

DISSONANT DEEJAYS OF CUMBIA SONIDERO: Cultivating Queer Vibes and Mujerista Mentorship

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Abstract: Informed by a soniderx methodology, I conducted participant observation and pláticas with ten womxn or queer deejays to theorize their soniderx practices. I built upon Deborah Vargas’s use of “dissonance,” an interruption or disruption to “heteronormative and cultural nationalist limits of Borderlands subjectivities and cultural histories” to characterize the work of these soniderxs. Dissonance—rather than the oft-used analytic of “resistance”—allows me to break from a dialectical opposition to oppressive systems of empire (heteronormativity, patriarchy, capitalism, etc.) and ‘aquí/allá subjectivities.’ Additionally, I employ José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of queer utopia to ground the term “vibe” as an analytic to describe the sonic futurity these deejays cultivate during their performances. Fueled by feminista empowerment and convivencia, vibe is produced by queer women of color and gender non-conforming deejays commanding turntables, creating ecstatic moments that constitute a potentiality and a horizon of possibility (Muñoz 2009). Grounded in the Afro-diasporic genres cumbia and reggaetón, the vibe generated by soniderxs signals possibility and futurity to envision a world that centers and connects non-normative identities and cultures.

Keywords: *cumbia sonidera, dissonance, mujerista mentorship, queer, vibes, deejays, utopia*

The *Rat-tat-tat rat-tat-tat* of a güero guacharaca echoes through a dark narrow hallway in downtown Los Angeles. A man working security in the non-descriptive building I stepped through asks, “Are you here for the cumbia party?” As I nod my head yes, he indicated, “Through the first door on the right.” After I open the door, I am greeted by UndocuQueer artist Julio Salgado¹ with, “Welcome to Cumbiatón!” Cumbiatón is a monthly party honoring AfroLatinx culture and music (@Cumbiatón_LA) by centering “womxn and queer people of color both on the dance floor and in the deejay booth” (cumbiaton.org). In the five years since the party was founded in

May 2017, the Boyle Heights-based Cumbiatón has grown into a nationwide celebration with Cumbiatón West Coast Connect expanding to Seattle, Washington²; Cumbiatón Bay Area in San Francisco³; and collaborative parties in New York City.

The *rat-tat-tat* is now backed by a *knock knock knock* on a wooden clave and a high pitch squeal of the accordion held for one elongated note. The shrill of the accordion echoes off the bare walls of the room, a video production studio by day converted to a cumbia party by night. The accordion continues, now in a melodic loop that fills the room. Boyle Heights raised Guerrerense DJ Sizzle Fantastic⁴ commands a set of turntables, mixer, and laptop atop a makeshift stage. The güero guacharaca, clave and accordion persist in a continuous loop, as they are the introductory bars of Aniceto Molino's classic vallenato style cumbia record *Cumbia Sampuesana*.⁵ DJ Sizzle Fantastic takes to the microphone, hyping up the dancing crowd as her cheerful call weaves seamlessly with the song “Wepa! Sonidero, Sonidero! Sonidero Nacional! Sonidero! Sonidero! Sonidero Nacional!”⁶

In this essay, I examine the performative instrument amplifying cumbia globally, the sonidero, or the deejay or “literally the sound makers or sound men” of cumbia sonidera, cumbia played over a sound system (Ragland 2003). Specifically, I analyze the cultural work of a collective of queer Latinx sonidero deejays using a mixed methods approach I call soniderx methodology. I conceptualize this work in a variety of ways. To begin with, I draw upon my analysis of participant observation, interviews and pláticas (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016) with a collective of soniderx⁷ deejays. I draw upon the work of Deborah Vargas to situate their project as one of dissonance. I employ José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) concept of queer utopia to ground the term “vibe” as an analytic to describe the sonic futurity

these deejays cultivate during their performances. I use *vibe* to articulate the “construction of [socio] sonic environments” where “creative fantasies” and transgressive queer women and non-binary centered futurities unfold (Ragland 2003, 352). Importantly, I showcase how *mujerista* mentorship (Villaseñor, Reyes, and Muñoz 2003) and *convivencia* (Gonzalez 2014) between deejays cultivates this *vibe*. Grounded in the Afro-diasporic genres *cumbia* and *reggaetón*, the *vibe* generated by *sonideras* signals possibility and futurity to envision a decolonial world: a world without borders that embraces Afro-Latinidad and does not reproduce anti-Blackness while centering and connecting non-normative bodies, identities, and cultures. I conclude this essay the way I opened it—with an ethnographic vignette of the *vibe* created during a dissonant deejay party and the moments of hope and joy it cultivates.

Soniderx Methodology⁸

The *soniderxs* featured in this research project include the founding members of *Cumbiatón Los Angeles*: undocumented Guerrerense DJ Sizzle Fantastic, Normz La Oaxaqueña, queer undocumented Latina DJ Funky Caramelo, resident illustrator undocuqueer artist Julio Salgado, and resident visual storyteller, photographer, and videographer Paolo Riveros⁹ (Avila 2019; *cumbiatón.org*). Other deejays that were part of this project include: DJ Killed by Synth, a lesbiana first generation Latina born and raised in Los Angeles and creator of *Techno Cumbia Party*¹⁰, a queer Latinx dance party and the longest running Selena tribute celebration in the U.S. (@technocumbiaparty); *Techno Cumbia Party* resident deejay Afro-Chicana DJ Zuri Adia; DJ Lady Soul, a queer non-binary deejay from a mixed status family; gender fluid queer African American deejay DJ Kellye Kell of *Grrrlnight*¹¹, a queer/trans people of color dance party; and San Francisco based deejay, member of the Bay Area Chapter of *Chulita Vinyl Club* and *Cumbiatón San Francisco*, resident deejay DJ Sin Amores who identifies as a queer Chicana.

Informed by Christine Bacereza Balance's (2016) turntablist methodology, I employed a mixed methods approach I am calling soniderx methodology—an improvisational cut-mix, and hopefully, a harmonious transition between an otherwise cacophonous set of practices and methods that guide this research. Two methods I employ in this approach include participant observation and pláticas (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016). Heeding the call of Chicana feminist and queer feminist theorists and pedagogues, I conceptualize soniderx methodology to challenge restrictive categories, positivist objectivity, and empiricism in the social sciences that function as tools of colonization. Decolonial methodology, epistemology, pedagogy and, importantly, axiology must, as Alejandra Elenes (2011) states, move beyond hegemonic categories of analysis and create new discursive practices and methodological tools. Further, as educators and academics, our duty is to put “our tools and knowledge” to use in our communities while working to absolve “community/academia” divides (Flores Carmona 2014, 114; Téllez 2005, 47).

Feminista scholars have long championed reflexivity and the interrogation of power between researcher and subject, especially as an insider/outsider and/or colonizer/colonized researcher (Villenas 1996; Delgado Bernal 1998). As researchers with authoritative voice over the research process (Portillo 2011; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga and Flores Carmona 2012), code-switcher and translators (Flores Carmona 2014), and borderland ethnographers (Téllez 2005), I follow the path set forth by decolonial feminista scholars who strike a balance of self-reflexivity and the voices of the deejays. Like a deejay, my role is to play the songs and honor the knowledge production of the artists. As a researcher, I am equipped with a metaphorical sound system that can amplify the voice of artists but ultimately convey an authoritative voice to those listening. Soniderx methodology seeks to lessen my presence and privilege by listening closely to my participants, writing with intentionality, and

selecting, beat matching and mixing the sound of the artists—producers of knowledge—with care and transparency. My aim in stating my positionality and my “uncomfortable reflexivity” (Flores Carmona 2014, 116) is not to center my voice, but instead to play the tune of these deejays creating utopic potentiality. This work is not about me, a cisgender heterosexual Chicano male, grappling with and employing feminista and queer of color methodological tools.

The tools comprising the *soniderx* methodology of this project include participant observation at eight dance parties hosted and curated by the participant deejays. I attended several of the parties with Chicana-and Latina-identified *colegas* and two of them with my Chicana wife.¹² As a straight Chicano male, I am positioned as an insider/outsider researcher in this space. To account for the ways I simultaneously belonged and held privilege, I made sure I never attended the dance parties alone. For the most part, I was simply a party attendee having a fun night out with friends or my partner. I chatted with friends either at the bar or at a table, as well as with some of the deejays. At times, I was on the dance floor “two-stepping.” I am neither a good nor confident dancer—and an even worse cumbia dancer—but I can hold my own two-stepping back and forth without feeling out of place. My participant observation in the field could be described as “dirty participation” (Di Felicianantonio and Gadelha 2017, 280) and open reflexivity where my “performativity of the self in the research process” (Rooke 2009, 159) is connected, unbounded and unstable in time and place. This allows a “full space for sensitivity,” permitting an embodied affect of the party—that is, where much of what was observed is registered and represented through memory interpretation of the structures of feeling and ephemeral moments of a particular party (Di Felicianantonio and Gadelha 2017). Additionally, I conducted seven *pláticas* (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016) with the deejays.

The pláticas were recorded and transcribed. They ranged from an hour to four hours long and occurred at panaderías over café, horchata lattes and pan dulce, or over draft beers at a quiet South Los Angeles dive bar.

Six of the seven deejays are based in Los Angeles. DJ Sin Amores is originally from Los Angeles but has been living in San Francisco for over a decade. DJ Sin Amores is a member of an all women deejay collective in the Bay Area, although she is a regular collaborator and organizer with the Los Angeles deejays. The interview with DJ Sin Amores occurred at her workplace, a non-profit agency in San Francisco's Mission District.

Dissonant Deejays & Vibe

I extend the work of scholar Deborah Vargas's *Dissonant Divas: The Limits of La Onda in Chicana Music* (2012) to the collective of cumbia deejays in this paper, identifying them as dissonant deejays. Vargas uses "dissonance" as an analytical tool to "symbolize an interruption or disruption of the heteronormative and cultural nationalist limits of La Onda" (2012, xiv), allowing her to problematize canonized male-centric Chicano music histories. Vargas demonstrates how the cultural production of Chicana/Tejana musicians and singers contradicts and complicates nationalist discourses of Chicanismo, and sedimented orders of knowledge production by providing new sonic imaginaries and discursive categories of the borderlands (2012, xii). Vargas's use of dissonance as an analytic queers the canonical, male-centered tropes that are typical of Chicano studies. These often foreground race and class, while neglecting gender and sexuality.

Like the dissonant divas studied by Vargas, the soniderx deejays of this study challenge individualist, masculinist sonidero deejay authoritative culture.¹³ In her rich ethnographic exploration of sonidero bailes in New

York and New Jersey, Cathy Ragland (2003) notes “the sonideros are always male, [are] typically older than their audience, and young men in the audience outnumber the young women at a ratio of at least three to one” (339). Furthermore, cumbia sonidero scholarship typifies the sonidero himself, as larger-than-life “quasi-heroic figures” with superhuman qualities (Ragland 2003, 350). The “heroic” sonidero imaginary is developed through the sonidero’s theatrical presentaciones (Kun 2015, 540), a form of self-advertisement and self-branding where the sonidero “frequently reiterates his stage name...[while] he boasts of his powerful system and unique musical selection... commentary about the ‘authenticity’ of the sonidero’s musical selection and the sheer volume and power of his sonido” (Ragland 2003, 344-345). The sonidero scene has been portrayed as a masculine space, with its key figures viewed as mavericks, (disc)jockeying to be recognized as the single most powerful or most authoritative deejays. The deejays in my study, however, exhibit dissonance by challenging these attributes. Instead of individualistic self-branding as “quasi-heroic” sonideros, they view their deejay practices as collective acts, which center the voices and bodies of queer Latinx women and gender non-conforming Latinxs. For the seven dissonant deejays I came to know through this project, collectivity, community, and family undergird their cultural work as deejays.

The utility of “dissonance” rather than the oft-used analytic of “resistance” is that it breaks from a dialectical of opposition to oppressive systems of empire (heteronormativity, patriarchy, capitalism, etc.) and the imposition of those matrices of power. Fueled through hetero-masculinist logics of resistance and subordination, this binary sediments systems of power as natural phenomena and creates subjectivities that are always already contesting them (Vargas 2012, ix). The term “resistance” thus reaffirms a marginalized positionality in an asymmetrical distribution of power, actively, yet unintentionally,

bolstering the U.S. empire. Rey Chow asks us to consider, “[the] ideological forces are there that would enable the individual representative of an ethnic minority to move beyond the macro sociological structures that have already mapped out her existence” (Chow 2003, 31). Although resistance is a “step towards liberation,” Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us that:

it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed...all reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank... somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once, and at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react (Anzaldúa 1987, 78-79).

Dissonance provides an alternative to this duality, as it is disharmony and disruption of structures of empire, not a counterstance against them. Through their performative labor, and presence at the deejay booth, these cultural workers command a crowd using a set of turntables, mixer, and mic. In these moments, the deejays are not on the “opposite [side] of the river bank” nor are they straddling “both shores at once” (Anzaldúa 1987, 78). Through action rather than reaction, the deejays chart what Anzaldúa described as another route—one of the “numerous possibilities” (1987, 79).

The existing scholarship on cumbia sonidera—cumbia that is played over a sound speaker—primarily centers on a transnational counterstance discourse of sonideros and displaced communities of Mexican immigrants—affirming a trope of bi-national immigrant struggle and fostering an “aquí in the allá” sociality (Ragland 2003; Kun 2015). Whereas the existing scholarship on cumbia sonidera foregrounds transnational “aquí and allá” socio-spatial politics, I found that dissonant deejays studied here queer the south to north migration to embrace a “ni de aquí, ni de allá” narrative. Rather than creating an aural affect of “longing, love, and homesickness left behind” (Lippmann 2018, 211), dissonant deejays evoke queer temporal and spatial logics (Halberstam 2005). By ‘coming out’ as both queer and undocumented in the United States, the performative actions of dissonant deejays do not render a time and space “left behind.” This was exemplified amidst the global lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when Cumbiatón LA’s DJ Funky Caramelo created the virtual dance party “Reggaetón sin barreras: El curso virtual” on Instagram live. Creator DJ Funky Caramelo likens deejaying with pedagogy, as this “party in full quarantine” taught a “lesson” in perreo. Reggaetón sin barreras operated by this guiding principle: “Just like our immigrant existence, this course plans to break barriers. We might be apart, but nothing stops al perreo” (Cumbiatón_LA instagram). What these deejays evoke, then, is a non-binary and non-linear affective performance. The resultant socio-sonic oeuvre is a space and time of possibility—of an existence that breaks barriers while striving for a world beyond borders and the restrictive categories of citizenship.

When articulating this mood, this setting, this non-normative logic of space and time (Halberstam 2005, Muñoz 2009), the dissonant deejays refer to cultivating a “vibe.” Their sense-making indicates that this “vibe” cultivates intergenerational familial joy, dissonance, and healing via cumbia—a tri-

cultural Afro-Indigenous-diasporic sound. Ultimately, dissonant deejays constitute a space of normative temporal rupture and spatial transcendence or moments in flux (Lethabo King 2019).

Cumbia refers to a rhythm, a genre of music and a style of dance. All originate from Colombia's heritage of African, Indigenous and European cultures. According to D'Amico (2013), the etymology of the word "cumbia" is disputed, but most scholars affix the term with African roots. Anthropologist Fernando Ortiz traces the term to areas north of Guinea and Congo where "kumba" is a "popular toponymic and tribal denomination" (D'Amico 2013, 31). Historian Carlos Esteban Deive states that "cumbia" is derived from the kumba word for navel, "cumbancha," while Nicolás Del Castillo suggests the word is derived from an African word meaning drum (D'Amico 2013, 14). Despite its contested origins, there is consensus that the style of music and dance was a product of *música costeña* (coastal music) a colonial blending of Indigenous, Spanish, and African stylistic and cultural elements (D'Amico 2013, 28). As the national music of Colombia, cumbia took on more orchestral arrangements, influenced by Afro-Cuban orchestras touring Colombia's radio stations (D'Amico 2013). Cumbia was disseminated throughout the country and later across Latin America by local town *banda de vientos* (brass bands) which played *música costeña's* folk rhythms (D'Amico 2013). The new cosmopolitan cumbia was packaged as *música tropical* and disseminated throughout Latin America.

Before cumbia's introduction to Mexico in the 1950s through cinema (Olivera Gudiño 2013), Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions, particularly Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican, had been long established especially in Mexico City and in the coastal region of Veracruz. Mexico's prolonged exposure to Afro-Caribe genres like bolero, *danzón*, and rumba may be

why cumbia was taken to immediately, especially by urban migrants from rural Mexico (Olvera Gudiño 2013). Cumbia's popularity escalated in the state of Monterrey, where regional Mexican music integrated with cumbia's tropical rhythms. In metropolitan areas on both sides of the border—like Monterrey, San Antonio, and Houston—nortefío conjunto musicians playing the accordion and the bajo sexto began experimenting with cumbia (Olivera Gudiño 2013).

Cumbia's diasporic African-Indigena origins represent a shoal or a "point suture that brings Indigenous life and Black flesh and life into the same frame" (Lethabo King 2019, 60). Thus, the phonic substance of cumbia syncopated rhythms pulsing within the deejays' vibe, coupled with the queer Black and Brown bodies in ecstasy might be thought of as the "ontological field" of the black radical tradition (Moten 2003, 85). By cutting and mixing cumbia with the regional Mexican genres of banda, working-class corridos (Simonett 2001), Afro-diasporic sounds of Latin America reggae, reggaetón, bachata, dembow, and U.S.-based hip-hop, soul and new wave creates a dissonant borderland sonic imaginary that highlights hemispheric Blackness and indigeneity. The cut and mix across diasporic genres creates discursive spaces and physical spaces (Johnson 2013) that actively call out blanqueamiento—erasures of blackness. This happens not only through the sonic imaginary foregrounding Afro-diasporic sounds and genres, but also through the bodies of Afro-Chicana and Black deejays, like DJ Zuri Adia and non-binary DJ Kellye Kell.

Cumbiatón LA's flyers created by Julio Salgado contribute to this reimagining as well. Salgado's digital images challenge an anti-Black and misogynistic archive of cumbia album covers where light skinned women are stripped of their clothing and agency—reduced to bikini-clad breasts and butts

to be traversed upon by the hetero-masculine gaze. In contrast, Salgado's flyers depict empowered queer, dark-complexioned female-centered images exhibiting what Deborah Vargas describes as making face, a "literal and figurative 'telling off'" (Vargas 2012, 186). The dazzling femmes in Salgado's flyers affirm their sexuality through their front-facing body language and clothing.¹⁴ Piercingly looking forward at the viewer, they are adorned with large earrings, necklaces with large pendants, and tiaras. Their hair, clothing, and face are made up with vibrant colors in greens, blues and purples defying normative cultural conceptions of beauty and the body.

By physically occupying the space of the deejay booth, commanding a set of turntables, controller and mixer, and crafting set lists, these transgressive deejays create socio-sonic experiences best described as *vibe*—a sound and space of possibilities and futurities. For the deejays, their performances, Afro-diasporic music selections, and control of the turntables is both dissonant and empowering. The next section highlights the way these dissonant deejays find their cultural work empowering by taking up spaces they are often excluded from, as well as through a sense of solidarity with each other that is cultivated through a *mujerista* mentorship (Villaseñor, Reyes, and Muñoz 2003) and *convivencia* (Gonzalez 2014).

Empowerment and *Mujerista* Mentorship/*Convivencia*

DJ Funky Caramelo alludes to a sense of empowerment when describing the control they experience commanding the sonic experience of a *Cumbiatón* party: "I get a little smile when I see people dance to the music that I play. Being able to play the music for the party, there's control that comes with it. Women hardly get that control. As women we are always being either erased or just being spoken down to." DJ Funky Caramelo links her feelings of control as a deejay playing the music as a way to rupture patriarchy. She

also connects the power of her authoritative voice with the visibility of her intersecting identities at the deejay booth:

It's empowering, because all of the identities that I share are continuously oppressed in many ways. Being able to be visible, you know, and seeing there's a short brown girl behind the decks and rocking it out. Definitely it's empowering—being seen and taking space, even if it's just for a one-hour set.

Beyond visibility politics, DJ Lady Soul encapsulates the feeling of empowerment by understanding her position as a deejay as occupying space and the possibilities and potentiality she embodies by taking up that space: “Just knowing that we’re taking up the space that is normally taken up by men is empowering! There is a chance for anyone. You know, you don’t have to look a certain way. Just be yourself and play whatever the fuck you want.” For DJ Lady Soul authoritative voice “to play whatever the fuck you want” is dissonant—“to play whatever the fuck you want” is to create vibe through dissonant sounds and visibilities. Vibe is the otherwise possibility rupturing normative discourse by occupying the space of being a deejay that is usually taken up by a man as “embodied others [who] function to serve as active agents who carry with them the potential to contribute to the fragmentation and reinvention of space” (Chávez 2015, 338).

For DJ Zuri Adia, visibility occupying the socio-sonic space of the deejay ruptures racialized, gendered stigmas about women of color, and particularly Black Latinx deejays’ ability:

It is great to have a female deejay in the space, especially when you’re good, because I feel like often women are stigmatized and made to

feel like we don't know how to deejay. ... Being in a space, playing well, provides a level of representation that can cut stigmas and generalizations of women of color deejays. I am a good DJ! I am Black and Latina in this space and [I] show we exist.

DJ Zuri Adia's technical ability importantly lends credibility to her work as a deejay—and creates a double rupture both by demonstrating women are talented deejays and by transgressing the hegemonic formulation of non-black mestizo Latinidad.

San Francisco based deejay, DJ Sin Amores, tethers deejaying to a sense of empowerment, visibility, and personal stories with a sense of political urgency in a political climate under a president who has attacked women, LGBTQ communities and communities of color.

I think under the [Trump] administration, we're saying fuck that, you know? So I think deejaying is a way for people to feel a sense of empowerment and creating that space and being really who we are. To that administration or whoever else finds issue with comeres. But I really feel that for people this is a way of fighting back. You know, it'd be like, fuck you, we are here, we are queer, we are Latinos. We're not going to go anywhere. Visibility is important. That's how stories get told. That's how people's stories, especially those who are marginalized, stay marginalized. When they don't have that visibility. So it's important that we have visibility.

For DJ Sin Amores, deejaying is a proclamation of undocumented queer existence in the United States. By telling the stories of marginalized communities who were under attack by the Trump administration, DJ Sin

Amores articulates the connection between visibility, representation and authoritative voice. In an era of increased vulnerability and racial targeting he spearheaded, the act of playing cumbia music, and especially creating socio-sonic space through cumbia is insubordinate (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019).

Mujerista Mentorship. In addition to engendering an alternative space outside of the rigidities of coloniality, heteronormativity, or nationality, this group of dissonant deejays build community and mentoring relationships off the dance floor in ways that reproduce and constitute the vibe they express while performing. The deejay's collective and reciprocal mentorship practices are reminiscent of a *mujerista* mentorship as delineated by Maria Joaquina Villaseñor, María Estefani Reyes, and Imela Muñoz (2003). *Mujerista* mentorship is a pedagogical approach that arises from a Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x education context and praxis. Villaseñor, Reyes and Muñoz (2003) describe *mujerista* mentorship as:

a collectivist, assets-based model that values the lived experiences and multiple ways of knowing of Chicanas/Latinas, focused on the building of communities and reciprocal mentoring relationships, and challenging models of mentoring that re-inscribe hierarchies between mentors and protégés. . . *mujerista* mentoring takes a more holistic approach, bridging the academic, professional, and the personal in order to create more meaningful and enduring mentoring relationships (50).

The collectivist praxis enacted through mentorship relationships that extend beyond the craft of deejaying disrupts hierarchical relationality between mentors and protégé and by “equally valuing the individual as well as collective success and progress,” (Villaseñor, Reyes and Muñoz 2003, 55).

The dissonant deejays exhibit a *mujerista* mentorship that bridges their professional (deejaying) and their personal, reconfiguring these affiliations to loving relationships fostered through *convivencia* (Gonzalez 2014) that cultivates shared visions, sonic imaginations, and queer futurities of the present and the future.

Mujerista mentorship exhibited by these deejays reverberates with other *feminista* musical collectivist praxis who share a similar sense of dissonance. It is the praxis of imagining new spaces, music scenes, realities, and futurities through collective engagement—*convivencia*. Martha Gonzalez (2014) describes *convivencia* as “the deliberate act of being with or present to each other” exhibited through *fandango*, where *fandango* and collectivist songwriting practices “generated physical, spiritual, and ideological space from which mothers were able to theorize and imagine new realities for themselves and their families” (58). Habell-Pallán, Sonnet Retman, Macklin, and De La Torre (2018) articulate *convivencia* as method manifested as the joy and camaraderie of a collectivist praxis that “values living process over finite product” (68). *Convivencia*, thus, is decolonial and emancipatory community building.

For dissonant deejays, deejaying is recontextualized as familial spaces of collectivist queer futurities through vibe-driven *convivencia* and *mujerista* mentorship. DJ Kellye Kell, resident deejay of the party collective *Grrrlnight*, illustrates this sentiment when they describe the relationships they have with the deejays in their collective—DJ Funky Caramelo and DJ Lady Soul—as “the best thing about deejaying.” They state:

The best thing that I like about deejaying is just spending time with my friends. I feel like two years ago I didn't really have people

that understood me. Linking up with these [DJ Funky Caramelo and DJ Lady Soul] and everybody who I've met through them, the whole Grrrlnight experience has allowed me to find my tribe. I think that the music is great, it's important, but really just having that camaraderie, that sisterhood between us really means a lot to me. So that's the best part—gaining that sisterhood between us and then we can vibe off music is like a cherry on top and it's like my safe space.

For DJ Kellye Kell, the *convivencia*, or coming together and building community, is an emancipatory experience that creates safe spaces and builds camaraderie.

Meanwhile, DJ Killed by Synth, the eldest member of the deejays I interviewed, describes herself as a “deejay mom” to several of the other deejays. DJ Killed by Synth shares the cautious advice she gives other women deejays about party promoters exploiting female deejays' labor. Her advice to the other deejays comes from a sense of love that she has for her mentees. As is evidenced in her relationship with DJ Zuri Adia, DJ Killed by Synth has a desire to see the continued success and growth of the scene of queer Latinx deejays.

I'm afraid of women being exploited. I've already seen it happen with some of the girls that I've helped push into the scene. I just want girls to be smart and make sure they're being treated right I'm such a deejay mom. I tell other deejays 'make sure you do this and make sure you do that,' because I love them. DJ Zuri is one of the girls that I helped put on. I'm really proud of her...I love supporting women and female deejays. I want to see the scene grow and want the girls to get treated right!

For DJ Killed by Synth, her enactment of *mujerista* mentorship results in “establishing and strengthening the network” of women of color deejays because she “thinks beyond the success of the individual selves and cares for the success of generations to come” (Villaseñor, Reyes, and Muñoz 2013, 55).

DJ Funky Caramelo describes the development of her relationship with DJ Sizzle Fantastic, the director of the *Cumbiatón* collective, which exhibits *mujerista* mentoring in praxis. When asked if there were any deejays that influenced her, DJ Funky Caramelo replied, “I would say DJ Sizzle for sure... I used to hire her to deejay events at my work. She has been an inspiration and a mentor too. She has been opening the door for me as a deejay. She’s the type of person that just wants to see you shine, and she’s willing to share opportunities and to bring you up along with her.” The mentor relationship between DJ Funky Caramelo and DJ Sizzle Fantastic grew from a customer and service provider relationship to a collaborative relationship where DJ Funky Caramelo is now *Cumbiatón* resident deejay and marketing lead for the collective. The relationship between the two deejays displays the “dialogical, collectivist and horizontal” characteristics of *mujerista* mentorship (Villaseñor, Reyes, and Muñoz 2013, 62).

Finally, when DJ Sin Amores discusses the relationship she has with her mentor DJ Brown Amy,¹⁵ DJ Sin Amores describes a deeper relationship between mentor and protégé, as is typical with *mujerista* mentorship. Her mentor was pivotal in her development and identity as a deejay. DJ Sin Amores states that DJ Brown Amy helped her unapologetically affirm her identity and encouraged her to play the music she loves: “I play just cumbia. You know, my mentor DJ Brown Amy told me, ‘If you love cumbia you should just be a cumbia deejay! You should just do that.’ When she told me that, it just clicked. She was right.” DJ Sin Amores describes a mentoring

relationship where the personal is bridged, creating a more enduring mentoring relationship. The bond between the two deejays is further strengthened as they share a similar spatio-temporal experience and ideas of home as queer Latinas originally from Los Angeles and who now reside in San Francisco. Reinforcing the centrality of home, DJ Sin Amores recalls DJ Brown Amy's home as the site where she honed her craft as a deejay, "She [DJ Brown Amy] would allow me to go to her pad. I would spend whole Sundays there. She would teach me different techniques." For DJ Sin Amores, these Sunday sessions with her mentor were foundational moments that led to DJ Sin Amores' craft and identifying as a deejay.

Ultimately, a "vibe" emerges out of the empowered and collectivist deejay performative practices. The next section maps out the ways the dissonant deejays conceptualize the notion of "vibe" and I theorize a potentiality it nurtures, an imaginary rooted in intergenerational familial memories and bonds.

Vibe

Articulation. Throughout the interviews I conducted with the dissonant deejays, "vibe" was the word repeated by each deejay to articulate a relational emotional connection, an atmosphere and affect, between themselves as deejays and their audience. Based on the ways dissonant deejays utilized the term, vibes are shared, possessed, affective and discursive. Vibe also describes a party's atmosphere. Vibe is transmitted through the flyers and Instagram stories created by the deejays. For example, DJ Killed by Synth explains that for her Techno Cumbia Party flyers, "I try to visually express what the party is, so you look at the flyer and you get the kind of vibe it's going for."

Vibe is desire, hope and potential to make creative physical, spiritual, and mental connections between dissonant deejays and party attendees.

DJ Lady Soul explains *vibe* as creative relational expressions of shared experiences when she retells how the three deejays in the Grrlnight collective became a queer of color deejay collective. “The three of us (DJ Lady Soul, DJ Funky Caramelo and DJ Kellye Kell) have been able to *vibe* off each other and identify around shared experiences. Then being able to like create Grrlnight, really opening the space while collaborating with other women and queer deejays.” For Grrlnight, *vibe* resulted from the creative relational expressions that engendered collaboration and additional connections.

Vibe is also within the interstitial abrasions and pauses of the cut and mix that move the spirit of both creator and spectator. The deejay’s subliminal firing synapses attune to the vibration of the bass as their right wrist flexes, simultaneously abducting and adducting, gliding the crossfader while the fingertips on her left hand grazes the record, pulls back and releases—pulls back and releases. It is the intimate connection between deejay’s fingertips, turntable stylus and the grooves of a vinyl record. *Vibe* is the way sound waves soothe and heal the bodymindspirit (Lara 2002). DJ Kellye Kell explains, “I think playing music [deejaying] is like a real spiritual experience. It helps me to be calm, helps me to feel pain, it helps me to, like, just get through. It means a lot to put songs together and have people dance and just *vibe* off my *vibe*.” For DJ Kellye Kell, deejaying is a shared ephemeral and affective social experience between deejay, song, and dancer exhibiting Raymond Williams’ (1997) notion of structures of feeling.

For Williams, the concept of structures of feelings refers to a process of relating the continuity of social formations within a work of art. Specifically, structures of feelings are:

the unmistakable presence of certain elements in art which are not covered by other formal systems. [This] is the true source of specializing of ‘the aesthetic,’ ‘the arts,’ and ‘imaginative literature.’ We need, on the one hand, to acknowledge the specificity of these elements—specific dealings, specific rhythms—and yet to find their specific kinds of sociality, thus preventing the extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (and at the root historically) reduced. (Williams 1977, 133)

Potentiality. In addition, Raymond Williams’ concept of structures of feeling is useful to describe how the vibe produced by the dissonant deejays allows for Muñoz’ potentiality of queerness. The spaces, interactions, and structures of feeling of vibe proffer an anticipatory illumination of queerness upon the horizon, “which can be characterized as the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices helping us see the not-yet-conscious...anticipatory illuminations of certain objects is a kind of potentiality that is open, indeterminate, like the affective contours of hope itself” (Muñoz 2009, 7).

The vibe created by the dissonant deejays is manifest in the structure of feelings it creates by pointing toward a queer utopian futurity that transcends the spatial and temporal registers of heteronormativity, patriarchy, cultural nationalism, citizenship and subjectivities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Vibe generates moments of ecstasy. Muñoz identifies ecstasy—or more precisely, ecstatic time—as queerness’s “ecstatic and horizontal temporality” that is a “stepping out of the linearity of straight time” (Muñoz 2009, 25). Straight time is the dominant and overarching teleological temporal and spatial organization of the world. Straight time

is the “stultifying temporality and time that is not ours (the queer) that is saturated with violence both visceral and emotional”—straight time is the time of empire, it is the time of patriarchy, heteronormativity, it is time that renders people citizen and illegal (Muñoz 2009, 187). Straight time has a “stranglehold” on the world, yet those often-ephemeral moments of ecstasy “announced in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present or future” (Muñoz 2009, 32). Dissonant deejays’ vibe produces moments of ecstatic time—the feeling of a smooth transition between songs, the sociality and affect amongst a dancing crowd and deejay evokes and produces intergenerational memories and a communal soundscape as dancers and deejay groove to cumbia where the party becomes a site of past, present, and future embodied knowledge and movement.

Additionally, DJ Zuri Adia describes her Techno Cumbia Party as a space where familial and embodied knowledge is both produced and shared. She states, “Techno Cumbia is a place I can go, and I could feel like when I was a little kid and I listened and danced to these songs...I also get to share that experience. That those memories, feelings, and emotions are shared in that space is really great.” As the author of her set, DJ Zuri Adia describes why she chooses to center merengue in her playlist: “It is what my family played at parties all the time. It was the first thing I learned to really dance to. My dad taught me how to ‘just two-step, two-step to merengue’. It holds a warm place in my heart.” For DJ Zuri, the sound of merengue evokes generational knowledge and youthful sentiments in the ecstatic moment of the back and forth two-step syncopation.

Creator of Techno Cumbia Party DJ Killed by Synth similarly describes her party as a recreation of family memories:

People can relate to my Techno Cumbia Party and want to come and hear the stuff they grew up on. I want you to come and bring your fucking tía or your mom, bring your dad, you know. These parties are great because multiple generations of people come out and they're partying. There are kids that are in their twenties and there are people like in their late forties and fifties. So I'm just trying to, like, kind of low key, just recreate the type of parties that we grew up on like being in L.A. with my family.

Although personal to DJ Zuri, these moments of reliving and reaffirming cultural knowledge are shared and recreated at cumbia parties, marking them as sites of shared embodied knowledge. The vibe created here nurtures a sonic imaginary that centers and celebrates racialized and gendered bodies representing multiple generations, ultimately yielding a space of intergenerational possibility.

Outro

It is a mild spring evening. The muted pulse of cumbia and salsa music can be felt along First Street in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. First Street may well be the epicenter of the battle between proactive residents fighting displacement from their neighborhood and real estate developers motivated by soaring property values catering to affluent hipsters allured to the neighborhood's proximity to downtown. Less than a mile from Mariachi Plaza is the considerably gentrified neighborhood the Los Angeles Arts District, home to hip coffee shops, art galleries, breweries, new loft apartments and archival clothing boutiques, or second-hand clothing at marked up prices.

Across from historic Mariachi Plaza sits Eastside Luv Wine Bar y Queso. Chicanas/os/xs and Latinas/os/xs congregate just outside the hipster

bar smoking cigarettes plotting their next destination of Friday evening barhopping. As the red door of the corner establishment swings open, the street is flooded with the clamor from inside the jam-packed bar. Inside, the crowd is buzzing and a cheerful howl is heard as the familiar trumpeted notes of Celia Cruz's acclaimed Salsa song, *La Vida es un Carnival* (1998) roars over the sound system. I follow a group of four twenty-something Chicanas southbound across the street. The crowded Eastside Luv Bar is not my destination.

Tonight, I am headed to First Street Pool and Billiards to attend a Cumbiatón Boyle Heights/Grrrrlnight collaborative party. On this night, the commonly hetero-masculine space of a billiards hall is transformed into a queer- and women-centered dance space. Sitting in stark contradiction to the vibrantly mariachi mural facade of Eastside Luv, the pool hall occupies the street level of a nondescript two-story plaster building. Just inside the billiard parlor's broad steel doors is a long wooden bar with heavily worn bar stools. The cash only bar serves inexpensive domestic beers and Latin American imports. The spacious room is illuminated by the gloomy haze of fluorescent bulbs radiating down from pool table lights that hang from the ceiling just above the ten green felted billiards tables. The building's cement foundation is mostly exposed through a haggard patchwork of linoleum tiles that have yet to be worn away through years of use. A hodgepodge of tennis shoes, loafers, cowboy boots, and high heels click and clack against the floor in a syncopated zapateado that matches the rapid snap of snare drum of the tamborazo record DJ Lady Soul spins. Four pool tables positioned behind the makeshift dance floor have been converted into sales booths displaying merchandise from local artists and vendors. The party also doubles as a women and queer trans people of color-owned tianguis (marketplace) where vendors sell their silk screen shirts, handmade jewelry and works of art. Cumbiatón attendees spend

the evening moving between dance floor, tianguis and bar, all to the sonic vibrations spun by Grrrlnight resident deejays.

Grrrlnight resident deejay, DJ Kellye Kell takes over the reins as dissonant deejay of the party. Positioned atop a makeshift stage housing a deejay booth, sound system and lighting equipment, DJ Kellye Kell is spinning the latest track by Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar, known by her stage name Cardi B. Below the deejay booth, groups of women and gender non-conforming folks groove to the music on the open cement floor. At midnight, the dance floor clears, opening the space for Gogobella X, a leotard clad hoop dance performer. The sights and sounds of ecstasy vibrate out of Gogobella X and radiate to the awestruck crowd as Gogobella X contorts their body, bouncing and twirling across the dance floor while spinning and twisting inside a glowing led-lit hula hoop. From my vantage point just off the dance floor, Gogobella X's gender cannot be easily discerned. Gogobella X's gender queer body fits right in at Cumbiatón, as it is a space rife with normative ruptures, a reimagining and restructuring the world for the here and now, as well as the future. This is a future that embraces the potentiality of queerness, belonging, Blackness and Latinidad. The moments of hope and joy on the dance floor transmitted through sonic imaginings and remembering are vibe. Vibe is a collective and shared experience, the cultural work of dissonant deejays. They are but one example of transgressive and likeminded individuals and collectives doing similar dissonant cultural work, such as queer Latinx poets, undocuqueer artists, body positivity activists, queer and trans advocates, sex workers, or podcasters. Inevitably, these dissonant actors engage and interact with each other in various ways. For example, they use social media to hype each other's events, share comments, likes, and reposts. Beyond this cybersphere, the network of dissonant actors also often collaborates in ways

reminiscent of Gaye Johnsons' (2013) concept of a shared constellation of struggle. This notion captures the "array of activities, histories, and identities that each [person] symbolically brings with [them]. Similarly [it] suggests the mobility of many parts, as well as the ability to re-form around different nuclei" (Johnson 2013, 158). The constellation of struggle suggests a mobility of its multiple parts, but it seems to limit individuals to already established subjectivities, activities, and histories, almost as though the constellation represents groups of containers coming together and then separating. The vibe created by the dissonant deejays, however, is open and fluid. Rather than a constellation of struggle, I envision these actors as an ensemble of disharmony creating a cacophony of sound. In an ensemble, individuals come together in performance or shared structures of feeling toward a reimagined queered futurity aptly articulated as vibe, the sonic renderings of possibilities and futurities. Specifically, vibe describes [socio] sonic environments of creative fantasies that are produced by queer women of color and gender non-conforming dissonant deejays. This space embraces and celebrates the Black genealogies of music and bodies typically identified by the limiting umbrella term Latina/o/x. Vibe is collectivist and reciprocal, fostered through the *mujerista* mentorship and *convivencia* amongst the dissonant deejays, a praxis that eschews a hierarchical relationality between mentors and protégé. Lastly, vibe exhibits the performative potentiality of queerness that is doing for and toward the future.

Notes

¹ Visual artist Julio Salgado. Salgado is the co-founder of DreamersAdrift, a media platform led by undocumented artists who take back "undocumented narratives" through art, videos, music, spoken word, prose and poetry (Dreamers Adrift n.d.) <https://www.juliosalgadoart.com/>.

² https://www.instagram.com/cumbiaton_wcc/.

³ https://www.instagram.com/cumbiaton_sf/.

⁴ DJ Sizzle Fantastic is an entrepreneur, DJ, restaurant owner, public speaker and former labor-immigrant rights organizer. She is the director and co-founder of Cumbiatón. She was born in Guerrero, Mexico and raised in Boyle Heights. <https://www.sizzlefantastic.com/about>.

⁵ Aniceto Molina's "Cumbia Sampuesana" was originally released in 1978 in Mexico by Erre records (discogs). Cumbia Sampuesana is a quintessential vallenato style cumbia. Vallenato is accordion and guacharaca scraper forward with a "repetitive four-beat cumbia rhythm with emphasis on beat one, and secondary accents on three and four" (Ragland, 2003 343). See: <https://youtu.be/u30pMHwCwwQ>.

⁶ See Cumbiatón Los Angeles Posada Tropical: <https://youtu.be/dsnh97VTj5c> and Cumbiatón Uproxx Feature: <https://youtu.be/acYjcNKiUsg>.

⁷ I use *soniderx* when referring to the dissonant deejays as deejays of *cumbia sonidera*. Some of the deejays in the collective identify as non-binary. Non-binary gender inclusivity is denoted by the suffix 'x' while 'a' and 'o' suffixes denote gender in the Spanish language.

⁸ I do not use pseudonyms in this paper. The names that appear are the artists' and deejays' stage names. The deejays had the option to go by a pseudonym but preferred that I use their actual names.

⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/paolotrivers/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/technocumbiaparty/>.

¹¹ <https://www.instagram.com/grrrlnightofficial/>. Grrrlnight deejay DJ Danger joined Grrrlnight after this initial research, and I have not had the opportunity to interview or converse with DJ Danger. DJ Funky Caramelo is also a founding member of Grrrlnight.

¹² Most of the participant observation I conducted occurred while I was in the master's program in Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies at California State University, Los Angeles. The collegas were fellow graduate students.

¹³ In Rodolfo Aguilar's (2020) rich ethnographic examination of the Chicagoland Mexican *sonidero* scene, the *sonideros* made a clear distinction between themselves as *sonideros* rather than deejays. One *sonidero* in particular claimed "Somos *sonideros*, no somos DJs. No *mixteamos*. Dejamos la canción correr y mandamos saludos" (Aguilar 2020, 86). The distinction is an important one. In my research, I am not discussing the scene of *sonideros*, rather I am foregrounding the important work of queer deejays of *cumbia sonidera*.

¹⁴ See Cumbiatón_LA 2018. "Cumbiatón LA Grrrlnight Take Over." <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhqBoCqBTjA/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY%3D>.

¹⁵ DJ Brown Amy is a Chicana gender queer deejay and member of the Bay Area chapter of Chulita Vinyl Club. I did not interview Brown Amy for this project. Brown Amy's relationship with DJ Sin Amores exemplifies the *mujerista* mentorship practices amongst the group of dissonant deejays interviewed for this study.

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