

Cyborg Cumbia Queen
A Three Movement Composition Informed By
Feminist Cumbia and Technology-Mediated Composer-Performer Cultural
Expression
by
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ABSTRACT

This research explores technology-mediated composer-performer practices situated within the context of *feminist cumbia* and the idealized vision of a socio-technical imaginary cumbia. The work built upon this research is titled *Cyborg Cumbia Queen (CCQ)*, a three movement electro-acoustic fixed media work that braids live vocal improvisation and electronics. Both contemporary music and traditional Latin cumbia forms were influential in the creation of this work as well as personal experiences as a recording artist of the 1990s *grupera* movement. *CCQ* synthesizes a post apocalyptic soundscape where the protagonist, an imagined cyborgian feminist Latina existing post singularity, creates a new futuristic *feminist cumbia* genre from many sound remnants of various genres. The work utilizes a palette of sound manipulation technologies and software that augment, facilitate, and deepen musical and cultural expression.

DEDICATION

I am forever grateful to the two incredible and selfless human beings who gave me life, my parents Esperanza and Armando Esparza. Thank you for your unconditional love, and support. Everything I learned from you is in some way a part of this dissertation. Your strength, determination, resolve, deep commitment to your family, scaffolded my growth and learning resulting in the most generous role models. I am so lucky to have you as my parents. This undertaking would not have been possible without the steadfast support of my wonderful, supportive, and loving husband Paul Isaacson, whose steadfast words of wisdom, encouragement, and humor kept me motivated and grounded. He and I brought four extraordinary humans into this world, Isabel, Alessandra, Liliana, and Isaac. They are indeed our greatest accomplishment and I could not fathom working on a dissertation if I didn't have their blessing. We shoulder our work with care, love, and careful consideration of them, and the support and guidance they need. I could only embark on this program of study, knowing that they were on safe and strong footing, and well on their way to becoming independent makers, thinkers, and creators of their own dreams. Thank you for participating in my musicking spaces, projects, and being open to new avenues of noisy, disruptive, and often abstract ways of creating music. I would also like to thank my brother Armando Esparza Jr. for his unconditional love, brotherly support and for going on tour with me when I needed help the most. You have always had my back and I hope you know that I always have yours. You amaze me every day and you are absolutely the best brother one could have. Last but not least, I would like to thank my dear friend Jenny White for her friendship and support throughout our motherhood and return-to-school journeys and my dear friend Juan Antonio Vasquez for his kindness, generosity, and support when my music career was just getting started.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The uncompromising nature of individual compositional practices within the Western canon and, more recently, the expanded musical context that is more inclusive of global and cultural perspectives, establish broader musical avenues for composition and alternative approaches to creating scored, acoustic, and digital media works. The strategies for creating music are ever expanding, especially considering the technological advances and democratization of notation software, music composition programs, music distribution platforms, and the increased availability of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms. The composer's voice and their place within the music creation world is continuously shifting given the music streaming platforms, live performance offerings, social media, academic musical contexts, festivals, and professional music organizations. The role of composer-performer casts an even wider net of available technological tools as support systems for forms of expression. In the following, I will elaborate on the half human, half machine culminating composition, *Cyborg Cumbia Queen (CCQ)*, and the ingredients of my dissertation that went into making it. I will share background information, the questions that guided the research, and the methods that best served the creation and visualization of this imaginary cyborg. This will include previous works inspired by feminist perspectives and cultural narratives. Grounding and fundamental to this work are the research foundations regarding the origins of *feminist cumbia*¹ and technology mediated composer-performer cultural

¹*feminist cumbia* Cicchetto (2018) is a musical, cultural, and hybrid movement across Latin America and the diaspora that adopts the traditional forms of cumbia rhythms through a feminist lens. This hybrid genre is based on the traditional cumbia style, a Latin American musical tradition and dance originating on Colombia's Caribbean coast, that emerged and was influenced by the fusion of African, Indigenous, and Spanish influences.

expression. I will discuss how the work is constructed and brought to life through the fixed media three-movement work, *CCQ*. The protagonist of this musical narrative is a half-human cyborg woman that is symbolic of my eclectic background and lived experiences as a Latina musician who utilizes music technology to embed cultural expression. The visual narrative guiding the composition of the piece grounded the sonic elements of each movement as it was created. The first movement of *CCQ* establishes the environment in which she, imaginary cyborg lives, the second, guides her exploration of this environment and its artifacts within, and the third, will forward her manifestation of a new futuristic cumbia form.

CCQ and its supporting research reflect my personal eclectic composition practices and cultural expression through technological means. The foundation of the investigations can be categorized as two areas of foundational research, *feminist cumbia*, a category of cumbia music whose feminist perspective narratives appear as early as 2010, and cultural expression through technology-mediated composer-performer practices and sound synthesis techniques.

A *Grupera* Autoethnography

Throughout this research, I have included autoethnographic narratives about my lived experience in the *grupera*² music movement, a Regional-Mexican music subgenre, whose songs were mostly cumbias. This movement reached the height of its popularity in the late 90s throughout the northern Mexico border regions, and later spread to the US Mexican diaspora. *Grupera* music has had a recent resurgence due to the democratization of music distribution of independent artists and younger generations discovery of the musical genre. A *Grupera* (plural: *gruperas*) refers to

²The *Grupera* movement (also known as *Grupero* or *Onda Grupera* or *Grupero*) is an artist who performs subgenre songs of Regional Mexican music consisting of cumbia, ballads, and polka rhythm songs.

the female led bands or female soloists that specialized in this musical genre and *gruperos* (plural: *gruperos*) is used to refer to male led bands or male soloists of the same genre. The *Onda*³ (wave or movement), has had a recent resurgence (starting around late 2010s) and new artists whose parents might have listened to *gruperas* music are now writing and recording their own songs. Also, careers of artists of that era like *Ana Barbara*, and *Alicia Villareal* to name a few, have been revived due this renewed interest. During my years as a *gruperas*, my career as a programmer-analyst provided me financial security while I built the early stage of my musical career as a *gruperas* recording artist — an advantage not had by many Regional Mexican women performers. It also facilitated the use of technology in my musical endeavors. Eventually, when I started making a consistent income from music, I left my day job to pursue music full-time. During these years I toured parts of Mexico, the US, and Europe performing songs from my own catalog as well as cover songs. I performed as a soloist but the bands that backed me as a singer had several names over the course of this era. I alternated between two names, *Noemy y Mettal* and *Noemy y Grupo Eterno*. During my years with Fonovisa, one of the largest Regional Mexican record labels at the time, I recorded the following albums: 1) *Eternamente*, 2) *Noemy*, and 3) *Armando Sueños y Esperanzas* (an homage to my parents Armando and Esperanza). Albums released under my independent label RevoluZion Music Group included 1) *Desnuda (Nude)*, and 2) *Fronteras (Borders)*. A career in technology not only provided financial security, but it also introduced music technology exploration, further strengthening my resolve to make music independent of the commercial music machinery. *Gruperas* in my view, changed the way the Regional Mexican music industry viewed women. *Gruperas* would cross paths with

³Carrizosa, Tono. La onda gruperas: historia del movimiento gruperos. Edamax, 1997. Carrizosa (1997)

other *gruperas* at coinciding festivals and concerts. In these spaces I observed how women were treated by record label executives, venue owners, and booking agents, the majority of whom were men. Regrettably, sexism in some shape or form will always exist in the music industry, nevertheless I argue that an increase in participation of female *gruperas* performers created a “safety in numbers” effect. We supported and looked out for each other. The *gruperas* experience and topic is under-researched, unexplored, or underexamined, hence the perspective I am sharing is through the lens of my own personal observations and my lived experience as a *gruperas* during this musical movement.

In addition to my experiences as a *gruperas* vocal recording artist, my identity as a mother and the motherhood experience also informed and influenced *CCQ* and the supporting research. In 2001 I married and became an instant step-mom to my husband’s lovely two-year old daughter from his first marriage. In 2006 six we had our first child together. With the exception of the rare performance or festival appearance, I paused my music career to focus solely on raising our first child, a daughter, born in 2006. Her sister followed in 2007, and two years later in 2009, our son was born. For the first five years of their lives, I was able to stay home to raise our children. Although I was not performing and no longer on the road, I was still writing and recording music in my home studio. During these years I became aware of the Mayan motherhood philosophy after reading Michaela Doucleff’s article *Secrets Of A Mayan Super Mom: What Parenting Books Don’t Tell You*.⁴ What stood out to me in the article was the author’s emphasis on the fact that the word “stress” does not exist in the Mayan language. The Mayan mother who was interviewed, Maria de Los Angeles Tun Burgos, a Mayan mom, shared that she completed her

⁴Doucleff, Michaela. *Secrets Of A Mayan Supermom: What Parenting Books Don’t Tell You* Goats and Soda [BLOG], NPR, 2018. Doucleff (2018)

daily work alongside her children and as they grew, they helped with age-appropriate tasks. This approach to parenting was very appealing to me because as much as I was enjoying motherhood, it was challenging and at times I missed my music career. I could not envision a way to be both a mother and musician and do well at both. However, I began to make deliberate efforts to follow this philosophy. This way of being immersed in motherhood could also help me to continue to be immersed in music. I stopped thinking that I needed to “make time” for music and stopped feeling guilty about not producing new material and instead combined both roles. It seems straight-forward now but I had to actively have this mentality in order to make music while being a mother. I did not set unachievable goals but I would track progress. While I was recording, I would also record my kids. They were intrigued by the equipment and what I was doing. These recordings are now some of my most prized possessions. Motherhood and this philosophy helped me be present in both activities, raising my kids and making music. It helped me be more organized and forgive myself if I did not meet a goal. Even if my children had been in the other room with a hypothetical caregiver, my baseline maternal concern for them would have prevented me being fully focused on musical compositions. Including them in these activities seemed the natural path to follow, even if I made slow progress or no progress at all. These formative years not only for my kids but also for me were rewarding and challenging. Therefore, similar to the Mayan motherhood philosophy, I wanted to include my children and these memories in this composition. Although their voices are not present, their childhood toys and sounds reminiscent of childhood are. I have included a baby’s laugh and the sound of a pin art toy in several of the movements as a reference to them.

Motherhood also inspired me to experiment with the equipment that I already owned and had not fully exploited. Creating music was fun and experimental, not

tied to looming deadlines or release dates. With no professional musical obligations, I was free to develop my sound design, recording, and video editing skills, albeit at a slow pace due to my parental obligations. I began learning digital animation and took my somewhat primitive audio recording techniques up the steep learning curve. I had previous experience with both sound reinforcement and recording, but I wanted to gain a higher level of mastery. When I returned to ASU to pursue my MFA, I became interested in building electronic instruments. I also pushed myself to complete a series of micro-controller tutorials to gain fluency in the language of circuitry with my son beside me. Motherhood despite its physical demands gave me the freedom to experiment with technology and eventually became the impetus to pursue my MFA and DMA studies. It also motivated me to imbue *CCQ* with feminist perspective narratives, lyrics, and ideals that through this work would be a voice for my daughters and other young women like them. *CCQ* has many layers of meaning and motherhood, and the technology that motherhood enabled me to access is at the center of it. My collective identities, mother, composer, programmer-analyst, wife, and *gruper*, have informed this work in both tangible and intangible ways. Several musical genres and research disciplines have inspired this work through the lens of an educator, technologist, composer-performer, mother, and wife.

Chapter 2

FEMINIST CUMBIA

The cumbia musical genre extends over many cultures and resonates throughout many communities around the globe. Cumbia refers not only to the music genre, but also the particular style of dancing. Cumbias, danced as individuals, couples, or groups, in its simplest form is danced with a side-to-side motion, but can include more complex dance steps such as a back-break⁵ or a rock step.⁶ The footwork is interspersed with spins and circular and hand motions. This music is typical in Mexican and Mexican-American family celebrations and gatherings in homes, neighborhoods, streets, and parks, is often danced for hours at a time. For the purposes of this research, cumbia refers to a style of music usually in $\frac{2}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{4}$ time that is characterized by strong downbeats followed by two shorter percussive accents (up-beat) and could

be notated as . Several hybrid cumbia styles were informed by this rhythm throughout many Latin American countries. Similar to ways that hybrid genres often form through various influences, cumbia has formed its identity through the transformations of local musics combined with African-Caribbean rhythms. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will focus on one specific sub-genre of Regional Mexican music, the *cumbia* genre of Mexico's northeast region whose form and rhythm would later influence a hybrid cumbia form, *feminist cumbia*.⁷ The

⁵A Latin dances move where a dancer shifts their weight backward and then forward again. Valdez, Andrea. "Dancing Cumbia." *Texas Monthly* (Austin) [Austin], vol. 38, no. 2, February 1, 2010, p. 34. Valdez (2010)

⁶A two-step dance move where a dancer shifts their body weight onto one foot, and then "rocks" their weight back onto the original foot. Valdez (2010)

⁷*feminist cumbia* first use in Latino Life online magazine (2010). Cicchetto, Susana, (2018, *Cumbia Feminism?*, <https://www.latinolife.co.uk/articles/cumbia-feminism>, Cicchetto (2018)

feminist cumbia form, now in existence for over twenty years, is a musical, cultural, and hybrid genre across Latin America and the diaspora that adopts the traditional forms of cumbia rhythms but leans towards feminist lyrics. This hybrid genre is based on the traditional cumbia style, a Latin American musical tradition and dance originating on Colombia's Caribbean coast, that emerged and was influenced by the fusion of African, Indigenous, and Spanish influences. *Feminist cumbia* claims the male-dominated cumbia genre as a way to challenge the Regional Mexican music patriarchy. Additionally, this hybrid genre promotes gender equality and celebrates bodily autonomy by leveraging body positive lyrics, feminist-centric symbolism in both music videos and branding. Furthermore, lyrics depart from the typical love stories or sexist lyrics of traditional cumbias, and instead take an activist voice, question institutions of power, and become of a voice for underrepresented and marginalized communities. These manifestations are further explored in this chapter and Chapter 3. To understand the development of this movement, the origins of cumbia in the northeast region of Mexico must first be investigated. The foundation of cumbia and its origins can be traced to the Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and Texas in the United States. "The most enduring and successful cumbia styles in northeastern Mexico — Norteño, grupera, and colombiana⁸ — are those resulting from a hybridization that takes into account elements particular to a specific group, be it rural, regional, or transnational. Furthermore, the accumulation of cumbia styles validates this genre as one of the most popular musical expressions in northeastern Mexico."⁹

⁸Mekus, Irene L. *Music and the Migrant: A Transnational Account of Cumbia*. Cumbia colombiana originated on the Caribbean coast of Colombia in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is a fusion of music and dance from three primary cultures: African, Indigenous, and Spanish. Mekus (2016)

⁹Fernandez, José Juan Olvera. "Cumbia in Mexico's Northeastern Region." *Cumbia!: Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre* edited by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Pablo Vila, Duke University Press, 2020, 87, Fernandez L'Hoeste and Vila (2013)

In the 1970s, the region of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon established itself as a musical and cultural center for cumbia music. The majority of the record labels promoting and recording this music were located in border regions of Texas. Record labels like Del Valle, Ideal Records, Corona, Falcón or the Mexican affiliates of North American labels such as RCA Victor and others were churning out cumbia music for mass audiences that not only welcomed new offerings but were eager to consume it.¹⁰ The genre then spread across the state of Texas through the support of Spanish speaking radio stations and was further supported by local bands that recorded and performed this style of music. Due to the strengthening of Monterrey’s economy, the trends often emanated from the city center performance venues and radio stations.¹¹ Attending both small and large dance events in which cumbia and Norteño were popular offerings, the supporters of this music and the attendees of public performances in these musical epicenters (Monterrey, NL, McAllen, Brownsville, Houston, and Dallas, TX), propelled the music forward with their purchasing power. They consumed the media (vinyl, cassettes, and later CDs), called radio stations to request their favorite songs, and attended high-ticket concerts. Other hybrid music offshoots of the cumbia genre include Norteño,¹² Tejano,¹³ conjunto,¹⁴ and *grupera*. The instrumentation of these

¹⁰Fernandez, *Cumbia*, 88

¹¹Fernandez, *Cumbia*, 88

¹²Norteño is a popular regional Mexican music genre originating in the early 20th century from the Mexico’s northern border regions. Cumbia music instrumentation consisted of accordion and bajo sexto, featuring polka, waltz, and corrido (traditional Mexican narrative ballads that tell stories of historical events, heroes, and contemporary life) rhythms. Popularized by artists like Los Tigres del Norte, it often covers socially relevant topics or love stories. Burr, Ramiro. *The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music*. Billboard Books, 1999., 55, Burr (1999)

¹³A vibrant Tex-Mex genre blending Mexican roots with American rock, country, and pop, originating in South Texas. Characterized by accordion-led conjunto or modern synthesizer sounds, it features dance rhythms like cumbia and polka. Led by legends like Selena and Emilio Navaira, it remains a cultural staple. Fernandez L’Hoeste, Hector D., and Pablo Vila. *Cumbial!: Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre*. Duke University Press, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822391920>. Fernandez L’Hoeste and Vila (2013)

¹⁴A popular accordion-driven music genre and ensemble style originating from South Texas over 100 years ago, deeply rooted in Tex-Mex (Tejano) culture, Burr, 56, Burr (1999)

genres were similar across styles: voice, bass, accordion, bajo sexto/electric guitar, drums, and percussion and their band members consisted of mostly men. Based on what I observed of the genre as it grew in popularity, female singers or musicians were rarely seen. The rare exception would be when a band was comprised mostly of family members and women contributed to the collective family music endeavors. As the genre grew in popularity so did the support and the opportunities for new artists to make their mark within the cumbia genre of the music. Hybrid styles of cumbia would reflect a region's special flavor and preference of music. For example, Tejano music is derived from Mexican cumbia and Norteño music, combined with influences from the sounds of American popular music, like synthesizer sounds, digital drums, and modern audio effects. The result is a completely new take on the genre, a combination of digital and traditional instrumentation. This music was favored in the San Antonio, Houston, and Chicago area while areas closer to the border leaned toward the more traditional Norteño music trends. Traditionally, audiences seemed to separate the lyrics from the music. For example, the first Mexican cumbia song ever recorded was *La Múcura* (clay pot) composed by Crescencio Salcedo.¹⁵ "The song's lyrics are an example of a double entendre in Hispanic popular song," according to social scientist Marcelino Canino Salgado. "The image of the broken water jug (el cántaro roto) is an old and common metaphor for the loss of virginity in some Latin American and Mexican cultures."¹⁶ The lyrics, seemingly innocent, are in fact portraying the sexual assault of a young girl. Sexist and misogynistic lyrics are often set to danceable rhythms. Despite their troubling lyrics, they are socially accepted.

¹⁵There is also a process of "Cubanization" of the Colombian repertoire on behalf of Cuban orchestras, as is the case with the porro "La múcura" (The Vase) by Crescencio Salcedo, Wade, Peter. *Music, Race, Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*. University of Chicago Press, 2000., Wade (2000)

¹⁶The word "múcura" was once thought of as having precolombian origins but it is in fact of likely Kikuyu origin. Its meaning is the same as "cántaro," namely, a clay jug. Wade, *Music, Race, Nation*, 3

La Múcura
 Crescencio Salcedo
 recorded by: Mike Laure (1949)

La múcura está en el suelo
 Mamá, no puedo con ella
 Me la llevo en la cabeza
 Y Mamá, no puedo con ella

Muchacha, si tú no puedes
 Con esa múcura de agua
 Muchacha, si tú no puedes
 ¿Por qué no llamas a Pedro?

Mamá, no puedo con ella
 Mamá, no puedo con ella
 Es que no puedo con ella
 Mamá, no puedo con ella

“Ay, nena ¿quién te rompió
 Tu mucurita de barro”
 “Fue Pedro quien me ayudó
 ¿Pa’ qué me hiciste llamarlo?”

La Múcura (Clay Pot)
 Crescencio Salcedo
 recorded by: Mike Laure (1949)

My clay pot is on the floor
 Mother I can’t carry it
 I try to carry it on my head
 But it is too heavy

Little girl if you cannot carry
 That clay jug of water
 Little girl if you cannot
 Why don’t you call Pedro to help?

Mother I cannot carry it
 Mother I cannot carry it
 But I cannot carry it
 Mother I cannot carry it

Oh little girl, who broke
 Your clay jug?
 It was Pedro that helped me
 Why did you tell me to call him?

In the decades leading up to the major media and technology changes, the pre-Napster¹⁷ era, the success of cumbia rhythms earned staggering profits for the regional-Mexican music industry record labels. Spotify and other streaming service technologies did not yet exist. However, the impact Napster and the mp3 media it created, would forever change the way music was accessed and consumed and would have a

¹⁷Napster, music file-sharing computer service created by American college student Shawn Fanning in 1999. Napster allowed users to share, over the Internet, electronic copies of music stored on their personal computers. The file sharing that resulted, set in motion a legal battle over digital rights and the development of digital rights management software to prevent computer copyright piracy. Hong, Seung-Hyun. “Measuring the Effect of Napster on Recorded Music Sales: Difference-in-Differences Estimates Under Compositional Changes” *Journal of Applied Econometrics* (Chichester, England) (Chichester, UK) 28, no. 2 (2013): 297–324. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jae.1269>, Hong (2013)

devastating impact on their profits.¹⁸ From a socio-economic and cultural perspective this could be viewed as progress towards increased recognition of Regional Mexican and hybrid genres through the democratization of music distribution. Nevertheless, as a participant in the *Onda Grupera* (*Grupera* Movement) itself, I observed that the cumbia genre was still rife with troubling sexism, not only in the lyrics but in the industry itself. Through the lens of activism, as an important anchor for this research, I analyze the lyrics of cumbia songs that contain derogatory or sexist lyrics, and describe how I recorded samples of the chorus of these songs and constructed new melodies with these audio slices as a form of activism (Chapter 4). The act of creating new sonic material with these lyrics, symbolically erases their deficit meaning and contributes their reconstructed form to *feminist cumbia* narratives.

Analysis of Sexist Cumbia Lyrics: A Three Song Case Study

Although the origin of *feminist cumbia* cannot be directly tied to sexist lyrics as the main contributing influence, the creation of *CCQ* has been motivated by the desire to correct and reconstruct sexist and derogatory lyrics through a performative activist act. Analysis of these lyrics is needed to understand the sentiment expressed in problematic cumbia lyrics. To establish this foundation of understanding, I will describe and analyze the lyrics of three songs which I believe fall under this category. Note: One of these songs, *Son Tus Perjumeses Mujer* (*It's Your Fragrances Woman*), is not a cumbia but in the style of “son nica.” I chose to include this song in my analysis because of its ubiquitous presence during my adolescence. It permeated Mexican,

¹⁸Hong, Seung-Hyun, 23

Mexican-American, Latin-American, and Spanish culture and was a big hit.¹⁹ The curated songs and corresponding lyrics are as follows: 1) *La Coseca de Mujeres* (*The Harvest of Women*) by Mike Laure and written by José María Peñaranda (1964 and 1991), 2) *Son Tus Perjumeses Mujer* (*It's Your Fragrances Woman*) by Carlos Mejia Godoy y los de Palangagüina (1977), and 3) *Niña Mujer* (*Girl Woman*) by Los Angeles Azules (1996).

I selected Mike Laure's *La Cosecha De Mujeres* for several reasons. First, this song was a hit not only for Mexican-American audiences but also throughout Mexico. Over the past four decades, the song has been covered countless times both by men and women in a variety of styles. Second, I grew up singing this song with my family at most family celebrations, therefore, the song became engrained in my consciousness as one associated with nostalgic and pleasant childhood memories. The lyrics convey a very simple message: "We can run out of most things, but the harvest of women will always be plentiful," objectifying and attributing disposability to women. The author and singer may have used these lyrics to convey a tongue-in-cheek comedic sentiment that perhaps should not be taken seriously; however, the intent does not ameliorate the severity of the words themselves. As I began to write my own music and reflected on the cumbia songs of my childhood, their derogatory nature did not sit well with me. It would be impossible to separate the lyrics of this song from its popularity and collective sentiment in the Mexican, Mexican-American, and Latin diaspora. What is possible, however, is acknowledging and highlighting their problematic nature through careful and intentional critique.

¹⁹A traditional Nicaraguan musical genre featuring a distinctive rhythm often accompanied by acoustic guitar. It celebrates rural Nicaraguan life utilizing local idioms, Linford 2019, "Nicaragua: History, Culture, and Geography of Music." *The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Music and Culture*, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483317731.n518>, Linford and Sturman (2019)

<i>La Cosecha de Mujeres</i>	<i>The Harvest of Women</i>
José María Peñaranda	José María Peñaranda
performed by Mike Laure (1964)	performed by Mike Laure (1964)

Se acaba la papa
 Se acaba el maíz
 Se acaba los mangos
 Se acaban los tomates

We run out of potatoes
 We run out of corn
 We run out of mangos
 We run out of tomatoes

Se acaban las ciruelas
 Se acaban melones
 Se acaba la sandía y
 Se acaba el aguacate

We run out of plums
 We run out of melons
 We run out of watermelon
 We run out of avocado

Y la cosecha de mujeres
 Nunca se acaba
 La cosecha de mujeres
 Nunca se acaba
 La cosecha de mujeres
 Nunca se acaba

But the harvest of women
 Never ends
 The harvest of women
 Never ends
 The harvest of women
 Never ends

Similarly engrained in my childhood memory and adolescent experience, is *Son Tus Perjumenes Mujer*, hereafter referred to as *Perjumenes*, by Carlos Mejia Godoy y los de Palangagüina (1977). Notably, *Perjumenes* was released the same year as Laure's *La Múcura*, whose own problematic lyrics have been highlighted earlier in this chapter. In songs like these, the use of double entendres to convey sexual themes becomes normalized. When combined with the music and rhythm that make these songs danceable, the themes are hidden in plain sight. The lyrics of *Perjumenes*, written by Godoy and inspired by a folk song from the province of Tonalá in the Chinadenga territory of Nicaragua, begin innocently enough, but then progress to a more explicit objectification of the body of a woman. In an interview with *El Tiempo* in 2019, Godoy states “Hay cierta onda erótica en la canción, y si no la hubiera tenido no habría sido lo mismo.” (“There is a certain wave of eroticism in

the song, and had it not been present it would not have been the same.”) he shares with BBC Mundo.²⁰ The timing of the release of this song in Spain coincided the lifting of censorship laws, a serendipitous result for Godoy and his group. Since its release it has been covered by many bands, soloists, including women, including the group whose version I hear originally in my infancy, Los Alvarado. The first verse of *Perjúmenes*, quotes a conversation between two friends. One is named Baltazar, possibly a fictional character, and the other, although no documentation was found to confirm this, one could assume is the singer of the song, Carlos Mejía Godoy. The first man asks Baltazar “What is el sulibeyo?” Baltazar proceeds to illustrate its meaning by describing how a pumice stone when thrown into the water sinks then rises, or “sulibeya.” The word(s) “sulibeya, sulibeyan, sulibeyar” whose commonly agreed upon meaning is “levantarse o salir a flote alguien o algo” (“To be lifted, for someone or something to stay afloat”)²¹ are intermixed with other words like *aleteyan*, *soripeyan*, *reververeyan*, and *amareya*, words that according to philology and linguist analysts are altered extensions of colloquial versions of similar words.²² Godoy also speaks of it originating from the French word *soulever*, meaning “to lift” or “raise”. They are often referred to as “americanismos” (“americanisms”), words rooted in indigenous languages but altered as a result of colonialism.²³ At the center of the song is the word “perjúmenes,” meaning fragrances — a woman’s

²⁰Wallace, Arturo, “La historia olvidada de ‘Son tus perjúmenes mujer’”, Wallace (2019) La Canción Nicaragüense Que Fue Número 1 en España y América Latina (y Popularizó la Palabra Sulibeyo)”, *BBC News Mundo*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-48107059>, accessed June 28, 2026

²¹Castro Sanchez, Paola, “La historia desconocida de ‘Son tus perjúmenes mujer’”, la canción que llegó a competir con el mismo Elvis Presley” *El Herald*, December 23, 2022 <https://heraldodemexico.com.mx/tendencias/2022/12/23/la-historia-desconocida-de-son-tus-perjumenes-mujer-la-cancion-que-llego-competir-con-el-mismo-elvis-presley-468489.html>, Accessed June 29, 2026

²²Frago Gracia, Juan Antonio. “Son Tus Perjúmenes, Mujer, Los Que Me Suliveyan.” *Revista de filología española* [Madrid], Frago Gracia (2004) vol. 84, no. 1, June 2004, pp. 211–16, <https://doi.org/10.3989/rfe.2004.v84.i1.103>.

²³Frago Gracia, “Son Tus Perjúmenes,” 212

frangrance. The song begins by stating that the woman’s frangrances “suliveyan” the man, “lift” the man. Although Godoy himself has never confirmed this to mean anything other than sexual attraction, or arousal, in several interviews when asked what this meant, he coyishly chuckles and returns to his canned answer, “to uplift the spirit.”²⁴ Next, the lyrics focus on the woman’s eyes. She states that her “colibri” (hummingbird) eyes, “aleteyan” (flutter) or cause the man to “aleteyar” (flutter). The woman in this song wants to attract the man with her “fluttering” (eyelashes and) eyes. The male authored lyrics assign a position of power to the woman and cast her in the role of temptress and seducer, luring the man into her web. In each verse, the lyrics switch from first person (Godoy) to second person, the fictional woman, often singing the same line but using different possessive adjectives, my vs. your. Godoy lists the woman’s attributes, all of which are physical parts of her body. He makes no mention of her actions and her ability to think, feel, and work. She is not described as a fully formed human being but merely an object. The woman’s lips are described as a flower in bloom in response to the man’s lips also in bloom. In this verse, the word “soripeyan” is also introduced seemingly to suggest that the woman is the one teasing, seducing, or making advances. Linguists associate the neologism to the song but the exact meaning of the word is elusive.²⁵ According to Godoy “‘Es que como está llena de tantas palabras nicaragüenses... ¿Quién va a entender sulibeyo, soripeyo, almareyo?’ fue el razonamiento. (Well it’s that the song is full of so many Nicaraguan words, Who is going to understand sulibeyo, soripeyo, almareyo?) was his reasoning.”²⁶ The next set of verses begin with the woman

²⁴Wallace, *BBC News Mundo*, 2

²⁵Maestu, Enrique Balmaseda. “La canción latinoamericana en la enseñanza del español: Música, cultura y variación lingüística.” Maestu (2011) *Del texto a la lengua: la aplicación de los textos a la enseñanza-aprendizaje del español L2-LE*. Asociación para la Enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extranjera-ASELE, 2011.

²⁶Wallace, *BBC News Mundo*, 2

exclaiming “My breasts, my breasts, look how they ‘reverbereyan,’” a word originating from the Latin word *reverberare* meaning the physical bouncing or reflection of light, heat, or sound. Lastly, the woman proclaims “My body ‘chucaro,’” meaning savage, untamed, and often attributed to antisocial people who run from or reject society. The woman exclaims that her body is untamed and “almareya” (possibly originating from *almarear*, meaning to provoke, cause dizziness, blind, dazzle, fascinate or intensely attract a person). The song lists several successful Latin-American women artists, Massiel, Paloma San Basilio, and Natalia Baeza, who were highly acclaimed at the time. Wrapping these words around their names can be read as an accolade or a declaration of admiration. On the other hand, these words can be read as generally derogatory towards women and to the artists in particular by associating their names with phrases like “honey breasts” (analogous to a man using fruit or food related words to describe the body of a woman). These multi-faceted women artists, well known on their own merits, hard work, and talent, are reduced to adjectives like sweet, pretty, fertile, and ones to be tamed or dominated. Instead, they are mentioned in passing as pretty things that a man can look at. In re-recordings of the song, ironically, each of these artists were invited to sing this song with Carlos Mejia Godoy y los de Palangagüina. Each sang one of the female quotes and embodied the role of a seductress in the remake of the original song. Other words used throughout the song that signal this power imbalance are “fecunda” an adjective that translates to fertile, fruitful, or prolific. This word is derived from the Latin word *fecundus* and describes something capable of producing an abundance of offspring, crops, or new growth, ironically similar to the song *La Cosecha de Mujeres* by Laure. The very fact that Godoy refers to a woman’s “frangrances” (*perjumenes/perfumenes*), is suggestive of a female animal emitting a scent to signal she is in heat, in the context of a description of how she is arousing the man. Additionally, the scene is reminiscent

of the stereotypical woman who is “asking for it” based on the shape of her body or the way she is dressed. Furthermore, the song implies that the female protagonist is not only enticing the man but also willingly playing the role of seducing, a reflection of the male gaze at the time the song was originally recorded.

Son Tus Perjúmenes Mujer

Carlos Mejia Godoy
y los de Palangagüina (1977)

“¿Qué cosa es el sulibeyo?”
Le pregunté a Baltazar Nicoya.
Y Baltazar tomando
Una piedra pómez
La arrojó al fondo del río
Y cuando la piedra
Volvió a la superficie,
¿Saben lo que me dijo?
“¡Mírela, mírela como se sulibeya!”

Son tus perjúmenes, mujer
Los que me sulibeyan
Los que me sulibeyan
Son tus perjúmenes, mujer

La primerita en la frente
Dijo la espuma al peñasco
Y aparece reluciente
La bella, Ángela Carrasco

Mis ojos son de colibrí
Ay, ¡cómo te aleteyan!
Ay, ¡cómo me aleteyan!
Tus ojos son de colibrí

“No hay primera sin segunda”
Dijo la ceiba al laurel
Y aquí está, siempre fecunda
La simpática, Massiel

They Are Your Fragrances Woman

Carlos Mejia Godoy
y los de Palangagüina (1977)

“What exactly is sulibeyo?”
I asked Baltazar Nicoya.
And Baltazar, picking up
A pumice stone
threw it into the depths of the river.
And when the stone
Rose back to the surface,
Do you know what he said to me?
“Look at it! Look at how she sulibeya!”

It is your fragrances, woman
That attract me
That attract me
It is your fragrances, woman

“The very first one, right on the forehead!”
Said the foam to the crag
And appearing, radiant and bright
Is the beautiful Ángela Carrasco

My eyes are like hummingbirds
Oh, how they flutter toward you!
Oh, how they flutter toward me!
Your eyes are like hummingbirds

“There is no first without a second”
Said the ceiba tree to the laurel
And here she is, ever-fertile
The charming Massiel!

Perjumes (cont'd)

Mis labios pétalos en flor
Como me soripeyan
Como me soripeyan
Tus labios pétalos en flor

Una palomita blanca
Cruza el cielo con sigilo
Y anunció con voz muy clara
“Mi hermanita, San Basilio”

Mis pechos cántaros de miel
¡Cómo reververeyan!
¡Cómo reververeyan!
Tus pechos cántaros de miel

El zorzal miró a la Elsita
Y aquilató su belleza
Por eso con voz dulcita
Anunció: “¡Aquí, Baeza!”
Mi cuerpo chúcaro, mi bien

Mi cuerpo chúcaro, mi bien
¡Ay, ¡cómo te almareya!
¡Ay, ¡cómo me almareya!
Tu cuerpo chúcaro mi bien

Fragrances (cont'd)

My lips are petals in bloom
How they beckon to me!
How they beckon to me!
Your lips are petals in bloom.

A little white dove
Crossed the sky with stealth.
And announced in a clear voice
“My little sister: San Basilio!”

My breasts! pitchers of honey;
How they reverberate and sway!
How they reverberate and sway!
Your breasts are pitchers of honey.

The thrush gazed at little Elsita,
And appraised her beauty.
And so, in a sweet, gentle voice,
He announced: “Here is Baeza!”
My wild, untamed body, my love

My wild, untamed body, my love
Oh, how it makes you swoon!
Oh, how it makes me swoon!
Your wild, untamed body, my love

The third song whose lyrics will be analyzed is *Niña Mujer (Girl Woman)* written by Jorge Mejía Avante and performed by Angeles Azules. Los Angeles Azules is one of the most well known and influential Mexican musical groups. Many of their songs contain sexist lyrics. In light of the fact that their fan base is comprised mostly of women and young girls, this is problematic. In the case of the song *Niña Mujer (Girl Woman)*, with over 700 million streams on YouTube, the lyrics describe the innocence of a girl protagonist described as a woman in a girl's body. This musical group has recorded other songs with similar narratives, i.e. *Tus 17 Años (Your 17 Years)*. I had never questioned the word *niña* (girl) because from the perspective of my

adolescent self, it is used as a term of endearment in most Mexican, Latin-American, and Mexican-American households. In the context of this song and through the scrutiny and protective maternal perspective, their true meaning is revealed. The narrative is that of a grown adult man addressing a young girl. The song further eludes that the girl (niña) is experiencing first love with him portraying him as a savior. Another example of these lyrics is the Angeles Azules song *El Liston De Tu Pelo*, (*The Ribbon of Your Hair*) which refers to the ribbons in a young girl's hair. In Latin culture, ribbons are symbolic of the way a young girl's hair would be styled, not commonly worn by an adult woman unless it is worn as part of the traditional Mexican clothing.

Niña Mujer

Jorge Mejía Avante
recorded by Angeles Azules (1996)

Cuando creí morir
Fue en verdad cuando nací
Al verte a ti, bonita mujer
Desde ese momento
Tus ojos se clavaron en mi alma
Tu ternura y sencillez

Quedaron sembradas en mi corazón
Mujer niña, mi niña mujer
Mujer niña, mi niña mujer
Amor a primera vista
Amor de primera vez

Linda es tu sencillez
Tu honradez y honestidad
Por ello pongo mi mundo a tus pies

Cuando creí morir
Fue en verdad cuando nací
Al verte a ti, bonita mujer

Child Woman

Jorge Mejía Avante
recorded by Angeles Azules (1996)

When I thought I was dying
That was truly when I was born
Upon seeing you, beautiful woman
From that moment on
Your eyes pierced my soul
Your tenderness and simplicity

Were sown deep within my heart
Child-woman, my child-woman
Child-woman, my child-woman
Love at first sight
First love

Lovely is your simplicity
Your integrity and honesty
For this, I lay my world at your feet

When I thought I was dying
That was truly when I was born
Upon seeing you, beautiful woman

*Niña Mujer (cont'd)**Child Woman (cont'd)*

Mujer niña, mi niña mujer	Child-woman, my child-woman
Mujer niña, mi niña mujer	Child-woman, my child-woman
Amor a primera vista	Love at first sight
Amor de primera vez	First love

In this section I have analyzed the lyrics of three songs popular containing what to me are sexist lyrics. These songs pandered to listeners by portraying women as objects, insatiable animals, fruits to be harvested, and vulnerable children too weak and small to protect their own “clay water jug.” They sold reverberating breasts to audiences ready to buy them. At times the lyrics hid their true meaning by inventing words or offering alternative interpretations. As a woman moving through the Regional Mexican music industry, I carried these songs as symbols of success to an aspiring recording artist. However, as I scrutinized each word, I realized the importance of creating songs whose lyrics reflected my values and the way Mexican-American women should be perceived. Several iterations of reading and analyzing these lyrics, revealed how common and accepted songs of this nature are. I also revealed how invented words can justify almost any meaning through a precious interpretation of the original song and at times appropriate colloquial Spanish to achieve this. They serve to preserve pre-feminist notions of how men and women see each other and the freedoms each claim for their sex. In terms of Mexican/Mexican-American culture, each instance of a sexist song covered by another artists, propogates these same values within listening audiences and reinforces anachronistic ideas about women. Each lyric that depicts child sexual abuse serves to normalize such behavior in Mexico, a country which ranks number 2 among Latin American countries, in cases of sexual violence against children and saw an increase of nearly 500% between 2020 and

2021.²⁷ It is impossible to listen to *feminist cumbia* artists, discussed and described in the following section, and not understand them to be pushing back on the rampant sexism of the past in the songs analyzed. Literature does not claim sexist lyrics as a direct motivator to the *feminist cumbia* movement. However for me, and from my own perspective as a producer and consumer of cumbia music, it was decidedly so. Knowing the power of these songs and the way they depicted women, unquestionably inspired my own writing and provided an impetus for correcting and undoing the sexism of the past. For me, this activist approach has manifested in several songs, both cumbia and other styles. In a verse from my song *La Leona (Lioness)*,²⁸ I write lyrics that empower women who suffer from gender-based violence, oppression, and domestic abuse. The song is a declaration of independence whose protagonist realizes her self worth and leaves a potentially dangerous situation.

La Leona

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2026

Ni que fueras el rey del universo
 Ni que fueras un juez o un general
 Pa' mandarme y dirigir mis sentimientos
 Ahora mismo yo te pongo en tu lugar
 Hoy pondré punto final a esta historia
 Y hoy te me vas, y hoy te me vas
 A chillar a otro lugar

Ya crecí, ya aprendí
 Ya me harté de tus insultos
 Soy leona enfurecida
 Hazte a un lado no provoques mi ira

The Lioness

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2026

Not like you're king of the universe
 It's not like you're a judge or general
 To order me and direct my feelings
 I am going to put you in your place
 Today I will end this story
 Today is your day to leave
 To leave and cry somewhere else

I've grown, and I've learned
 I'm fed up with your insults
 I am a an enraged lioness
 Step aside don't provoke my ire

²⁷Child Rights International Network, OOSI Mexico Briefing, *Out of the Shadows Index: Mexico* Smith and Doe (2023), March 23, 2023, <https://home.crin.org/readlistenwatch/stories/oosi-latin-america>, accessed July 2, 2026

²⁸***La Leona (The Lioness)*** can be accessed on the Spotify streaming platform via this link: <https://open.spotify.com/track/6ZdDg6mg05IpOM1PVPVtqN?si=39f520037ee94a35>

The *Feminist Cumbia* Grass Roots Movement

By the late 1990s, due to the technological advances in computing and the establishment of the internet/World Wide Web, the music industry experienced a significant shift in the way it distributed its music. The days of mass distribution of physical media were in the past. As this transformation was brewing, the percentage of women performers and songwriters of cumbia music on Latin radio progressively increased until it shared almost half of the airwaves offering with their male artists counterparts. Lydia Cavazos, Laura Canales, and Eva Ybarra were the first female cumbia and regional-Mexican music pioneers able to sustain professional music careers. By the late 90s half of the female cumbia artists that were programmed on the radio, were female regional Mexican music artist.

Despite the increased participation of women singer-songwriters, the thematic content continued to focus on the traditional narratives of love and love lost. Notwithstanding slow detachment from traditional sexist lyrics, the *feminist cumbia* movement was gaining traction and further propelled by shifts in music media technology. Napster simultaneously democratized and decimated the traditional model of the music industry. It also transformed the way society consumed music. Media players like the iPod²⁹ further exacerbated the impact these technology shifts had on record label revenues. The DIY music makers and emerging regional-Mexican music labels could now compete with the large conglomerates by mass producing their own music and taking advantage of the “the small size of mp3”³⁰ files, new cumbia music. These new music offerings influenced new ideas for performing, composing, and writing cumbia

²⁹iPod was the first mp3 player of its kind and was released by Apple in 2001. <https://www.apple.com/newsroom/2022/05/the-music-lives-on/>

³⁰The mp3 file format was a means of compressing a sound sequence into a very small file, to enable digital storage and transmission. Oxford Dictionary.

music. Curatorial decisions were no longer in the hands of record labels and radio program managers.³¹ This influx of new artists included feminist perspectives and activist based lyrics. Three artists exemplifying this progressive spirit of feminist cumbia music are Renee Goust, Lila Downs, and Sonideras. These female musicians, composers, and singer-songwriters, changed the trajectory of cumbia music.

Feminist Cumbia Artists: Three Case Studies

Renee Goust: La Cumbia Feminazi

The first wave of emerging artists consolidating the feminist cumbia movement to be discussed in this chapter is Mexican-American songwriter Renee Goust (Fig. 2.1), known for the Spanish lyrics song *La Cumbia Feminazi* (2016),³² of her own authorship. Goust was born in 1984 in Tucson, AZ but has also lived in Mexico. Goust composed *La Cumbia Feminazi* (Fig. 2.2) in response to hate speech and online bullying/micro aggressions. Goust's songs centers on women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and promote bodily autonomy while challenging the machista³³ stereotypes and attitudes. Her songs symbolize activism and protest through music and counter Latin machismo,³⁴ characterized by aggressive, controlling, and violence-based attitudes towards women.

“No me llames Feminazi, por tener la autoestima alta y no callar.” (Don't call me a Feminazi, for having high self-esteem and not staying quiet.)³⁵

³¹Fernandez, *Cumbia*, 88

³²Renee Goust, *La Cumbia Feminazi*, Goust (2009), Renee Goust Live, Youtube Video, Aug 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7IXTxHcL7s>, accessed March 28, 2026

³³a male chauvinist, a man who believes that women are inferior to men.

³⁴word originating from machista to signify a collective male chauvinist attitude

³⁵Renee Goust, *La Cumbia Feminazi*, August 2016, Infante (2021), “Renee Goust Quiere Empoderar Con Su Propuesta Musical.” *La Opinión* (Los Angeles, Calif.) [Los Angeles, Calif], accessed March 18, 2026.

Her lyrics speak out against gender-based violence and the precarity that women face just walking around in their own hometowns. Following the acceptance and success of *La Cumbia Feminazi*, Goust continued to tackle social issues even when they involved religious references, a stand that not many Latin artists will take. Her song *El Cristo Buchón*³⁶ honors the mothers of the victims and survivors of gender-based violence, kidnappings, murders, and rape, highlighting the frustration and pain they carry due to the perpetrators who act with impunity and the lack of action by those in power. Goust’s critique of Mexico’s religious systems highlights the irony of seeking answers from “Cristo Buchón,” a male Christ, calling attention to a patriarchal system that is complicit in these crimes or silent on seeking justice for the disappeared.



Figure 2.1: Renee Goust b. 1984



Figure 2.2: Renee Goust, *La Cumbia Feminazi*, 2016

³⁶Renee Goust, *El Cristo Buchón*, Youtube Video, Dec 12, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMRaJx92RT8>, Goust (2025), *Buchón* (masculine) or *buchona* (feminine) is a Mexican slang term for someone who flaunts extreme wealth and luxury, often associated with narco-culture, characterized by flashy clothes, accessories, and a “puffed up” (arrogant) attitude. It implies a loud, showy aesthetic, similar to a puffed-up bird, accessed March 28, 2026

Lila Downs

Lila Downs (Fig. 2.3) is a Mexican born singer-songwriter, child of a Scottish-American father and Mixtec mother, now living in the United States (born 1968 in Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, Mexico), also reigns as a *feminist cumbia* queen.



Figure 2.3: Lila Downs pictured at La Casa de Mexico in Madrid, El Pais (2024)³⁷

Her career started with border narratives and eclectic combinations of traditional acoustic instruments, hybrid rhythms, and expansions on the traditional cumbia form. Downs' catalog and performance repertoire are not exclusively feminist cumbia songs. Until recently, her songs were culture centric, celebrating the food, people, and customs of Mexico but rarely taking an explicit activist role through her lyrics. In an interview with Zoe Harr at George Mason University Center for the Arts, Downs speaks of a performance she posted for International Women's Day honoring women everywhere. She performed fragments from poet Rocío García Rey's *Mujer Colibrí* ("Hummingbird Woman"). "The poem, written by a fellow Mexican woman involved in activism through the arts, details violence against women, both past and present, and asks that past victims not be forgotten. Just as Lila Downs has made a point to remember those of indigenous culture who have faced injustice, Downs makes a simi-

³⁷Lila Downs pictured at La Casa de Mexico in Madrid, <https://english.elpais.com/culture/2024-07-10/lila-downs-my-mother-always-told-me-that-women-should-never-speak-badly-about-another-woman.html>, accessed April 20, 2026

lar statement for women all over the world.”³⁸ As her popularity and influence grew, Downs took a stronger stance against injustices towards women. She also doubled down on her elaborate and often gigantic stage costumes to call attention to these issues. In her song *Clandestino (Clandestine)*³⁹ she speaks out against the immigration policies of the United States. The song underscores the challenges and dangers that undocumented immigrants face once they arrive in the United States. Through her music, she raises human rights questions, and attempts to embody the precarious, traumatic, and often dangerous experiences that immigrants face. In *Clandestino (Clandestine)*, she sings ‘Soy una raya en el mar. Fantasma en ciudad.’ (I am a line in the ocean. A ghost in the city) to convey the fragile nature and emotionally fraught side of the immigrant experience.

“In an interview with Radio Canada, when asked if Downs felt that she has disrupted the music industry with her musical activism, she laughs and says, ‘I hope that I have. I love to break the expectations even though it’s hard and it feels like you’re constantly swimming against the current, but it’s worth it because you are creating . . . I hope that we are able to do more and disrupt some more of the patriarchal musical lanes.’”⁴⁰

Her career and influence now spans four decades and continues to grow. As the first major recording artist to wear colorful, ribboned, and embroidered traditional Mexican clothing and even chili headpieces on national stages, she stepped into the role of global ambassador for Mexican music worldwide. (Fig. 2.4) Downs recently collaborated with Panteón Rococó and the Mexican Institute of Sound Mix on her

³⁸Harr, Zoe, George Mason University Center for the Arts, cfa.gmu.edu/news/2022-04/celebrate-belated-international-womens-day-grammy-winning-singer-lila-downs, accessed April 11, 2026

³⁹Lila Downs, *Clandestino*, Nov 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBxkpkj9If8>, accessed March 20, 2026

⁴⁰Harr, George Mason University, 2

song *Cariñito*⁴¹ to promote education for women. Down’s work has inspired countless artists and composers to follow in her footsteps and write about topics outside of the stereotypical love and love lost tropes of Mexican music lyrics. She is a multi-instrumentalist and often styles her long hair in traditional ribbon laced braids.



Figure 2.4: Lila Downs wearing headpiece made of red and green chili⁴²

Downs is the first Mexican female singer-songwriter to perform Mexican Day of the Dead⁴³ songs for mainstream audiences and is well-known on global music stages for her rendition of *La Llorona*.⁴⁴ Downs continues to create music enmeshed with activism, feminist perspectives, and lyrics that celebrate Mexican culture and women. Downs influenced my own songwriting practice. Instead of conforming music industry expectations of *gruper*a singer-songwriters and body stereotypes, she inspired me to lean into New Mexico culture and activist narratives within the cumbia genre, embracing my unique identity.

⁴¹A term of endearment similar to sweetie, sweetheart, darling, or honey.

⁴²Lila Downs wearing headpiece made of red and green chili, <https://english.elpais.com/culture/2024-07-10/lila-downs-my-mother-always-told-me-that-women-should-never-speak-badly-about-another-woman.html>, accessed April 20, 2026

⁴³The Day of the Dead (Día de Los Muertos) DDLM celebration/holiday, celebrated in Mexico, Central America, and the US, is a day that honors and commemorate the lives of the dearly departed and welcomes the return of their spirits.

⁴⁴For context, *La Llorona* (“The Weeping Woman”) is a Mexican/Hispanic folklore legend described as a ghost woman dressed in white who drowned her children and now roams waterways eternally crying “¡Ay, mis hijos! (Oh my kids!)” The various versions of the legend says she lures children to watery deaths, serving as a cautionary tale to keep children away from danger.

Sonidera MX

A recent movement within the Mexican music night club scene that has gained traction and a strong following, is the Sonidera MX or sonidero culture. These performances are DJ based and feature loud energetic and often slower tempo cumbias, (ranging between 50—60bpm) in which indigenous singing, traditional Mexican instruments and ritualistic melodies are often featured. The powerful sound systems emanate through small and large venues and feature intermittent call-outs, dedications or uplifting words that energize the crowd. These female DJs apply dramatic reverb, delay and stutter audio effects while playing older cumbia songs that date back to the 1950's. This phenomenon and musical manifestations result in a range of events, some organized, requiring the purchase of advanced tickets, and others organic, popping up on street corners, bars, people's homes, and in neighborhood streets. The cumbia dancing continues into the early morning hours and occurs within a crowd of people instead of the more traditional couple format. The Sonidera MX dance events whose music blends indigenous rhythms with modern digital media techniques organically attracts people through the improvised call-outs and the draw of the music itself. Due to its grassroots infancy, little has been written about the movement in academic circles. One of the biggest proponents and DJs of this style of music is Joyce Musicolor also known as Sonidera Mixpower (Fig. 2.5),⁴⁵ her more recent gender neutral name. Sonidera Mixpower runs her own record label, works as a radio host, and spearheaded the Mexican Sonidera scene. Frequently, she can be found spinning records and calling out to the audience as she plays an eclectic mix of

⁴⁵Joyce MusiColor, en la Alameda Central presenta el Poder Cumbiambero Ciudad Cultural de América, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txVQkypiLrE>, accessed March 1, 2026

cumbias at a local park or plaza. Joyce is an active member of the “Mujeres Vinileras” (The Vinyl Ladies) Collective.⁴⁶ In the article “Women vinyl record players, Resistance through turntables,” the members of the collective, including Joyce states that “At one point in history, tropical music, especially cumbia, was very marginalized by the vinyl collector society, that’s the reality; today it’s a boom, before it wasn’t. The fact of being women in the scene..... becomes a political aspect, and being in music, which is a super patriarchal and violent scene, also means a lot of resistance.”⁴⁷ These musical and activist manifestations align with my own activist practices. At a time when *gruperas* were managed by labels and not allowed in the studio as engineers, I began to record my own music and learned all about studio recording techniques. I was the first *gruper*a to start an independent label and manage all aspects of the music creation process. Similar to Sonideras MX, I was creating space for women that wished to be both behind the microphone and the mixing console.



Figure 2.5: Sonidera MX Joyce Musicolor aka Sonidera Mixpower DJing at the Alameda Central in Mexico City, March 4, 2022

The feminist cumbia genre has not yet fully consolidated. It lives loosely amongst

⁴⁶Perla Velázquez, Notimex, Leviatan, <https://leviatan.mx/2019/07/11/mujeres-vinileras-resistencia-a-traves-de-las-tornamesas>, accessed March 23, 2026

⁴⁷Velázquez, Leviatan, 2

composers and performers that have created cumbia music for decades and contributed to the transformation of cumbia music manifested as *feminist cumbia*. These manifestations include DJ turntable artists whose performance practice levels the playing field for women where women rarely participated. For Downs, activism or feminist lyrics came later in her career, but these issues were cleverly hidden in sight. The songs she has written about Mexican foods feature women cooking for their families, working, and raising their children – these visuals embodied her feminist philosophies. For Goust, the cumbia genre became an outlet in which she could freely express ideas about identity, politics, culture, and race topics in mainstream cumbia songs. Through independent releases and self promotion, she established herself as an artist that represents and voices the concerns of underserved and marginalized voices. Ultimately, this is the thread that unites these three distinct artists and also ties them to my own work. They craft narratives, stories, perform at the turntable in ways that are novel. They critique and push against the cumbia status quo as I have attempted to do within the *CCQ* narrative.

Chapter 3

TECHNOLOGY MEDIATED PERFORMER-COMPOSER CULTURAL EXPRESSION

As important as feminist perspectives are in my work, the inclusion or, at times, intentional exclusion of cultural symbolism is also an important facet of my composition process. Considering the interdisciplinary nature of my personal eclectic performance and recording practices, the process of creating *CCQ* was inherently eclectic. In this chapter, I will discuss artists whose technology-mediated performance practices have influenced my own practice as well as the work of pioneering electronic musicians on whose shoulders we stand. Next, I will discuss three artists who weave cultural symbolism and expression into their composition and performance practices through a technological lens and whose work has directly informed my electronic music explorations. I will conclude with a discussion of my own technology-mediated practice and how I embed cultural meaning and activism via vocal techniques and instrument/sound sample selections within my own compositions.

On the Shoulders of Giants

Several pioneering women, whose artistic practices include technology mediated performance and composition, have made significant contributions to the field of electronic music. Laetitia Sonami, for example, the creator of the Lady's Glove,⁴⁸ built the first prototype of this electronic wearable music instrument in 1991.

⁴⁸Sonami, Laetitia, Lady's Glove, Portfolio, sonami.net, <https://sonami.net/portfolio/items/ladys-glove/>, Sonami (1998) accessed March 3, 2026

“I built my first gloves in 1991 for a performance at the Ars Electronica Festival (Linz) with Paul DeMarinis, entitled ‘Mechanization Takes Command.’ These were a pair of rubber kitchen gloves (the perfect housewife’s tool) with five Hall effect transducers glued at the tip of the fingers and a magnet on the right hand by touching the fingers on the magnet, varying voltages were fed to a Forth board and converted to MIDI signals. These signals controlled various synthesizers and samplers. Paul was using a Power Glove to control speech synthesis. While I was intent on finding a more fluid way to perform with the computer, this first glove was also somewhat of a joke, a response to the heavy masculine apparel used in virtual reality systems.”⁴⁹

The glove is “fitted with a vast array of sensors which track the slightest motion of her enigmatic dance: with it Sonami can create performances where her movements can shape the music and in some instances visual environments. The lady’s glove has become a fine instrument which challenges notions of technology and virtuosity.”⁵⁰ After experimenting with the Lady’s Glove for twenty years, Laetitia paused this work stating “it takes time to appreciate the limitations of the instrument, the boundaries of its expression, the pushback on one’s intents. I had good models, musicians who resisted the appeal of infinite buttons and modules: Eliane Radigue⁵¹ for instance who for thirty years adapted to the temperamental moods of her ARP 2500, or Michel Waisvisz⁵² who used his *Hands* for twenty years and would probably still wave them if present.”⁵³ When I first came across Sonami’s work at the beginning of my MFA

⁴⁹Sonami, sonami.net, 2

⁵⁰Sonami, sonami.net, 2

⁵¹Éliane Radigue (1932-2026) French composer whose work was created with the ARP 2500 modular synthesizer and tape

⁵²(8 July 1949 – 18 June 2008) Michel Waisvisz was Amsterdam, Dutch composer, performer and inventor of experimental electronic musical instruments

⁵³Sonami, sonami.net, 2

studies, the rich history of wearable instruments became clear when I began to explore making wearable instruments. As I was building these instruments both through a class setting and independently, I asked how the parameters that movement of a device or sensor affected would deepen expression. I found the attentive nature of Sonami's performance with her Lady's glove incredibly compelling and poetic. Her instrument was an extension of herself and expanded her music corporeally. In past performances my physical movements served to express lyrics and emotion tied to the music but they never directly impacted how my voice or instruments would sound. Sonami and her work were incredibly inspiring to my own work using wearable instruments because they deepened the expressive nature of the music in a way that I found incredibly provocative. As I have continued to practice with the instruments I build or have cobbled together using sensors and acquired patches, I find that they are very similar to acoustic instruments. You must practice them and also make them an extension of your musical practice. Sonami also inspired my interest in building new instruments. She is directly involved in every aspect of her instruments from the design to the soldering. I too wanted to experience the lows and highs of creating new instruments.



Figure 3.1: Laetitia Sonami performing with The Lady's Glove, Sonami, L., sonami.net, <https://sonami.net/portfolio/items/ladys-glove>

These forays into electronic music exploration for women performers did not exist in a vacuum. Several female artists before them paved the way, opened avenues, and

made themselves known in male dominated spaces. In the early 1920s and through the 1930s, virtuosic violinist Clara Rockmore, transitioned to and learned to play the theremin (an early electronic instrument controlled without touch), employing the stylistic tendencies of a fretless string instrument through the theremin, thus bridging traditional techniques with electronic sound. In 1938, Johanna Magdalena Beyer⁵⁴ composed *Music of the Spheres*, (an excerpt from her unfinished opera *Status Quo*), making her the first woman to write music specifically scored for electronic instruments. *Music of the Spheres* called for three “electrical” instruments. If the piece had been performed in the 1930s, it could have been played on ondes martenots, or theremins, or some other analogue synthesisers. The exact type of instrument she had in mind nevertheless, was not determined, specified, and perhaps did not yet exist. However, this is the very first piece for electronic instruments by a woman composer. Unfortunately, the piece was not produced during her lifetime due to lack of funding. “In 1938 Beyer applied, unsuccessfully, for a Guggenheim fellowship; the curriculum vitae she created the year before remains today the sole source of information about certain details of her life and work.”⁵⁵ Due to renewed interest in her work, “thirty-nine years after its birth it received its first performance on March 13, 1977, during a recording session for this LP at 1750 Arch Studios in Berkeley.”⁵⁶ Performed by The Electric Weasel Ensemble, performers on this recording included, Allen Strange, Stephen Ruppenthal, David Morse, (Buchla Music Easel, synthesizers); Brenda Hutchinson, (pulse control); Donald Buchla (frequency shifting and mix); Charles Amirkhonian (triangle). Bebe Barron⁵⁷ co-wrote the score for *Forbid-*

⁵⁴Beal, Amy C. Johanna Beyer. 1st ed., University of Illinois Press, 2016. Beal (2015)

⁵⁵Beal, Amy C. Johanna Beyer. 1st ed., University of Illinois Press, 2015. Beal (2015) p. 3

⁵⁶New Music for Electronic and Recorded Media, *Women In Electronic Music 1977*, 1977 <https://nwr-site-liner-notes.s3.amazonaws.com/80653.pdf>, Liner Notes, accessed July 2, 2026

⁵⁷Bebe Barron, and Louis. “Forbidden Planet (1956).” *Celluloid Symphonies*, edited by Julie Hubbert, 1st ed., University of California Press, 2011, p. 274. Barron *et al.* (2019)

den Planet with her husband, Louis Barron in 1956, the very first all-electronic score created for film. Delia Derbyshire⁵⁸ realized the *Doctor Who*⁵⁹ theme in 1963. Until recently, these women were often excluded from the history books, yet their contributions were pivotal, groundbreaking, and innovative evolutions of the manipulation of media, often utilizing homemade electronic instruments. Daphne Oram's⁶⁰ Oramics machine⁶¹ (Fig. 3.4) read hand painted glass plates. Each plate contained four hand drawn linear forms whose shapes specified pitch, velocity, delay, and reverb values. Oram was shaping parameters of sound through her drawings which were read and interpreted by her machine. The machine used optical scanning to interpret the hand drawn wave shapes to generate sound. Oram's ingenious invention is currently stored and preserved at The Science Museum of London. The last time it was on temporary exhibit was 2011. Specific details of how the machine created the sounds remain a mystery due to Oram's constant tweaking and modification of the system. In 2023 however, electronic musician and instrument designer Tom Richards developed the Mini Oramics Machine as a tribute to Daphne Oram.⁶² An online version version also modeled after the Oramics machine was created by Shane Chapman, professor of music theory at Brooklyn College and Kingsborough Community College.⁶³ In 2011, the Oramics Optical Synthesizer Application for iPad or iPhone was created and released by StrangeLoop Limited, however it is no longer available for download

⁵⁸(5 May 1937 – 3 July 2001) English musician and composer of electronic music. She worked with the BBC Radiophonic Workshop during the 1960s

⁵⁹Brend, Mark. *The Sound of Tomorrow: How Electronic Music Was Smuggled into the Mainstream*. Bloomsbury, 2012. Brend (2012)

⁶⁰Daphne Oram (1925 - 2003) was a British composer and electronic musician and the first British composers to produce electronic sound. She was an early adopter of musique concrète techniques in the UK, Oram and Angliss (2016)

⁶¹Oram, Daphne. *An Individual Note of Music, Sound and Electronics*. New edition., Anomie Academic, 2017.

⁶²Tom Richards, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/mini-oramics/>

⁶³Shane Chapman, <https://shanechapmanmusic.com/oramics/>

through through the App Store.⁶⁴



Figure 3.2: Daphne Oram's Oramics Machine and Glass Plates, Science Museum, London

Evidence of growing mainstream acceptance and legitimization of female electronic musicians due to the inroads made by these pioneers, is Suzanne Ciani's⁶⁵ appearance on the David Letterman Show in August of 1980 (Fig. 3.3).



Figure 3.3: Suzanne Ciani at The David Letterman Show, August 14, 1980

During this quite lengthy appearance, Letterman asks specific questions about Ciani's process and seemed to demonstrate a true interest in Ciani's work. One can observe that her complex system of devices entailed a laborious setup process and she was

⁶⁴An older version of the app that can be downloaded from oramics-ios.soft112.com and is compatible with iOS 3.1 or later.

⁶⁵Ciani, Suzanne, "Suzanne Ciani on the David Letterman Show" YouTube, 14 Aug. 1980, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZscRHkLMt0. NBC (1980), accessed March 1, 2026

given an amount of airtime that aptly reflected this effort. I argue that this particular appearance is an important feminist moment in music. At a time when most of the curated material one heard over the airwaves, the only source of new music delivered through the record label pipeline, mainstream media invited Ciani to demonstrate her unique musicianship. Although she did not perform an entire work, she gave the audience a glimpse and overview of her devices and how they worked together to create different sounds. Ciani is confident, eloquent, yet playful during this interview and both Letterman and the audience are intrigued by the technology and her command of it. She masterfully demonstrates her knowledge and understanding of the system. Ciani created music for several television shows, commercials, and movies and performed worldwide with the Buchla modular system (Figure 3.3).⁶⁶ She represents a handful of electronic musicians who were women and at the time were actively creating work that eroded sexist stereotypes. (Fig. 3.4) I was introduced to modular synthesis through my discovery of electronic artist Suzanne Ciani and her performances and compositions using the Buchla modular synthesizer. I related to Ciani's own experience of finding her voice and place within the music world. First, her music foundation was classical and traditional. She trained as a classical pianist at Wellesley College in 1965⁶⁷ and attended graduate school at Mills College. My training was not in classical piano like Ciani. I was trained classically in voice. During my undergraduate years at New Mexico State University, my repertoire included arias and chorales which I thoroughly enjoyed performing. My classical voice training would later become a foundation for an electronic music practice which was also the case for Ciani. During this time at NMSU, I was unaware of Ciani, however

⁶⁶Venker, Thomas, Kaput Magazine, https://kaput-mag.com/stories_en/electric-lights_women-in-electronic-music_suzanne-ciani-im-stubborn-and-i-try-not-to-be-lazy, June 12, 2022

⁶⁷Boon, Hussein. "Suzanne Ciani: The Diva of the Diode." *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*, vol. 21, no. 2, October 2023, pp. 193–209, <https://doi.org/10.1386/tear.00116.1>, Boon (2023)

what I did know was that I desired to extend my repertoire beyond classical music. It was the experimentation aspect of the Buchla and the way Ciani played it, that would later inspire me to explore the Buchla and the concept of modular synthesis. The physicality of the instrument, patching of cables, and touching of the keyboard that despite its two dimensionality responds to touch, were all appealing factors. This extended beyond playing an acoustic instrument. One could manipulate electronic parameters live and transform them while different notes were sustained. It would be the sculptor Harold Paris who would introduce Ciani to Don Buchla, the creator of the Buchla modular synthesizer. She would also collaborate with Paris on the sonification of twelve ideas based on prompts given to her by him. These included “The sound of a flower falling,” “The sound of an old man loving,” and “The sound of a nose peeling.”⁶⁸ Thus was born Ciani’s exploration of the Buchla modular system – a serendipitous and supportive introduction to Don Buchla would make the system accessible to her and her friendship with Paris would ground the exploration in an abstract and non-traditional way.

Similarly, when I began my DMA program at ASU, I was eager to get my hands on the Buchla Easel. The Buchla’s rich sound offers many timbral possibilities. I began experimenting with the Easel for an assignment whose prompt was the use of both its Modulation Oscillator and its Complex Oscillator. I was to experiment with two other parameters of my choice. After much experimentation with the instrument, and exploration of its rich timbres, I ended up creating a six minute piece that gradually transitioned between several parameters within the oscillator settings, waveshape and modulation, and other parameters that affected both oscillators, such as pitch, and voltage levels. The limited set of parameters allowed me to explore the instrument more freely. I might have found a longer prompt more intimidating.

⁶⁸Boon, “The Diva of the Diode.” 194

Ciani's lifelong work with the Buchla modular system and her experimentation also began with imagining visuals as sounds based on simple prompts. I titled this piece *Buchl-ando* (See Appendix for Audio), a title humorously conveying that the Buchla is bilingual. To create different sounds and timbres, the Buchla oscillators are connected to other Buchla sound manipulation paths, like timbre, frequency, and pitch using patch cables. By altering the path of the signal an infinite number of sounds can be created. It was the interactive aspect of the Buchla that appealed most to me. Turning knobs, plugging in cables, and raising and lowering faders was incredibly engaging and deepened the performance aspect of the instrument.



Figure 3.4: Ciani and the Buchla 200 modular synthesizer, Kaput Magazine

Lastly, another facet of Ciani's playing that I found inspiring was her choice to not face the audience and instead allow them to see how she was interacting with the Buchla. Although I usually face the audience, I have had some performances where I chose not to show my face. Instead, I dimmed the lights and projected audio reactive visuals. These were not the same choices made by Ciani, but her performance choices opened my mind to other ways of being while performing. Although scholarly attention to Ciani's work has historically been sparse, many music scholars are now attempting to remedy that by highlighting her work as a pioneer of electronic music.

When I was expecting my first child, I came across an album whose minimalist pixelated cover caught my attention. Something compelled me to purchase the album

*Speak For Yourself*⁶⁹ by Imogen Heap, an artist I had not previously encountered. My first exposure to this album and her electronic music techniques did not disappoint. I tinkered with my own devices to decipher Heap's harmonizer technique. Harmonizer and vocoder VST (Virtual Studio Technology) plugins (software that mimics external audio processing hardware) were not as ubiquitous then as they are today. Happily, I owned the same DigiTech Vocalist Access Effects Processor Heap used, and using my midi keyboard to control the harmonies, I was able to achieve similar timbres. Using the same chord progression as Heap, I recorded an a-capella song in Spanish, *Tinieblas* (*Caverns*), honoring femicide victims. This piece was also an homage to Heap and her techniques. As Heap's career has progressed, I followed her technological explorations. Heap collaborated with Stanford University to create the MiMU gloves.⁷⁰ Although Heap does not explicitly credit Sonami for the conceptualization of the first glove sensor, she has in the past mentioned that similar controllers exist. Also, the company that manufactures the gloves does credit Sonami as being the first to create a glove sensor.⁷¹ Heap's work directly influenced my desire to learn more about electronic music and my decision to return to academia. During my children's formative years, Heap's music was often played in our household. While the rest of my family enjoyed the music, I was dissecting it. I was curious about how she produced the album all on her own. I would imagine the disappointment she felt when she was dropped by the first label with which she signed when she was a member of *Frou Frou*,⁷² an event that would spawn *Speak For Yourself*. Separating from a record label is a devastating event

⁶⁹British artist Imogen Heap wrote, produced, arranged, and mixed the album *Speak For Yourself* in 2004. Heap (2005) The album was released in 2005 under her independent label Megaphonic Records Limited and distributed by Sony Music Entertainment.

⁷⁰"MiMU gloves are wearable musical instruments developed by artist Imogen Heap in 2010 to control music software through movement and gestures" mimugloves.com, accessed March 6, 2026

⁷¹<https://x-io.co.uk/new-interfaces-for-musical-expression-2014/>

⁷²Frou Frou are an English electronic duo composed of musician and singer Imogen Heap and record producer Guy Sigsworth

which I had also experienced. I strongly empathized with what she must have been feeling. I searched the internet for information about her recording process and her specific equipment. I listened intently to her interviews for clues about her process. On May 4, 2006, early in Heap’s solo career and before she reached her current level of fame, I was able to attend one of her live performances at the Marquee Theatre in Tempe, AZ. Imogen stood alone on stage surrounded by a collection of devices, keyboards, and MIDI controllers. I had never experienced music performed this way. I found this both perplexing and intriguing. I reflected on the challenges I had faced in my career in finding and transporting musicians to appear on stage and accompany me. I wondered if this way of performing was a possibility for me. Heap provided the spark that lead me to dedicate myself to the exploration of electronic music.

Technology-Mediated Composer-Performer Cultural Expression

The contributions of pioneering electronic artists like Laetitia Sonami, Suzanne Ciani and Imogen Heap have unquestionably influenced my own practice. Ciani inspired me to learn more about modular synthesis and the physicality of playing the Buchla Easel. She also inspired me to experiment by creating work tied to visual imagery. Patching of cables, moving faders and knobs to shape a continuous flow of sound is a meditative action — a flow state that is becomes even more compelling when I layer vocal improvisation. Ciani has inspired this kind of inquiry. Sonami, however has inspired me in other ways. When I first set eyes on her “Lady’s Glove” I was intrigued by the protruding wires, the way they were fastened to her and the glove, as well as the intentionality of her body movements as she shaped the sound. The act of creating this instrument as “as a satirical nod to the ‘macho’ Mattel Power Glove and as a conceptual subversion of the ‘perfect housewife’ stereotype doing electronic

music while washing dishes”⁷³ was incredibly compelling. She takes an activist stance,beit playful, through technology and music making. Another aspect of Sonami’s work that directly influenced my own is her curiosity for building new instruments and seeking interesting ways to generate sounds through their construction. I also experiment with microcontrollers, soldering, and sensors that alter my voice real-time. Unquestionably, this is not a novel notion. The artist and technologist Pamela Z has been experimenting in this way for decades. However, I hope that in my experimentation I will find my own unique way of working with technology to deepen expression. Lastly, for me, Imogen Heap unites the facets of these artists that I found most compelling. From the interactivity of her MiMU gloves to the wireless midi controllers triggering Ableton Live samples, Heap explores many facets of technology. Like Pamela Z, she alters her voice with special effects, vocoders, and harmonizers all techniques present in *CCQ*. In addition to sound design, Heap actively oversees her music video projects and experiments with audio reactive video, another facet of experimentation that I also share.

In addition to exploring their work, I also wanted to build upon these technologies as connection points to express culturally grounded symbolism and sound. For me, the performer-composer identities seemed fused together when I was composing *gru-pera* cumbia songs. They felt tied to my Latin culture. However, when I first started composing electronic music, I did not prioritize cultural expression. I was still compartmentalizing and creating work that I felt “belonged” in academia. As I reflected on my dissertation composition, it seemed only natural that I draw inspiration from the musical experiences outside of my academic composition work. I surveyed how other Latina performer-composers were leveraging technology-mediated strategies as an avenue for cultural expression and whose practices also included contemporary mu-

⁷³Sonami, sonami.net, 3

sis aesthetics. This exploration led me to several artists whose work I found symbiotic with my own practice and had/could inspire *CCQ*. For this reason, I will discuss the work of three seminal Latina performer-composers whose interdisciplinary practices have allowed them to express their unique cultural perspectives within the contemporary and electronic music community and have also influenced my practice. There are a plethora of artists who foster technology-mediated practices and create innovative and meaningful work. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, I draw from my experiences as an American born Latina, of Mexican and Native-American descent, to connect with the perspectives of other Latina musicians who express their culture through technology. Second, I discuss my own cultural expression through performer-composer practices and how I embody the Regional Mexican cumbia genre through electronic music technology.

Angélica Negrón

The first composer-performer whose culturally embedded composition and performance practice I will analyze is Angélica Negrón. My work has been influenced by many artists. When I first learned of Angélica Negrón several aspects of her practice resonated with me. For Negrón, cultural expression is an important consideration for her composition practice. She derives inspiration from her homeland Puerto Rico and its culture. Negrón also uses found objects as sound sources for her recording projects and live performances. There is a long tradition of sound artists experimenting with found objects, and many artists reach for peculiar sound sources. However, in Negrón's case, she combines these abstract sounds with subtle sonic cultural markers which could include rhythms, nature's sounds, and nostalgic lyrics. I identify with this approach as well. (Fig. 3.5) Originally from Puerto Rico,

her interdisciplinary and multi-instrumentalist practice embeds cultural symbolism in both her performance and composition work. Negrón’s unique approach to composing music was hailed as “wistfully idiosyncratic and contemplative” by WQXR New York Public Radio when her piece *Watercolor Clouds* was featured on the program.⁷⁴ She states “In my work, I often explore the sometimes-overlooked magic in the seemingly insignificant, the domestic and the quotidian.”⁷⁵ The “domestic and the quotidian” for me, conjured memories of my childhood home and the concept of homeland. Negrón’s *Marejada* is a composition for string quartet, electronics and percussion together gracefully paired with field recordings from Seven Seas Beach in Fajardo, Puerto Rico consisting of waves crashing, birds, water, etc. *Marejada*, commissioned by The Kronos Quartet during the COVID-19 lockdown, features string instruments pizzicato motifs contrasting with fixed media nature sounds. The piece begins with gentle wave sound then introduces a series of shorter pizzicato motifs layered with the wave sounds resulting in a cheerful and optimistic mood. At other times, the pizzicato passages are interspersed with forte energetic violin passages, and a contrasting driving fortissimo viola section. A unique aspect of this work is the string player’s doubling on percussion instruments; gongs and bowls. Additionally, Negrón builds structured performance alternatives for added versatility during the uncertain lockdown times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The added flexibility invited participation both in person and virtually, adding transparency to her process. In an interview with NPR’s Tom Huizenga, Negrón speaks of the “push and pull” for her homeland Puerto Rico. She stated that her work grounded by soundscapes replete with memory anchors from her birthplace. Negrón blends Puerto Rican rhythms and instruments with electronic instruments, sound synthesis processes, found objects,

⁷⁴Huizenga, Tom, *In Angélica Negrón’s music, childlike wonder meets the pull of Puerto Rico*, Huizenga (2023) NPR, npr.org, October, 12 2023

⁷⁵Huizenga, *Negrón*, Negrón (2010) October 12, 2023

and toys. “My hope is that my music still sounds like myself. I hope that it’s as cool as Tania León or Julia Wolfe or Meredith Monk. Those are people who have so much edge and heart and meaning, and knowing all of them personally, I know it’s because they’re speaking truth to who they are through their music. So regardless of the sounds I end up using or the instruments or the mediums or any stylistic or aesthetic things, what I can hope for is that it is speaking true to who I am.”⁷⁶ These explorations frame her work within a cultural context and uniquely express the intricate nature of identity and lived Caribbean experience. I argue that Negrón’s unique social and cultural perspective broadens the Western canon. Instead of adapting to traditional orchestration practices, she expands them by proposing new ways of musicking that is mediated by technology but grounded in Puerto Rican diaspora symbolism. Negrón also fosters a performance practice both as a soloist and with the ensemble Balún, of which Negrón is the founding member. This work of this music collective is inspired by the diverse cultural traditions of each of their members. This informs the unique blends of electro-acoustic sounds. (Fig. 3.6)



Figure 3.5: Angélica Negrón performing with plants through her electronic devices Afrotaino, www.afrotaino.com/spotlights/angelicanegron, accessed March 28, 2026

⁷⁶ *The Composers Interview*, Tom Huizenga, npr.org, *In Angélica Negrón’s music, childlike wonder meets the pull of Puerto Rico* Huizenga (2023)



Figure 3.6: Angélica Negrón NPR Tiny Desk Concert, Angélica Negrón and Balún, NPR (2020) accessed January 6, 2020

Maria Chavez

Maria Chavez, abstract turntablist and improviser, was born in Lima, Peru in 1980. She spent most of her formative years in Texas, but by 2005 she would find her way to New York City. There she would make a name for herself as a sound artist using a turntable and broken records. Chavez' debut CD *Those Eyes of Hers* featured a variety of sound textures, from a handful of vinyl records whose condition ranged from “immaculate to ruined.”⁷⁷ Chavez began her musical explorations through learning to play the guitar and piano, and attending the University of Houston to pursue a degree in Art History. While at university, Chavez worked at the Rice University radio station. After some ebbs and flows of her educational journey Maria dropped out of her Art History program and pivoted to an audio engineering program at a local community college. This amalgamation of experiences and her internship at the Pauline Oliveros Foundation led to her current turntablist practice. Chavez knows her turntable needles well and uses several to extract and craft her soundscapes with the desired sounds.

⁷⁷Rodgers, Tara. *Pink Noises : women on electronic music and sound*. Duke University Press, 2010. Rodgers (2010)



Figure 3.7: Maria Chavez at the Issue Project Room, Brooklyn, 2006.

“That’s one rule that I laid down from the beginning, was that this needs to be an organic process. Records can be ruined intentionally; I’ve had some people ruin records for me, but I really don’t use those very often. I have a couple that I ruined myself that I use maybe once every few months. But the records that I actually use the most are the ones that have been naturally ruined on their own.”⁷⁸

Chavez often breaks her vinyl records and places them on the turntable like a disjointed jigsaw puzzle. Playing the records this way forces the needle to jump and render unexpected sonic results. “Sometimes at the turntable I feel like I’m brewing. You know. Something like toil, toil, trouble and boil.”⁷⁹ Chavez interacts with the record or record pieces by pushing down on the needle, lifting the needle and interacting with external effects processors and levels. More recently, she has branched out into sculpture in an effort to engage audiences with the tactile nature of vinyl records and the grooved lanes upon which the needle travels.

⁷⁸Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 118

⁷⁹Leshaw, Hannah, *MARIA CHAVEZ - New York - by Hannah Leshaw - Festival Akelarre 2025*, Apr 13, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enIgJVbuKs>, accessed March 5, 2026. Leshaw (2025)

At the beginning of her career, she preferred to think of her sound as genderless. “It’s been a very superficial presence. I don’t consider myself a female musician. I don’t think anyone would want to. And I don’t think my sounds are feminine. If someone heard what I did, they would assume I was a guy.”⁸⁰ She relates that her music contemporaries would comment on the juxtaposition of such dark sounds emanating from turntables being spun by a woman whose personality was quite the opposite, cheerful and bubbly.⁸¹ A reviewer of her album *Those Eyes of Hers* said “One of my reviews for *Those Eyes of Hers*, this guy was like, She’s so exotic, she’s Peruvian, she’s a turntablist, so the ‘exotica mounts up!’”⁸²

“So the female aspect opens some doors, but in the end, the music speaks for itself.”⁸³ It’s all very superficial: if you’re a girl with a turntable, you’re just a novelty. Besides the fact that you’re with a turntable, you’re just a girl—that’s a novelty in itself, to be a woman in the world. My mom told me all the time, You always have to be five hundred times better than any man—that’s for any woman—but for you, you have to be a thousand times better, because you’re Hispanic and you’re a woman. And you’re playing on a turntable! [Laughs] My mom’s so great—she calls it music of the future.”⁸⁴

In 2016 Maria Chavez was diagnosed with a rare nervous system disorder, hemifacial spasms, that affects the facial muscles.⁸⁵ In 2019 she travelled to Japan to have a risky and experimental brain surgery. She paused her career for seven years to focus on her recovery. As a result of the challenges she faced after her surgery and the

⁸⁰Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 114

⁸¹Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 114

⁸²Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 115

⁸³Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 113

⁸⁴Rodgers, *Pink Noises*, 113

⁸⁵<https://www.thevinylfactory.com/features/maria-chavez-robert-wyatt>. Doherty (2025)

impact it had on her life, Maria slowly returned to her music practice with a raised awareness of her work before and after her surgery.⁸⁶ “It made me realize just how able bodied my practice was, because I wasn’t thinking about other bodies, other people, and their abilities to hear or not. That’s why my work has evolved into sculpture practice. I love working with sound. I do think it is the most democratic medium of all mediums of art.”⁸⁷ In 2012, Maria wrote a book titled *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable* that has become an important academic resource for abstract turntablism.⁸⁸

Personal Cultural Expression Through Technology

Over the years, I have constructed a technology framework that I use for live performances and recordings. At the beginning of my explorations with electronic music, my work consisted of sensors, recording software, and Max/MSP sound synthesis patches. I was guided by the creation of compelling sounds and the alteration of my voice via special effects processing. My goal was to build an untethered electronics system whose affordances included freedom to move around a larger space and in a way be a corporeal instrument. I use wireless MIDI controllers, a Sennheiser wireless microphone, and the M5StickC⁸⁹ IMU sensor. Despite the precarious and often unstable nature of this configuration, I have built in safeguards of analog device alternatives. The composition process for *CCQ* incorporates cultural expression through

⁸⁶Baker, Rob, UCLA Newsrooms, October 14, 2025, <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/exploring-trauma-disability-in-the-arts-ucla-conference>. Baker (2025)

⁸⁷Baker, *Disability in the Arts*, 2 Baker (2025)

⁸⁸Chavez, Maria. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable* : A Book of Essays & Illustrations. Edited by Danyel Ferrari, Rolling Press, 2012.Chavez (2012)

⁸⁹M5StickC is a portable, open-source IoT development board, with Wi-Fi and Bluetooth® powered ESP32 and various sensors various sensors (IR transmitter, microphone, 6-DoF IMU sensor)

the use of Regional Mexican music instrumentation (accordion, guiro, shakers, cabasa, and electric bass) and sound samples from Regional Mexican recordings from my own body of work. These avenues of exploration have guided a more intentional inclusion of cultural expression within my current composer-performer practice. Several activist approaches are taken with the body of this work. Additionally, when I include video in my live performances, the imagery may include Mexican patterns, symbols, or mythology abstracted through video processing. This further grounds my work within a cultural context.



Figure 3.8: Noemy Esparza-Isaacson at Super Bloom: A Southwest Drone Fest 2026

Feminist and cultural perspectives are present in most of my compositions and performances and are conveyed in many ways, some overt, some couched in symbolism, but present nonetheless. The most direct way I express feminist and activist views is with my voice, lyrics I write, and live vocal improvisations in Spanish. Although I improvise mostly in Spanish, I will at times intersperse English lyrics. The lyrics call attention to issues like the US/Mexico border, and gender-based violence. An example of this are the lyrics for *Who Decides*, the piece that I performed at Super Bloom in 2026.⁹⁰ The words “Who Decides” are repeated throughout the improvisation along with a spoken word section played at different speeds as the introduction.

⁹⁰Super Bloom: A Southwest Drone Fest at the ASU West Valley campus on Friday, February 20, 2026 Glendale, AZ, StatePress.com, Photographer Adam Peters, accessed February 28, 2026

Who Decides?

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2026

Words rumble, bounce around in my head
Their meaning vacuous – no feeling
No ties to pain or longing or indigenous lineages
Who decides which words matter? Who decides if pain is valid?
Who decides if our voices are to be silenced?

Playing these pre-recorded clips provides a foundation for the subsequent vocal improvisation techniques. During this performance, I also echoed my own vocal coyote howls thus interspersing my voice with those sourced from sound.org. My original plan was to trigger to clips and sing the recurring vocal line however in the moment, it felt more meaningful to perform my own version of the coyote howls in conversation with the recorded clips. The visceral characteristics of the howl itself, evoke the borderland and southwest desert landscape where I grew up as well as the related symbolism of the border crossing *coyotes*.⁹¹ This is symbolic for me because my own mother crossed the border with a *coyote* when she was only thirteen. At the behest of her parents, she boarded a bus from her hometown in Chihuahua, Mexico and was told her to find a *coyote* when she arrived in Juarez, Chihuahua. I often her navigating this responsibility at such a young age. Another example of activist lyrics and performance techniques can be heard in my video and vocal performance of *La Ausencia (The Absence)*.⁹² The lyrics of this song are an homage to the collective maternal spirit of all mother's of the victims or survivors of El Paso/Juarez femicides. Improvising in Spanish feels more natural, therefore lyrics translation is provided.

⁹¹People, Historically, *coyotes* were people who guided undocumented immigrants over borderlands in exchange for money. These trips were fraught with danger and uncertainty for those who are crossing

⁹²Noemy Esparza-Isaacson, MFA Thesis Exhibition 2021, Center Panel, *La Ausencia | Mujer Fronteriza, The Absence | Border Woman*, <https://youtu.be/dtUECGYpXXo>

La Ausencia | Mujer Fronteriza

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2022

Se escucha el viento
La pena de un mar inmenso
Mujer frontera
Mujer dividida
Se escucha el latir
Colectivo de un corazón
Lleno de agujeros. Lleno de dolor.

Mujer Fronteriza!
Tu llevas un alma en la mente
Mujer Fronteriza!
Tu siempre con la cara en alto

Enfrentas la vida valiente
Cargas con dolor
Caminas hacia la frontera
De tu amor
Mujer Fronteriza!
Detente y anuncíame!

Que aquí te esperare
Al borde de mi dolor
El tiempo congela
Al borde de mi dolor
Estatuas de mármol
Cargando con el dolor
De un mundo
Que no encontrara

Mujer Fronteriza, ayudame!
A encontrar la forma
De unir dos almas
Que eternamente dividen
La vida que estrecha frente a mí
Mujer Fronteriza!

The Absence | Border Woman

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2022

You hear it in the wind
The pain of an immense ocean
Borderland Woman
Woman divided
One hears the beating
Collective heart
With many holes. Full of pain.

Borderland Woman!
You carry one soul in your mind
Borderland Woman!
You always walk with your head high

You face life with courage
You carry your pain
You walk towards the border
Of your love
Borderland Woman!
Halt and announce me!

That here I shall wait
At the border of my pain
Time is frozen
At the border of my pain
Marble statues
Carrying the suffering
Of a world
That will not find

Borderland Woman, help me!
To find the way
To reunite two souls
That the world divides
The life ahead of me
Borderland Woman!

Chapter 4

CYBORG CUMBIA QUEEN COMPOSITIONAL METHODOLOGY

Renowned composer-performer Pauline Oliveros *Deep Listening*⁹³ practice identifies several methods to deepen one's relationship with the sounds that we experience and give attention whether or not one is a musician. In particular, she highlights that "Forms of Attention" we project to our musical selections and preferences include both focal and global attention. The former, "Focal attention" is "like a lens, producing clear detail limited to the object of attention."⁹⁴ The latter, "Global attention is diffuse and continually expanding to take in the whole of the space/time continuum of sound."⁹⁵

"Deep Listening is listening to everything all the time, and reminding yourself when you're not. But going below the surface too, it's an active process. It's not passive. I mean hearing is passive in that soundwaves hinge upon the eardrum. You can do both. You can focus and be receptive to your surroundings. If you're tuned out, then you're not in contact with your surroundings. You have to process what you hear. Hearing and listening are not the same thing."⁹⁶

Similarly, I argue that forms of attention during the compositional process also pertain to different forms of musicking. This could be in the way of placing granular level focus on a single motive or zooming out at a global level to create the supporting harmonic

⁹³Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*. iUniverse, Inc., 2005, Oliveros (2005)

⁹⁴Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, 26

⁹⁵Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, 26

⁹⁶Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, 25

material. These categories of attention can arguably exist within the performance discipline to deepen the experience of live improvisation performance through the lens of *Deep Listening* ideas as introduced by Oliveros. *Deep Listening* is not a concept that is mastered overnight. It requires practice, attention, and focus. The participant must listen to sound but also be aware of their body as an extension to the act of listening deeply and intently. After several years of composing music in cumbia form, whose harmonic progression adhered to pop music phrase models (I-IV-V-I or I-V-I), my creative outlet became the lyrics and vocal ornamentation. I strived to perform my songs with the same attention to detail during the recording process. This required attentive listening to my voice. When I branched out into improvisational techniques, the process of improvising was meditative – reminiscent of what I had learned about Oliveros’ *Deep Listening* practice. Performers and composers are constantly engaged in the creative feedback cycle amongst composing, revising, and listening. When I improvise, Oliveros’ practice influences how I listen and the intentionality of the lyrics, their phrasing, and the emotion conveyed by them. This culminating composition is built upon live improvisation performance recordings whose creation required active listening, directly influenced by *Deep Listening*. The methodologies accessed while composing *CCQ* were informed by several life experiences, technologies, vocal improvisation practices, and aforementioned areas of research that include *feminist cumbia* and cultural expression through technology-mediated composer-performer practices. These cultural inspirations include a body of work of Regional Mexican cumbia genre recordings, my tri-cultural Mexican/Yaqui/American identity, the borderlands region of the US El Paso/Juarez border, and a contemporary music composition practice.

In addition to lived experiences, music and world influences, the work is also inspired by an apocalyptic utopian narrative in which the cumbia genre is deconstructed

and reconstructed through a feminist lens. The inspiration for the title *Cyborg Cumbia Queen* is a conglomeration of several inspirations. The first is my fascination with all things robotic, electronic devices, cyborgs, and cybernetic organisms. In her book *Dreamscapes of Modernity*, Sheila Jazanoff, Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Harvard University, coined the term sociotechnical imaginaries⁹⁷ (in collaboration with Sang-Hyun Kim)⁹⁸ to mean “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology.”⁹⁹ The idea behind sociotechnical imaginaries informed not only the title of this work, but also my perspectives on what I envision for my future human imaginary¹⁰⁰ a reflection of my social, political, and cultural values. The protagonist cyborg is ageless and has agency over her body, the world in which she leaves, and futures she wishes to construct. The lyrics of *CCQ* possess gravitas and reflect serious questions about our future selves, yet are juxtaposed with irony and humor. This work is realized in three distinct fixed media recordings, each corresponding to a *CCQ* movement. The *CCQ* composition as a whole reconciles my distinct identities by weaving together various musical genres that traditionally have existed in their own musical silos. In past compositional efforts, I compartmentalized the sources of inspirations into several categories, academic/non-academic and “serious” contemporary music/commercial. These categories were what I perceived as acceptable and unacceptable in academia. The inclusion of several sources

⁹⁷Jazanoff, Sheila, Kim, Sang-Hyun, *Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity*, 5, Jazanoff and Kim (2015)

⁹⁸Sang-Hyun Kim is associate professor at the Research Institute of Comparative History and Culture, Hanyang University, Korea, and is currently involved in the HK Transnational Humanities Project funded by the National Research Foundation of Korea.

⁹⁹Jazanoff, *Dreamscapes*, 56

¹⁰⁰Imaginaries are creations of the mind, not grounded in reality, covering subjective fantasies, mental images, and socially constructed meanings, Jazanoff and Kim (2015)

of inspiration, my culture, my *gruperá* experience, contemporary music practice, and motherhood resolve the perceived friction between these sources. Through this reconciliation, I make space for the *feminist cumbia* genre within the academy and intentionally compose a work in which these identities coexist. In the following, I will elaborate on the compositional techniques and inspiration sources for each movement – identity, *feminist cumbia* and traditional cumbia genre, Latina culture, borderland symbolism – and recording, editing, and performance techniques utilized to achieve the desired aesthetics of each movement. The techniques of sound synthesis and manipulation will also be reflected in the sonic results.

CCQ is informed by the two research areas, *feminist cumbia* (including the history of cumbia and the factors that lead to the movement) and technology-mediated composer-performer cultural expression, the ways in which cultural expression can be leveraged when technology and vocal performance are used in concert. The word *cyborg* is informed by my interest in robotics, electronics, and tinkering. More accurately, *CCQ* is informed by Jazinoﬀ’s sociotechnical imaginaries, which she argues are socially constructed visions for the future that carry a mindset that is “for the greater good of humanity.” We collectively shape and inform these imaginaries through technology. The word cumbia in the title refers to the influence cumbia has had on both my life and music. Lastly, “Queen,” is a reference to the trope within the cumbia genre itself. In mainstream social media, many female cumbia artists are called and refer to themselves as “Queens” of the genre. In recent times, however, the word “Queen” has become a marker for collective female empowerment through a feminist perspective.

As I was composing *CCQ*, I looked to emotion as a guide for the movements as they unfolded. Originally, I had planned to use a plethora of tools and strategies,

like Artificial Intelligence (AI) music models, Machine Learning (ML) and Max/MSP custom programs, but in the end the words of the composers-performer Pamela Z came to mind.

“Of course, tools alone do not make great art. I like to think that the advances I described above stem from the combination of the effects of using the new tool and my strengths as an artist. An important part of an artist’s process is selection and it takes an intelligent, open, and inventive ear to recognize and select good ingredients and then build them into something viable. In the end, the instrument is really just a tool. Like my digital processors and my found percussion objects. And like my voice. And, as an artist, it is always important for me to be concerned about what work I am actually making with this tool. It frustrates me to see a world so seduced by new technologies that many have forgotten to be concerned about the output. We suddenly see a superabundance of works being created by people who are clearly more interested in what software they have mastered than they are in the value of what they are making with it.” — Pamela Z¹⁰¹

Pamela Z is a music technologist who uses software and hardware devices to create her music. However, she stresses that technology should not dictate how the work is created, it should be a tool that helps realize one’s vision. Hence, I revisited my palette and arrived at a set of software and hardware tools that would help do just that, craft *CCQ* in a way that was meaningful to me, and not only a reflection of the software tools and devices that are popular now.

¹⁰¹Z, Pamela. *A Tool Is A Tool*, Theater (New Haven, Conn.), vol. 30, no. 2, 2000, pp. 62–64, Z (2000)

Movement I: *Cumbia Fragmentos*

The first movement of *CCQ* titled *Cumbia Fragmentos* (*Fragments de Cumbia*)¹⁰² can be considered a sonic meditative space directly activated by Oliveros' *Deep Listening* concepts in which overlapping vocal lines and motives are interwoven with electronic sounds to create a variety of timbres and textures. My vocal techniques, especially in the cumbia songs that I have previously recorded in my career as a *gruper*, follow common-practice harmonic function chord progression and popular music phrase models, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In the first movement of *CCQ*: *Cumbia Frangmentos*, the vocal line's starting key is Gm whose melody follows a i - iv - V - i progression.

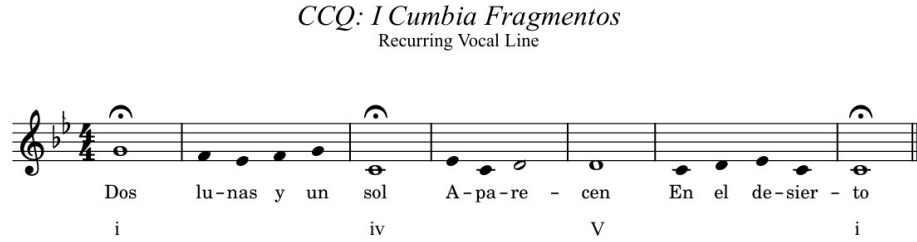


Figure 4.1: *CCQ: I Cumbia Fragmentos* Recurring Vocal Line

However, the voice is not supported by chords or harmonic material, as would be expected in a cumbia melody. Instead, it floats above chaotic electronic granulation sounds, glitches, and noise. The tension between the vocal line and what the ear expects to hear as traditional chords is never fully developed or satisfied, instead the melody modulates to different keys and remains in a limbo state of meandering to

¹⁰²In the Spanish language, one would write *Fragmentos de Cumbia*. However, I chose to title this first movement *Cumbia Fragmentos* due to my experience as an ESL (English as a Second Language) elementary school student. I would often apply English grammar rules to my first language, Spanish. I started Kindergarten with no knowledge of the English language, hence these language reconfiguration occurred often during my K-6 years as I gained fluency in the English language and could separate it from the rules of my first language. The title is tied directly to my language learning experiences in childhood.

various starting notes without supporting chords or bass lines. When I was growing up and still finding my belief systems, I found refuge as a soloist in the church and would alternate with the choir. I would often write religious songs and perform them a-capella. The reverb and delay applied to this recurring vocal line are reminiscent of these experiences. Gregorian chant aesthetics were also influential in the final mix of this movement. I utilize cathedral-like reverb but detach it from traditional religious meaning. Inevitably, I often tap into my background and upbringing in the Catholic and Jehovah's Witness religions. Although I do not currently ascribe to the dogmas of my youth, memories still surface in some of my work. I cherish these memories because they are often tied to my family and family celebrations.

The foundational audio track is fixed media recording of a live vocal performance processed through Max/MSP¹⁰³ patch. Through the process of recording my performance in both Max/MSP and Ableton Live,¹⁰⁴ The audio files that would become the foundation of the first movement were created by recording myself during a live vocal improvisation performance using a custom Max/MSP patch. This resulted in the generation of approximately fifteen minutes of sonic material that I could then utilize throughout *Cumbia Fragmentos*. Segments of this foundational sonic material were layered, pitch-shifted, and staggered to add texture where I desired a denser sound. The patch allows me to start and stop the recording of an audio buffer (an audio clip of a given length) and also allows me to start and stop the recording of my performance audio. In addition, I can control the audio input and output levels. This patch invokes several subpatchers that I have either created or acquired as I

¹⁰³Max/MSP is a visual programming language for digital media developed by the Cycling '74 company. This software enables users to create custom software solutions for interactive audio, video, and visual synthesis through the process of patch pre-constructed modular coding objects together.

¹⁰⁴Ableton Live is a Digital Audio Workstation audio recording software package that is unique in that one can record in session view, and arrangement view, facilitating live performance and live looping.

have progressed in my working knowledge of Max/MSP (Fig. 4.2).

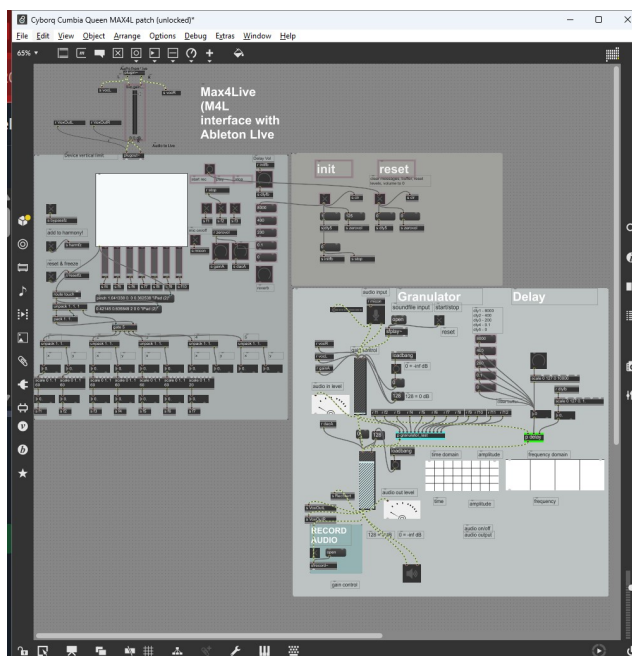
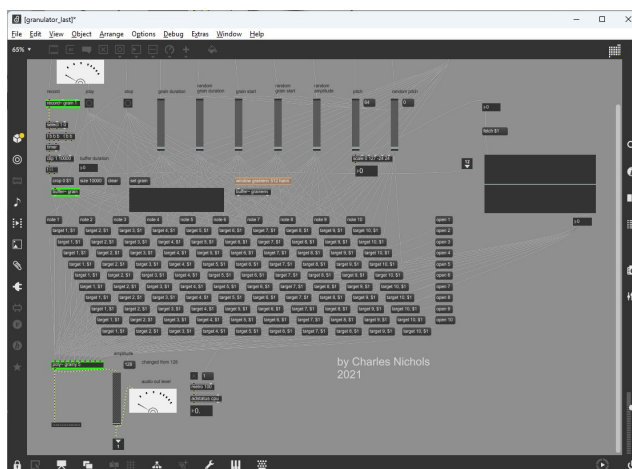


Figure 4.2: Custom Max/MSP utilized to perform and record Live Electronics in *CCQ*

These include a granulator subpatch created for *CCQ*. This patch is based on one shared with me during a Max/MSP workshop/concert series in which I participated. The original granulator patch (Fig. 4.3) was created by Charles Nichols.¹⁰⁵



¹⁰⁵Charles Nichols is a Professor of Music Composition and Production, Educator and Researcher at Virginia Tech School of Performing Arts specializing in computer music

Figure 4.3: Polyphonic Granulator courtesy of Charles Nichols

I also utilized a patch created by Professor Seth Thorn¹⁰⁶ that enables receiving wireless MIDI messages through the M5StickC sensor. Of several patches shared in his course, This event detection patch triggered and stopped recording of vocal buffers. (Fig. 4.4)

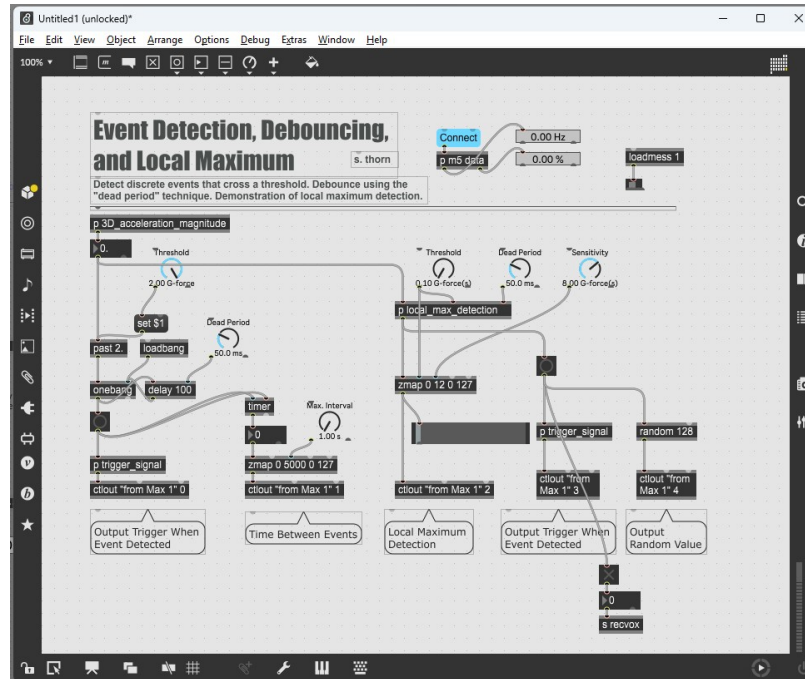


Figure 4.4: Event Detection, Debouncing, and Local Maximum Max/MSP patch, courtesy of Professor Seth Thorn

The custom Max/MSP *CCQ* (Fig 4.2) patch processes the live audio signal from the voice in several ways. When the vocal audio signal is received, a delay is applied and can vary between a 100ms delay up to a an 8000ms delay. This technique affords continuous sound generation while preparing to invoke other vocal techniques or trigger other sections of the patch. This sound manipulation process can best be

¹⁰⁶Seth Thorn is a multidisciplinary researcher and musician whose work spans philosophical approaches to interactive media, wearable music technology, creative signal processing for embedded audio products, and augmented instruments, particularly the violin. ASU.edu

described as longer duration live looping. The length of the delay can be altered in real time through the use of preset parameters. Through this iterative process, one can invoke several effects while performing, such as spectral freeze effects (a way of manipulating sound that isolates a small section of sound and sustaining it for an indefinite period of time which creates a drone, pad or hold effect), delay, reverb, granular synthesis,¹⁰⁷ and envelope¹⁰⁸ manipulation. During live performance the patch is set to presentation view (Fig 4.5), which only displays interactive aspects of the Max/MSP patch. Max/MSP’s presentation view allows the user to display only the buttons, meters, and toggles (pressed to stop and start a process) and hide all of the cables and subpatchers that are called within the main patch.

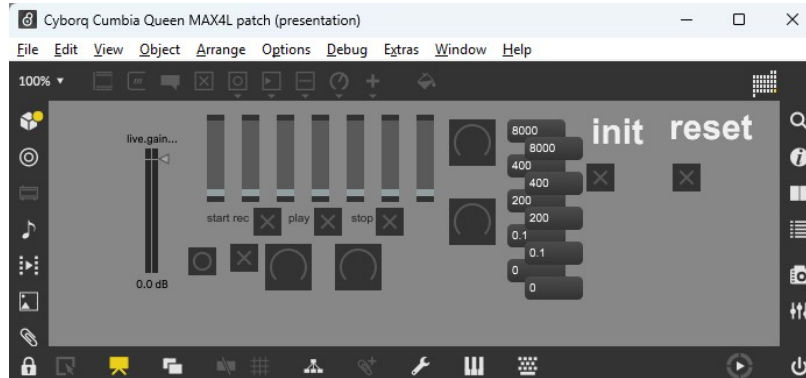


Figure 4.5: *CCQ* Max/MSP Presentation View for Live Electronics Performance

In addition to the manipulation techniques mentioned above, I utilized the spectral freeze effect sparingly throughout *CCQ*. This effect was especially compelling at the end of Movement I *Cumbia Futurística* where it was applied to the main vocal. The spectral freeze allows the voice hang in the air on the last syllable of “desierto” (“desert”). It was also useful in places where I wanted to have a subtle change in the timbre of an instrument. The repeating vocal line of the text, “Dos lunas y un sol

¹⁰⁷Granular Synthesis/Granulation is a sound synthesis technique that slices/break audio samples into tiny, overlapping snippets called “grains” (typical ranges include 1–100 ms) Each grains pitch, position, or density can be altered to create a variety of textures

¹⁰⁸The envelope represents the shape of a sounds amplitude, using Attack, Decay, Sustain, and Release (ADSR) stages to control dynamics

aparecen en el desierto” (“Two moons and one sun appear in the desert”) was set to this first movement as the cohesive material.

This recurring vocal motive is symbolic of the post-apocalyptic, post-singularity, utopian *CCQ* world. The visual narrative of this environment was inspired by my Virtual Reality world-building experience. If one can imagine an environment with two moons and one sun, then an assumption can be made that a cataclysmic event might have rippled through the solar system, possibly the universe to result in a reconfiguration of the world/universe. Imagining this world informed *Cumbia Fragmentos* because it reflected current socio-political shifts in space exploration. This reconfiguration is symbolic of the transformations that this work can inspire within the academy, a celebration and expansion of the western canon that includes cumbia and hybrid genres in academia. The recurring motive appears, then is replaced by shorter vocal melodies that restate the motive utilizing the same text but transform the melody through modulation, fragmentation, or harmonization. Through this variance in the melody, the energy is sustained, moved forward to avoid stagnation. The vocal lines are layered and intertwined with interesting segments of the sound synthesis recording which introduces an additional sound manipulation technique, granulation. Short duration clips of audio, also called grains, are recorded live then played back while manipulating several parameters, speed, frequency, and start/end time of the grain in real-time. These manipulations include changes to the start and end times of the segment of sound, grain,¹⁰⁹ and both temporal and pitch changes. These parameters are manipulated through MIDI controllers such as the Novation LaunchPad Pro MIDI controller,¹¹⁰ that sends MIDI messages, and

¹⁰⁹A tiny audio segment also called snippet or microsound that originated from a sound sample that was divided/sliced/spliced into smaller sections. See previous footnote on Granular Synthesis/Granulation.

¹¹⁰A 64 pad grid-based MIDI controller used with Ableton Live to launch clips, trigger drums, and sequence music during live performance

devices like the M5StickC¹¹¹ wireless IMU (Inertial Measurement Unit) that sends Open Sound Control (OSC)¹¹² messages. This data is transformed and interpreted by the main patcher in a way that informs how the sound is synthesized. These MIDI messages are then used to apply algorithmic changes to the sound synthesis process in the Max/MSP patch. Every audio recording in this first movement was sourced from my voice. No other instruments or synthesizers were used to create any of the sonic material in this movement. The most compelling moments were achieved through granulation, rendering percussive sounds that are abstracted from the voice.

When performing *CCQ* live, the Novation LaunchPad Pro is used to trigger Ableton Live audio samples (shorter 2-15 second audio clips) or effects, I use the M5StickC sensor to inform the granulation, and the audio sent to the computer DAW using the Focusrite audio interface(Fig 4.6).



Figure 4.6: From left to right, Pin Art toy used to create percussive sounds, Novation LaunchPad Pro, USB-C Interface Dongle, Collection of M5StickC sensors, and Focusrite Recording Interface *CCQ*

The M5StickC internal battery lasts between 10-15 minutes when used wirelessly, therefore several devices, configured in the same manner, are charged as kept as

¹¹¹pitch, yaw, and roll within a three-dimensional space, parameters generated through M5StickC sensor movement. M5StickC PLUS ESP32-PICO Mini IoT kit. Development Kit

¹¹²Open Sound Control (OSC) is a protocol for networking sound synthesizers, computers, and other multimedia devices for purposes such as musical performance or show control.

backups. The interface is connected to the laptop. Additionally, I utilized the pin toy (Fig 4.6) to generate and record audio samples using AbletonLive’s Sampler plugin.¹¹³ These slices, divided where transients¹¹⁴ are detected, are played back using a MIDI Keyboard controller. The sustained looping of the triggered samples and sequences frees the performer to take advantage of the added affordances of the wireless MIDI controller, M5StickC, Inertial Measurement Unit (IMU). The M5StickC sensor device takes frequent periodic measures of force and spatial position within a 3D field using accelerometers,¹¹⁵ gyroscopes,¹¹⁶ and magnetometers.¹¹⁷ The M5StickC takes measurements for pitch (nose-up/down), roll (lean), and yaw (sliding) using a 3-axis gyroscope (Fig. 4.7).



Figure 4.7: Pitch, Yaw, and Roll within a three-dimensional space, parameters generated through M5StickC sensor movement. M5StickC PLUS ESP32-PICO Mini IoT Development Kit.

¹¹³A versatile sampler plugin for slicing, warping, and manipulating audio samples using Classic, OneShot, and Slice modes

¹¹⁴The initial, high-energy burst of sound at the beginning of a waveform. Occurring at the onset of a note, they manifest as quick, steep spikes lasting only a few milliseconds.

¹¹⁵Accelerometer: An instrument for measuring acceleration.

¹¹⁶Gyroscope: a device whose internal rapidly spinning wheel within a frame measures axis to tilt in any direction. It measures rotation motion. <https://aerospace.honeywell.com>, *What is a Gyroscope?*

¹¹⁷Magnetometers act as a compass to provide a heading reference

This controller is used to inform the Max/MSP parameters and the granulation process within the patch. Pitch is mapped to frequency, yaw is mapped to the speed of the granulation, and roll is mapped to the start of the grain. The wearable instrument, and the ancillary devices become a non-linear data driven instrument that embodies sound and its properties, frequency, timbre, and amplitude. Sound becomes material that can be sculpted through movement. The chance sonic results are the most appealing quality of using sensors. Unexpected, sharp, chaotic, and random results are generated by movement data that drives the Max/MSP patch algorithms and sound synthesis. The wireless controller provides added expression, freedom of movement, and embodiment. During live performances, the loosened melodic framework results in a deepened improvisation due to the inclusion of chance to synthesize unexpectedly unique sounds. Each performance renders a unique recording of varied timbres that cannot be replicated. They are ephemeral and therefore motivate me to be more present and focused. *CCQ Movement I Cumbia Fragmentos* fades out with a restatement of the motive in a singular vocal line that lingers in the air through the use of a spectral freeze effect. The silence that follows prepares the listener for the continuing narrative: an awakening in a dystopian world that is signaled with a monophonic accordion line recorded from my keyed Hohner Accordion. With respect to *feminist cumbia* and cultural expression, *Cumbia Fragmentos* can be considered a reset of socially constructed stereotypes, and a space where these attitudes do not exist. New cumbia forms, and melodies can be created without outmoded encumbrances.

Movement I: Cumbia Fragmentos Analysis

The technical aspects of recording this movement were an important part of my process and in a way guided my aesthetic decisions. I will now expand upon the

justification of these aesthetic choices and further elaborate on their symbolism by highlight specific sections within the fixed media piece.

Section A – 00:00-02:00 *Cumbia Fragmentos* begins with the a-capella vocal line, treated with heavily saturated reverb and delay. Three instances of the voice are stacked, panning one track hard left, one track hard right, and leaving one centered. This vulnerable vocal line sets the stage for the imagined desolate, cold, unfamiliar, yet hopeful expectations. The cyborg has awakened. The initial vocal line takes approximate 45' to fully develop. A second instance of the vocal line joins in but is sporadic and out-of-sync. It is abrupt and disruptive creating a disruption of the tranquility of the first vocal line. Additional instances of this voice are layered with the two voices until they become a choir of voices. At 01:15 the foundational Max/MSP patch is recognizable because the voices have multiplied significantly and become chaotic. The longer grain length and looping in this segment facilitates the denser sonic material. By 01:35, a low frequency material is introduced. This is a segment of the original performance recording that has been spliced.¹¹⁸ This spliced audio is further altered by lowering the pitch by an octave further emphasizing the lower frequency rumble. At 01:40, I placed a section of the performance recording that resembled gurgling and bubbling to contrast with the high frequency granulation effect and the central vocal line. The transition to the next section of this movement starts at 01:57 where again the solo voice is heard but then is disrupted by an unexpected modulation.

¹¹⁸Traditionally, means to join two ends of magnetic tape by means of an adhesive material called splicing tape which is usually slightly narrower than the tape itself. In digital media, it is the joining of two segments of audio

Section B – 02:01-05:22 The introduction of a C# begins the transition to Section B. This section, loosely inspired by György Ligeti’s¹¹⁹ *Atmospheres* in which a new pitch guides the movement of his amorphous sonic material. In this section, I introduce dissonance by stacking chromatic clusters of voices. The beating of this dissonance can be heard here. There is no exact method here as I did not notate or plan what I would sing. I improvised this to achieve the dissonant effect; however, it was inspired by Ligeti’s dense chromatic clusters. By 02:28, the gurgling sounds are reintroduced and interrupt the sustained chromatic clusters. A new lyric “Sombras y reflejos de...” (Shadows and reflections of...) vocal swell is introduced and each repetition of this line floats to the surface and disappears to allow the next repetition to be heard. Beneath these voices, a track containing static sounds begins, resembling the static of an old car radio as the tuner knob is turned through the available stations. The static is reminiscent of my childhood family trips to Mexico and my father changed the station as the reception faded in the cities through which we traveled. By 03:15, the repetition of the lyric “Sol” (“Sun”) completes the previous lyric and introduces a new pitch Cb(B). More dissonances are introduced as the lyric is sung in microtonal increments. These are not planned, but instead are improvised in an effort to create the beating quality (03:20) perceived when dissonant pitches are heard in unison. At 04:13, the tranquil interspersed vocals are again disrupted by a rapid, sonic, conversation. The granulation section I selected here was reminiscent of a conversation that I might have heard at family gatherings. The women would gather in the kitchen; the men outside. Here, these animated conversations become the disruption. This symbolism does not tie directly to the piece itself; nevertheless, I found the clip interesting and felt it blended well with the longer phrases. The metallic random

¹¹⁹György Ligeti (1923-2006) A Hungarian composer of contemporary classical music considered one of the most important avant-garde composers in the latter half of the twentieth century. He developed the micropolyphony orchestration technique.

arpeggios introduced at 04:17 are reminiscent of echoing and resonant bus stations in Mexico. As different departure times and bus numbers are announced, the sound of the speakers resonates throughout the concrete structures and is often difficult to understand. I recall the perplexed looks on the passengers. These reverberations to me were music. I found it comforting to hear this section of the granulation performance track. These sounds seem to belong to the cyborg's environment. She awakens and explores what remains of our world. Picking up artifacts, listening to broken devices, repairing equipment, talking to herself, etc. At 04:33, I introduce a higher frequency by raising the pitch of the gurgling it with other instances of that same sample. I imagined creatures scurrying around trying to find refuge. 04:37 marks the beginning of what I visualize as mechanical birds in flight. Their voice boxes cannot produce the typical chirps, they are hockety and whiny. At 04:49, I visualized larger mechanical birds flying past the smaller flock.

Section C – 05:23-07:51 In section C, the footstep sounds allowed me to visualize the cyborg walking around in the environment. The rumble in the distance is symbolic of her past life, engines, machines and what is left of them. At 05:34, these rumblings to me are voices, perhaps her voice. I selected this clip due to its almost obscene sound. It was jarring and frightening, perhaps reflecting how scared she might feel, exclaiming her frustration. At 05:49, the vocal line is again introduced with an E as the starting note. The distant blurry echo was achieved by lowering the pitch of the clip of my voice and stacking it with the granulation clip. It is symbolic of a beacon of hope in the distance, the sound of a speeding train played at a very slow speed, a frozen moment of time to reflect and consider next steps. The original vocal line repeats again within this chaotic environment, culminating in a howl at 06:00. At 06:35, percussive vocal sounds end the piece and fade out to allow the vocal line to

remain on its own. The tail end of the vocal line is treated with a vocal freeze effect, allowing the note to hang in the air as it slowly fades (07:42).

Movement II: *Vaiven*

The techniques utilized to compose and record Movement II: *Vaiven* (*rocking, back-and-forth motion*), vary from those utilized to create Movement I *Cumbia Fragmentos*. A sparse microtonal and rhythmic accordion melody builds to fragments of the rhythmic foundation of the cumbia form. Syncopated, disparate, and disconnected segments of seemingly unrelated rhythms form cohesion over several minutes that result in a more unified cumbia rhythm. The rhythm of the shimmery high hats drive forward a locomotion energy inspired by arrangements of traditional cumbia songs. Cumbia songs are vessels for stories and laments, but their most appealing quality is danceability. Cumbia songs are the backdrop for important milestones. For Mexican/Mexican-American families these events include weddings, quinceañeras,¹²⁰ and family celebrations. By the end of the movement, the resulting form is one that is inspired by specific cumbia elements such as the cumbia rhythm, eight note followed by two sixteenths  and a walking baseline, usually consisting of the root of the chord that (usually) alternates with a perfect fifth on beats two and four. The bass and percussion parts introduce variations on this rhythm throughout a cumbia song but eventually return to the original beat as the default state. The congas accent beats two and four of the typical $\frac{2}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{4}$ meter and offer some ornamentation during the chorus sections. Their rhythm is further cemented with decisive guitar strums (traditionally) but in this work, I utilize chords played on a MIDI key-

¹²⁰A traditional Mexican birthday celebration celebrated on the fifteenth birthday, symbolic of the transition to womanhood. Traditionally, these celebrations were for girls but since the early 2000s quinceañeros, a celebration of a boy's 15th birthday, have grown in popularity

board that plays guitar VST¹²¹ to mimic the strums that land on the upbeat of beats one and three, resulting in a syncopated feel. Each of these elements are exploited in some way in *Vaiven*. Despite not adhering strictly to cumbia form, the elements are present and inspire the overall form.

The lyrics describe the awakening of a cyborgian woman who explores artifacts found in the post-apocalyptic world to reimagine the cumbia genre. They ground *Vaiven* through a utopian feminist cumbia lens and the actions performed by the protagonist. These actions include creating new sounds and lyrics from traditionally stereotypical cumbia lyrics, sample splicing, and rearranging through MIDI manipulation. This activist gesture is symbolic of the erasure and correction the problematic lyrics of past cumbia songs, especially those I analyze for this research. I sample the chorus of of the songs analyzed in Chapter 2, *Niña Mujer* and *La Cosecha de Mujeres*, to create new melodies that erode their original meaning. The samples are sliced utilizing the Ableton Live proprietary sampler enabling each slice to be playable using a MIDI keyboard controller. One can also alter the pitch and manipulate the slice lengths starts and end. The abstracted, deconstructed and reconstructed melodies are a performative erasure. They are severed from their original meaning and form pleasant rhythmic hocketing¹²² vocal lines. I am also distancing myself from the original song and severing the programmed attachment I once had to it. Traditional cumbia instruments and sounds, accordion, guitar, bass, drums, and percussion are also used throughout *Vaiven* but at times are treated with sound effects that abstract and mangle the sound in unexpected ways. The lyrics set to *Vaiven* celebrate move-

¹²¹Virtual Studio Technology: An audio plug-in format that allows you to load virtual instruments (like software synthesizers) and audio effects (like reverb or compression) directly into your digital audio workstation (DAW) and play them using a MIDI keyboard

¹²²A musical technique where a single melody is split up and rapidly alternated between two or more different voices or instruments

ment, *femist cumbia* philosophies, bodily autonomy, and independent thinking, and embody a future imaginary — stories we create and share to envision the future of humanity. The work utilizes technology but not for technology's sake. Instead, it is created from a phenomenological perspective taking into account 1) the technology as a vessel for expression 2) the emotions expressed and captured during the recording process and 3) the evocative aspects of the work when there is an opportunity to experience it live.

Vaiven

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2026

En la distancia
 Luces pulsantes
 Son evidencias
 De lo que antes fue
 Son obras de arte laten
 Con la esperanza de renacer
 Resurgen de la escumbre
 De las cenizas
 Reconstruyen algo
 Más animal que humano
 Mecánica hembra
 Brillando en el horizonte
 Despertando en una cama de flores
 Vivientes robóticas, robóticas

Asi ladrillo por ladrillo
 Se forman las ideas
 Se forman las ideas

 Asi pensamiento por pensamiento
 Se llega a las estrellas
 Se llega a las estrellas
 (Instrumental, voz/acordeón)

Come and Go

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2026

In the distance
 Pulsing lights
 Are evidence
 Of what once was
 They are works of art; they beat
 With the hope of rebirth
 They rise again from the heights
 From the ashes
 They reconstruct something
 More animal than human
 A mechanical woman
 Shining on the horizon
 Awakening in a bed of flowers
 Living automatons—automatons

Like this brick by brick
 Ideas take shape
 Ideas take shape

 And so thought by thought
 We reach the stars
 We reach the stars
 (Instrumental - voice/accordion)

*Vaiven (cont'd)**Come and Go (cont'd)*

Somos más que viento somos	We are more than wind and sand
Somos dinosaurios efímeros	We are ephemeral dinosaurs
Somos extraterrestres	We are extraterrestrials
Somos agua ardiente	We are boiling water
Caminando rumbo a ti	Walking our way toward you
Somos fulminante esferas	We are dazzling spheres
De vida e inocencia	Of life and innocence
Somos una y mil	We are a thousand in one
Animal y fiero	Animal and fierce
Corazón y fuego	Heart and fire
Apuntando al sol	Aiming for the sun

Movement II: Vaiven Analysis

Section A – 00:00-01:40 Section A of *Vaiven* opens with a distant accordion, achieved through a saturated reverb. The accordion becomes the accompaniment to the spoken word section. These lyrics describe the awakening of the cyborg (see the lyrics above). The knock sound at 00:46 is both jarring and symbolic of the construction and rebuilding she will have to do in this world where only remnants of a former life remain. At 00:49, an arpeggiation of a vocal sample beings the transition to the more rhythmic section of the song. I was attracted to both the percussive feel of this melody and the abstract sound of the voice played by each note of the MIDI keyboard. I envision an indigenous ceremony projected into the future, rooting my own indigenous lineage in the work itself despite its futuristic aesthetics. Unlike *Cumbia Fragmentos*, *Vaiven* is more rhythmic and energetic. A new material is constructed with parts of what look like a cumbia, symbolizing the reimagining of a futuristic cumbia (Movement III) that deconstructs stereotypical lyrics. At 01:23, a fast heartbeat bass drum encourages the lyrics to appear and forms the rhythmic foundation for the first verse.

Section B – 01:40-04:19 By 01:40, what might be considered a traditional verse chorus structure is introduced, however, the rhythm is abstract and does not fully form what is expected of a cumbia rhythm until 02:00. However, this rhythm is rigid and does not reflect the expected cumbia groove. This is due to the mechanical nature of the symbolism I wish to convey here. The cyborg is still finding her footing, her movement is still rigid, stiff, and inflexible. The shaker sound is reminiscent of sandpaper and other construction sounds like clinks, rotors, and revving engines (conveyed through sliding bass notes) are also introduced in this movement. Ugly vocal arpeggiations using a raspy vocal technique are also introduced at 02:00 and build to a wail – I imagined a TIG (Tungsten Inert Gas) welder and sparks at 02:34. Meanwhile, the constructions percussive sounds continue to build. At 03:12, the deconstructed lyrics of *La Cosecha de Mujeres* (*The Harvest of Women*) are introduced as a rhythmic supporting melody line, performatively erasing its previous meaning. At 03:40, a loose bass line is introduced on beat one of each measure, representing only half of what might be considered a cumbia bass line. The pin toy pictured in Fig 4.6 was used to create the sound at 03:52. At 04:02, a stack of fake money was recorded, sped up, and layered with three other instances to achieve this rattlesnake sound.

Section C – 04:20-06:25 The climax of this movement occurs at 04:21. The vocal bridge is accompanied by subtle percussive sounds and rumbling sliding bass lines. At 04:39, in honor of my children, a baby sound/cry is heard. The cry is symbolic of our vulnerability as humans especially through motherhood. I use this sample sparingly throughout *CCQ*. This section ends with synthesizer arpeggiations and chaotic bass lines that begin to resemble the expected cumbia rhythm, setting the stage for *Cumbia Futurística*.

Movement III: *Cumbia Futurística*

Cumbia Futurística (*Futuristic Cumbia*) establishes a positive outlook for the *CCQ* cyborg protagonist. The work is the culmination of an imaginary futuristic cumbia form that includes glitch sounds, computer bleeps, and a cyborg constructing a futuristic cumbia genre. The tongue and cheek lyrics present her as an ageless being of the past and the future. The sonic references to electricity and welding are representations of healing through self reflection and participation in supportive communities. Some sounds that ground and serve as cultural markers include rhythmic güiro passages, cumbia rhythms created with my voice, forte low frequency bass line samples that tie to low-rider culture, extreme stutter effects and delay that mimic Sonidera MX practices, and vocal effects that morph the voice from human to machine throughout the *Cumbia Futurística* chorus.

Cumbia Futurística

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2026

Dicen que hay que ser bonita
Para que te pelen
Que de 25 arriba te desapareces

Pero nada de eso es cierto
Miren nomas este cuerpo
Hecho de fierro y metal
Carne, hueso, y titanio

Soy hembra mecánica
Viajando por el tiempo
Voy construyendo esta

Cumbia Futurística
Cumbia Futurística
Cumbia Futurística

Futuristic Cumbia

Noemy Esparza-Isaacson ©2026

They say you have to be pretty
To be noticed
That from 25 and up you disappear

But none of that's true
Just look at this body
Made of iron and metal
Flesh, bone, and titanium

I am a woman in a mechanical body
Traveling through time
I'm building this

Futuristic Cumbia
Futuristic Cumbia
Futuristic Cumbia

Cumbia Futurística (cont'd) Futuristic Cumbia (cont'd)

Soy electricista	I'm an electrician
Yo misma me soldo	I weld and heal myself
Vengo del futuro	I come from the future
Y del pasado soy	And I'm from the past
Si bonita es lo que quieren	If you want pretty
Pos aqui estoy	Well here I am

I utilized Ableton Live for the recording and sound organization of all three *CCQ* movements. As I progressed in the production of the work, the sound material and arrangements increased in density. The first movement has approximately 20 tracks, the second approximately 30, and the third has denser sections of sound material of over 40 MIDI and audio tracks. Not all tracks are played at once or contain continuous sound but the number of tracks does represent the increase variety of sonic material that makes for a more challenging audio mixing and mastering experience. I manipulated frequencies and levels through the use of filters (external hardware or audio software programs through which specific frequencies can be boosted, attenuated or blocked off) thus allowing some melodic sections be more prominent on the hearing sound stage.¹²³

The tracks listed in Fig 4.8 show approximately half of the sonic material lines. Introducing unexpected samples and timbres as a way to engage the listener is part of the creative process. Testing timbres, frequencies, and densities is important for the mixing process. For example, one sample used is a baby's laughter. This sample had a nostalgic effect so I decided to use it in areas of the mix of the third movement where the texture was sparse. This sample served as a callout, in the style of Sonidera MX,

¹²³Perceived three-dimensional space of an audio system, spatialization of sound becomes increasingly challenging. Fléty, Emmanuel, and Frédéric Bevilacqua. "Wireless Inertial Measurement Units in Performing Arts." *Sensors* (Basel, Switzerland) [Switzerland], vol. 25, no. 19, October 2025, p. 6188, <https://doi.org/10.3390/s25196188>, Fléty and Bevilacqua (2025)

of the nostalgic sounds of motherhood. They are memory anchors for any mother that trigger nostalgic visualizations. Instead of locomotive drum arrangements, typical of cumbia chorus lines, the levels of the rhythmic material were lowered, allowing the vocals to cut through the lower frequencies. The vocals became the rhythmic material. My composition process for recording projects is organic and develops as I experiment with ideas, sound textures, and evocative melodies. This practice differs from my compositional approach for ensembles or acoustic instruments that involves organizing my ideas via sketching. However, my recording process involves creating the piece organically; guided by the *CCQ* narrative. I enjoy sculpting sounds, experimenting with different effects, and layering vocal tracks to achieve bizarre results.

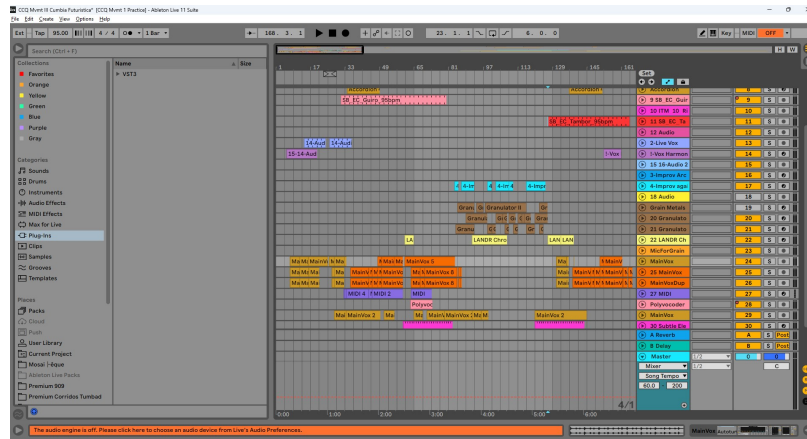


Figure 4.8: Ableton Live Session View

Cumbia Futurística is *CCQ*'s most rhythmic and cumbia-esque movement. By the end of the piece I fully embrace the cumbia rhythm but introduce metallic, glitchy, computerized, and abrasive sounds to contract. A free form granulation section is sandwiched between the first and third rhythmic cumbia sections. I chose a more conceptual cumbia form that grounds the work through familiar rhythms to expands the form in a more experimental way. I imagine, the Cyborg Queen dancing to the work she constructed. I espouse optimist visions of our future hybrid selves. They

should reflect who we are as a society as well as our cultures, traditions, and influences. My deep appreciation of *feminist cumbia*, traditional cumbia, contemporary music practices, and my desire to continue contributing to the *feminist cumbia* genre, are embedded in this culminating movement, *Cumbia Futurística*.

Movement III: Cumbia Futurística Analysis

Section A – 00:00-02:01 I wished to explore microtonality in the final *CCQ* movement, *Cumbia Futurística*. I found an arsenal of microtonal scales in Ableton Live’s Max for Live (M4L) proprietary Microtuner patch. I chose to work with the wilson_helixsong10-11-limit scale but would often increase the limit to 24 to expand the palette of available microtones within the scale. After some experimentation, I arrived at an other-worldly, out-of-tune, and bizarre accordion melody, enthusiastically embraced for the recurring melody of the futuristic cumbia. The introduction to the song may evoke horror film soundtrack aesthetics, which I find compelling. Instead of discarding these sounds, I chose to emphasize their presence. The layered microtonal voices at 00:37, sampled and played through a MIDI keyboard were layered with the plucked guitar patch. At 00:51 the lyrics begin stating, “They say you have to be pretty to be noticed.” This line is symbolic of the frustration I felt when seeking a record label at the onset of my career. Labels were notorious for prioritizing looks over musical talent. In these lyrics, the cyborg sarcastically replies by saying “If you like pretty, well here I am” in all my mechanical and robotic glory. The undertone of these lyrics can be interpreted in many ways. However, my intention is to emphasize body positivity through a feminist lens. By 01:05, the cumbia *sonidera*¹²⁴ rhythm,

¹²⁴A subgenre of cumbia that is characterized by a slower cumbia rhythm and street culture.

the rhythmic style used by bands like Los Angeles Azules who performed the problematic song *Niña Mujer (Woman Child)*, is established. I purposefully chose a slower cumbia rhythm and in my own way reclaim this genre through *feminist cumbia* lyrics. The microtonal accordion melody begins at 01:12 and feels slightly out of place on purpose. At 01:29, the voice is treated with Ableton Lives Vocoder and Auto Shift plugins to garble and distort the voice. Additionally, when the chorus is repeated at 01:46, an instance of the voice, tuned down by an octave, is layered with the vocal line, resulting in a robotic and artificial voice. As the movement ends, the chorus is treated with a long delay is pushed back on the sound stage. The delay fades through automation allowing the chorus to briefly reappear.

Section B – 02:02-03:18 At 02:02, the car horn sample is introduced. The car horn sample has been used in many hip-hop songs and throughout DJ culture. The horn here is a symbol of the Sonidera MX style women DJs in Mexico and the low-rider culture in my hometown of Las Cruces, NM. At 02:07, an audio clip of a deep rumbling bass line, that often emanates from sound systems installed in low-riders, is introduced. The lower frequencies are jarring and strangely pleasant to me. They are markers for communities that share a common interest and congregate around that interest, like low-riders. Many times, while driving around in my hometown and stopped at a traffic light, cars with powerful booming sound systems would pull up next to me. I would feel the bass frequencies travel through my body and almost make my heart skip a beat. It was uncomfortable but simultaneously pleasant. By 02:20, the cumbia rhythm includes all of the traditional rhythmic elements including the guiro.

Section C – 03:19-07:08 Section C can be considered the granulation section

and outro. In this section I experimented with the Max/MSP granulator I had used in movement I, but instead chose to use Ableton Live's granulator Max4L patch. The outcome and flexibility of this instrument were more compelling than the patch I used in movement I. I was able to control the aesthetics of the sound in Ableton as well by scrubbing through sections of the samples. I visualized welding, construction sounds like drilling and hammering, to mix this section but also included quieter segments of granulation, that draw the listener in, interspersed with denser and abrasive granulation. The low-rider bassline returns with the chorus and a new bongo rhythm. As the cumbia fades out, the low-rider bass is highlighted as it drives away into the distance while trailing its low frequencies.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

In this research, I discuss the investigations that bolster my dissertation topics and the inspirations for the composition *CCQ*. My lived experiences as a *gruper*a and academic interests guided the contextual history of the cumbia genre provided in this document. Additionally, *feminist cumbia* research and cultural symbolism contributed to the composition methodologies used to create *CCQ*. This research guided the foundational elements of *CCQ* and contributed to the enrichment of *feminist cumbia* (cumbia feminista) within academia. I argued that these spaces should be activated, constructed, shared, and expanded to generate and increase academic and musical contributions. *Feminist cumbia* studies and scholarship can claim space within the academy. By challenging the status quo, expanding the western canon and the composition models it mirrors, we can create meaningful ways of musicking beyond what the canon encompasses. Personal and cultural perspectives on *feminist cumbia* are important sources of inspiration for compelling new cumbia structures and harmonic transformations.

In my research and culminating composition, I discussed my experience within the *gruper*a movement, my personal career dichotomies, and interdisciplinary practices. In Chapter 1, I establish the foundation for exploration in subsequent chapters through a *gruper*a autoethnography in which I shared my own experiences within the *gruper*a movement, the music of the era, and my history as cumbia music artist. In Chapter 2, the historical and foundational changes in cumbia music were established to provide historical and political context for the origins of *feminist cumbia*, a genre

that is still gaining traction, support, and acceptance. I argued that sexist lyrics of the past may have influenced the growth of *feminist cumbia* and directly motivated new artists to write lyrics that resist the cumbia patriarchy of past decades. Three case studies of songs with problematic sexist lyrics representative of this era were analyzed and discussed. The work of three iconic female artists who compose *feminist cumbia* songs were analyzed through a feminist lens. These included Renee Goust, Lila Downs, and Sonidera MX, all artists contributing to the growing *feminist cumbia* genre and expressing their views through feminist, activist, and socio-political lyrics and imagery. *Feminist cumbia* has given voice to many issues in our general social consciousness that have become mainstream as a result of the movement. To understand and appreciate these movements, I shared my perspective on the history of cumbia, its strong pull within Mexican, Mexican-American, and Latin communities, and more recently, the increased influence of cumbia within mainstream music. The foundational history of cumbia combined with technological advancements like the mp3, the advent of streaming services, increased affordability, and accessibility of recording software/equipment, provided fertile ground for a new hybrid genre. *Feminist cumbia* artists offer alternative perspectives by challenging and critique stereotypically male dominated cumbia music. These offerings celebrate LGBTQ rights, diversity, women's rights, cultural expression, and through uplifting lyrics, challenge the status quo. These artists also leverage innovative technologies to share and disseminate media through democratized music platforms. In Chapter 3, I offered a glimpse of how feminist and cultural perspectives can be activated or amplified through the use of technology-mediated composition and performance practices. I discussed the work of electronic music pioneers whose work and explorations paved the way for female composer-performers such as Chavez, Ciani, Negrón, Sonami, and Heap. Additionally, I discussed how these electronic music artists directly influenced

my own work. Lastly, I discussed the technology palette of devices that I utilized to compose, perform, and express cultural and feminist perspectives. Chapter 4 expanded on the compositional methodologies applied to compose each *CCQ* movement and the cultural expression and feminist perspectives considered in each movement. I shared how the movements are tied through the post-apocalyptic Utopian narrative of the cyborg, using artifacts and musical remnants to construct a futuristic cumbia. Lastly, I expanded on the technological approach to creating *CCQ*, the vocal and electronic techniques adopted to perform, record, and mix the piece, and an in-depth analysis of important moments of the resulting fixed media piece. Furthermore, I described how Oliveros' *Deep Listening* practice influenced the performance of the foundational recordings in *CCQ* Movement I: *Cumbia Fragmentos*. In conclusion, *CCQ* reflects my work, values, and hopes for our future selves. Made of flesh, and metal, *CCQ* represents humanity and vulnerability. Her interior is a reflection of human fragility, but her metal exterior is a symbol of resilience and strength.

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APPENDIX A
FIXED MEDIA FILES

[Consult Attached Files]

Cyborg Cumbia Queen

FIXED MEDIA FILES