, it is worth emphasizing that it was already implicit in the “Island-based” PSP and PRNC. Rodríguez-Rodríguez has claimed that “in its discourse. . . [PRNC] revealed the economic and political circumstances that forced [Puerto Ricans] to migrate” (1995: 317). Indeed, albums such as Brown’s Yo protesto (1969), Basta ya... Revolución (1970) and Roy Brown III (1973); Noel Hernández’s De rebeldes a revolucionarios (1971); Taone’s Taoné en Cuba (1972); and Frank Ferrer’s Puerto Rico 2010 (1972) all include songs that speak to the material and epistemological violence behind migration. Contrary to El Grupo’s album, though, where the song “Comunidad” and the poem “Act of Love” emphasized the need for social justice within the US, these PRNC albums’ focus was on the moment of departure: when Puerto Ricans were forced to leave their homeland.116 And yet, because El Grupo is crisscrossed by the Island in so many ways, ascribing this to a diasporic sensibility only is misleading. Ultimately, these albums document two aspects of the history of Puerto Rican migration that are not mutually exclusive but complimentary, and that are indispensable in order to apprehend the historical past in its complexity.

I would not go as far as Rodríguez-Rodríguez, though, and claim that PRNC was “remarkably consistent in its inclusion of the Puerto Ricans living in the United States in its definition of a Puerto Rican cultural identity” (1995: 317). Had this been the case, albums of PRNC in Spanish and English would be the norm rather than the exception. And yet, as Rodríguez-Rodríguez notes—apparently without realizing what the implications of her statement are—PRNC tended to celebrate “the similarities between the struggles of the popular classes on the island and the struggles of the popular sectors of the exiled Puerto Rican community” (1995: 317).

116 Such is the case of songs such as “Ya se van” by Noel Hernández and David Rivera, and “Negrito bonito” by Brown or even his “Lamento Nuyorquino,” which, although narrated from NYC—and evoking salsa via the use of minor percussion and the montunos of a guitar—is less concerned with life in NYC than in critiquing US imperialism and capitalism.
Indeed, it celebrated the similarities. Celebrating, or even acknowledging, the differences, was harder. This would explain, in part, why despite PRNC singer-songwriters’ love for poetry (many singer-songwriters were poets or set music to poetry), El Grupo’s is the only PRNC album to include Nuyorican poetry. The only other album that comes close to this is Taoné band-member Sánchez’s production of Aquí se habla español (1971) (Here We Speak Spanish). In this album Sánchez plays the guitar as Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri, one of the founders of the Nuyorican Poet’s Movement, and a friend of Meléndez and Palombo, declaims (Sánchez, pers. interview June 21, 2013).

Finally, gender justice, another key component of the “triple thesis,” was also sounded out in “Island-based” PRNC. In 1978, for example, in his album Uno, Eladio Torres recorded “El silencio,” a danza where he condemns the “church, society, social class, the sorority, the university, and the party” for forcing women into a scripted gender role that would have them engage in domestic labor, take care of the children and accept domestic abuse. Dreaming with “becoming the lover” of the main character of the local soap opera, after a day of labor and a life of oppression, she is also expected “to be sensual at night” (my translation). In 1985, Cuban singer-songwriter Marisela Verena, then a resident in Puerto Rico, recorded Viento y madera—an album where PRNC singer-songwriter Rucco Gandía, who had recorded the bass for El Grupo, was the “director.” The album included songs that directly addressed gender inequalities. Most emblematic is “Tecnicientas,” arranged by Gandía and Papo Gely, where Verena reflects on how technology has led to the exploitation of women in new ways. Now that she has “a washing and drying machine that lets her know with a buzz when the cycle is done, and a dishwasher, a toaster and a vacuum cleaner” she has more time “to iron [her husband’s] clothes.” Adding that “today technology is our godmother” she concludes by stating that “we work double
and we don’t even realize it” because “we are perfect tecnicientas” (my translation). Tecnicientas being a wordplay that combines the word “technology” with “Cenicientas” or Cinderella.117 Américo Boschetti had made a similar point in his song “Mujer” (1981) as we will see in chapter eight.

If as of now I have emphasized how El Grupo lives in the interstices of multiple geographies, I have also been hinting at the fact that PRNC as a broader experience also emerges in such interstices. In this regard, if El Grupo cannot be considered to be only from NYC, PRNC can barely be considered to be a “cultural phenomenon in Puerto Rico [my emphasis]” as described by Rodríguez-Rodríguez (1995: 5). The extent to which non-Puerto Ricans and diasporic experiences are central to PRNC cannot be underestimated as my brief—and far from comprehensive—survey shows.

Sánchez and Santiago, as the duo Pepe y Flora, began singing protest song in the late 1950s in NYC (pers. interview Sánchez June 21, 2013). The title of their album Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón was a slogan of the NYC chapter of the Young Lords (see Fernández 2020). In 1963, Sánchez actually led Puerto Ricans from NYC to Washington D.C. to participate in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that culminated in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (pers. interview Sánchez June 21, 2013; Malavet Vega 1988: 124). Along with Santiago, he was also part of the Sociedad de Jóvenes Progresistas, a New York City-based organization that defended the rights of Puerto Rican and Latino tenants by supporting rent strikes against negligent landlords throughout the 1960s (see Sánchez 1964, 1965). Previously,

117 Other songs within the PRNC repertoire worth exploring in this regard are “Compañera del silencio” by Brown (1976) “Mujer de 26 años” by José Hernández Colón, popularized by Haciendo Punto en Otro Son (1976), “Las mujeres de mi patria” by Muratti and Logroño and recorded by Moliendo Vidrio (1977). Among the albums worth exploring are: José Hernández Colón’s songs as interpreted by Croatto and Glorivee (1977), Zoraida Santiago’s Tiene que ser la luna (1983), María Gisela Rosado’s He tomado la palabra (1985), and Marisela Verena’s Viento y madera (1985).
he had collaborated with the New York City branch of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party for which he produced the album *Habla Albizu*, an edited speech by nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos (pers. interview Sánchez, June 21, 2013). The album was later released by Paredon Records; the title was inspired by *Malcolm X Speaks*.

Brown, who lived in exile for thirteen years (Pagán 2019: 218), claimed in the liner notes of his album *Basta ya... Revolución* (1971) that he had developed a political consciousness in 1964 while he studied in the United States. Singer-songwriters Estrella Artau and Sandra Roldán118 lived in New York City; whereas Artau participated in events sponsored by the NYC-branch of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (Artau 1975: 2), Roldán performed during the first meeting of Boricua Gay and Lesbian Forum held in NYC in 1987 (Aponte-Parés and Merced 1998: 309-310). Jiménez too, known as “El Jíbaro” (The Peasant), lived briefly in NYC in the late 1960s and developed a political consciousness after returning from the Vietnam War (Reyes 1972: 22). Boschetti, a Puerto Rican of Italian ancestry, spent five years in the mid-1970s traveling throughout Europe, Canada, Mexico, the United States and Puerto Rico and many of the songs of his album *Colindancias* (1981) were composed in those places and shaped by those experiences; Gary Núñez and Sunshine Logroño created the band *Moliendo Vidrio con el Pecho* while they studied at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst (Rodríguez-Rodríguez 1995: 238). Brown and Zoraida Santiago’s band Aires Bucaneros was created in NYC in the late

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118 Artau released *Algo se quema allá fuera/Something is Burning Out There* in 1975, and Roldán *Raíces boricuas/Boricua Roots: A Puerto Rican from Brooklyn ‘Los sures’ Sings Puerto Rican Songs* in 1978. While most of the songs in Artau’s album are original or poems by Cuban Nicolás Guillén and Dominican Pedro Mir, she includes a few covers by Puerto Rican composers Rafael Hernández and Noel Hernández as well as Argentinian composer Atahualpa Yupanquí. Roldán’s album, in turn, is largely composed by cover songs by Rafael Hernández, Antonio Cabán Vale, Pepe Castillo, Suní Paz, Manuel “Canario” Jiménez and “¡Coño, despierta boricuál!” made popular by Andrés Jiménez. It includes two original songs, one of which is a poem by Julia de Burgos set to music by Roldán. Suní Paz’s presence in Roldán’s album demonstrates to what extent this Argentinian had been accepted by the Puerto Rican community. Not unlike Bernardo Palombo whose song “Imagen Latina”, co-composed with A. González, was recorded in the same year by *salsa* band *Conjunto Libre* (1978).
1970s. There is also the case of the Ghetto Brothers, an NYC gang turned-community organization-turned-band that released the album _Power-Fuerza_ in 1972. The album included a song entitled “Viva Puerto Rico Libre” (“Long live Puerto Rico Free”), a blend of rock and the _aguinaldo jíbaro_, a style of _jíbaro_ music. They worked hand-in-hand with the Young Lords and the MPI.119

There is even an imagined exile shaping the aesthetics of PRNC. Cabán Vale, for example, commenting on the origins of his song “Verde luz,” stated in an interview that: “It was 1966. I was 24 years old. I had just earned my Bachelor’s degree in literature. At the time, things were bad work-wise and I thought about leaving for the United States in search of opportunities. I was inspired by exile. I imagined myself outside of Puerto Rico” (qtd. in Ramírez Ruiz 2007: 167; my translation).120

The interstitial qualities of PRNC are also confirmed by looking at non-island-based sources. Although the bulk of information on PRNC is to be found in Spanish-language newspapers and magazines printed in Puerto Rico—such as _Claridad, Avance, El Reportero, El Mundo, El Vocero, El Nuevo Día_—English language newspapers, such as the _San Juan Star_, also covered it. PRNC was also part of an on-going conversation in the US: it was highlighted in the American protest music magazine _Sing Out!_,121 the bilingual New York City-based Young Lords’ newspaper _Palante_,122 and even the mainstream press—or what the NYC branch of the PSP called the “mouthpiece of bourgeois respectability” (Desde las entrañas 1973: 19; my translation)—such as the _Chicago Tribune_ and _The New York Times_.123 Never mind that, though

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119 See the documentary: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kTojJZyyc
120 In 1979, he was one of the featured singer-songwriters when Palombo opened _El Taller Latino Americano_.
121 See “Roy Brown” (1980) and “Buccaneer Spirits of New Song” (1980)
122 Jiménez’s album _Como el filo del machete_ was reviewed in _Palante_. Artau was interviewed by the newspaper as well. See in bibliography “El Jíbaro Sings Out”; and Rodriguez 1972.
123 On 3 July 1973 Richard F. Shephard reported for the New York Times that a show would take place at Damrosch Park, next to the Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center, Broadway and 63d [sic] street... [where]
most albums were produced in Puerto Rico, many were recorded elsewhere, and non-Puerto Ricans played pivotal roles in their production.124

Transnational experiences as artists who were performing throughout the world (the Soviet Block, the Caribbean and Latin America) also ensured that PRNC would be shaped by cross-cultural and interethnic collaborations. Among the members of Group Alborada, which included Danny Rivera, Heriberto González and Eladio Torres, there was a “Neorican, and one Chicano who turned on to Puerto Rican folk music after years of listening to American folk-rock singers like Bob Dylan, James Taylor and Cat Stevens” (Baird 1976). Alberto Carrión, for his part, began his musical career by playing with the New Zealand Trading Company, a rock band composed of Europeans, Caribbean musicians and two Maori from New Zealand.

Migration to Puerto Rico also impacted PRNC: Cuban singer-songwriter Verena, as previously noted, released her nueva canción album in 1985. Argentinian singer-songwriter Tony Croatto, for his part, was not only a founding member of Haciendo Punto en Otro Son, the most successful PRNC band, but it was in his studio where Brown’s classic album Distancias—which included poems by communist poet Juan Antonio Corretjer set to music—was recorded

124 Among them Pepe y Flora’s Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón and En la lucha; Aires Bucaneros band’s Aires Bucaneros (1979) and Casi Alba (1980), Brown’s Nuyol (1983)—which included English-language poems by Langston Hughes and June Jordan—Artau’s Algo se quema allá fuera/Something is Burning Out There (1975), Roldán’s Raíces boricuas/Boricua Roots (1978), and Andrés Jiménez’s Como el filo del machete (1972). Other albums were recorded elsewhere: Irving García’s Irving García y el grupo Tanamá (1979) in Boston; Taoné en Cuba (1972), Taoné Típico (c. 1975), and Brown’s La profesión de Urayoán (1975) and Arboles (1987), in Cuba. One should also remember that American singer-songwriter Barbara Dane and Irwin Silber re-released several albums of PRNC which included bilingual liner notes under the label Paredon Records. The albums re-released by Paredon Records were: Pepe y Flora’s Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón, Estrella Artau’s Algo se quema allá fuera, Andrés Jiménez’s Como el filo del machete (previously released by Disco libre), and Albizu Campos Speaks (a speech edited by Pepe Sánchez)
There was also the case of the group Tepeu composed by Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, among whom Enrique Ríos and Mayra Escribano.

Finally, one should also take into account that, while PRNC singer-songwriters performed throughout the Island, their epicenters were Río Piedras—where the University of Puerto Rico is located; many PRNC singer-songwriters studied there—and a cosmopolitan Old San Juan, which was rich in cafe-theaters such as La tahona and La tea.¹²⁵

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how revisiting PRNC and Puerto Rican anticolonial history with El Grupo blurs the Island/diaspora divide erected by celebratory Puerto Rican anticolonial studies and Puerto Rican decolonial studies. In the process, I have also challenged the former’s tendency to dismiss the diaspora, and the latter’s notion of “Island-based” anticolonial politics as retrograde. In my final remarks, I would like to stress that the history of unity that I have shared (a history of cross-cultural collaborations, inter-ethnic solidarity, and Island/diaspora interactions) is also a history of misunderstandings and conflicts.

According to Meléndez (pers. interview Dec. 11, 2015) and Palombo (pers. interview May 11, 2018), Brown’s job as the “technical advisor” of their album, consisted in “censoring” songs. Among the songs “censored” was purportedly Cabán Vale’s “Antonia”—which poetically dwelled upon the assassination of Antonia Martínez Lagares, a college student who was shot by a policeman during the 1970s anti-ROTC protests at the University of Puerto Rico. Meléndez had added a poem in English entitled “There Are No Innocent People,” which elaborated on

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¹²⁵ In *San Juan Gay* (2016), Javier E. Laureano documents just how cosmopolitan Old San Juan has been since at least the 1940s. By narrating the history of gay struggles in Puerto Rico, Laureano further shows how the international gay community played a major role in this cosmopolitanism. Researching how PRNC singer-songwriters’ experiences with non-heteronormative “others” shaped their work, remains to be explored. So is studying whether non-heteronormative singer-songwriters inscribed their identities and sexual orientations in their songs. For a partial exception to the latter see Fiol-Matta’s reflections on Luvecita Benítez (2016). While this is beyond the scope of my work, it is my hope to research this in the future.
Cabán Vale’s song. The song/poem was allegedly deleted by Brown for reasons unknown to Meléndez and Palombo.

Whether Brown, whose lifetime commitment to the anticolonial cause has been widely documented,\(^{126}\) acted alone or was following the orders of the Party, is unclear. As a party member and not only a sympathizer—which was the status of the band members of El Grupo—Brown may have been simply doing his job by ensuring that the Party line was being followed. It might have been an act of “democratic centralism,” as Pepe Sánchez told me when I asked him how Taoné chose its repertoire for a performance. When I asked him how the Leninist concept of “democratic centralism” worked, Sánchez replied amidst chuckles: “the party told us what to play, and we played it” (pers. interview June 21, 2013; my translation). When I reached out to Brown via email on April 21st, 2020, asking him what his role as “technical advisor” entailed and how he had been assigned to that position, he replied that of El Grupo: “tengo un recuerdo leve, levisimo” (I have a slight recollection, a very slight recollection of El Grupo). On May 11th, he sent me another email telling me that, “Quizá les pasé algún contacto o asistí a alguna grabación” (“maybe I passed them a contact or assisted in the recording session”).\(^{127}\)

But conflict, misunderstandings, and issues of “translation,” also emerged among the members of El Grupo.

When I asked Pardo why he only played the harmonica in one of the songs of the album—Paz’s “Chile, paloma herida”—he said that playing Puerto Rican songs was difficult (pers. interview June 3, 2018). Actually, Pardo, a talented quena player (and painter) has been

\(^{126}\) There is not a PRNC source that does not mention Brown.

\(^{127}\) I would like to thank Brown, to whom I am a stranger, for replying to my email despite being ill. By sharing this anecdote by no means do I wish to diminish Brown’s contribution to PRNC and the anticolonial cause. These have been widely documented in the extant literature, and several of his songs have shaped Puerto Rican popular culture in important ways. Brown’s band Aires bucaneiros is actually the first memory that I have of PRNC: at age four my mother used to play Juan Antonio Corretjer’s “Oubao moin” as set to music by Brown, and I would sing some lines. Hence, I am indebted to Brown (and my mother) for what has become a lifetime passion and intellectual endeavor.
unable to “translate” his musicianship into Puerto Rican music despite a lifetime living in Puerto Rico with his wife Montañez. In November 2019, as Montañez, Pardo and I walked through Old San Juan, a classic salsa tune was played from one of the restaurants. Montañez and I had a blast watching Pardo as he tried to sing what seemed like a fairly simple melodic phrase (the 3-2 son clave, the rhythmic cell that drives this music, threw him off). Palombo’s relationship with Puerto Rican music is not that dissimilar. Performing his song “Palomero” was a real challenge. “Palomero” was clearly influenced by salsa, and its son clave, and so I proceeded to find a montuno (a riff usually played by the tres cubano or the piano) that would work. But any attempt to play the song in clave failed. As this Argentinian recognized, despite his deep admiration for Ismael “Maelo” Rivera and his love for salsa in general, and even after forty years listening to this music, he could not sing or play the guitar in clave. (I should note that it was just as hard for me to play Palombo’s Argentinian folk-inspired songs). Contrary to Pardo and Palombo, Montañez, who is co-credited along with Paz for “Sigue la vida su curso” (“Life Continues to Flow”), had no difficulty singing the more Argentinian-influenced songs of the album because she had listened to Latin American musics on the radio since her childhood years in the southern city of Ponce (pers. interview June 3, 2018).

If playing together was an enriching yet challenging endeavor, their first impressions of the art-making of one another is no less revealing. When I asked Pardo what his first impressions were when encountering Meléndez and Esteves’s Nuyorican poetry, he told me: “it was weird, I didn’t know English; and for me poetry was about intimacy, you read it to yourself, when you read it out loud you miss a lot” (pers. interview June 3, 2018; my translation). When I asked Montañez what were her first impressions of Nuyorican poetry, she told me that, although she appreciated its aesthetics and its message—which went beyond the “academic poetry” of the
time—she had never liked poetry too much. She had always preferred song. They both described Meléndez and Esteves, though, as being ahead of their time and contributing to what would soon be called hip hop (pers. interview June 3, 2018). When during a visit to Meléndez in El Barrio, I noticed that he was listening to “Verde luz,” I asked him what he made of the song back in the 1970s. He told me that he only came to understand it (and appreciate it) recently in part because of the language barrier (his main language being English). When I asked Palombo whether “Verde luz,” which explicitly calls for Puerto Rican independence, was a nationalist song, he answered “no,” talking thereafter about the fascist role of nationalism in Argentina (pers. interview November 11, 2018). Whether he viewed nationalism in the same light back then is unclear to me.

In the end, though, these individuals came together connecting in different ways, illustrating that despite the differences and disencounters, uniting in the name of social justice and decolonization, was not only necessary but possible. El Grupo’s experience is a testament to this, as are other PRNC experiences. How exactly El Grupo sounded out its decolonial and anticolonial politics is the subject of the following chapters.
Chapter 5:  
The Decolonial “Acts of Love” of El Grupo:  
When Nuyorican Poetry Sings and Puerto Rican-Argentinian Nueva Canción Declaims

To Maritza Stanchich and Juan Flores

In his seminal work *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (2014), Urayoán Noel claimed that it was “in the differences between Esteves and Meléndez’s performances, and in their shared difference from the aesthetic of the rest of the El Grupo LP” where “we can read the contours of the urban, self-reflexive performance poetics that would soon find a (counter) institutional home at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe” (2014: 28). Indeed, it is in the Nuyorican poetry where Noel reads the decolonial, insofar as it is a “a poetics of contradiction [that] resists the juridical and geographic limits of poetics of blunt political statement, allowing for more complex and nuanced—sited, embodied, gestural—modes of representation, reflecting the shifting positions of the personal and social self across space and time” (2014: 27-28).

In this chapter, though, I would like to nuance Noel’s assessment regarding the aesthetic differences that he sees between the poems and the songs of El Grupo’s album. Paying attention to the sounds and the musical techniques employed by the poets and the poetic techniques used by the singer-songwriters, I illustrate how Esteves’s poems “Act of Love” (which Noel does not discuss) and “Maria Cristina,” and Meléndez’s “Superpig,” have more in common aesthetically with the Puerto Rican-Argentinian nueva canción of the album than Noel grants. Furthermore, without denying that Nuyorican poetry is as Noel claims a decolonial manifestation, I illustrate how El Grupo’s album itself is a decolonial artefact.

Walter Mignolo has noted that one of the key characteristics of decolonial thinking involves the articulation of a “border thinking” that is informed by “local histories ‘within the
modern world system (e.g. the local histories of the ‘metropolitan centers. . .’) and the local histories of its margins” or colonial and postcolonial countries (2012: 64). It entails “thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies” (2012: 85). Building on Mignolo, I argue that El Grupo’s album articulates a form of “border thinking” where the local histories of the metropolitan center (the US), the colonial margin (Puerto Rico) and the postcolonial margin (Argentina) are enmeshed. Ultimately, it is in the space where Nuyorican poetry and Puerto Rican-Argentinian nueva canción meet where El Grupo sounds out its decolonial “act of love.”

**Listening for the Music in the Poetry and the Poetry in the Music**

“Act of Love”\(^{128}\) is centered around the Puerto Rican diasporic experience of living in New York city during the 1960s and 1970s. Describing the hardships endured by the Puerto Rican community as an exploited minority—an exploitation that dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century (see Vega 1977; Colón 1967; Ribes Tovar 1970)—Esteve offers a solution. In order to “help” the oppressed, the sick, the drug-addict, the marginalized, the displaced, the unwanted, the wretched of the Earth as Fanon put it, one needs a revolution that works as an “act of love”:

An act of love  
Revolution is an act of love  

Bust a pusher/help a junkie  
Help him into a revolution of love  
Help him into PEOPLE love  
Into SELF love  
Into WORK love  
An act of love  
Into RHYTHM love  
And jobs for our communities  

\(^{128}\) To listen to “Act of love” go to: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdhvAuot20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdhvAuot20)
An act of love
And homes for our third world
An act of love

This act of love is sounded out through a duet of voices with no musical accompaniment. As the transcription of the opening bars shows, both Esteves and Meléndez apply several musical techniques. Esteves’s declamation of “an act of love” is sung (upper staff), whereas Meléndez’s declamation of “Revolution is an act of love” (lower staff) has the consistency of a riff:

To the extent that these are two independent melodies that are overlapping, Esteves and Meléndez can be said to be creating a polyphonic texture. Such a polyphonic texture, albeit more elaborated, will be used in “Pedro Pueblo,” composed by Palombo and Valdés, a song that according to the inner sleeve is dedicated to “two levels of reality, Pedro Albizu Campos, national hero of the Puerto Rican independence movement, or any peasant, everyman.” But considering that Meléndez’s melody is only approximate (his pitches are not as well defined as Esteves’s), it might be more appropriate to describe this as polyrhythm. The rhythmic consistency and repetitiveness of Meléndez’s rhythmic cell, in turn, is rather evocative of the snare drum in a (revolutionary) military band. In this regard, it inscribes the revolution in sound, foreshadowing Ernesto Che Guevara’s presence in the poem, who Meléndez will later quote:
LET ME SAY
AT THE RISK OF SEEMING RIDICULOUS
THAT THE TRUE REVOLUTIONARY
IS GUIDED BY FEELINGS
OF LOVE

Throughout the poem, the performers also apply a musical technique that is emblematic of African and Afro-diasporic musics: the call and response. When in the transcription above Esteves declaims “an act of love” three times, each time her call is answered by Meléndez’s percussive-sounding “revolution is an act of love.” But Esteves and Meléndez’s use of call and response is a staple of the poem. A few measures after the transcription ends, Esteves declaims in a monophonic texture, “Let’s commit an act of love/for our people today.” Then, declaiming the phrase “an act of love” she is answered by Meléndez who repeats the same melodic material and phrase:

![Musical notation]

Note: pitches are approximate

This melodic phrase, or motif, is again repeated various times towards the end of the poem with different degrees of emphasis and varying dynamics before there is a “coda” or a return to the opening bars with some slight variations. In the coda, Meléndez and Esteves’s voices, having reached several climaxes where they call for the revolution, fade out in a final decrescendo that ends in whispers. Ultimately, they engage in another form of word painting where the “fact” that the “revolution is an act of love” is sounded out in the dynamics of two voices that make love to one another.
Call and response is also used in several of the songs of the album such as “Te digo hermano.” Composed by Palombo and Sánchez, this song explicitly calls for a revolution that is indissociable from achieving gender justice:

**Te digo hermano que entiendas**
- que la mujer es tu hermana
- no es ningún mueble de lujo
- ni un artículo de cama.

**Te digo hermano que entiendas**
- que el deber de la mujer
- no es solo [sic] parir los hijos
- cuidar la casa y coser. . .

**Te digo hermano que es tiempo**
- de hacer la revolución
- pero empieza por ti mismo
- que después seremos dos.

Indeed, this is the most progressive track of the album (Nuyorican poems included) when it comes to contesting patriarchy. This taking into consideration the time period, and the fact that it is a discourse articulated from a heterosexual male point of view. Only Esteves’s “Maria Cristina” comes close to elaborating such a critique, and yet, as we shall see later, the poem has been widely criticized for upholding patriarchy. The origin story of Palombo’s song is no less interesting and worth discussing in some depth. As Palombo told me during an interview on May 11, 2018:

“Te digo hermano” came about in Argentina because of a series of “encojonamientos míos” [he was pissed off]. Sometimes the movement is as reactionary as those it critiques. I was kicked out of the Communist Party, and from Mendoza [his hometown] in 1967 because, according to a letter sent by the Secretary of the Communist Party of Mendoza, Dr. Mario Corvalan, I ‘wore some clothing that could make others doubt the masculinity of the compañero [a multicolor T-Shirt]. But in reality that wasn’t true;

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129 To listen to “Te digo hermano” go to: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP0ZfIYSyEA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP0ZfIYSyEA)

130 All English-language translations of the songs are copied verbatim from the album’s inner sleeve. They represent the labor of Linda Burk Wecer and Jerome Nickel.

what happened was that I had something with a nun and she confessed. But the Party was so bourgeois. They accused me of being maricón (faggot), and of refusing to do the auto-critique which was evidence of my petit-bourgeois convictions. (May 11, 2018; my translation)132

Palombo’s statement is important because it illustrates how “Te digo hermano” is born out of a series of conflicts with the Left, the Right and the church. But it is also important because it recognizes that patriarchal values, and homophobia, permeated the whole ideological spectrum though the Left was slightly better insofar as it is only “sometimes” as “reactionary” as the Right. The fact that Rafael Rodríguez, a gay man, was the PSP-appointed director of El Grupo, is no doubt informing Palombo’s nuance. Indeed, that patriarchal values shaped (and shape) political culture widely speaking can also be seen in Palombo’s way of describing “Te digo hermano.” It is literally born from his testicles: from his encojonamientos—a word that stems from the word cojones which means balls. One should not read too much into Palombo’s encojonamientos though. Even women use the expression “estoy encojoná” (I am encojoná) to express anger, a non-sensical expression considering the female anatomy. Though, once again, this illustrates just how hegemonic masculinity is.

As the transcription below shows, despite the thematic differences between “Te digo hermano” and “Act of Love” these are linked via the use of call and response and riffs:

132 “Te digo hermano” salió en Argentina. Sale por un montón de enconojonamientos mías, en aquel momento. El movimiento es a veces tan reaccionario como lo que critican. A mí me echan del Partido Comunista, y de Mendoza, en 1967, por ‘usar indumentaria que puede hacer dudar la masculinidad del compañero’ [una camisa multicolor] firmado por el secretario del Partido Comunista de Mendoza, el doctor Mario Corvalán, 1967; pero no es verdad; lo que pasa es que tuve una cuestión con una monja y ella confesó; pero el Partido Comunista era tan burgués...Me acusaron de maricón. Y de negarme a hacer la auto-crítica lo que demostraba mis convicciones pequeño burguesas.”
While José Valdés’s guitar opens by playing the same arpeggio thrice, his call is answered by Cuqui Lugo’s bongos, which play a different rhythmic pattern twice, before being joined by Rucco Gandía’s bass, who plays more or less the same rhythm than the bongo. After four
measures of silence, the guitar returns playing three chords in eighth notes (Gm, Am, Gm) that are answered by the bass and the bongo within the same bar.

But the presence of the bongo in “Te digo hermano” also connects Palombo and Sánchez’s song with Meléndez’s poem “Superpig.”

Previously published in *Have You Seen Liberation?* (1971), in “Superpig” Meléndez indicts policemen/soldiers for their oppressive role in a capitalist society. The police/soldier is represented by the anti-hero “Superpig” (“pig” being a recurring epithet used by activists of the time to refer to the police) who is in direct dialogue with Superman. But whereas Superman, as the televised series would proclaim, is “a strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men [and] who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands,” Superpig is “a strange intruder from another block” who “came into our communities/with strange powers and a gun.” And while Superman is “faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound,” Superpig is “faster than a roach/running from a spray can/more powerful than steam coming up/on winter days/able to leap garbage cans/in a single bound.” Finally, while Superman “disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way,” Superpig is “disguised/ as the junkie on the block/the pusher on the corner” and “fights a never ending battle/for nixon & his friends/with liberty/justice/& and the gun of his/american way” and “smiles as he watches us/killing one another.” Ultimately, Meléndez equates the police/soldier to Superman: “PIGS: if you all think you’re/supermen, unity is kriptonite.”

Thus, Meléndez transforms “goodness” into “evilness” and vice versa, echoing Fanon who had noticed how Manicheism informed

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133 As spelled in the album. This is clearly not a typo; it is spelled in the same way in Meléndez 2012: 102.
colonial societies (1961). In a more recent poem entitled “Kill, Kill, Kill” published in *Papolítico* (2018)—a titled proposed by his friend Palombo—Meléndez’s is even more forceful equating the police to the KKK. The triple K would later be added to “Superpig” in the word “amerikkkan” (see Meléndez 2012: 102).

In her introduction to Meléndez’s anthology *Hey Yo! Yo soy!* (2012: 3), Esteves noted that “Superpig” is “recited in a cadence that copies, beat-for-beat, the introduction to every Superman episode we watched on the tube during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s.” Indeed, Meléndez engages in word painting in this regard. But the bongo does so as well. Its quick repiques in the background throughout Meléndez’s performance strive to inscribe in sound Superman’s speed, the velocity of flying bullets, and the cockroaches running from a spray can. But the bongo, as previously noted, also serves as a bridge between the Nuyorican poetry of the album and the Puerto Rican-Argentinian *nueva canción*. It also signals the presence of Afro-Caribbean influences that are shared both by the poets and the singer-songwriters.

In “Act of Love,” Esteves and Meléndez evoke what in *salsa* is known as the *soneo*. The *soneo* is a particular section of a *salsa* song consisting of a brief chorus followed by the singer’s improvisation of lyrics and melodies (an improvisation that is also called *soneo*). The pattern chorus/*soneo* is repeated several times, allowing the singer to showcase his talents as an improviser. In “Act of Love,” something akin to the *soneo* section can be heard at times. In certain occasions, Esteves repeats the word “revolution” as Meléndez declaims, and in other instances Meléndez repeats the phrase “revolution is an act of love” while Esteves declaims. These repetitive phrases work as choruses against which the lines (or *soneos*) are declaimed. But Esteves and Meléndez also apply a musical technique known as “*pisar el soneo*” (stepping on the *soneo*). Made popular by Puerto Rican *salsa* singer Ismael “Maelo” Rivera, “*pisar el soneo*”
refers to the act of stepping on the chorus. That is, rather than waiting for the chorus to finish, the singer begins to sing his improvisation over it. Insofar as both poets can be heard in the background declaiming a phrase (chorus) while the other is singing/declaiming the *soneos*, the main declaimer is “stepping” on the chorus. This technique is made most obvious when Esteves “steps” on Meléndez’s declamation of the phrase “an act of love,” calling for:

homes where people smile and laugh
homes where children sing and play
homes where rats don’t breed
and clean water, fresh air
flows free.

Such *salsa* influences are not surprising considering how Afro-Caribbean musics shaped Esteves aesthetics. As the poet told interviewer Bruce Dick:

> Latin rhythms were an influence in my work, and women’s influences came through the music, the influence of women like La Lupe, like Graciela, Celia Cruz, and others. I see the voice as an instrument. I remember there were times when I actually would try to compose words to simulate a conga. I would listen to Cubans speak, and they seemed to do so with a conga rhythm. I used to think it would be nice if somebody would write a poem like a mambo, which I did, finally, in *Bluestown Mockingbird Mambo* [“Mambo Love Poem”]. (2003: 59)

Indeed, the influence of *salsa* and Afro-Caribbean musical genres is key to Esteves’s poetry books widely speaking where she often references Afro-Caribbean musical instruments, songs and singers (see Rivera 2002). Such influences, in fact, permeate Nuyorican poetry in general (see Algarín and Piñero 1975; Mohr 1982), PRNC (see chapter ten), and the songs of El Grupo’s album.

If Lugo’s bongo in “Te digo hermano” already signals an Afro-Caribbean sensibility in the *nueva canción* of the album so does the presence of another sound. In “Pedro Pueblo,” for example, the presence of the 3-2 *son clave* can be heard in the background played by the two wooden sticks. The 3-2 *son clave* along with the 2-3 *son clave* is the cornerstone of *salsa* and
Cuban son organizing the melodies of musicians and singers and giving coherence to the song (see Washburne 1997; 2008).

Another example of how the nueva canción and the Nuyorican poetry of the album come together can be heard in the relationship between Paz’s “Chile, paloma herida” and Esteves’s “Maria Cristina.” In the latter Esteves declaims:

My name is Maria Cristina
I speak two languages
broken into each other
but my heart speaks the language
of people born in oppression
I do not complain
about cooking for my family
because abuela taught me
that the woman is master of fire
I do not complain about nursing my children
because I determine
the direction of their values.

Retitled “A la mujer Borinqueña” (“To the Puerto Rican Woman”) in her poetry book Yerba Buena (1980), this poem is also known as “My name is Maria Christina.” It has been widely discussed by literary critics who have highlighted how the poem privileges cultural affirmation over women’s liberation (see Barradas and Rodríguez 1980: 19-20; Umpierre 1983: 113-128; Luis 1997: 137-149; DeCosta-Willis 2004: 7-8). According to Costa-Willis, Esteves herself “blame[d] her politically incorrect views—which are feminine rather than feminist—on her youth, ignorance, and conflicting views of women” (2007: 7). Still, I share Noel’s more nuanced interpretation:

It is tempting to read “My Name Is María Cristina,” with its Earth Mother conceit and its defense of a woman cooking for her family, as insufficiently oppositional, and in fact the poem, included in Esteves’s landmark first book Yerba Buena (1980) under the title “A la Mujer Borinqueña [sic],” came under scrutiny as part of efforts to create a corpus of diasporic Puerto Rican (and U.S. Latina) feminist poetics in the 1980s, a corpus it helped define. Still, Esteves’s performance is note-worthy for its articulation of the struggle of young urban women in the context of the Latin American protest music of El Grupo and,
more generally, within the largely male and largely ideologically driven Left cultures on the island and stateside. (2014: 29).

Indeed, Esteves’s poem is not only about femininity, though, it falls short of articulating an antipatriarchal critique that is as forceful as the one elaborated by Palombo in “Te digo hermano;” at least regarding the lyrical content. Though it might be more productive to hear both the poem and the song as different ways of challenging patriarchy; within the limits of their time period and the authors’ positionalities.

In “Chile, paloma herida,” for her part, Paz deals with an entirely different subject-matter. This song is an indictment of Augusto Pinochet, who on September 11, 1973, just a few months before El Grupo’ album was recorded, had presided over a coup d’état against Salvador Allende, the first democratically-elected socialist president in Latin America. In a song that includes only her voice and guitar playing, and the beautifully and heartfelt sounds of Pardo’s harmonica, Paz sings:

Chile, paloma herida
en un rincón del mapa
acorralada
te quieren arrancar tus rojas alas
desangrar tu bravío corazón.

Chile, wounded dove
in a corner of the map
they want to tear off your red wings
to bleed your brave heart.

Still, while Paz’s and Esteves’s work have nothing in common thematically, they nevertheless share in their musical aesthetics. Paz’s mellow and subtle guitar playing is the background against which Esteves declaims. And as noted by Noel, like several of the nueva canción songs, including Paz’s song, Esteves’s poem is also solemn (2014: 29).

The nueva canción of the album and the Nuyorican poetry also meet insofar as they both borrow from African American culture. As noted in the preceding chapter, the Black Arts Movement was influential in Esteves’s work. “Act of Love” sounds out these influences by evoking Gil Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” released in Pieces of a Man.
Both poems call for revolution entwining music and poetry in their own ways (contrary to Esteves and Meléndez, for instance, Scott-Heron is accompanied by a band). Similar to Scott-Heron’s poem, which concludes by repeating “The revolution will not be televised, not be televised, not be televised, not be televised,” “Act of Love” ends with the repetition of the line “Revolution is an act of love, an act of love, an act of love.” But as the latter overlap shows, the revolutions are different. Esteves emphasizes “love,” whereas Scott Heron’s stress is on the mass media (television).

As noted by McClure (2016: 13), in “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” Scott-Heron proposes that “any change to existent antagonisms and oppression. . . must occur in the realms outside the home, where either the state, mass culture, or narcotics will subdue you.” For Scott-Heron:

You will not be able to stay home, brother
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and drop out
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and skip
Skip out for beer during commercials
Because the revolution will not be televised.

Scott-Heron, thus, establishes a stark juxtaposition between the home and the outside world.

“Act of Love,” for its part, while calling for being outside to “bust a pusher/help a junkie/help him into a revolution of love” also calls for “homes where people smile and laugh/homes where children laugh and play/homes where rats don’t breed/ and clean water, fresh

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134 I would like to express my gratitude to my friend, poet and scholar Yarisa Colón Torres, for pinpointing the similarities between these poems. You can listen to Scott-Heron’s version here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwSRqaZGsPw&list=OLAK5uy_iAHaXOBBoIJi61cVDPuPXn5AmUhxGQ
135 It is worth noting that Scott-Heron had released a prior version “that is more like spoken word acts of the time, a year prior to this more well-known version” (Fellezes, pers. comment April 17, 2021). Still, it differs greatly from “Act of Love” insofar as it includes bongos and congas. You can listen to that version here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZIoXXEzUsY
Although Esteves echoes Scott-Heron’s critique on narcotics (e.g. “bust a pusher”), her revolution rather occurs in the “act of love” between the home and the outside world. Esteves makes this point more explicitly in “Maria Cristina” via her emphasis on cooking and motherhood: “I do not poison their bellies [of “our men”]/with instant chemical food/our table holds food/from earth and soul. . . I teach my children/how to respect their bodies/so they will not O.D./under the stairway shadows of shame”). Ultimately, it is in the dialogical relationship between the home and the outside world or the “community”—understood as an extension of the home—where the revolution takes place for Esteves.

African American influences are also present in the songs of the album. “Te digo hermano,” for example, ends with a guitar solo by Valdés where he plays the pentatonic scales emblematic of the blues. So does “Comunidad.” Indeed, as several of the band members were keen to highlight, it was Valdés who brought the blues and rock influences to El Grupo. 136

If the poets and the singer-songwriters shared similar musical influences, they also related similarly to music. Esteves, like her fellow singer-songwriters/friends and like most Latin American/Caribbean composers of popular/folkloric music, does not read or write music. Still, not unlike these musicians who often write down their lyrics dividing them in stanzas, adding chords and other cues that trigger the memory, Esteves inscribes her music in analogous ways. In her manuscript collection The Collected Musings Cantations and Poems of a Rican Astro Lodger (1977), 137 which includes earlier versions of the poems that she would publish in Yerba Buena (1980), a typed draft of “Act of Love” can be found. 138 The draft includes slashes within the lines

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136 Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to meet Valdés who passed away in 2000.
137 This manuscript is located in the archives of Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College. I would like to express my gratitude to senior archivist Pedro Juan Hernández for sharing this invaluable manuscript with me.
138 To the best of my knowledge this poem has remained unpublished which would explain why it has not been discussed by Nuyorican scholarship.
and between them, handwritten parenthesis on the side that read “SLIGHT PAUSE” and other parentheses that read “pause.” Some lines, such as the quote by Guevara and Esteves’s answer quoting Malcolm X are capitalized: “I HAVE NO MERCY OR COMPASSION IN ME FOR A SOCIETY THAT WILL CRUSH PEOPLE AND THEN PENALIZE THEM FOR NOT BEING ABLE TO STAND UP UNDER THE WEIGHT.” This suggests sonorous (and theatrical)\textsuperscript{139} effects. Indeed, when listening to these sections of the poem, one can hear the poets “impersonating” the revolutionaries: the timbre of their voices become more somber; the tempo slows down; and they transition from the use of rapid rhythmic cells to much slower ones.

I would also be able to see just how musical these poets were through my own fieldwork experiences with Meléndez. Just like Esteves, Meléndez, who claims that poetry has “a musicality to it because they [the words] are laid out really like musical notes” (2012: 251), has entwined music and poetry throughout his career. During the 1960s, for example, he sang doo-wop with a group of friends (Meléndez 2012: 291) and in the 1990s, he had a jazz band called Exiled Genius. In early February 2020, Meléndez asked me to compose instrumental music with my \textit{cuatro} for some of the poems of his most recent book \textit{Borracho [Very Drunk]: Love Poems and Other Acts of Madness} (2020). The poems were to be recited by poets and performers during the book release to be celebrated on February 13th in El Barrio’s Artspace PS 109. Because there was such short notice, I composed four chord progressions, and used cover songs for the other six or seven poems (mainly jazz standards and \textit{boleros}). After the event, on February 18, Meléndez and I got together at his place to work together on the original music for the poems. During our rehearsal we went over “My Lady.” I recorded Meléndez declaiming it, and once

\textsuperscript{139} Limitations of time and space prevent me from exploring the relationship between Nuyoriacn poetry and theater, and between the latter and PRNC. Suffice it to say that the encounters between these art forms were plenty, and await the keen ear of future researchers. For more on Esteves’s relationship with theater see Herrera 2020.
home, recorded over it the chord progressions that I had previously composed with my cuatro making some minor changes in order to have it match his style of declaiming. A few days later, on February 26th, Meléndez and I met again at my place, in Morningside Heights, near the Columbia University campus.

During this rehearsal, Meléndez did not only alter his way of reciting (based on my music) but sang a melodic introduction for the poem. Then he had me slow down the tempo in certain parts, and double the meter in a section where he recited more quickly. As part of my original composition, I had highlighted a few lines from the poem and turned them into a chorus that would come in the breaks of Meléndez’s declamation (breaks that were to be determined by him). After Meléndez decided where the chorus should come in, he added more melodic phrases to it and wrote the corresponding lyrics (a variation on existing lines). Ultimately, Meléndez’s suggestions led to the addition of bars and to changes in the dynamics and timbre of the cuatro (e.g. certain beats were more or less stressed according to the rhythmic accents of his voice).

What had originally been my music and his poem, soon became our composition. But mostly his considering that he had altered the music and the lyrics but I did not “intrude” in the poetry. This experience struck me as being not at all that different from co-composing with musicians who do not read or write music (an experience that I explore in chapter ten). Indeed, so musical are Esteves and Meléndez’s poems that I have been able to set music to several of them.140

If the Nuyorican poets saw their work as music, the singer-songwriters saw their songs as poems. In “Chile, paloma herida,” Paz does not only sing, she also declaims:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chile no se ha rendido</th>
<th>Chile has not surrendered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>arde en lo vivo</td>
<td>she burns in what is alive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sangrante mensajera</td>
<td>bloody messenger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

140 Among them: “Fertile Woman,” “A Vast Sky Above” “Look to the Sun” and “Celebration” by Esteves, and “Somewhere and Here,” “They—Those,” “I’ve Looked Deep into the Abyss” and “The Chemistry of Racism” by Meléndez.
which reminds us of a revolution
that is not made half-way.

Palombo also declaims in “Canción por la flor y el fusil:”

Porque el peligro de pensar
es que podemos conocer
que solo un nombre tiene el mal
dejar hacer dejar pasar
si no es con vis no te metas
pero hoy me paro y digo no.

Because the danger of thinking
is that we can understand
that only a name has evil
let it happen, let it pass
if it doesn’t concern you, don’t bother
but today I stand and say no.

This song echoes “Te digo hermano” by calling, yet again, for a revolution that challenges
patriarchy insofar as the composers Palombo and Sánchez question scripted gender roles (hooks
2004). The song concludes with the following stanzas:

Y si me matan por decir
que hoy en la mesa falta el pan
será el cañón y no el rosal
el que repita la canción. . .

And if they kill me for saying
that today there is no bread on the table
it will be the gun and not the rosebush
that repeats the song

Escúchenme, quiero ser flor
Pero si no, seré fusil.

Listen to me, I want to be a flower
but if not, I’ll be a gun.

That a heterosexual revolutionary male would prefer to be a flower over a gun was a rare
occurrence in popular song, particularly in a revolutionary repertoire permeated by a masculinist
imaginary where Che Guevara’s New Man was clearly a man (see Carrillo Rodríguez 2014: 231-
250). By displacing “the attributes of paradigmatic femininity to the realm of the masculine”
Palombo proposes what Illa Carrillo Rodríguez (2014: 246) has described as a “feminized New
Man.”141 Still, as Carrillo Rodríguez warns “these seemingly novel political identities do not
evacuate the canonical gender regimes that structure the masculine/ feminine dyad: i.e., the
feminine as the impotent site of love and self-sacrifice and the masculine as the empowered

141 See chapter seven for a similar experiment in “Las palomas” and “Canción necesaria para Adofina Villanueva” by Américo Boschetti.
locus of discipline, reason, and transcendence” (2014: 246). Nevertheless, Palombos’s gender politics represents a significant rupture at a time where Queer theory’s insights regarding gender fluidity (see Preciado 2016 [2008]) was not a part of the social imaginary.

By the time I came across Palombo’s song in 2015, I had already experimented with a similar idea. Playing arpeggios and sounds reminiscent of the banjo with my *cuatro*—which I achieved by playing a D major chord that included a high-pitched G\(^{142}\)—I celebrated my role as a proud stay-at-home-dad who is eagerly waiting for his wife to come back from work:

You’re home.  
And the laundry’s done  
and so is the bed  
and the trash is gone  
and the baby’s fed  
and there is even more.  
You’re home.  
And I smell like perfume  
and I combed my hair  
and I bought a red sexy underwear  
and passion’s in the air.

Baby, let me love you how I can  
with this love of mine that is from Mars.  
I don’t have to be no Macho Man  
to hold you every night in my arms. . .  
As long as you’re a present in my life,  
I don’t mind being your housewife.

It is not by coincidence that this was one of Palombo’s favorite songs of my repertoire. We were both interested in exploring alternative masculinities, even if in the process, we reified gender binaries by “becoming” the “woman” rather than challenging the essentialism that springs from the male/female binary. While these songs are “conservative” when seen through a Queer lens, they are nevertheless “progressive” in the light of a heteronormative imaginary. And they do an

\(^{142}\) In the banjo the G note works as a sort of pedal; it is often included in the D major chord. I only came to realize that my *cuatro* sounded like a banjo in my song because of my addition of this G years later when I bought a banjo.
important labor in the world for other heteronormative men. Being a “flower” or a stay-at-home-dad is just as “manly” as being a “gun” or a worker. It should not lead to the psychological deterioration in men that bell hooks (2004) has so brilliantly described as being an act of patriarchal violence (see also Tacey 1997; Samuels 2001).

Singing and declaiming within a song was actually a common practice within PRNC. Group Instarte’s albums (Volumes I, II and III, recorded in the early 70s), included poems set to music and poems declaimed; O.Decrem’s Razones y sentimientos para una patria (Reasons and Sentiments for a Homeland) recorded in the late 1970s engaged in similar strategies, and so did Andrés Jiménez in Cantata (1980), an album of poems by Joserramón “Che” Meléndes. In fact, PRNC is indissociable from poetry. As noted by Rodríguez-Rodríguez, in 1970 Roy Brown, Noel Hernández and Neftín González “were invited to participate along with poets who wrote protest or politically-committed poetry” during the first Puerto Rican Festival of protest music and poetry celebrated in the southern town of Salinas in 1970 (1995: 221). Indeed, much of the PRNC repertoire has consisted in setting music to the great Latin American poets such as Juan Antonio Corretjer, Julia de Burgos, Luis Lloréns Torres, Pablo Neruda, Pedro Mir, and Mario Benedetti, among others. Of course, as I noted in the prior chapter, Nuyorican poets were excluded as was English-language poetry in general, though Brown set music to “Drum” by Langston Hughes and “Now you know” by June Jordan in the album Nuyol (1983).

Whether younger singer-songwriters influenced by PRNC are singing Nuyorican poems is unknown to me. But as a singer-songwriter and a poet who is proud of the history “of” the Island and “of” the diaspora, I have strived to continue blurring this dichotomy by setting music to poems by Esteves and Meléndez and singing them in Puerto Rico and New York City (and Montreal). Esteves’s “Fertile Woman” and Meléndez’s “Somewhere and Here,” are a part of my
repertoire, and I have shared these songs with all of my interlocutors. Both to honor Esteves and Meléndez and to connect with singer-songwriters who share similar sensibilities.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how the Nuyorican poetry of the album and the Puerto Rican-Argentinian *nueva canción* overlap aesthetically and ideologically in significant ways despite the more obvious differences that Noel noted. I have shown what an ethnomusicological ear can offer to the analysis of Nuyorican poetry and *nueva canción*. Inspired by Mignolo, I have argued that El Grupo’s album articulates a form of (decolonial) “border thinking” that enmeshes the local histories of the metropolitan center and colonial and postcolonial local histories. But El Grupo’s album also articulates a decolonial critique insofar as it significantly challenges patriarchy.

Given the history of El Grupo (see chapter four), it is obvious that *Canciones y poesía de la lucha de los pueblos latinoamericanos/Songs and Poetry of the Latin American Struggle* is also an anticolonial album that explicitly calls for Puerto Rican independence. How El Grupo sounded out Puerto Rican anticolonialism is the subject of the following chapter where we listen to the band’s rendition of “¡Coño, despierta boricua!”
Chapter 6: 
Relistening to “¡Coño, despierta boricua!” With El Grupo

To José “Pepe” Sánchez

In this chapter I focus on one of the cover songs recorded by El Grupo, the PRNC anticolonial classic “¡Coño, despierta boricua!” (CDB). Comparing El Grupo’s rendition of this song to the original version recorded by singer-songwriter Andrés Jiménez I ask: How do these versions sound out different understandings of Puerto Rican national liberation? How might El Grupo’s version help us to rethink the nationalist import of Puerto Rican pro-Independence history? How does this problematize the Island/diaspora dichotomy? By listening to CDB with an ethnomusicological/musical deconstructionist ear, and relying on archival research, I show how CDB is crisscrossed by multiple global influences, and diasporic experiences. Throughout, I also show how the revolution imagined in CDB was not only inscribed in the subversiveness of the lyrical content as is often highlighted (see Centeno 1996: 162; Rodríguez-Rodríguez 1995: 268-269) but in the music, the sounds, the language, the context in which CDB was played, and their interrelationship. I show how CDB challenged the colonial status and social, lyrical and musical expectations of the time generating what PRNC singer-songwriter and anthropologist Zoraida Santiago (N.D.) has called “malestar” (discomfort).

Two entwined arguments guide this chapter. I argue that El Grupo’s interethnic, musically creolized diasporic version of CDB is more representative of pro-independence Puerto Rican history and Puerto Rican national culture than Jiménez’s more Island-centric one. But I also argue that the interethnic musically creolized diasporic aspects sounded out by El Grupo were already present in Jiménez’s CDB. El Grupo, so to speak, “simply” raised the volume. As I show, it is not PRNC or Puerto Rican anticolonial history which is overdetermined by nationalism; it is the discourse about these histories which is.
CDB: Continuities, Ruptures and Subversiveness

CDB calls for the decolonization of Puerto Rico from the US by revisiting the events of the Grito de Lares Revolution of 1868, a failed attempt to overthrow the Spanish colonial regime and to end slavery in Puerto Rico. Though we will have occasion to look at the lyrical content in detail in the second section of this chapter, suffice it to say that the song explicitly calls for independence by referencing Ramón Emeterio Betances, Mariana Bracetti and other Grito de Lares revolutionaries via a chorus that is known by heart by sympathizers of Puerto Rican independence: “Oye boricua, yo te canto esta canción, ¡viva la patria, viva la revolución!” (Listen Puerto Rican to this song, long live the homeland, long live the revolution!).

Popularized by Andrés Jiménez “El Jíbaro” (The Peasant), who hailed from the mountainous town of Orocovis, CDB was written by the published poets Francisco Matos Paoli, a disciple of Albizu Campos who was incarcerated for his political convictions, and Andrés Castro Ríos. Guarionex Hidalgo Africano, a pseudonym, is also credited as an author. Recorded in Jiménez’s first solo album Como el filo del machete (1972) produced by José “Pepe” Sánchez under the PSP’s label Disco Libre, CDB includes five décimas (stanzas of ten octosyllabic lines that follow the rhyme scheme abbaaccddc). The music of CDB is a seis llanera—one of more than ninety seises that make up the repertoire of Puerto Rican trova or jíbaro music (Bofill-Calero 2013: 48-49).

From a musical point of view, CDB, and Jiménez’s work broadly speaking, belong to what can be described as the “purist” tendency of PRNC. According to journalist Pedro Zervigón (1983: 23) Jiménez was a musical “purist” insofar as he sought to keep “his music within folklore free of the contamination of jazz harmonies, rock or other influences” (my translation). Indeed, a few years before, in 1978, Jiménez himself had expressed similar views stating that
“we must make Puerto Rican music with a national definition that does not break the frontiers of national music” (qtd. in Seijo 1978: R6; my translation). Still, Jiménez also recognized that foreign influences were already present in Puerto Rican music. He argued that it was necessary to make Puerto Rican music with foreign influences but not the other way around. As an example of someone who was creating foreign music with Puerto Rican influences, he highlighted the work of Puerto Rico-based Argentinian singer-songwriter Tony Croatto. Jimenez’s critique of Croatto had less to do with Croatto’s ethnicity or foreignness than with his aesthetics. For Jiménez Croatto was not really knowledgeable on jíbaro music, and his creolizations went from the foreign to the national. Hence, Jiménez was less of a purist than he was against certain forms of creolization. Or, to put it in Sarah Weiss’s words he seems to have favored natural hybridity (where the hybrid is heard as primal), and opposed to intentional hybridity where “fusion is integral to the aesthetic of the work” (2008: 206)

Jiménez’s musical aesthetics stood in stark contrast not only with Croatto but with the two more dominant strains of PRNC: the neofolkloric one and the “progressive” one.

The neofolkloric strain, or what Angel David Lahoz called the “nueva perspectiva típica” (“new folkloric perspective”) in an article for Claridad (1976: 12-13), creolized different Puerto Rican musical genres. It would mix, for example, jíbaro music with plena, bomba, danza, salsa or it would mix different seises and aguinaldos. It could also simply evoke a particular Puerto Rican genre not fully subscribing to its aesthetic rules. This is the case, for example, of Antonio Cabán Vale’s “Verde luz,” which though being a danza does not follow the aesthetic rules of the genre. It lacks the “appropriate” quantity of measures and sections required by this genre. The neofolkloric strain was also open to mixing Puerto Rican musical genres with Latin American and Afro-Caribbean ones. So was the “progressive” strain, as Roy Brown described his own
work in a 1987 interview (see Arana 1987: 45-47). But “progressive” PRNC also embraced American and African American influences such as rock, blues, jazz, fusion and even disco. Many of Brown’s songs are characterized by its “progressive” sound as are the works of Noel Hernández, José Nogueras’s band Trapiche (1978) and Frank Ferrer’s works in the 1970s (see chapter ten).

When Jiménez recorded CDB he was aspiring to a “purist” aesthetic, one that, from a musical standpoint, would stay close to jíbaro music. An effect that he achieved by recording with an ensemble typical of trova that included the cuatro, guitar, güiro, accordion and bongos. In fact, even the melodic material of the chorus, which I initially thought represented a rupture with jíbaro music, had a precedent.

*Seis llaneras,* and seises in general, consist of a series of décimas without a chorus. They are not sung in the chorus-refrain format emblematic of CDB which alternates between the décimas and the phrase “Listen boricua, to this song/long live the homeland, long live the revolution.” Doing research for Ansonia Records, though, I discovered that jíbaro singer Flor Morales Ramos “Ramito” had experimented with this in the 1950s. In “*Quererte como te quiero*” and “*Mensage a la mujer,*” recorded in 1958, he had already added a chorus to his *seis llaneras.* In fact, the style of the *seis llanera* had been created by him and Tuto Feliciano as recently as 1953. As I listened to Morales Ramos’s chorus in his *seis llanera* “*Mensage a la mujer,*” I noticed that it had much in common with the chorus of CDB. They had the same harmony and quantity of bars, and a similar melodic contour. Lyrically, though, the differences were stark. While Morales Ramos was singing to a woman, Jiménez was calling for a revolution.

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143 Recorded in *Ramito El Cantor de la Montaña Vol. 1* released by Ansonia Records.

144 [http://cuatro-pr.org/node/212](http://cuatro-pr.org/node/212)
Whether Afro-Puerto Rican poet Juan de Matta Garcia, who claims to have composed the chorus of CDB,\(^{145}\) listened to Morales Ramos’s songs is unknown to me. But one has to wonder what Morales Ramos, a supporter of the Free Associated State (see Fiol-Matta 2016: 121-171) that Jiménez so passionately and courageously opposed, would have made of his influence on CDB. “Courageously” is not an overstatement. Since at least 1971 Jiménez, not unlike most if not all PRNC singer-songwriters, was under surveillance by the Division of Intelligence of the Police of Puerto Rico (Marrero 2018: 154-156).

Jiménez’s aspiration for musical “purism”—for as we will see this was a chimera—was entwined with his own perception regarding the state of jíbaro music. According to Jiménez, Puerto Ricans were ashamed of singing and listening to trova and only embraced it during Christmas time when it was “socially acceptable” according to standards imposed by colonialism and US imperialism. During the rest of the year Puerto Ricans would “hide” in order to listen to a music that, not unlike the jíbaro, was often described as backward (see Reyes 1972: 22). In this regard, Jiménez portrayed Puerto Rico as a geographically-bound rural-oriented nation in need of decolonization in order to avoid further assimilation and remain faithful to its true self.

Interestingly, the pattern described by Jiménez, whereby trova is perceived as Christmas music—Christmas becoming a time where Puerto Ricans celebrate their backwardness—is still more or less prevalent. What has changed, ironically, is that today jíbaro music, PRNC and Christmas music proper, are all largely played and sung only during the Christmas holidays. In occasions, this can reach hilariously absurd proportions as when, during one of my visits to Puerto Rico, I heard—blasting from a neighbor’s house—a live medley of CDB and “El lechón”

(The Pig)—a popular song that explains how to slaughter a pig in order to have the ideal Christmas meal.

It was at the lyrical level, then, where Jiménez was really willing to experiment and be “subversive,” breaking away from a jíbaro music tradition. As noted by Jiménez, trovadores “never” sang about national heroes such as Grito de Lares leader Ramón Emeterio Betances and Pedro Albizu Campos (see Reyes 1972: 22). In fact, the national heroes of trova were others such as colonial(ist) governor Luis Muñoz Marín, Jesus Christ, Mary, the Catholic Saints, or international figures irrelevant to PRNC such as Robert Kennedy. And second, the fact that several of the décimas sung in CDB were written by Matos Paoli and Castro Ríos contrasted with the décimas sung by trovadores. The latter largely relied on oral traditions, and seldom, if ever, set music to published poems. And yet, to the extent that the origins of the most common décima in Puerto Rico, the décima espinela, are credited to sixteenth century Spanish writer and musician Vicente Espinela, and considering that trovadores often sing oral versions of literary décimas (see Mason and Espinosa 1918), Jiménez’s rupture in this regard should be nuanced. “Oral” décimas were already “literary.”

An emblematic case in point is jíbaro Morales Ramos, who in “Adivíname” (1963) sang a quatrain that Alden Mason, during his fieldwork in Puerto Rico in the early twentieth century, had also heard but as a five-line verse. Mason notes that this five-line verse is actually based on a poem by José de Espronceda published in 1900: “Hojas del árbol caídas/juguetes del viento son/las ilusiones perdidas/ ¡Ay! son hojas desprendidas/del árbol del corazón”/ “Fallen

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146 Flor Morales Ramos “Ramito,” one of the most iconic trovadores, recorded his heartfelt “A Luis Muñoz Marín” lamenting the politician’s passing: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiL8knS-chE.
147 The lesser known yet superbly original trovador Germán Rosario sang to Robert Kennedy whose “memory would be honored/by the Puerto Rican people” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Pktihp1Oiw).
leaves of the tree/they are toys of the wind/the lost dreams/Oh, they are leaves/detached from the

In this regard, the radical contribution of CDB is not so much that it breaks with the past by voicing literary décimas in trova or that it blurs the divide between oral and literary traditions or “low culture” (e.g. trova) and “high culture” (e.g. literature). It is rather that it makes explicit how these categories are already “cross-contaminated,” and historically co-constitutive of one another (see Ochoa 2014: 76-121; Fox 2004; for an in-depth analysis of this entwinement).

Jiménez’s use of the word “coño,” was another form of experimentation that added to the subversion of CDB. “Coño,” literally means “cunt” but in this context it is more akin to “shit” (“Shit, Wake Up Boricua!”). Jiménez’s “coño” (no pun intended) had caught my attention because swear words are extremely rare in PRNC. The only other exceptions that I know of are “Compadre Armando” written by Joserramón Meléndes where Jiménez sings the word “puta” (whore)\footnote{Released in the album Cantata (1980), the lines go: “Cabaret lleno de cueras/pa’ chulos marinos yankis/putas borrachas in panties/mamando al gringo la pera” (Cabaret filled with whores/for the pimps, the Yanki marines/drunk whores in panties/sucking the cock of the gringo).”} and Heriberto González’s “Huracán” (1976), a song where he uses the phrase “pa’l carajo” (“to hell”) to signal how a lack of an ecological consciousness might lead the Island to sink in the ocean:

\scriptsize
\begin{align*}
\text{Así es que cuídate si al viajar} & \quad \text{So beware if when you travel} \\
\text{cuando mires hacia bajo} & \quad \text{when you look down} \\
\text{no encuentres que la isla} & \quad \text{you don’t see that the island} \\
\text{se haya hundio pa’l carajo} & \quad \text{has drowned [gone to hell].}
\end{align*}

\normalsize

Even here, though, the lead singer Danny Rivera and the choir only sing “ajo” rather than the full word. Singing “¡Coño!” in the early 1970s must have been quite something. Indeed, when I
asked Montañez about her experience singing this song with El Grupo, she told me that her mother refused to attend one of El Grupo’s concerts because they sang the word “coño.” In order to make sure that I had properly understood Montañez, I asked her if her mother’s resistance may not have had more to do with ideological discrepancies—her mother, after all, was not a leftist, and had been scandalized when Montañez went to Cuba in 1969 (see chapter four). But Montañez was adamant: “No, it was because of the word coño” (pers. interview March 14, 2020; my translation).

According to de Matta García, it was he who added this word to the song (1991 [1990]: 102) although Jiménez claims to have done so as well (see Reyes 1972: 22). Regardless of who added the “coño,” both the nationally well-known Jiménez and the relatively unknown de Matta García were at the center of CDB. As Jiménez stated for PSP newspaper Claridad in 1972 (Reyes 1972: 22), in an article that included the lyrics of the song, when he saw de Matta García singing décimas in a 1969 MPI event “se me subió el clamor jíbaro y empecé a cantar también” (I heard the jíbaro’s calling and began to sing décimas). Along with the two years that he spent in New York “washing dishes and mopping” and the year that he spent in the Vietnam War, Jiménez highlights this moment as central to his emergence as a politically committed PRNC singer-songwriter (Reyes 1972: 22; my translation).

The “coño” seems to have been an influence of the Puerto Rican anticolonial poetry of the 1960s’ generation where swear words were not that uncommon (see De la Puebla 1979: 79-80). Castro Ríos, one of the co-authors of the CDB, was a key figure of this literary generation as part of group Guajana—to which Taoné-member Cabán Vale also belonged. According to Castro Ríos’s colleague, the poet and editor of the Guajana literary magazine Jose Manuel Torres Santiago, curse words generated discomfort among anticolonialists of a prior generation.
such as poet and educator Concha Meléndez (see Cortés Cabán 2007). Hence, CDB embodied not only an anticolonial ethos but a generational rift sounded out in an anticolonial “coño” that generated unease among Puerto Ricans from different walks of life.

If the “coño” in CDB is a key word in this so is “despierta.” “Wake up” linked CDB to myriad political upheavals of the twentieth and nineteenth centuries. One of the slogans of the MPI/PSP, after all, was “Despierta boricua, defiende lo tuyo” (Wake up Boricua, defend what is yours)—mobilized against the United States’s attempts to engage in extractivist exploitation in the mountain range of Puerto Rico (see Colón, Córdova and Córdova 2014; Klein 2018; Lloréns and Stanchich 2019).

CDB also linked the 1960s struggles to the Grito de Lares Revolution via its obvious reference to Lola Rodríguez de Tió’s revolutionary anthem “La borinqueña” whose lyrics, written in 1868, called for an awakening: “Despierta borinqueño/que han dado la señal. . . ven nos será simpático/el ruido del cañón” (“Wake up Boricua, the signal has been given. . . Come, the sound of the cannons/will be pleasant”). Finally, the fact that Jiménez was singing CDB as a sympathizer of the PSP, distinguished him from other jíbaro singers most of whom supported the Free Associated State or Puerto Rico’s integration as state of the United States. The latter was the case of Jesús Sánchez Erazo “Chuito el de Bayamón,” for example (see Rodríguez León 1979: 58). Indeed, within PRNC there is no other singer-songwriter who claims the label “jíbaro” as part of his artistic persona.

When El Grupo recorded CDB barely a year or so after Jiménez, it inherited these meanings. But it also added its own. El Grupo arranged the song in a neofolkloric style. Rather than striving for the “authentic” sound of trova, El Grupo sought to renew trova by adding

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151 http://www.jornaldepoesia.jor.br/ag60santiago.htm
musical elements that were “foreign” to it. This is materialized in changes in tempo—their version starts much slower before picking up in speed—and a vocal arrangement that harmonizes the décimas of CDB via homophony and polyphony. These changes point towards the influence of Argentina’s nuevo cancionero as I could notice by listening to the album Argentina, el nuevo cancionero (1978). Released under Palombo’s label Americanto, in the album one can appreciate the preponderance of choral arrangements. In this regard, El Grupo’s neofolkloric rendition challenged the “purism” of CDB whose décimas—following the tradition of trova—are sung only by one voice, that of Jiménez. By extension, it challenged the expectations of trova.

When El Grupo recorded CDB, then, it moved the song away from Jiménez’s musical “purism.” In this sense, it can be heard as questioning a geographically bound and ethnically-driven understanding of Puerto Rican culture and national liberation. And yet, Jiménez’s CDB already exceeded the nation.

First: Jiménez had recorded CDB in New York City. Second: while written in décimas, the décima is not uniquely Puerto Rican but rather an Ibero-American phenomenon: it is sung in Dominican Republic, Cuba, New Mexico, Mexico, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Chile Argentina, Peru, Brasil and the Canary Islands (Jiménez de Baez 1964; Mason and Espinosa 1918; Ruiz-Caraballo 2015). Jiménez, in fact was aware of this; having performed in Cuba during the festival “Un cantar del pueblo Latinoamericano” (“A song of the Latin American People’s”) he stated that “the décima was the dominant form of poetic expression throughout

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152 Created around the time of El Grupo, Americanto released other albums of solidarity with Latin American revolutionary causes and nueva canción: Cuba canta a la República Dominicana, Canto obrero, Testimonios de la tortura en Chile, Compañero Víctor Jara, Ecuador, canciones por la unidad, songs for unity jatari!!, and The Center for Cuban Studies Presents: Grupo Moncada (see https://tallerlatino.org/blog/2020/1/4/americanto-music).

153 It is worth noting, though, that Puerto Rican décimas were at times sung in harmony, as a recording of a seis chorreo by Gracia López and Jorge Santoni in 1909 illustrates: https://www.archivoicp.com/primeras-grabaciones-coleccion-de-cilindros
Latin America” (see Mulet 1974: 22). Third: even the term “jibaro” as Jiménez designated himself, transcends its common definition of a purportedly white Puerto Rican peasant. As noted by Alvarez Nazario not only was it originally associated with other terms such as guajiro (Cuban peasant) and cimarrón (maroon) which were used during the sixteenth century to designate Indians who fled to the mountains (qtd. in Quintero Rivera 1998: 221), but “jibaro” has also been used in Mexico and Brasil with other connotations (Quintero Rivera 1998: 221). Fourth: Morales Ramos himself acknowledged that composing the seis llanera was inspired by Venezuelan music (see Mirós 2014: 392). Fifth: although the original version of CDB uses “a traditional band of jibaro music” that includes the sinfonia (button accordion) and the Puerto Rican cuatro (Ramírez Ruiz 2007: 144), it also includes bongos, a twentieth century addition that is most likely a Cuban influence (Manuel 1995: 55). Never mind that, according to Nieves Quintero, who played the Puerto Rican cuatro in the album, the uniqueness of his style of playing in the 1950s and 1960s was in part due to a “certain Americanized thing” that he gave the cuatro, mainly, his incorporation of rock and roll, jazz, and blues influences; although, interestingly, in the same interview he claims to be a “purist” when it comes to playing trova.

Furthermore, what is a “traditional” cuatro is debatable. In 1933 artisan and cuatro player Efraín Ronda published in NYC—both in Spanish and in English—the first method for the Puerto Rican cuatros. Yes, cuatros in the plural. As Ronda emphasized, the method was meant for teaching how to play both the “original” and “primitive” four double-stringed cuatro (his

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154 “La décima es la forma que predomina como expresión poética de Latinoamérica.”
155 “yo le daba cierta cosa americanizada... le puse otro sabor al cuatro. . . A mí me inspiró que yo oía mucha música americana allá. Y oía muchos de los guitarristas. Y me gustaba lo que ellos hacían, que... cuando oía algo, que yo iba a ser típico, me acordaba de algo que ellos hacían, ciertas partes, tu sabes... y yo lo incluía ahí también, sí, sí... eso, para el tiempo yo le metía Jazz y todo esas cosas... Yo soy purista en cuanto a la música tradicional.” (See Sotomayor and Cumpiano: http://www.cuatro-pr.org/node/260).
156 The implication seems to be that Nieves Quintero was willing to play different musical genres and experiment with foreign influences but not within trova.
words), and the *cuatro moderno* or “the modern 10 string” *cuatro* (Ronda 1937: 1, 18). The one played by Nieves Quintero in CDB was the “modern” one. Ronda republished his method in 1965 and 1970 which suggests that both *cuatros* were still around when Jiménez recorded “his” song. Jiménez’s CDB, and his PRNC in general, thus consisted in upholding an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that was largely based on ethnomusicologist Francisco López Cruz’s “Island-based” method for the Puerto Rican (10 string) *cuatro*—no longer called modern—a method that, contrary to Ronda’s, was not self-published but published by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture in 1967.

Finally, although CDB is generally described as a nationalist song of Puerto Rican liberation, the “national” revolution proposed in its lyrics already exceeded narrow nationalism. Interethnic solidarity, diasporic experiences, and global dynamics were already present in the nineteenth and sixteenth century historical events referenced in the song’s lyrics. El Grupo raised the volume. It is to this that I now turn my attention.

**CDB, and the Multiplicity of Voices that Lie Therein**

CDB explicitly mentions some of the key figures of the *Grito de Larens*. The leaders referenced are: [Manuel Rosado Giménez] “Manolo El Leñero,” [Ramón Emeterio] “Betances,” [Segundo] “Ruiz Belvis,” “Mariana” [Bracetti], and [Matías] “Brugman.” These were all involved, in one way or another, in an uprising that was forged in transnational/diasporic flows. Betances was detained in Saint Thomas and thus unable to smuggle guns and ammunitions to the rebels. His father was Dominican, he spent most of his life in exile in Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the ethnomusicologist Noraliz Ruiz-Caraballo for making me aware of this method, and sharing a PDF copy with me.

157 In 1970, Ronda, along with other prominent Puerto Ricans such as Rita Moreno, Pura Belpré, María Teresa Babin and Ruth Fernández, among others, would be recognized by the NYC-based *Instituto de Puerto Rico* for his contributions to Puerto Rican culture (see: https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/digitalarchive/index.php/Detail/objects/10339)
NYC and France, where he lived for forty-five years (Ojeda Reyes 2018: Vol XIII, 378) and his literary works were written in French (see Ojeda Reyes and Estrade 2017: Vol III). Bracetti, who purportedly sewed the flag of the would-be Republic, today the flag of the town of Lares,\textsuperscript{159} was the daughter of a Venezuelan (Rosario Rivera 2014). Brugman, who was killed after the Revolution shooting at Colonel Martínez (Jiménez de Wagenheim 1985: 99) was born and raised in New Orleans. Ruiz Belvis—who died in Chile in 1967 as he sought support for the Revolution—studied in Venezuela and Madrid. Finally, Manuel Rojas, another central figure in the \textit{Grito}, though not mentioned in the song, was born and raised in Venezuela. This “foreigner,” not unlike Brugman, paid a heavy price for his support to the anticolonial cause. He was “hung by his hands from one of the beams of the house where he was found hiding, . . . slapped and spat on his face” by Colonel Martínez who in addition “hit him with his revolver in the mouth until it was all bloody” and “pulled his beard so hard that part of it ended in his hand, with some flesh still attached to it” (Jiménez de Wagenheim 1985: 100).

Indeed, 7\% of the \textit{Grito de Lares} rebels were foreigners: fourteen Spaniards, nine Venezuelans, four Dominicans, three Dutch Caribbean, three Africans, three Italians, two French, and one Mexican (Jiménez de Wagenheim 1985: 29-31). The multiethnic import of the \textit{Grito de Lares} is even more evident if one considers that—at least for Betances—the goal was to create an independent Puerto Rico that would join a multilingual Confederation of the Antilles (that would include Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica) with the geopolitical objective of keeping the United States’ imperialistic ambitions at bay (Ojeda Reyes 2017: Vol. XIII, 337-338).

\textsuperscript{159} For a problematization of this narrative where it is shown that there were multiple flags and that others may have sewed the “national” flag, see the following article by Mario Cancel Sepúlveda: https://www.academia.edu/39962026/Mariana_Bracetti_Cuevas_un_perfil_y_una_imagen
But if CDB contains within itself all these “extra-national” histories how is it that it came to be reduced to narrow nationalism in PRNC studies and the popular imagination?

In her study of the Grito de Lares, Jiménez de Wagenheim argues that Puerto Ricans were taught to be dismissive of the Grito de Lares because of its duration, its scope and the presence of foreigners (1985: 29). Indeed, the “foreign” presence was used by conservative Spaniards and Puerto Ricans in order to question “the legitimacy of the revolution” (Cancel Sepúlveda 2011: 84, my translation). CDB’s reduction to nationalism, then, seems to be a reaction to these colonial and colonizing narratives. In striving to value the Grito de Lares as a dignified act of national independence, it has been nationalized beyond factual recognition. The overemphasis on the “Puerto Ricanness” of the Grito de Lares—simultaneously affirmed and contested in CDB—leads to an ironic outcome. The downplaying of how foreign and diasporic experiences shaped the Grito gives birth to a rare alliance between a 1960s anticolonialism embedded in the PSP’s internationalism/Third Worldism and transnational flows, and colonial(ist) nineteenth century discourses that posited a multiethnic Puerto Rican revolution as inauthentic.

The lyrics of CDB also refer to other acts of resistance that are crisscrossed by global flows. In addition to the Criollo leaders, CDB mentions Guarionex, one of the Taíno chiefs who was ordered by Agüeybana II to set fire to colonizer Sotomayor’s Villa during the 1511 rebellion, a rebellion that lasted at least twenty years (Badillo 2008: 92-93). Jiménez sings:

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160 According to Mario Cancel Sepúlveda, nineteenth century Puerto Rican autonomist leaders also devalued the Grito often describing it as an unnecessary and poorly executed rebellion. (See: “La insurrección de 1868 en la memoria: el tránsito del siglo 19 al 20.” https://puertoricoentresiglos.wordpress.com/2018/12/14/la-insurreccion-de-1868-en-la-memoria-el-transito-del-siglo-19-al-20/). The autonomist view would be reproduced in history books used in the public school system after the US invasion and contested by Puerto Rican anticolonialists as early as the beginning of the twentieth century (see Borges 1915; Lloréns Torres 1917).

161 This stanza was one of two that was not sung in El Grupo’s album although Montañez highlighted that they sang all five stanzas when performing live; the song would have been “too long” had they included all five (pers. interview Montañez March 14, 2020).
No me llames por mi nombre
que no te responderé
llámame por Guarionex
aunque te retumbe el orbe.

Don’t call me by name
for I will not answer
call me by the name Guarionex
even if the world trembles.

In this regard CDB is part of a tradition of Puerto Rican poetry, stretching back to the nineteenth century, that has included the *Taíno* in the genealogy of the Puerto Rican anticolonial struggles (see Corchado Juarbe 1985). While this no doubt subsumes the struggles of the *Taínos*—for whom the concept of nation-state was alien—within a pro-independent nation-state project, it nevertheless created a necessary and radical “discomfort” at the time. After all, historiographers of the Free Associated State, inspired by nineteenth century and early twentieth century historians such as Salvador Brau, were engaged in reproducing a history of “pacific” *Taíno* chiefs, such as Agüeybana I, at the expense of downplaying more militant figures such as his brother Agüeybana II (Sued Badillo 2008: 111-120). This idea of the *Taíno* reinforced the purported docility of Puerto Ricans positing the recurrent anticolonial nationalist violence as an anomaly.

While CDB questioned this colonial(ist) narrative, the presence of the *Taíno*, which is also implied in the references to the mountains, the seashell that calls for the revolution, and the use of the word “*boricua,*” signals as well the presence of “*foreigners.*” As noted by Sued Badillo, the *Taíno* rebellions against Spanish colonization counted at times with the support of the Caribe Indians “from” the Lesser Antilles, and enslaved Africans (2008: 136-138). Even though in CDB the *Taíno* rebellions are clearly secondary and subordinated to the revolution of the Criollos leaders, they nevertheless sound out extra-national forms of subversion.
Compared to the *Taino*, the enslaved African is even less audible in CDB insofar as he/she remains unnamed.\textsuperscript{162} But though subordinated the African is not totally absent in CDB.

Enslaved Africans are implicitly present in CDB given that: a) the Criollos referenced or their families owned enslaved Blacks; b) the abolishment of slavery was a part of the *Grito de Lares* program; and c) 9% of the rebels in the *Grito* were enslaved Africans (Jiménez de Wagenheim 1985: 33). That the Black voice within CDB is barely audible is not surprising in some ways. To this day, Puerto Ricans in general—including anticolonial leftists—are unable to name the enslaved Africans that conspired and revolted in Puerto Rico, this despite the publishing of works that have unearthed these histories (see Baralt 1982; Nistal-Moret 1984). The relative absence of the enslaved African in Jiménez’s album, however, is somewhat surprising given that by 1971, his collaborator de Matta had published some of his Afrocentric poems (see Zenón Cruz 1974: 154). So proud is de Matta of his African roots that, as we learn in his book *Prietuscus y tarcualitos: poemas negristas y otros poemas* (1991 [1990]: 97), he named one of his sons Malcolm X. This relative absence is built upon—and legitimizes—historical narratives that posited enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico as docile and well-treated when compared to slaves under British colonial rule (Díaz Soler 1953). The narrative of a benevolent form of Spaniard enslavement in Puerto Rico was still being taught in the early 2000s when I was an undergraduate at the University of Puerto Rico. Isabelo Zenón Cruz’s critiques of such colonial notions had fallen on deaf ears (1974:162).

The relative absence of the African seems to be largely a legacy of Albizu Campos’s post-1930s nationalism. A fact that shows to what extent twentieth century nationalism under US domination redefined nineteenth century nationalism under Spain. Although Albizu Campos

\textsuperscript{162} In this regard, it is reminiscent of Rafael Hernández’s “*Preciosa*” where Spanish and *Taino* legacies are celebrated but Blackness—despite the Blackness of the composer—is absent.
stressed the importance of the *Grito de Lares* patriots, this dark-skinned mulatto—whose grandmother was a slave and whose grandfather was a white slave owner—was extremely proud of figures such as Christopher Columbus and the early sixteenth century colonizer Juan Ponce de León (Ferrao 1990: 120-23). In 1936, for example, he described Puerto Rico as “the most Spanish of all the nations after Spain, in regards to blood,” a blood that was “seventy-five per cent Spanish” (qtd. in Torres 1975: 82)—although he also stressed that he carried his “African blood,” with “the supreme pride of human dignity” (qtd. in Fernández Méndez 1975: 324). Such views contrasted greatly with those of Betances, who also had Black ancestry and viewed Spain as a “steppmother homeland” that had committed genocide against the *Taínos* and as a retrograde country incapable of modernizing Puerto Rico (see Ojeda Reyes and Estrade 2017, Vol III: 109-158; Ojeda Reyes, Vol XIII: 62). Betances was also a huge admirer of Haitian leaders Toussaint L’Ouverture and Alexandre Pétion (see Ojeda Reyes and Estrade 2017, Vol. IV: 181-206; 215-238).

Not unlike the *Grito de Lares* and the *Taíno*’s struggles, Black struggles for liberation in Puerto Rico were rather interethnic and global in scope.

Nineteenth century Spaniard colonial rule was not only haunted by Criollo conspiracies. Slave conspiracies and the specter of Haiti, the first social revolution and Caribbean/Latin American Republic of the Americas, also haunted Spain all the way up to the abolishment of slavery in 1873 (see Baralt 1982). This not only had to do with President Pétion’s support of Simón Bolívar’s war for independence, which led Spain to lose most of its American empire by the 1820s, but to Haiti’s support of slave revolts on the Island. In 1805, for example, the Haitian

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163 Albizu Campos also added that it was now—in 1933—that “the glories of the of the African civilization are being unearthed in the Congo; it is today that in the Americas the majesty of the Indians is being unearthed” (in Fernández Méndez 1975: 324; my translation).
mulatto Chaulotte, who spoke French, English, and Spanish, was arrested in Puerto Rico because, according to the Spaniard authorities, he “had been sent by Dessalines” to incite the slaves into rebellion (Rosario Rivera 2015: 91-92). Later, in 1826, the slaves Joaquín Quiñones, a “creole” “from” Puerto Rico, Juan de Bautista “from” Haiti, Julián, “from” Guinea and Llán Fransuá “from” Martinique were whipped, imprisoned and ordered to be sold out of Puerto Rico because they had conspired to escape to Haiti during a baile de bomba (a gathering during which they danced and sang this Afro-Puerto Rican music) (Nistal Moret 2004 [1984]: 228). Hence, black sounds also haunted Spain, and these sounds were also linked to Haiti—as evidenced by Juan de Bautista’s example and as demonstrated by Emmanuel Dufrasne who has underlined how several denominations within bomba are indebted to Haitian Kreyòl (1985: 219-243). Black sounds would continue to haunt Spain via the “camouflaged [bomba] drum” that shapes jíbaro music and the Puerto Rican danza, genres typically associated with Spain and whiteness (Quintero Rivera 1998).

Anticolonial histories of resistance that exceeded the nation would continue to flourish throughout the twentieth century.

The constitution of the Partido de la Independencia de Puerto Rico founded in 1912 by Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón and poet Luis Lloréns Torres, whose works have been set to music by several PRNC singer songwriters, was inspired by the constitution of New Zealand (Bernabe 1996). Nationalist leader Albizu Campos was inspired by the Irish and Indian struggles for independence; he believed in a Bolivarian-inspired unity of Latin America, and was married to Peruvian militant Laura Meneses. The parents of Arturo Schomburg—recognized in NYC for his contributions to the Harlem Renaissance and Afro-diasporic cultures—were from St. Croix and Germany; he began his political career in NYC in 1895 by joining the “Sección Puerto Rico” of
the Cuban Revolutionary Party, which called for Puerto Rico and Cuba’s independence from Spain (Piñero de Rivera 2008: 7). South Dakotan Pacifist Ruth Mary Reynolds was imprisoned and tortured in Puerto Rico in the 1950s for her support for Albizu Campos (see Jiménez de Wagenheim 2016: 129-160). Bishop Antulio Parrilla Bonilla developed his theology of liberation-inspired anticolonial consciousness via his interactions with priests from the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe and the United States (see Santiago Santana 2018 [2013]).

The NYC chapter of the PSP sought alliances with undocumented Latin Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos and African Americans (see Desde las entrañas 1973). One of the key leaders of the Young Lords was African American Denise Oliver (see Fernández 2020). It was a Dominican, Federico Lora, who was the First Secretary of El Comité, another anticolonial and socialist Puerto Rican organization based in NYC (see Muzio 2017). Lolita Lebrón, the nationalist heroine that led the 1954 attack on the US House of Representatives, joined the Nationalist Party in 1947 in NYC; her lawyer was African American Conrad Lynn (Jiménez de Wagenheim 2016: 242-278).

Ultimately, when El Grupo sings CDB, a song that must be heard in its intertextual relation to the Nuyorican/African American poem/song “Act of Love” and the other poems and songs of the album, it is calling for the awakening of a national consciousness that is global in scope and grounded on different articulations of inter-ethnic solidarity, cosmopolitanism and internationalism. It is encouraging Puerto Ricans to wake up to the historical fact that Puerto Rican anticolonial struggles have never been only from the Island. It is reminding Puerto Ricans that the Grito de Lares was neither the making of foreigners nor merely a Puerto Rican affair; that it was a multiethnic challenge to colonialism and slavery. It is reminding Puerto Ricans that the Tainos and the enslaved Blacks’ resistance was just as multiethnic, diasporic and global. It is
blurring the Island/diaspora dichotomy by making more audible what was already latent in Jiménez’s CDB.

**Conclusion**

In one of the few cover songs of the album, “*Canción con todos*” (“Song with All”) the Argentinian *nuevo cancionero* classic by Armando Tejada Gómez and Cesar Isella, El Grupo sings about unity of “*todas las voces, todas*” (“all of the voices, all”). While the song is specifically a call for Latin American unity, El Grupo’s interpretation adds more voices if one hears this song in conversation with their histories and the rest of the album. The voices of the poor, the colonized, the oppressed, the sick, the colonized; the voices of the *Taino* rebellions (Guarionex, Agüeybaná II, the Caribe Indians and the Africans); of the enslaved Blacks who conspired (Juan de Bautista, Joaquín Quiñones, Julián, Llán Fransuá and others, and so many lost to history); of the *Grito de Lares* (Mariana Bracetti, Lola Rodríguez de Tió, Betances, Brugman, the enslaved Blacks); of anticolonial twentieth century anticolonialists (Pedro Albizu Campos, the Young Lords, Mari Bras, Rodríguez Abeillez); of international revolutionaries (Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Malcolm X, Salvador Allende, Frantz Fanon) and revolutionary poets (Matos Paoli, Scott-Heron, Castro Ríos); of the non-Puerto Ricans who have contributed to Puerto Rico’s decolonization (Laura Meneses, Sandra Levinson, Denise Oliver, Ruth Mary Reynolds, Angela Davis); of the social justice oriented singer-songwriters of the PRNC movement. Ultimately, listening to PRNC through/with El Grupo leads us to ask: Is it not possible that the real revolutionary import of Puerto Rican anticolonial struggles lies in the fact that they were *el Grito* of many from many places and with different social and racial backgrounds?

As I have argued, it is in the careful and unconventional listening to the voices of PRNC and voices akin to it; in the listening to the voices “from” the Island and “from” the diaspora and
their interrelationship; in the listening to some of the many voices contained within those voices; where novel contributions to Puerto Rican anticolonial history and decolonization are to be found. Some may be more audible than others. But as El Grupo teaches us, we can raise the volume. Puerto Rican anticolonialism has never been about one voice. It has always been about *todas las voces, todas*.

**Coda**

Throughout the last three chapters, I have referred to the members of El Grupo by their last names. But Palombo, Meléndez, Montañez and Pardo are really Bernardo, Papoleto, Hilcia and Oscar. They have seen my daughter Gabriela transition from toddlerhood to childhood, and I have lost count of the many presents that they have given to her. They have welcomed me to their homes. They have cooked for me. I have done the same for them. They have encouraged me to read so many books that I lost count of that as well. And I have been honored to be in the presence of these individuals whose commitment to Puerto Rican liberation was considered a threat by the FBI (see Marrero 2018: 185-186, 154).

I have lived moments with these artists that I cherish profoundly. The morning of May 23, 2017, stands out, though. Then I played with Bernardo at Castle Bridge School in Washington Heights where he was teaching a group of young children “*Verde luz*.” I must admit that when Bernardo invited me to play, I was not too enthusiastic. In my view, “*Verde luz*” had lost much of its political edge. For example, although this song explicitly calls for independence, in 1997, the ex-director of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture Awilda Palau had proposed it as the official song of the hundredth anniversary of the American invasion. According to Palau, “despite the pro-independence interpretations that could be attributed to *Verde luz*, sympathizers of Puerto Rico becoming a state [of the United States] have also supported” the proposal (qtd. in
That day, playing with Bernardo, I learned an invaluable lesson, though.

In this context, “Verde luz” was doing a different labor. Bernardo had effectively taught a group of multi-ethnic and multilingual children to sing what is a beautiful if little-known song beyond Puerto Rico. As Bernardo sang, I played the same riffs and melodies that I had been playing for over two decades with a new sense of purpose. I was happy to be sharing with these children such a poetic call for decolonization. But I was proud to see that my daughter was also there, learning to sing “Verde luz” thanks to the passion of this Argentinian.

I have also been honored to perform with Papoleto and spend time with him at his home and at my own. Throughout the years we have played with Bernardo “Antonia” by Cabán Vale, to which Papoleto has added his poem “There Are No Innocent People.” Reimagining “Antonia” in this bilingual rendition, and singing it in the diaspora, has led me to see how PRNC can still shape the present in significant ways. Here we were, an Argentinian, a Nuyorican and a “young” Puerto Rican teaching a multiethnic group of people about the Puerto Rico of the 1960s and 1970s, and its struggles. Thanks to Papoleto, I became a fan of Nuyorican poetry as I devoured the works of Miguel Algarín, Pedro Pietri and Martín Espada, among others, in an effort to better understand Meléndez and Esteves.

My visits to Hilcia and Oscar at their home in Cupey, Puerto Rico were no less filled with magic. As Gabriela colored with Oscar, I would interview Hilcia, and vice versa. And our conversations would invariably end in a tertulia singing nueva canción, jazz standards, Argentinian folk songs, boleros, seises and my own songs. When Gabriela began to sing one of the boleros as Oscar drove us back to my Airbnb in Old San Juan, I was moved but not totally surprised. But I was proud to see how their knowledge was shaping her own imaginary. Even my
brief encounter with Suni Paz at El Taller Latino Americano and my meeting with Sandra María Esteves, who despite being ill, was kind enough to visit me once, are moments that stand out as important and beautiful. Gabriela’s photo with Esteves is priceless. In fact, it is with Esteves with whom I would like to conclude.

In the opening bars of “Act of Love” Esteves’s voice can be heard travelling from left to right and vice versa via the application of a studio technique known as audio panning. During a workshop that I organized around El Grupo’s album on March 25, 2021, Heather Murphy-Lessard, one of the attendees, told me that to her ear this suggested an “exchange of ideas and love through the spoken work.” Indeed, by using this studio technique, “Act of Love” summarizes El Grupo’s proposal. Canciones y poesía de la lucha de los pueblos latinoamericanos/Songs and Poetry of the Latin American Struggle is about the movement of love between the members of a band of friends, and the movement of the love that they gave to individuals, communities and nations that were oppressed. But it is also about the movement of the love that they gave me and my daughter. Moving with El Grupo’s movement, then, I give these chapters back to them as my own “act of love.”
Chapter 7: Marie-Claire Séguin: Feminism and Settler Colonialism in “Mater Maria”

In 1972 Québécois singer-songwriters Marie-Claire Séguin and her twin brother Richard, alongside Joni Mitchell and Peter, Paul and Mary, played in a benefit concert in defense of the Cree Nation of the Baie-James, a municipality located in Northern Québec. Known as the band Séguin, Marie-Claire and Richard stood in solidarity with the Cree and the Inuit First Nations then facing the expansionist and nationalist policies of the Québécois state and the James Bay Hydroelectric Project. That day, Séguin performed two original songs that forcefully condemned settler colonialism: “Som Séguin,” composed when the siblings were age sixteen (Pedneault 2003: 17), and “Génocide” (see Bleau and Gagnon 2012: 9). Both would be released in 1972 on their first album entitled Séguin.

Though solidarity with the First Nations was expressed by other Québécois singer-songwriters of the 1960s and 1970s (see Roy 1991: 226-227), “Som Séguin” and “Génocide” were rather exceptional within the chanson québécoise repertoire, which like Québécois political discourse widely speaking, was not too concerned with the First Nations. Whether it was the Quiet Revolution (1960-1966), a series of liberal reforms that moved Québec away from the conservative Catholicism of Premier Maurice Duplessis (1944-1959) and towards modernization, or a Louder Revolution (Third Worldist Québécois anticolonial and socialist discourses, québécois counterculture and feminism), First Nations were barely audible therein. Not surprisingly, Séguin has (rightfully so) been celebrated in chanson québécoise and

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164 Québécois poet, journalist and politician Gérald Godin and Québécoise singer Pauline Julien also participated in this event. See: https://www.lapresse.ca/arts/musique/entrevues/201211/17/01-4594973-richard-seguin-la-guitare-comme-compagne-de-vie.php.
165 Renamed Eeyou Istchee James Bay Territory in 2012.
166 Previously, though, Marie-Claire and Richard had recorded together as part of the band La nouvelle frontière.
countercultural literature for this act of solidarity, though, an in-depth analysis has been lacking. The history of this act of solidarity and the silence around its details, led my footsteps to Marie-Claire’s\textsuperscript{167} home.

When I met Marie-Claire for the first time in her beautiful home in Montreal on July 22, 2018,\textsuperscript{168} I was extremely excited about learning more about this performance and her interactions with the First Nations. To my surprise, Marie-Claire’s personal involvement with the First Nations was less significant than I had anticipated though she had continued to read and watch documentaries about the First Nations.

As we spoke about Séguin, it also became apparent that she was not too interested in talking about her work with her brother. Still, she accommodated me. While this conversation yielded some valuable information regarding “Som Séguin” and “Génocide,” it was brief, and I began to wonder whether I would be able to write about the subject in a thoughtful way. I proceeded to ask Marie-Claire more general questions about the Québec of the 1960s and 1970s until I realized that she was rather eager to talk about her own work as a solo artist. As I was leaving her home after a two-hour meeting, I asked her if she would sell me some of her solo productions so that I could study them. Instead, Marie-Claire asked for a USB, and downloaded several of her albums along with the lyrics. I left uncertain regarding what my next steps should be but excited about (and daunted by) the amount of work ahead: I had nearly one hundred songs to listen to!

\textsuperscript{167} Throughout this chapter, I refer to Marie-Claire by her first name to avoid any confusions. Her brother, of whom I also write, shares the same last name, their band was called Séguin, one of the songs that I discuss is called “Som Séguin,” and one of their ancestors is called Som Séguin.

\textsuperscript{168} Interestingly, this is Mary Magdalene’s Day, a “character” of this chapter. I thank Yarisa Colón Torres for bringing this act of Jungian synchronicity to my attention. For more on Colón Torres, see chapter ten.
During our second interview on October 26, 2018, I was still somewhat at a loss. But our conversation made it clear that feminism was key for Marie-Claire. Marie-Claire was extremely enthusiastic about talking about her role as a woman singer-songwriter, a mother and a feminist. Leaving now under the cold Montreal weather, I wondered: could I find a song that would allow me to address our common interests?

Relistening to her repertoire back in New York City, I came across “Mater Maria,” a song composed by Marie-Claire and G. Sheppard169 about Mother Mary/Black Madonna composed in the 1980s and released in 1990 in her album Une femme, une planète. I was intrigued by the poetry, in part, because I did not quite understand the references, and fascinated by the music: the song opened with an Indigenous-sounding chant that was recurrent throughout the piece.

During our following encounter, on a freezing December 10, 2018, I began asking questions about “Mater Maria.” As a full hour went by discussing this five-minute song, I became convinced that this was “our” song: one through which we could both dwell upon our common interests. I took notes as best I could. Québécois-accented French was somewhat of a challenge to me, and it remains so. Though several meetings followed nothing was as rich as this discussion. Hence, on October 30, 2019, having confessed to Marie-Claire my linguistic limitations, I asked her if we could have the same conversation around “Mater Maria” but this time audio-recorded. Marie-Claire smiled and said, “Oui.”

In this chapter I engage in an in-depth analysis of “Mater Maria” exploring Marie-Claire’s musical-political-poetic consciousness. I use the song as a way of revisiting the Québec

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169 Marie-Claire credited G. Sheppard as a co-lyricist because she was inspired to write the poem after having been interviewed by Sheppard. For more on how songs are collective compositions and not only the affair of the composer, see chapter two.
of the 1960s and 1970s in conversation with some of the ten First Nations that inhabit within the province. Throughout, I highlight the many tensions behind a song that simultaneously challenges patriarchy while reproducing certain settler colonial tropes. I argue that a deeper understanding of Québécois 1960s resistance requires, in part, reading Québécois anticolonial and feminist discourse in conversation with settler colonialism. How does Marie-Claire understand the relationship between feminism, Québécois nationalism, music and Indigenous cultures? How might antipatriarchal discourses unwittingly reproduce settler colonial logics?

I begin by providing a general sketch of Marie-Claire’s political ideas throughout the 1970s leading up to her composing “Mater Maria.” In the second section, I analyze Marie-Claire’s feminism as developed in “Mater Maria” highlighting how the song relates to her own personal and professional struggles. In the third part, I discuss “Som Séguin” and “Génocide,” focusing on how Marie-Claire and Richard portray the First Nations’ history and struggles. This is paramount in order to properly understand what the “Indigenous” chant means in “Mater Maria,” a task that I engage in the fourth part by analyzing the presence of the Indigenous in “Mater Maria” and explaining how it relates to Marie-Claire’s feminism.

My analysis is based on my fieldnotes and one audio-recorded interview with Marie-Claire. I also rely on secondary sources recommended by Marie-Claire (feminist Québécois literature, Jungian psychology, and ethnographies of First Nations), archival research and Marie-Claire’s critical commentaries.

**Marie-Claire and the 1970s**

In 1977, Marie-Claire and Richard gave an interview twenty-three pages in length to Hélène Pedneault. Published as a chapter of Séguin, a book about their band, the interview gives us a glimpse at Marie-Claire’s (and Richard’s) worldview at the time. During the conversation
Richard references Pierre Vallières *Negres blancs d’Amérique* (1977: 28) which he describes as being emblematic of the political climate of Québec’s 1960s. Building on Richard’s comment, though seemingly not very knowledgeable on Vallières, Marie-Claire mentions having attended a conference by pro-independence activist Michel Chartrand, “founding member of the *Parti Socialiste du Québec*” and president of the Montreal Central Council which represented “roughly 65,000 workers” (Mills 2010: 166-168). While she acknowledges that she understood little about syndicalism, her impression was that “il est correct ce gars-là” (1977: 28). Based on these comments, and on the fact that she says nothing about Vallières, it is safe to say that Marie-Claire was aware of and sympathized with these anticolonial and socialist struggles—they resonated with her working-class background—but she was not privy to the details. Having read a prior draft of this chapter, Marie-Claire expanded on why she identified with Chartrand:

*Je viens d’un milieu ouvrier. . . Chez nous on ne parlait pas de politique. Si j’ai mentionné Michel Chartrand, c’est qu’à l’écoute de sa conférence j’ai saisi que mon père était un ouvrier. Chartrand parlait de ces hommes et de ces femmes avec tellement de dignité que j’ai pu me relier à ces racines. L’impact a été plus que «c’est un bon gars.» Ces rencontres c’était le début d’une éducation nouvelle pour moi.* (pers. communication Jan 24, 2021)

Marie-Claire’s political thought did not quite fit within the boundaries of Québécois pro-independence discourse of the time. At one point during the 1977 interview, Marie-Claire remarks that singing “*Notre pays*” (presumably a patriotic song composed by Yvan Ouellette and Raoul Duguay) made her aware of that which had been “acquis” (1977: 32). To this, the interviewer replies “*Mais vous n’avez jamais été revendicateurs du pays.*” Marie-Claire agrees with her by answering “*Je n’y crois pas. Parce que pour moi le pays, il est dans chaque individu. Je trouve pas que c’est des choses qui doivent être complètement conscientes. Il faut y aller avec*”

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170 See chapter two for more on this.
171 I have been unable to find this song. From the context, however, it is clear that it is a patriotic song of national (Québécois) affirmation.
Here, Marie-Claire criticizes pro-independence discourses for their nationalism and their articulation of a collectivism that does not take into account the individual, the unconscious, intuition and instinct. If that is what it means to vindicate the country (to claim an independent homeland), she does not. Her brother agrees with her but nuances her statement by adding “mais ça t’amène à revendiquer [le pays]/ “but that leads to vindicating the homeland.” Thus, he challenges the interviewer’s take on Séguin’s politics: Séguin, for him, vindicates the homeland without sacrificing the individual, the unconscious, intuition and instinct. In order to prove his point, he mentions Séguin’s songs “Le roi d’à l’envers” and “Som Séguin”; these “vindicate” the country insofar as they are for social justice, and in the case of “Som Séguin,” insofar as it is against settler colonialism.

Hence three different positions are taken regarding what it means to vindicate the homeland. For the interviewer, affirming Québec is synonymous with political independence and nationalism. For Richard vindicating the homeland has to do with a sense of individuality that, because it is oriented towards social justice, actually vindicates it (this might or might not overlap with independence, it is not clear). Marie-Claire, agreeing with the interviewer, concludes that she has not been vindicating the homeland (with Séguin), although, she appreciates people who do so.172

Forty years after the 1977 interview, Marie-Claire still viewed Séguin’s work as non-political; a point that she stressed during our first encounter. By this she meant that it was different from Félix Leclerc or Claude Leveillé, singer-songwriters who were unambiguously for

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172 In 1993 Marie-Claire still expressed similar ideas regarding what it meant to vindicate Québec. When asked by Pauline Séguin-Garçon whether she was a nationalist, she answered: “On vient d'un pays, c'est évident. Je suis québécoise. On est fait de ce pays. On est conditionné par la neige, par les saisons, par la terre d'où l'on vient. C'est important car elle nous révèle un comportement, une façon, une psychologie, une spiritualité. Dans ce sens, je suis nationaliste” (1993: 7).
independence and who often sang about the topic. But her own “lack of clarity” vis-à-vis independence, as she described her youthful statements, had changed. Indeed, when I mentioned how moved I was when I watched the video of the founder of the Parti Québécois Premier René Lévesque nearly crying during his concession speech after the defeat of sovereignty-association referendum of 1980, her eyes watered, and she was clearly shaken.

“There was so much hope” she said. Commenting on a prior draft of this chapter, Marie-Claire elaborated:

Mon affirmation politique à 20 ans n’était pas mûre. Ce qui m’exaltait comme mouvement, c’était la contre-culture qui proposait une façon différente de voir la vie, mais j’étais de la partie avec la montée du Parti Québécois. C’était un souffle nouveau et on sentait qu’il était possible de penser qu’on pouvait vraiment changer les choses en profondeur pour plus de justice d’égalité et en respect avec la nature. C’était un engagement personnel basé sur ces valeurs et cela est toujours présent dans ma vie.

(March 24, 2021)

If this gives us an idea of Marie-Claire’s relationship with anticolonial and socialist discourses during the 1970s, she was also exposed to the emergence of a renewed and progressive Catholicism. From 1972 to 1974 she attended the interdenominational Centre Monchanin (later renamed l’Institut Interculturel de Montréal), founded by the Québécois priest Jacques Langlais in 1963. It was also there, incidentally, where she met the poet Francine Hamelin who provided Séguin the lyrics of several of their classics, among them the impressively beautiful and powerful “Les enfants d’un siècle fou” (1977: 24). Other experiences that shaped Marie-Claire’s worldview include her interactions with non-Québécois. At the Centre Monchanin, for

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173 As Marie-Claire told me in an email exchange: « J’ai relu l’entrevue dans le livre des Séguin et Dieu que j’ai trouvée pénible cette lecture tant nos propos étaient découps et naïfs. Quand dans l’entrevue on parle du pays, pour ma part, je sentais que le pays du Québe était déjà une réalité. Je reconnais que je n’étais pas claire, pas du tout articulée pour parler politque. » (pers. comment Jan 24, 2021)

174 To watch Lévesque’s moving speech go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1AofQIHy-4

175 Though at the Centre liberation theology was a subject of discussion, this did not influence Marie-Claire’s thinking. That is, she did not come across this. For the presence of theology of liberation at the Centre, though, see their magazine Monchanin Vol XIII, No. 3, Cahier 68 (1980), entirely dedicated to the subject.

176 You can listen to the song here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2-VW9K2biM
instance, she was exposed to different cultures (including that of the First Nations). She was similarly exposed to other cultures during her performance at the *Superfrancofête* of 1974, where Francophones from all over the world, or rather people colonized by France, joined to share their musics and culture. Never mind that new migration laws had made it easier for people of color to establish themselves within Québec thus diversifying the province, particularly Montreal.

Finally, Marie-Claire was heavily impacted by Québécois counterculture and its values. Indeed, in the extant literature, Séguin’s work is often described as part of the hippie movement given its concerns with ecology, spirituality, and “peace and love” (see Brouillard 2018: 185; Roy 1978: 194-198). Alongside singer-songwriters such as Robert Charlebois, a foundational countercultural figure (see Roy 2008), *Le Quatuor de Jazz Libre du Quebec* (Fillion 2019), the *Ville Émard Blues Band*, Beaudomage, Jean-Pierre Ferland, Plume Latraverse, and the producer André Perry (see Côté 2016), among many others, Marie-Claire played a prominent role in the Québécois counterculture (see Brouillard 2018; Warren and Fortin 2015 for more).

Curiously, throughout the 1977 interview, there are no explicit references to feminism, this despite its impact on Québécois society (see Gagnon 1974; de Sève 1984; Mills 2010: 119-137), and Marie-Claire’s own interest in the matter. Still, this silence is not absolute. Throughout the interview Marie-Claire reflects on her role as a woman, a female singer and a sister. While Marie-Claire developed a formal feminist consciousness after the interview (shortly after the band Séguin broke up), the seeds were already there. Reflecting on these roles would become emblematic of her repertoire as a solo career artist as we will see.

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177 Her mentioning of Jiddu Krishnamurti during an interview (1977: 37) would seem to speak to such influences, if one considers how influential Indian spiritual thinkers were for the hippies.

178 See my chapters two and three. Though I do not specifically reflect on the *Ville Émard Blues Band* (VEBB), Vachon (chapter two) later recorded “Octobre au mois de mai,” (my object of analysis) with this band, and both her and Rodriguez played in the band Toubabou where Michel Séguin, an ex-member of VEBB, was central.
Marie-Claire’s Feminism and “Mater Maria”

In “Mater Maria,” Marie-Claire envisions Mother Mary as a feminist icon. She calls for a Mother Mary that is neither silent (“ils ont parlé pour toi”), blind (“t’ont fermé les yeux”) nor immobile/fixed (“ils ont figé ton corps/l’ont couvert d’or”). If Mary is portrayed as incapable of speaking, she is nevertheless capable of producing meaningful sounds. Marie-Claire sings: “Moi j'ai entendu ta voix/Quand l'enfant sortait de toi/ Je connais tes cris de colère.” Mother Mary, thus, has a wordless voice: one made out of her birthing “cris de colère.” This silence has been imposed by the Catholic priests: “quand nos pères nous ont fait porter ton nom/était-ce pour nous faire taire/dis-moi Maria.”

This antipatriarchal and religious critique is accompanied by, what seemed to me to be, a veiled economic critique. Marie-Claire, after all, associates Maria’s immobility with gold (« ils ont figé ton corps/l’ont couvert d’or”). This reminded me of the deep relationship that exists between economic exploitation and gender oppression, a point made by Marxist-inspired Third World and African American feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s (see Montanaro Mena 2017: 76-94 for a review) and white Marxist-inspired feminisms (see, for example, Rubin 1975). Still, as Marie-Claire emphasized, such a Marxist-feminist critique was not what she had in mind (pers. email March 24, 2021). Her metaphor intended instead to “dénoncer une autre façon de bloquer le corps des femmes” and to stress how covering Maria’s body in gold « était une façon d’éteindre la vie, la vie du corps des femmes » (pers. email March 24, 2021). The feminisms that

Having read a prior draft of this chapter, Marie-Claire was adamant that “ils” referred to « les pères de l’Église. Cette communauté d’homme en robes noires » (pers. communication Jan 24, 2021). This significantly altered my prior analysis where I mistakenly assumed that “ils” was a broader category that included men and women who supported patriarchy.
inform “Mater Maria” are rather those that emerge in the intersection of spirituality/religion and motherhood.

In “Mater Maria” Mary is described as a “déesse de vie.” She is a Maria that links maternity and sexuality to the earth, fertility, and rituals: “Moi j’ai entendu ta voix/Quand l’enfant sortait de toi/Je connais tes cris de colère/tes chants de terre, tes chants d’amour.” It is a Maria that evokes the Black Madonna (as Marie-Claire told me) also known as the African Mother Goddess, the “oldest divinity we know” (Birnbaum 2001: 3). As Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba has noted if “Mary’s officially sanctioned qualities are submission, humility, purity, suffering and renunciation,” the “Great Mother/Black Madonna,” which has emerged throughout different times and cultures both in the Old and the New World, is “considered dangerous by patriarchal society [because of her] uncontrollable aspects of wisdom, sexuality, dominion over death, and transformation” (2007:19). It is this Maria that Marie-Claire mobilizes in her effort to disrupt Christian patriarchy, and patriarchy writ large. Marie-Claire, thus, is largely building on a tradition of what has been called maternal/goddess feminism.

Gerda Lerner describes maternal/goddess feminism as a feminist school that, based on the “ubiquitous evidence of Mother-Goddess figures in many ancient religions. . . argued for the reality and actuality of female power in the past” or the existence of matriarchy (1986: 28-29). Lerner remains skeptical of a matriarchal past both on account of the archaeological evidence and the ambiguity of the term “matriarchy” which she notes varies widely from author to author and is not too rigorous (1986: 141-160). Despite Lerner’s skepticism, and her critique of maternalism as an essentializing discourse that reaffirms patriarchy, maternal/goddess feminism

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180 Lerner writes: “we need to stress only the difficulty of reasoning from such evidence toward the construction of social organizations in which women were dominant. In view of the historical evidence for the coexistence of symbolic idolatry of women and the actual low status of women, such as the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages. . . one hesitates to elevate such evidence to historical proof” (1986: 29).
is hardly reducible to this. As noted by Susan Rowland, “Jungian goddess feminism”—which I view as a subcategory of Lerner’s maternal/goddess feminism—sought to rethink the “crucial debates about gender and culture outside, or at least less in the tradition of, a post-Christian monotheistic culture” positing the goddess as “immanent in nature, necessarily experienced as plural and differentiated, not transcendent of the material world, so not one, plus the ‘other’” (2002: 69).

That Marie-Claire was influenced by Jung is beyond doubt: she urged me to read Emma Jung’s *Animus and Anima* (1957) in order to better understand “Mater Maria,” which in turn led me to the aforementioned readings. But “Mater Maria” also challenged other “avant-garde feminist groups” of the 1960s and 1970s that rejected motherhood based on “an acceptance—conscious or not—of its traditional representations by the great mass of people, women and men” (Kristeva 1977: 161). An antipatriarchal motherhood was possible as Kristeva maintained and so sang Marie-Claire. But the influence of Jungian goddess feminism went beyond Marie-Claire’s reading of Emma Jung. It was part of a wider trend within Québécois society.

Among the texts that Marie-Claire had me read was Denise Boucher’s play/musical *Les fées ont soif* (1978). Boucher, a political activist previously arrested during the October Crisis of 1970 presumably because of her friendship with Québécois anticolonial nationalist Pierre Vallières (Samson-Legault 2018: 226), introduced three characters in her play: “La Statue” (the Virgin Mary), Marie (the mother/housewife) and Madeleine (the prostitute). In her speech “La Statue” describes herself as “un silence plus opprimant et plus oppressant que toutes les paroles” and as “celle qui n’a pas de corps” (Boucher 1998: 50). Through the dialogues and song exchanges between the characters Boucher explored a variety of topics around the

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181 For more on the October Crisis see chapter two.
ideological and material oppression of women, among them rape. In an intense scene, Madeleine complains that because she is a prostitute, when she was raped, the courts declared the rapist innocent, ruling that raping a prostitute was unconceivable, assuming that she must have “wanted” it (Boucher 1998: 94). Ultimately, all three characters “rebel against their archetypal roles and invite the audience to ‘imagine...imagine...imagine’ a different world, recreated by women” (Fernandes-Dias 2008: 83).

Keeping in mind the differences between a song and a play, Marie-Claire’s “Maria” is nevertheless reminiscent of “La Statue.” Both are immobile and revolt against their silencing. Both also relate Mary’s motherhood to sexual pleasure though Boucher is more explicit. Whereas Marie-Claire speaks of “chants de terre, tes chants d’amour” (a reference to fertility rituals) as Mary gives birth, Boucher writes “la chair de l’enfant m’érotise et/me flambe seins et cuisses” (1998: 99-100). The Marys are also different insofar as Boucher uses mockery. For example, instead of a rosary “La Statue” holds a thick chain (Boucher 1998: 49). Furthermore, Boucher’s Mary often speaks in joual, a mix of French, English and Québécois colloquialisms. The poetic language of Marie-Claire’s Maria is much more formal (it is in standard French), and mockery is absent.

Boucher’s Mary, then, is much more irreverent and confrontational. Indeed, as noted by Maria-Suzette Fernandes-Dias Les fées ont soif created a scandal “more than a decade after the Quiet Revolution (1960–66) and Quebec’s rejection of traditionalist spiritual values, classical education, church-controlled and inspired social welfare institutions and its rural, agricultural heritage, and its assertion of a new Quebecois identity” (2008: 81). Another key distinction is that whereas Marie-Claire’s Maria is explicitly linked to the Black Madonna, such references are
absent in Boucher. Still, both Boucher and Marie-Claire agree with the sentiment that Mary must be liberated, and that liberating her can contribute towards female empowerment.

If “Mater Maria” allowed Marie-Claire to sound out her vision of feminism, this feminism was grounded on personal reflections around gender, which in turn, is emblematic of “Jungian goddess feminism.” According to Rowland, this articulation of feminism offered (and offers) “opportunities for feminine fictions of empowerment and agency” (2002: 68). For Marie-Claire “Mater Maria” was an empowering “fiction” given that it provided a creative space through which she could continue to empower herself as a woman, a solo artist and a mother.

During our interview Marie-Claire was adamant to highlight that her feminism was not academic—by which she meant that it was not based on any formal engagement with feminist literature, though, she had clearly read some relevant literature. Behind this, it seemed to me, was a critique to the academy as a space of ungrounded ideas that have little to do with real life. Because I was literally on the ground (e.g. doing fieldwork), and –as far as I could tell—living a real life, I took no offense. Still, having read a prior draft of this chapter, Marie-Claire clarified:

Quand je dis que mon féministe n’était pas académique, ce n’était pas une critique de la parole plus académique. C’est encore l’autodidacte qui a sa vie comme référence et qui était bien heureuse de pouvoir par ses lectures valider ses sentis, ses intuitions et ses batailles. On se sent moins seule. (pers. comment Jan 24, 2021)

Indeed Marie-Claire, who stopped going to school at age eighteen in order to pursue a musical career (pers. comment Jan 24, 2021), engaged in a feminist practice that was deeply entwined with her lived experience. Named after the Virgin Mary, she was raised in the Québec of the 1960s, a time when the Catholic Church “despite its waning political clout, exercised nevertheless, considerable influence on the behavior of women” (Fernandes-Dias 2008: 81). Not surprisingly in “Mater Maria” Marie-Claire evokes childhood memories of her Catholic upbringing (“Quand nous étions enfants/Nous savions chanter”) which she linked to singing with
her father during Mass. Prior to singing these lines, Marie-Claire inscribes a Catholic memory in sound when, right after the Indigenous-inspired chant (of which more later), she sings a melody that is very similar to that of the beginning of Schubert’s “Ave Maria.”

It was motherhood, though, rather than childhood, Marie-Claire told me, which made her aware of how women and men were treated unequally. Before becoming a mother she had not quite noticed gender inequality. When she was part of Séguin, for example, she was “one of the boys” (pers. interview Oct. 30, 2019). It was when she became a mother, right after Séguin broke up, that she realized that she was not “one of the boys.” Most of the duties around child rearing, she continued, became a woman’s responsibility something she could confirm by looking at the situation of other female friends. As she told Pauline Séguin-Garçon in 1993, when her son Nicolas was born in the late 1970s:

> dans la société, on nous faisait accroire que c'était aussi facile pour les femmes que pour les hommes d'élever des enfants, ce qui était complètement faux. Je voyais les musiciens qui s'arrangeaient bien, car ils avaient une femme à la maison qui voyait à tout, aux enfants, etc ..., mais nous, même si notre chum avait de la bonne volonté, nous avions à remonter un courant social énorme; mais ça change heureusement (1993: 6).

While motherhood no doubt led Marie-Claire to her gender consciousness, the seeds of this awareness were already perceptible in the 1977 interview.

During the interview, Richard notes that he and Marie-Claire were musically tight because, as twins, their communication went all the way back to their mother’s womb. Agreeing with Richard Marie-Claire goes on to add: “Il y a une chose que j’ai réalisée plus tard. En tant que femme et à cause de toute l’éducation de femme que j’ai reçu, j’ai toujours été plus à l’écoute de ce que tu faisais toi Richard. Pis j’essayais de me placer là dedans” (1977: 22). Here, Marie-Claire describes herself as being trained/conditioned to be subordinated to her brother; she has been gendered in such a way that constrains her to a secondary place within his world. This
subordination—iterated again on page 24 when she says “des fois j’ai juste l’impression d’avoir suivi Richard”—is grounded in the act of her listening: if they are musically “tight” it is because she listens well, follows his lead, and thus sings in the right way. Ultimately, she must listen for what Richard does (vocally, musically) in order to place herself “là dedans.” Still, as she puts it, she only “tried” to place herself “là dedans” which implies that she was not always successful.

Shortly after the 1977 interview, Séguin broke up, and it is not a coincidence that gender would become a central topic of Marie-Claire’s solo career. While the four albums of Séguin showcase Marie-Claire as a composer and co-composer, gender considerations are not key topics of the repertoire. This led me to wonder whether Marie-Claire’s contributions to Séguin as a composer also felt as if she were placing herself within her brother’s world. Intrigued by my assessment, Marie-Claire clarified:

Quand tu dis que tu as l’impression que je me plaçais dans le monde de mon frère, je n’irais pas jusque là. J’étais présente, mais j’étais d’une époque où généralement le monde de la musique était un monde d’homme. Les femmes étaient des interprètes, interprètes de parole d’hommes. C’est par la suite que les femmes ont commencé à prendre parole et moi-même à trouver ma voix, ma voie personnelle. (pers. comment Jan 24, 2021)

Marie-Claire’s comment was extremely important. It taught me two humbling lessons. The first lesson was that given that my analysis was based on an interview, my conclusions could only be at best partial. That is, I could not possibly fully comprehend the complexity of Marie-Claire’s relationship with her brother based on this one document. The second lesson was that by narrating Marie-Claire and Richard’s interactions as a story of stark gendered juxtapositions, I

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182 By 1993 in her interview with Pauline Séguin-Graçon, Marie-Claire had nuanced this take. When asked whether she felt to be in Richard’s shadow she replied: “C’est le Dr. René Zazzo qui disait que les jumeaux prennent chacun un ministère: le ministère intérieur et le ministère extérieur et ça peut changer. Parfois c’était moi qui prenait le ministère extérieur et lui l’intérieur et vice et versa. C’est au fond une relation très intense et doublement car on a fait carrière ensemble très jeune» (1993 : 5).
had voided Marie-Claire of any agency. Quite a paradox for a chapter that is invested in challenging patriarchy with Marie-Claire!

Marie-Claire, then, did have a voice with Séguin. But it is clear that her voice was more forcefully asserted when she became a solo artist. In the light of this it is not surprising that in “Mater Maria” the voice of Mother Mary is so central. Mary is constantly encouraged to voice herself. The phrase “dis-moi Maria” appears four times throughout the song, and Marie-Claire claims to know (connaître) Mary’s “cris de colère” as she gives birth as well as her “chants de terre” and “d’amour.” Then the singing voice asks Mary to tell her what happened “quand nos pères nous ont fait porter ton nom/ Etait-ce pour nous faire taire?” Here, Marie-Claire named after Maria, and Maria become one. While both are expected to remain silent, their voice “percer leurs bruits” (will pierce through the noises patriarchy). The priests will have to listen to Maria and Marie-Claire and their “cris de colère.” They will have to listen to “le sacré du corps dans la sexualité et la maternité” (pers. email March 24, 2021). Marie-Claire, is then, a medium of sorts: as a liberated woman of the 1970s and 1980s, she is capable of translating Maria’s wordless sounds, her “cris de colère,” into text. And these “cris,” that are also “chants de terre” and “d’amour,” sound Indigenous.

In order to fully assess how these “cris” and “chants” sound Indigenous we need to understand Marie-Claire’s relationship with the First Nations. And in order to do that, we must go back in time and listen to Séguin’s “Som Séguin” and “Génocide.”

**Precedents of The Indigenous Presence in “Mater Maria”: “Som Séguin” and “Génocide”**

If, as previously stated, the 1960s saw Québec opening up to modernization and liberalism via the Quiet Revolution and the emergence of counterculture, anticolonialism, socialism, migration, liberation theology and second-wave feminism, or the Loud Revolution, it
also led to the worsening of settler colonialism, this time, à la québécoise. The Quiet Revolution was entwined, and indeed dependent upon, the transference of settler colonial power—or rather portions of it—from Canada to Québec. According to Inuit writer and activist Zebedee Nungak, a native of Nunavik (located in Northern Québec), it was only in 1964 when, due to “a political awakening in Southern Quebec, known as the Quiet Revolution” (15), that Québec “discovered” this territory which it baptized as “Nouveau-Québec, although it had been Quebec since 1912” (2017: 16-17). Then, liberal Premier Jean Lesage, architect of the Quiet Revolution, dispatched his Minister of Natural Resources René Lévesque “to meet with Inuit leaders” as the representative of “new rulers [who] came north with an attitude of ‘We’re the Bosses here now!’” (Nungak 2017: 16). This renewal of a settler colonial power in French—it literally led to renaming places in the French language—was an echo of the seventeenth century French colonization of Canada. It would eventually lead to the dispossession of Cree and Inuit of a significant portion of their ancestral lands in the Baie-James municipality, known today as the Eeyou Istchee James Bay Territory. Québec’s economic sustainability as a potentially self-reliant state, so it was argued, depended on the construction of the James Bay Hydro-Electric Project. As Boyce Richardson noted:

Like all others North Americans, [the Québécois] wished to embrace the technological dream, and shrewd politicians among them had found the means to pursue policies of resource sellout on a gigantic scale while making it sound as if they were all necessary in defense of French-language cultural and national survival. It was this nationalist ethic, harnessed to a technological dream” which the Cree and the Inuit had to confront (1974: 22).

If the Quiet Revolution depended on the exercise of settler colonial power to be “successful,” the Loud Revolution—counterculture, Third Worldism, second wave feminism, and so forth—was rather quiet when it came to the subject of settler colonialism. Pierre Vallières’s Nègres blancs d’Amérique (1968), a call for Third World solidarity and Québec’s
decolonization from Anglo-Canada and the US, simply ignored the First Nations.¹⁸³ Charles Gagnon (1968), Vallières’s comrade in the revolutionary urban guerilla Front de Libération du Québec, for his part, mentioned the “Amérindiens” in Feu sur l’Amérique. But these did not live in Québec. Describing the Québécois revolution as a North American experience which was in solidarity with African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Acadians, Métis from Manitoba and “Amérindiens,” he emphasized that the injustices endured by the latter were perpetrated by the British as they expanded West: “Nous n’oublions pas que le ‘développement’ de l’Ouest américain et canadien s’est fait dans le sang des Amérindiens et des Métis” (2006: 134).¹⁸⁴ Québécois feminist literature (such as Les femmes vues par le Quebec des hommes: 30 ans d’histoire des ideologies 1940-1970 by Mona-Josée Gagnon published in 1974) and anticlerical works (such as Les Insolences du Frère Untel by Jean-Paul Desbien published in 1960) were also silent on the First Nations in Québec.

Liberation from colonialism, patriarchy and religious conservatism, then, was seemingly possible without addressing the “logic of elimination” of settler colonialism which ranges from genocide to assimilation (Wolfe 2006). In fairness, the term “settler colonialism” would only emerge at a later date, so the absence of such a key word is not surprising. But its underlying logic was there, and First Nation activists were vocal about it (see Manuel 1974; Hall 1979). While silencing this reality was intrinsic to Québécois radical discourse, there were exceptions.

¹⁸³ In Vallières’s defense, he did acknowledge this shortcoming in his preface to the 1994 edition of Nègres blancs d’Amérique.
¹⁸⁴ If settler colonialism was not a Québécois concern for Gagnon neither was racism. According to him “L’Amérique du Nord est le continent du racisme blanc anglo-saxon” (113). That the enslavement of Africans played a role in the history of French Canada (see Macey 2010; Trudel 1960; Winks 1971; Voltaire 2007) was apparently unknown to Gagnon, and Vallières.
Along with Marie-Claire, other Québécois feminists of the 1970s raised their voice in support of the First Nations in strong unambiguous language that effectively described the French (and not only the British) as conquerors, linking them both to genocidal practices:

On estime à 200,000 le nombre des indigènes qui habitaient le Canada et Terre-Neuve avant la conquête par les ‘Blancs’. . . On sait que les Français attisaient les rivalités entre tribus pour les laisser ensuite se détruire entre elles. Tactique efficace qui accéléra encore l’extermination des amérindiens/nes. (Saint-Pierre et al. 1983 [1972]: 41)

In the same anonymous article entitled “Histoire d’une oppression” (41-45), the author approves of Québécois scholar Léandre Bergeron’s comparison of the genocide practiced against the “Amérindiens/nes” and the one practiced against the Jews and the Vietnamese (45).

As part of my archival research, I came across a comic book by Léandre Bergeron and Robert Lavaill entitled L’Histoire du Québec published at some point in the 1970s. Adapted to a play/musical (or inspired by it; it is unclear), the comic book brought to the forefront French settler colonialism in Canada while simultaneously positing poor French-Canadians as allies—or potential allies—of the First Nations. Insofar as social class strife was made to be analogous to settler colonialism, a rhetorical strategy utilized by Vallières, who in Nègres blancs d’Amérique equated the enslavement of Africans with Québécois’ economic exploitation and political subordination, this was, despite being well-intentioned, a flawed and insensitive strategy.

Equating white proletarian exploited masses to dispossessed First Nations (whose very existence was under threat epistemologically, ontologically and materially) based on a shared subordination to the Catholic clergy and French elites was clearly a stretch. But at least it was an attempt to rethink Québec’s struggles in conversation with the First Nations, trying to find some common ground. Another exception to the silence around the First Nations was of course Marie-Claire and Richard’s songs “Som Séguin” and “Génocide.”

185 For more on the musical see chapter two.
“Génocide,” written by Serge Badeaux and set to music by Marie-Claire and Richard, a sort of psychedelic rock song that like “Mater Maria” includes an “Indigenous” chant, explicitly condemned settler colonialism: “Ils étaient sauvages, on le disait/ ils étaient courage, on le savait/ on les a mis en cage.” Soon, however, this manifestation of Québécois solidarity with the First Nations takes a different and problematic turn: “Mais c’est soir je suis du sang des indiens/qui dans le temps mouraient pour rien/comme un printemps/et j’ai leur joie, leur envie et leur ambition/et leur souffrance et leur souffrance.” Suddenly, the Québécois singers are of the same blood of the “indien,” at least for an evening, and share in the same emotions. Though Marie-Claire did not write the lyrics, these represented, to a certain extent, her own way of thinking. During our first encounter, for example, she told me how for many years she thought that she had Indigenous ancestry. To her surprise, she told me laughing, her DNA test showed that she was 49% British. Still, the lyrics did not entirely represent her views.

In the 1977 interview, reflecting on “Génocide,” Richard commented: “c’était le temps de la prise de conscience de la Baie James.” To this Marie-Claire replied: “Moi ça m’a complètement bouleversée.” She then added that those struggles made her realize that “il y a des génocides, des injustices, que la terre est massacrée, violée. . . on avait besoin de le crier.” Then, as if rephrasing the lyrics of the song, and altering their meaning she said: “c’est une affaire qu’on avait vraiment vécue en dedans de nous autres, même si on pouvait pas se mettre à place des victimes” (25). This is key because Marie-Claire is acknowledging that even if this is a “matter” that “we (“on”) had lived inside of ourselves,” “we could not take the place of the victims.” Marie-Claire is expressing here a form of solidarity or sympathy that acknowledges the suffering and particularity of the other. Whether this “we” is a reference to her identity as a Québécois subjected to Anglo-Canada, her role as a woman subjected to men, or her struggle as
a human seeking spiritual liberation is not clear. Given her references in the interview to the pro-independence labor leader Michel Chartrand, her struggles to assert herself her own voice as a woman, and the Indian spiritual thinker Krishnamurti, it might well be a combination of all three. Nevertheless, Marie-Claire is clear that these forms of oppression, while allowing for a space where Québécois, women, and Western individuals can identify with the (settler colonized) “indien” was not interchangeable: “on pouvait pas se mettre à place des victimes.” As noted, this is quite distinct from what is said in “Génocide” where one could seemingly take the place of the victim.186

Ultimately, Séguin seems to be proposing a Québécois identity with Indigenous influences—not unlike a film that Marie-Claire had me watch: L’empreinte (2016) by Roy Dupuis. In this regard, the song is reminiscent of Bergeron and Lavaill’s ideas concerning the possibilities and potentialities of Québécois/First Nation solidarity. If Bergeron and Lavaill made an analogy between exploited Québécois workers and The First Nations, these two countercultural Québécois singer-songwriters of a working-class background develop a similar strategy.

“Som Séguin,” for its part, offers a different kind of intervention regarding the Québécois/First Nation encounter.

Composed by Marie-Claire, Richard and René Letarte, according to Marie-Claire, “Som Séguin” tells the story of her English-speaking ancestor Som Séguin, the great grandfather of her grandfather William Séguin (who arrived in Québec at age seven). According to family lore,

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186 As she stressed: « Quand on écrit des chansons sur un sujet, on se rend disponible, en phase, en empathie. On peut se rapprocher de la peine de la souffrance le plus près. C’est certain qu’on ne se met pas à la place des victimes, mais à 20 ans et peut-être même avec maladresse on sent l’injustice et leur douleur» (pers. email March 24, 2021).
Som Séguin, a shop owner ("aubergiste"), lived in Eau Claire, Wisconsin where he traded alcohol for furs, and "commençait à exploiter les Indiens" (Marie-Claire, pers. comment Jan 24, 2021). Whether Som Séguin lived in Wisconsin during or after the French lost control of the region to the British during the French and Indian War (1754–1763) or whether he was a French-Canadian who had migrated to Wisconsin from Québec, a French man who lived in Wisconsin or a British man with a French last name of Germanic origins is unknown (Marie-Claire pers. email March 24, 2021). But Marie-Claire is adamant that "il vivait en anglais" (pers. email March 24, 2021).

"Som Séguin" revolves around this ancestor, also referred to as "le vieux blanc," and an Algonquin who goes by the name Anaquiet. Singing in joual, Anaquiet, who speaks in the third person, implores Som Séguin to open the doors of his shop: "Som Séguin, ouvre moé, Anaquiet attend après toé." Calling on him twice, Som Séguin finally gives in, as the narrative voice makes clear:

\[
\begin{align*}
    \text{Le vieux blanc finit par ouvrir sa porte} \\
    \text{En s'assurant que l'indien est bien seul} \\
    \text{Les peaux sont belles et la boisson est forte} \\
    \text{C'est conclu: une peau d'loup, une peau d'castor pour une bouteille}
\end{align*}
\]

But this only leads to other injustices: the Algonquin is taken advantage of in this unequal exchange, and alcoholized. Realizing that his original quest for justice has backfired, Anaquiet then tells Som Séguin "éloigne-toé, Anaquiet a pas besoin d'toé." Thus, if the song first proposes

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187 As nineteenth century historian S.S. Hebberd put it somewhat hyperbolically, during the seventeenth and eighteenth century the links between France, colonial Québec and Wisconsin were rather strong: "The story of the French Empire in America has long been invested with a deep dramatic and philosophic interest; for, it has been well understood that upon the downfall of that dominion depended the rise of American liberty. . . I hope to show that the French struggle for supremacy over the continent was, to a large extent, decided by events that took place in Wisconsin. Here was the entering wedge of disaster and ruin. Here happened the real although obscure crisis in a great drama of which the Fall of Québec [i.e. the 1759-1761 British Conquest of Canada] was merely the closing scene" (1890: 5).
that the Algonquin might benefit from an exchange with “le vieux blanc,” it ends by concluding that the best course of action is for Som Séguin to stay away from Anaquiet who “does not need him.”

While the narrative voice (Marie-Claire and Richard) is articulated in French, Anaquiet “speaks” joual (e.g. ouvre-moé, instead of ouvre-moi) and (presumably) in his native tongue. According to Marie-Claire “Anaquiet oman,” the phrase with which the song opens, means “Anaquiet est là” (pers. comment Jan. 24, 2021). Som Séguin, on the other hand, speaks English. A point made by Marie-Claire and Richard who sing his name not with a French pronunciation but an English one (like saying the word “ruin”). Ultimately, by singing his last name with an English pronunciation and by expressing their condemnation of his actions in joual, French, and a presumably native tongue, Marie-Claire and Richard distance themselves from such a nefarious ancestor.

But the song is not only about the past; it is also about Marie-Claire and Richard’s present and Québec’s 1960s and 1970s. Anaquiet’s joual is a testament to this. Furthermore, as the twins sing: “ça pas tardé que Sam système a pris sa place/ ça pas tardé que Sam Baie James a pris sa place.” Here, the singers stress that the individual actions of their ancestor were eventually supplanted by a “Sam système” – an obvious reference to Uncle Sam—and “Sam Baie James,” a reference to Québec’s Hydroelectric project that was then dispossessing the Cree and the Inuit. And because the Sam Baie James Project was inextricably entwined with Québec’s dream of modernization and national affirmation, the song suggests that Anglo-imperialism and Québec’s Hydroelectric Project are, despite the latter’s entwinement with the Quiet Revolution and despite Québec’s colonial subordination to Anglo-Canada, actually allies: they are engaged in plundering the First Nations.
But in the transition from Som to Sam there is also a qualitative change in how colonial violence is articulated. If the English-speaking “vieux blanc” asked for the skin of a wolf and a castor, Sam Système, a bilingual regime of oppression, is far more ambitious:

Il d'mande plus une peau d'loups, une peau d'castor  
Mais c'est rendu qu'on leur demande  
Leurs montagnes et chaînes de montagne  
L'eau du ruisseau, les vagues du lac  
Leurs jours de pluie, de brume et de soleil, d'oublier leur langue  
D'oublier leurs coutumes, d'oublier leur Dieu

Sam Système wants it all: not only the skins but the mountains, the rivers, the days of rain, fog and sun. He also wants to obliterate the Algonquin’s religious beliefs and culture; the Algonquin must forget their language, their customs, their God. In the transition from «Som» to «Sam,» Marie-Claire and Richard inscribe how settler colonialism is a long process that takes different forms and shapes and how individual acts of colonial violence are eventually consolidated into the settler colonialism of their day. As Marie-Claire stressed: “au départ ce sont les gestes individuels qui vont finir par faire un Sam système insatiable de pouvoir et richesse » (pers. email March 24, 2021). In the end, by revisiting the individual colonial practices of their English-speaking ancestor—an ancestor who, given the ambiguity of his identity embodied both British and French imperial logics—Marie-Claire and Richard forcefully indict not only their ancestor, but the settler colonialism of his time and their own.

Now that we have a better understanding of Marie-Claire’s relationship with the First Nations, we can proceed to analyze how the Indigenous is sounded out in “Mater Maria,” and how it relates to feminism.

**Indigenous Presence (?) in “Mater Maria”**

Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba (2007) has noted how visual and spiritual characteristics of the ancient Mother Goddess (represented in paintings, sculptures, and myth)
continuously reemerge in the figure of Mary as she is syncretized throughout Europe, Latin America and the Chicano community in the US. The Black Madonna is “a fluid syncretic blend of the Virgin Mary and ancient Mother Goddesses from Eurasian, Native American, and African cultures” she writes (2007: 9). “Mater Maria” belongs to this long tradition of antipatriarchal syncretism though, contrary to the case studies discussed by Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, the syncretism is not visual but based on sound.

“Mater Maria” opens in a 2/4 meter with a wordless chant, that as Marie-Claire told me, was intended to evoke the First Nations. Throughout these first twenty seconds, Marie-Claire’s timbre is breathy. In her lower register she sings the vocables “he eh eh hai” each syllable sung in a quarter-note (with some slight rhythmic and syllabic variations). A drum plays a quarter-note during the first beat of each measure (presumably evoking Indigenous drumming). This is followed by Marie-Claire’s exploration of similar sounds (he eh eh hai) in her higher register for another twenty seconds. As this comes to an end, a bell chimes (a reference to the Catholic church made evident by Marie-Claire’s singing “Ave Maria” using a melodic phrase evocative of Schubert’s Ave Maria). There is a brief overlap between the “First Nation” 2/4 meter and the “Ave Maria” before the latter ends in a monophonic texture. This soon gives way to a moment in time in which there is no discernible meter. To my mind, this sounds out the early colonial encounter in Québec.

According to Lisa J.M. Poirier, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth French settler colonialism “understood as an historical and social structure that ‘strives for the dissolution of native societies’ as it ‘erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base (Wolfe 2006, 388), . . . [was] not yet established” (2016: 14). Serge Bouchard and Marie-Christine Lévesque (2017), for their part, claim that during this time period the interactions between Europeans and
the First Nations (with the exception of the Iroquois) were marked by cordial relationships of mutual respect. Writing about the first “franco-amérindienne” alliance between Champlain and “les Montagnais—ce qui inclut les deux autres nations algonquienes en presence” (89), the authors note: «nulle tractation ou marchandage, ni usurpation ou cession de terres; plutôt une entente cordiale, une réciprocité d’intêrets, un pacte tout à fait unique dans les annales de la colonisation» (2017: 89). Going even further, they posit this alliance—and its textual inscription “Commission Générale sur le nouveau territoire” signed by Henri IV in 1603—as being foundational; this act/text served as “d’embryon à la reconnaissance—quatre siècles plus tard!—des droits ancestraux des peoples autochtones au Canada” (2017: 91). And yet, as Poirier has rightfully emphasized in her work on the relationship between the French and their Wendat allies in Québec: “the misunderstandings inherent in contact between cultures speaking different material and symbolic languages were catastrophic” (2016: 4). Adding that “the earliest French disruptions of and incorporation into Native kingship structures presaged the genocidal structure of settler colonialism” (2).

I find myself agreeing with Poirier. But despite Bouchard and Lévesque’s excessively rosy picture—which tends to uphold a colonial logic despite their claim to oppose it—I find their research valuable (see also Bouchard and Lévesque 2014). Highlighting historical experiences where mutually productive encounters—however slanted in favor of the Europeans—took place, is important. These stories too are a part of the colonial experience, and they do not only illustrate the complexities and degrees of colonial violence but open the door towards decolonizing the relationship between Natives and non-Natives. Marie-Claire, who actually gifted me a copy of Bouchard and Lévesque’s Le peuple rieur: hommage à mes amis innus (2017), would seem to agree. And so would Innu poet Joséphine Bacon who, in a collaborative poetry
book with Québécois poet José Acquelin entitled *Nous sommes tous des sauvages* (2017), makes a similar call without downplaying settler colonial violence.\(^{188}\)

After these meter-less seconds, the listener is brought to a 3/4 meter where Marie-Claire sings the lyrics of the song previously analyzed. As the lyrics unfold, the bells continue to chime accompanied now by the drum set, the bass, keyboard, and synthesizers. Two minutes into the song a new “Indigenous” chant emerges reminiscent of the introductory one. This time, though, it is dubbed: two female voices, both in the higher register, are heard. Then, the last stanza is sung: «Déesse de vie/Je te salue Marie/le creux de ton corps/Appelle l’aurore/Désormais ta voix percera leur bruits/ Et je sais qu'avec moi/La terre se réjouit. » The aforementioned “Indigenous” dubbed chant returns and the song concludes with the “Ave Maria” reminiscent of Schubert and a fade out.

When I asked Marie-Claire if she was referencing any particular First Nation, she answered “*non.*” She stressed that this was just the way in which she imagined First Nations through sound. When I asked if she had been in contact with other First Nations beyond her participation on the 1972 benefit-concert for the Cree, she answered in the negative. When I asked why this was the case, she shared an anecdote. Having called the *Centre Monchanin* in the mid-1970s curious about learning some Mohawk songs, she received the following answer: “First you stole our lands and now you want to steal our songs?” For someone who had sang precisely against this in “*Som Séguin,*” this must have been confounding. In retrospect, though, Marie-Claire understands why she received this answer: «*la réponse que j’ai reçue de mon interlocuteur face à ma demande d’apprendre leurs chants m’a permis de sentir le poids de la

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\(^{188}\) For more on Bacon, whose work I was introduced to by Marie-Claire and who despite my efforts, I was unable to meet, go to: [https://myscena.org/la-scena-musicale-team/josephine-bacon-a-linguistic-legacy/](https://myscena.org/la-scena-musicale-team/josephine-bacon-a-linguistic-legacy/)
blessure de ce peuple” (pers. email March 28, 2021). While it seemed to me that this incident had led Marie-Claire to seek knowledge about the First Nations through books and films rather than personal engagement, Marie-Claire clarified that “je n’ai pas évité les rencontres personnelles. . . mais ce n’est pas l’expérience directe que j’ai eue. Les concerts-bénéfice que j’ai faits ont été pour le français, pour le droit à l’avortement, pour eau secours, pour l’écologie » (pers. email March 28, 2021).

Despite Marie-Claire’s claim that her chant is “imagined,” interestingly, the breathy timbre of her vocables is rather reminiscent of Inuit throat singing. According to Jean-Jacques Nattiez, in katajjait [Inuit throat-singing]: “each of the low sounds and each of the high sounds are emitted alternatively by each woman. Most of the time, the motif of the second voice is identical to the motif of the first voice, but occasionally it is entirely different” (Nattiez 1999: 402). Marie-Claire follows this pattern: during her introductory “Indigenous” chant she goes from the lower to the higher register. Of course, because this is not a duet (and Marie-Claire is not overdubbing), the effect is not quite the same. And yet, it is as if she had decided to sing the part of one Inuk (singular of Inuit) singer, and follow it with that of the other. Her higher register sounds though, are neither “identical to the motif of the first voice” nor “entirely different.” They are rather more reminiscent of the variations that occur in Western Art music—which is not surprising considering Marie-Claire’s Catholic background and her knowledge of this music, her variation on Schubert’s Ave Maria being a clear illustration of this.

Marie-Claire’s chant also evokes the “guttural style of singing or chanting” emblematic of throat-singing which “is made of a morpheme, a particular rhythm, an intonation

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190 https://folkways.si.edu/throat-singing-unique-vocalization-three-cultures/world/music/article/smithsonian
contour, a pattern of voiced and voiceless sounds, a pattern of sounds inhaled and exhaled. . .

[that] allows us to speak of ‘panting’ ”(Nattiez 1999: 401). And yet, Marie-Claire’s
“morphemes” (he eh eh hai) are not really such insofar as morphemes are the smallest units of
meaning in a language. Considering that her vocables are not related to French, and that Marie-
Claire does not speak any First Nation language, then, they are not morphemes. Still, while their
meaning is not related to language, they are not meaningless. For Marie-Claire, these
“morphemes” evoke a non-specific First Nation which in turn links Mother Mary to the Black
Madonna through the “cris de colère” and the “chants d’amour et de terre” of a birthing Mother
Mary.

Curiously, Marie-Claire’s evocation of throat-singing reaffirms the maternalist/goddess
feminism espoused in the lyrics of the song. Throat-singing, after all “was traditionally used to
sing babies to sleep or in games women played during the long winter nights while the men were
away hunting.” Moreover, “while the husbands were away hunting, the women performed
these games not only in order to have fun and to enjoy themselves, but also in order to exert
some influence on the spirits of the birds, the sea mammals, the wind, the water, the ancestors,
etc., in an attempt to create the most favorable conditions for hunting and fishing” (Nattiez 1999:
405). Inuit throat-singing has also been associated with fertility rites (Nattiez 1999: 405). While
seemingly unaware of this, for Marie-Claire these sounds were meant to express Maria’s “cris de
colère,” the physical pain involved in giving birth, and the spiritual/political power that might be
derived from the Mother Goddess for whom sexual and land fertility were entwined.

Considering the aesthetic similarities and resonances, Marie-Claire’s “Indigenous” sound
is not so much “imagined.” It seems to rather be a variation/reinterpretation of a real Indigenous

191 https://folkways.si.edu/throat-singing-unique-vocalization-three-cultures/world/music/article/smithsonian
sound that was a part of Québec—via the Inuit presence—and that was being thoroughly researched in the 1970s by musicologists Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Nicole Beaudry, Claude Charron and Denise Harvey (Nattiez 1999: 399).

Having read a prior draft of this chapter, though, Marie-Claire expressed amusement at the links that I had made between her “Indigenous” sounding chant and Inuit throat-singing because the latter had not been an influence for her. Recognizing, nevertheless, that “oui, il y a une influence amérindienne évidente dans Mater Maria» (pers. email Jan 24, 2021), she elaborated:

dans une recherche vocale comme chanteuse, il y a des sons qui m’appartiennent. Quand j’ai accouché de mon premier enfant, j’ai entendu mes chants de terre, mon chant du ventre qui était des sons inconnus de moi avant cette expérience. Ce sont aussi des sons universels de femme. (pers. email March 28, 2021)

If Marie-Claire related her “Indigenous” sounding chant to the sounds of motherhood and birthing, she also linked the “Indigenous” sounds of “Mater Maria” to nature, particularly, to her own personal experiences singing in natural settings. As an example, she mentioned Mont Royal which inspired her to improvise in particular ways. According to her, Mont Royal was an important place for the First Nations from a spiritual point of view. As she told me, one could take from the other without knowing so. Marie-Claire’s main contention seemed to be that as an artist she could tune into, and serve as a medium to, the sounds of nature, and by extension, the First Nations. An article from 2003, where she spoke about her album Milles Traversées sheds some light on these associations. The interviewer writes:

Il paraît très naturel que Marie-Claire Séguin ait choisi des sonorités amérindiennes. . . Car la terre-mère, l'eau et l'air, les éléments premiers de la vie sont des guides tout au long de ces «traversées». Marie-Claire Séguin a vécu une expérience rituelle d'initiation: elle est allée passer quelques jours seule sur une île, laissant derrière elle tous les confort de la vie contemporaine.

To which Marie-Claire replies:
These associations were not new to Marie-Claire. Back in the 1970s, she had described “Génocide” (see the prior section) as “le respect que l’homme perd pour son environnement, son milieu, ce sont les arbres de 150 ans qu’on coupe, comme ça, d’un seul coup, sans se rendre compte qu’ils sont là depuis 150 ans” (qtd. in Roy 1978: 197). Without failing to note how both Marie-Claire and the interviewer reproduce a colonial trope whereby, in the name of praise-worthy ecological and spiritual concerns, the First Nations and nature are made barely distinguishable, one should add that, as First Nation scholars have noted, there is indeed a close relationship between nature and culture in the Indigenous imaginary (see Coulthard 2014). In this regard Marie-Claire’s conflating of nature and the First Nations is not reducible to a Eurocentric fantasy. And yet, as Philip Deloria has stressed, Indians are part of the city landscape as well (2004). Inuit throat-singing, for instance, sounds out both nature and the city. It often imitates animals and nature but also “absorbs sound sources of various origins” including objects (Nattiez 1999: 4); according to throat-singing sisters Kathy and Karin Kettler, it can even imitate “tools.” In Marie-Claire’s case, though, the Indigenous always seems to be associated with nature. It is in the trope of the Indigenous-as-only-an-extension-of-nature, and the reification of a generalizable “Indigenous” chant that cannot be traced to any specific First Nation, where a colonial trope is to be found.194

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192 See the full article here: https://www.ledevoir.com/culture/musique/40377/entretien-avec-marie-claire-seguin-chanter-une-facon-de-vivre
193 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLMLkinYe0U
194 In an iteration of the same trope, having read a prior draft of this chapter, Marie-Claire highlighted how the song “Chuncho” by Peruvian virtuoso singer, Yma Sumac, had influenced her (pers. email Jan. 24, 2021). Released in 1958 in the Mexican movie Música de siempre, in the film Sumac, who as part of her artistic persona claimed to have descended from Incan Emperor Atahualpa (Salazar-Soler 2014: 4), is shown in a forest surrounded by animals
This is part of a broader colonial logic, though. In the colonial imaginary Indigenous peoples are generally disassociated from modernity. Being Indigenous is often understood as a synonym for primitive, “sauvage,” premodern. Furthermore, when an Indigenous person is allowed to become modern it is often with the purpose of stripping him of his rights. This was the case during the Bay James trials concerning the Hydroelectric Project, when Jacques Le Bel, the lawyer for the James Bay Development Corporation and the government questioned Josie Sam, “the Shell agent in Fort George as well as the regional chief for the Indians of Quebec Association” (Richardson 1974: 115). Le Bel asked Josie Sam to describe his many jobs as gas station owner, skidoo dealer, seller of outboard motors and chains saws, and so forth (Richardson 1974: 135-136). The implication was that neither Sam—nor the Cree that would be displaced and affected by the project—were “authentic” (e.g. primitive) “amérindiens.” They were rather modern (understood as behaving “white”), and hence, had no rights over the land. Their “modernity” disassociated them from their ancestors who were “sauvage,” which in turn denied them any legitimate claim to the land.

Indeed, the right to be modern in an “Indigenous” way is perhaps one of the most ignored “cris de colères” of the First Nations. Despite Deloria’s Indians in Unexpected Places where Indigenous musicians are shown playing Western Art music (2004: 183-223) and shaping American modernity in other ways; or ethnomusicologist Gérald Côté’s essay on teaching music to young Cree of Chisasibi—who were eager to plays songs by Led Zeppelin, Cream and Metallica, something that made their parents “fiers de l’accomplissement de leurs jeunes à l’école” (2007: 19); being Indigenous and modern is still largely conceived as a contradiction in

or rather by their sounds, some of which are reproduced by her voice and others by the musical accompaniment. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KprLT-JxPY
terms. A powerful colonizing trope that despite her good intentions, Marie-Claire could not avoid partially reproducing as she sought to liberate herself, and others, from patriarchy.

Replying to my critique, though, Marie-Claire stressed that her motherly-influenced “Indigenous” sounding chant “ne s'oppose aucunement à la modernité” (pers. email 28 March, 2021). I found Marie-Claire’s’s response to be fascinating. Yes. Her chant is not opposed to modernity: Marie-Claire is recording in a music studio; she lives in the city; and she is engaging in what are quintessentially cosmopolitan modern practices of creolizing myriad musical traditions and worldviews. But the point remains that, despite her admirable defense of the First Nations and unequivocal condemnation of settler colonialism in “Génocide” and “Som Séguin,” and the aesthetically sophisticated way in which she entwines maternal/goddess feminism, spirituality and the “Indigenous” in “Mater Maria,” in these songs, and in the statements that she has publicly made throughout the years, the First Nations are indistinguishable from nature. In this regard, they are “Indians in expected places” (Deloria 2004) who exist beyond modernity.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how Marie-Claire’s antipatriarchal statements are entwined with the reproduction of certain settler colonial tropes even as she is courageously challenging settler colonialism. If I have avoided reducing Marie-Claire’s’s chant to appropriation, I have also sought to avoid uncritically celebrating these ideological, musical and spiritual creolizations as unproblematic acts of intercultural solidarity.195

In the end, Marie-Claire’s’s use of an “Indigenous” chant can be described as the artistic output of the “good colonizer.” As Albert Memmi has noted in *Portrait du colonisé* (1957) in

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195 See Fellezs 2011: 123-147 for a similar reflection.
colonial contexts, allies of the colonized who belong to the colonizing nation can only aspire to be “good colonizers:” they cannot escape the colonial logic and their role in it. Yes, Marie-Claire was subordinated insofar as she was a woman singer but neither her or her brother can fully transcend their privileged positionality as the descendants of settler colonizers; they can only attenuate it, and this is no doubt praiseworthy. My critiques are not really aimed at Marie-Claire—for whom I have deep respect and admiration—but at a “Sam Système” that is powerful enough to distort history to such an extent that even counter-narratives take for granted some of its tropes. Ultimately, Marie-Claire’s musical-political-poetic universe is informed by her positionality, life experiences, the readings that she did, and those that she did not. It is also indissociable from Québec’s historical particularities in the 1960s and 1970s as a would-be independent nation colonized by Anglo-Canada and the US.

In concluding, I hope to have shown why “Mater Maria,” “Som Séguin” and “Génocide” are important songs. Their importance lies not only on account of what they did in the Québec of the 1970s, but on account of the ways in which they shed light on the complexity behind the struggles against patriarchy and settler colonialism. Addressing both, after all, is indispensable in order to achieve a Québécois (and a global) decolonial future.

Coda

On January 18, 2021, somewhat nervously, I emailed Marie-Claire an earlier draft of this chapter. The situation is far from ideal. Covid-19 has made it impossible for me to cross the Canadian border to share the chapter in person. This is particularly troublesome considering that Marie-Claire’s English is “approximatif” or limited. Indeed, when Marie-Claire emailed me

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196 All of the quotes of this section date from Jan 24, 2021, when Marie-Claire emailed me back her impressions of the chapter.
back a four-page-response, she informed me that she had to use Google Translate “pour m’assurer de bien comprendre.”

All things considered, though, her reaction could not have been better: “Je voulais te dire que ta réflexion, l’honnêteté de tes propos et la patience que tu as eu envers moi m’ont beaucoup touchée. Je suis impressionnée par les liens que tu fais et je comprends plus ta démarche.” I am moved (and relieved!). I was so worried that my reflections might offend her in some way! She then proceeded to make several clarifications and corrections. Some of these I have inscribed in the body of this chapter or in my footnotes. Her remarks regarding my prior analysis of “Som Séguin,” though, which are not present, were particularly important though. They actually led me to change most of my analysis. I had totally misinterpreted the song! Marie Claire, always kind, continued: «J’en suis probablement responsable compte tenu de ma réserve dans nos premiers entretiens. Je reconnais mon inconfort à parler de chansons à l’époque des Séguin, comme si je n’étais pas très confortable d’oser prendre parole juste pour moi. Le cadeau de ma gémellité. Je pensais m’en être libérée.» Though I am still somewhat embarrassed, the kindness with which she proceeded to explain how I had gotten virtually every aspect of the analysis wrong, attenuates the blow. Of course, Marie-Claire is being generous by taking some of the blame. In reality, my own linguistic limitations vis-a-vis Québécois-accented French, have played a major role. My analysis of this song, after all, was not based on an audio-recorded interview, but on the fieldnotes of our first encounter.

I rewrite. I send her back the chapter. She sends me back several more pages with comments. I edit. She takes issue with some of my analyses. I reconsider. I revise. I include yet again some of her comments. I nuance here and there. I keep my ground where I find it prudent.
We have a Zoom meeting on March 31. I rewrite. I send it back. At some point this will have to stop. Will we reach a middle ground or a point where we just agree to disagree in friendly terms?

As I re-read her initial four-page response I am particularly struck by her comment regarding how now, having read my draft, she “better understood my approach/process” (“je comprends plus ta démarche”). It makes me wonder.

Throughout my dissertation I have sought to empower my interlocutors by theorizing with them. I have done so, in part, by choosing the object of analysis together and writing together. Most of my interlocutors, after all, have commented on their chapters either orally or in written form, and I have done the utmost to address their concerns. But Marie-Claire’s comment makes me wonder. Was the overall theoretical framework of my dissertation open to discussion? Or have I reserved power over this domain only for myself? Have I been theorizing with my interlocutors or engaging in a simulacrum?

As I look back at my original dissertation proposal, I see that my dissertation is more or less representative of it. I am tempted to think that this is evidence of a simulacrum. But I soon remember that my proposal was informed by years of interactions with my Puerto Rico-related interlocutors and archival research surrounding those from Québec, and listening to their songs. Furthermore, my dissertation is only more or less representative of the original proposal. This more or less is key. It is yet another space inhabited by my interlocutors; a space from which they have impacted and altered my initial goals leading me through unsuspected paths. Yes. I chose which paths to follow (there were so many!). But I never did walk alone.

Édouard Glissant once wrote that “the movement of the beach, this rhythmic rhetoric of a shore, do not seem to me to be gratuitous. They weave a circularity that draws me in” (2010 [1990]: 122). My interlocutors have been like this “movement of the beach” weaving
circularities. I have done my best to let them draw me in. Having emerged from the waters, I now tell their stories. Or rather, I tell our story.
Chapter 8:  
The Puerto Rican Nueva Canción of Américo Boschetti:  
His Story, My Story, Our Story

To my mother, María Bigay

On a sunny summer day in late May 2013, I took a public bus departing from Old San Juan’s Covadonga terminal heading towards Río Piedras. I had just returned to my country on May 21 with the mission of finding and interviewing my first Puerto Rican nueva canción (PRNC) interlocutors. Two years into my Master’s program in Interdisciplinary Studies at New York University, I had spent my prior summer scanning and collecting over a thousand newspaper articles about PRNC published between 1970 and 1990 at the Lázaro Library in the University of Puerto Rico. I had also started to create a collection of LPs that would eventually lead me to acquire the near totality of PRNC albums. This, in addition to being familiar with this music since childhood, and the fact that I played the Puerto Rican cuatro—a key musical instrument in this repertoire—gave me a sense of confidence, allowing me to navigate through what was about to happen during my bus ride.

As the bus departed, I looked around and noticed that other than myself, there was only one additional customer. I was not particularly struck by this, though. This was, after all, the first stop, and it was not rush hour. But as I focused my attention on this individual, I noticed that he was reading a two-page newspaper that featured the Puerto Rican cuatro. Holding my cuatro between my legs, I looked more closely at this stranger. Could it be, I thought? He reminded me of an older version of one of the singer-songwriters that I had seen in those old newspaper articles from Lazaro Library. I touched the individual’s shoulder, and making peace with the fact that I might be embarrassing myself, I asked: “¿Usted es Américo Boschetti?”

Boschetti is known in Puerto Rico for being the composer of “Sentimiento,” recorded by salsa icon Cheo Feliciano in Profundo (1982); “La guaracha del ruiseñor” and “Canción para
los niños” recorded by Danny Rivera in Alborada (1976) and Muchachito (1979), respectively; and of “Paseo de Nanay” and “Caminos de Arecibo”—a poem by Luis Lloréns Torres that he set to music—recorded by Haciendo Punto en Otro Son in Morivivi (1982) and in Son de la América nuestra (1980), respectively. But I was also familiar with Boschetti because of his album Colindancias (1981), a little-known jewel of the PRNC repertoire that I had come across at some point in late 2012/early 2013 during my visits to flea markets and collectors’ homes. Boschetti is also well-known (and respected) for belonging to a community of “no less than 75,000 persons” who had been put under surveillance by the Division of Intelligence of the Police of Puerto Rico (Bosque and Colón 2006: 14), for their commitment to independence, socialism and social justice. Boschetti’s carpeta—as the police files created by the Division of Intelligence were referred to—is badge of honor that, I am proud to say, is also shared by my parents.

I do not remember exactly where I was heading to when I took that bus on a sunny summer day of late May 2013. But that day I met my first interlocutor thus transitioning from archival research to the “field.” More importantly, that day was the birthday of something more transcendental: the beginning of a long-lasting friendship with Boschetti.

In this chapter, I revisit several songs composed by Boschetti throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, highlighting how these have impacted my life. I also show how our friendship has been informed by a shared love for music, poetry, history, anticolonial leaders and relatives. But I also emphasize how the way in which we relate to these differ. I do so by relying on our email exchanges during the last eight years and by writing with Boschetti. That is, Boschetti’s critical voice having read a prior draft of this chapter is incorporated throughout. Though far from exhaustive, in this chapter I also document several key moments in Boschetti’s career as a politically-committed anticolonial singer-songwriter, paying careful attention to the different
ways in which he sounds out the relationship between anticolonialism and gender in his songs. Finally, while the story that I tell is deeply personal, it is also the story of Puerto Rican struggles for social justice and decolonization, as I hear them with Boschetti.

Audre Lorde once wrote that “poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before” (2017 [1977]: 3). bell hooks, for her part, has noted that patriarchy oppresses men by subjecting them to “rigid sex roles” and making them “emotional cripples” (2004: 26-27). Building on Lorde’s notion of poetry and hooks’s assessment, I show how Boschetti’s repertoire and my relationship to it, allow us to amplify—from a male point of view—some of the more intimate spaces that inhabit the struggles for national liberation. Spaces where Boschetti and myself, in our own ways, challenge the notion of men as “emotional cripples.” My overall argument is that decolonization is not only about ending colonialism and coloniality; it is also about the sound of this personal-collective poetry that is “the skeleton architecture of our lives.” Or as Boschetti put it:

“Las cosas que más nos acercan
son las más pequeñas y más espontáneas”

“The things that bring us together the most,
are the smallest and the most spontaneous ones”197

This is also the story of those things.

First Stanza

The first time I met Boschetti he was just a voice. No. Not even that. My mother used to play Boschetti and Lloréns Torres’s “Caminos de Arecibo” but it was the voices of Haciendo Punto which sounded out Boschetti. I must have been five years old or so.

197 All English translations are mine.
Published in 1940 in *Alturas de América*, but written at some point after 1913 (Lloréns Torres 1984: 271; 490), “Caminos de Arecibo” is a celebration of the many little dirt paths that make up Puerto Rico’s mountainous towns. By using the diminutive (“caminitos”/“little paths”), Lloréns Torres also conveys a sense of endearment for the natural landscapes of the homeland:

*Caminitos que bajan de Ciales.* Little paths that descend from Ciales.
*Caminitos que bajan de Utuado.* Little paths that descend from Utuado.
*Caminitos de curvas y cuestas.* Little paths of curves and hills.
*Caminitos de a pie y caballo.* Little paths for walking and riding on horses.
*Caminitos hermanos del río.* Little paths siblings of the river.
*Caminitos vestidos de blanco.* Little paths that are dressed in white.
*Caminitos del ruisenor y la reinita.* Little paths of the mockingbird and Adelaide’s warbler.
*Caminitos del pitirre y el guaraguao.* Little paths of the gray kingbird and the red tailed-hawk.

Listening to “Caminos” as an adult, though, never did bring me back to the beautiful and idyllic natural scenery that Lloréns Torres describes. I have always been from the city. Though I spent my first four years in the rural town of Hormigueros, I have no childhood memories of Lloréns Torres’s “caminitos.” By the age of four I had moved with my mother and sister to the United States in a moving frenzy that would have us live in Washington State, Pennsylvania and Florida. Five years later, we returned to Puerto Rico settling in a lower middle class residential area in Trujillo Alto, and six years later we moved to Old San Juan, where the federal program known as Plan 8 covered part of our rent expenses. Listening to “Caminos,” brings back memories of my mother, my sister and myself playing dominoes, briscas (cards), and monopoly during our diasporic errantry. It also brings back memories of my mother’s struggles as a single woman battling depression and destitution, forging a camino for my sister and myself. I know that these are not Lloréns Torres’s caminos. I also know that these are not exactly Boschetti’s, who has always acknowledged that despite having paid a heavy price for his convictions and activism, he comes from a wealthy background. But these are the “little” paths that I see when I hear Boschetti’s song.
But we meet at a crossroad.

On November 23, 2019, Boschetti gave me a tour of his hometown Corozal. Located in the mountainous area in the central eastern region of Puerto Rico, Corozal is just north of Orocovis which is located in the central mountain range, which in turn is just south of “the little paths that descend from Ciales.” Pointing towards the river, and filled with pride, Boschetti told me: “that is the Río de Corozal.” I recognized the name. This was an important river. Since age four I had been listening to “Oubao Moin,” a poem by communist leader Juan Antonio Corretjer set to music by PRNC singer-songwriter Roy Brown. A canonical PRNC song, and a well-known poem with which Boschetti is familiar, “Oubao Moin” begins with the line “El Río de Corozal, el de la leyenda dorada” (“The river of Corozal, the one of the golden legend”). A fierce condemnation of how the Taíno Indians, enslaved Blacks, and poor whites were oppressed and exploited under Spaniard colonial rule, “Oubao Moin” is also a homage to their resistance and to those “who work today” because they are “building” the “liberated homeland.” In “Oubao Moin,” the river is not “the sibling of a little path”; it is a site of death: “la corriente está ensangrentada.” The “river is drenched” in the “blood” spilled by Spaniard and US colonialism. When Boschetti pointed towards the river and told me “that is the Río de Corozal,” I was taken aback. I recognized the name. I had heard the name. But I had never actually seen the Río de Corozal. In fact, it hadn’t even occurred to me that this river could be in his hometown.

It hit me. The Río de Corozal was real for Boschetti as were Lloréns Torres’s caminos. For me these were just metaphors. Yes, they were powerful metaphors that had instilled in me a love for my homeland and its decolonization but they were nevertheless metaphors. Boschetti and myself were simultaneously brought together and separated through this river and these little paths. They embodied proximity and distance.
That day, though I could not articulate it then, I learned that despite a shared love for the same repertoire and poetry, Boschetti and I related differently to these objects. Indeed, having read an earlier draft of this chapter, it became clear to me that Boschetti had a different relationship with “Caminos.” “On February 4, 1979,” Boschetti told me, his neighbor Rodolfo Córdova, stopped by his apartment in Old San Juan interested in learning how to sing some of his songs. They engaged in a conversation about the art of setting music to poetry. Telling Córdova that some poetry “already included the music,” Boschetti stressed that one only had to “discover” it. In order to prove his point, he grabbed a copy of Lloréns Torres Obras Completas (Complete Works) which he happened to have nearby, opening it randomly. The first three or four poems did not catch Boschetti’s attention. But then he came across “Caminos.” Noticing that it “already had music,” he began to sing it, composing the song in its entirety in the moment. “I did not choose the poem, the poem chose me” (pers. email April 4, 2021). 198 Hence for Boschetti what is important about “Caminos” is not that it brings him back to the caminitos of Corozal. The poem is important to him because it showcases his skills as a singer-songwriter who is gifted with the talent of listening for the music that is already present in some poems. 199 Composed in the city, Boschetti did not intend to sound out Lloréns Torres’s caminitos nor his own even as he evoked both.

198 Boschetti’s original communication goes as follows: «CAMINOS DE ARECIBO surgió accidentalmente un 4 de febrero del 1979. Vívia en el Viejo San Juan, en el condominio Luna, previo a mudarme al callejón del Toro, esquina Luna y me encontraba musicalizando algunos poemas de Lloréns Torres, fragmentos de ellos, por lo extensos que son. Ya tenía LA FLAMBOYANA, TRISTEZA JÍBARA, y EL VALLE DE COLLORES (poema suyo que lo tengo como el primero entre ellos). Me llegó de visita mi vecino Rodolfo Córdova, que vivía en el apartamento frente al mío, al lado opuesto del patio interior. El es sobrino de la dueña del Restaurante la Danza, en la Calle Fortaleza, esq. Calle del Cristo, que estaba ilusionado con cantar (tenía una tremenda voz) y quería canciones más. Ese día, hablábamos de música, y tocamos el tema de musicalizar poemas. Le dije que, para mí, el poema viene con la música, y uno se la descubre, o él se la muestra. Como tenía el Libro de Lloréns al frente, su obra completa, quise darle un ejemplo espontáneo. Lo abrí al azar. El poema que abrí no me llamó la atención (ni recuerdo el nombre). Me puse a pasar páginas, y como al cuarto poema, allí estaba CAMINOS DE ARECIBO. Me puse a dar los primeros acordes de La a Re. Y comenzé a cantarlo.”

199 All of these comments were made on April 3, 2021.
But on that November 23, 2019, I also began to understand that scholarly analyses, as the one that follows, while indispensable, should not do away with the poetry that emerges in the spaces of intimacy where fieldwork and life are blurred. The knowledge produced in these spaces is just as valuable.

The Other Paths of “Caminos”

Written during the first half of the twentieth century, at a time when Puerto Rico was still a largely rural country, Lloréns Torres’s “Caminos” nevertheless idealizes the rural landscape. Throughout the poem no one walks on these Edenic paths other than Lloréns Torres in his dreams (“Caminitos que en sueños yo ando” /“little paths that I walk in my dreams”). Absent from these paths is a peasantry that jíbaro singer Jesús Sánchez Erazo (“Chuíto el de Bayamón”), in songs such as “Un matrimonio en Jayuya” and “El niño campesino” released in the 1960s, would describe as living in abject poverty and ignorance. As noted by Aixa Rodríguez-Rodríguez, PRNC singer-songwriter Andrés Jiménez would make this critique even more forcefully by describing agricultural workers as exploited linking their exploitation to capitalism (1995: 312). In “El pobre sigue sufriendo” (“The Poor Continue to Suffer”), a seis milonga composed by Jiménez and Juan de Matta released in Como el filo del machete (1972), Jiménez sings:

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El pobre labra tierra
trabajando en la montaña
sacando de sus entrañas
el fruto que ella encierra.
Y en lo alto de la sierra
su vida está consumiendo
trabajando y produciendo
padeciendo a cada rato.
El rico compra barato,
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The poor cultivate the land
working in the mountains
extracting from its bowels
the fruit that she encloses.
And up in the mountain range
their life is being consumed
working and producing
suffering every moment.
The rich buy things for a cheaper price

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200 These songs were released in Chuito y Natalia Los decanos de los cantores (1965) and Chuito El Decano de los Cantores, Volume 7 (1966), respectively. According to Ansonia Records’ archives, “El niño campesino” was written by Defit Martinez.

201 This was Jiménez’s first solo album.
y el pobre sigue sufriendo. and the poor continue to suffer.

And yet while Jiménez stressed rural exploitation, not unlike Sánchez Erazo he knew that it coexisted side by side Lloréns Torres’s caminitos. In the same album Jiménez includes Lloréns Torres’s classic “Valle de Collores,” a seis con décimas, where once again, the poet idealizes the countryside. Indeed, thinking about this duality—the stark contrast between the beauty of nature and social misery—is part of a Puerto Rican musical-literary tradition. It can be traced back to Rafael Hernández’s song “Lamento borincano” (1930),202 and Manuel Zeno Gandía’s novel La charca (1894).

Despite Lloréns Torres’s idealization, though, when “Caminos” was written in the first half of the twentieth century, such caminitos were rather emblematic of the Puerto Rican reality. Puerto Rico was, after all, a rural/agricultural country. By the time Boschetti set “Caminos” to music in 1979203 and Haciendo Punto recorded it in 1980, however, the Island had transitioned into an urban/industrial one. This transition came on the heels of Luis Muñoz Marín’s rise to power in the mid-1940s and his program of industrialization by invitation known as Operation Bootstrap whereby American corporations were exempted from paying taxes benefiting as well from the lower costs of labor on the Island. Touted as a success by the Free Associated State, founded by Muñoz Marín in 1952, Operation Bootstrap is indissociable from the massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the US, the emergence of shantytowns, social dislocation, and the consolidation of Puerto Rican colonial dependency (see Dietz 1989).

According to geographer Romain Cruse in Le mai 68 des Caraïbes (2018) Operation Bootstrap also represents a significant chapter in the history of neoliberalism. Tracing the origins

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202 Released in the album: Canario y Su Grupo (1930). For more on this album, see the review that I wrote for the Library of Congress: https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/LamentoBorincano.pdf

203 Date provided by Boschetti in a personal email dated April 4, 2021.
of neoliberalism back to the late nineteenth century (2018: 59), Cruse argues that Puerto Rico’s Operation Bootstrap opened the doors towards the “portoricanisation néoliberale” of the Caribbean (2018: 43). That is, for Cruse, the Puerto Rican economic colonial experiment, or its spearheaded the spread of a neoliberal logic throughout the region (2018: 43). This “modèle de développement” includes the huge role played by multinationals throughout the Caribbean, the overreliance on tourism, the subjection to the dictates of the imperial powers, economic dependency and hence the absence of a meaningful sovereignty regardless of whether the country is formally independent or not. 204 Interestingly, by claiming this, Cruse puts into question David Harvey’s history of neoliberalism (2005). If Harvey had focused on the 1970s, Cruse’s emphasis is on the 1940s and 1950s. If Harvey was concerned with the United States, Great Britain, Chile and China, Cruse looks at the Caribbean. In this regard, Cruse follows in the footsteps of Paul Preciado.

In Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era (2016 [2008]), Preciado claimed that:

> From an economic perspective, the transition toward a third form of capitalism, after the slave-dependent and industrial systems, is generally situated somewhere in the 1970s; but the establishment of a new type of ‘government of the living’ had already emerged from the urban, physical, psychological, and ecological ruins of World War II. (2016 [2008]: 25)

Identifying the 1940s as a key moment in the history of neoliberalism, Preciado also reflects on neoliberalism’s Caribbean iteration. For him, Puerto Rico is central to this history as well. But Preciado places the accent on the “pharmacopornographic era” as lived in the 1950s and 1960s when Puerto Rico was transformed into “a parallel, life-sized biopolitical pharmacological laboratory and factory” becoming “the most important clinical site for the

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204 See Cruse (2018: 104-105) for explicit iterations of this.

When “Caminos” became a song, then, much had changed in Puerto Rico. Not only was “Caminos” depicting a country that had been idealized by Lloréns Torres, but that country had been significantly altered by Operation Bootstrap. Lloréns Torres’s little paths were still around as they are today. But in the light of the aforementioned and of urban development, the mass migration that took place from the rural areas to San Juan during the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence of shanty towns (see Safa 1974; Fusté 2010), and the fact that PRNC flourished in the urban context of San Juan, “Caminos”—and Lloréns Torres’s poems widely speaking as heard in the 1970s—became an object of nostalgia that evoked a rural country that was no more.

Indeed, Rodríguez-Rodríguez, commenting on how the “agricultural past” and the image of the jíbaro had been used in some songs of the PRNC repertoire, unveiled an important aspect this dynamic:

In a sense, the affirmation of a jíbaro identity [within PRNC] was a rejection of modernity and the changes modernity brought with it. The jíbaro image appeared to have been used as a way to reject the values of modern capitalism by glorifying the values of an agricultural past, which by the late 1960s was almost completely replaced by urban forms of relationships. (1995: 312)

Having read this quote, Boschetti countered:

The affirmation of a jíbaro identity, is not only about rejecting modernity/modernization as Aixa Rodríguez claims in your quote on page 9. It is more so an invitation to emulate the “peasant’s life style.” It was then when many began to create their own home gardens, and to move to the countryside. (April 4, 2021)

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205 La afirmación de la identidad jíbara, no es por rechazo a la modernización únicamente, como dice Aixa Rodríguez en la cita que incluye en la pág. 9. Es más una invitación a emular ‘la vida campesina’. Es entonces que muchos comienzan a tener huertos caseros, y a mudarse al campo.
Furthermore, in Boschetti’s view, PRNC was singing about the jíbaro “which was already a thing of the past as if it existed in the present in order to preserve it for the future, at least as a memory” (pers. comment April 3, 2021).206 Here, Boschetti draws a line between PRNC singer-songwriters’ praxis and a strain of anthropology concerned with documenting a dying past. PRNC is creating an archive of the jíbaro past. An act that cannot be read as “rejecting modernity” insofar as this is embedded in PRNC’s broader project of founding an independent (and more often than not, socialist) nation-state. As he later added, though, “PRNC recurs to or evokes the jíbaro to make him eternal singing to him during that present, a present that seemed to be heading towards the past or disappearing; but [that past, that jíbaro] is still there in the mountains. You just need to search for it” (April 4, 2021).207

Rodríguez-Rodríguez’s assessment—which is based only on archival research and concerned only with lyrical analysis and the “image” of the jíbaro—needs to be reconsidered as well in the light of the musicians’ “speech about music” and the sound of the jíbaro/“agricultural past” in PRNC.

Following Rodríguez-Rodríguez’s logic “Caminos,” would be a 1970s song that “rejects” a post-1940s modernity. Listening to Haciendo Punto’s musical arrangement of “Caminos,” though, leads through another path.208 Featuring the Puerto Rican cuatro, the quintessential instrument in jíbaro music, “Caminos” could be heard as a “rejection of modernity and the changes modernity brought with it.” The cuatro’s riffs, that evoke the jíbaro style known as aguinaldo cagueño, would seem to point in the same direction. But the fact that this is only an

206 "La nueva canción puertorriqueña le cantó al jíbaro, una cosa del pasado como si fuera del presente para mantenerla para el futuro por lo menos como un recuerdo"
207 "Cuando la Nueva Canción puertorriqueña recurre o evoca al jíbaro puertorriqueño, al campesino, es para eternizarlo cantándolo en aquel presente, que parecía ir camino al pasado, o a la desaparición. Pero todavía está ahí. En nuestras montañas. Solo hay que ir a buscarlo." (4 de abril, 2021)
208 You can listen to “Caminos” here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gawW8CaC7I4
evocation—the aguinaldo is never actually played—and that Lloréns Torres’ poem does not consist of decimillas\(^\text{209}\) as required by this style of music, glorifies not “the values of an agricultural past” but the values of modernizing a past that was already modern (more on this below). Moreover, the song’s complex harmonies were anything but reminiscent of jíbaro music, which in general consists of three or four chords. There is also the matter of Haciendo Punto’s collective and sophisticated musical arrangement and “Caminos’s” modulation. But jíbaro music had already engaged in similar practices. In Sánchez Erazo and Natalia Rivera’s Los decanos de los cantores (1965) one is exposed to the complexity of cuatro player and composer Ladislao “Ladi” Martínez’s musical arrangements. In songs where Sánchez Erazo and Rivera sing together, they are each provided a unique musical background when they sing their décimas or decimillas, and not unlike “Caminos,” Martínez’s arrangements often included modulations. Hence, jíbaro music as well was engaged in modernizing the values of the rural past albeit in its own way.

Considering that the aesthetic experience of “Caminos” is rather the norm within PRNC—this without denying the idiosyncratic creativity of each individual—can PRNC songs be said to be “glorifying the values of an agricultural past”? In a sense, the answer is both “yes” and “no.” “Yes” insofar as, often, there is an idealization of that past in the lyrics. “No” insofar as musically, there is a challenge to it. But in another sense, the answer is that such a framework (modern Bootstrap capitalism vs. agricultural past) is not that useful. As Jiménez had sung, Puerto Rico’s agricultural past of exploitation was intrinsic to modern capitalism. Jiménez’s own life as a jíbaro living in the city and recording his first album in New York City (see chapter six), further illustrates the enmeshment of these temporalities. This enmeshment had already been

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\(^209\) Decimillas consist of ten hexasyllabic lines with an abbaacddc rhyme scheme.
experienced by jíbaro singers of the prior generation given that they were participating in the logics of “modern capitalism” by recording albums, going on tours throughout the cities of the United States, and more often than not, supporting the policies of the Free Associated State and its project of modernization (see Fiol-Matta 2016: 121-171). As Boschetti noted, these jíbaros were also engaged in singing about modern topics and denouncing social issues (pers. email April 4, 2021). Indeed, in songs such as “Consejo de padre” (1966) Sánchez Erazo condemned drug and alcohol abuse, though at the expense of stigmatizing drug addicts.210 Whereas Flor Morales Ramos “Ramito” (1915-1989), in “El preso y el que está muerto” (1961) called for visiting inmates, and not forgetting about them as one typically did with the dead.211 As for PRNC, challenging social inequalities was at the heart of the repertoire as we saw in chapters four, five and six, and as we shall see below.

But even if we were to limit PRNC to a lyrical analysis, it should be stressed that the “glorification” of the rural past is barely unique to it. Jíbaro singers engaged in similar practices. As noted by Licia Fiol-Matta, Ernestina Reyes “La Calandria” (1925-1994) was adept at reproducing idyllic rural tropes in her repertoire, as were other jíbaro music singers (2017: 121-171). And having written several reviews of jíbaro music albums for the label Ansonia Records, I was able to identify similar tropes in the work of Morales Ramos.212

Ultimately, “Caminos” the song, and PRNC in general, simultaneously idealizes the rural past and modernizes it. Despite its novelties, though, it is part of the “invented tradition” of Puerto Rican culture or those “set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted

210 Released in Chuito El Decano de los Cantores, Volume 7 (1966), Ansonia Records.
212 I wrote three-to-four page reviews for the following albums by Ramito: Ramito el cantor de la montaña Vol 1 (1958), Volume 2 (1960), Vol 3 (1961), Vol 6 (1965), Vol 7 (1966), and 78 pueblos borincanos (1979) Go to: https://ansoniarecords.bandcamp.com
rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1). PRNC sounded out a new sound, no doubt. But one of its most important legacies, in my view, lies in its vocation to amplify the “invented” quality of Puerto Rican traditions. PRNC makes audible how change, and modernizing the past, is a long-lasting Puerto Rican tradition.

Second Stanza

If my friendship with Boschetti taught me that we related differently to the same objects, it also taught me that my own way of relating to some of his songs could shift throughout time. In my Master’s thesis “The Puerto Rican New Song Movement and Its Aesthetics: Between the Modern and the Postmodern” (2014), I had highlighted “Paseo de Nanay” (“Nanay’s Stroll”) composed by Boschetti in Texas in 1974, analyzing the version released in Colindancias (1981). At that moment, I was fascinated by Boschetti’s creative genius. Boschetti had taken the melodic and harmonic material of the Puerto Rican danza “Impromptu” by Luis R. Miranda, and repurposed it in an unexpected way. Danzas begin with an instrumental introduction known as paseo and are typically in 2/4. Boschetti had taken the first four bars of “Impromptu,” developed a variation on its melody, added lyrics to it and changed the meter to 6/8 thus creating a valse-like feeling (Cancel-Bigay 2014: 40). Insofar as Boschetti’s song revolved around romantic love for a woman, it stayed close to “Impromptu.” But Boschetti’s lyrics were much more profound and written in the beautifully poetic style that would come to define much of PRNC and Latin American nueva canción broadly speaking:

Las cosas que más nos acercan
son las más pequeñas
y más espontáneas.
A ti

Las cosas que más nos acercan
son las más pequeñas
y más espontáneas.
A ti

The things that bring us together the most are the smallest and most spontaneous ones.

To you,
que te dejé a la deriva,
me acercó la distancia,
el silencio y tu ser.

whom I left adrift,
I was brought closer by the distance,
the silence and your being.

Y aún cuando miro en silencio
las horas que pasan
cayendo lentamente,
te miro
escondida en mi
con tu amor siempre alerta
y tu sonrisa sin fin.

And even when I look in silence
at the hours as they pass by
falling slowly,
I look at you
hidden within me
with your love that is always alert
and your never-ending smile.

While I was enthralled by this song because of Boschetti’s musical creolization and his poetic sensibilities, I was also amazed by it for another reason. Since age thirteen I had actually been playing “Impromptu.” It was one of the first danzas that my cuatro teacher and mentor Emilio “Millito” Cruz had taught me how to play during my school years in the Escuela Libre de Música in Hato Rey, San Juan. And yet, I had not noticed Boschetti’s musical borrowing until he made me aware of it! 213

In fact, Cruz, who I came to love as a father, was at the heart of how “Paseo de Nanay” began to change for me. In 1982, my mentor had recorded a version of this song in Haciendo Punto’s album Morivivi, just a year after Boschetti’s release. Showcasing his classical music training and his deep knowledge of the bolero, the danza and bossa nova, Cruz’s guitar arrangement is masterful. Combined with Nena Rivera’s warm voice, it made the song resonate with what in Western Art Music is called “art song” or “lied:” those poems that, set to music during the Romantic Period, were interpreted by a singer and a pianist (see Gorrell 1993 for more). 214 Indeed, other than Zoraida Santiago’s setting to music of Julia de Burgos’s “Casi Alba,” released by Aires Bucaneros in 1980, 215 I know of no other PRNC song that is able to

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213 You can listen to Boschetti’s version here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lHHTuRl6BTI
214 You can listen to Haciendo Punto’s version here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrrRTmMzZYmK
215 Santiago is accompanied on the piano by her brother Tato Santiago: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goZKsGJ2tRM
inhabit this space between popular music and Western Art Music. Though several boleros by singer-songwriter Sylvia Rexach (1922-1961) evoke a similar aesthetic as “Yo era una flor” as interpreted by Lucecita Benitez in her album *En la intimidad* (1970) illustrates.\(^{216}\)

On June 25, 2018 Cruz passed away. And it was then when I began to pay more attention to Haciendo Punto’s version of “Paseo de Nanay.” Suddenly, Boschetti’s compositional feats and the quality of his poetry receded in importance. It is not that I did not hear these aspects of the song nor that I had forgotten about them. Nor had I come to believe that my prior assessment was unimportant. But Boschetti’s “Paseo de Nanay” had become a song of loss and mourning. The man who had taught me how to play the cuatro and given me the opportunity of performing with him from age thirteen onward in different venues—thus freeing me from a poverty-stricken childhood—was gone.\(^{217}\) When on January 25, 2019 Boschetti sent me an email with the photo of the chair where Cruz used to sit a local bar in *La Perla*, I was tremendously moved. Yes, it is true, I thought: “Las cosas que más nos acercan son las más pequeñas y más espontáneas.” The “things that bring us together the most are the smallest and most spontaneous ones.”

While this was an important moment in the history of my friendship with Boschetti, our friendship had actually begun to consolidate much earlier.

On December 19, 2013 at 9:25 in the morning my daughter Gabriela was born. The next day, I sent photos of the newborn baby to several of my friends. Among them, was Boschetti, who congratulated me warmly. In early February, 2014, I shared some epigrams with him that I had written for Gabriela:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{II} & \\
No \ sé \ por \ qué \ mundos \ viajas \ tú & \text{I do not know what worlds you visit} \\
cuando \ se \ va \ de \ tus \ ojos \ la \ luz. & \text{when the light leaves your eyes} \\
\text{Dicen que sueñas con ángeles} & \text{I am told that you dream of angels}
\end{align*}\]

\(^{216}\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtz7eYql5g8

\(^{217}\) See: Malinow Maceo 1999: 4, for an account of the early days of my relationship with Cruz published in *El Star*. 
cuando te duermes y te orinas
de la risa.
Pero no sé
si serás
tan narcisista.

X
Ningún filósofo marxista
ha podido explicar el fenómeno
de que del cruce de una madre quasi burguesa
y un padre pseudo proletario
naciera una princesa
anarquista.

On February 18, 2014, Boschetti emailed me a homemade recording of a song that he had composed in 1980 for his step-children Teresita and Iván, ages nine and six. In the body of the email, Boschetti mentions as well his son Pablo, Teresita and Iván’s half-brother, who had not yet been born. Entitled “Menudo ser” (“Small Being”), the song includes only Boschetti’s voice and the guitar. In this regard, it is not really aligned with the audio-recorded experience of PRNC. With the notable exception of Antonio Cabán Vale’s first solo album (1972), most if not all of the PRNC albums released between 1969 and 1990, always included more than two musicians. Boschetti’s acoustic and “lonely” sound—characteristic of his more than three hundred home recordings, but standing in stark contrast to his released albums—218—is rather reminiscent Cuban nueva trova, where such sonic practices were more common. Albums such as Silvio Rodríguez’s Al final de este viaje (1978) or Pablo Milanés’s Canta a Nicolás Guillén (1975) being emblematic. Giving us perhaps a glimpse at how live performances of PRNC singer-songwriters sounded during the 1960s and 1970s, Boschetti sings:

Menudo ser querido, pedazo de sueño,
que sabes sostener en tus labios la risa
y llevas el amor en tu linda mirada
cuando te miro a ti se transforma la vida.

Small beloved being, a piece of a dream,
You who know how to hold the laughter on your lips
you who carry the love in your beautiful gaze
when I look at you, life is transformed.

218 In addition to Colindacias (1981), Boschetti also released Antologia Sencilla in 2000.
Déjame verlo todo en tu forma sencilla,  
que se me llene el alma de cosas bonitas  
y que me broten todas como tu sonrisa,  
tú que eres dueño de las alegrías.  

Menudo ser querido, pedazo de sueño.

Let me see it all in the simple way in which you do  
may my soul be filled with lovely things  
and may they all arise just like your smile,  
you who are the owner of all my joys.  
Small beloved being, a piece of a dream.

While Boschetti is more widely known for having composed “Canción para los niños,” a  
song about the importance of creating “better world” without “wars” for our children,  
popularized by Danny Rivera, it is “Menudo ser” which resonates with me in a deep way.  
Having received this strophic song that is barely over a minute long, I listened to it over and over  
again: “When I look at you, life is transformed. . . small beloved being, a piece of a dream.” In  
these lines, Boschetti had captured the way in which I felt as I looked at my two-month-old  
daughter. Now, as I write these lines, I revisit my dream diary. I realize that I had actually  
dreamed about Gabriela on September 24 and December 4, 2013. Gabriela is literally “a piece of  
a dream.”

It was at that moment, in a shared fatherly love for our children, that Boschetti and I  
began to bond beyond but within our common interests in music and poetry. If Boschetti had his  
“Small Being,” I had my “anarchist princess.” And we could both hear the echoes of José Martí’s  
“príncipe enano” (dwarf prince), as the nineteenth century Cuban freedom fighter had tenderly  
called his son. We were both familiar with Pablo Milanés’s setting to music of this poem in  
Versos de José Martí (1974). These exchanges would continue to take place throughout the  
years, in part, because Gabriela was often present during our encounters. And so long as  
Boschetti got Gabriela a piragua, those excessively sugary shaved ice desserts that no child  
should have, she was a willing participant.

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219 See the album Muchachito (1979).
220 You can listen to “Menudo ser” here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5Pz3LwYjhQ
On July 9, 2015, Boschetti emailed me another of his home recordings, this one dating from 1985. In the recording Boschetti and his son Pablo, then two years and eight months old, can be heard singing a duet of the classic children’s song “Palomita blanca:”

Palomita blanca
de pQUITO azul
llÉVAME en tus alas
a ver a Jesús

Little white dove
with a blue little beak
take me in your wings
to see Jesus.

Boschetti, who was raised a Catholic and even considered becoming a priest, has since the late 1960s ceased to profess such religious convictions. Neither a Christian nor an atheist, he considers himself to be a spiritual person. By singing this song with his son, then, he is not instilling a Christian faith in him but having him learn a song that is a part of Puerto Rican culture. I myself, who am not a Christian, have taught my daughter this beautiful tune. But Boschetti is also doing something else here. He introduces the song by saying: “Today is July 27. Yesterday, we celebrated the Cuban Revolution. Pablo and I spoke a bit about it last night.”

Thus, Boschetti—who had gone to Cuba the year before to participate in the Festival de Varadero—mobilizes a song about Jesus, not to instill in his son Christian values, but to give him a sense of pride in the Cuban Revolution. Indeed, Boschetti’s commitment to revolutionary causes and social justice cannot be overstated, as we will see in the following section.

**Boschetti’s Life as Singer-Songwriter and Activist: an Exploration of Anticolonialism and Gender Politics**

Between August 20, 1980 and September 16, 1986, Boschetti was under surveillance by the Division of Intelligence of the Police of Puerto Rico. On June 13, 2014, Boschetti emailed me a PDF copy of his one hundred-and-thirty-three-page carpeta, the police files that embodied the violation of Boschetti’s civil and human rights. His number was 9619. I had never read a

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221 “Hoy es 27 de julio. Ayer celebramos la Revolución cubana, y hablamos un poquito Pablo y yo anoche. . .”
carpeta before. But I had seen one. As a freshman, during the Spring of 2002, I had attended “Introduction to Social Sciences” with Professor Juan Angel Silén, a historian, a writer and the founder of the FUPI (the Federation of Pro-Independence College Students) in 1956. Though this happened nearly twenty years ago, I remember that day quite vividly. During our first class, without uttering a word, Silén began piling documents on top of his desk. This must have gone on for a few long minutes until there was no space left. Looking at us with the characteristic intensity of his gaze, he finally spoke: “This is my carpeta.” By then, I was already politically-aware on account of my mother’s labor of love. But I often wondered whether Silén’s powerful visual statement had had any impact on students who had a less generous upbringing. Boschetti’s carpeta, though, was the first one that I ever read.

The earliest entry in Boschetti’s carpeta is dated August 20, 1980. It is an event at the University of Puerto Rico organized by the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) and the FUPI. Boschetti is only described as an attendee. By the second and third entries, though, dated October 27 and 29, 1980, the carpeta “announces” that Boschetti will be performing in an activity organized by the PSP to be held on October 30. Following the activity, a newspaper article from El Nuevo Día written by Carmen Judith Vélez dated October 31, is added to the carpeta where we are informed that Boschetti had performed during the final campaign push of the PSP alongside Andrés Jiménez and Antonio Cabán Vale. But, as Vélez highlights, October 30 was also the commemoration of the Grito de Jayuya Revolution, when Puerto Rican revolutionaries attached to Pedro Albizu Campos’s Nationalist Party, had risen against US colonialism led by Blanca Canales. Vélez quotes socialist leader Carlos Gallisá as dedicating the PSP’s closing campaign to those who had died in the uprising. Boschetti’s official incursion into the world of “subversiveness,” thus, was marked by his artistic performance in such an event.
Just a year before, at some point in October, when the Division of Intelligence had not yet taken note of him, Boschetti had written a letter to Lolita Lebrón, who had just been pardoned by Jimmy Carter on September 10, 1979. Lebrón was an anticolonial leader and poet who on March 1, 1954 had led an armed attack on the House of Representatives of the United States Congress alongside Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores and Andrés Figueroa Cordero. A suicide mission, the objective was to expose to the world how, despite the foundation of the Free Associated State—which had presumably resolved the colonial status—Puerto Rico continued to be a colony that was in war with US imperialism. Imprisoned for twenty-five years, on September 12, 1979, Lebrón, Cancel Miranda, Flores and Oscar Collazo222—who had been serving a life sentence for his attempt to murder President Truman on November 1, 1950—arrived in San Juan. Upon arrival, they were “greeted by a huge crowd that stretched from the airport to the cemetery in Old San Juan, where the four went to pay homage to their late leader Pedro Albizu Campos”223 (Jiménez de Wagenheim 2016: 270).224

At some point in 2014, Boschetti shared with me that he had written a letter for Lebrón, and showing me Lebrón’s reply he gave it to me as a gift! I couldn’t believe it. Though I had only met Lebrón in passing, I admire her deeply. Furthermore, I had performed during an event at the Conservatory of Music of Puerto Rico where Cancel Miranda was an invited guest in 2013, and as I look at a copy of Los indómitos (Madrid Navarro 1981) that I inherited from my mother—an oral history of these revolutionaries—I realize that they have been a part of my life for a long time. The book is autographed by Cancel Miranda and Irving Flores, and dedicated to

222 Collazo was accompanied by Griselio Torresola during his attack on Blair House.
223 September 12 is Albizu Campos’s anniversary.
224 Figueroa Cordero had been released before because he was dying of cancer.
my parents a year before I was born. While the location of Boschetti’s letter to Lebrón is
unknown, I transcribe her reply in full below followed by my translation:

23 de octubre de 1979

Querido compañero Américo:

Recibe mis profundas gracias y la expresión de mi gozo al recibir tu «Serenata Montanera» a ésta tu servidora, dedicada. También, por tu preciosa carta.

Es una hermosísima poesía y composición musical. Me siento emocionada con tu bello regalo. ¡Eres un gran cantor!

No me ha sido posible hacer mas temprano reconocimiento [sic] a tu poética ofrenda dado a que aún estoy de casa en casa entre infinitidad de dificultades y limitaciones a causa de las circunstancias.

«La patria es valor y sacrificio».

Pienso estar en Naranjito el 27 de Oct para la conmemoración de la Revolución del 50 y en Jayuya el 30 de Oct.

Tu compañera, Lolita Lebrón

October 23, 1979

Dear comrade Américo,

Receive my deepest gratitude and the expression of my joy having received your “Mountain Serenade,” to yours truly, dedicated. [Thank you] as well for your precious letter.

It is an extremely beautiful poem and musical composition. I am moved by your beautiful gift. You are a great singer!

It has not been possible to acknowledge sooner your poetic offering because I am still going from house to house dealing with endless difficulties and limitations due to the circumstances.

“The homeland is courage and sacrifice”

I will be in Naranjito on Oct. 27 for the commemoration of the 1950 Revolution and in Jayuya on Oct. 30.

Your comrade, Lolita Lebrón

In this heartfelt letter, written barely a month after her release from the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson West Virginia (Jiménez de Wagenheim 2016: 267), Lebrón invites Boschetti to join her in the October 30 commemoration, and alludes to Albizu Campos by quoting his emblematic maxim: “The homeland is courage and sacrifice.” But the subject matter of the letter really revolves around “Serenata Montanera,” the song that Boschetti dedicated to her. As Lebrón
notes, having listened to the song, she is “moved” and “filled with joy.” This is a “lovely gift” that is “extremely beautiful,” and Boschetti is a “great singer.”

On September 16, 2013 in an email where Boschetti sent his regards to my wife and “la bebé inquilina,” (the “baby who was renting my wife’s womb”), he attached a WMA file of “Serenata Montanera” (“Mountain Serenade):

Despierta tu corazón esta madrugada  
que canta el ruiseñor en la enramada  
y se le quiebra la voz del amor que siente  
por su tierra y por tu ser mi bienamada.

Ya tiembla el día sobre la cordillera  
los gallos llaman ansiosos a la alborada  
y con mi alegría amplia como horizonte  
yo vengo a traerte el canto de la mañana

Por tí amo más a mi tierra en este día  
por tí se me enciende en el ser siempre esta esperanza  
por tí se proclama el amor en el centro de mi alma  
por tí en mi tierra florece hoy la flor de la patria

Despierta tu corazón esta madrugada  
y recibe mi canción mi linda serrana  
y llévala para siempre en tu pensamiento  
que sepas que alguien te ama cada momento

Wake up your heart this dawn 
the mockingbird is singing on the branches 
and its voice is breaking due to the love that it feels 
for its land and your being, my beloved.

The day is now trembling over the mountain chain 
the roosters call anxiously the daybreak 
and with my wide happiness like a horizon 
I come to bring you the song of the morning.

Because of you, today I love more my land 
Because of you, hope is always ignited in my being  
Because of you, love is proclaimed in the center of my soul 
Because of you, today in my land the flower of the homeland blooms.

Wake up your heart this dawn
and receive my song, my beautiful mountain-dweller
And carry it always in your thought
You should know that someone loves you in every moment.

Reminiscent of «Caminos,» and its idyllic tropes of rural life, in “Serenata Montanera” Boschetti exalts the natural beauty of the Puerto Rican landscape. But this landscape is not empty; it is inhabited by a “linda serrana” (“beautiful mountain-dweller”) who sounds like a bolero. Acknowledging that this was a “bolero romántico” (a romantic bolero), on April 4, 2021, having read a prior draft of this chapter, Boschetti shared a page from his diary dated August 17, 1979. There I noticed that Boschetti had described “Serenata Montanera” as a “canción danza jibara.” Indeed, the melodic material of “Serenata Montanera” is actually organized by the cinquillo rhythm emblematic of the danza. Furthermore, thanks to another entry of his diary dated July 30, 1979, I learned that “Serenata Montanera” had been inspired by “Linda serrana,” a song by jibaro singer Sánchez Erazo:

Despierta linda serrana
que el gallo canta al amanecer
los bueyes se desperezan
mugen las vacas en el batey
y el carretero vuelta a los aires
Con sus cantares a ti mujer

Whereas Boschetti confirmed this part of my analysis, though, he pointed out how I had misinterpreted his song in significant ways.

Assuming that “Serenata Montanera” had been written for Lebrón, I had engaged in the following analysis:

In this serenade, the poetic voice fluctuates between celebrating Lebrón for instilling love for the homeland (“por ti amo más esta tierra”/“because of you I love this land more”) and another voice that transforms Lebrón herself, it seems, into an object romantic love

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225 You can listen to “Serenata Montanera” here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2A1Ci36wNvA and to “Linda serrana” here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge0kzSL96YY
226 You can listen to the song here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge0kzSL96YY
("que sepas que alguien te ama"/ “You should know that someone loves you in every moment"). Of course, this should all be understood as poetic license. Lebrón was sixty years old when she was released from prison; Boschetti was around thirty. But it is significant to note how Lebrón is gendered. To my ear, the song evokes a Lebrón who is standing in a balcony as she is being serenaded by Boschetti and his beautiful crooning voice. (Cancel-Bigay, April 1, 2021)

From there, I had proceeded to compare the gender politics of “Serenata Montanera” with that of “Juan Pitirre” (Juan the Gray Kingbird), a song written for Corretjer, another disciple of Albizu Campos:

Se llama Juan Pitirre viene de Ciales hasta Guilarte
montado sobre un potro su rabia viene a cantarte. . .

Se llama Juan Pitirre, su rabia sangra también dolor,
desde hace mucho tiempo el es Consuelo el es su amor. . .

Y al oír su voz, ¿no sientes que late el alba en el horizonte?
Y al oír su voz/¿la sientes hecha de roble y de flamboyán?

Quien canta es Juan Pitirre,/Juan de la guerra,
Juan de la paz,/Pitirre que crece y crece/con la semilla de libertad.

His name is Juan the Gray Kingbird, he is coming from Ciales to Guilarte
Riding on a horse he is coming to sing his anger. . .

His name is Juan the Gray Kingbird, his anger bleeding also pain
Since a long time ago he is Consuelo227 he is her love. . .

And when you hear his voice/Don’t you feel that the dawn beats in the horizon?

And when you hear his voice/Do you feel that it is made out of oak and flamboyant?

He who sings is Juan the Gray Kingbird/Juan of war
Juan of peace/Gray Kingbird who grows and grows
with the seed of liberty.

Comparing Lebrón’s song to Corretjer’s I had concluded:

Just like in Lebrón’s song, nature plays a prominent role here as well. But Corretjer is associated with “anger” (twice), “pain,” “blood” and “war.” Furthermore, contrary to Lebrón, he is portrayed as being in movement (“viene de Ciales hasta Guilarte”/ “he is

227 Consuelo Lee Tapia is the name of Corretjer’s partner; a revolutionary in her own right, her name means solace.
coming from Ciales to Guilarte”). And whereas Lebrón is a “linda serrana,” Corretjer is “Juan Pitirre” (Juan the Gray Kingbird). The pitirre is a small bird celebrated in Puerto Rico for fighting against the much larger guaraguao (the red-tailed hawk). A national symbol associated with anticolonial struggles against US imperialism (i.e. the guaraguao), the pitirre can nevertheless also be found in the insular Caribbean, Florida and the North of Colombia and Venezuela (see Joglar and Longo 2017: 242).

But as Boschetti stressed, my analysis was flawed. Though he had written the third stanza of “Serenata Montanera” with Lebrón in mind (Because of you, today I love more my land. . .

Because of you, love is proclaimed in the center of my soul), the song was not composed for her. It had only been dedicated to her—as Lebrón herself had acknowledged in her letter. Boschetti further clarified:

I am imagining that I am going to sing to Lolita [Lebrón] at the window of her prison cell. I am going to sing to a political prisoner, to thank her for having taught me to love my homeland. It is not about making love to her or anything [like that]. These are metaphors. It’s not that I’m in love [with her]. (pers. email April 3, 2021)²²⁸

Commenting on my critique regarding how Corretjer was in movement, and thus active, whereas Lebrón seemed still and passive—which had struck me as being an articulation of rigid gender roles—he clarified:

I am writing “Juan the Gray Kingbird” for a man who is not in prison, a man that I know, the leader of a guerilla movement. That is why he is going from Ciales to Guilarte. Which again, is metaphoric. (pers. email April 3, 2021)²²⁹

Indeed, Boschetti knew Corretjer quite well. The poet had actually dedicated a copy of his poetry book El leñero to Boschetti on January 4, 1981, signing with the name “Juan Pitirre.” Interestingly, in the same dedicatory Corretjer called his partner “Consuelo pitirra,” thus making the “pitirre” feminine in a linguistically unconventional way (pers. email April 5, 2021). As

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²²⁸ "Yo me estoy imaginando que le voy a ir a cantar a Lolita a la ventana de la prisión. Voy a cantarle a la prisionera política, agradeciéndole que me haya enseñado a mi a amar a mi patria. No es que le voy hacer el amor ni nada. Son metáforas. No es que yo esté enamorado." (pers. email April 3, 2021)

²²⁹ Juan Pitirre se la estoy escribiendo no a un hombre que está en la cárcel sino al hombre que yo conozco, líder de un movimiento guerrillero. Por eso es que viene de Ciales a Guilarte. Lo cual, nuevamente, es metafórico. (pers. email April 3, 2021)
Boschetti stressed, he had been supportive of Corretjer’s political organization, the *Liga Socialista*, though he was not a formal member.

I was fascinated by Boschetti’s reply. The major contrast between the two songs was not to be understood along the male/female divide but the liberty/imprisonment divide. That is, Corretjer could move because he was free and engaging in revolutionary acts. Lebrón was still because she was imprisoned.

Providing more evidence that showcased how my prior analysis was erroneous, on April 5, 2021, Boschetti shared a song that he had actually composed for Lebrón and her male partners upon their impending release. Written on September 7, 1979, in “*Las palomas*” (“The Doves”), Boschetti sings:

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Hoy salen las palomas
los aires a surcar
estaban enjauladas
cuando querían volar...
Saben que el sol les pertenece
y se hacen soles al volar
sus cuerpos frágiles contienen
los rumbo nuevos por trazar
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Today the doves leave
to fly through the skies
they were in a cage
when they wanted to fly
They know that the sun belongs to them
and they become suns when they fly
their fragile bodies hold
the new paths yet to be traced

Stressing that “their fragile bodies” referred to how “we are all fragile when confronted by death,”²³⁰ Boschetti noted that he could have entitled this *bolero*-sounding song “*Los pitirres*” instead of “*Las palomas.*” The point being that in this song both men and women were associated with the “feminine” peaceful dove rather than the virile war-like *pitirre*.

What I learned from these exchanges is that Boschetti’s gender politics were (and are) far more complex and fluid than I had initially thought, and that taking into account the creative imaginary of the singer-songwriter is paramount in order to fully understand a song. Though I was

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²³⁰ « *Somos TODOS frágiles ante la muerte.*»
embarrassed by my blunders, I was relieved by the kindness with which he critiqued my prior criticism.

My initial oversimplistic analysis of “Serenata Montanera,” “Juan Pitirre,” and their relationship, though, was not only due to my ignorance regarding Boschetti’s intended meaning and the story behind these songs’ creation. My analysis had also been overdetermined by an in-depth analysis of a thirty-five page poem written by Boschetti in 1971 entitled “La emancipación de Rudrigo (elegía de un sueño)” “The Emancipation of/Rudrigo (Elegy of a Dream”), from now on, TER, of which I offer the highlights of my analysis.

TER tells the story of Rudrigo Antón Vihane, a fictional Puerto Rican anticolonial freedom fighter named after Rodrigo Díaz Vivar, the main character of the classic medieval epic The Poem of the Cid. Boschetti narrates the story of how Rudrigo transitions from being an alienated colonial subject into a socially aware revolutionary leading him to confront a monstrous bigger-than-life leech (read US imperialism). Throughout the poem, the leech is described as “raping” the homeland. At the beginning of the final battle with the leech, Rudrigo is somewhat successful: he is able to wound it with his machete. But the leech is soon aided by an ambulance providing a much-needed blood transfusion. Fully recovered, it fatally wounds Rudrigo. But the victory is Pyrrhic. As Rudrigo dies he “makes love” to his homeland, “poisoning” the leech as Rudrigo’s blood penetrates the earth. Nine months later the homeland gives birth to nine children.²³¹ La petite mort thwarts la mort.

Curious about Rudrigo’s dying orgasm, I had asked Boschetti what he intended by this. Boschetti answered:

Here we make love to it in the right way. . . I have a song entitled “Blooming in Love”. . . about a girl. [He sings]: “I would touch you as I would touch my land if it were free and it

²³¹ Boschetti uses the word “hijos” which could mean children or just sons. He told me that “hijos” should be understood as referring to children of either gender.
were a woman.” I have several songs like that... like “Tell Me, Was it Worth It” which is influenced by Davilita [an anticolonial singer-songwriter of the previous generation] and his patriotic songs. Maybe if you listen to them you will see many things that are there [in TER]. (pers. interview May 29, 2019)

Rudrigo’s dying orgasm was a way of making love to the homeland in “the right way.” In this regard, it stood in stark contrast to the leeches’ rape. But Rudrigo and the leech came together insofar as they both gendered the nation as female.

Boschetti’s way of gendering the nation follows in the footsteps of a long tradition of Puerto Rican poetry, one that, given PRNC’s investment in poetry, has informed it as well. As noted by Carmen S. Rivera, “for the most part, the poets of the first half of the twentieth-century” (poets such as Virgilio Dávila, Luis Lloréns Torres, and Luis Palés Matos) inspired by the nineteenth century romantic images of José Gautier Benítez, “sing to ‘la isla’ (the island) as a beautiful woman of great sensuality and voluptuousness” (2002: 79). Such tropes have also informed a strain of PRNC. Danzas such as the non-official national anthem “Verde luz” by Antonio Cabán Vale composed in 1967, or “Isla Nena” by Silverio Pérez—a condemnation of the US Marines’ military practices in the island of Vieques composed in 1978, and which became the town’s official anthem in 2003—have also reproduced this trope of the woman-homeland that is in need of being saved by the heroic male (see García Ramis 1993: 111-114, for a critique of “Verde luz”). Indeed, this is a trope that permeates Puerto Rican anticolonial discourse widely speaking (Pabón 2003) and Third Worldist discourses more broadly (see Saldaña Portillo 2003).

232 « Aquí se le hace el amor como es debido. . . Yo tengo una canción que se llama “Florecida en el amor” . . . sobre una muchacha. [Canta]: “yo te tocaría como tocaría a mi tierra si mi tierra fuera libre y fuera mujer. Hay varias canciones. . . como “Dime de qué te sirvío” que tiene influencia de Davilita y su canciones patrióticas. Tal vez si oyes las canciones vas a ver muchas cosas que están allí en TER! » (pers. interview May 29th, 2019)

233 I would like to thank my friend and PRNC scholar Eddie Pesante González for making me aware of the fact that “Isla Nena” is the anthem of Vieques. See: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10152194359998240
Reading TER, I had also been struck by the masculinist universe of the poem. Throughout the poem myriad male figures are mentioned such as: Mio Cid, Prometheus, Corretjer, Don Quixote, composer Rafael Hernández, Tony Bennett, and Taino Indian chief Agüeybaná. Implied are: Ramón Emeterio Betances, Albizu Campos, Bob Dylan, and Pedro Ortiz Dávila “Davilita,” among others. Only two women are explicitly mentioned in TER: Rudrigo’s girlfriend (who doesn’t have a name) and the woman-homeland. Boschetti does allude to women such as nineteenth century anticolonial poet Lola Rodríguez de Tió, who wrote the revolutionary lyrics of the Puerto Rican national anthem, Lebrón; and Blanca Canales. Ultimately, it seemed to me, that the liberation of the woman-homeland was carried out by a Rudrigo who had been mostly if not entirely inspired by male revolutionaries.

When I raised this issue with Boschetti at the time he told me that Rudrigo’s last name “Antón” “may” have been inspired by Antonia Martínez Lagares, the nineteen-year-old student who was assassinated by the police during the protests against the presence of the ROTC (Reserve Officer’s Training Corps) in the University of Puerto Rico on March 4th 1970 (see Sánchez Martínez 2019). But the fact that he was uncertain made this claim dubious. He also said that he had been inspired by Che Guevara’s notion of the hombre nuevo (new man), a concept that included women as well (pers. interview May 29, 2019). Having read a prior draft of this chapter, he also rightfully noted that at that time one did not use the inclusive language of today (pers. email April 7, 2021). According to this logic, TER’s presumably male-centric universe is really meant to be read as cross-gender. Still, the absence of the names of revolutionary female

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234 According to Boschetti, the surrealism present in TER “was inspired by Bob Dylan’s songs” (my translation).
235 Boschetti also pointed out that his references to ants and their association with revolution and Betances (I don’t want to be stepped on/ by Spaniards nor North Americans/ what is going on with the ants/ that they don’t bite? a reference to a famous speech) implied female empowerment insofar as ants are led by the queen ant (pers. email December 12, 2019; my translation).
figures that were known during the 1960s and 1970s, remains troublesome to me, though it is worth stressing, that when Boschetti wrote TER, he was a nineteen-year-old man living at a time where second wave feminism was barely beginning to leave its imprint (see Rivera Lassén 2001). Indeed, his poem is part of a constellation of cultural objects that reproduced the same logic during the time period.

In *Nuyorican Feminist Performance* Patricia Herrera reflects on a poster by anticolonial artist Antonio Martorell from 1970 that was reprinted by the Young Lords in their newsletter *Palante*. The poster commemorates the 1950 Jayuya Revolution led by Canales and the 1954 attack on the House of Representatives led by Lebrón. However, as Herrera notes:

> There is no visual representation of the women who led these revolts. The body of Albizu Campos, as opposed to the body of Blanca Canales or of Lolita Lebrón, becomes the terrain on which to document these women-led revolts. In eliding these female activists from this history, Martorell propagates a nationalist discourse that is constructed and represented predominantly by men. Even though female leaders were central and pivotal to leading this resistance, Martorell’s remembering of this history is tightly bound by a masculinist representation. (2020: 23)

A similar phenomenon takes place in TER, which is permeated by masculinist representations.

In the light of this, when I listened to “Serenata Montanera,” all I could see was Lebrón’s fusion with the woman-homeland. If the nation is “a beautiful woman” indissociable from nature, and Lebrón is the nation, I had thought, she can only be gendered in such a scripted way. And yet, I was quite off the mark! “Serenata Montanera” had not been written in an effort to document Lebrón’s life. She was not the “linda serrana.” The song was far more complex than I had believed it to be. I must confess that I was quite embarrassed. But I would have felt much more embarrassed had I not included in that prior draft, the following analyses where I had in fact acknowledged how Boschetti’s ways of gendering women were far from monolithic and scripted.

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236 By stating this I do not wish to efface the important legacies of first wave feminism in Puerto Rico (see Valle Ferrer 1990; Ramos 1992). But many of these legacies would be made visible by second wave feminism.
“Canción necesaria para Adolína Villanueva” (1980) is dedicated to Adolína Villanueva, an Afro-Puerto Rican woman who was killed by the Division of Tactical Operations of the Puerto Rican police on February 6, 1980 as they sought to evict her from her home in Loíza. According to his carpeta Boschetti attended several protests and homages related to Villanueva’s murder. In the song, Boschetti describes Villanueva as a “compañera del amor y de la vida” (“partner of love and life”) after which he associates her with a “rose”: “Esa rosa en los andamios de la vida ya no está”/ “That rose [Villanueva] is no longer in scaffold of life.” Villanueva is also a “flor” (“flower”) that the police “quieren matar” (“want to kill”). Towards the end of the song, however, we are told that “se incorporará Adolína en el rosal, como ausubo firme sobre nuestra tierra” (“Adolína will rise in the rose garden [Puerto Rico] like a firm ausubo on our land”). Thus, while Villanueva is associated throughout most of the song with the fragile flower, at the end she emerges as a strong ausubo, a tree that is actually central to Corretjer’s aesthetics. In “Ahora me despido,” for example, set to music by Brown, Corretjer had written: “De una sola pieza/me hicieron de ausubo/la cuchilla subo/con mucha tristeza” (“I was made of one piece/I was made out of ausubo/I raise my blade/with much sadness”).

But it is in “Mujer” where Boschetti offers a view on women that significantly departs from conventional forms of gendering:

Señora complementaria de la vida/que haces este camino junto al hombre y él junto a ti camina este camino,/lo digo para que nadie se equivoque.

Tú eres fuente del curso de la historia/que en ti se desborda y en ti continúa crisol del amor/baluarte de la vida/morada de mundos nuevos es tu vientre

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237 For more on this chapter of Puerto Rican anticolonial history regarding the “rescates de tierra” (land recoveries), and how the colonial state sought to and removed people who “illegally” inhabited such lands, see Cotto Morales 2006).


239 Released in *Aires Bucaneros* (1979)
Bread of our hearts/So hungry when we were growing up
Bread of our hearts/Beloved/Mother/Woman

Just like you forge and love life/you have been the indispensable partner
who in South America went down to the mines,/and you have given your life in one of its jungles.

You are a worker/an economist/a scientist/an office worker/a sculptor

Because this is so, mother and woman worker,/how beautiful it is to contemplate the daybreak next to you

And every day I admire you because I can see/how you dedicate yourself to the doubly difficult task of being a woman

Composed in 1981, in “Mujer” Boschetti recognizes women as workers, mothers, guerillas, and partners, explicitly acknowledging that they have it harder than men on account of their gender. Indeed, throughout his fifty-plus year career, Boschetti has sung about and to women leaders who challenge patriarchy by embodying unconventional gender roles. He has performed in events dedicated to Dylcia Pagán, Carmen Valentín Alicia and Lucy Rodríguez,

You can listen to « Mujer » here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjfpVNEh5W0
political prisoners belonging to the Armed Forces of Puerto Rican National Liberation (FALN), whom he actually visited in their prison at Dwight, Illinois in 1981. More recently, he has sung in support for other political prisoners such as Ana Belén and Nina Droz (recently released). He has also performed with Ruth Fernández and Myrna Oliver, among other woman singers whom he admires and respects. And playing a prominent role in his life is his mother, who nurtured his love for music, and passed away a few months before he started writing TER (pers. email April 7, 2021).

As I listen to “Mujer,” I cannot help but remember my mother, a “worker,” a psychologist, an anticolonial poet, “the source of the course of history,” a history that “overflows” her and “continues” in her, and in me. My mother, who gave me the gift of playing “Caminos” when I was five years old.

**Conclusion**

In a newspaper article dated April 17, 1983, Juan Cepero writes: “Love is a keyword in the poetic-musical work of Américo Boschetti. Love without restrictions and that does not restrict. Love for liberty.”

Indeed, my friendship with Boschetti has been characterized by this “love for liberty” without “restriction” and without “restricting,” though the age difference unavoidably establishes a hierarchy and certain “restrictions.” He is not my childhood friend. Boschetti, as are all my interlocutors, is my elder, and I owe them respect. I listen. I revise. I keep my ground where I find it prudent. And I can only hope that despite the differences, the friendship will remain.

Throughout this chapter, I have sounded out Boschetti’s life and my own, amplifying the sounds of our friendship, our shared passion for poetry and music, and the love that we feel for

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Puerto Rican freedom fighters and family members. I have told the story of how Boschetti’s songs have shaped my life paying careful attention to the ways in which we relate differently to the same objects. By theorizing with my interlocutor, I have shown how despite a friendship of eight years, I can still misinterpret Boschetti’s works. I do not fully know Boschetti. I never will. But perhaps that is precisely why I am driven to him and my interlocutors in general: there is so much to know!

I have also called for listening to the spaces where the line that divides fieldwork and life, the personal and the collective, dreams and reality, is blurred. Spaces where the love for the homeland and its decolonization is inextricably entwined with the love for friends and family members. Spaces that are “the skeleton architecture of our lives” (Lorde 2017 [1977]: 3). Decolonial spaces of poetry.

In Let’s Talk About Love, music critic Carl Wilson, reflecting on the reasons that might lead one to love a song, writes:

You can also love a song for its datedness, for the social history its anachronism reveals. You can love a song for how its sentimentality gives a workout to the emotions. You can love it for its foreignness, for the glimpse it gives of human variability. You can love it for its exemplarity, for being the “ultimate” disco floor filler or schmaltzy mother song. You can love it for representing a place, a community, even an ideology, in the brokenhearted way I love “The Internationale.” You might love it for its popularity, for linking you to the crowd: being popular may not make it “good” but it does make it a good, and a service, and you can listen to learn what it is doing for other people.” (2014: 155).

But you can also love a song because writing about it allows you to give back the love that you were gifted through a song.

**Coda**

On a sunny summer day in late May 2013, I took a public bus departing from Old San Juan’s Covadonga terminal heading, so I thought, towards Río Piedras.
Chapter 9:
Sylvain Leroux:
Sounding out the Encounter Between Québec, West Africa and the First Nations

To Patrick-André Mather

On April 5th, 2018, my interlocutor Bernardo Palombo, the director of the Latin American Workshop (El Taller), emailed me asking if I would like to jam with Argentinian singer-songwriter Juan Falú in an upcoming performance on April 14. I was in the final stages of drafting my dissertation proposal and getting ready for my upcoming fieldwork year. Why I decided to perform in the midst of so much work, I can’t quite remember. Falú’s work was out of the scope of my research, and I was already friends with Palombo (see chapters four, five and six). Looking back at my email thread with Palombo, though, I suspect that what moved me to acquiesce was Falú’s complex 6/8 syncopated repertoire and his beautifully poetic lyrics. But I probably also felt that I just couldn’t say “no.” Palombo’s support had been constant since our first encounter in 2015. So constant that I lost count of how many times he invited me to sing my songs at El Taller or to perform with him there, in others venues and his home. Thus, a mix of fascination for Falú’s repertoire and gratitude towards Palombo must have compelled me to participate in this non-paid gig. Palombo’s support, after all, was priceless.242

Arriving at El Taller, located at 99th street between second and first avenue, on April 14, I was met by a group of ten musicians or so who had also been invited to play with Falú. Before performing, we rehearsed frantically for an hour following Falú’s guidance and reading the music sheets. While performing with Falú was a joy and an honor,243 what made this gig

242 I should also stress, though, that in most occasions, Palombo did pay me for my work as a musician. Depending on the circumstances, my pay could range from $40 to $150. In one occasion, I was paid the impressive amount of $500.
243 For more on Falú go to: https://watson.brown.edu/clacs/events/2018/juan-falu-guitarra-argentina
memorable and pertinent to my dissertation, though, was what happened afterwards. I had not just participated in an amazing concert. Unbeknownst to me, I had actually begun my fieldwork vis-à-vis Québec.

After the show, one of the few musicians that I knew from prior performances asked me how my research was going. As I began to talk about Québec in the 1960s and 1970s, Pierre Vallières and his “nègres blancs,” and my interest in the relationship between Québécois and Black culture, he said: “You know, the flutist that was playing with us is Québécois, and he plays African musics too…”

I had just performed with my first Québécois interlocutor,244 the multi-instrumentalist and expert in West African musics Sylvain Leroux. Now, I just had to meet him!

Talking with Leroux, I realized that I had already come across his name as I searched for Québécois musicians who played and recorded with Black musicians in the Québec of the 1970s.245 But never imagining that I would simply run into Leroux by chance, I had no in-depth knowledge of the arc of his professional career, and I knew nothing about his life story (to my mind, he was still living in Montreal). During our conversation, Leroux expressed surprise at my interest in Québec, a topic that not many people knew about he said. Prompted by my mentioning of Vallières, he shared that his father had been a key player in the Quiet Revolution (1960-1966) and a member of the Rassemblement pour l’Indépendance Nationale (RIN), an anticolonial organization. (The RIN, in turn, had splintered, paving the way for the creation of the urban guerillas known as Front de Libération du Québec of which Vallières was an important member). The fact that Leroux had been raised in a politicized household and was

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244 Of course, this is a retrospective assessment, Leroux was not my interlocutor when we played.
245 Leroux had actually collaborated in an album released in Montreal in 1980, described by one critic as the « premier album de ‘Musique du monde’ ayant vu le jour au Québec!”
See: https://quatuorcreole.wordpress.com/about/quatuor-creole-cd-reviews/magazine-son-image/
familiar with Québécois politics of the 1960s and 1970s made him an ideal interlocutor: here was someone who had lived through some of the events that I had only read about. That day, I learned as well that he was an expert on the tambin also known as Fula flute—the flute of the Fulani people of West Africa.246

Meeting Leroux marked a significant moment in my research. Up to that point, I had worked only as a “cultural insider,” that is, I had only done fieldwork with fellow Puerto Ricans, Nuyoricans or Latin Americans such as Palombo who had been actively involved in Puerto Rican political-culture. Of course, I was an “outsider” in these relationships at multiple levels on account of ethnic, age, and language differences—my Nuyorican interlocutors Papoleto Meléndez and Sandra María Esteves, though fluent in Spanish, felt much more comfortable speaking in English. But insofar as we were talking about Puerto Rican history and culture, I was an insider. (Although I must confess that my relative ignorance at that time regarding US-based Puerto Rican struggles,247 a reflection of the Island-centric education that one receives in the homeland, often made me feel as an outsider when speaking with Meléndez, Esteves and Palombo).248 But Leroux was my first Québec-related interlocutor. Despite my experiences as a cultural “outsider” meeting him represented a significant rupture. I was talking about a different country, and though Leroux, a Francophone, was kind enough to speak to me in English, he was also generous enough to allow me to practice my French and reply in his mother tongue. Excited about the prospects of thinking my project with Leroux, though uncertain as to where it might

246 The Fulani are also called Peul or Fulbe; they inhabit many parts of West Africa and are concentrated in Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Cameroon, Senegal and Niger. See: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fulani. For more on the Fulani people, specifically in Burkina Faso, see: Riesman 1977 [1974].
247 It was a “relative ignorance” because by the time I met Palombo, who in turn introduced me to Nuyorican poet Jesús “Papoleto” Meléndez, I had already attended a seminar at New York University with Dr. Juan Flores, an expert on the Puerto Rican diaspora. I had also attended a seminar at Columbia University with Dr. Christopher Washburne whose work Sounding Salsa (2008) also explores Puerto Rican diasporic culture.
248 For more on a discussion on the insider/outsider or etic/emic dichotomy within ethnomusicology see: Rice 1997: 101:120.
lead, we began to meet on a regular basis. That summer, as I began my fieldwork in Québec, I was still terrified. This was the first time I would conduct fieldwork in a foreign country with the exception of the United States. But Leroux had given me a much-needed boost of confidence: if I had been able to successfully interact with Leroux, I could potentially do the same with other Québec-related interlocutors.

Intrigued by the *tambin*, but also just eager to learn how to play a new instrument, I became Leroux’s student. This shaped our friendship in significant ways as I discuss in the following section. My fieldwork with Leroux also included attending several of his performances in New York City, and I even had the honor of playing with him on January 24, 2020, during one of my performances for the People’s Music Network at The People’s Forum. During this show Leroux accompanied me with the *tambin* as I sang “Negro,” a poem by Langston Hughes that I set music to when I still lived in Puerto Rico. I was also fortunate enough to coincide with him in Montreal during the summer of 2018 where he gave me a tour of his neighborhood, the Plateau Mont-Royal, and another *tambin* class at his brother’s home. Finally, I listened to his many albums—all of which are related to West African musics with an emphasis on Fulani and Mande culture—took extensive fieldnotes, and conducted several audio-recorded interviews with him. Having collected so much data, deciding what would be my main object of analysis was extremely difficult. One of my initial inclinations had been to pick an album, a musical piece or a particular performance, and see how Leroux inscribed in sound his ideas around Blackness and a Québécois sensibility related to the 1960s and 1970s. I was soon dissuaded from this, though.

Despite all of my efforts (*tambin* classes and research), I am not an expert in West African musics. Thus, I cannot really evaluate in any depth the aesthetic complexities of

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249 Because my fieldwork was multi-sited (Puerto Rico, NYC, Montreal) and I was the primary care-giver of a young child, my fieldwork was characterized by a constant back and forth between all three locations.
Leroux’s sounds and music. Reviewing again my fieldwork materials, I found an oral history interview that I had conducted with Leroux on October 2, 2018. There, Leroux narrated his childhood and youth in Québec, sharing his musical influences in detail and talking profusely about Québécois anticolonialism, his father, social justice struggles, his relationship with Black culture and Black musicians, spirituality and the First Nations. I had found my object. An object that I could actually analyze in an insightful manner.

In this chapter, then, I use this interview as the main entry point into exploring some of Leroux’s ideas around music, race, (anti)colonialism and social justice, highlighting the decolonial critiques that emerge in the process. As is customary throughout my dissertation, though, I also interweave historical documentation of the time and critical historiography in order to complicate, nuance or problematize Leroux’s memories and assessments. What emerges, in the end, is not so much a recounting of Leroux’s memories, but a composite of his memories, and my own interpretation of them based on archival research and scholarly literature. But because Leroux has also commented on prior drafts of this chapter, this composite also includes his counter-arguments or clarifications.

Ultimately, I share Leroux’s life story as a means to reflect upon some of the ways in which the Québec of the 1960s and 1970s sounded out resistance, anticolonialism, decoloniality and cross-cultural encounters. I focus on Leroux’s musicking—the ways in which his views on music are shaped by family members, friends, historical figures and the other.250 My overall argument is that without an understanding of the historical contexts that inform interlocutors’ lives, understanding their aesthetic choices, and their political-spiritual views, is impossible.

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Who was Leroux in the 1960s and 1970s? How did he entwine politics, music and spirituality? What is the political import of his musical life as sketched here? What does this teach us about the Québec of the time? Before addressing these questions, I begin by engaging in a methodological reflection.

**A Methodological Reflection: Synchronicity and Bi-Musicality**

In addition to theorizing with my interlocutor, two key methodological techniques shaped my relationship with Leroux: synchronicity and bi-musicality.

The randomness involved in how I met Leroux, though unexpected, was not an entirely novel experience for me. As I highlighted in chapter eight, a similar phenomenon had occurred with my first interlocutor ever Boschetti, whom I randomly met in a public bus. My encounter with Marie-Claire Séguin (see chapter seven) was no less bizarre.

During May of 2018 I was rehearsing with the folk band Hudson Valley Sally and Argentinian singer-songwriter Rubén González. Hudson Valley Sally banjo player and singer-songwriter David Tarlo, an Anglophone originally from Québec, asked me about the defense of my dissertation proposal. I barely had time to answer when he continued: have you considered interviewing Richard and Marie-Claire Séguin? In fact, Richard and Marie-Claire had been one of three Québécois groups that I had explicitly mentioned in my proposal. Still shocked at the odds of this, Tarlo proceeded to inform me that his brother and nephew played music with Richard and knew him well. Soon, Tarlo’s family members had put me in touch with Richard who in turn put me in contact with his sister Marie-Claire.

Previously, in 2013, when I was working on my Master’s thesis at New York University, similar acts of randomness had come to my aid. In late June I reached out to Puerto Rican *nueva...*  

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251 Unfortunately, Richard was in the middle of recording his album *Retour à Walden - Sur les pas de Thoreau* (2018), and was unable to contribute to my research.
canción-related musician and composer Nicky Aponte. I scheduled an interview to meet him on July 2 at his home in Lajas, one of 78 Puerto Rican towns, and a two-hour trip from Old San Juan, where I was staying. It occurred to me that I should send a Facebook message to Puerto Rican nueva canción singer-songwriter and anthropologist Zoraida Santiago, to see if we could also meet at some point, and so I did on July 1. Dr. Santiago replied that she would be glad to meet me but there was only one inconvenience: she lived far from Old San Juan...She lived in Lajas! That day, I met both with Aponte and Santiago.

Randomness has been key to my methodology. Or is it randomness?

When I met with Leroux during our first formal meeting on May 16, 2018 near his apartment in the Lower East Side, just a few blocks away from the Nuyorican Poet’s Café, I shared the story of how I met Boschetti, and how it resonated with our own encounter. Leroux, who had read Carl Jung’s autobiography (1961) when he was twenty years old, somewhat matter of factly told me “that is what Jung called synchronicity.” Vaguely familiar with Jungian terminology—during my youth, my mother María, an ABD in psychology and a psychic, had routinely bashed Freud’s phallocentrism while celebrating Jung’s mysticism—I learned that synchronicity was:

> no more baffling or mysterious than the discontinuities of physics. It is only the ingrained belief in the sovereign power of causality that creates intellectual difficulties and makes it appear unthinkable that causeless events exist or could ever occur... Meaningful coincidences are thinkable as pure chance. But the more they multiply and the greater and more exact the correspondence is, the more their probability sinks and their unthinkability increases, until they can no longer be regarded as pure chance but, for lack of causal explanation, have to be thought of as meaningful arrangements... Their

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252 This thanks to the kind intervention of his sister Kitty Aponte who facilitated me with his phone number.
253 Here, I must express a note of gratitude to my friend and compadre Carlos Andrés Rodríguez who drove me all the way there.
254 It always struck me as odd that my encounters with a Québécois would take place in a largely Nuyorican geography. But then again, my second encounter with Leroux on April 21st 2018 occurred at El Taller during an event where my Nuyorican interlocutors Papoleto Meléndez and Sandra María Esteves were declaiming their poetry. Leroux was one of the musicians of the Karl Berger CMS Improvisers Orchestra accompanying the poets.
255 Incidentally, when I shared these experiences with Marie-Claire she also said “that’s synchronicity.”
‘inexplicability’ is not due to the fact that the cause is unknown, but to the fact that a cause is not even thinkable in intellectual terms” (1989 [1961]: 401).

Given the scientific/rational aspirations behind methodological endeavors, claiming with Jung that things that are “not even thinkable in intellectual terms” inform my methodology might seem rather absurd. And yet my empirical evidence (paradoxically) points in that direction. I cannot “prove” synchronicity but neither can I dismiss it given my experiences. Furthermore, would it be truthful of me to deny that despite the rigorous rationality of my academic endeavors (proposal, archival research, the high level of discipline) I have been assisted by forces that transcend logical explanations? At the risk of sounding mathematically inept, and leaving aside the patriarchal biases of Machiavelli, Fortuna is indeed the “arbiter” if not “of one half of our actions” at least of an important percentage of them (2008: 84).

If “synchronicity” was a major “methodological tool” in my fieldwork with Leroux (and others), so was what Mantle Hood called bi-musicality (1960), or rather, an idiosyncratic version of it. Most of my conversations and interactions with Leroux, after all, were developed in a student-teacher context.

In the mid-1990s, Leroux’s interest in West African musics led him to learn how to play the tambin (see Pareles 1997: C12), an instrument that he became aware during the 1980s in Montreal (pers. interview Oct. 2, 2018). Made out of “conical vine from the forests of Guinea,” one of the most emblematic characteristics of the three-hole tambin flute is that the musician can speak through it. As Leroux put it, its most striking characteristic is “the voice/flute effects and multiphonics produced by the instrumentalist by over-blowing and interspersing

\[\text{256} \quad \text{Machiavelli, emphasizing that Fortuna was a woman, called for the Prince to “beat” her and “force her down” in order to “keep her under” (2008: 86).} \]

\[\text{257} \quad \text{http://www.fulaflute.net/fula_flute/flutes/instruments.html} \]
blown notes with yodeling” (qtd. in Racanelli 2010: 118). When done at the right moment “people in Africa can actually cry” because of the emotional charge (pers. comment August 6, 2018). By 2000, Leroux’s drive had led him to create the Fula Flute recording project, and by 2013, he had founded L’École Fula Flûte in Guinea. Attached to the Centre Tyabala Theatre de Guinée, Leroux and others, such as his “old teacher Mamadi Mansaré, [a] retired veteran of the world-famous Ballets Africains and one of the most well-known and respected flutists in Guinea”259 teach Fulani children how to play the flute.260 Intrigued by the instrument, and eager to see what I could learn about Leroux’s musical-political-spiritual worldview by playing with him, I became his student.

Given my prior experience playing the transverse flute, producing a sound with the tambin was not particularly challenging. Indeed, Leroux was surprised at the ease with which I was able to do this. But my sound was not the right one. I was aspiring to the “clean” sound of a classical flute, which ran counter to the ideal sound of the tambin which is more akin to playing percussion with a wind instrument. Even the sound of the finger closing the hole is part of the flute’s sound (something unconceivable in the transverse flute, at least in Western art music). While I needed to sound out the percussive aspect of the flute, I still needed to play it as if it “were a bird, lightly, without putting too much pressure on it” (pers. comment Sept. 17, 2018). But I also needed to “play loud, not paying attention to the neighbors as if I were in the mountains” (pers. comment Nov. 6, 2018) though it should feel “like swimming, like a pendulum, not really on the beat, a steady flow where you control the air movement and don’t

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258 When Leroux started the “Fula Flute” recording project, he recorded “some of oldest and most revered works in the griots’ traditional repertoire” capturing “the truest sense of griot music as a form of musical expression” (Racanelli 2010: 118).

259 See: http://www.fulaflute.net/eff.html

260 To learn more about Leroux’s school, see his moving documentary Les enfants de Tyabala: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UeClgwHjjg4
give it all at once” (pers. comment Dec. 23, 2018). Leroux’s advice was getting at a limitation that I was never quite able to overcome: playing “lightly” meant not allowing my body to become tense. I never did manage to relax while playing the tambin. In fact, to my embarrassment, by the fourth class I had already broken the hand-made flute that he had sold me for $200. So hard was I pressing on it. Having offered to buy another one, I was moved when Leroux simply gave me another flute in exchange. Soon, though, I broke that one as well, at which point I asked if he wouldn’t mind giving me one of the plastic versions of the tambin that he had also made. As far as I can tell, that one is alive and well.

If I call these interactions with Leroux “bi-musicality,” it’s for lack of a better term. I am clearly repurposing this methodological tool in significant ways. While Hood, a white ethnomusicologist, used bi-musicality in order to learn about the musical universe of “traditional” “authentic” “ethnic” others, I have applied it to explore the cosmopolitan worldview of a white musician invested in learning about musical West African “traditions,” who at times, creolizes these traditions with jazz or classical music.261 The fact that he teaches and plays the traditional tambin and a chromatic version of it that he designed in 2012, is also a testament to his desire to sound out at least two distinct aesthetics.262

In a sense, I was reversing Hood’s logic. Here, it is was an “ethnic” Puerto Rican “other” who was applying bi-musicality to a white man or at best a “négre blanc.” But I was also altering the end goal of such a methodology. After all, I was not playing music with the other in order “to comprehend a particular Oriental musical expression” so that my “observations and analysis as a

261 Leroux’s recorded repertoire includes albums concerned with preserving West African traditions and albums that creolize these traditions with other musics. Albums such as Les enfants de Tyabala (2014) and Tyabala (2019), consist largely of children from the Fula Flute School performing, for the most part, traditional Fulani repertoire. Whereas Quatour Créole (2011) creolizes jazz and West African traditions.

262 See: http://www.fulaflute.net/ct/chromatic_tambin.html
musicologist do not prove to be embarrassing” (Hood 1960: 58). I was trying to learn more about a cultural practitioner of the culture of others, and seeking to develop a space of intimacy that would make Leroux feel comfortable enough to share his musical-political-spiritual views.

Though I learned to play a few pieces of the Fulani repertoire—which included Fulani and Mande songs—I never went beyond a basic level. But going beyond that was not the goal. And though I acquired some knowledge about West African culture, particularly Guinea and Mali, I am by no stretch of the imagination an expert on this subject. But that was not the goal either. The goal was to develop a friendship with Leroux, and have access to ideas and feelings that might not have been accessible otherwise. In the process, though, I have also shown what decolonizing Hood’s bi-musicality might look like.

**Sylvain Leroux: Retracing Some of His Influences**

One of Leroux’s earliest musical memories is related to Félix Leclerc (1914-1988), the prolific Québécois poet, playwright, and singer-songwriter. Known for his pacifism and his pro-independence political activism, Leclerc was influential on renowned figures such as Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel. By 1961, when Leroux was around five years old, he was already a fan of Leclerc, though, as he promptly clarified, given his young age he was not really aware of his politics. When his father, Maurice proposed that the family go visit Leclerc, Leroux was ecstatic. Mid-way to Leclerc’s home, though, Leroux threw a tantrum. The prospects of meeting his idol were perhaps too much, he told me as he tried to make sense of his actions. The family was forced to return home.

From Leclerc, Leroux’s musical memories jumped to Chubby Checker’s “Let’s Twist Again,” The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix. So much did he admire Hendrix that, as he

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confided amidst chuckles, he dressed like him (bandana included) and even began playing the electric guitar at times “on his back.” Jethro Tull, Joni Mitchell and Frank Zappa were also major influences. So was Québécois singer-songwriter and countercultural icon Robert Charlebois, who Leroux saw on TV when he was twelve.

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, Charlebois came to embody Québec’s musical-political redefinition as a modern North American Francophone country that stood in solidarity with African Americans, the Third World more broadly and Québécois independence (Roy 2008). As Leroux put it, his music “spoke to our feeling; so much creativity, so positive. He brought together the Amerindian feeling, the American feeling, our own way [e.g. Québécois] of doing things. He brought the poetry, our musical traditions, rock and roll, R’n’B, country, jazz.” While much of this aesthetic assessment and appreciation is no doubt a posteriori, that is, it is the evaluation of a man who revisits his childhood memories, as a fan of Leclerc Leroux would have most certainly appreciated Charlebois’s novelty. Charlebois represented a turning point in Québécois musical culture and a generational shift. His creolization of the aforementioned musical genres and the use of joual, that mix of French and English and local colloquialisms, contrasted with Leclerc’s more conventional (French-standard) poetic language and acoustic sound.

By 1971, when Leroux was sixteen, he had exchanged the electric guitar for the transverse flute. It was around then that he began studying at Vincent d’Indy Music School. There he became acquainted with classical music composers like Bach. In 1974, when he was eighteen years old, he attended the Superfrancofête, a massive music festival celebrated in Québec City where “Francophones” from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean—or rather, peoples who had been colonized by France—gathered together to share their music. Leroux, contrary to
Lise Vachon (with Toubabou), Marie-Claire Séguin (with Séguin), Félix Leclerc and Robert Charlebois, was not a featured artist. But he did play informally in the street with some friends “earning enough money to eat for five days.” While Leroux doesn’t remember listening to African music during the festival, he does remember Vachon and Michel Séguin’s performance with West African musicians. Whether he listened to them live or shortly thereafter when they released their fusion album *Le blé et le mil* based on this performance, is not clear. But it was around then, that Leroux began to explore, however rudimentarily, West African musics.

During one of my *tambin* classes, however, I was able to learn that Leroux’s relationship with West African musics was more complex. One of the major difficulties that I had playing the *tambin* repertoire was the fact that it was not diatonic but based on modes. The melodies were tremendously difficult to memorize, and to my mind, they seemed to be going in the most awkward directions. My difficulties were related both to my unfamiliarity with Fulani musical traditions and a musical training as a performing musician that had not exposed me to modal music. In my ignorance, and mistakenly assuming that Leroux too had transitioned from a major/minor repertoire to a repertoire based on modes, I asked him how he had managed. To my surprise, Leroux answered that it had not been hard at all. Since the early 1970s he had been familiar with modal jazz via Miles Davis’s groundbreaking *Kind of Blue* (1959). Thus, the transition was rather smooth in this regard (pers. comment Dec. 23, 2018). That Leroux was familiar with the modes through jazz was an important “discovery” for me. It implied that, despite his relative ignorance of West African music back in the early 1970s, by the time he had begun playing African musics in the late 1970s, he had come across some West African influences *through* jazz.264

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264 Leroux’s expertise in jazz should not be underestimated. By 1978 he had attended Karl Berger’s Creative Music Studio in Woodstock where he was exposed to the jazz musicians/composers such as Don Cherry and Ornette...
Having read a prior draft of this chapter, Leroux made a point of stressing that *Kind of Blue* was also important to him not only because it served as a sort of bridge between jazz and West African music but because it was embedded in synchronicity. Leroux noted that Miles Davis had been inspired by *Les Ballets Africains* from Guinea, and their performance at the Apollo Theater in 1953. He added that performing at that concert were kora player Mbady Kouyate, balafon player El Hadj Dejli Sory Kouyate, and Mamady Mansare senior. Leroux had become close to all three. He had become a part of Mbady Kouyate’s family—to the point of being considered like a son to him. Regarding El Hadj Dejli Sory Kouyate, in 2004 Leroux had invited him to play with his band at Zankel Hall in New York City. Concerning Mamady Mansare senior, his son—who is currently teaching at *l’École Fula Flûte*—had become Leroux’s teacher (pers. comment Jan 19, 2021). Hence, while *Kind of Blue* initially spoke to Leroux’s musical interests, in retrospect, it had become an object that foreshadowed important moments of his professional and personal life. It was a sound object that embodied synchronicity insofar as “meaningful coincidences. . . the more they multiply and the greater and more exact the correspondence is, the more their probability sinks and their unthinkability increases, until they can no longer be regarded as pure chance but, for lack of causal explanation, have to be thought of as meaningful arrangements” (Jung 1989 [1961]: 401). *Kind of Blue* was such a magical object.

If *chanson québécoise*, rock and roll, Anglophone and Francophone countercultural rock, classical music, jazz, fusion and West African musics were emblematic of Leroux’s musical

\[\text{Coleman, and by 1983 he had “performed at the Montréal International Jazz Festival” with Mysterioso, a band “dedicated to the music of jazzman Thelonious Monk.” See: http://www.fulaflute.net/source/Leroux.html }\]

\[\text{265 Leroux provided the following youtube link, where, in effect, Davis reflects on this influence. Go to minute 14: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Owem2DT9kTo&feature=youtu.be}\]

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universe in Québec, this was accompanied by the development of a rich political consciousness. While a good portion of the latter came through his musical influences (the political import of *chanson québécoise*, countercultural musics, and jazz), his father’s political activism also played a significant role.

On August 6, 2018, after one of my *tambin* classes, Leroux brought me into his office, and handed me a folder with the following inscription: “à mon cher fils LEROUX en souvenir d’un épisode marquant de ma vie et qui a fait du bruit en son temps. Affectueusement, Maurice.” Within the folder were newspaper articles about, and letters written by, Leroux’s father during the 1960s. They were related to Maurice’s political career and anticolonial ideals. By extension, these documents shed light on Leroux’s childhood, allowing me to see what political ideas were shaping his household. The dream come true of a historical-anthropologist!

Maurice, it turned out, had worked for Jean Lesage, the architect of the Quiet Revolution and its myriad liberal reforms after the conservative and Catholic decades-long government of Duplessis.266 He had been the director of foreign relations under Lesage and was “responsible for the party’s television programs, including the Lesage-Johnson TV debate which has been described as a turning point for the Liberals, in 1962” (see “Leroux Quits” 1965). A solid academic preparation had prepared him for this moment. Maurice, after all, “*avait fait des études en relations industrielles à l’Université de Montréal, en droit à l’Université McGill, puis en cinéma-télévision à l’Institut des hautes études cinématographiques de Paris et au TV Workshop of New York*” (Cardinal 2015: 217).

The story of how Maurice joined Lesage’s *Fédération Libérale du Québec* (later *Parti Libéral du Québec*) in 1960, is no less interesting. According to one source, he had been invited

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266 See chapters one and two for more on this.
to join by no other than René Lévesque (see “Maurice Leroux sera” 1965).267 Then minister of natural resources, Lévesque would eventually become the prime minister of Québec in 1976 and the leader of the (failed) pro-independence referendum of 1980. A veritable nightmare for the Inuit, the Cree and the Mohawks— he was an enforcer of settler colonialism in the name of the Quiet Revolution268—Lévesque nevertheless embodied the hopes of most independence supporters throughout the 1970s, particularly, after having founded the Parti Québécois in 1968.

Even Pierre Vallières, the incendiary revolutionary who called for a Third Worldist revolution in Quebec, then in hiding, became a member of Lévesque’s Parti Québécois in 1972, renouncing revolutionary violence as a viable method (Samson-Legault 2018: 248-250).

By April 15, 1965, however, Maurice, who described himself as a “socialiste de coeur” but “non doctrinaire” (see « Maurice Leroux sera » 1965), had resigned to Lesage’s (and Lévesque’s) Liberal Party because, according to his letter, dated April 15, 1965: “Je ne crois plus que vous puissiez sortir le Québec de l’état colonial dans lequel il se trouve présentement. Je ne vois qu’une solution: l’INDÉPENDANCE.” Shortly after resigning, he ran for the presidency of the Rassemblement pour l’Indépendence Nationale (RIN), a pro-independence organization founded in 1960. He withdrew his candidacy, though, allowing Pierre Bourgault to renew his mandate, becoming instead the director of the organization’s journal L’Indépendance (Cardinal 2015: 220).

The RIN was characterized by a relentless defense of independence through peaceful means. Inspired by African American sit-ins, on June 22nd 1965, seventy-five members of the RIN, among them Maurice, entered the restaurant Honey Dew in the afternoon, ordered a coffee

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267 Leroux notes, though, that his father was recruited by Jean Lesage to coach him on how to appear on TV given his success in this medium (pers. comment Jan 19, 2021).
268 See chapters seven and two for more on this.
or a tea and rested “paisiblement assis, à l’heure pointe du service, en lisant un exemplaire de L’Indépendance” until 7pm, when they paid and left (Cardinal 2015: 246-247). The objective was to denounce “l’industrie de la publicité au Québec, qui développait pour un peuple francophone une publicité pensée en anglais” thus facilitating the assimilation of French Canadians (Cardinal 2015: 246). Considering that Québécois were often told to “speak white” by Anglo-Canadians, their borrowing of African American tactics of resistance should not be dismissed as a ridiculous (mis)appropriation, though it is clear that their whiteness shielded them from harsh treatment. The protestors were not met by the violence that African Americans routinely encountered when engaging in this revolutionary praxis. They were not spat upon, injured, nor attacked, nor were they removed by the police.

By the time Maurice participated in the sit-in, Leroux was around ten years old. It would be a mistake to argue that Leroux shared all of his father’s ideas. But the latter no doubt shaped his political subjectivity. Until this day, for example, after more than forty years of living in the United States, Leroux has been unable to become a US citizen. As he told me, he just can’t bring himself to recite the Pledge of Allegiance (pers. comment Feb. 25, 2019). While as a white man he knows that the stakes for not doing this are relatively low, this nevertheless speaks to a sense of belonging to his homeland; a sense that was partly instilled in him by Maurice.

Leroux’s political consciousness also became obvious when we spoke about Vallières and the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ). Founded in 1963 by members disillusioned with the RIN, between 1963 and 1972, the FLQ engaged in acts of sabotage and robberies; stole military armament, bombed innumerable locations that it deemed strategic; and kidnapped the British diplomat James Richard Cross and kidnapped and killed the “ministre du travail du Québec” Pierre Laporte (Laurendeau 1990: 310-320). These kidnappings led to the October
Crisis of 1970.269 When I asked Leroux if he had read Nègres blancs d’Amérique, he answered that he began reading it but did not finish it. He continued:

C’était provocateur, ça a exprimé une certaine réalité parce qu’on était une sous-classe, parmi toutes les sous-classes de Canada on était avant-dernière ou quelque chose comme ça, alors on était le peuple fondateur du Canada; donc, aussi cet idéal de nous même comme peuple opprimé, exploité m’a donné la sympathie pour les noirs américains, et la situation des noirs dans le monde. (Pers. Interview October 2, 2018)

The fact that he did not finish the book is not surprising. Around five hundred pages in length, a good portion of the latter half of the book is quite theoretical in contrast to the more biographical first half. While Leroux emphasizes one of the texts’ central claims—the parallelism between Québécois and Blacks—his remark regarding how French Canadians were the founders of Canada (and a comment that he made later regarding how the French colonizers were, despite their colonizing mission, pretty brave on account of their small numbers when compared to the First Nations), is not representative of Vallières’s ideas. Vallières simply ignored the role played by settler colonialism, and placed the accent on Québec’s belonging to a socialist anti-imperialist Third World geography. Here Leroux is reproducing a rather less radical and more common pro-independence trope espoused by René Lévesque. In a speech given on November 2, 1977 in Paris for the National French Assembly, for example, Lévesque argued that:

De la Baie d’Hudson et du Labrador tout en haut jusqu’au Golfe de Mexique tout en bas, et de Gaspé près de l’Atlantique jusqu’aux Rocheuses d’où l’on voit presque le Pacifique, c’est nous—et c’est donc vous en même temps—qui fûmes les découvreurs et aussi les premiers européens à prendre racine. Les pèlerins du Mayflower n’avaient pas encore tout à fait levé l’ancre pour aller fonder la Nouvelle-Angleterre, que déjà Champlain avait érigé à Québec son Abitation et que la Nouvelle-France était née. (1980: 34)

Both Lévesque and Leroux, in other words, would seem to say “we, the descendants of the French, founders Canada, do not deserve to be at the near bottom of the social pyramid for

269 See chapter two for more on this.
we are conquerors.” Their statements imply that oppression is more humiliating when endured by a colonizing/“civilized” power (how could we, the conquerors, allow ourselves to be conquered?). That Leroux echoes Lévesque is not surprising. Both on account of the latter’s historical stature and his “presence” in Leroux’s childhood home. But it also speaks to a broader Québécois anticolonial political culture that reduced Canadian history to the struggles between French-Canadians and Anglo-Canadians, often reifying the French language (see Barreto 1998) and silencing settler colonialism. As Edouard Glissant noted, highlighting along the way the ambiguities behind Québec’s political subordination:

The fact is that the aggressive bilingualism of Quebec keeps these two languages [English and French] forever apart. “Speak white,” say the anglophone Canadians. Which will not make the Quebeçois more black or more red (The cultural militants in Quebec have been criticized for ignoring the Indian minorities of Quebec). Economic disparity has established only one kind of separateness, that is linguistic. (1999 [1981]:153)

Having read an earlier draft of this chapter, Leroux emphasized, however, that he did not “identify” with conquerors. Suggesting that I use the word “discoverer” instead, he elaborated:

I am proud of my ancestors who braved the harshest conditions to build a society on a ‘new’ continent and of all the Europeans who arrived on the shores of America, the French Canadians integrated the most peacefully with the Amerindians and did not actively perpetrate genocide on them as opposed to the Spanish and the Portuguese, who would wholesale enslave, rape and kill everybody they found, and the Anglos who would eradicate them when they were in the way. (pers. comment January 16, 2021).

While Québécois scholars would agree with Leroux (see Bouchard and Lévesque 2017), First Nations scholars and activists have a less generous take regarding their relationship with the French and French-Canadians highlighting how settler colonialism in and of itself is a form of violence (see Simpson 2014; Nungak 2017; Grand Council of the Cree 1998). Some Québécois

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270In their formidable and beautifully written historical ethnography concerned with defending the First Nations, the Québécois authors nevertheless write: «Quel monarque européen n’ambitionne d’élargir les frontières de son royaume? Sauf que Henri IV ne le fera pas à la manière forte des conquistadors espagnols en Amérique du Sud. Il comptera plutôt développer des relations diplomatiques avec les premiers occupants des lieux » (2017 : 90)
feminists of the 1970s reached similar conclusions: “on sait que les Français attisaient les rivalités entre tribus pour les laisser ensuite se détruire entre elles. Tactique efficace qui accéléra encore l’extermination des amerindiens/nes” (Saint-Pierre et al. 1983: 41).

Leroux’s emphasis on “discoverer” over “conqueror,” however, made me notice that I had inadvertently substituted Lévesque’s “découvreurs” in the prior quote for “conquerors” (“c’est nous—et c’est donc vous en même temps—qui fûmes les découvreurs et aussi les premiers européens à prendre racine»). What Lévesque was celebrating was not his role as the descendant of conquerors but his role as a descendant of discoverers. Yet, claiming “discovery” of a land that had already been “discovered” by its original inhabitants is still emblematic of a Eurocentric gaze, something that Leroux hints at by writing quotation marks around the word “new” when referencing the “‘new’ continent” in the prior quote, even if he continues to be proud of the discoverers. But while “discovery” is not synonymous to conquest, as Leroux correctly points out, more often than not—and this is true for Canada—it has led to conquest. Furthermore, in the light of Lévesque’s fraught relationship with the First Nations, the difference, though important, seems rather technical. Ultimately, then, the worthiness of the Québécois is posited as depending on the reclaiming of an imperial past that is not assessed as such, and a settler colonialism with a human face.

Leroux’s relationship with the First Nations is more complex, though. As he noted, he actually felt deep admiration for them. During our interview Leroux expressed that he was not only for Québécois independence but “very leftist” by which he meant that he was also “for the rights of women, animal rights, and the rights of Amerindians.” Stressing the latter, he added that he “sympathized with the Iroquois, les Apaches, les Comanches, Cheyennes, Cherokee…” Adding that “regarding my spiritual philosophy I considered myself Amerindian.” Of the
aforementioned Nations, the Iroquois, particularly the Sioux, had impacted him the most. Somewhat familiar with Iroquois history, on account of having attended a seminar with Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson, I was thrilled to hear this. I shared with Leroux how much I admired the Iroquois for their fierce anticolonial resistance, and how I had been amazed to learn that they even had their own passport (Simpson 2014). For Leroux, though, the Iroquois were important because of their spirituality. Ultimately, though, both Leroux and I were engaging in two forms of reductionism. If for Leroux the Iroquois were about spirituality, for me they were about anticolonial politics. And yet, as noted by settler colonial studies, such stark divisions between the spiritual and the political, and the cultural and the economic, simply do not hold when it comes to the First Nations.271

How exactly, if in any way, Leroux’s ideas concerning the First Nations shaped his music, is not clear to me. But in this regard, Leroux is partaking of a post-1950s tradition that saw white Western subjects, including countercultural musicians, exchange religion for spirituality (see Fellezs 2011; Owen 2008), often mediating this exchange through the use of psychedelic drugs (see Osto 2016: 194-195). Such cultural practices coalesced around the New Age movement—which had some influence on Leroux272—where the term ‘spirituality’ “was employed by New Age practitioners” around the same time that it had “appeared as a descriptor for Native American religions” (Owen 2008: 11). As stressed by Suzanne Owen (2008: 1-25), both articulations of spirituality are not monolithic but tremendously diverse, and they share a rejection of religion which is understood as being bound to an “institution” (Owen 2011: 11).

271 See Manuel 1974; Smith 2012; Coulthard 2014; Richardson 1975; Simpson 2014; Walsh 2012; Rivera Cusicanqui 2014.
272 Leroux notes that at some point he thought about marketing his band The Maintenance Crew, with which he performed between 1989 and 1995, as New Age. Though he didn’t follow through (pers. Zoom meeting March 26, 2021).
Despite these overlaps, though, non-Native uses of native spiritualities often serve to mask or bypass settler colonialism through a discourse of respect and admiration for indigenous life (see Deloria 2004: 183-223). Furthermore, there is a fine line between borrowing and appropriating, although this line is rather blurry. Owen expands:

Native Americans writing about the appropriation of their traditions compare non-Native practice with that of traditional tribal practice, implying that the tribal practices are conducted in the right way, are traditional and universally accepted as such (which is not always the case), while ‘appropriations’ are considered distortions veering too far from traditional models to be recognized as ‘Native American’ . . . [but] academic critiques say that Native Americans excluding non-Natives are employing a Western criterion for determining identity (2008: 14, my emphasis).

In the end, Leroux’s considering himself philosophically and spiritually “Amerindian,” is fraught.²⁷³ But given the on-going debates regarding what is appropriation, and the uncertainty regarding who has the authority to give access to Native culture (see Owen 2008), it speaks to a problematic that is not specific to Leroux nor to Québécois culture in general. It is a structural problematic intrinsic to the settler colonized world. That is, the real problem is not so much how individuals choose to relate to Native epistemologies (though this is important, particularly when making a profit, which is not Leroux’s case) or whether they evoke the trope of the noble savage trope (as Leroux and Marie-Claire Séguin do). The real problem that requires urgent resolution is a capitalist Eurocentric settler colonial system that makes respectful and egalitarian borrowings virtually impossible even when practiced by well-intended whites such as Leroux and Marie-Claire. While problematizing individual cases is important in order to avoid a romantic hagiographic narrative that further reproduces settler colonial epistemological violence, overcoming the latter is indispensable.

²⁷³ See chapter seven for more on this.
I would argue that the same is true regarding Leroux’s relationship with Black culture. That is, insofar as white supremacy is intrinsic to the capitalist order, white individuals cannot escape its logic. Though, as I will show below, within the limits imposed by this structure of oppression, and taking into account Leroux’s background, Leroux’s use of Black culture has been truly admirable particularly because it is indissociable from his love for and friendship with Black people.

According to Leroux, Vallières played a prominent role regarding his relationship with Black culture and struggles. Vallières’s notion of the Québécois as nègres blancs made Leroux aware of the “situation” of Blacks throughout the world, and led him to identify with them. But his love for Black music had been the first stepping stone: “since I loved Black music [Vallières’s book] multiplied my empathy for Blacks; my humanism told me that we were all the same… that we are all fundamentally brothers; I loved Black forms of expression; I wanted to express myself in such a way.” For Leroux, then, Vallières’s main contribution to his worldview was that he “multiplied” his “empathy for Blacks” a multiplication that could only occur given his “love for Black music.” Such stark distinctions between musical and political discourses should be taken with a grain of salt, though. As the reader might remember, Leroux was (and remains) a huge fan of Québécois rock icon Robert Charlebois whose performance during the ground breaking countercultural spectacle L’Osstidcho (1968), was heavily influenced by Nègres blancs d’Amérique (see Roy 2008: 56, 118, 122). Furthermore, Vallières himself was influenced by countercultural values. According to Daniel Samson-Legault from 1973 onwards “à la faveur de la contre-culture, il [Vallières] voudra bientôt vivre une bisexualité plus ouvertement, avant de choisir son camp et de très publiquement ’sortir du placard’ à partir des années 1980” (2018: 275). Charlebois’s influence on Leroux also leads us to reconsider to what extent Leroux’s
memories of his love for rock followed by a passion for jazz is as clear cut as he remembers. During *L’Ossitcho*, after all, Charlebois was accompanied by the free jazz of *Le Quatuor du Nouveau Jazz libre*—a band inspired by Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman’s free jazz (Roy 2008: 56).

When I asked Leroux if he still saw himself as a *nègre blanc* he said: “No, because despite that, I am white, and I benefit from white privilege.” As Leroux admitted, this awareness emerged later, once he had moved to the US in the mid-1980s. His experiences in New York, and in West Africa above all, were key. In my estimation, his marriage to Haitian architect Magali Régis, also played a role. Still, that he not only felt like a *nègre blanc* back in the 1970s but actually was one cannot be denied albeit with Glissant’s caveats: Québécois, after all, were frequently told to “speak white” (e.g. English), and the nineteenth representations in Anglo newspapers that portrayed them as Black, still resonated then (see Scott 2016).

During one of my *tambin* classes, I had a chance to better understand some of Leroux’s ideas around Blackness. In this occasion he was teaching me how to play “Sunjata,” a piece honoring the 13th century Mande emperor of Mali, who has become widely popular in the West due to *The Lion King* (Holloway 2007: 3), and more recently Beyoncé’s *Black is King*. Leroux, though, had learned about Sunjata in Montreal in 1981 through other African musicians with whom he played among which Senegalese percussionist Ibrahim Gueye, Malian kora player and griot Younoussa Cissoko, and Sénégalaise bassist Abou Dramé.

Clarifying that he was not an expert in West African medieval history, he told me that he admired Sunjata because of his personal story of overcoming (according to the griots he had been crippled). But he also admired Sunjata because of the splendor of an African past that heavily contrasted with the current African present. For him Sunjata represented a Malian
Empire characterized by “its social justice and democracy” (pers. comment Jan. 21, 2019). This understanding of the Malian past was very idiosyncratic. As Michael A. Gómez has noted “beginning with Sunjata and his generals, a significant portion of the Malian military was enslaved” adding that “the precise servile component cannot be determined, but the oral corpus leaves no doubt about this, while nothing in the written sources indicates the practice was at any time arrested or altered” (2018: 132). It is quite difficult to square this description with Leroux’s view of the “same” past. And yet, this was the Sunjata that Leroux played. Though Leroux evokes (again) the trope of the noble savage trope—Sunjata is portrayed only as a benevolent/positive force—despite this and the historical inaccuracies, I found it to be quite powerful: “Sunjata” is about social justice and democracy. In a distant past not of his own Leroux had found and heard the sounds of social justice that he was now teaching me.

Ultimately, Leroux articulates a discourse of music, politics and spirituality where nationalism, socialism, counterculture, cross-cultural interactions, and a deep love for his father play major roles. In Leroux’s imaginary the First Nations and West Africa serve different functions: the first move him towards a non-Western spirituality; the latter, towards non-Western musics (though jazz had begun to do that labor already).

**Conclusion**

In chapter two, I noted how during the 1968 Congress of Black Writers celebrated in Montreal, Stokely Carmichael underscored that despite their status as “nègres blancs” French-Canadians were “still part of white Western [colonialism].” According to him, they had “rape[d] West Africa because my friends in Guinea speak fluent French” (qtd. in Austin 2018: 214). Indeed, as noted by Catherine Foisy, since the nineteenth century Québécois missionaries had been actively engaged in Africa (2012).
Working within a capitalist-settler colonial-white supremacist global order, Leroux cannot escape the borrowing/appropriation conundrum. And yet, within this logic, and despite Canada’s complicity with a colonial logic in Africa, Leroux’s cultural practice has been what Sandra María Esteves would call “an act of love.” Leroux’s *l’École Fula Flûte*; his constant fundraising efforts to raise the quality of life of the children who attend; his years of friendship with Bailo Bah and Abdoulaye Diabaté among other West African musicians; and his marriage to a Haitian woman; are all a testament to his love not only of Black culture but Black people. In this regard, Leroux belongs to a long tradition of Québécois solidarity with Africa that has taken two major forms. One is tied to Leftists groups of the 1960s that actively supported Africa’s struggles for decolonization and social justice both in Québec and Africa (see Beaudet 2018). The other is related to state-sanctioned Canadian-Québécois interventions in Africa. As underlined by Robin Gendron “by the early 1970s over 200 French-speaking Canadian teachers from Quebec were working in Africa under the auspices of Canada's external aid programme for French Africa” (2000: 35). While these traditions are no doubt crisscrossed by contradictions and tensions, as no doubt must be Leroux’s own experiences in West Africa, they speak to ways of relating to the Black other that are not reducible to a white/Black binary of absolute opposition.

Reflecting upon the work of John McLaughlin, Kevin Fellezs asks:

What was possible in the cross-cultural collaborative projects McLaughlin initiated, given histories of colonialist desires for colonized bodies and cultures as sites and spaces of pleasure, as imagined repository of ‘timeless’ spiritual knowledge, and as source for economic gain? Even allowing for McLaughlin’s innocence, sincerity, and sensitivity to the issues the question raises, historical and ongoing inequalities remain. Are good intentions good enough? (2011: 123)

Fellezs’s answer is that good intentions are not enough. But he also implies that in the absence of a total reconfiguration of a system characterized by “complex weavings of the political and the cultural—particularly as they are mediated through international markets, consumers, and tastes
regimes, and sifted through the histories of Western appropriation and exploitation of Othered cultural production” (141-142), it might be a good start. Specifically, when the good intention is accompanied by a constant refection on one’s positionality and practice (147). This is the case of Leroux, who contrary to McLaughlin, has never made a living out of performing African musics relying instead on a day job as a Senior Presentation Specialist for a pharma ad agency.

White individuals are often rightfully accused of loving Black culture and despising Black people. But Leroux shines a path. White people can actually do both. All they have to do is to will it. Good intentions are not enough. But they are indispensable.

Coda

Throughout this chapter I have stressed that my interest in Leroux lied in exploring his political-musical-spiritual imagination, and the political implications that I saw emerging from his life story and his worldview. But at a more personal level, I connected with Leroux, or rather Sylvain, for another reason.

It is July 13, 2018. Sylvain and I are walking through his old neighborhood near La Fontaine Park in Montreal. The air is filled with nostalgia as he remembers his youth in his homeland showing me the places where he used to go, and explaining some of the ways in which the city has changed. He takes me to a local restaurant and we eat some Québécois culinary specialties. I particularly love the fêves au lard, a dish consisting of baked beans and maple syrup. After more than a decade of living outside of my country I too become nostalgic. Sylvain’s nostalgia infuses my own. We bond. If I could choose a date for the birth of our friendship, this would be it. Now, though, as I write these final notes, I think about my other interlocutors/friends. And it suddenly hits me. They too had to leave their homelands. What did it mean for them?
My friendship with Sylvain leads me to ponder upon why I gravitated towards musicians who, for the most part, share a similar profile. Bernardo Palombo and Oscar Pardo, Argentinians in NYC; Hilcia Montañez and Frank Ferrer,274 Puerto Ricans in NYC; Sandra María Esteves and Papoleto Meléndez, Puerto Ricans/Nuyoricans in the same city; Doudou Boicel, a French-Guyanese in Québec; Georges Rodriguez, a Haitian in Québec; Lise Vachon, a Québécoise in NYC; and Boschetti and Marie-Claire Séguin who, despite having lived most of their lives in their respective countries of origin, I felt driven to on account of the many ways in which they exceeded these geographical boundaries. Might it be the case that I have been searching for myself in these displaced others? Julia Kristeva once wrote that “in the eyes of the foreigner those who are not foreign have no life at all: barely do they exist, haughty or mediocre, but out of the running and thus almost already cadaverized” (1991: 7). Is this what I have done? Written out of disdain for those who are at home? No.

If these eleven years of forced diasporic life have been bearable (and indeed rewarding), I owe it foremost to my wife and daughter who are at home at least in ways that I will never be. But I am also indebted to these interlocutors/friends who welcomed me into a community of individuals who do not quite belong, and taught me to cherish it through music, poetry and sound. If today I can “think and act in a manner as if I belonged—and that ‘as if’ is enough for me” (Dabashi 2011: 131), I owe it to them as well.

274 See the following chapter.
Chapter 10:
Fin de Fiesta
Frank Ferrer, Fieldwork and Friendship

To Emilio “Millito” Cruz

Throughout his more than fifty year-long career Frank Ferrer has built a rich political-musical legacy. As a producer of Puerto Rican nueva canción (PRNC), his name is indissociable from that of renowned singer-songwriters Noel Hernández, Antonio Cabán Vale “El Topo,” and Roy Brown, and related PRNC singer Lucecita Benítez. As a producer of salsa, his name is linked to that of Lalo Rodríguez, the band Batacumbele and Fe Cortijo and Ismaelo Rivera, the adoptive daughter and son of bomba/salsa icons Rafael Cortijo and Ismael “Maelo” Rivera respectively. Ferrer also produced the classic of jíbaro music De los trece tres (1980) with trovadores Florencio Morales Ramos “Ramito,” and his brothers Luis and Juan María, and he launched Glenn Monroig’s career as a balladeer (1980). His legacy also includes the production of festivals/concerts, among which was the 1982 Festival de la Trova Iberoamericana when he was successful in bringing Cuban nueva trova singer-songwriters Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez to Puerto Rico. The Festival was a huge achievement considering how colonial Cold War logics tended to thwart, that is, censor, such “communist” efforts. Finally, and these are just some of the highlights, he also produced festivals and concerts of salsa, jazz, rock and flamenco, where stars such as Rubén Blades, Ismael “Maelo” Rivera and Dizzy Gillespie were featured.

As a singer-songwriter and performing artist, Ferrer’s contributions have been no less significant. In fact, Ferrer’s career began in the early 1960s in his native Ponce, when inspired by

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275 This is the title of one of Ferrer’s songs released in Yerbabruja (1976). Its lyrics were a potpourri of verses written by communist Puerto Rican poet Juan Antonio Corretjer. Given that this is the final chapter of my dissertation, this too is a “Fin de fiesta” or “end of the party.”

276 The name of the concert, performed in the 1990s, was “Trova, Rock y Descarga.”; it included an album that was never released.
a trip to Mexico and the local band Los Rogers, he created the Teen Dreamers, a band that by the mid-1960s had metamorphosed into Los Magníficos. With Los Magníficos he recorded several albums singing a repertoire that included Latin American popular music standards and salsa. So popular did the band become that it was featured in the film El derecho de comer (1968). That same year, under the label RCA International, he released The Wonderful Latin-American Sound of Puerto Rico. In 1969, Ferrer created the band Puerto Rico 2,010 releasing the album Cuánto te amo where then little-known salsa composer Tite Curet Alonso translated several songs from English to Spanish, among which was Lennon and McCartney’s “And I Love Her.” Cuánto te amo was followed by a trilogy of albums sharing similar musical/lyrical aesthetics and political concerns: Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010 also known as Hemos dicho basta (1972), Aleluyah (1974), and Yerbabruja (1976). The 1980s would see Ferrer recording with his band Puerto Rico 2013, and with the Descarga Boricua in the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s Ferrer was living in Spain, returning to Puerto Rico in 2003, and leaving for New York City in December 2012. It was roughly a year and a half later when our paths crossed.

In September 2014, as I began my masters-doctoral degree in ethnomusicology at Columbia University revolving around the topic of PRNC, I had the fortune of meeting Ferrer.\footnote{Here, I must acknowledge my friend Prof. Carla Santamaria who made me aware of Ferrer’s presence in NYC.} What began as a pleasant interview at my home in Morningside Heights on October 1\textsuperscript{st} 2014—where I bombarded Ferrer with questions about his life as a politically committed anticolonial singer-songwriter throughout the late 1960s and 1970s—led to a series of musical rehearsals at his apartment in El Barrio (Spanish Harlem) during the summer of 2015, and several gigs throughout 2016 and 2017. Then, I would join him playing the Puerto Rican cuatro, our national guitar, while he sang and played the guitar or minor percussion instruments such as the güiro, the
congas or the *cajón peruano*. By early 2018, Ferrer and I began composing songs together, largely thanks to poet, scholar and friend Yarisa Colón Torres.²⁷⁸ It was her poetry which led Ferrer and I to take on this new form of collaboration. So influential was she (we have set music to around ten of her poems) that in July 2020, as all three of us discussed what should be name of our workshop we settled on “*El Taller Viento Vital Boricua*.” The name was partly based on Colón Torres’s poetry book *Viento abajo* (2021, forthcoming)—which I translated into English—and the poem “*Viento,*” which Ferrer and I had set music to in 2018.

In this chapter, I tell the story of this workshop, focusing on my relationship with Ferrer. I reflect on some of the highlights of our workshop documenting key moments that, in my estimation, led to what today is “simply” a friendship. Throughout the years, Ferrer and I have not only engaged in a series of professional interactions where mutual admiration and respect has bound us together. Ferrer has also seen my daughter grow from being a nine-month-old baby to a seven-year-old girl; he has become friends with my mother, and I have become friends with his son Fransuá, a talented musician and a brilliant intellectual. In this regard, though this reflection is based on “fieldwork,” the term does not quite represent what we have lived. Indeed, calling Ferrer an “interlocutor” sounds extremely disingenuous. That my first meeting with Ferrer in 2014 would lead to such an outcome, I never took for granted. I knew all too well that “a wish for friendship may arise quickly, but friendship does not” (Aristotle 2019: 170). Friendship takes time, a sustained disposition to be there for one another, and a loving and active form of listening. I was lucky to meet a caring elder who was searching for the same thing.

And yet, despite my reservations with the word “fieldwork” and the related term “interlocutor,” it would be dishonest to claim that I have done no fieldwork. After all, I have

²⁷⁸ Colón Torres is a PhD candidate at the *Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe.*
been archiving “fieldnotes,” interviews, and audio-recorded rehearsals for years with the goal of writing him into my dissertation. In my defense, Ferrer too was looking forward to being documented and written about. In the end, Ferrer is my friend-interlocutor, and I am his friend-researcher. I choose to emphasize the first part of that composite. So does he.

With Colón Torres my relationship was different. When hurricane María hit Puerto Rico in September 2017, Ferrer introducing me to Colón Torres was lifesaving. Our poetry exchanges during such a difficult period of national mourning, along with my wife’s support and understanding, was instrumental in overcoming a sadness that bordered on depression. Soon, Colón Torres too was a recurrent presence at my home (and Ferrer’s) during our rehearsals. Then, Ferrer’s Afro-Caribbean beats, Colón Torres’s poetry, the sounds of my Puerto Rican cuatro, and my cooking of Puerto Rican rice and beans and porkchops (or Ferrer’s soups), would bring us back home, as we conversed about social justice, anticolonialism, history, literature and music, exchanging books and records. In the end, this constant sharing, and a willingness to care for one another, had led us to become friends. But because my research project revolved around singer-songwriters/poets of the 1960s and 1970s, and Colón Torres like myself, could have been Ferrer’s offspring, I never did consider her an interlocutor (she was rather just a friend). Still, throughout this chapter, I rely on her insights, particularly, in sections three and four where I discuss her poems “Invocación” and “Viento.” How Colón Torres relates to our workshop, and how she relates to Ferrer, is a story that will be told in a forthcoming documentary film that we are working on with Julio César Torres González.

I begin by narrating my original interest in Ferrer’s work, an interest that centered on the trilogy of albums Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010 (1972), Aleluyah (1974) and Yerbabruja (1976). In this section I ponder upon the importance of these albums for Puerto Rican musical-
political culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Writing this history is important not only in and of itself but vis-à-vis my fieldwork experiences with Ferrer. Many of my expectations regarding what it would mean to play music with Ferrer, after all, were based on the erroneous idea that we would be doing something along those lines. In the second part, I summarize some of the key moments rehearsing and playing music with Ferrer between the summer 2015 and 2017, a period that in retrospect, I see as a bridge between two forms of engagement: one that consisted in conversation/interviews (September 2014 through April 2015) and another that consisted in composing together (2018 forward). In this section I also reflect on the importance that the son clave (the emblematic rhythm of salsa) has for Ferrer. This is followed by a third section where I analyze our setting to music to Colón Torres’s poem “Invocación.” Here I explore a series of related topics such as Ferrer’s Afro-Caribbean aesthetics, his friendship with salsa icon Ismael “Maelo” Rivera, his spiritual beliefs, and his relationship with his mother. In the following section, I discuss our setting to music of “Viento” another poem of Colón Torres’s authorship. Here I explore Ferrer’s nueva canción aesthetics, his political ideals, his friendship with nueva canción singer-songwriter Antonio Cabán Vale El Topo, and his relationship with his father. Throughout the latter two sections, I ask: What led Ferrer to choose these poems? How do they speak to him? How do these poems sound to him and how does he inscribe them in sound and music? What role does the son clave play in this? I conclude by briefly reflecting, once again, on the relationship between friendship and fieldwork.

My overall argument is that musics of resistance, such as Puerto Rican nueva canción, need to be listened to with an ear to their deeper personal meanings. Listening for the ways in which Puerto Rican nueva canción’s more commonly explored features (its anticolonial/socialist lyrics and to a lesser degree its musical creolizations) is informed by friendship or “acts of
love”—as Nuyorican poet Sandra María Esteves might say—illustrates to what extent the search for collective and personal freedom was/is intrinsic to this music. In other words, the Puerto Rican nation to be liberated from US colonialism, was/is not only an “imagined community” mediated by the press and the state as Benedict Anderson might posit (1983) nor by oral traditions (as Caribbean studies have often counter-proposed). While Anderson is right to note that the nation is an imagined community, in part “because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983: 6-7), the Puerto Rican nation to be liberated—as imagined by Ferrer and PRNC singer-songwriters in general, most of whom subscribed to some form of socialism—was/is also a community that aims at “horizontal comradeship.” Moreover, and this is what I emphasize in this chapter, friendship and love, and the tensions and disappointments that lie therein, are also intrinsic to the imagined community of the Puerto Rican liberated nation that is longed for. I show how this is so by reflecting on my interactions with Ferrer, interweaving archival documents, fieldnotes, interviews, and using an ethnomusicological ear that listens for the role that music and sound play in Ferrer’s musical-poetic-political imagination.

**Frank Ferrer: The Experimental 1970s**

In July 1972, Frank Ferrer and his band Puerto Rico 2010, released what is today a little-known eponymous album of PRNC. Recorded in New York City, in RCA Victor’s recording studio, the album’s musical arrangements and creolizations were unlike anything else heard in the Puerto Rico of the time. Only two years later, in 1974, when Afro-Puerto Rican Rafael Cortijo recorded *Cortijo and His Time Machine*—an album that included Puerto Rico 2010 band member Pepe Castillo, and musicians Edgardo Miranda and Gonchi Sifre who had just recorded in Ferrer’s equally experimental *Aleluyah* (1974)—would a similar Puerto Rican sound be
heard. In the light of this, it is not surprising that the title of Cortijo’s record, like that of Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010, also stressed “time” as a keyword. As their titles implied, these albums were projecting themselves towards the future. Indeed, when salsa artist Roberto Roena heard Cortijo’s work, he said: “Rafa, you’re screwed! This music is 30 years ahead of its time, no one will understand it.” The same was true of Ferrer’s prior albums Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010 and Aleluyah.

Ferrer’s albums and Cortijo’s were innovative and ahead of their times in similar ways: the musicians’ musical creolizations challenged the boundaries of recognizable musical genres seeking to revitalize Puerto Rican traditional musics (trova, bomba, plena, danza) by mixing them with salsa and nueva canción—musical “genres” that were rather umbrella terms for myriad musical genres—and rock, jazz, bolero, guaracha, blues, classical music, funk, and reggae, emphasizing overall an Afro-Caribbean aesthetic. All three albums were also invested in highlighting the connection between anticolonialism/anti-imperialism and music, though, in this regard—and despite Cortijo’s rendition of Pepe Castillo’s anticolonial song “La verdad” (also known as “Rueda por el suelo”), Ferrer’s albums were more forceful. Indeed, Ferrer’s repertoire was mostly composed by covers of Puerto Rican and Latin American nueva canción—songs that explicitly called for revolution—whereas the topical content of Cortijo’s songs mostly focused on affirming Afro-Puerto Rican pride, an equally important topic with political implications given how anti-Black racism has impacted Black and mulatto Puerto Ricans both in Puerto Rico and the United States albeit in different ways. Among the repertoire recorded by Ferrer in

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279 According to Ferrer, Pepe Castillo “took” both musicians with him in order to record with Cortijo (pers. communication Dec. 29, 2020).
281 Considerations of time and scope prevent me from discussing how racism against Black Puerto Ricans works differently in Puerto Rico and the US but see: Zenón Cruz (1974) and Godreau (2015).
Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010 were Latin American nueva canción classics such as Uruguayan Daniel Viglietti’s homage to Colombia guerilla priest “Camilo Torres” and Chilean nueva canción band Tiemponuevo’s “Hemos dicho basta,” which has been used as the informal title of the album; and Puerto Rican nueva canción singer-songwriters Noel Hernández’s “Ya se van,” where Hernández decries Puerto Ricans’ migration to the US and their exploitation. Aleluyah, for its part, though including songs that did not focus on anticolonial matters (such as the bolero “Obsesión” and “Aleluyah”) included two songs by Cuban nueva trova singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez, an inclusion that given the anti-Cuban Revolution rhetoric intrinsic to colonial Puerto Rico, gave it a revolutionary aura. All songs were arranged to the aforementioned musical fusions, which, as I have implied and will illustrate shortly, also made these albums quite revolutionary.

That the political lyrics of Ferrer’s albums were considered subversive by the colonial state is unquestionable. As noted by Ramón Bosque Pérez and José Colón, in 1987 “when the scandal” of the surveillance of anticolonialists by the Division of Intelligence of the Police of Puerto Rico erupted, “no less than 75,000 persons had active files that ranged from a few index cards to full dossiers” (2006: 14). Among those with a “carpeta,” as the police files came to be known, was Ferrer (see Marrero 2018: 158-159).

But Ferrer’s music, in and of itself, was subversive too, revolting simultaneously against the colonial status quo and anticolonial aesthetic expectations as Mayi Marrero mentions in passing (2018: 159). How exactly Ferrer’s music challenged anticolonial aesthetic expectations can be glimpsed at by analyzing some of the reactions to his music at the time.

In Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010, Ferrer included the Puerto Rican anthem, the danza “La borinqueña” sung to the revolutionary (and unofficial) lyrics written by nineteenth century
revolutionary and poet Lola Rodríguez de Tió. Calling for Puerto Rico’s decolonization, and
entwined with the 1868 Grito de Lares Revolution against Spanish colonialism and slavery,
these lyrics are still widely sung in anticolonial manifestations, though today the colonial master
is no longer Spain but the United States. Ferrer’s rendition, however, did not only disturb the
colonial status quo; it also created other forms of “discomfort,” as PRNC singer-songwriter and
anthropologist Zoraida Santiago has called it (N.D.). Puerto Rico 2010’s arrangement
transformed this danza into salsa, drawing the ire of culturally conservative anticolonialists who
viewed this aesthetic move as disrespectful (see Reyes 1971b: 23). Though as Bobby Capa, one
of the arrangers along with Paco Laboy and Ferrer, noted: “the intention was to go beyond the
traditional concept of the anthem” and update it by adding more “musicality” to it (see Reyes
1971b: 23; my translation). Curiously, by updating and adding more “musicality” to the anthem,
Puerto Rico 2010, no doubt unknowingly, highlighted the similarities between the respected
danza (associated with elite culture) and salsa, which at the time still carried the stigma of being

The musical genre of the danza was developed in the mid-nineteenth century and was
“celebrated for its distinctively non-Spanish qualities” (Manuel 1994: 254).282 Indeed, as noted
by PRNC singer-songwriter Irving García, its sections (with exception of the paseo/introduction)
are “merengues”—an Afro-Caribbean rhythm not to be confused with contemporary Dominican
music—that had been prohibited by the colonial Spanish government in 1840 (2002: 80). The
merengue, in turn, was based on the Afro-Caribbean rhythmic cell of the cinquillo. Regarding

282 According to Muñoz de Frontera there are three theories regarding the danza’s origins. One claims that it
evolved from the dance caballeresa of Extremadura in Spain; another that it evolved from the Venezuelan danzón
and the Cuban habanera; yet another that it comes from the upa or merengue brought from Cuba (1988:436)
the lyrics, some of the first danzas were entitled “Rabo de puerco” (Pig’s tail) and “Yo quiero comer más mondongo” (I want to eat more tripe) which gives us an idea of some of its original topics (García 2012: 83). Furthermore, the danza was considered lascivious and immoral by some Puerto Rican women as a letter written in 1853 to the newspaper El Ponceño testifies to (see Thompson 57-60). But by the 1960s, such origins (and controversies) had been largely effaced from the popular imagination, including that of anticolonialists. Indeed, as noted by Peter Manuel, by the twentieth century the danza had become “a symbol of refined Hispanic island culture, in contradistinction to the cheap American commercial culture which was already influencing the island” (1994: 254).

Hence, when Ferrer interpreted “La borinqueña” with Puerto Rico 2010’s arrangement, the perceived distance between the danza and salsa was abysmal, which in turn, made the band’s transgression quite prominent. In this regard, this transgression is somewhat analogous to Jimi Hendrix’s rendition of the US national anthem at Woodstock: it made a political point by challenging aesthetic expectations. Indeed, the analogy with Hendrix is not that farfetched when one considers that Ferrer and his band performed “La borinqueña,” among other songs, at the Festival Mar y Sol, the Puerto Rican Woodstock, in April 1972. This as the newspaper of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) Claridad, condemned the festival as an imperialist “bacchanal” of drugs and death (Reyes 1972: 4).

Tellingly, Puerto Rico 2010’s participation in this “bacchanal,” alongside the then-rock musician PRNC singer-songwriter José Nogueras who performed with his band Banda del Carajo, had taken place just a few months after Ferrer’s band had accompanied PRNC singer-songwriter Roy Brown, in his recording the anthem of the PSP (see “Momentos en que la agrupación” 1971: 4). Ferrer’s willingness to inhabit two spaces which were not always neatly
aligned, namely, socialism and the counterculture, speaks to the independence that PRNC artists often affirmed vis-à-vis the tenets and moral judgements of pro-independence parties. They tended to assert the independence of Puerto Rico by supporting pro-independence parties and organizations, while nevertheless asserting their own autonomy vis-à-vis those very same groups. As I argued in chapter four, the members of El Grupo asserted themselves in similar ways.

If “La borinqueña” showcases a Ferrer that is rebelling politically and musically, similar dynamics were reproduced in some songs of Aleluyah (1974) and Yerbabuña (1976). Regarding the first, one should mention Ferrer’s inclusion of Silvio Rodríguez’s “Ojalá,” a romantic love song that the Cuban singer-songwriter popularized in the 1970s. What was a rather grave, sad and solemn song, where Rodríguez accompanied himself with virtuosic guitar arpeggiation, was transformed by Ferrer, Paco Laboy and Bobby Capa into an upbeat piece through the use of drums, bass, horns, keyboards, minor percussion and the electric guitar. Genre-wise, it lived somewhere in between rock, funk, jazz and Afro-Caribbean sensibilities. If Rodríguez’s musical arrangement inscribed in sound the nostalgia for a past love, Ferrer’s suggested that this first love was still around and waiting to be asked out to the dance floor.

This musical irreverence was entwined with revolutionary politics. Because Rodríguez’s repertoire is inextricably tied to the Cuban Revolution, Ferrer’s decision to record this cover song was an act of political defiance. Indeed, as Ferrer shared with me Aleluyah “was manufactured in Miami City, where it was boycotted by the employees of the manufacturing company, who were Cuban exiles, and did not approve of Silvio Rodríguez’s music” (pers. email

283 According to Silvio, and despite the many debates regarding the meaning of his song, he wrote it for his first love: https://web.archive.org/web/20160202114241/http://ovejanegra.peru.com/temas-libres-dia-que-silvio-rodriguez-escribio-ojala-video-385874
Jan. 5, 2021; my translation). This, he added, “affected the sound quality of the album which did not compare to that of Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010.” But Ferrer’s “Ojalá” also suggested that making revolution and having fun were not diametrically opposed, and that this fun could be articulated in what culturally conservative anticolonialists heard as the “imperialist” sounds of rock. Ferrer’s “Ojalá” could have been played at the Festival Mar y Sol. In some ways, Ferrer’s “Ojalá” served as a reminder that when Cuban nueva trova was born in the 1960s, it was closely tied to rock and Anglophone counterculture, influences that were initially considered counterrevolutionary by certain segments of the revolutionary regime.  

Regarding Yerbabruja, the song “Jayuya-Jayuya,” composed by Ferrer and Carlos Rodríguez Orama, and arranged by Wisón Torres Jr., raised similar forms of contestation. In this song, Pedro Albizu Campos’ nationalist revolution of 1950 is celebrated to the tune of electric guitars and rock, picking up PRNC anticolonial musical trope originally developed by Noel Hernández in his album De rebelde a revolucionario (1971), incidentally produced by Ferrer. However, contrary to Hernández, Afro-Caribbean aesthetics remain central to this piece and the album overall.

If the aforementioned songs generated these forms of “discomfort,” the trilogy’s overall sound did so, too. Lying somewhere in between nueva canción and salsa, Ferrer’s music disturbed categories in a way analogous to fusion, a music that, according to Kevin Fellezs, “by the early 1970s, jazz, rock, and funk were positioned in diametrically opposed ways, and by mixing them together, fusion musicians participated in a larger shift, not simply in the categories but in the categorization process itself” (2011: 5). Not coincidentally, Ferrer’s albums are

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284 See Silvio Rodríguez’s interview in La cultura y revolución cubana (Padura Fuentes and Kirk 2002: 40-46) for a nuanced take on this.

285 A key difference between the albums is that in Yerbabruja Ferrer asserts himself as a singer-songwriter.
discussed both by PRNC scholars (see Rodríguez-Rodríguez 1995: 227-228; Marrero 2018: 158-159; Pagán 2019:168-184) and salsa scholars (see Rondón 2008: 259-262). Belonging to both “genres,” and neither, Ferrer’s trilogy disturbed “the categorization process itself” as I explain below.

Ferrer’s trilogy was not exactly salsa for a variety of reasons. First, the songs often changed the underlying rhythmic pattern mid-way through, thus undermining the danceable appeal that was so key to salsa’s aesthetics. Second, Ferrer’s lyrics were either poems set to music or original lyrics written along poetic lines, and as implied by prolific salsa composer Tite Curet Alonso, salsa lyrics can be more aptly described as rhymed stories. According to Curet Alonso, the lyrics of PRNC “though of quality, tended to be too intellectual and excessively descriptive” whereas the public liked [songs that were] narrative, [like] the news and [that had a] dramatic element” (see Rodríguez Martinó 1985: R15; my translation). Third, Ferrer’s articulation of an anticolonial/socialist imaginary effectively distanced this trilogy from salsa, making it too PRNC-like. Although contemporaneous to Ferrer there was what came to be known as protest salsa (Eddie Palmieri’s “Justicia” (1969), Willy Padín and the band Los 13 (1972), and several songs by Curet Alonso and Rubén Blades), with the exception of Willy Padín, these repertoires did not affirm Puerto Rican independence nor they did disrupt the prior two aesthetic requirements: the consistency of the son clave (or a constant beat that allowed for dancing) and a rhymed story that was not too abstract in its imagery. Presumably aware of this, in the 1980s Ferrer created the band Puerto Rico 2013 with singer Van Lester releasing two

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286 By “excessively descriptive” Curet Alonso seems to have meant that the lyrics were too metaphorical or that they were more concerned with adjectives than with developing a plot. This is my best guess based on my knowledge of the lyrics in PRNC and salsa/Puerto Rican popular music in general (with the possible exception of some of Rafael Hernández’s and Sylvia Rexach’s boleros, where poetry often plays a prominent role thus aesthetically linking them to PRNC from a lyrical point of view).
albums that, while addressing political issues, were musically less experimental: a song would end and conclude with the same rhythmic base.

If Ferrer’s trilogy was not exactly salsa it wasn’t exactly PRNC for a variety of reasons as well. Indeed, in an article published in Claridad celebrating the eve of the 1868 Grito de Lares Revolution, Ferrer’s band was described as “a salsa orchestra that plays protest song” (Martínez Archilla 1972: 16). German art historian and journalist Peter Bloch also noticed how Ferrer’s aesthetics were somewhat at odds with PRNC noting that “the group Frank Ferrer and ‘Puerto Rico 2010’ may belong to a somewhat different category [than that of ‘protest singers’] but have appeared with the protesters” (1973: 63). Clearly, both authors had difficulties categorizing what they heard. Other articles in Claridad unveil complaints that illustrate the band’s complex relationship with the category “nueva canción,” (still known as “protest song” at the time). In one such article Félix González, a student of the Conservatory of Music, defends Puerto Rico 2010 from socialist poet Edwin Reyes who, in a prior article, had—according to the student—described the “modern musical arrangements” of the band as being “disrespectful” towards the lyrics, something that negatively impacted the original version of the song “Paloma”287 (1972: 6). In yet another article, spectator Ernesto Reyes, this time commenting on a show that took place in New York City, complains about the band having “too many amplifiers” thus leaving one “deaf and overshadowing the message” (1972: 16). As another critic noted, Ferrer’s voice was at times “drowned” by the band (Martínez Archilla 1972: 14). In all instances, the band’s music is perceived as getting in the way of the real political message which is purportedly to be found in the words. But as the aforementioned Conservatory student Félix González implied, and as I have been stressing throughout, the music too was the band’s political message.

287 Composed by the nationalist actor Samuel Molina.
It was this Frank Ferrer, the one who had participated in the creation of a trilogy that had rebelled against the social injustices of the colonial regime, culturally conservative anticolonial ideologies of the 1970s, the musical expectations of PRNC and salsa audiences, and the category of categorization itself, that I wanted to write about when we met in September of 2014. And yet, as my relationship with Ferrer evolved throughout the years, my original research interests were altered. Suddenly, writing about what Ferrer had done fifty years ago was less appealing to me than writing about what we had been doing together in the recent past.

This is the story of that recent past.

**Rehearsing with Ferrer**

The shift in my interest regarding Ferrer’s work began as we started to play together. Between June 2015 and December 2017, Ferrer and I rehearsed on and off at his apartment in *El Barrio* and mine in Morningside Heights. Then, I would take out my Puerto Rican *cuatro* (at times the electric one; at times the acoustic one), and try to play something that made sense with Ferrer’s songs. For the most part, these rehearsals were informal gatherings where Ferrer would play the guitar and sing, and I would struggle to decipher what he was doing. “Struggle to decipher” is not an overstatement. Because Ferrer is not a guitar player nor a gifted singer—and because, as he often stressed—he was out of practice, it was a real challenge to know what he intended to convey when he sang. Figuring out the contours of his melodies and the underlining harmony was exhausting: often, Ferrer would play the wrong chord or sing out of key. In other occasions, he might sing the same lyrics with a melody and a harmony that was widely different from a prior rendition. Being unfamiliar with a repertoire that he had not previously recorded, it took various five-to-six-hour rehearsals before I could understand any given song. Hence, my first step as his incipient collaborator was to sing and play back with my *cuatro* what I thought
was the right melody and chord progression until he would confirm “that’s it.” Then we would record it and write the lyrics down with the corresponding chords. As we continued to do this, I soon became acquainted with the melodic and harmonic patterns of his compositional style, which was fairly conventional given that it remained within the norms of popular/folk Puerto Rican music. Often, three or four chords would suffice for a song, and when more were required, they were part of the chord family.

Still, despite some evident progress, it often happened that a song that seemed to be finished was not. As I soon learned, Ferrer was not really sharing a song with me but composing it as he sang it. That is, often, he would have a motif (musical and/or lyrical depending on the song) that served like a sort of pedal. He would often repeat incessantly this motif before exploring new melodic and or lyrical material, and returning to it. It was in this back and forth that Ferrer (at some point) would determine the overall structure of the song: How many choruses? How many refrains? How should they be ordered? Where should the musical interlude be? Soon it became fairly evident that I had not been drafted only to play the cuatro but to help him finish the songs.

Throughout this time with him, I had much difficulty reconciling the sophisticated musical arrangements of his 1970s trilogy (see prior section) with Ferrer’s musical limitations. As Ferrer noted on several occasions, he had been frequently mocked for these limitations by some of the talented musicians that worked with him. And, yet, as he would rightfully point out, “look at all the work that I did.” It took many rehearsals before I understood what Ferrer’s real talents consisted in. These involved bringing talented people together, coming up with a concept for a given song or album (which would then be sounded out by arrangers and musicians, including himself), producing music, and composing, a creative process that, in his case,
consisted mostly in setting music to poetry (though he has also written and co-written several songs). Ferrer was also a maestro of Afro-Caribbean rhythms. Though he humbly acknowledged that he would often consult with his friend and neighbor Carlos “Rigo” Malcolm, an Afro-Puerto Rican minor percussion expert and composer who had played and recorded with Ismael “Maelo” Rivera y sus Cachimbos throughout the 1970s,\(^{288}\) when it came to settling on the rhythmic basis of a song (pers. comment Jan 17, 2021). Comprehending this aspect of Ferrer’s compositions, and being able to play properly within it, represented a huge challenge for me. This was particularly true for those songs that were in the 3-2 son clave characteristic of Puerto Rican salsa—indissociable from the Cuban son—which characterized the majority of his compositions. My difficulty with this aspect of his music was due to my musical background.

My musical training as a player of the Puerto Rican cuatro, an instrument that I have played for over twenty-five years, was based on the exploration of myriad musical genres: jíbaro music, danzas, mazurkas, bossa nova, jazz, rock, blues, tango, plena, bolero, and Western art music. While I had spent a lifetime listening to salsa—and several years reading about it as part of my ethnomusicological training—\(^{289}\) none of the genres I was used to playing were in son clave. This was a major issue: the clave is not just a rhythm; it actually determines the rhythm of all the melodies (musical instruments and singer’s voice included) involved in a salsa song. And the way in which it does this is an extremely complex process. As Christopher Washburne has noted, a music phrase is considered to be in clave if:

1. Accented notes correspond with one or all the clave strokes. 2. No strong accents are played on a non-clave stroke beat if they are not balanced by equally strong accents on clave stroke beats. 3. The measures of the music alternate between an “on the beat” and a

\(^{288}\) See the album Esto si es lo mío recorded in 1978.

\(^{289}\) Two professors were key in this academic endeavor: the late Juan Flores, of whom I had the fortune of being a student at NYU, and Christopher Washburne, who as a professor of Afro-Caribbean musics at Columbia University, had a profound impact in the way in which I perceived myself. After attending his seminar, I considered myself not only Puerto Rican and Latin American but Caribbean as well.
“syncopated beat” phrase or vice versa, similar to the clave pattern. A phrase may still be considered in clave if the rhythm starts out clashing but eventually resolves strongly on a clave beat, creating rhythmic tension and resolution. (1997: 67)

Unaware of this complexity, I would often find myself “correcting” the rhythm of a melody sung by Ferrer. To my uneducated ear, it seemed that Ferrer was out of rhythm. Surprised, he would proceed to sing the melody again as he played the son clave with his hands or the clave sticks. Suddenly, the melody made sense to me. While Ferrer had internalized the clave (he could hear it in his head) I could only hear it if it was sounded out. I never did manage to hear this “silent” clave but I was humble enough to recognize that I just did not know enough about the son clave and “the underlying rules that govern this organizing principle” (Washburne 1997: 66).

Finding the appropriate montuno (rhythmic motif), dictated as well by the clave, was also extremely hard. The few montunos that I did manage to memorize were taught to me by him, his son Fransuá or Malcolm who joined us in several rehearsals. I was, however, no Yomo Toro, the cuatro player who became famous for his salsa performances with the Fania All Stars. Realizing this, Ferrer soon settled for my jíbaro music arpeggios, and my rock and blues riffs. At the time, I was fairly convinced that he considered me a lost cause, though, subsequent rehearsals made it clear that he actually liked my substitutions. Of course, Ferrer accepting (and even liking) my riffs and arpeggios was related also to necessity: cuatro players, after all, are pretty scarce in New York City, and even scarcer are musicians willing to rehearse for “free” during four-to five-hour sessions. I write “free” in quotation marks because insofar as I was doing fieldwork, learning new musical skills from an experienced elder, and learning not only about Ferrer’s fascinating life but Puerto Rican anticolonial history broadly speaking, poetry and literature, I was getting free lessons!
While Ferrer and I accepted that I would never be Yomo Toro, I remember being somewhat shocked with my musical limitations. How was it possible that coming from the same small Island, and taking into account that I was somewhat acquainted with *salsa*, I did not understand Ferrer’s *son clave*-based way of composing? Like most *salsa* fans I knew several songs by heart including their *soneos* (the vocal improvisations of the singers). Furthermore, how was it that having played Puerto Rican *danzas* since age thirteen, I could not translate this into playing *salsa*? Wasn’t the *danza* based on the Afro-Caribbean *cinquillo*, a rhythmic cell from which the *son clave* had purportedly emerged? (Washburne 1997: 66). And, if *seises* and *aguinaldos*, the key musical styles of the *cuatro* repertoire, are informed by the Afro-Puerto Rican rhythmic patterns of the Afro-Puerto Rican *bomba*—which I listened to for years as played by *Son del Batey* in Old San Juan—and the *cinquillo* (Quintero Rivera and Alvarez 1994: 27-37), why could I not transition easily into the *son clave*? This difficulty illustrates how, despite the obvious fact that Puerto Rican musics are all permeated by Black influences—even those that the Puerto Rican popular imagination still considers “white” such as *jíbaro* music and the *danza*—playing any given genre requires a particular expertise. Had studying the *son clave* been a part of my childhood’s musical training in the *Escuela Libre de Música*, the public music school that I attended, I would had been able to play Ferrer’s repertoire “naturally.” Because this was not the case—and this speaks to a musical-racial discrimination that excludes *bomba* drums and *plena panderos* from being taught in the state’s institutions—I found myself totally lost as I tried to play a music that I was familiar with, and that I indeed loved, but that at the same time I ignored so much about.

My rehearsals with Ferrer between 2015 and 2017 led us to play several gigs together where I could showcase some of my newly acquired skills, no doubt with limitations. The first
was a Christmas gig in December 2016 when Ferrer, Pepe Castillo and I played at a house of a fellow Puerto Rican. Playing with two of the original members of Puerto Rico 2010, and with the composer of “La verdad” or “Rueda por el suelo” (see prior section) made me extremely proud. That evening, though, Castillo, Ferrer and myself, did not play that song but Puerto Rican Christmas covers. Still, I was happy to play with the composer of “La verdad,” a jíbaro music-sounding song that condemned US imperialism and that was important to me for emotional reasons, as well. My cuatro teacher and adoptive father, Emilio “Millito” Cruz, after all, was the cuatro player in Lucecita Benítez’s 1976 version of the song. Her famous “Suénalo Millito (Play it, Millito)” is still remembered by many people from his generation. When playing music with Cruz between 1997 and 2009, I remember his fans often bringing this phrase up. It was the sounds of these temporal and emotional connections, that I heard as Ferrer, Castillo and I performed that night.

Interestingly, Cruz, with whom Ferrer had worked in Antonio Cabán Vale’s album Las manos del campo (1975), had been central in the consolidation of my relationship with Ferrer. During a series of text exchanges in September 2014, Ferrer mentioned that he had met me when I was a child playing the cuatro with Cruz in the bar/restaurant El Patio de Sam in Old San Juan. This memory seems to have been triggered by a Youtube video that I sent him performing at the Fundación Nacional para la Cultura Popular in July 2013. Recorded by my father, in the video, I am seen singing in front of several portraits of famous Puerto Rican musicians. Among them is Cruz. But this video also resonated with Ferrer in other ways. During the performance I am playing an electric version of the cuatro designed by Freddy Burgos and singing “Jibarito urbano” (“Urban Little Hillbilly”). A song in the jíbaro seis chorreado style, in my lyrics I make fun of the rural tropes that characterize much of jíbaro music and a strain of PRNC, where
milking the cow and cultivating the land is portrayed in idyllic terms (see chapter eight). I also make fun of manifestations of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism that lack a decolonizing edge. This critique is inscribed in my reference to the coat of arms where Puerto Rico is portrayed as a submissive lamb that is forever faithful to Spain. After singing the required *lo le lo lay of jíbaro* music, I sing my décimas, of which I share a few:

\[
\begin{align*}
Yo no conozco a la vaca, \\
yo sólo sé que hace moo \\
y eso lo aprendí en youtube \\
fumando hooka en mi hamaca. \\
A mí el calor no me saca \\
de quicio nunca en verano. \\
Con mi aire acondicionado \\
nos hace mella el sol \\
y eso me hace por default \\
un jíbarito urbano. \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
I don’t know what a cow is \\
I only know that it goes “moo” \\
I learned this on Youtube \\
as I smoked a hooka on my hammock. \\
For me the heat is not an issue \\
even in the summertime. \\
Because of my A.C. \\
the sun doesn’t affect me. \\
And that makes me by default \\
an urban little hillbilly. \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
El inglés yo lo aprendí \\
mientras me daba un mavi \\
frente a mi cable TV \\
oyendo a ACDC. \\
Nacido afuera o aquí \\
yo siempre soy borincano. \\
Tengo el escudo tatuado \\
en la espalda baja baja \\
y es que soy hasta la raja \\
un jíbarito urbano. \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
I learned English \\
drinking mavi [a local drink] \\
watching cable TV \\
listening to ACDC. \\
Born here [PR] or out there [US] \\
I’ll always be Puerto Rican. \\
I have the coat of arms tattooed \\
in my lower lower back \\
cause down to the crack of my ass \\
I’m an urban little hillbilly. \\
\end{align*}
\]

As Ferrer told me approvingly over the phone in September 2014, barely being able to contain his laughter: “¡Tú eres un irreverente!” You are so irreverent!\(^{290}\)

Another important gig occurred when we played during “The 30th Annual Loisaida Festival” on May 28, 2017. Then, Ferrer, myself and a host of extremely talented musicians, including drummer Henry Cole, played several songs from one of the albums that had driven me to Ferrer, *Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010* (1972). If the songs were already politically combative

\(^{290}\) The performance can be watched here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4rtyKbof3I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4rtyKbof3I)
as I described in some detail in the prior section, Ferrer made sure to update their combativeness by condemning the Fiscal Control Board which had been recently established in Puerto Rico thus undermining the little autonomy/democracy presumably enjoyed by Puerto Ricans since the establishment of the Free Associated State in 1952. As I told Ferrer in an email sent right after the show doing this gig “was a dream come true.”

All of these experiences (rehearsals, gigs, reminiscences) led to the development of a profound friendship.

Up to this point, though, I only played the cuatro, that is, despite being a singer-songwriter, I refrained from singing. This was in part because playing in clave was already hard enough for me, and to sing and play at the same time was just too much of a challenge. This changed however in November of 2017. Then, Ferrer had shared a poem by Puerto Rican poet Etnairis Ribera, entitled “No quererte es el blues” (Not loving you, that’s the blues) to which he had set music. Because this was not in son clave (it was a blues), it was much easier for me to sing and play. And so, when Ferrer arrived home for one of our many rehearsals, I surprised him by singing his song back to him. Voicing Ferrer’s song touched an emotional chord. That evening, as Ferrer got on the M60 bus that would bring him back to El Barrio, he kissed me in the forehead in a gesture of fatherly love unknown to me. I walked back home surprised and confused. What had just happened? What did this mean? Was this even fieldwork?

It was shortly thereafter that Ferrer and I began composing together.

**Invocación**

In retrospect, my experiences with Ferrer between 2014 and 2017 were a build up towards a more intimate form of collaboration: co-composing. (Ribera’s poem serving as a sort of aesthetic-emotional bridge). Significantly, it would take another woman poet to make this
form of collaboration a reality. It was thanks to the poetry and presence of Puerto Rican poet Yarisa Colón Torres, that Ferrer and I began to compose together.

Shortly before hurricane Maria’s devastation of Puerto Rico in September 2017, Ferrer asked me to accompany him to La Marquetá, located in East Harlem, just a few blocks away from his apartment. There, I was introduced to his friend Colón Torres, a young poet of my generation whose work Ferrer deeply admired. Meeting Colón Torres was as if I had met someone that I already knew before, though we had never crossed paths until this moment. Soon, I found myself reading her poetry and feeling drawn to it. From that moment forward, Colón Torres became a part of my life and that of my family. Thanks to Ferrer, I had made a new friend, a huge achievement considering the hustle and bustle of New York City.

Colón Torres’s friendship could not have arrived at a more auspicious moment. The trauma of hurricane María was not only affecting those on the Island, though of course, they had it worse. Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, such as myself, were also profoundly affected: How could we help? Was it ever enough? How come we were spared? Something of the survivor’s guilt informed my grief and that of others. We had been the “lucky” ones who had left before María. This was no doubt irrational. My “luck” had consisted in not being able to survive in my own country which in turn had driven me to migrate. Be it as it may, Colón Torres inspired me to write poetry again, and by exchanging poems, I was able to process these feelings. This, along with my wife’s support and the joy of my daughter, allowed me to get through an emotionally distressing time.

On February 5th, 2018, Ferrer invited me to his apartment. This rehearsal would be unlike any other, and it was then, I believe, that what would in 2020 be called El Taller Viento Vital Boricua, was born. During this rehearsal Ferrer asked me to set music to a poem by Colón
Torres to which he had already partially set music to. Entitled “Invocación,” the poem was an “invocation” to Saint Michael, the archangel that, sword in hand, is shown vanquishing Satan who has taken the shape of a dragon. Singing the lines to which he had set music to several times, Ferrer told me: “Voy a comprar unas cervezas. Vengo en un rato. Ponle música al resto” (I’m going to buy some beers, I will be back in a bit. Set music to the rest”). I was, to say the least, shocked at Ferrer’s request. Compose in situ and by request? And compose by departing from the musical ideas developed by someone else? Though I had spent two decades composing my own songs and setting music to poetry, I had never done this. Somewhat nervously, I picked up the cuatro and began to sing a melody to the lyrics as I searched for the appropriate chords.

By the time Ferrer came back, twenty minutes or so later, I had something to share. Since the first part of the song was in the 3-2 son clave, and since standard salsa songs always include a section known as soneo (where there is a brief chorus followed by musical/lyrical vocal improvisations also called soneo) I figured that the following lines should be sung in this format. Hence, one of the lines (“Para que nuestro barro pueda bailar”/So that our clay/body may dance) became the chorus of the song whereas the rest of the lines became vocal “improvisations” or soneos. I write “improvisations” in quotation marks because insofar as they were being composed, they were not being “improvised”; typically, a sonero invents soneos impromptu, altering the lyrics and melodic material to different degrees in live performances, although often, certain soneos acquire such popularity that they become fixtures of the song.

Having decided that this would be the soneo section of our song, I began searching for a harmonic pattern. The soneo section, after all, consists of a harmonic loop, a series of chords that are repeated. (In a harmonic loop the listener hears one full round of the chorus and the soneo which is then repeated several times). By establishing this chord pattern, I was able to narrow
down the melodic possibilities of my *soneos*. In the end, the four “improvisations” (the lines in the poem did not allow for more) were like a variation on a theme as their melodies were not significantly different. But because the poem was in free verse—meaning that each line had a different syllabic count—each “improvisation” had its own peculiar syncopation. As I composed this, I could not help but remember *salsa* singer El Cano Estremera who, in songs such as “*La boda de ella*,” developed richly syncopated *soneos* largely because of the varied syllabic count of his lines. But whereas El Cano Estremera was a master of the *clave*, I was merely beginning to understand its inner workings.

When Ferrer returned, he was extremely pleased with my overall idea. As he noted, though, there was one issue (surprise, surprise): I was not in *clave*. My melodic material was stressing the wrong syllables and my accents were misplaced. In order to fix this, several of my syncopations needed to be adjusted. With much effort, Ferrer began to memorize my melodic material trying to rephrase it in such a way that would work with the *clave*. It took several rehearsals before Ferrer had solved the issue. But then a new situation arose. Ferrer wanted me to sing that portion of the song. Because I had not internalized the *clave* this meant that I had to memorize his phrasings. Months later I was still unable to sing my own contribution to “*Invocación*” with Ferrer’s vocal syncopations. It was only in November 2019 when Ferrer announced that it was time that we head to the recording studio, that I could actually “master” this. Preparing for the studio entailed rehearsing with piano player Edsel Gómez and bassist Ariel Robles, and writing down the music sheet of “*Invocación*,” among other songs. Up to that point, our rehearsals had been mostly with percussionists and chorists Malcolm and Carlos Fuentes, who did not require this.
Writing “Invocación”’s” music sheet was an arduous process. Since now the consensus was that I would harmonize the soneos, I needed to write down the exact syncopation and my melody. “Can you sing that again, Ferrer?” Writing it down and singing it back to him, I would ask: “Is that it?” “No, that’s not it.” “Can you sing that again, Ferrer?” This went on for an hour or so, until I was finally able to do what Ferrer did so matter-of-factly. Now, I could finally sing this section of “Invocación” in the right way. Not because I understood the clave but because I knew how to read complicated syncopations (thanks to my training in bossa nova and jazz). To this day, and after having composed over a dozen songs with Ferrer, many of which are in son clave, I still misplace the accents of my melodies and continue to rely on Ferrer to make the adjustments.

If “Invocación” allowed me to better understand the clave and how it informed Ferrer’s Afro-Caribbean rhythmic universe, it also gave me a glimpse of his views on spiritual matters. “Invocación,” after all, is a poetic and erotic prayer, rich in complex and surreal metaphors, where the poet—articulating a collective “we”—asks the saint to help her and her people to overcome hardship and injustice. In the poem dancing/copulating is portrayed as a source of liberation. That is, once Saint Michael has granted the poet’s/the people’s wish “our clay/body will be able to dance:”

**Invocación**
San Miguel
tú que salpicas saliva
con esa espada
siembra soles santiguados
en nuestra cebolla
y empapa como dulces vulvas
este valle de lágrimas
para que nuestro barro pueda bailar
acalorado con tu lengua
todo esto te lo pedimos
hasta con el dolor sin piernas

**Invocation**
Saint Michael
thee who sprinkles saliva
with thy sword
sow suns that make the cross
in our onion
and drench like sweet vulvas
this valley of tears
so that our clay/body may dance
heated by your tongue
we ask for all of this
even with the pain without legs
That this prayer/dance of personal and collective liberation was entwined with a celebration of sexuality as a liberating practice is made plain in the use of words such as “saliva,” “sword,” “vulva,” “tongue” and “metallic spear,” which, as the poet told me “alluded to the body and eroticism” (Colón Torres pers. email January 3, 2021).

When Ferrer introduced me to this poem, I was quite surprised. His repertoire as a performer had never touched upon eroticism. And with the exception of his recording of Daniel Viglietti’s “Camilo Torres,” a homage to theology of liberation guerilla priest in Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010 (1972), and a few cover songs by jíbaro singer Luis Morales Ramos that he recorded with Puerto Rico 2013, religious/spiritual matters were absent from his repertoire, as well. Furthermore, throughout the years of our friendship, Ferrer had often stressed that he was an atheist. Why then had he chosen to set music to this poem?

One answer to this question was fairly obvious. Since our first encounters Ismael “Maelo” Rivera had been a constant topic, and presence. During our rehearsals in Ferrer’s apartment, we were always being “watched” by an image of Rivera (as well as another image of Puerto Rican revolutionary and anticolonialist Pedro Albizu Campos). Never mind that Malcolm, who often joined us in our rehearsals, had been Rivera’s percussionist with Los Cachimbos in the 1970s. Furthermore, in 1972 Rivera had recorded “San Miguel Arcangel,” a classic composed by Henry Williams, where Saint Michael was also extolled albeit in a different poetic tone than the one used by Colón Torres:

*Yo tuve una revelación*

*I had a revelation*

*vi a San Miguel que me hablaba:*

*I saw Saint Michael, who spoke to me*
ya no tienes que temer
yo te vine a proteger
y a quitarte esos fluidos
pues te quieren envolver.

Si tú quieres progresar
y buena vida seguir llevando
reza a Dios y a San Bernardo
que siempre te están cuidando

Coro:
Si no me quieres creer,
pregúntale a San Miguel.

Soneos...

When Colón Torres, inspired by the Afro-Dominican music known as *palo dominicano* and Puerto Rican *bomba*, wrote her poem, she was unconsciously alluding to Rivera’s song, a connection that Ferrer and I immediately saw. In order to draw both songs even closer, Ferrer actually borrowed the chorus of the latter “Si no me quieres creer/pregúntale a San Miguel” adding it to the end of “Invocación.”

On December 12, 2020, seeking to better understand his friendship with Rivera, I had a Zoom interview with Ferrer (friendship in the times of Covid-19!).

Ferrer’s first memory of Rivera was when he was in the eighth grade. At that time, he heard him singing on the album *Cortijo y su Combo Invite you to dance* (1958). A decade or so later, around 1967, Rivera came across Ferrer’s band Los *Magníficos* as they performed in the *Terraza Cirilo* in the barrio Mayagüez of Ponce. According to Ferrer, he liked the band’s music so much that he tried to connect them with his contacts in San Juan, though this did not come to fruition. In the mid 1970s, Rivera and his wife Gladys would visit Ferrer on and off in his home.

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291 As Colón Torres wrote to me in a private email, back in the year 2000, when she wrote “Invocación,” she frequently attended performances where friends of hers played these musics (Jan. 21, 2021).
in the town of Trujillo Alto where they would get together with poet Angelamaria Dávila, declamer and actor Miguel Angel Suárez and Danny Torres, the father of Julio César Torres González—who is currently working on a documentary film on Ferrer and our workshop—to sing and declaim poetry. In one occasion, Ferrer stresses, Rivera and Gladys invited some African American friends who worked as professional dancers during Rivera’s performances. In 1976, when Ferrer was recording *Yerbabruja* in New York City, Rivera was informally a part of the process. According to Ferrer, Rivera loved the anticolonial song “Jayuya-Jayuya;” he would playfully imitate Ferrer’s voice. This was not surprising, said Ferrer, given that Rivera supported Puerto Rican independence. Indeed, as underlined by César Colón Montijo, even though Rivera’s repertoire focused largely on affirming Afro-Puerto Rican pride, Rivera was “connected to pro-independence and nationalist struggles initially through his father, who was a member of Albizu Campos’ party, and would actually take Rivera 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” (2018: 164).

Such a friendship had emerged between the two that when Ferrer’s son Fransuá was born in 1977, Rivera became his godfather. Still, as Ferrer stressed, his relationship with Rivera was also complicated. At some point during the 1970s, Ferrer was producing a concert in the Felt Forum of Madison Square Garden called “*Tierrazo: la noche de nuestra música.*” It included a host of well-known Puerto Rican singers, among which was Rivera, who Ferrer had heavily promoted. But as Ferrer told me, he made a mistake. He never spoke with Rivera about signing a proper contract, and, feeling disrespected, Rivera decided to not participate. “It was an important lesson,” Ferrer told me. “And he was right, I only wish he had taught me this lesson in a different way; it was so embarrassing to announce Rivera, and he was not there!”
In the light of this, Ferrer’s interest in Colón Torres’s poem was entwined with his love for Rivera. This love, though, should not be confused with belonging to what Colón-Montijo described as “the transnational network of Maelo-centered devotion” (2015: 20). Ferrer is not a devotee of Rivera nor the Black Christ of Portobelo, Panama—a Christ that played a key role in Rivera’s spiritual awakening and healing from drug addiction, and who he came to embody (see Carrasquillo 2015: 237-255). Contrary to Colón-Montijo’s interlocutors, I never saw Ferrer performing any kind of ritual around Rivera nor did we listen to his music. If Ferrer was close to being a devotee of someone it was Fidel Castro, who, in a photo gazing at the horizon as a young man in the Sierra Maestra, listened to our rehearsals. (Later this photo was joined by a five-hundred-page biography of the Cuban revolutionary by Claudia Furiati that I gifted him, and which he would often reference). The absence of a “Maelo-centered devotion” did not prevent him, though, from co-composing with Malcolm, Colón Torres and myself, a song celebrating this aspect of Rivera’s relationship with the Black Christ, a sort of follow up to “Invocación.”

Still uncertain about Ferrer’s religious beliefs, during the same interview I asked him, “Are you an atheist?” To which he answered, “Yes, I think that I am an atheist who is convinced of the importance of upholding traditions; traditions that are Catholic and spiritist.” The addition of “spiritist” was surprising to me. Where was this coming from? Before I had a chance to ask further questions, he added, “My mother was a Catholic and spiritist. Every Monday there would be a seance session at home. And the spirits would speak.” To this I replied, “But you are an atheist, so you don’t actually think that they spoke, right?” To which he replied, “Oh, yes, they were speaking. We are spirits. I also believe in miracles. I am in this apartment in NYC because of a miracle.”
As Ferrer emphasized, his definition of atheism did not exclude the existence of spirits, miracles or even a higher force. But he was not a Christian. Still, because he was “convinced of the importance of upholding Catholic and spiritist traditions” he could cherish Christian traditions, including the Day of the Three Kings which he particularly loves. When I asked him why, in consideration of all of this, he described himself as an atheist he said, “I am a communist, and when you are a communist you cannot be religious.”

Ultimately, because Ferrer is a proud communist (and eager to be recognized as such) he is willing to describe himself as an atheist, despite believing in reincarnation and some sort of spiritual energy informed by spiritism. Because he is not a Christian, he cannot claim to be a liberation theology type communist. But because he is a defender of Puerto Rican culture, he cherishes certain Catholic traditions and icons. Among these icons is Saint Michael, whose cult began in fifth century Spain as a syncretism with a pagan medical divinity known as Endovélico (Castillo de Lucas 1961: 146), and whose day has been honored by Afro-Puerto Ricans since at least the nineteenth century (see Guasp Dubón’s racist yet insightful nineteenth century recollections: 2003: 289-291).

Interestingly, when I asked Ferrer about the orishas, the Yoruba gods and goddesses that Rivera often referenced in his songs—Rivera’s “San Miguel” actually ends with soneos where he mentions Changó, Eleguá, Yemayá and Obatalá—he argued that these were Cuban influences, implying that, contrary to spiritism and Catholicism, santería was not intrinsic to Puerto Rican culture. To me, par contre, these Yoruba gods were just as Puerto Rican as Cuban. Accustomed as I was to hearing their names sung by Rivera, Héctor Lavoe, and Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz, these Puerto Ricans had “nationalized” the Yoruba deities. So much, that by age eighteen, I was reading about santería and had actually the name of Oyá—goddess of the winds—inscribed in
one of my *cuatros*. In addition, from a young age, my mother had told me that I was the son of Babaluayé (Saint Lazarus). While Raquel Romberg has noted how *santería* is often included in Puerto Rican popular articulations of spiritism (2003), according to Ferrer, his mother did not include the orishas in her seances during the 1950s.

Ferrer’s exclusion of the Afro-Cuban religion as part of Puerto Rican culture on the basis of its purported foreignness is to say the least curious. After all, he composes and performs Puerto Rican music largely based on the Afro-Cuban *son clave*. Never mind that spiritism, too, was foreign—it arrived in Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century via its French proponent Allan Kardec (see Romberg 2003). In the end, Ferrer’s views on the orishas are shaped by his own spiritual experiences, one where they were simply not present.

Ultimately, Ferrer was interested in “*Invocación*” not only because it spoke to his love for Rivera but because it also evoked his mother, Nicolasa Nazario Olivieri. As our conversation continued, Ferrer’s reflections on his childhood led him to share how Nicolasa was actually his biological father’s sister. When he was six months old, in 1946, his biological mother María Dolores Mateo, like thousands of Puerto Ricans in the 1940s and 1950s who sought to escape poverty, left for New York City never to return. As Ferrer told me, it was just like the poem by Juan Antonio Corretjer “*Boricua en la luna*” to which his friend Roy Brown had set music. While the climax of the song is the final stanza—where Puerto Ricans sing “and hence I tell the tyrant/that I would be Puerto Rican/even if I were born on the moon”—for Ferrer the climax arrives in the first *décima*:

*Desde las ondas del mar*
*que son besos a su orilla*
*una mujer de Aguadilla*
*vino a New York a cantar.*

From the waves of the sea
that are kisses at its shore
a woman from [the town of] Aguadilla
came to New York to sing
But no. Only to cry a long cry and to die.

From that cry I was born. I live in the long wait of recovering what I lost.

Like a beast in the rain

De ese llanto yo nací.

From that cry I was born.

Kon la lluvia una fiera

I live in the long wait of recovering what I lost.

Substitute Ponce for Aguadilla, and this décima is the story of Ferrer and his biological mom. It is true that she did not physically die after having migrated (as the poem implies vis-à-vis the mother from Aguadilla). But she ceased to exist as a mother thus dying in another sense. In the light of all these connections, it is no wonder why “Invocación” was so important to Ferrer, and why we spent so many hours trying to get it right.

Viento

A few months after our first rehearsal on “Invocación,” in April 2018, Ferrer laid in front of me what would be our second compositional collaboration: another poem by Colón Torres entitled “Viento.” Similar to “Invocación,” Ferrer sang the music to the first part, and asked me to set music to the rest. And like “Invocación,” it was in clave. I took the poem home along with a recording of Ferrer singing his part, and the following day sent him an MP3 recording of my work. Ferrer liked the melody but noted that it wasn’t in clave. This time, however, contrary to “Invocación,” I was not aiming at being in clave. Inspired by Ferrer’s proposal in the trilogy of albums that I was so fond of (Frank Ferrer Puerto Rico 2010, Aleluyah and Yerbabruja) I was eager to co-compose a song where, similar to those recordings, one could abandon the clave and return to it. My melody, compared to Ferrer’s, was at a much slower tempo and non-syncopated. It was also rather difficult to sing, melismatic, with high notes and accompanied by a relatively complicated harmony largely based on bossa nova-inspired major 7th chords. It was a sort of aria, something that Ferrer picked up on by pretending to sing it as an opera singer. Indeed, to my
mind, only a powerful voice such as that of Lucecita Benítez, for whom Ferrer had produced the album *Creceremos*, could sing this.

How surprised was I to learn that this was a problem! As Ferrer told me, the experiments of his trilogy—which César Miguel Rondón, reflecting on *Yerbabruja*, positively described as “open-ended and somewhat disorderly” experimental styles” (2008: 260)—had proven unsuccessful: they had little appeal to audiences who wanted to dance. And, as Ferrer stressed, we were making danceable music. It was then that I realized that Ferrer was thinking about the songs of our workshop more along the lines of his albums with the band Puerto Rico 2013 and *Descarga Boricua*. There, the *son clave*—or the Afro-Caribbean rhythm characteristic of any given song—was rarely changed. Somewhat disheartened at having composed something that was beautiful but useless, Ferrer reassured me that he would work on it until it was in *clave*, which I thought was impossible. Several months passed by (I spent most of my summer travelling) before we reconvened. To my surprise, Ferrer had adapted my melody to the *clave*. In order to sync my tune to the 3-2 *son clave*, Ferrer made my melody more syncopated; he eliminated some bars; added others, and placed the accents of the melody in the right place. So much had my melody changed rhythm- wise—Ferrer continued to sing the original pitches—that I was unable to sing it back! Like “Invocación,” it took several rehearsals before I could internalize Ferrer’s rhythm, and I was only able to do so by writing the melody down, reading

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292 Ferrer takes issue with this adjective (“disorderly”) which no doubt is an aesthetic judgement on the part of Rondón. As Ferrer notes, the songs were arranged and thus they were not “disorderly.” Still, Rondón is actually celebrating this aspect of Ferrer’s music; “disorderly” most likely referring to the fact that there are many rhythmic changes in the songs. Ferrer, also takes issue with Rondón’s comparison of his work with that of Panamanian *salsa* singer-songwriter Rubén Blades. As Ferrer told me, “Blades never sang in Cuba,” thus, he was less politically committed than Ferrer and *nueva canción* singer-songwriters widely speaking. Though they both sang socially aware songs, Ferrer stressed that he was actually committed to the anticolonial/socialist cause (pers. communication Jan. 8, 2021).
the syncopations and memorizing the accents. And though the effect was less dramatic than I had intended, it was still pretty powerful. Furthermore, the section sounded just fine in my voice.

For “Viento,” Ferrer also asked me to set music to the final ten lines of the poem. For this part, I adapted the melody of the *aguinaldo cagueño* to Colón Torres’s lyrics, and played the harmony and arpeggios characteristic of this *aguinaldo*. Two of her lines became the chorus, and the other eight lines were divided in two quatrains that became the *soneos*. Ferrer liked the idea, but as customarily, the rhythm of my melody was off. While I was singing my melody following the flow of *jíbaro* music, Ferrer wanted it matched to the *clave*. Once again, I found myself trying to memorize Ferrer’s rhythmic phrasing. In some ways this was even harder than my prior efforts. It represented shifting from a *jíbaro* music phrasing that was firmly established in my mind, to a *clave*-based phrasing that clashed with the expectations of *jíbaro* music. Such subtle musical creolizations between *jíbaro* music and *salsa*, it should be noted though, have a long history that goes back to at least the early 1970s: Héctor Lavoe, Willie Colón, Ismael Miranda, and band La Selecta, among others, all experimented with this (Quintero Rivera 2015: 217-236). So did Ferrer in songs such as “*La borinqueña*” (1972), where the electric guitar, right after the song’s introduction—an innovative take on the *paseo* of the *danza*—plays the melody of the *aguinaldo cagueño*, or in the instrumental piece “*La montaña canta*” (1976) where several *seises* are evoked and where Ferrer sings the “*le lo lai*” emblematic of *jíbaro* music. But I had never paid close attention to this and so, I was totally unprepared for it. Overall, then, “*Viento*” ended up being a song in *clave* where Ferrer’s relatively simple melody (yet rich in syncopations) was followed by my more complex melody (enriched by Ferrer’s syncopations as he adjusted it to the *clave*) ending in a *soneo* section reminiscent of *jíbaro* music. (More recently we added a final
section: a pedal, anchored on the tonic (E) where we sing the title of Colón Torres’s poetry book *Viento abajo*. But what had led Ferrer to “Viento”?

Ferrer’s interest in “Viento,” like “Invocación” was his response to a variety of motivating factors. At first, I thought that he liked it primarily because it reminded him of Antonio Cabán Vale’s poems for whom he had produced *Las manos del campo* (1975). The album included the song of the same name. Colón Torres’s “Viento” and Cabán Vale’s “Las manos del campo” shared similar imagery and addressed similar emotions. In his song, Cabán Vale spoke about the “adorable small hands” of children who “caress the earth and make her fall in love with them/until they achieve the sweetness/involved in work and hope”; from these hands “the dream of the future of the race arises” (my translation). As he told Gloria Alonso in 1976, he “wrote it for the children that attended schools in the campos [rural areas] of Cuba,” though as a father of a “nine-year-old daughter and a two-year-old [boy?]” he would often sing it as a nana to the former (see Alonso 1976: 8; my translation). Colón Torres’s poem, for its part, was dedicated to her father, and reminisced about her childhood experiences with her dad. Colón Torres writes about the “soil,” “the seeds that survive among the weeds,” the “fruits/offspring,” the rainforest “El Yunque,” the “gray kingbird;” narrating how her father taught her to love the land, its fruits, and freedom. As she told me in an email her poem is about “a father who supports his daughter’s desires of personal and collective freedom:”

At an early age
my father offered me the fire and the soil. . .
He spoke of the time of the offspring
and of the seeds that survive among the weeds. . .

He refused to raise me in a cage
because gray kingbirds are owed respect
he would say
lost in his Yunque [rainforest]
dreaming the dreams
that torment.

Now that I’m so far away
and miss him because he grows old
and because I understand much better the pain
I strive to continue flying
so that the master may be made smaller.

Wind, do not constrain yourself.
Fly when you feel like flying.

Colón Torres and Cabán Vale’s poem were also similar in their condemnation of US imperialism. If the latter did this via a veiled celebration of the Cuban Revolution, the former did it via the references to the “gray kingbird” (a symbol of the independence struggle), the “master” (US) and the rainforest the *Yunque*, which as Colón Torres expressed in a personal email is a “sacred *Taíno* Indian and Caribbean mountain that does not belong to Puerto Rico. . . [since it] was stolen by the US military, who use it for their experiments.” Further asking, “who is not tormented to remember that it was there that the army experimented with orange agent?” (Colón Torres, Jan. 4, 2021).

I had also assumed that Ferrer saw these poems as similar because he had mentioned that one of the melodies that he composed for “*Viento*” was reminiscent of Cabán Vale’s “Las manos del campo.” Indeed, my own setting to music of the final quatrains were meant as a sort of homage to Cabán Vale. That is, I had aimed for a *jíbaro* sounding melody that, combined with Colón Torres’s poetry, would evoke Cabán Vale. Though “Las manos del campo” is a ballad,

293 The full poem in Spanish goes as follows:

*A temprana edad/mi padre me presentó el fuego y la tierra/Compartió algunos secretos/y me escondió los más poderosos/ para que yo creciera/Me habló del tiempo de los frutos/y de las semillas que sobreviven en la maleza/No me crió enjaulada/Porque los pitirres se respetan, decía/perdido en su Yunque/soñando los sueños/que atormentan/Ahora que estoy lejos/y lo extraño porque envejece/y porque conozco mejor el dolor/intento seguir volando/para que el amo empequeñezca/(Ese truco también me lo enseñó él)/Qué no te asombre el cielo/los que más hablan siempre tiemblan/besa lo que la mirada dispare/saluda lo que tu piel sienta/Aprende de los que fingen/para que seas más honesta/y si llega un pájaro herido/anídalo donde amanezcas/No te obligues a nada, Viento/vuela cuando tú quieras*
much of Cabán Vale’s repertoire is actually neofolkloric, that is, based on jíbaro music (and other Latin American folk musics). But Ferrer had not noticed these lyrical similarities. To him, both songs were extremely different (Zoom interview Dec. 12, 2020).

Ferrer’s view of these poems as very different was in part based on his experiences with Cabán Vale, and his experiences with us in our workshop. Throughout the 1970s Ferrer had worked with the poet/singer-songwriter, and composer of Puerto Rico’s second anthem “Verde luz,” not only as his producer but a music collaborator. In 1976, Ferrer had co-composed “Yerbabruja” with Cabán Vale—together, they had set music to this poem by communist poet Juan Antonio Corretjer. But according to Ferrer, Cabán Vale, did not understand what it meant to engage in collaborative work. Remembering Cabán Vale’s song “Este canto de tierra” he highlighted how this blend of a danza and a seis chorreo had emerged as part of a workshop that they did related to the presentation of a play entitled like the song “Este canto de tierra.” While according to Ferrer these interactions led to Cabán Vale’s inspiration, the latter claimed the song only as his composition.

Another similar incident involved the song “Somos uno,” the anthem of Los juegos centroamericanos y del Caribe of 1993. Once released, Ferrer gave both himself and Cabán Vale credit for the composition. But when the latter learned of this, he was upset. According to Ferrer’s recollections, Cabán Vale argued that since Ferrer had just composed the chorus, that barely amounted to having co-composed the piece. At the heart of their dispute were different conceptions of what entails authorship. To Ferrer, if you were exchanging ideas with others, and came up with a song that was inspired by those exchanges, those involved deserved credit. For Cabán Vale, based on Ferrer’s memories, the notion of the composer seems to have been more restricted: only the one who had composed most of the song deserved credit. As Ferrer stresses,
though, what is important is that, despite their differences, time “was not wasted, a work had been realized” (pers. comment Jan. 15, 2021). Indeed, they were able to create songs that have shaped Puerto Rican popular culture in significant ways

Still, while these personal issues no doubt shaped his understanding of “Viento” and the relationship that Ferrer saw between it and “Las manos del campo,” Ferrer’s aesthetic criteria was key to why he heard these poems as being so different despite the topical similarities. Trying to get an answer, I pressed: “Do you associate Colón Torres’s way of writing to that of Cabán Vale?” His answer was an unequivocal “no.” Because throughout the years of our workshop we had exchanged poetry books by myriad Puerto Rican poets from the Island and the diaspora, and Latin America, I asked, “Is Colón Torres’s poetry reminiscent of any of the many poets that we have read?” Because the list was so long, it took Ferrer a while to answer. “Clemente Soto Vélez, he would be the closest.” Curious to learn how the poetry of a founding member of the Atalayismo literary-political anticolonial movement of the 1920s related to Colón Torres’s work, I pressed, “How exactly do you see their poetry as similar?” Ferrer answered, “It’s the rhythm, the rhythm of their poetry.” Is it an Afro-Caribbean rhythm, I asked. “Yes, they share an Afro-Caribbean rhythm; Cabán Vale’s poetry does not have that; it’s more jíbaro-based.” While jíbaro music is already informed by Afro-Caribbean rhythms or a “camouflaged drum” (Quintero Rivera and Alvarez 1994: 27-37), this is not the Afro-Caribbean rhythm for which Ferrer listens.²⁹⁴

Ferrer’s answer was quite revealing. Ferrer was not so much setting music to poems but unveiling an Afro-Caribbean rhythm that was already present in the language, that is, in the way in which the words were organized. The similarities that he saw between both poets had nothing

²⁹⁴ These are my translations. Though Ferrer understands English and speaks a bit, our conversations are always in Spanish.
to do with topical similarities. The fact that Soto Vélez and Colón Torres shared an anticolonial sensibility was rather secondary. Ferrer was a getting at another kind of reading, one in which Afro-Caribbean beats somehow informed certain poems that, because this was the case, he was then able to set to music. The presence of this Afro-Caribbean beat had nothing to do with the topic of the poem: neither Soto Vélez nor the Atlayismo movement celebrated Blackness, a task that would be pursued by poet Luis Palés Matos who Ferrer has also set music to. Interestingly, Colón Torres told me that she wrote many of her poems influenced by bomba and the Afro-Dominican genres palo dominicano and salve, though as a non-musician, she did not know what role these played exactly in her writing (pers. email Jan. 3, 2021). In any case, Ferrer seems to have picked it up.

Ferrer’s ear vis-à-vis the Afro-Caribbean rhythm of some poems is reminiscent of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s explorations of the relationship between “patois dominguois,” an antecedent of Haitian Kreyòl, and music. As Haitian musicologist Claude Dauphin explains, at some point between 1754 and 1756 Marthe-Jerome Duvivier de la Mahautière, a wealthy white creole from Saint Domingue, wrote the first poem in “patois dominguois” (2018: 81). Setting it to a popular music of the time, from the French region of Poitou, his creole song became very popular in Haiti. Coming across this song, according to Dauphin, Rousseau:

entrepit sans tarder d’extirper du poème créole une mélodie consubstantielle pour remplacer sa gangue musicale poitevine [from the region of Poitou, France]. Une minutieuse analyse de l’air composé par Rousseau révèle en effet une volonté du compositeur d’ajoindre au poème créole, une nouvelle ligne mélodique dont le caractère rythmique découlerait de sa langue originelle. (82)

Having found this “new melodic line whose rhythm came out” of the Kreyòl language, Rousseau composed a song that he entitled “Chanson nègre,” something that Dauphin reads as an act of solidarity with the “damnés de la terre de son son temps” (83). Based on his analysis of
“Chanson nègre” and its relationship to Duvivier de la Mahautière’s Haitian Kreyòl poem, Dauphin concludes that what Rousseau unveiled was the presence of the *cinquillo* (83-84).

While Ferrer cannot read or write music, he has been engaged in a similar interpretative exercise as Rousseau: searching for the Afro-Caribbean rhythm within language/poetry in order to compose music. But contrary to Rousseau, he has also done this in order to unearth the danceable qualities of language. As Ferrer often stressed, “dance is essential” to his music making, and to conveying his political ideas (pers. comment Jan. 17, 2021).

If the presence of this rhythm had driven Ferrer towards “Viento” (and “Invocación,” and indeed the poetry that he sets music to broadly speaking), emotional resonances had also led him to “Viento.” The relationship that Colón Torres described between a child and a father in her poem had captivated Ferrer’s imagination. I would only discover this two years later in October 2020 when Ferrer, Colón Torres, and I began working with documentary film director Julio César Torres González in order produce a documentary film about Ferrer and our workshop (part of an on-going project). During one of these meetings, Torres González asked Ferrer to speak about his father. It was then that I learned that Ferrer’s biological father Domingo Nazario Olivieri had been absent in his life; his position being taken by his political uncle Frank Ferrer, the husband of his mother (aunt) Nicolasa. It was only then, after six years of friendship that I learned that Ferrer’s actual name was Domingo! As Ferrer told Torres González, “One day, when I was five years old, as my mother [Nicolasa] was registering me in the school Lessie Graham, the registrar asked her, ‘What is the boy’s name?’ Before she could answer I said, ‘My name is Frank Ferrer’.” That was how Domingo became Ferrer as he told us through Zoom, breaking down in tears. Domingo became Frank Ferrer to honor the man who had chosen to be his father, and the man that he loved as a father. Moved, I couldn’t help but remember my *cuatro*
teacher Cruz, the man who had chosen to be my dad, and who had passed away on July 25, 2019. It was thanks to him in part, that I was now a friend of Ferrer.

Ultimately, Ferrer loved “Viento” not only because it evoked jíbaro music, nueva canción, salsa, and asserted Puerto Rican independence but because it brought him all the way back to the beginning, to the genesis of his being, to the moment when he became Frank Ferrer. In the end, Colón Torres, Ferrer and I all saw a piece of ourselves and our fathers reflected in the poem.

The beauty and power of poetry as it is transformed into song.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have reflected on the relationship between music making, anticolonial politics and friendship, focusing on some of Ferrer’s experiences, and that of our workshop Viento Vital Boricua. I have shown how Ferrer uses music and sound in order to make a political anticolonial point while simultaneously inscribing personal stories and feelings in song. In the process, I have highlighted a PRNC that was quite entwined with salsa and Afro-Caribbean sensibilities thus contributing to a PRNC historiography that, overemphasizing this music’s more obvious Latin American connections as part of the Latin American nueva canción movement, has neglected to listen for its Caribbean sound. In the end, I have sought to demonstrate that Ferrer’s aspiration for a liberated Puerto Rican nation is not only about an “imagined community.” It is also based on a real community insofar as it is informed by acts of love and friendship, and the negotiations and tensions that lie within.

**Coda**

According to Aristotle, in a friendship implying inequality such as the one that emerges between the elder and the young, “the love should also be proportional, i.e., the better should be
more loved than he loves, and so should the more useful... for when the love is in proportion to the merit of the parties, then in a sense emerges equality, which is certainly held to be characteristic of friendship” (2019: 175). My friendship with Frank, and my elderly interlocutors in general is premised along Aristotle’s line. I have always felt that it was upon me to love them more than they loved me for the sake of equality. And yet, some of these friends, among which is Frank, have broken this “rule.” As they ask me about my wife and give my daughter gifts; wonder about my mother’s health and how she is doing in Utah; genuinely celebrate my modest accomplishments or express admiration for my own work as a musician and singer-songwriter, I wonder. It would seem that a good friendship can be disproportional too. After all, more often than not, these elders have granted me a love that exceeds my merit.
Conclusion

When Hilcia Montañez passed away on October 1, 2020, I was shaken but not surprised. I had seen her the prior summer, and the strong and always joyful and chatty Hilcia could barely speak. Just like I had done with Millito and Doudou, I kissed her goodbye. The following day, as requested by her widower Oscar “El Flaco,” I texted Sandra María and Papoleto to let them know. Their replies did not take long:

Oh, I am so very wounded to hear this. My condolences to Flaco and familia, y todos who remember, who loved her voice, who loved Hilcia.

--Papoleto

Thank you, Mario for letting me know. My condolences to Flaco and her family for their loss. Special and magical spiritual soul, nueva voz diva, she will be missed and loved eternally. QDEP

--Sandra María

I also spoke with Bernardo over the phone. I have never heard him so estremecido (shaken).

On January 25, 2021, Oscar shared a video in homage to Hilcia, which Bernardo forwarded to me and the members of El Grupo. Consisting in a sequence of photos that documented Hilcia’s life since she was a baby all the way to her performances with El Grupo and her life afterwards as a mother and a community organizer and activist, Oscar had included a photo of one of our tertulias. There I was, with my cuatro, next to Hilcia and other friends. I was moved. I still am. I knew that I loved them. I knew that they loved me. But being in this video? Did I really deserve this? In the background Hilcia could be heard singing “Sigue la vida su curso” (“Life Continues to Flow”). Composed of some décimas that she and Suni had written together, and recorded in El Grupo’s album to the tune of a seis con décimas, Hilcia sang:

Como agua cantarina
la vida baja remando
a veces viene saltando
otras veces viene herida
sus crecientes no se olvidan

Like melodious water
life descends rowing
sometimes leaping
other times, she arrives wounded
when rising, she does not forget
It was then, through this email exchange, nearly four months after Hilcia’s passing that Suni found out that Hilcia had died. While Oscar had sent us all a message on October 1, 2020 with the subject title “Un adiós” and a quote from the song, Suni had not connected the dots, as she told me when we spoke over the phone on January 27, 2021. I felt terrible. I should have prevented this pain. But I was not close to Suni—I had only met her briefly once at El Taller Latino Americano—and I did not have her contact info (I only noticed that she was one of the addressees of the prior email after our conversation). And because she was close to Oscar and Hilcia, I had assumed that she knew. When on January 27 I read her email messages of distress asking if Hilcia had died, I asked her if I could call her. During our conversation, I shared my last memories of Hilcia and what Oscar had shared with me. I felt better with myself, and Suni was grateful, but I wish I could have done more.

According to Aracelis Delgado, Hilcia’s childhood friend, in her final days Hilcia would tell her “tráeme la pasta de Mario.” Prior to departing from New York City, Hilcia had asked me to bring her some Miso Pasta. I had no idea what this was, and for one moment I thought that it

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295 My translation.
was not that important. Still, I asked my wife about it, and she found Hilcia’s pasta for me. As Aracelis told me, in her last days Hilcia would eat nothing else: “tráeme la pasta de Mario.” Though I want to remember the vibrant Hilcia of our tertulias, I want to keep this final memory as well. I could not be with Hilcia in her final days. But in some minimal way, I was there helping her in her transition to a “new dawn.”

Each time an interlocutor/friend dies, those who passed before return. Each time a friend/interlocutor dies, I shudder wondering who might be next. I have approached these men and women attracted by their age, their wisdom, their brilliant minds and their courage. They are not perfect. Nobody is. But they have led beautiful musical-poetic lives committed to social justice. And they are still going at it! When I become an elder, I want to be just like them: filled with life and a desire to change the world for the better. We have had arguments as friends do. I have apologized when I have failed them. I have been understanding when I have felt left down by them. But they are my elders, and I would never dream to bring this up. Yes, we are friends. But they are my elders.

Throughout the last decade, I have prepared to the best of my abilities in order to be worthy of their presence. But have I prepared to exist in their absence? I fear not. The chapters that follow this conclusion will be painful. But they will also be filled with new memories and surprises.

_Sounds that Fall Through the Cracks, and Other Silences and Acts of Love_ is about anticolonialism, decoloniality, social justice, music, poetry, song, the history of the 1960s and 1970s as heard through Puerto Rico and Québec. I have argued for the importance of “theorizing with your interlocutors” in a meaningful way: for considering the interlocutor in her complexity and listening to her deeply; for negotiating and writing with your interlocutor; for being critical
and honest but understanding, kind and humble; for meeting somewhere on the bridge that has connected our lives. I have called for reimagining PRNC, CQ and anticolonial history of Québec and Puerto Rico, and for bridging different bodies of knowledge concerned with coloniality, and questioning some of their tenets. Inspired in part by Glissant (2010 [1990]), my overall argument has been that decolonizing knowledge involves a collective praxis that in addition to assessing how colonial logics are reproduced and proposing ways to contest them, must also challenge the “totalitarian” and individualist “root” of academic discourse. In the process, I have sounded out many silences. But I have also reproduced a fair share.

During this quest, several of my interlocutors knocked at the doors of Asia: the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse Tung, Krishnamurti, Buddhism. I read about these subjects as well but was unable to incorporate it in a significant way. Theater, art and dance also came up quite often. Many of my interlocutors are also painters and actors or have a close connection with these artforms. Though I read about these subjects as well, I chose to focus on sound, music and poetry. While delimiting is a part of any project, I want to stress that my friends/interlocutors are more talented and complex than I have been able to convey.

As I conclude my work, I cannot help but wonder, “What is the decolonial import of bodily discourses? What does this mean for CQ and PRNC and what do these musics do to bodily discourse?” What articulations of the decolonial emerge in the point of contact between theater, music, poetry and dance?” I am also left wondering about these musics’ relationship with capitalism. What does commodification do to anticolonial albums? How does capitalism shape the values of singer-songwriters that self-describe as socialist or anticapitalist?296 Finally, how do

296 See Santiago 2013 for partial answers to these important questions.
these musics inform contemporary musics of resistance? I have dwelled on the latter question, here and there, by relating my song-making to that of my interlocutors. But a systematic study would shed much light on just how much has changed and how much has remained more or less the same. There is also the matter of these musics’ connections to ecological concerns, something that I only mention in passing.\textsuperscript{297}

Some of these questions are worthy of their own dissertation, and I can only hope that they will be taken up by future scholars. In the end, I took the \textit{caminos} that made sense to me and my interlocutors, and I made sure to not walk alone. May others take their \textit{caminos}, and borrow as they see fit, from ours.

\textbf{Coda}

One day, after several \textit{tambin} classes, Sylvain asked me, “What is your project about?” Somewhat nervously, on account of not being certain, I gave him the academic answer: “my project is about unveiling the political in cross-cultural musical collaborations related to the Québec and Puerto Rico of the 1960s and 1970.” I then added: “I also want to write about musicians who challenge the expectations of particular musical genres, people who do not fulfill aesthetic and political expectations.” Sylvain answered “Oh, I see, you are writing about musicians who fall through the cracks.” –“Yes! That’s it, I thought. It is about musicians who fall through the cracks; I am amplifying the sounds that fall through the cracks.” But in a deeper sense, this project has also been about friends who fall through the cracks, and the “acts of love” that they have made for others, myself and my daughter included. I have been lifted by them. Hopefully, I have done the same for them.

\textsuperscript{297} I am glad to see, though, that this line of enquiry is being investigated by my mentee, Eddie Pesante González, who is working on this vis-à-vis PRNC. His Bachelor’s thesis announces what will no doubt be an invaluable contribution to PRNC, and the history of Puerto Rican musical-ecological resistance during the 1960s and 1970s.
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