THE ALIEN MUSICAL BROTHERHOOD OF THE COLOMBIAN ANDEAN PLATEAU:

SOUND WORLDS, MUSICAL RHETORIC, AND MUSICAL MEANING IN BOGOTA’S EXPERIMENTAL TROPICAL PSYCHEDELIA (1998–2014)

Luis Fernando Valencia Rueda

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Kofi V. Agawu

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Abstract

In Colombia, music from the Hispanic Caribbean, typically known as “tropical music,” has been the most popular of popular musics throughout the last half century. The 1990s witnessed a particular boom of this popularity, thanks notably to the uprising of tropical pop star Carlos Vives, which catapulted vallenato to an unprecedented global success. Partly inspired by Vives's music and its distinctive hybridization of modern and traditional elements, there has appeared in Colombia a variety of mostly urban musical projects known as New Colombian Musics, whose distinctive quality has been the innovative use of local musical languages.

Amongst these projects is a series of bands from Bogota that feature projects like Meridian Brothers, Los Piranás, or Frente Cumbiero. Made up by a group of formally trained musician friends, these bands have exploited the tropical theme that has been so pervasive in the recent Colombian soundscape in a particularly peculiar manner. Besides its prominent tropical vibe, the sound world of these bands has inspired denominations such as “psychedelic,” “electronic,” “experimental,” or “extraterrestrial.” Parting from these descriptors, and taking into account the thoughts of some of these bands’ members, this dissertation on the one hand thoroughly examines and explores the musical and cultural meanings that underlie such denominations, and on the other hand analyzes the specific ways in which musical elements associated with these denominations are treated in this music, so as to ultimately propose a reading about the meanings that this particular strand of urban tropicality has in the present Colombian context.
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"A thing happens with music and with art in general: you have an imaginary of how things are, and you control it until you [express] it... Here in my head it works perfectly and ‘fucking awesome’... No one permeates it, it’s pure... The minute I make a song, the lyrics of a song, an album cover, a concert... there’s somebody else interpreting it, and [then] it is no longer under your control."

Santiago Botero

I. Analyzing “Rolo Experimental Tropidelia”: preliminary definitions and goals

As Santiago Botero expresses in the epigraph above, once a cultural expression starts circulating beyond the mental space of its creator(s), it inevitably becomes susceptible to interpretation. In the case of music, Botero’s comments colloquially summarize the phenomenon by which all musical commentary arises—whether the informal one of a bar conversation, the semi-formal one of the newspaper critique, or the formal one of the most rigorous and refined musicological research. As Nicholas Cook (1992), Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1990), and Naomi Cumming (2000) among others have argued, a musical culture is the

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1 In Spanish, the original expression used here was “de puta madre.”
2 Santiago Botero is a jazz (counter)bass player from Bogota and the leader of the project El Ombligo, whose result was the production of two albums called Canción Psicotrópica y Jaleo (Psichetropical Song and Jaleo), Volumes 1 and 2, released in 2012 and 2015, respectively. His comment was given within the context of a talk I organized in Universidad Javeriana in 2016, revolving around the topics developed in the present work, whose participants besides Botero were Eblis Álvarez and Mario Galeano, both of which could be considered the main creative forces behind most of the studied musical projects. For the reader’s reference, all citations from this talk are marked as TroPs 2016. Some of Álvarez’s thoughts throughout this study, as well as some by Juan Sebastián Monsalve, a main protagonist of the New Colombian Musics movement (see below), were gathered in the context of the seminar “Así suena Colombia en el Siglo XXI” (“Thus sounds Colombia in the twenty-first century”), organized by Teatro Colón of Bogota in August 2015. Memories from this seminar can be found at http://www.elorejonsabanero.com/2015/08/memorias-del-seminario-asi-suena.html. For the reader’s reference, all citations from this seminar are marked as NMC 2015.
sum of both its musical artifacts and the commentary inspired by those artifacts. In this sense, many, if not all, of the contributions of formal musicological studies can be understood as constituting just a minor part of the components that together constitute a given musical culture. Even if not through sounds themselves, musicological studies contribute to enriching and defining the particular spirit of musical traditions. Through the unique power of their main instrument of expression—the written word—they provide those musical traditions with a very particular kind of memory, thus aiding in the historical construction of these traditions.

Accordingly, the present work constitutes a humble attempt at contributing to the development and historical construction of Colombian music in general, and music from Bogota in particular, through the analysis and interpretation of a very specific corpus of musical production, whose first seeds were planted in Bogota in the late 1990s, and which has been thriving in alternative music circles, locally and globally, since the early 2000s. I have decided to dub this corpus of music “Rolo Experimental Tropical Psychedelia” (henceforth Rolo ET), in an attempt to synthesize the components of its sound world. Names, like words in general, are oftentimes unfit and unfriendly when attempting to describe real world experiences. This is perhaps especially true with music, since words have a tendency to freeze the myriad possibilities of experience that the art form offers. Accordingly, naming the studied phenomenon certainly does it injustice, not least because it tends to group together musical projects that, although similar in nature, include also subtle, yet rich differences. Yet one function of words is also to provide a common ground through which to communicate the infinite experiences of the world: to synthesize so as to provide a conceptual map. In this spirit, and for pragmatic purposes, I proceed with this conceptual baptism, as it were, of the studied corpus of music. As we shall see, the name is, however, not arbitrary. It seeks to synthesize not only my own thoughts about this music, but also the more informal descriptions

3 I have decided to use an acronym throughout this work essentially for practical purposes. My goal is not to institute the acronym as a sort of official name or category through which to describe this musical and artistic conglomerate of Bogotano artists and musicians.

4 Here comes to mind that famous maxim, attributed variously to Frank Zappa, Laurie Anderson, and Thelonious Monk, among others, according to which “writing about music is like dancing about architecture.”

5 Is not this the way musical categorization has always worked, anyway? On the other hand, more generally speaking, this tendency towards categorization seems to be a cognitive proclivity residing in every human being, as a necessary tool to traverse this world. On this topic as related to music, see Zbikowski (2002).
that have been made about it, especially in journalistic internet blogs or anonymous internet forums, which constitute Rolo ET’s main channel of commentary and distribution.

But what exactly is Rolo ET? What does “Rolo” and what does “experimental tropical psychedelia” mean? When, how and why did it emerge? Let me start by explaining the term “Rolo,” which is the easier term in the constellation. “Rolo” constitutes one of the many demonyms (gentilicio in Spanish) that have been historically used to refer to people from Bogota. The term is jargon whose use is nowadays fairly common, even though it is probably only used (and understood) by Colombians—especially by non-Bogotanos. I have decided to use the jargonistic demonym (“Rolo”), instead of the generic one (“Bogotano/a”), as a way to maintain the colloquial, antiformal spirit that characterizes Rolo ET.

As for the expression “experimental tropical psychedelia,” whose last two words are commonly fused as “tropidelia” (hence the absence of the “P” for psychedelia in the acronym), it designates the predominant sound worlds and musical approaches found within the music of Rolo ET. But since I personally fabricated this particular “name” so as to describe the musical output of a specific artistic conglomerate of musicians and artists—which is to say that an official or popularly accepted category doesn’t really exist—in this introductory context, the expression and its acronym serve only as a point of departure.

One goal of the present work is precisely to analyze—or to deconstruct, as it were—the two main musical categories “tropical” and “psychedelic,” both from the perspective of the musical sounds themselves and from the perspective of the cultural discourse that has been constructed around them, including the thoughts on the matter by some of the principal figures of the movement (see footnote 2

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6 Others include “cachaco,” “capitalino” (i.e., from the capital city), or the generic “Bogotano.”
7 In my own experience, I have found that this form of Bogota’s gentilicio sometimes is used in deprecatory or detrimental fashion, especially by people from Antioquia (colloquially “paisas”), because of the cultural rivalry that exists between that region and the capital.
8 This fusion of the categories “tropical” and “psychedelia” is reminiscent of “Tropicalia,” which is the name given to an avant-garde musical and artistic movement that developed in Brazil in the 1960s, and which also was conceived of as a hybridization of local musical languages and the internationally famous psychedelic rock music of the time. For more information, see Chapter 3.
9 Other expressions found in written or oral, semi-formal and informal commentary include “galactic cumbia,” “galactic tropics,” “electrocumbia,” “surreal tropics,” “tropical avant-garde,” among others; as well as the herein used “tropical psychedelia,” “tropidelia,” or the related “psychetropical music.” For an example of the typical rhetoric used to describe some of these bands, see the review by Juan Carlos Hidalgo of Meridian Brother’s album *Salvadora Robot*, released in 2014, at http://www.tierraadentro.conaculta.gob.mx/meridian-brothers-tropico-alienigena/.
above). In doing so, I seek to better comprehend what the combination of such descriptors are suggesting with respect to this music, on the one hand from the standpoint of the mechanisms of musical construction per se, and on the other hand from the standpoint of the meanings derived from, or expressed by, these sonic constructions. Why, in other words, is this music described in the ways that it is? Is it only because of the sounds and what they sonically evoke? If these musicians are, in fact, consciously seeking to use sounds that are conventionally associated with the categories “tropical” and “psychedelic,” what, if anything, motivates this approach? And even if there is no provable or visible intent on the part of the music’s creators, why do listeners (like myself) tend to generate these associations? For the fact is that—indeedently of whether these associations were intended or not, whether they are perceived by these musicians to be a fair depiction of their projects or not—these and similar descriptors pervasively became tags of Rolo ET’s music, a phenomenon that, as Botero said, is no longer in the hands of the creators. In the end, the fundamental question I am pursuing is about the possible meanings of Rolo ET within the context it arose and developed. But I seek to provide some, at least provisional, answers to this question beginning with, and focusing on, the way the music is put together. In the present work, in other words, I take Rolo ET’s sound world—i.e., the types of musical references evoked, and the specific technical and stylistic modes of appropriation and expression of these references—as well as the implied cultural meanings of said musical references as the fundamental proving grounds to tackle this question and propose one possible reading.
À propos of what I have called “modes of appropriation and expression,” and before proceeding to contextualize Rolo ET within the Colombian and global musical landscape, a preliminary explanation is still missing with regards to the term “experimental,” which corresponds to the letter “E” in my proposed acronym. Unlike “tropical” or “psychedelia,” which as we shall see imply both musical and cultural categories in their own right, the term “experimental” here alludes precisely to a way of conceptually, and thus also technically, approaching musical (i.e., sonic) discourse. At first instance, then, this term speaks of a penchant for musical experimentation that is at the crux of these musical projects, even though the degree or level of experimentation naturally varies from project to project. Depictions that portray Rolo ET bands or music as avant-garde(ish) usually do so on the grounds of this proclivity to, or interest in, experimenting. Now, the abbreviation “E” of the word “experimental” here actually serves a purpose beyond mere practicality. For it is also common to read or hear terms like “extraterrestrial” (from which the word “alien” of the title is derived) or “electronic” in relation to, or as descriptors of, this music. In today’s musical world, the term “electronic” will usually be understood straightforwardly as a relation to electronic music in general, or—actually more pertinent in this context—to electronic dance music (or EDM, as it is commonly known) in particular. At first glance, the semantic implications of the term “extraterrestrial” are,

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10 This promotional image constitutes an eloquent visual and verbal version of the musical category “experimental tropical psychedelia” herein discussed. Taken from http://www.enorbita.tv/psicodelico.
on the contrary, quite ambiguous, at least in relation to music. Suffice for now to say that it is a fortunate coincidence that ET can mean either “experimental tropidelia” or the more commonly known “extraterrestrial.”

In any case, the terms “experimental,” “electronic,” or “extraterrestrial” refer to musical approaches rather than categories or genres as such. At its core, this music is understood to be either tropical or psychedelic. From the perspective of musical genres, in other words, the tropical or the psychedelic elements would tend to be more “structural,” so to speak. Yet in fact, as will become evident, most of Rolo ET pieces can primordially be described in terms of tropical music genres. In more practical terms, this means that Rolo ET pieces are conceived of as experimental, electronic, extraterrestrial and/or psychedelic cumbias, salsas, vallenatos, puyas, porros, etc. The “tropical” is most often Rolo ET’s primordial spirit, the psychedelic or experimental being more (or less) ornamental, from what I would argue is a properly ontological point of view.11

While in most cases the “tropical” element is predominant, this preliminary hierarchical model of Rolo ET’s sound world is, of course, quite varied. The different musical forces and their plausible semantic allusions change from piece to piece, and oftentimes from excerpt to excerpt. A fundamental thesis guiding my approach is that the fuzzy hierarchical dynamics between the detected sound worlds in this and many other musics provides crucial information for pursuing a hermeneutic reading that is culturally oriented, yet grounded in the analysis of the sound structures and their conventionally codified meanings. To primarily ground a hermeneutic reading in the analysis of sound structures implies asking the following, thorny question: how does the sound world of a given music—rather than its lyrics (with its references, topics, etc.) or surrounding discourses and practices—say something about its possible extramusical meanings? More specifically in relation to the present study, how does the sound world of

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11 On the theoretical side, if we were to search for strictly sonic explanations for the prevalence of ‘tropicalness’ over the qualities associated with other musical worlds, one preliminary hypothesis is the apparent primacy of rhythmic aspects over other type of musical elements, in judgments regarding musical categorization. More simply put, rhythm seems to be a crucial marker of musical genre. Accurate or not, this hypothesis implies a musical or sonic hierarchy that occurs within a listener while in the process of associating sonic structures to established musical categories. It would imply, in other words, that in processes of musical signification that ultimately lead to musical categorization, there is an organized spectrum of <<more-structural-to-more-ornamental-elements>>, somewhat analogous to the Schenkerian paradigm of tonal organization in Western tonal music. In this analogy, rhythmic considerations (e.g., rhythmic structure, rhythmic feel, rhythmic articulations, etc.) would correspond to the more “structural” end of said spectrum.
Rolo ET configure a semantic field verbally construed by a set of words such as “psychedelic,” “tropical,” “experimental,” “alien,” or “extraterrestrial,” and what does this set of words imply with respect to this music’s plausible meanings?

Of course, because of music’s widely commented upon semantically undetermined nature, the answer to such questions is, at best, complicated, and at worst, simply not answerable. Be that as it may, if one wants to believe in the possibility of a sonically-grounded hermeneutic enterprise, like the one I here set out to pursue, a theoretical framework around the issue of musical signification that provides at least a consistent conceptual support becomes crucially necessary. Before tackling this theoretical conundrum, though, let me first offer a brief historical and musical contextualization of Rolo ET and its constituent bands and projects, and then present a brief review of the state of the art of the admittedly scarce musicological literature that has addressed musical phenomena closely related to Rolo ET, so as to epistemologically locate my study within that field.

II. Locating Rolo ET in the Colombian Soundscape: Multiculturality and New Colombian Musics

In the previous section, I have provisionally defined what Rolo ET means, taking into account only the terminology included in its name (and corresponding acronym). But what are the specific human and musical constituents of Rolo ET? Why and how did this artistic and musical movement come about, and in which context did it arise? The bands and musical projects that together constitute Rolo ET are actually an avant-garde subset of a bigger and heterogeneous Colombian musical movement, which arose in the 1990s, and which has come to be famously known—especially in artistic and academic circles—as “Nuevas Músicas Colombianas”¹² (“New Colombian Musics,” henceforth NCM).¹³ Because of their

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¹² The phenomenon is sometimes referred to in singular (New Colombian Music) and sometimes in plural. I prefer the version in plural, as I believe it better depicts the variety and heterogeneity of the bands and projects it comprises, as well as the myriad musics and musical styles from where it feeds.

¹³ For a recent, comprehensive revision of definitions, concepts and scholarly literature revolving around the phenomenon of NCM, see Hernández, M., (2014). Other studies that contain theoretical, historical, contextual, and/or musicological approaches to the issue of NCM or related phenomena include, for example, Calle, 2012; Hernández Salgar, 2004 and 2007; Ochoa, A.M., 2009, 2003, and 1996; Pinzón, 2009; Rojas, 2000; and Santamaría, 2007.
musical heterogeneity, NCM are difficult to describe in a succinct way. In general, though, the sound worlds of NCM is characterized by particular uses and transformations of mostly Colombian, but also more generally speaking Caribbean, traditional and popular musics. Most definitions of NCM tend to echo this characterization, albeit in more specific terms. For instance, in 2005, within the context of the contest of New Colombian Music sponsored by the British American Tobacco company (BAT), NCM were defined by the organization as “all that results from the exploration, search, deepening, and innovation of the elements that make up the heritage of [Colombian] popular music, through an expansion and development of its language.” (cited in Santamaría, 2007, p. 6; Translated By Author) Similarly, internationally famous jazz saxophonist Antonio Arnedo, often considered one of the main precursors of NCM (see below), defines it as “music that in its content proposes, or seeks to redefine, or gets deeper in the languages of local music in Colombia.” (p. 16; TBA) Ethnomusicologist Carolina Santamaría interprets Arnedo’s words to imply the appearance in this music of “specific technical elements (rhythmic patterns, use of certain instruments, formal procedures, melodic constructions, etc.) [that serve] as indexes of local music,” this way providing a more technical description of the NCM’s sonic world. (Idem; TBA)

The fact that a whole new category has been devised in order to describe and rationalize this phenomenon speaks of its unique effervescence. Its gradual emergence in the early 1990s later led to a boom of multifaceted bands and projects that has continued to develop and thrive up to this day. So why did this boom happen in the first place? What, in other words, made possible and stimulated this renewed and effervescent, mostly urban, interest in the country’s folk traditions? Answers to these questions are, of course, naturally complex. Since it is neither my goal nor this the place to fully address this issue, I refer the reader to the various studies that have made an attempt at rationalizing the phenomenon alongside its possible causes (see footnote 13, above). Suffice here to point out two general, interrelated phenomena—one more ideological and one more purely musical—that contributed to its emergence.

As Ana María Ochoa explains, the term ‘popular music’ in English has been traditionally used to denote urban musics associated to mass media production and distribution such as rock, pop, or hip-hop. In Spanish, the term is more ambiguous and usually includes both urban and traditional or folk musics, given that in Latin America the distinction between these musical expressions is oftentimes unclear (Ochoa, 2003, p. 2). My use of the term will follow the latter usage, which means to include both urban and folk musics, indistinctly to their relationship with mass media.

Beyond specific definitions, for Leonor Convers and Juan Ochoa (2007, pp. 15-16), the upcoming of NCM represented a long waited popularization of Colombian traditional musics—a phenomenon that had famously taken place long before in countries like Cuba or Brazil.
As explained variously by Calle (2012), Hernández (2009), and Santamaría (2007), among others, the precipitous interest by especially younger generations in the study, the rescue, the use, and the larger exposure of Colombian traditional and popular musics within the bigger, more modern urban centers of the country was possible because of an ideological shift that precisely in the 1990s, enshrined in the country’s new multicultural constitution of 1991, suddenly changed the standards by which these musical traditions had previously been valued (or perhaps misvalued). This shift had both a local and a global dimension. The two dimensions are usually understood as being connected, given the acceleration of the process of globalization during the previous decades, which locally took a decisive push in the 1990s by the upcoming of Cesar Gaviria’s administration in 1990. In general terms, the ideological shift meant the acceptance and positive valuation of many cultural traditions that had previously been ignored or disqualified as uncultivated and thus deemed undesirable. In the global scale, this new vision entailed a relativization of cultural values, and, specifically in the world of music, it was undoubtedly connected to the creation within the music business of the category known as World Music, probably also facilitating its commercial success. Arising from the phenomenon of globalization, the new paradigm also entailed a new way of conceiving and experiencing one’s identity. As Nestor García Canclini puts it, within the new globalized environment, “notions of citizenship, identity and belonging are not only constructed from the national space, but also from the interaction of the local, the national, and the transnational.” (cited in Santamaría, 2007, p. 10; TBA) And so for Santamaría, NCM’s “rediscovery of the local is not exclusively an aesthetic trend, but is the result of much deeper cultural transformations. The political, economic, and social changes of globalization have had, as one of its many consequences, the articulation of what seems to be a new paradigm of nation and a new way of giving meaning to what it means to belong to it.” (Idem; TBA)

16 Judy Lochhead’s comment regarding the change that a new intellectual ambience brought to academia and its objects of study is particularly pertinent in this respect. She writes how “the influx of ideas from the various strands of postmodern thought has enacted a flattening of traditional hierarchies, effectively broadening the canon.” (Lochhead et al., 2002, p. 2; emphasis added). For a critical account and reactionary analysis of this type of changes, specifically within the universe of American higher education, see Bloom, A. (1987). *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

17 As Manuel Castells writes regarding globalization, "we are not sharing a global culture. Rather, we are learning the culture of sharing our global diversity." (2010, xxxvi)
In Colombia, these allegedly global tendencies gained particular momentum thanks to the constitutional reform of 1991. The new Constitution defined Colombia as a pluriethnic and multicultural nation, which represented a significant change with respect to the theretofore official ideology, which had been a predominantly homogenizing one. In Santamaría’s words, “this change [was] very important since . . . it [produced] a radical rupture of a homogenizing historical process that took place in Latin America for almost two hundred years.” (Idem; TBA) This shift in the official discourse was chiefly of symbolical importance, and allowed the emergence of new identity searches, like the ones exemplified by, and expressed in, the different projects of the so called NCM. But the change in the constitutional text was not only symbolically important. The new definition also helped shape new educational and cultural policies that gradually reached increasing portions of the Colombian population, including those living in large urban centers. In this sense, NCM can be said to be an eloquent example of the changes conceived in the constitutional reform. Finally, it is necessary to mention some of the social dynamics that contributed to the creation of an urban atmosphere that ended up nurturing the development of NCM. According to Leonor Convers and Juan Ochoa (2007, p. 15), during the 1990s the escalation of the Colombian armed conflict in the rural areas caused the migration of many traditional musicians to the cities, which incidentally also caused a musically enriching encounter between peasant and urban musicians\(^{18}\).

In sum, then, these were the factors that coincided to allow for the emergence of New Colombian Musics: the new multifaceted identities triggered by globalization; the new, more horizontal valuation of the various cultural traditions of the world, and by extension of those within the country; the symbolic incarnation of these ideas in the new Constitution of 1991 plus the explicit repercussions its new definition of nation had in terms of new educational and cultural policies; the incidental encounters between city musicians and musicians from the rural areas, sadly caused by the displacement caused by the country’s armed conflict; and finally, more specifically with regards to music, the new valuation of what within Western culture were perceived as exotic musical traditions of the world, which represented the creation of the category World Music within the global music industry, and which opened up unprecedented possibilities for the type of music that was to be produced by the representatives of NCM.

\(^{18}\) For a brief, yet more detailed explanation of the recent dynamics of Colombia’s armed conflict, see Chapter 5.
Now, as far as NCM’s specific musical origin and stimulus is concerned, Carolina Santamaría (2007) suggests that the initial boom of NCM towards the mid-1990s was possible due to the musical experimentation with Colombian musical folk traditions, especially as developed by two parallel projects. On the one hand, there were the experiments carried out especially by jazz saxophonist Antonio Arnedo, mostly within Bogotano alternative, jazz circles, which presented Colombian folk music translated into a jazz language. On the other hand, there was the highly successful commercial proposal led by the figure of former soap-opera actor and pop singer Carlos Vives, which essentially fused Colombian Caribbean rhythms, especially vallenatos, with elements from the Anglo pop/rock music tradition. While the similar, yet decidedly more academic experimentations of Colombian Caribbean composer Francisco Zumáqué could also be conceived of as an important precedent for the emergence and evolution of NCM, Santamaria believes that the aforementioned “tendencies arising in jazz and mass popular music seem to have been more decisive and to have a much more direct influence on the development and momentum that the movement currently has.” (Santamaria, 2007, p. 9; TBA)

The exact nature and dynamics of NCM’s musical origins have had, and will most probably continue to have, slightly different readings. The fact remains, however, that in the 1990s Colombia saw increasingly effervescent musical activity in the major urban centers, whose particular signature was the inclusion of one or more of the various, multifaceted folk or popular musical traditions of the country, usually in innovative fashion. Now, in the same way that Santamaria points to two different musical worlds—Arnedo’s specialized, perhaps more underground and alternative one, and Vives’s commercially successful and massively popular one—as the musical laboratories in which the first seeds of NCM were allegedly planted and began to sprout, the whole gamut of the subsequent projects that are nowadays commonly associated with the movement also tend to fall into one of two analog categories. Of course, between the ideal category of the “alternative” or “underground,” and the equal ideal category of the “popular” or “commercial,” there exists a wide spectrum of “in betweens.” The actual heterogenous

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19 In Chapter X of their analysis of the nature and evolution of Carlos Vives and his musical project, entitled Carlos Vives y La Provincia: Travesías por la Tierra del Olvido, (Sevilla et al., 2014) show the connections that exist between the uprisal of Carlos Vives’ project and the emergence of more satellital sets of musical projects that began to appear in Colombian cities towards the end of the 1990s. Among those smaller projects were the bands that served as inspiration for many of the Rolo ET projects of the 2000s. More detailed information about Carlos Vives and his project can be found in Chapter 2 and especially Chapter 5 of the present work.
musical nature of all these projects notwithstanding, there has been a tendency to categorize this multifarious set of musics, bands, and projects, perhaps as a way of attempting to make sense of such staggering musical variety.\textsuperscript{20}

Nowadays, within a hypothetical list of the more commercially successful projects of NCM that have existed or still exist, one might find bands or artists like Bomba Estéreo, Sidestepper, Bloque de Búsqueda, Aterciopelados, ChocQuibTown, and, most famously, Carlos Vives and his band La Provincia. On the other side of the spectrum, more alternative projects include bands or artists like Curupira, La Mojarra Eléctrica, Sinsonte, Las Áñez, Primero Mi Tía, Puerto Candelaria or Rolo ET’s Meridian Brothers or Los Pirañas.\textsuperscript{21} As with all categorizations, such partition is clearly limited. First of all, one band or project might seem more “commercial” when compared to another one or vice versa. And it may be common that its members might disagree, or feel uncomfortable, with being categorized within the more commercial category (or again vice versa). On the other hand, a single band might have had some allegedly more commercially oriented projects or periods, and some which have been supposedly more underground.\textsuperscript{22} And then there is the problem of other type of categorizations, which have their own conventional ways of understanding the categories of the “commercial” and the “alternative.” For instance, bands like Bloque de Búsqueda or Aterciopelados are essentially rock bands, and—as for example rock scholars Lawrence Grossberg or Andrew Goodwin have argued—rock music is a category which tends to think of itself as essentially oppositional; as authentic in comparison to the artificiality of

\textsuperscript{20} Other traditional ways of categorizing musics—according for example to genre, technical approaches, or instrumentation—have also been applied in the case of NCM. Yet the innovative and/or experimental character of much of this music still defies any attempt at obvious or clean categorizations.

\textsuperscript{21} In their own work, Convers and Ochoa (2007) highlight the role played by the following musicians and bands in the constitution of NCM and its consequent popularization of traditional musics: Totó La Momposina, Héctor Martignon, Grupo Bahía, Juan Sebastián Monsalve, Petrona Martínez, Francisco Zumaqué, Antonio Arnedo, Fredy Henríquez, Leonardo Gómez, Liliana Montes, Claudia Gómez, Carlos Vives, Andrés Cabas, Guafa Trío, Quinto Piso, Puerto Candelaria, Curupira, La Mojarra Eléctrica, and Jazz of Colegio Alemán of Barranquilla.

\textsuperscript{22} An eloquent example of this phenomenon is that of Puerto Candelaria, a band originally from Medellin, whose first period was highly avant-garde and experimental, but whose latest productions have acquired a clearly more digestible, commercial sound. Even if considered perhaps the most commercially successful one in Colombia in recent times (at least within the domain of NCM), Carlos Vives’s career itself has had periods or albums that—sonically speaking—could be understood as more decidedly experimental than others. His first independent successful album, \textit{La Tierra del Olvido} (1993), is in fact sonically quite innovative and to a certain degree also experimental. It could thus be categorized as alternative, despite having had a very high success in sales.
most mainstream commodities. And yet their commercial success, or the difference between their musical approaches and those of projects like avant-garde jazz band Primero Mi Tía, might incline the balance so as to include them in the more commercial category.

In general, though, one does find that—besides the frivolous one of arid sale numbers—there are perhaps two fundamental criteria that, independently or combined, seem to determine whether a project is perceived of as tending to be more or less “commercial” or “alternative,” according to the local understanding of these terms. First, the more a given project evinces an experimental, unconventional, or avant-garde musical (performative or compositional) approach and sound, the more that given project will tend to fall under the categories “underground,” “specialized,” or “alternative.” Second, the more a given project draws on the use of what are perceived to be traditional folk music elements from any given Colombian tradition, and the more exotic those elements are perceived to be in modernized urban settings, the less that given project will be perceived as commercially oriented. Of course, their (intentional or unintentional) combination yields a musical result that would allegedly constitute the epitome of a non-commercial, alternative approach. Generally speaking, avant-gardism and exotic traditionalism seem to be, then, the signs of alternativity within NCM; Together they seem to constitute a sort of opposition against the mandates of the musical mainstream.

According to this logic, the projects that constitute what I have here dubbed Rolo ET tend to fall under the category of “alternative.” Of course, part of the present work’s goal is to provide a detailed analysis and assessment of Rolo ET’s sound world and ideology, in a manner that seeks to problematize precisely this type of designation, instead of naturalizing it. As we shall see, however, the decidedly experimental and unconventional nature of these bands’ musical approach, as well as their ideological underpinning, will in fact provide elements to support the claim of some form of “alternativeness”, albeit with a richer understanding of what this particular term might mean. Rolo ET can thus be generally conceived of as a particular musical vanguard from Bogota, which is part of the so called NCM

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23 According to Grossberg (1993, p. 186), an “ideology of authenticity” constituted the fundamental form of relationship between fan and music in rock culture before the 1980s, an ideology not very different from the driving force of radical folklorists regarding folk traditions. NCM include both “rockers” and “folklorists,” for which a similar type of ideology is pervasive within the movement, especially within its more alternative strands. Regarding rock music’s stereotypical oppositional nature, Andrew Goodwin writes, for example, how the “ideology around rock music . . . sets itself up in opposition to selected elements in the commercialization of music, which establishes an opposition between youth and parental cultures, and which maintains a vaguely oppositional left/liberal political agenda.” (Goodwin, 1993, pp. 60-61)
movement, but whose sonic and ideological characteristics make its constituents cluster in such a way that allows for it to be understood as a distinct, separate movement.

**Rolo ET’s origins and constituents**

As a tentative step towards a mini-history of Rolo ET’s, one might consult ethnomusicologist and sociologist Simón Calle’s (2012) work. Even if Calle embraces a slightly larger collective of people and musical projects, which are basically those associated with Bogota’s independent music label and promoter La Distritofónica, the origin and early history of Rolo ET—including its members and musical projects—mostly overlap with the ones found in Calle’s account. In the previous section, I suggested how one could understand Rolo ET as a circumscribed musical movement within the broader spectrum of NCM, thanks to the distinct *sound world* of its musical production, as well as the *ideological* underpinning that motivates its aesthetics. Part of the present work’s goal is precisely to show how this is so. However, it is worth mentioning that scholars like Calle (2012) or Ochoa and Botero (2009) have also shown how many of the musical projects and bands that constitute NCM are typically grouped together for reasons other than purely stylistic or musical ones. From these scholars’ sociological and ethnomusicological approaches, we learn that productions within NCM that are in fact musically quite varied, are nevertheless understood as clustered together because they are part of a loosely constructed web of associations that transcend specific musical approaches. Calle, Ochoa, and Botero show how this web is knit together by associations between people, places, venues, technologies, besides, of course, the musical approaches per se. Following these scholars, then, it could be argued that—besides purely stylistic or ideological considerations—Rolo ET can be conceived of as a distinct category also because it is the musical expression of an underlying compact social and artistic network. So what are the origins and dynamics of this network?

According to Calle, one can trace the origins of this musical movement back to the Bogota of the late 1990s, where a group of white, predominantly middle-class, young musicians and artists began both studying and experimenting with Colombian popular musics mostly from the Caribbean region of the
country. Many of these people were students from one of the several undergraduate music programs that existed back then in the city, though some were also “street” musicians who had opted (by choice or by force) to develop their musical careers informally. From the beginning, the movement was characterized by this mixed input of varied musical experiences and knowledge, which without a doubt has shaped its dynamics and musical and artistic outputs.

Though the movement has had a particularly effervescent and vigorous life in Bogota—its short history notwithstanding—other urban centers in the country (most notably Medellin) have simultaneously witnessed the offspring of similar bands, movements and practices, creating a sort of apparently disconnected and serendipitous network of nevertheless comparable musical vanguards. These musical expressions have more than just national connections, though, as witnessed by some of the bands’ explicit references to other non-Colombian, Latin-American bands or musics (past and present). According to these references, these bands and musics have played various roles in the development of the Colombian movement (e.g., inspiration, model, partnership, support, identification, etc.). In fact, one could probably make the case that these local Colombian vanguards relate in more than one way to other urban musical practices, not only in Latin America, but also in other parts of the world. However, it is not the central goal of the present work to analyze or reflect on the dynamics of these relationships, whether local or global, but rather to concentrate on the musical production of the local movement of Bogota that I call Rolo ET. While belonging to this partly heterogeneous musical mass, as expressed above, the bands

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24 Popular music genres from the Caribbean region of Colombia include collections of dances and airs known traditionally as ‘Música de Tambora’ or ‘Música de Acordeón’ (Tambora music or Accordeon music), such as Cumbia, Bullerengue, Mapalé, Chandé, Porro, or Vallenato. Even though they are separate dances and airs, each with its own characteristics, often times these musical expressions are generically known as Cumbia or Vallenato. When referring to this group of musical expressions I will use the generic expression ‘Cumbia-Vallenato complex,’ which means to include all of the varied expressions of these musics. For taxonomic descriptions of these dances and airs and their instruments see, for instance, Abadía (1973, 1981), Bermúdez (1985), Convers and Ochoa (2007), or Ocampo (1976, 1985, 2006). Examples of more critical (historical, sociological, and political) accounts regarding these musics include, for instance, Bermúdez (2003, 2006), Blanco (2009), Fernández and Vila (2013), Gutiérrez (1992), and Ochoa (2005 and 2006).

25 Nowadays there exist more than a dozen options to study music professionally in Bogota. Back then, though, there were no more than five institutions offering undergraduate programs in music or its equivalent, most of which had recently been founded. These institutions were Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Universidad Pedagógica (whose program focused on Music Education), the ASAAAB (whose program focused on the study of popular musics), Universidad Javeriana, and Universidad de los Andes. Examples include tropical music bands such as Los Corraleros de Majagual, Los Melódicos, or Alfredo Gutiérrez.

26 Examples include tropical music bands such as Los Corraleros de Majagual, Los Melódicos, or Alfredo Gutiérrez.

27 The music of American avant-garde composer and arranger John Zorn and his circle is arguably an example of a comparable musical movement outside of Colombia and Latin America.
and music of Rolo ET share unique attributes that I believe warrant an analysis of their music from the local situated vantage of Bogota.

More particularly, the nucleus of what I dub Rolo ET comprises the following bands or projects: Ensamble Polifónico Vallenato (EPV), Meridian Brothers, Frente Cumbiero, Los Pirañas, Chúpame el Dedo, Romperayo, and the slight outsider El Ombligo. However, during the course of this work, I will also briefly touch upon the music of other tangentially related bands from Bogota and elsewhere, such as Curupira, Puerto Candelaria, or Primero Mi Tía, all of which are included in the more alternative corners of NCM. In sum, the music I chose to analyze belongs to a broader set of musical projects that—as shown by Calle (2012), Botero and Ochoa (2009)—are typically grouped together not so much because of the stylistic attributes of their music per se, but rather because they are closely associated through various social and cultural channels and networks. Yet besides emerging and evolving because of these types of fundamentally social dynamics, I believe that the subset of musical projects I here name Rolo ET warrants a distinctive category also because of its unique sound world, no doubt partly motivated by ideological considerations. By the end of this study, I hope to have shown some musical and ideological reasons for which Rolo Experimental Tropidelia could be justifiably understood as constituting an idiosyncratic subcategory of the more musically ambiguous NCM movement.

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28 El Ombligo is a project by contrabass jazz player Santiago Botero. Even if Botero does not belong to the social group and generation of most of the musicians participating in other Rolo ET projects, his project finds particular inspiration in the kind of approach evinced in those projects. Coming from the jazz world, the sound world of El Ombligo is unique amongst the universe of Rolo ET. But unlike other jazz-based musical projects of NCM, El Ombligo does have a psychedelic flavor to it that puts it closer to other Rolo ET projects (especially the second volume). The subtitle of the albums, “Canción Psicotrópica y Jaleo” (Psychetropical song and jaleo) speaks of the particularity of the sound world found therein.
III. Musicological Approaches to Latin American and Colombian Musics

Latin-American Musicological Studies and Popular Music

Both outside and inside Latin America, musicological scholarship regarding Latin American music has tended to focus mainly on the study of popular musics. The first more or less systematic studies of Latin American musical phenomena date from the beginning of the twentieth century, mostly undertaken by composers of a nationalistic bent à la Bartók, interested in investigating a great variety of local musics to be used in their own work. At the same time, different personalities of several academic and artistic circles around the continent pressed similar types of agenda, creating their own accounts regarding the history and the present of local musics.

Systematic research by professional musicologists within Latin America (i.e., scholars specifically trained to conduct scientific research) is often times associated with the seminal work of Argentinean musicologist Carlos Vega, who also focused on the study and theorization of urban popular musics, or, as he used to call them, ‘mesomusics’ (in Spanish, mesomúsicas). Other early important contributions from Latin American scholars to the study/research of Latin American popular musics include the work of Lauro Ayestarán, Samuel Claro Valdés, Francisco Curt Lange, and Isabel Aretz. Meanwhile, outside of Latin America, one can highlight the early contributions of scholars like Charles Seeger, George List, and

29 For reviews of musicological literature in Colombia focusing on popular musics see, for instance, Miñana (2000) and Santamaría (2009). Both of these studies underscore this tendency of the musicological community to focus on the study of popular musics. In contrast, to my knowledge there is no single review regarding the study of Colombian ‘Classical’ or ‘Concert’ music. The only textbook addressing this topic is the now classic and clearly outdated Historia de la Música en Colombia by José Perdomo Escobar (1963 [though probably written in the 1940s]). More recently, Colombian contemporary composer Rodolfo Acosta (2007) wrote a valuable, yet—in musicological terms—unsystematic account of the principal developments in Colombian contemporary composition since the 1980s.

30 Examples include Mexican composers Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas, Cuban Alejandro García Caturla and Amadeo Roldán, Brazilian Heitor Villalobos and Mozart Camargo Guarnieri, or Colombian Guillermo Uribe Holguín, among many others in Latin America.

Robert Stevenson, the former two in relation to popular musics, and the latter in relation to Latin American music of the Colonial period.

The trend of Latin American music studies concentrating predominantly on popular musics (both past and present) has been a constant since those seminal days, and still remains the general rule both in Latin American and American scholarship on the subject. Of course, epistemological, methodological, and philosophical approaches have varied according to the historical transformations within the discipline, both inside and outside of Latin America. Early research is therefore associated, for example, with structuralist methods32 while more recent studies exemplify either the anthropological/sociological shift that is typical of ethnomusicological studies from the 1980s onward33, or the critical approaches typical of disciplines like British Cultural Studies that are pervasive in the so-called New Musicology34. Both of the latter approaches epitomize the postmodern academic environment in the humanities of the late twentieth century.

Research devoted to Colombian musical practices in particular is not the exception. Here, the tendency also has been to gravitate towards the study of popular musics, albeit from varied standpoints. However, within this universe of studies, musicological approaches as such are not the rule, especially inside Colombia. While one might probably find traces of considerable amounts of (mostly pseudo) musicological research that has been done in the past and continues to be done in the present, a majority of this research has not been and continues not to be officially published in academic media, partly due to its informal, non-rigorous nature. Most published material corresponds to work of scholars who have been trained outside Colombia (mainly in Europe or the U.S.), which speaks of the still incipient state of professionalization of the discipline within the country. One can see nonetheless a more promising future for the developing discipline within Colombia; provided that 1) these internationally trained musicologists

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32 One famous example is Vega’s work on transcriptions of Argentinean folk songs first published in 1941 “La música popular argentina. Fraseología.” George List’s (1980) fieldwork and compilation of musical materials in the Colombian Caribbean region represents a sort of transition between purely structuralist or taxonomic studies, and wider contextual approaches.

33 See, for instance, Birenbaum’s (2009) ethnographic study of the Afro-Colombian musical practices of the Pacific region or Calle’s (2012) sociological study of ‘New Colombian music.’

34 Ana María Ochoa’s (2002, 2005, and 2006) critical outlook of Vallenato and the creation of its canon is a good example of this type of approach, as well as Carolina Santamaria’s (2007) problematizing of the idea of nation within ‘New Colombian Musics,’ in the context of the world music market.
continue to engage in research related to local musics, and 2) that at least some of them engage in the task of leading the training of new musicologists at local institutions, amongst other factors.

**Dissertation-specific Literature Review**

The salient *musicological* literature related to the universe of Colombian popular musics that is pertinent to the present study (mainly musical practices/genres originating in the Caribbean region of the country, and particularly the cumbia-vallenato complex) corresponds, then, to the work of a handful of Colombian and international scholars, most of whom have approached the subject from an ethnomusicological point of view. In general, these scholars have thus concentrated their efforts on problematizing or elucidating aspects related to various fields surrounding these musical practices, generally including a mixture of social, anthropological, political, and cultural issues.\(^{35}\)

Noteworthy as examples and particularly relevant to my dissertation are the works of Héctor Fernández-L’Hoeste and Pablo Vila (2013) and Darío Arboleda Blanco (2005 and 2009) on cumbia as a transnational phenomenon, and those of Simón Calle (2012), Oscar Hernández (2009 and 2015) and Manuel Sevilla et al. (2015) on Colombian contemporary urban musical practices and musical signification. Trained initially as a sociologist, but also having practiced journalism, Calle investigated sociological aspects of a particular subset of musicians that belong to the NCM movement as it developed in Bogota since the late 1990s and throughout the first decade of the present century, through the use of a series of theoretical tools from the field of sociology and using mostly ethnographic methods. Meanwhile, Oscar Hernández (2009) has studied the proliferation of appropriations of Colombian popular musics of the Pacific Coast by white/mestizo bands in urban centers during the last couple of decades. In this work, Hernández’s central interest is the problem of identity, particularly focusing on the way identities are created, transformed, and negotiated within the dynamics of these musical ‘collaborations’ and/or borrowings.

\(^{35}\) Early literature of these popular genres is mostly descriptive (particularly taxonomic) in nature. Examples include Abadía (1973, 1981), Bermúdez (1985), List (1980), Ocampo (1976, 1985), and Zapata (1962).
More recently, Hernández (2015) has studied the ways in which a universe of musical topics that is nowadays traditionally associated with popular musics of the Andean and the Caribbean regions of Colombia was constructed through verbal and musical discourses during the first half of the twentieth century. In this work, Hernández is essentially preoccupied with the political motivations and implications of this construction of topical fields, which tends to fixate in the imaginary of the nation the idea that there are certain supposedly essential/inherent, affective qualities inscribed in the musics of each region. In so far as Hernández deals directly with the study of musical signification and its sociological implications via a particular appropriation of the idea of musical topics in Colombian music, this work constitutes a central reference for my dissertation with regards both to the repertoire it touches upon (though in a slightly tangential manner) and to some methodological and conceptual aspects (see particularly Chapter 2).

Finally, there is the work by Sevilla et al., focused specifically on tracing the history, development, and meaning of the musical production and musical career of tropipop star Carlos Vives (see Chapters 2 and 5). This source is particularly relevant to the extent that it offers a critical portrayal of the phenomenon of Vives, who is perhaps the most recognized and popular artist of NCM. Within their work, Sevilla et al. account for the appearance of more alternative collective of musicians such as Rolo ET in part deriving from Carlos Vives’s boom of the 1990s. The portrayal and interpretation of Vives’s music by Sevilla et al. serves here as an example of a contrasting development within NCM.

Fernández-L’Hoeste, Vila and Arboleda, on the other hand, have concentrated their work on the transnational flows of cumbia, tracing and characterizing the varied flavors of local cumbias throughout Latin America in the former case, and investigating the origins and dynamics of the social and musical flows between Colombia and Mexico in the latter case. Amongst other significant musicological works related to the cumbia-vallenato complex, I should mention here Ana María Ochoa’s (2005 and 2006) discussion of the relationships between literature (words) and politics, and their central role in the construction of vallenato as the mythic genre it has come to be in Colombia. Finally, Peter Wade’s (2002) work on Colombian tropical music of the second half of the twentieth century (i.e., a particular subset of popular musics from the Caribbean region of the country) has been the single, most complete reference around these musical practices for anyone addressing the subject since its publication. Wade focuses on
the economic, commercial, and social dynamics of the phenomenon, thoroughly describing how these dynamics helped to shape the specific development of Colombian tropical music in the twentieth century.

Except Hernández, who straightforwardly advocates for the need of engaging with ‘the music as such’ in sociological studies revolving around musical practices, none of the other authors focuses on the analysis of the sonic aspects of the musical practice as such. Any discussion related to meaning is therefore tangential at the most, and arising from contextual aspects. In this sense, my dissertation principally seeks to shift the discussion so that the elucidation of the nature of the musical discourses (understood as codified and patterned constructions of sound) and their contribution to the creation of meaning become a central and necessary aspect of the musicological research related to local musics. Underlying this call is of course an advocacy for the need of a constant (re)creation and use of sophisticated tools for the critical analysis of musical sounds and structures as an indispensable contribution to musical research, regardless of the questions being asked. In the necessarily interdisciplinary and collective quest that is the investigation of musical meaning, music analysis constitutes a small, yet important link in the chain and cannot be overlooked or set aside on the premise that musical sounds are, above all, ineffable. Precisely in relation to the problem that musical ineffability represents to studies on musical signification, the next section seeks to provide the theoretical support that guides my analysis and interpretation of Rolo ET.

IV. Musical Codes: a theoretical interpretational framework of musical signification

In this chapter’s introductory section, I stated how the present study is fundamentally an attempt to construe a sonically-grounded interpretation of Rolo ET’s music within the context in which it arose and developed. I also stated that such a hermeneutic enterprise requires a theoretical framework around the issue of musical signification, to serve as a conceptual support for the interpretative observations arising from the musical analysis. In what follows, I present precisely this theoretical framework, which in the present case revolves around one possible application to music of Umberto Eco’s idea that all signification is possible because of a culturally constructed underlying rule that connects the material expression of signs with its possible meanings. My whole examination of the semantic dimension of Rolo
ET’s sound world, and in turn also of my interpretation of Rolo ET’s idiosyncratic musical treatment of previously codified musical elements, is dependent upon a distinctive understanding of how this “culturally constructed underlying rule” is fashioned in music. In the spirit of clarifying my working assumptions, I offer, then, the following detailed presentation of the theoretical framework of musical signification upon which my subsequent analysis and interpretation of Rolo ET’s music relies.

**Semiotics and Musical Signification**

It is safe to say that music is somehow meaningful to people, to human beings. In very colloquial terms, one could say that music means something to people, or, perhaps conversely, that people make some sense of the music to which they listen. To that extent, at least, we can say that music signifies. And if it does, there is a "how," and thus, there is musical *semiosis*. The question of how something becomes meaningful, in other words, is a question for the field of semiotics—or of musical semiotics, in the specific case of music. Semiotics deals fundamentally with the question about the ways in which a signifying system produces meanings. The search for answers to that question with regards to music, as happens with most human signifying systems, is quite complex. A sole approach cannot cover this complexity; a single field of research, let alone a single researcher, cannot possibly deal with the multiple approaches that would need to coalesce in order to begin to holistically tackle the problem. Simply put, we find ourselves with an epistemological problem. Answers to the ways in which music signifies must therefore necessarily arise from a sum of multiple historical efforts, which approach the subject from different angles. For if one conclusion can be drawn from the history of the field of musical semiotics it is that each proposed answer is but a small piece of a huge puzzle.36

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36 Semiotic-based approximations to the question of musical signification have tended to privilege particular parts of the complex chain of musical semiosis (i.e., the process of signification). Some have chosen to focus mainly on the musical text or musical structure per se (e.g., Ruwet, 1972; Nattiez, 1976; Tarasti, 1994; Agawu, 2008); some on the cognitive processes of the addressee or receiver (e.g., López Cano 2004 and 2007); some on the cultural or social dimensions of musical signification as they are coded in the music (e.g., Hatten, 1994; Monelle, 2000 and 2006); some on the phenomenological aspects of musical semiosis (e.g., Cumming, 2000; Turino, 1999 and 2014), or some on the performative aspect of musical signification (e.g., Martínez, 2001). Naturally, most studies include elements from various of these categories (e.g., Agawu, 1991 is an approach which combines textual, syntactical analysis and analysis of the cultural imprints residing in the music through the notion of musical topics [see below]).
Within those approaches appear first the ones preoccupied primarily with musical syntax (e.g., Nattiez, 1976 and 1990; Ruwet, 1972, 1987; Tarasti, 1994).\textsuperscript{37} Influenced, as all studies are, by their own intellectual zeitgeist, these so-called structuralist approaches sought to understand the phenomenon of signification within the patterned organization of music “within itself.” Here arose, for instance, the much criticized notion of the neutral level—i.e., the level of allegedly pure, uninfluenced sound structure—famously borrowed by Jean-Jacques Nattiez from Jean Molino’s tripartite model (see Nattiez, 1976, 1990).\textsuperscript{38} Many associate the development of structuralist approaches in general, and to music in particular, with the work of French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In this respect, Michael Klein points out how literary theorist Jonathan Culler, for example, “quickly noted a connection between [structuralism’s] diverse practices and the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure,” and how “most later attempts to define structuralism begin by reestablishing this same connection.” (2005, p. 22) Klein describes the Saussure-inspired structuralist approaches as follows: “broadly, the model of Saussurian semiotics infused structuralism with an objective—\textit{to uncover and formalize the conditions of meaning in cultural phenomena.} The distinction between what things mean and how they mean underpins the structuralist project.” (Idem; emphasis added) Following Klein, one could say, then, that the early structuralist approaches to musical semiotics were mainly concerned with formalizing the “conditions of meaning” in music through a close examination of musical syntax. Employing Klein’s terms, these early semiotic approaches could be conceived of as constituting a “\textit{poetics} of formalism . . . concerned with the \textit{how}, if not the \textit{what}, of [musical] meaning.” (Idem; emphasis added)

With regards to music, the question of \textit{what} it signifies is much more difficult to approach than the question of \textit{how} it signifies.\textsuperscript{39} Early semiotic approaches to musical analysis left the “what” largely within other words, while one can see a tendency to prioritize a certain angle within a given study or approach, different aspects will necessarily appear, given the impossibility of completely dissecting the complex process of signification.

\textsuperscript{37} For a comprehensive review and explanation of early semiotic approaches in musical studies, see Monelle (1992). More recent critical reviews of the field of musical semiotics in general can be found in Hernández (2012) and Naomi Cumming (NY).

\textsuperscript{38} Simply put, Molino’s model makes a ternary conceptual partition of the process of signification. In Molino’s view, the process of signification occurs through the interaction of three levels—the \textit{poietic} level, the \textit{neutral} level, and the \textit{esthesic} level, which colloquially can be understood as the level of production, the artifact or medium of expression per se (i.e., sound), and the level of reception.

\textsuperscript{39} The whole enterprise of recent music theory can be in fact understood as a highly sophisticated approach to the workings of musical structure within particular musical languages. Music theory, in other
the musical structure itself, which is to say that their analytical results accounted only for *intra-musical* references (or even “intra-piece” references, that is, references of sections of a piece to other sections of the same piece). Saussure’s conception of signification understands the sign as a fundamentally binary structure consisting of signifier and signified, the latter being the semantic level of the sign—or, in more colloquial terms, the “what” of the signification process. In these terms, structuralist semiotic approaches understood the “signified” in music as certain partitions of the sonic structure of the music itself. Now, semiotic approaches like those of Eero Tarasti (1994) or Márta Grábocz (2009) (which by and large consist of the application of classical narratology to the study of musical structures), tended to include terminology that seemed to provide musical pieces with an extra-musical dimension. But this extra-musicality was really only a byproduct of the terminology they used, since the analysts never claimed to say anything about meaning external to the pieces under investigation. The slightly more hermeneutically-oriented language, in other words, still described the intra-musical forces of the piece analyzed, understood fundamentally through the lens of narrative structures.\(^{40}\)

We could say that, at least within the recent field of music theory, the semantic level of music (i.e., the *extra-musical* signifying implication of musical structures) was approached seriously only with the advent of the notion of musical topic in the 1980s, as well as the subsequent evolution of this notion within the realm of what is now known as “topic theory.”\(^ {41}\) The term “topic,” used specifically in reference to musical phenomena within the realm of Western classical music, was first elaborated in the work of Leonard Ratner. The notion was initially amplified by the work of W. A. Mozart’s music by Wye Jamison Allanbrook (1983), and it was later semiotically re-construed in the analyses of Western classical music by Kofi Agawu (1992) and of Beethoven’s music by Robert Hatten (1994). Approaches that take into account the notion of musical topic have since grown exponentially (see Agawu, 2007; McKay, 2007).

Ratner initially described topics as “a thesaurus of characteristic figures” that were “associated with various feelings and affections,” or had a “picturesque flavor.” (Ratner, 1980, p. 9) More generally


\(^{41}\) For a critical and historical review of “topic theory” in music studies, see Agawu (2007) and McKay (2007).
speaking, such figures or topics were conceived of as “subjects of musical discourse.” (Idem) The key insight drawn from Ratner’s initial exposition of the concept and its subsequent development is that the particular non-verbal, sonic materials used in many musics are not just abstract or pure sounds, as the advocates of absolute music would have it. On the contrary, many musical materials contain within themselves culturally constructed associations or, in more overtly semiotic terms, correlations with extra-musical elements (see Hatten, 1994 and Monelle, 2006 [pp. 22–23]). With musical topics, the question of “what is this music about” and not just of “how is this music organized so as to produce any meaning” began to be tackled beginning from the sounds themselves. In other words, unlike purely hermeneutic interpretations that typically rely on the biographical and cultural context of the composer of a given piece, analyses that take into account the notion of musical topics tend to (explicitly or implicitly) understand musical meaning as deriving from a constructed rule (in Hatten [1994 pp. 29–34], for instance, understood as correlation through markedness), whereby certain sonic configurations have become conventionally associated with something else outside the music (or at least the piece of music) itself.

My mention of a “constructed rule” serves to make evident the connection between the notion of musical topic as I have briefly depicted it in its semiotic construal, and one of the basic principles of the semiotic theory of the Italian semiologist and philosopher Umberto Eco ([1976] 2005). After theoretically contextualizing his study, Eco presents a general theory of semiotics in two main parts. The first part is dedicated to what he calls a “theory of codes” (pp. 48-150) and the second to what he calls a “theory of sign production” (pp. 151-313). Eco explains that the “theory of sign production” pertains to the world of pragmatics, i.e., the actual practical use of sign systems, while his “theory of codes” is independent of the practical world. The implication is that within Eco’s framework, the study of what he calls “codes” can dispense with any empirical corroborations, which would instead pertain to the world of “sign production.” In other words, as understood by Eco, codes and their functioning are independent of their actual use, even if the origin of a given code comes from the practical world (as it often does). Once the structure of a code is put into place, one can study its properties without regard to how it came to be or how that particular code functions in practice. But before further developing the implications this understanding has with respect to the present study, it is necessary to first address the question of what an Ecoian code is,
and how it can be understood in relation to musical signification in general, and musical topics in particular.

**Eco’s Codes**

Before presenting his definition of the term “code,” Eco makes sure to differentiate the concept of "communication" from the concept of "signification," precisely because the existence of a code is what allows processes of signification to occur. For Eco, communication can be understood as merely a passage of stimuli, an event that by itself does not imply signification as such. On the other hand, whenever the destination of a given signal is a human being (henceforth “addressee”), and “the signal is not merely a stimulus but arouses an interpretive response in the addressee,” there is a process of signification. Moreover, “when—on the basis of an underlying rule—something actually presented to the perception of the addressee stands for something else, there is signification." (Eco, 1976, p. 8; emphasis added) A code is precisely this “underlying rule,” for which any process of signification “is made possible by the existence of a code.” (Idem)

More specifically, this underlying rule can be conceived of as one that associates elements of a syntactic system (e.g, a musical phrase) with elements of a semantic system (e.g., the possible extra-musical associations of that musical phrase). As a general rule, elements of a syntactic system are always materially present. They correspond to Saussure’s signifiers or what Eco calls the expression plane of a sign-function. The elements of the semantic system are, on the contrary, materially absent, in the sense that they constitute the world of coded correspondences of those signifiers. They correspond to Saussure’s signifieds or what Eco calls the content plane of a sign-function. Eco thus writes that “a code is a system of signification, insofar as it couples present entities with absent units,” or, in other words, insofar as it provides rules of correlation between the expression and content planes.42 (1976; emphasis added)

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42 In this respect, Eco writes that “when a code associates the elements of a system of transmission [i.e., syntactic elements] with the elements of a transmitted system [i.e., semantic elements], the first one becomes the expression of the second one, which, in turn, becomes the content of the first one.” (Eco, [1976] 2005, p. 83; TBA)
But perhaps the most important feature of the Ecoian understanding of the term “code” is that the rules of correlation that underlie any given system of signification are possible only by a process of social conventionalization. Eco thus writes that “there is a signification system (and therefore a code) when there is the socially conventionalized possibility of generating sign-functions provided that the correlation has been previously posited by a social convention.” (Eco, 1976, p. 4; emphasis added)

Whereas for Saussure a sign is a signifier and a signified that corresponds to each other, with no explicit contextual condition for this correspondence, for Eco a sign is “always constituted by one or more elements of an expression plane conventionally placed in correlation with one or more elements of a content plane.” A sign thus only exists whenever there is a correlation of this type that is “recognized by a human society.” (Eco, [1976] 2005, p. 83; TBA, emphasis added)

Even if the characterization of what constitutes this “human society” is never totally clear in Eco, the main point to be taken is that signification is mainly dependent on a previous collective agreement. This dependence moreover implies that, just like societies or human collectives, codes and signification are malleable, i.e., susceptible to change. Yet also implied in Eco’s formulation of codes is the fact that this susceptibility to change varies from code to code, and is dependent on the degree of collective appropriation of a given code. In other words, there can be correlations in a given culture that have been more solidly established, typically through pervasive repetitive use over long periods of time. On the contrary, there can be correlations that have been less solidly established, either because they have existed for a shorter period of time or because they are, culturally speaking, more confined (i.e., their use hasn’t been generalized or is agreed upon by smaller portions of a given population). The former correlations are said to be over-codified and the latter under-codified.

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43 Eco calls the expression and content planes the functives of a sign-function. “A sign-function is realized,” he writes, “when two functives (expression and content) enter into a mutual correlation; the same functive can also enter into another correlation, thus becoming a different functive and therefore giving rise to a new sign-function.” (Eco, 1976, p. 49) Elsewhere, he similarly writes that “a semiotic function exists when an expression and a content are in correlation, and both elements become functives of the correlation.” (Eco, 2005, p. 83; TBA)

44 Eco differentiates “signal” from “sign” in the following way: “a signal is the pertinent unit of a system that may become a system of expression correlated to a content, but which could also remain a system of physical elements lacking a semiotic function….A signal can be a stimulus that doesn’t mean anything but that can cause or provoke something; but when it is used as the acknowledged antecedent of a foreseen consequent, it is considered a sign, given it stands for its consequent (be it for the emitter or the receiver).” (Eco, 2005, p. 83; TBA) Therefore, while any process of communication includes a signal, said signal formally becomes a sign once a process of signification is realized through the activation of a conventionalized correlation, i.e., a code.
Finally, before connecting Eco’s ideas with the specificities of musical signification, it is important to point out that in Eco’s semiotic framework, referentiality to the real world (what is called the extensionality of a given system of signification) is not a condition for the factuality of a code. On the contrary, within the realm of the theory of codes (i.e., independent of the actual use of codes), the semantic space of a code is never constituted by facts that materially exist in the world. Simply put, the meaning (or signified, or content plane, or object) of a sign is not “something” in the material world, but rather what Eco calls a “cultural unit.” Eco puts it as follows: “we need to know to which cultural unit (i.e., to which set of intentionally analyzable properties) corresponds the content of said expression. The semiotic object of a semantics is primarily the CONTENT, not the referent, and we must define the content as a CULTURAL UNIT (or a set, or even a haziness of, interconnected cultural units).” (Eco, [1976] 2005, p. 104; TBA, emphasis added) But what is a cultural unit? Eco defines it as “simply something that [a given] culture has defined as a unit different from others, and can thus be a person, a geographical location, a thing, a feeling, a hope, an idea, a hallucination.” (Eco, [1976] 2005, p. 112; TBA) The point is, then, that referentiality is not a condition of signification: “from a semiotic point of view [meaning] can only be a cultural unit.” (Eco, 1976, p. 67) The semantic elements of the structure of a code are thus cultural constructions, of which real-world things are mere tokens.

We have, in sum, a semiotic framework that understands signification to be possible by the existence of codes, understood as culturally constructed underlying rules, which is to say that they have been socially conventionalized. This understanding moreover allows for the malleability of these codes, through the natural changes typically arising from the use of said codes in their cultural environments. And finally, we have a framework that, given its semiotic nature, understands the meaning derived from any process of signification not as a real-world referent, but as content of a cultural nature, or, in Eco’s words, a cultural unit. The question remains as to how this framework relates to musical signification in general, and the theoretical construction of musical topics in particular, to which I now turn my attention.

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45 Eco straightforwardly states it as follows: “the meaning of a term (and therefore the object it ‘denotes’) is a CULTURAL UNIT.” (Eco, [1976] 2005, p. 111; TBA)
46 Monelle (2006, p. 23) points out that this definition is actually a quote by David Schneider.
Dimensions of Conventionality: From Musical Topics to Musical Codes

Since Eco’s theory of codes is meant to be all embracing, it is understood as accounting for any system of signification, including, of course, music. Not surprisingly, some major studies in musical semiotics have already used Eco’s ideas as part of their theoretical framework (e.g., Hatten, 1994; Samuels, 1995; Klein, 2005; Monelle, 2006). Eco’s understanding of the workings of systems of signification is especially akin to the general understanding of the idea of musical topic within the scholarly community, particularly the one developed and proposed by Raymond Monelle. In other words, the concept of musical topic can be illustrated eloquently in terms of Eco’s ideas. A musical topic can thus be understood as a system of signification whose correspondences or correlations between the elements of the expression plane (the signifiers) and the elements of the content plane (the signifieds) have been established through a historical process of social conventionalization. In a musical topic, a culturally constructed rule underlies the association between the sonic dimension of music and the extra-musical (or at least extra-textual) “something” the music denotes. Eco writes how in music “there are musical ‘signs’ (or syntagms) with an explicit denotative value (trumpet signals in the army) and there are syntagms or entire ‘texts’ possessing pre-culturalized connotative value (‘pastoral’ or ‘thrilling’ music, etc.).” He then adds how “in some historical eras music was conceived as conveying precise emotional and conceptual meanings, established by codes, or, at least, ‘repertoires.’” (Eco, 1976, p. 11; emphasized) Eco thus provides, in his own terminology, a generic description of the type of phenomenon that in music constitutes or at least contributes to constituting a musical topic.

Now, an Ecoian view of a musical topic understands the elements of its content plane as cultural units that are associated with certain musical elements by an underlying rule or code. In his famous study about the musical topic, Monelle (2006, p. 25) provides an eloquent example of how to understand Eco’s idea of cultural unit within the world of musical signification. He shows how in the topic of the noble horse, the content of said topic is not an actual horse, but what he calls a cultural horse. The object of the sonic signifiers participating in this musical topic does not exist in the real world (though an actual horse can be a materialized example of the notion of cultural horse). Following Eco, Monelle writes: “when a musical text evokes a horse . . . there is never a question of referentiality or extension, but always of the
acceptance and formulation of a cultural unit." Thus Monelle dismisses the perennial problem of music's inability to create explicit references. "The idea of ‘referential,’ ‘extramusical,’ or ‘extrageneric’ meaning is apt to arouse resistance in some quarters," he writes. "Music cannot, it is believed, ‘refer’ to anything, because its reference can only be known from a verbal text or title. This may turn out to be a false problem, because ‘referentiality’ is not really a semiotic idea at all." (2006, p. 20) The web of signifieds of a musical topic should thus be understood as discursive, cultural constructions, which go beyond the realm of sounding music per se, to include constellations of ideas circulating in various expressive media within a given culture.

Even if the meanings of a musical topic are capable of touching cultural realms far larger than “music per se,” the tools by which it triggers such conventionalized associations are still purely musical elements. If the content plane of a musical topic is theoretically understood as a set of cultural units, the theoretical expression plane of a musical topic consists of a set of generic types of musical structures, materialized in practice by actual sounding musical objects. The nature of the musical medium is such that the actual material expressions of the set of possible signifiers of a given code are not as stable as those of, say, the verbal systems of signification (i.e., verbal language). Differently put, the actual musical materials that could potentially serve as the signifiers of a given code or musical topic are tremendously varied. However, as Robert Hatten points out, “correlated musical structures, unlike linguistic structures, may not have consistent forms; but they can exist as relatively stable types in the style, with a wide range of tokens of each type possible in various works in the style." (Hatten, 1994, p. 166) In more colloquial terms, the materialized signifiers or tokens of a given musical topic come in various forms and sizes, so to speak, yet this variety is theoretically grouped into stable types, precisely by virtue of the ruling code. What this means is that an addressee knowledgeable of the code—or, in Hatten’s terms, a competent

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47 Hatten makes a similar point when he writes that “music structural types correlate with cultural units as types of expression, not necessarily with perceived or experienced emotions.” (Hatten, 1994, p. 45; emphasis added)
48 For details of his argument, see Monelle (2006, pp. 20-26)
49 Hatten defines type as “an ideal or conceptual category defined by features or a range of qualities that are essential to its identity. A type is understood or conceived as an inference at the level of cognition; it does not exist at the level of perception, though acts of perception are fundamental to its inference.” (Hatten, 1994, p. 44-45) Token, on the other hand, is “the perceptible entity that embodies or manifests the features or qualities of the type. Generally, those features and qualities are not the only ones which the token possesses; they are merely the ones which are relevant to its being understood as a token of the type.” (Hatten, 1994, p. 45)
listener—will tend to automatically recognize a specific token as a member of the types that constitute the theoretical expression plane of said code. This theoretical insight is of course never quite stable in practice, partly because of the relative malleability of codes in general, and the unique instability of the musical medium in particular. It is precisely this potential play between the theoretical malleability of Ecoian codes and the distinctive plasticity of the musical medium which provides the space and the opportunity for musicians to expressively meddle, as it were, with more or less established codes.

À propos the notion of “more or less established codes,” I believe that the ideas of the plasticity and of the varying degrees of stability of Ecoian codes have some interesting implications with regards to the nature of the processes of musical signification, especially as they are construed in topic theory. For when can one say a musical topic has been formally constituted? At what point in the process of social conventionalization can one say that the code ruling the signifying dynamics of a musical topic has been sufficiently conventionalized, so as to name that system of signification a topic? Amongst the many theoretical complications and vacuums of topic theory, I consider this issue to be particularly problematic, yet at the same time particularly insightful with respect to the nature of collective musical signification. I believe that the notion of musical topics in part seeks to provide a theoretical framework that supports the mostly intuitive suspicion that most musical practices contain the potential for fabricating shared meaning—beyond the personal, idiosyncratic relationships any individual can establish with sounding music. In this sense, a musical topic constitutes an ideal category, wherein shared musical meaning is understood and demonstrated to exist as a result of a process of historical, collective conventionalization. The relative success of such a demonstration necessarily implies thinking of this category as “universal” as possible. In order to be recognized as such, in other words, a musical topic must contain correlations that can be proven to have been sufficiently sedimented in the widest possible cultural and social space.

However, conceiving shared musical meaning in an Ecoian sense does not prevent us from understanding that collective musical signification works in similar fashion even when a given correlation has not been sufficiently established. This insufficiency could be deriving from the limited size of the social sample where the correlation has been establishing itself, or from a lack of the type of pervasive repetition of the correlation that would ensure a stable coding. Even so, the idea still applies that an underlying rule that connects expression and content planes is what allows for the existence of a shared
musical meaning, no matter the dimension of the social group. The extent to which a certain meaning triggered by music is more or less "universal" does not have to do with the workings of musical signification per se, but with the degree of conventional codification of certain correlations. Music could mean a certain "something" to just one person at a given time, or a certain "something"—i.e., the same or a similar "something"—to a huge collective of people at a given time. Those would be the two ends of the spectrum of the degree of "collectiveness" of musical meaning. Under Eco's view, the way a system of signification is structured (i.e., following an underlying rule of conventionalized codification) would remain the same, independently of the degree of collectiveness of a certain set of correlations between music and cultural units. Whether we are speaking of a family to which a certain set of sounds are associated with a certain set of meanings, or of a broad human culture within which there also exist such types of associations, signification can be theoretically understood as emerging from a conventionalized code. For conventionalization can be understood to be happening both within the family milieu or within the scope of a whole culture. We could speak of dimensions of collective signification that could go from musical codes understood by just a few people to musical codes understood by the grand collectives we understand as "cultures." The expression "musical topic" would correspond to the latter type of codes. Coming as it does from the broader concept of topos, the expression is reserved to characterize phenomena of musical signification in which data is sufficiently available and sufficiently broad so as to support claims of a shared musical meaning. The separate category exists, I suspect, for epistemological reasons. Yet as hard as it surely is, field and documentary research could in theory be applied to any type of social and historical dimension, so as to collect data that could sufficiently support the discovery and characterization of decisively more “local” musical codes.50

The existence of more “universal” musical codes such as musical topics or more “local” ones also speaks of the aforementioned idea that there exist over-codified and under-codified systems of signification. When one calls a certain set of conventionalized correlations a “musical topic,” the implication is that there is a documented corroboration of this correlations within the cultural space of a significant number of people. In music, such a phenomenon would be the epitome of an over-codified

50 Philip Tagg’s and Robert Clarida’s (2003) extensive empirical study about the extra-musical meanings of ten little tunes is one eloquent example of such a possibility. The study is also a corroboration of the titanic task of this kind of systematic empirical approach to the study of musical meaning, particularly focused on its semantic dimension.
system of signification. Yet, as a general rule, no musical topic actually precedes practice. Differently put, it is in practice that the correlations are gradually formed and eventually conventionally fixed. Of course, as Eco himself states, this fact doesn’t preclude that, once established, one cannot study the structure of a given correlation, without regards to its practical use. But the point is that at some point during the process of conventionalization, the correlations that eventually became relatively fixed were still either locally confined or not consistently established. At some point, in other words, the system of signification that would eventually become sufficiently conventionalized so as to acquire the denomination “musical topic” was still an under-codified system of signification. Regardless of the size of the human collective within which a certain process of (in this case musical) codification is taking place, we can speak of a spectrum between over-codified and under-codified systems of signification.

I have attempted to portray a particular understanding of musical signification, taking into account the ideas presented by Eco in his theory of signs. I have also tried to show how musical topics constitute a unique category situated at the end of a wide spectrum of possible musical codes, all of whose meanings constitute cultural units, and all of which are constructed through processes of collective conventionalization. Finally, I have briefly touched on the idea that there also exists a spectrum of codes that organizes particular structures of signification from under-codified ones to over-codified ones. Taking all these considerations and caveats into account, how does one go about approaching musical signification, with the still structuralist, yet also culturally grounded Ecoian perspective of semiosis in mind? In the next section, I will briefly explain the ways in which these ideas will be brought to bear in my analysis of Rolo ET’s music and its potential meanings.

V. Method: the discursive and intermusical construction of musical codes, and the semiotic-hermeneutic divide

Monelle insisted on the importance of studying the broader (extra-musical) cultural networks that work around and within the musical manifestation of a topic, in order to more comprehensibly grasp the myriad of connotations of a sounding topic within a particular cultural context. In doing so, he reasonably helped turn the balance of musical semiotic studies towards the semantic dimension of the musical code,
which in music theory quarters in general, and semiotic approaches to musical analysis in particular, had largely been ignored before the advent of topic theory. At the same time, I believe that a distinctive feature of any semiotically grounded approach to musical analysis and/or interpretation is precisely the careful consideration of the syntactic dimension of the code, which correspond to the sounds themselves, their organization, and their intra-musical, intermusical and inter-media relationships (see below). À propos the importance of sound, Eco writes that “an aesthetic text is a set of messages in which a particular treatment of the channel (or of the matter in which the signifiers are realised) becomes very pertinent.” (Eco, [1976] 2005, p. 92; TBA, emphasis added) In music, this so-called channel is of course the sound itself, and thus its particular treatment and the implications that this treatment has in terms of signification are indispensable for, and especially pertinent to, any interpretative study of music with a semiotic underpinning.

My study of Rolo ET’s music is framed by the semiotic understanding of musical codes, as I have construed it above, and follows both Monelle’s preoccupation about the cultural web of meanings of a given topic (or code) and Eco’s reminder about the pertinence of focusing on the treatment of the channel of the expressive medium, which in this case is the sound. Accordingly, it seeks to take into account both the expression and content planes of all intervening musical codes. Now, as previously noted, alongside the processual malleability of codes (whose degree depends partly on their level of conventionalization), the instability of material musical forms creates serious problems of interpretation for the analyst, at the same time that allows the potential for creative innovation and the plasticity of signification that are so characteristic of the musical medium. Let me first address the issue of the variability of musical forms and the problems this variability creates with regards to musical signification in general, and with the type of systematic correlations proposed by topic theory in particular.

In a sense, topic theory seeks to undermine these problems by attempting to create a sense of stability in the world of musical shapes (Hatten’s types). One may become suspicious of the degree of stability proposed in the formulation according to which certain generic types of musical forms systematically constitute the expression plane of a given musical topic (Ratner’s thesaurus). This proposition implies that any musical object taken to be a token of a certain type has to be immediately understood as conventionally correlated with a given set of meanings. This “fixation” of meaning is, of
course, troublesome, because actual musical forms are much less graspable than topic theory would like to have it. As Nicholas Cook (1994, 2000, and 2001) has variously argued, musical objects might not have that level of semantic specificity, but neither do they have infinite semantic possibilities. According to Cook, within a set of semantic possibilities, oftentimes the interaction of certain musical forms with other media (or other musical forms) renders that fuzzy field considerably more confined, much like quantum particles exist as mere probabilities that only become fixated when observed. Bolstering this notion with the idea of relatively stable musical codes—which in this light could be conceived of as mega semantic fields of connotation, historically and culturally constructed through complex processes of reiterative chains of signification—we can think of a musical code as a particularly complex historical and cultural medium, against which certain musical objects become semantically defined. In simpler terms, just as an image accompanying a particular musical form might generate a particular semantic understanding of this form, a musical code might constitute the horizon that supports the choice of a certain correlation between a musical form and a particular meaning over other plausible correlations.

Under this view, the search for operating musical codes within a given musical fragment, piece, or repertoire is the search for a horizon that puts semantic possibilities into perspective, this way aiding interpretative exercises. It is the search for the cultural, collective signification inscribed in the sounds themselves. The question remains how to perform this search. If the methodological problems that this question poses are, in principle, quite thorny, they become particularly taxing when one is dealing with either under-codified systems of signification, or with codes that—albeit having been more properly established—are yet to have been systematically studied and characterized. For instance, while a topical analysis of Western classical music carries within itself a series of complications, the fact is that there is a fair amount of information about that particular musical universe that has been collected and analyzed, in relation to the musical codes it uses. Apart from a notable interest from the part of the music scholarly community, the fact that this musical universe is sufficiently confined from both an expressive and a stylistic point of view, and that it is inscribed within the logic of what is largely a written tradition has

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51 Advocates of topic theory actually recognize such difficulties (see Agawu, 2007). To be fair, most approaches that use musical topics as part of their analytical toolkit are usually quite nuanced in their theoretical explanations. The stylistic and contextual spaces in which musical forms are presented play a decisive role in their interpretation as parts of musical topics. On the other hand, the ambiguities generated by these imprecisions are rich territories for hermeneutic interpretations. The inherent malleability of codes can thus be part of what explains the charm of signifying systems like music.
undoubtedly helped the enterprise of studying it from the perspective of topic theory. This musical universe is, moreover, confined to the past, for which an attempt of a *historically contextualized* understanding of its musical meanings does not have to address the issue of the malleability of codes (i.e., the change that a given code undergoes through its use).

In the case of Rolo ET, an analyst doesn't have such privileges. Rolo ET's music is still a "work in progress," so to speak. Many of the musical referents it uses are also of recent use (e.g., psychedelic or tropical music), and so these musical worlds in and of themselves are still undergoing changes that affect the degree of sedimentation of their conventionalized meanings. Even so, these musical worlds have had a sufficiently rich cultural history, so as to allow a tracing of possible processes of conventionalization. A starting hypothesis is that it is precisely the existence of this type of sedimented, conventionalized meanings in the musical materials used by Rolo ET that allow the understanding of this music as a *playing* with, and thus also a *commentary* about, these meanings. And, as we shall see, this particular treatment and presentation of the signifiers of relatively established musical codes (some more codified than others) can ultimately be understood as actions that contribute to the altering of these codes—to unique subversions of their conventionalized structures. This understanding, in turn, will allow for a hermeneutic interpretation of these alterations, in relation to some of the particular contexts in which this music is being used.

In this sense, the present study has both a semiotic and a hermeneutic dimension. Semiotically speaking, it attempts to elucidate some of the possible meanings embedded in the music of Rolo ET, first and foremost by tracing the musical codes that inhabit the type of musical sounds employed. Hermeneutically speaking, it attempts to interpret what the idiosyncratic uses of said codes are ultimately trying to say or express within a given context. With regards to the semiotic aspect of the study, the search for musical codes and their corresponding conventionalized associations entails on the one hand a tracking of the types of musical references pervasively found in the studied music, and on the other hand an examination of the ways in which these referenced musics are understood within some of the cultural milieus where they have been typically used.

Implied in the first task is a recognition that intertextuality—here re-named "intermusicality"—plays a crucial role in processes of musical signification and interpretation. To slightly paraphrasing
Michael Klein: “since as [listeners] we bring [other pieces and musics] to our understanding of a single [piece], some notion of [intermusicality], however defined, must underpin explicitly or implicitly our struggle to make meaning of a [piece].” (Klein 2005, 12; emphasis added) I subscribe to Klein’s insight that “the frontiers of music are never clear-cut: beyond its framing silence, beyond its inner form, it is caught up in a web of reference to other music: its unity is variable and relative. Musical texts speak among themselves.” (Idem, 4)

I borrow the distinction between intertextuality and intermusicality from Ingrid Monson, and strictly follow the rationale behind her distinction. Monson describes the notion of intermusicality, as opposed to intertextuality, as follows:

In jazz improvisation aural references are conveyed through primarily instrumental means, that is, without words. *While it is possible to call these references the "intertextual" aspect of music, I prefer to call them "intermusical" relationships to draw attention to a communication process that occurs primarily through musical sound itself rather than through words.* The word intermusical is best reserved for aurally perceptible musical relationships that are heard in the context of particular musical traditions. Associations carried primarily through song lyrics would be primarily intertextual, and *musical relationships observable with the aid of a score only might best be called intertextual musical relationships.*

Monson sees various advantages in using intertextuality as a tool with which to approach musical analysis. In this respect, she writes that “the productivity of the literature of intertextuality for ethnomusicology seems to me to be manifold: (1) It provides a way to return sound to our discussions while avoiding the problem of looking at music as an autonomous, reified product. (2) It emphasizes the historicity embedded in music events as process. (3) It recognizes that aural awareness is the product of a continuous socialization process that varies greatly from individual to individual and is made social by the degree of overlap in the sound worlds of groups of individuals.” (Monson, 1994, p. 309) In my view, her last point constitutes a formidable description of the type of dynamics that make a musical code, in an Ecoian sense, possible. The greater the degree of overlap in the sound worlds of groups of individuals, the greater the possibility that conventionalized correlations between music and cultural units arise.
about a similar process (though not using the same word), intermusicality “might best be concerned . . . with all the straightforward instances of appropriation from other works and styles, especially when those appropriations entail not merely syntactic borrowings but also borrowings of, or tropings upon, the correlations of appropriated material.”53 (p. 197; emphasis added) I believe Hatten’s clarification is important if one’s aim is to address the semiotic implications of intermusicality. In the specific case of Rolo ET, the examination of intermusical relationships within the musical fabric seeks not merely to establish the types of music it is (consciously or unconsciously) referencing, but also crucially to make sense of the semantic implications of the musical codes of the referenced musics or musical types, so as to tackle the question of the repercussions Rolo ET’s particular re-appropriation of said codes has on their original semantic spaces. To consider the re-appropriation of the intermusically referenced material is to consider the syntactic space or expression plane of Rolo ET’s music. Methodologically speaking, in order to analyze the nature of the expression plane of the analyzed music, I part from the musical fabric in and of itself, examine its constituent intermusical worlds and their original expression types, and then circle back to examine the ways in which these types are re-appropriated or sonically re-construed.

The analysis of the content plane of the analyzed music, on the other hand, necessarily has to transcend sound and consider some of the cultural units that are conventionally associated with the expression plane of the referenced intermusical worlds. As we shall see, some intermusical worlds of Rolo ET appear to be more “coded” than others, which is to say that the correlations between sounds and cultural meanings seem to be more solidly established and thus slightly more fixed in some musical worlds than in others. However, this appearance might also have to do with the extent to which a particular musical world has been studied from a semiotic or topical perspective. The world of Colombian tropical musics, for example, has been thoroughly studied by Hernández (2015), precisely in terms of the degree to which some meanings in these musics have been collectively conventionalized throughout the twentieth century (see Chapter 2). In his work, Hernández evinces the existence of a topic he dubs “alegría costeña” (i.e., coastal joy), the latter Spanish term being the demonym used for populations of the Colombian Caribbean coast. No such work has been yet done in relation to North American psychedelic music of the 1960s, for which the tracking of conventional associations will have to be done

53 Hatten defines intertextuality (i.e., what I here dub intermusicality) as “the use of different styles or works to enrich the discourse of a given work.” (Hatten, 1994, p. 197)
But the lack of studies approaching the repertoire from a perspective of topics or codes does not imply that such conventional associations do not exist. Musical topics in eighteenth-century Western European music surely existed, even if they were not systematically reported in scholarly studies of the period.

Taking into account these considerations, I seek to at least explore in a preliminary way the constellation of ideas revolving around some of the most salient intermusical worlds of Rolo ET. While intermusical relationships give us a clue about the sound worlds alluded to in this music, these sound worlds, in and of themselves, do not provide information about the plausible conventionalized correlations between their sounds and cultural units. In the vein of Monelle’s late approach to musical topics, a preliminary characterization of the semantic spaces of the musical codes that allegedly underlie these musical practices necessarily needs the examination of verbal discourses around and about these musics, as well as an examination of other non-verbal expressions with close cultural connection with these musics. For, as various authors have argued (e.g., Nattiez, 1990; Cook, 1992; Monelle, 2002 and 2006), meaning in music is constructed also through verbal discourse. Verbal commentary about music is a critical element in the formation of Ecoian musical codes. Without verbal discourse, the conventional associations that define a given code could not be gradually constructed. In a similar way, other non-verbal expressions such as images, which within a certain cultural milieu are found to be consistently associated with a certain musical world, provide valuable symbolic information about the types of cultural units that constitute the semantic space of these expressions and the associated music.

Throughout this study, I examine various sources of verbal discourse about the intermusical worlds surrounding Rolo ET, with a special emphasis on the tropical and psychedelic. Examined verbal sources include scholarly publications, most of which implicitly or explicitly address the question of the cultural signification of these musics, as well as the typical connotations linked to their sounds. My observations in this dissertation are largely based on these kinds of informal commentary. In this sense, the sum of the information collected in these sources provides a sort of preliminary synthesis of the ideas these musics are most commonly associated with. My sources include journalistic commentary,

54 Tagg’s and Clarida’s (2003) work does report what seem to be at least incipient conventional associations within rock music, but the study does not focus specifically on the world of psychedelic rock as such.
interviews, documentaries, and internet blogs and commentary. The vast majority of these sources are in Spanish (and unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author). Lastly, I include the voices of some of the most prominent creative members of Rolo ET themselves—Eblis Álvarez, Santiago Botero, and Mario Galeano—with the intention of taking into account their thoughts about both the intermusical worlds they use and their own projects and music. Cited excerpts from these members are taken from their participation in two academic events revolving around Rolo ET’s music and other related musics. Organized by Teatro Colón of Bogota, the first one was a seminar called “Así Suena Colombia en el Siglo XXI” (“Thus Sounds Colombia in the Twenty-first Century”), which took place in Bogota in August 2015. This seminar was a week-long event with talks, panels and workshops revolving around the phenomenon of NCM, and included interventions by Eblis Álvarez, Juan Sebastián Monsalve, and Mario Galeano, precisely about musical techniques and approaches of some of Rolo ET projects. The second event was a talk I organized in Universidad Javeriana in Bogota, in April 2016, which meant to discuss and problematize the tags “tropical” and “psychedelic,” while also considering the political implications of this music and this movement. Finally, while I rely mostly on the examination of verbal sources in order to preliminarily characterize the semantic spaces of the various musical codes underlying Rolo ET’s intermusical worlds, I also tangentially consider other non-verbal expressions such as images, which usually serve to reinforce certain associations found in the purely verbal reports.

Now, while the thoughts of Rolo ET members are important when considering the question of intent or agency in this music, my primary motivation for sharing their ideas is to more clearly elucidate the conventional meanings associated with the examined intermusical worlds. In other words, the perspective of Rolo ET members might reinforce ideas about conventional musical associations found elsewhere, or it might contradict them, or complement them. Their perspective provides us with a sense of the musical codes underlying, for instance, tropical or psychedelic music as they have been used and understood by Rolo ET members themselves. For while one can get a sense of the historical codification

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55 See footnote 2 above.
56 Monelle would probably argue that a complete characterization of the semantic space of any musical code needs a rigorous and profound consideration of both the verbal and nonverbal media somehow associated with the examined music. This is especially true if a code’s plausible categorization as a musical topic is at stake. Under this view, my observations with regards to the semantic spaces of the examined musical worlds are, of course, still preliminary, and thus constitute just a contribution, amongst many, in the search for a broader understanding of the semantic universes of said worlds.
of tropical musics in various sources (e.g., how its code was structured in the 1950s), I am more interested in understanding the present codification of those musics within the cultural milieu of Rolo ET members. I am primarily concerned, in other words, in investigating the nature of the musical codes of tropical or psychedelic musics as they actually function within this milieu.

A musical composition might be understood as particular type of listening, at least insofar as a new creation is in part the consequence of a listening memory. In a similar fashion, a new musical piece might be understood as an interpretation of aural memories. Eco proposes that within the realm of “sign production” (i.e., the actual use of codes), the addressee—which in the case of music is the listener—actively participates in the re-creation (or alteration) of a given code. Following Eco, one could say that the listening memories from which a new creation emerges, which constitute the music one has listened to in the past and listens to in the present, are interpreted (whether in listening or in composition) according to the underlying code as it is used by the listener/composer. I believe that understanding the code that underlies the way in which Rolo ET members experience the musics of their intermusical worlds brings one closer to understanding the nature of semantic space of the code of Rolo ET music itself, an understanding which in turn helps guide a hermeneutic interpretation of this music. Rolo ET’s code of their intermusical worlds provides, in other words, the key to understand how their music is semiotically re-interpreting those worlds, and transforming the associated codes. Chapters 4 and 5 precisely seek to present a hermeneutic interpretation of some of Rolo ET’s music, in an attempt to make sense of their idiosyncratic appropriation of their intermusical worlds. In particular, Chapter 4 will present an argument of how some of the musical treatments of Rolo ET can be said to exemplify musical irony, and—taking into consideration the nature of the codes of the examined intermusical worlds—Chapter 5 will present a reading of the meaning of Rolo ET in relation to the Colombian context within which it arose.

Ultimately, my hermeneutic reading is based upon the unique ways that Rolo ET plays with and between the musical codes of their intermusical worlds, as I construe them in Chapters 2 and 3. In the end, even if Rolo ET’s music is filled with innovation, the horizon of said musical codes is sufficiently present so as to understand it as a commentary. Eco points out that when a work possesses unique features that are not (as yet) generalizable—i.e., whose code is not yet widely disseminated and adopted—its interpretation necessarily relies on pure speculation. (Eco, 1976, p. 33) While Rolo ET’s
music possesses unique features, they can all be interpreted against the grain of sedimented codes. As we shall see, the sense of alienness in some of this music comes partly from this relationship between sedimented codes and codes that are “not yet generalizable,” that is, from the play between more codified and less codified expressions. 

Throughout the present study, I move between a semiotic perspective and a decidedly hermeneutic one, i.e., between a search for establishing the working mechanisms of certain musical codes and an interpretation of the uses and re-appropriation of those codes in the studied music. When shifting from a purely semiotic perspective to a hermeneutic one, my own interpretations become susceptible of being included in the study about how these codes are actually used. This study would pertain to the realm of what Eco calls the theory of sign production, i.e., the theorization of the ways in which sign systems are actually used in practice. This way, while in some parts of this study I examine the codes as they have been previously structured, in some parts I myself contribute to the evolution of said codes; like the music of Rolo ET, my interpretations become integral part of the life cycles of said codes. In this sense, my own interpretative exercise constitutes an extension of the possible interpretations predicted by the analyzed codes. By constantly shifting the focus between an analysis of codes and an contextualized interpretation of their actual use, I subscribe to Hatten’s method of “working back and forth between stylistic knowledge and interpretative speculations; grounding those speculations in hypothetical stylistic oppositions; and then moving beyond established correlations of the style to a contextual and thematically strategic accounting of the unique significance of musical events.” (Hatten, 1994, p. 61)

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An Ecoian approach to a sonically-grounded hermeneutic reading of Rolo ET’s music means that actual musical sound structures can be connected to a web of possible extra-musical meanings because of rules which, gradually constructed by collectives of human beings, allow for such connections to exist. As we have seen, such a construal of musical signification has close ties with the idea of musical topics,

57 This view of the musical fabric as containing more or less codified elements is somewhat analogous to Roland Barthes’ distinction in photography between what he calls the studium—i.e., “the informative cultural data”—and the punctum—i.e., “the striking detail that catches the imagination, which varies from observer to observer.” (cited in Slobin, 1992, p. 57; emphasis added)
which has been developing in scholarly circles since the 1980s. Ultimately, I here propose an extension of
the idea of musical topics via Eco, which understands extra-musical signification in music as occurring
thanks to oftentimes tacit agreements with varied degrees of codification, between collectives of people of
varied dimensions. Constructed via a dynamic interaction between the music, its intermusical references,
and other types of discourses or cultural expressions (verbal, visual, gestural, etc.), these agreements
can have various degrees of sedimentation or conventionalization that make them more or less
semantically stable. In other words, this degree of stability, alongside their degree of collectiveness (i.e.,
the size of the population that partakes on them), makes these agreements more or less susceptible to
change. In the end, it is the fact that such agreements exist that allows for musicians like those of Rolo
ET to “play” with them, as it were, and for interpreters like myself to venture a reading about what these
“games” with the semantically established fields of certain sound structures mean.

Like the analysis of any other cultural expression, the analysis of music might be understood, in
the end, as an analysis of some of the codes that emerge, live and evolve through us. Cultural artifacts
like Rolo ET, in other words, can be understood as transiently materializing and transforming the codes
that constantly build our cultural being. Eco writes that “because they are accepted by a society, codes
constitute a cultural world that is neither actual nor possible: their existence is of a cultural order and
constitutes the way in which a society thinks and speaks, and—while speaking—determines the sense of
its thoughts through other thoughts, and these thoughts through other words.” (Eco, [1976] 2005, 103-
104; TBA) In engaging in the analysis and interpretation of the sound world and the music of a particular
set of current Rolo cultural expressions, perhaps what I ultimately seek is to humbly partake on the
process through which the society I am part of thinks, speaks, and determines its thoughts through
thoughts and words.
"Before pop art, there was such a thing as bad taste. Now there’s kitsch, schlock, camp, porn [and cumbia]."

Don DeLillo

I. Introduction

Colombia is nowadays typically deemed as a tropical nation. Except that it isn’t. Or rather, it is or it isn’t, depending on what one understands by the word “tropical.” In the purely geographical sense, yes, Colombia is a tropical country, since it is located in the globe’s tropical zone, commonly known as simply “the tropics.” However, the word “tropical” has a variety of connotations, only some of which are associated with its geographical location. In general, but especially for inhabitants of non-tropical countries (i.e., countries located in the southern and northern temperate or frigid zones of the planet), the word “tropical” might be associated with all-year-round hot and sunny weather, paradisiacal territories and beaches, palm trees, coconuts, the sea. It might also be an index of humid rainforests and jungles, or ferocious storms. For those with the privilege, the tropics might constitute an index of leisure time and vacations. For others, the term might ignite an association with poverty and a under-developed world. It might evoke, on the other hand, people of a certain temperament—people who are experienced or imagined as open, happy, or festive. “The tropical” might also bring to mind certain types of cultural expressions. It might be, for example, an index of certain musical practices, with particular characteristics and associations. In short, for those outside the physical realm (and, indeed, for some within it), the
tropics represent a half real, half imagined, exotic world. In this sense, “the tropics” constitutes more than a mere geographical zone: rather, it constitutes a sort of myth.58

In this, more culturally constructed, sense of the word, Colombia could not be described entirely as a tropical nation, since the universe of ideas associated with this expanded (partly mythic), version of “the tropical” would be applicable only to certain areas. From a topographical and geographical perspective, for example, the Andean region—with its chains of mountains, high plains, template and cold weathers, paramos, cold foggy forests, and the such—would clearly not line up with the aforementioned imagery of the tropics. This imagery would rather be more readily associated with both the Atlantic and Pacific coastal regions of the country, where much of the landscape coincides with the stereotypical images commented upon above (heat, beaches, tropical rainforests and plains, palm trees, etc.). And yet within Colombia, the term “tropical” is clearly marked, for there is an established tendency to automatically associate it with the Atlantic coastal region of the country (nowadays more commonly dubbed as the Caribbean region), rather than the Pacific one. This tendency is especially visible when talking about music. In Colombia, the category “tropical music” immediately indexes Caribbean musics in general, and Colombian music of the Atlantic coastal region in particular. Both Peter Wade (2002) and Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste (2008?, 2013) have shown how this music, traditionally known in Colombia as música costeña (literally “coastal music” or “music from the coast”), has played a significant role in projecting a “tropical” vision of the country to the international community. It turns out, then, that Colombia’s current international fame as a fundamentally tropical nation is due, in no small part, to the type of musics that has represented it since around the middle of the twentieth century.59

This view of Colombia is, however, not exclusively an international point of view. While Colombians of different regions and customs are most certainly aware of the cultural diversity of the country, and the Constitution of 1991 itself famously proclaims this diversity, many Colombians would probably affirm what constitutes a problematic, homogenizing view. This self-identification with

58 For a similar understanding of a mythic construction of the tropics, see Hernández’s (2015) application of Roland Barthes’s notion of myth in his discussion about the cultural depiction of the tropical and Andean worlds within Colombia.
59 Bambuco, a mestizo dance from the interior of the country, had been considered the national dance par excellence during much part of the first half of the twentieth century, after which genres of costeño music such as porro, cumbia, and vallenato came to replace it as such. For more information and different perspectives about this transformation see Wade (2002), Blanco (2009) and Hernández (2015).
“tropicalness” has a lot to do with one particular connotation of the family of words, which associates “tropicalness” with “happiness” or “festiveness.” Authors like Peter Wade (2002), Darío Blanco (2009), and Oscar Hernández (2015) have variously shown how during the twentieth century, the internal hegemonic view of Colombia as a nation gradually changed from a sober, gloomy and melancholic one to an open, festive, and joyful one; and how the shift of the musical representation of the nation, from the allegedly more solemn airs of the interior of the country to the allegedly more festive and happier ones of the Atlantic coastal region, was crucial in this overall transformation. One significant end result of this transformation was that by the end of the twentieth century, and despite Colombia’s infamous associations with drug dealing and guerrilla conflicts, Colombians tended to imagine themselves, or—in Benedict Anderson’s famous words—to imagine their community, as festive and happy in an almost ontological sense.

Since, as Hernández (2015) has shown, the instrumentality of music’s signifying potency has been crucial in rendering this identitary imagery viable and sometimes even blindly credible, it comes as no surprise that a significant percentage of the recent developments in Colombian popular music are somehow related to musics deemed the “tropical” kind. This phenomenon is also true within the so-called New Colombian Musics (NCM) [see Ch. 1], where musical languages evocative of musical genres of the Atlantic and Pacific coastal regions such as tambora musics, band porro, cumbia (in its various manifestations), or currulao, are pervasive. Such is also the case in the subset of these expressions that I here have dubbed Rolo ET, which explains why characterization of this musical cluster as tropical psychedelia. The “tropicality” of the studied music is, in other words, a common trait of the musical ethos that has dominated the musical landscape of Colombian music for a while now. In this sense, Rolo ET could be viewed as, at best, trendy, and, at worst, downright cliché. However, while under this logic the generic trait of “tropicalness” in this music would appear to be unremarkable at first sight, a closer examination of this repertoire’s particular intermusical tropical references, and the particular sonic uses of

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60 Wade (2002), Blanco (2009), Hernández (2015), and Bermúdez (2007) all suggest in one or other way that, at some point, part of the motivation for this transformation and its sustainability over time derived from the necessity of confronting (or escaping from) the cruel reality of a (still) ongoing violence, which has constantly battered the country since at least the middle of the twentieth century.

61 For detailed information on: tambora music see Convers and Ochoa (2007); band porro see Botero (1989); currulao see Convers et al. (2014). For a comprehensive introduction about cumbia, including a synthesis of the debates about its origin, and an overview of its national and transnational development see Fernández L’Hoeste and Vila (2013) volume: fI. INTRO AND CHAPTER 1.
its tropical elements partially helps to explain its peculiarity within the general map of recent Colombian tropical musics.

In point of fact, this chapter seeks to explore the distinctiveness of Rolo ET’s tropical sound world through a reflection of the significance and meaning of its intermusical universe on the one hand, and the analysis of some of its strategies of appropriation of tropical musical elements, on the other. As a point of departure, I discuss Emily Dolan’s appropriation and adaptation of the concept of musical kitsch, which she brings to bear on the Anglo repertoire commonly known as indie pop, so as to explain the particular way in which the idea of “authenticity” operates within this genre. I consider Dolan’s observations to be particularly relevant, since the music of Rolo ET has been oftentimes supported by independent music labels, and tends to typically circulate through the institutions and networks associated with “indie” music (see Chapter 5). After elaborating some of Dolan’s ideas, I examine the system of values that has been created around certain tropical musics, focusing especially on porro, cumbia, vallenato, and salsa. As we shall see, this so-called system of values implies the existence of a culturally constructed hierarchy within this tropical musical world, which is essentially supported by associations between certain musical manifestations and particular segments of the social world. We shall then see how most of the referents that nurture Rolo ET’s creations belong to what I dub the “tropical underworld,” in reference to the bottom or (until recently) unprivileged sections of this hierarchy. I will then offer examples of some of the idiosyncratic ways in which these musical projects sonically handle tropical elements in their music, after which I will proceed to make some closing remarks about some of the implications of Rolo ET’s expression of “the tropical.”

By way of conclusion, I will argue that both the specificity of the set of intermusical references inhabiting Rolo ET’s musical and conceptual world, and the peculiarity of its tropical sound, can be understood as: 1) a critique of other recent appropriations/expressions/transformations of the Colombian tropical heritage, 2) a self-reflection and deconstruction of what Hernández (2015) has called the topic of “coastal joy” (alegría costeña), i.e., the now naturalized association between the tropical world and happiness, and 3) a particular commercial exploitation of this construction and its identitary potency through the veil of a contestatory and critical language. In short, Rolo ET’s idiosyncratic handling of the tropical musical world seems to be strategically deployed so as to construct a critical stance toward
particular aspects of the national and transnational tropical heritage, while at the same time exploiting it through channels that champion such stances. Ultimately, I set off to show how Rolo ET’s tropicality is an eloquent example of a critical, artistic embrace of a tradition, which, in the process, generates the groundwork for either a fortification of that tradition’s Ecoian code (e.g., Hernández’s joy topic) or a subtle promise of structural transformation.

II. Kitsch and musical kitsch: a discussion

In the quote by American novelist Don DeLillo that serves as an epigraph to this chapter, there is an implication that whatever “bad taste” was supposed to mean before the emergence of pop art is now lost in a sea of (oftentimes self-consciously) ugly postmodern artifacts. Or, more bluntly stated, “bad taste”—and by extension, clearly defined categories of taste in general—just don’t exist anymore. This is not to say that DeLillo himself thinks so. If anything, a straightforward reading of the quote shows how DeLillo’s categories of kitsch, schlock, camp, and porn seem to actually constitute the current epitomes of bad taste. With the uprising of pop art, bad taste has not disappeared, but has rather materialized itself in specific sets of objects—each of them with their own denomination—which are readily packaged and spread for the general consumption of tacky cultural goods. So perhaps it is not that “bad taste” (or other categories of taste) has ceased to exist, but that it has been redefined—actually sometimes embraced—by recent artistic (can they still be labelled as such?) trends. For, before recent popular artistic trends emerged, bad art—sometimes pejoratively referred to as “kitsch”—was frowned upon. It was pop art—or more generally so-called postmodern art—that apparently revalued the concept. As Chilvers and Glaves-Smith claim, precisely in reference to kitsch, “the wake of Pop art . . . blurred the distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art and therefore complicated attitudes towards kitsch. Postmodernism has further complicated the issue, for now kitsch imagery is used in an ‘ironic’ way by ‘serious’ artists.” (Chilvers et al., 2009; emphasis added) Before dwelling on recent appropriations of kitsch and kitsch’s relationship with the present study, however, we must confront the question of what constitutes kitsch. In other words, beyond vaguely referencing bad taste or bad art, what exactly is kitsch? Is the concept still useful? Can it be applied to music? And how so?
Most definitions of kitsch position it as a fundamentally denigrative term of allegedly Germanic origin, generally meaning something like "rubbish," or "pretentious" or "vulgar trash" (Ayers, 2001; Chilvers et al., 2009; Curl 2006). When applied to art, kitsch usually points to artistic creations that are perceived as pretentious, false, and superficial, and whose primary intention is merely to please and soothe—usually for commercial purposes. Seemingly unknown before the 19th century, kitsch appears to be a relatively recent concept that, according to art historian Clement Greenberg, emerged in the West largely as a result of the socioeconomic upheavals brought by the process of industrialization and the concomitant emergence of a massified urban population, with much higher levels of literacy than ever before. (Chilvers et al. 2009) This new, expanded and better-educated—yet allegedly tasteless—middle class began to demand cultural artefacts its leisure time consumption. The demand was met, or so the story goes, by the emergence of a brand of art that, in its vulgar imitation of “real art,” could never aspire to be considered “serious art.” Greenberg synthesizes the phenomenon as follows:

Peasants who settled in the cities as proletarian and petty bourgeois' lost the taste for their traditional folk culture and ‘set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new

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62 Chilvers et al. (2009) see the term probably deriving from the German verb verkitschen, which means “to cheapen or sentimentalize.” Beam et al. (2014) similarly relate the term with the colloquial German verb kitschen, which means “to stroke, pet, smear, or lump together,” adding that its meaning is also akin to adjectives such as “smarmy” and ‘unctuous,’ which are, in the authors’ words, “among kitsch’s tacky cousins.” Crediting a Germanic origin, Bearn (1998) likewise writes that it “appears to have been invented around 1870 in the art circles of Munich,” noting, however, that the origins remain obscure. Bearn also points out that while its German origin is the most plausible, there is, nonetheless, a possibility that it may have derived from the English word “sketchy.” For more information on the etymology of the word, see Bearn (1998).

63 Greenberg’s views on kitsch are condensed in his essay “Kitsch and Avant-Garde” from 1939, which, according to Chilmar et al. (2009), constitutes the first serious critical discussion of the concept in the English language (the first appearance of the term in the Oxford English Dictionary dating from 1926). However, the first known published discussion of the term was Fritz Karpfen’s 1925 book Der Kitsch: Eine Studie über die Entartung der Kunst (“Kitsch: A Study of the Degeneration of Art”). German critic Theodor Adorno’s views on the subject can be found in some of the essays included in the collection entitled Essays on Music, published in 2002, particularly in his essay “Kitsch,” apparently written circa 1932, and entirely devoted to the subject. Related views by Adorno can also be found in the essay “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” of 1938, included in The Essential Frankfurt School Reader, edited by Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, and published 1982; and in the book Aesthetic Theory (1970), edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, whose translation to English by C. Lenhardt was published in 1984. Another important source on kitsch is the 1969 collection of essays, edited by Italian historian, theorist, and critic Gillo Dorfles, entitled Kitsch: the World of Bad Taste, which addresses various aspects of the iconography of popular culture.
commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide. Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits...The precondition for kitsch...is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends. (Greenberg 1939)

Various questions immediately arise from this admittedly vague depiction of kitsch art. Explicit in Greenberg’s notion of kitsch is the existence of a genuine culture—one within which there is a corpus of allegedly “legitimate” artefacts, and against which it is possible to identify, in contrast, what constitutes merely a vulgar imitation of them. From the perspective of the early twenty first century, the first question that emerges is what might constitute this so-called “genuine” culture. After the twentieth-century’s gradual but decisive debasement of the idea of a hierarchy of cultures—after the emergence, that is, of the once unthinkable, but now hegemonic notion of cultural relativism (at least within the milieu of the academic field of the humanities in the Western hemisphere)—the idea of a culture that is more genuine than any other would be considered in most circles as downright chauvanistic. But for Greenberg, as well as for various Western authors writing during the first half of the twentieth century (I am thinking, for example, of German critics like Fritz Karpfen or Theodor Adorno—for more, see footnote 65, above), there clearly existed a corpus of art that constituted the expression of a higher culture—the highest possible, actually—one to which any human being should be thrilled to aspire, if only it wasn’t reserved for a chosen few.

The actual delimitation of the “real” versus the “fake” has, in point of fact, always been rather nebulous and—perhaps as a symptom the problematic nature of the concept—seemingly everchanging. For example, as Chilvers et al. (2009) note, in the 1930s Greenberg included within the purview of kitsch expressions such as North American jazz (a music also famously condemned by Adorno), or artists such

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as Maxfield Parrish and Norman Rockwell, all of which nowadays are considered “serious art.” As if by magic, in other words, certain artistic expressions that at some point were deemed vulgar, and whose only real effect was to trigger sheer superficial sentimentality, transformed themselves into art of “serious” consideration. This transformation speaks to the ambiguity (and, indeed, the limited usefulness) of the concept of kitsch in art, at least concerning any attempt to make it objectively operational. Whatever it is that makes art kitsch—its kitschiness, if you will—is, simply put, ungraspable. As Bearn (1998) eloquently writes, “kitsch presents a problem of what Immanuel Kant would have called reflective judgment: given a number of examples of kitsch, a critic will construct an account of what makes kitsch kitsch. But most discussions begin with putative examples of kitsch.” In other words, there is always a kind of circular logic wherein the exemplary list that the critic deems as kitsch is what nurtures its definition. In short, there appears to be no clear or straightforward answer to the question “of what does the kitschiness of kitsch consists?”.

There is however a different and more meaningful way to approach the topic of the kitsch. If not as a tool for the objective judgment of artistic objects, I believe the phenomenon of kitsch merits some attention due to—among others—the emergence, per se, of such a concept, understood in part as a reaction to the proliferation and growing influence of a popular art that was perceived as a cultural threat; its instability as a functional category of art; what it has to say about the problem of taste and the ways the latter has been artistically exploited for particular expressive purposes; and, somewhat related to the latter, the more recent enthusiastic embracing of allegedly kitschy materials for artistic purposes (partly understood as a critique to that first reaction). What interests me here is the general discursive framework around the concept, which provides a picture of the interplay between various aesthetic and ideological points of view that are sometimes purposefully put into play within cultural expressions. In other words, I am here interested in examining, not the specific nature of the kitschiness of kitschy objects, which is at best blurry, but rather the general terms of the criticism towards kitsch, as well as

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65 Bearn’s list of examples of objects that could have been typically deemed as kitsch includes “hummel figurines, paintings on black velvet of a tearful clown or a beatific Elvis Presley, Muzak, Eiffel tower pepper grinders, ice cubes shaped like breasts, peek-a-boo anything, paintings of mournful waifs with the outsized eyes made familiar by Margaret or Walter Keane, Walt Disney Tudoroid or Bavarioid architecture, heart-shaped grave stones, plates adorned with cute fluffy kittens.” (Bearn 1998)

66 Greenberg, for instance, wrote how kitsch was “crowding out and defacing native cultures in one colonial country after another … [kitsch] is now by way of becoming a universal culture, the first universal culture ever beheld.” (Cited in Bearn 1998)
some modern appropriations of the concept that I consider particularly relevant to the purposes of this project.

So what, then, are the primary criticisms of kitsch that help, in a round-about way, to define it? For Bearn (1998), criticisms of kitsch can be summed up in three general ideas: first, kitsch is too easy; second, kitsch is too formulaic or too mechanical; and third, kitsch is false, and therefore ethical dubious/reprehensible. Real, fine, or serious art is—by the same logic—the mirror opposite of kitsch: it is not conceived to be easy to digest, it is far from being formulaic or mechanical, and it is good for the soul because it is true, or—perhaps more appropriately—it speaks of the truth. As Bearn himself explains, in their most general sense arguments regarding "bad" or (less pejoratively) "pedestrian" art can be traced to earlier times, when the concept of kitsch as such did not exist. Bearn points, for example, to Kant's distinction between art and artifice as roughly analogous to the later distinction between art and kitsch.

Such previous similar discussions, which with the benefit of hindsight seem to preconfigure a concept that starts to crystallize only towards the end of the 19th century, underscore the importance of historicizing kitsch. This historicization is crucial if one wants to fully grasp, if not kitsch's meaning, at least its significance to the establishment of a particular critical discourse. In other words, it is important to notice that the emergence of kitsch goes beyond (or perhaps below) purely abstract, qualitative hierarchies of art. Kitsch is, as it were, a sign of its time. As stated above, whether as a set of real objects, or as a nebulous critical category of culture, kitsch is a phenomenon that derives from industrialization, the uprising of capitalism as an economic system, and, ultimately, the mass commodification of art. As such, it stands in opposition to the concept of autonomous art, which by the early twentieth century was already a calcified category, and which was often viewed as a space of resistance to such impulses of commodification. As Bearn (1998) puts it, "with a certain algebraic formality we can say that the rise of industrial culture gave birth to two opposed traditions—that of kitsch and that of autonomous art." Kitsch emerges, in other words, as a tawdry, commodified counterpart of autonomous art, with the aspect of commodification entailing a further interpretative problem. Since oftentimes kitsch has been equated to commodified art, any instance of "autonomous" or "serious" art subjected to trivial commodification could...
eventually enter the list of kitsch artefacts; it could eventually become kitsch, or “kitschified” art. This possibility of transformation is, incidentally, yet another instance of the porosity of the category of kitsch (and, why not, of autonomous art), which tends to further debilitate the notion that there exists a set of qualities that define kitsch objects.

Now, even if such conceptual porosity has always existed with regards to kitsch (and to autonomous art, its supposed nemesis), early critics such as Greenberg or Adorno nevertheless tried to establish a working definition of what constitutes kitsch, since to their minds the phenomenon was both observable and verifiable. Besides the basic critiques of kitsch mentioned above (too easy, too mechanical, fake), central to those definitions is the admittedly obscure notion that—in pretending to achieve the status of serious art, while not quite succeeding at doing so—kitsch still uses the formal materials of serious art as its constituent elements, albeit in raw or hollow manner. As Chilvers et al. (2009) put it, kitsch uses “for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture,” adding that “the precondition for kitsch . . . is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition.” Kitsch, in other words, required an already developed “genuine” culture from where to extract its prime matter. In kitsch, or so goes the argument, materials from objects of serious art do appear, but now devoid of content—hence the idea of rawness and hollowness. In his essay on kitsch, Adorno explains:

Kitsch is the precipitate of devalued forms and empty ornaments from a formal world that has become remote from its immediate context. Things that were part of that art of a former time and are undertaken today must be reckoned as kitsch. On the other hand, the objectivity of kitsch is the source of its justification. For kitsch precisely sustains the

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67 Surrealism is perhaps the epitome of a “serious” artistic current whose creations were “kitschified” due to their vulgar popularization, a process that occurred mostly against the will of the movement’s artistic representatives. In W. Murray’s words, Surrealism is an example of “a radical fringe movement becoming a mass phenomenon. To extend the rock metaphor a little further, it’s the story of the sell-out - cashing in indie cred for a payoff. And whether they meant to or not . . . the purity ascribed to the Surrealists by their de facto leader, Andre Breton, proved to be so seductive to so many that it became infected by what he loathed most almost immediately. Surreal tropes . . . the lynchpin belief that true creativity occurred when it flowed from the raw unconscious were deliciously Modern notions that seemed readymade . . . for mass-consumption.” Taken from Murray, W. (2009). Taking the pop out of surrealism. Toronto Star (Canada), p. E08. (accessed November 2, 2016), emphasis added.

68 While writing extensively about kitsch and related subjects, Adorno himself admitted that “it is impossible to define what kitsch or artistic trash is,” in definitive manner. (cited in Beam et al. 2014)
memory, distorted and as mere illusion, of a formal objectivity that has passed away.”

Kitsch is therefore “unrealised, illusory, living on false emotion. . . . The power of the dead forms has absconded from it. It has been eliminated. (Adorno 2002, pp. 501, 502 and 504; emphasis added)

Key in Adorno’s account is the temporal aspect. The passage of time is a fundamental cause of the draining of power from artistic forms. A de-contextualized use of a given material, deprived of its original meaning or sense of being, seems to be an important condition for understanding something as kitsch. Now, in such abstract terms, this idea results quite problematic, for it can be extrapolated and applied in various ways to various artistic or musical phenomena. Its general applicability seems to render it almost useless. Therefore, it is important to point out that here, the idea of a loss of an original sense is not just simply about misunderstanding, re-appropriating, or re-signifying some artistic form, whatever that may be. Implied is also the fact that the materials found in kitsch create the illusion of sustaining the memory of an original sense (hence, in part, the idea of pretentiousness). In doing so, kitsch apparently aspires to pass as the art that was the original medium of those forms. It is the fake, watered-down mimesis of a once “objective” art. The problem for the Adornos was that—in its apparently great appeal to popular masses—kitsch seemed to be quite effective. It was obviously a commercial success. Regardless of its (mis-)use of “genuinely” artistic forms, irrespective of its dystopian rendering of art as such, kitsch somehow worked.

A clear sense of elitism undergirded explanations ascribing true and false meanings to artistic forms: kitsch was bad, kitsch was ugly, kitsch represented a middle-to-lowbrow taste. Its proliferation would only diminish the quality of human beings’ consciousness. But this point of view would be defeated. Both the continuous rise of popular culture, particularly during and after the countercultural movement of the 1960s (see Chapter 2), and the more or less concomitant paradigm-shifting of a so called postmodern era, brought along a completely different view and treatment of the idea of kitsch. A counter-cultural movement against a culture that highly esteemed certain artistic practices and highly despised others would eventually tend to embrace the latter. And a highly deconstructionist intellectual ambience would also motivate a playful artistic mumbling of the binary art/kitsch. In a shift sometimes understood as the
cultural revenge of kitsch, kitsch came to be positively appreciated. Such a shift—that, as we will see, did not necessarily break up the distinction between high and low art altogether—is variously described in accounts of the concept and speaks to the significance of the so called postmodern appropriation of kitsch.

For instance, despite its brevity, the most basic definition of kitsch found in the Oxford reference tools is sure to include the notion that kitsch is “sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way” (n.n. 2009). Woodham (2004) notes that kitsch’s “conscious adoption in opposition to the tenets of Modernism and ‘Good Design’ may be found in a number of Postmodern designs.” Curl (2006) notes that kitsch “has also been described as the cultural revenge of the proletariat, and has been identified as part of Camp taste that values the outrageously hideous for its own sake.” Ayers (2001) likewise describes kitsch as “[lending] itself strongly to irony and camp,” adding that it “has thus appealed to the avant-garde,” and that “even the image of avant-gardism has been appropriated and commercially exploited by kitsch.” After noting the generally derogatory use of kitsch, Buchanan (2010) points to its use “in an affirmative sense when it refers to items of nostalgia.” Finally, Chilvers et al. (2009) attribute to postmodernism a further complication of the issue, “for now kitsch imagery is used in an ‘ironic’ way by ‘serious’ artists.”

To sum up, kitsch began as an ill-defined category grouping certain expressive objects, that for multiple reasons were not deemed worthy of being considered serious art. Apparently, these “wanna-be” artistic objects were easily digestible and oftentimes intentionally formulaic or repetitive, for which they succeeded at being quite appealing to a general public that was still not properly educated. Their most immediate goal, at which they were usually successful, was to provide instant gratification, which corresponds to the most banal or superficial of sentiments. On the other hand, in using the raw prime matter of real artistic endeavours (which are usually separated in time with respect to the kitschy expression that defiles them), they constituted merely a mimesis or simulacra of real art. In this pretending to be art, they could fool only the uneducated. Yet it rapidly became evident that the separating lines between the constructed categories of kitsch and art are not always clear. On the contrary, they are oftentimes blurry and constantly mutating. And to top it off, recent cultural and
(sometimes serious) artistic trends start to embrace kitsch (both the actual objects and the concept), variously as irony, nostalgia, counter-culture, or a living manifesto (like in the case of Camp\textsuperscript{69}).

So, taking this scenario into account, what would still be worth contemplating regarding kitsch? Why consider kitsch pertinent to this study, and to what end? And, assuming its pertinence, how could one understand it to be working in music, i.e., as sound? Let me address the latter question first. With regards to musical kitsch, the first problem that arises is, as often happens with musical matters, the ineffability of the musical medium. More precisely put, the low capability of music’s signifying systems to convey a minimally straightforward meaning—the impossibility, that is, of establishing highly conventional and thus intersubjectively clear semiotic relationships in music—further complicates the already complex task of delimiting kitsch. Perhaps for this reason, Emily Dolan (2010) states that in order to consider the concept of kitsch in music, one must necessarily disregard the alleged condition that unobjectionable representation is a prerequisite for considerations of kitsch in any medium. Here, the idea of musical topics, understood as culturally conventionalized sets of musical codes, whose family (or chain) of signifieds are often closely related to wider cultural phenomena might prove to be helpful, an idea to which I will return below. On the other hand, Dolan believes that one must go beyond the simple qualification of kitsch as “bad,” given the obvious pitfalls that this simplistic, colloquial understanding of the word would imply for a nuanced interpretative exercise. Yet if one wants to address kitsch, not as a set of objective qualities (i.e., this or that artistic expression is of bad quality because of this or that), but in terms of particular discursive uses of the term (i.e., how it has been accounted for in verbal form) on the one hand, and particular artistic appropriations of the concept on the other, then that simple qualification of kitsch as “bad” might actually be needed, for, if nothing else, the formula “kitsch-as-bad” or “kitsch-as-bad-taste” seems to be an essential semantic relationship of the kitsch-(proto)code.

Dolan needs to go beyond that simple equation because in her study of musical kitsch in Anglo indie pop music,\textsuperscript{70} she seeks to idiosyncratically uncover certain characteristics found in definitions of

\textsuperscript{69} For a provocative reflection on what constitutes Camp, see Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp’,” retrievable at: http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html

\textsuperscript{70} The term “indie” is an abbreviation of the term “independent.” Accordingly, indie music is a category that, in its most general sense, refers to music that transits (is produced, marketed, distributed, etc.) through “independent” channels, i.e., channels that are outside of the mainstream channels owned by the big corporations of the music industry. The existence of indie music is thus dependant on the existence of such dominant, mainstream music corporations, against which indie music defines itself as a reaction.
kitsch that are understood as qualities of kitsch. The adjective “bad” or the idea of “bad taste” would not suffice to rigorously explain the appearance of kitsch in this or any musical context, given that, at least in the current academic context, emitting such a judgment would probably be considered snobbishly uncritical. This is not to say that musical taste or qualifications of good or bad in music should be abolished in general (though the mandates of political correctness currently present in academia would perhaps recommend applying the latter). But, in accordance to the current intellectual spirit, these sorts of raw qualifications should be left to flow freely only in oral or written networks of non-scholar discursive communities, i.e., never in scholarly published material. Dolan is therefore careful in clarifying that she does not consider her studied repertoire to be “bad” or to express “bad taste.” On the contrary, she finds an affirmative sense of kitsch working in indie pop, much as many of the so called postmodern appropriations of the concept, or the set of artefacts that define kitsch, do.

Dolan observes a connection between the aesthetic choices and musical language of indie pop and an idea of kitsch as nostalgia. In her necessary cherry-picking from the available ideas on kitsch, Dolan finds particularly pertinent Adorno’s idea of kitsch as any artifact that pretends to sustain the memory of a given form, alongside its original sense, yet only as mere illusion. As she puts it, kitsch “crops up when old forms that were once steeped with meaning are reused out of their primary context; the original force and meaning are thus drained away and replaced with ossified stereotypes.” (Dolan, 2010, p. 463) Dolan sees this sense of kitsch “cropping up” in indie pop music, through its nostalgically driven treatment of musical materials, a treatment that goes beyond mere formal considerations. “Within popular music especially, kitsch can be evoked not just through use of ‘decontextualised forms’,” she writes, “but also through vocal timbre, instrumentation, arrangement and production values.” For Dolan, indie pop in particular “highlights this idea of temporal and aesthetic disjunction by sounding wistfully outdated, thus preserving the memory of some distant and imaginary past.” (p. 464) Indie pop thus cultivates what the author calls “an aesthetic of memory.”

The following auto-proclamation of independence by the Miami-based independent label Pop Up Records serves as an eloquent example of what Dolan calls “the indie ethos”: “We are a label run by artists, for artists and do not believe ‘indie’ to be genre-specific. The corporate structure crushes creativity, and our goal is to nurture our artists’ collective vision instead of chasing the latest commercially viable fad. We believe true talent perseveres and are more interested in creating a feeling than a marketable ‘single’.” (Cited in Dolan, 2010, p. 460)
Dolan thus reads the appearance of kitsch in this repertoire as a positive appropriation of one of kitsch’s illusory qualities, which, first having been thought of as a shortcoming with respect to kitsch’s aspiration to becoming art, is now lauded thanks to a newly valued idea of nostalgia and sentimentality. Dolan goes further to suggest that appropriations of kitsch like the one found in indie music have made that the types of elements that in kitsch were construed as illusion are now perceived as authenticity. She explains it as follows: “the very existence of indie music—a discourse that actively embraces kitsch—is a telling phenomenon. It suggests that ‘authenticity’ is neither dead nor dying, but that which was once antithetical to authenticity—kitsch—has become a new form of authenticity.” (Dolan, 2010, p. 467) In an ironic reversal, kitsch, the traditional epitome of inauthenticity, now seems to triumph as the new vehicle of authenticity. But beyond new found values of nostalgia and authenticity, one also finds in Dolan’s study a particular valorization of kitsch that has been part of the ideological struggle surrounding kitsch throughout the last century. Originally a negatively appraised category of culture, kitsch seems to have become a symbol of anti-snobbism, as can be seen by some of its recent, oftentimes enthusiastic, appropriations. In point of fact, Dolan underscores indie music’s embracing of a lo-fi sound ideal, adding that indie music’s “sound world projects both a lack of presumption and an emphasis on its own self-aware identity as kitsch—but as good kitsch, that is, kitsch that is aware of its status as kitsch and does not attempt to masquerade as something with ‘class.’” (p. 464) Ultimately, Dolan’s reading of indie pop as kitsch (or of kitsch in indie pop) constitutes in itself a positive reappraisal of kitsch, and in assigning a positive value to kitsch as nostalgia, new authenticity, and anti-snobbism from a scholarly perspective, it contributes to the strengthening of that positive value in the culture in general. This positive spin notwithstanding, residing in Dolan’s views of how kitsch works in this music is a tension between a re-valorization of kitsch (which ideally would lead to its disintegration altogether) and its reification, as I shall later argue also happens in the case of Rolo ET.

Now, after having examined both the general idea of the concept of kitsch and Dolan’s take on a particular musical manifestation of kitsch, the question remains about the pertinence of these ideas to Rolo ET and its context. In the most general sense, the discussion around kitsch is essentially a discussion about values. It constitutes a very particular instance of a much more widespread and older discussion regarding different artistic registers (typically consisting of high, middle, and low), which
usually echo the existence of different social registers within a given context. The peculiarity of kitsch, of course, is largely due to the historical and cultural milieu from where it arises (it being usually conceived of as a consequence of industrialization, it being understood as a frivolous response to capitalist interests, it being closely associated with twentieth-century popular culture in general, etc.). The emergence of such a notion within its particular milieu speaks of an ideological and aesthetic battle whose temporal battlefield was, as it were, the Western twentieth century, for the most part. And while this aesthetic and ideological clash has a particular context (the Western artistic tradition), I believe its general terms can be applicable to different contexts, albeit with obvious necessary adjustments.

We shall see, then, how in the case of Rolo ET, there exists a general tension between high and low registers that somewhat recreates and somewhat echoes parts of the twentieth-century discussion about kitsch, as has been briefly summarized above. We shall see that the phenomenon of Rolo ET—its ideological and musical discourse, that is—also includes other key components of the art-versus-kitsch discussion: first, a particular use of the idea of an expressive medium that supports the illusion of real meaning, negatively seen in Adorno and, according to Dolan, positively revalued in manifestations such as indie pop music; second, the tension arising from the supposed incompatibility between serious artistic intention and commodification; and, finally, the conscious appropriation of kitschy materials through an aesthetic that embraces supposed ugliness or lowness,71 somewhat à la Camp or à la Lowbrow art (both concepts to which I shall return below). In sum, I believe kitsch is pertinent to the present study because, in a fundamental way, Rolo ET’s discourse seems to be partaking in the kitsch-versus-art conversation in ways that are unique to its particular context, some of which somewhat ambiguously resonate with Dolan’s ideas about the workings of kitsch in indie pop.

In order to address Rolo ET’s unique participation in said conversation, we need to first explore its musical referents, particularly focusing on the high-and-low dynamics of its intermusical world that are sonically brought to bear in its music, so as to (implicitly or explicitly) a position in this regard. Because Rolo ET’s music circulates variously in local (Colombia, particularly Bogotá), regional (Latin America) and

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71 While in its beginnings kitsch was not usually considered to be synonymous with ugly, but rather an epitome of a quite refined idea of “bad taste” (enjoying simulated beauty implied bad taste, ergo bad taste did not necessarily imply ugliness), subsequent, more ample definitions of kitsch tended to include any artefact considered to be ugly. This process continued to the point that kitsch—now converted into a gross master signifier of anything trashy—colloquially became synonymous with a much cruder idea of bad taste, often implying simply ugliness.
broader international contexts (U.S. and Europe), it is first necessary to delimit the cultural boundaries in which to advance the discussion, given that high, middle, and low divides differ within different cultural boundaries (even if ever so slightly). The following discussion will thus only take into account a local (Colombian and sometimes Latin American) perception of the musics under discussion, and will concentrate on the tropical aspect of the repertoire. While in the choice of denomination of the repertoire—tropical psychedelia—there is implied an admittedly reductionist, and apparently balanced, binary of musical referents, the tropical component of that binary usually takes precedence, in the sense that it tends to constitute the rhythmic basis of the music. In other words, one decidedly hears cumbias, salsas, porros, etc., treated in a peculiar manner, and not, say, rock’n roll with tropical overtones. The tropical component is, thus, not ornamental, but the single constitutive element of musical identity (genre-speaking). More importantly, the ideological and aesthetic positions that are most pertinent to the discussion of kitsch appear most clearly in the world of tropical musics and its dynamics, as it is understood locally. And finally, as stated in the introduction to this chapter, the goal here is to characterize the peculiarity of Rolo ET’s handling of tropical musics, in relation to the widespread use of this type of musics in the Colombian context. Having this in mind, and focusing particularly on the airs of cumbia, porro, vallenato, and salsa, all of which appear prominently in the studied repertoire, the next section will both briefly describe the tropical musical world, in terms of a high-low divide as it is locally imagined, and show some of Rolo ET’s most significant and visible tropical intermusical choices and their positioning within the described tropical musical world.

III. Tropical Joy, Tropical Kitsch, and Tropical Chic: the worlds and underworlds of Cumbia, Vallenato, and Salsa

If one wants to have a working idea of kitsch within the world of the so called “tropical” musics, one first has to come up with analogs, within this world, of the fundamental binary surrounding kitsch, i.e., the opposition “serious art/kitsch art,” or the abbreviated one, “art/kitsch.” What, in other words, would constitute the “serious art” of the tropical musical world and what the kitsch? Of course, as previously discussed, even in their original context, the definitions of both of these categories have been
characterized by their instability. In other words, judging from the history of kitsch as a concept, one can see that, in Eco’s more semiotic terms, a relatively stable code surrounding said concept has never really crystallized. There have been, at most, several idiosyncratic and usually obscure kitsch-codes, which, even if pointing to a similar phenomenon, follow slightly but crucially different criteria. Just as the objects that represent it are considered pseudo- or proto-art, kitsch appears to have semiotically existed as just a pseudo- or proto-code in the culture as whole. Yet the idea of kitsch-as-bad or kitsch-as-bad-taste (which, as discussed above, is too generic and subjective to be useful in actually defining kitsch objects) has apparently outlived this codal instability and seems to appear in all of the more local, idiosyncratic kitsch proto-codes. If there’s one stable semantic structure that would help constitute a kitsch-code, properly speaking, this is the one. Perhaps this is the reason why most colloquial, allegedly uncritical, understandings of kitsch are reduced to this simplified notion, as many basic dictionary definitions show. So even if not attempting to judge specific objects as “bad” or as “of bad taste,” the search for kitsch in the tropical musical world must necessarily seek to understand what, within this particular world, is culturally conceived of as being “bad” or “of bad taste” (which is oftentimes synonymous with “popular” or “lowlbrow” taste). This way, the original question about the analogs of the binary “art/kitsch” now becomes a question of what is deemed as tacky, ugly, or lowbrow taste within a particular cultural milieu; or, in Eco’s terms, a question about the sets of tropical-musical objects that—in the practical use of the kitsch-code within Colombian culture (Eco’s pragmatics)—constitute the actual signifiers of the kitsch-code’s fundamental semantic structure <kitsch-as-bad-taste>. Unlike Dolan’s goal, which is to characterize something in the musical language of indie pop music as kitsch (i.e., to seek a quality of kitsch), the goal here is, at first, to search for the stereotypes of what is considered to be bad music or music of bad taste, and thus kitsch.

72 For example, basic definitions of kitsch in the Oxford Dictionary of English have it as something “considered to be in poor taste.” The Cambridge Dictionary, in its American version, defines kitsch as “showy art or cheap, decorative objects that are attractive to people who are thought to lack any appreciation of style or beauty,” and, in its British version, as “art, decorative objects, or design considered by many people to be ugly, without style, or false.” Finally, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as either “something that appeals to popular or lowbrow taste and is often of poor quality,” or as “a tacky or lowbrow quality or condition.” Taken, respectively, from: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/kitsch, http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/kitsch, and http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kitsch (visited on 11/28/16).
Vallenato: a story of triumph

Nowadays, vallenato is the most popular and commercially successful genre of Colombian popular music within Colombia. Not only that, thanks mainly to the success of Carlos Vives following the release of his 1994 pop-fusion album *Clásicos de la Provincia*, it also constitutes, alongside cumbia, one of the two main musical genres for which Colombia is known worldwide. The creation of the vallenato Grammy award in 2007 perhaps represents the climactic point of this story of national and international commercial success. Many sources agree that this success is the product of what José Antonio Figueroa dubbs a “cultural tropicalist project” (proyecto cultural tropicalista), which was consciously driven by mostly local elites consisting of politicians, journalists, musicians and writers, starting in the 1960s (Hernández, 2015, p. 222). Two foundational events of this cultural-political project were the creation of the Department of Cesar in 1967 and of the Festival de la Leyenda Vallenata (Vallenato Legend Festival) in 1968. According to Hernández, vallenato music played a central role in this project, in the sense that it constituted “the main tool to promote an image of la costa (the Atlantic coastal region)—and especially of Cesar—as a pacific and conflictless place from which the future of Colombia could be promoted.” (Idem) Under this view, vallenato music began to be used essentially as a political tool, though this was perhaps not evident to the everyday Colombian, for the channels through which it started to massively circulate were essentially the commercial ones used by the private music industry including private radio stations. (Wade, 2002, pp. 227–35) The journalistic, literary, political, and commercial promotion of vallenato during the 1960s and (especially) the 1970s had an important stimulus when Colombian journalist and writer Gabriel García Márquez—one of the most important spokesmen of vallenato—won  


74 Key figures in this process include Alfonso López Michelsen, first governor of the Department of Cesar in 1967 and president of Colombia between 1974 and 1978; the Araujos, an influential and affluent family of local politicians and empresarios; Gabriel García Márquez, Colombian writer and Nobel Prize winner; and Enrique Santos Calderón, a famous journalist from Bogota, affiliated for several years to the newspaper *El Tiempo*, perhaps the most important newspaper in the country. Now, though the first nationally-visible stimuli of this music started in the 1960s, García Márquez had already started to create in writing what Hernández calls the vallenato “ethos,” which would constitute a crucial discursive imagery surrounding the musical genre throughout its subsequent development. (Hernández, 2015, p. 223) See also Ochoa (2006).

75 Wade (2002, p. 229) comments how the idea for creating the festival supposedly first came up in 1963 during an informal meeting offered by vallenato legend Rafael Escalona to Gabriel García Márquez, upon the latter’s arrival to the country after a seven-year absence.
the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983. This event constituted a significant step towards vallenato’s national, but especially *international*, recognition and valorization, due to the central role it played during the Nobel Prize-giving ceremony, through a performance by vallenato legends Los Hermanos Zuleta (the Zuleta brothers). In short, then—from the creation of the vallenato festival in 1968 to the international spotlight offered by the Nobel Prize, from the international boom led by Carlos Vives to the establishment of the vallenato Grammy award category in 2007—the story of this music genre is one of a meteoric rise towards remarkable levels of popularity and prestige, both nationally and internationally.

This prestige, however, is not equally distributed throughout the landscape of the different musics that can be or have been dubbed vallenato. Even within vallenato there exists a hierarchy, separating different musical expressions according to particular sets of values. In order to characterize vallenato’s internal hierarchy and to signal some of the examples that give material life to it, one must first briefly discuss the problem of the genre’s origin, which incidentally serves to highlight the meteoric dimension of its rise to success.

Following original research by French musicologist Jacques Gilard, both Wade (2002) and Bermúdez (2004) support the thesis that vallenato, as a distinctive musical genre, was essentially unknown before the 1940s. According to these three authors, rather than a musical tradition that was transformed, modernized, and eventually popularized by the music industry (as many authors who have written about this music maintain), vallenato is a downright modern creation of the music industry.

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Noteworthy, in this respect, is the fact that the first Grammy award in the vallenato category in 2007 was granted to these same artists. The Zuleta brothers, long-known by most of the elites participating in the promotion of their most precious cultural good—vallenato—are now the most important living symbol of this enterprise, and the most important living legends of this musical practice. These brothers are, however, also controversial figures, as they are thought to have intimate ties with representatives of the paramilitary culture of the Colombian Caribbean (the culture surrounding the founding and development of illegal, counter-guerrilla armed groups), and therefore to be its musical representatives. The links between vallenato and paramilitarism in Colombia is a common, yet still not thoroughly studied, subject. Authors like Bermúdez (2004), Blanco (2009?), Hernández (2015), and Wade (2002) touch upon the subject, albeit without completely developing it (Blanco being perhaps the most incisive one). Figueroa’s doctoral thesis (2007), devoted completely to the relationship between vallenato and violence in the Colombian Caribbean region, examines the subject in more detail, drawing particularly controversial conclusions. He straightforwardly describes the elites that have promoted vallenato as paramilitary landowners. For him, the creation of the vallenato Grammy award derives completely from the lobby and promotion of vallenato made by these elites in the United States. He cites a famous passage from a song by the Zuleta brothers as a cynical symbol of the ties between vallenato and paramilitarism. In its original language, the pertinent fragment goes “no joda, viva la tierra paramilitar, vivan los paracos,” literally an ode of the paramilitary movement that can be loosely translated as “long live the paramilitary land, long live the paramilitary!” (Cited in Hernández, 2015, p. 222)
beginning in the 1940s with the consolidation of the phonographic industry. Significant, in this respect, are writings by García Márquez, who in the 1950s sought to explain to people in Barranquilla (the economic hub of the Colombian Caribbean) that the denomination música vallenata (vallenato music) derived from the fact that it came from the city of Valledupar, vallenato being this city’s demonym. The need for this explanation, according to García Márquez himself, was evidence that both the term and the music were not yet well known. (Wade, 2002, p. 227)

Gilard’s, Wade’s, and Bermudez’s insistence on uncovering this relatively recent origin of the development of vallenato music derives from the necessity to counteract countless efforts to award this music (and culture) a mythical origin, thus covering it in a magical aura.\(^{77}\) For instance, the Festival of the Vallenato Legend is founded upon the story of the figure of Francisco el Hombre, a semi-mythic musician who fought and defeated the devil itself, thanks to his prodigy when interpreting the accordion (a similar story appears in other musical traditions).\(^{78}\) Besides this mythic origin, most of the aforementioned biased accounts describe vallenato music as existing since remote, unidentified, times, with no documentary basis to support this claim. These accounts underscore the music’s role in poetically recounting stories of the region (dubbed colloquially “La Provincia,” i.e., the province), thus serving both as a depository of the cultural memory of this province, and more practically as a kind of musical “newspaper,” whose news was spread by musical interpreters and songwriters who traveled throughout the region. The accounts particularly highlight the literary quality of the lyrics or texts of the old, traditional vallenatos, in what constitutes a successful attempt at awarding this musical tradition a prestige that makes it supersede all other musical traditions of the region and the country. (Ochoa, 2006) Even if talking about the colloquial, ordinary events of everyday life, the lyrics are allegedly never rude or coarse. Quite the contrary, they are

\(^{77}\) An extensive list of investigations on vallenato, most of which insist on awarding this music a mythical-magical aura, can be found in Bermúdez (2004, p. 13 [footnote 3]). These works include journalistic, literary, and scholarly perspectives on the subject. Featured authors of the creation of this mythic aura include Consuelo Araújo de Molina, Daniel Samper Pizano and, of course, Gabriel García Márquez. For a critical discussion on the joint efforts of the literary and political worlds in creating this vallenato construct, see Ochoa (2006). Interesting in her discussion is the connection between vallenato and what Hernández dubbs the ideology of macondismo, “which sees Latin America and the Caribbean, through the lens of magical realism, as an indecipherable region and beyond any code.” (Hernández, 2015, p. 223) This connection has never been more evident than in García Márquez’s famous statement that Cien Años de Soledad (One Hundred Years of Solitude)—his masterpiece novel, and the literary epitome of magical realism—is a 350-page vallenato.

\(^{78}\) From its inception, the main act of the festival has thus been a competition between accordionists, the winner being acclaimed as “el rey vallenato”, i.e., the king of vallenato.
elegant and stylish, while at the same time maintaining a folksy character that liberates them from any judgment of arrogant snobbism. With this kind of argument, many defenders of traditional vallenato have gone as far as to compare this musical tradition with that of the French troubadours and trouvères of the Middle Ages, consequently dubbing the legendary songwriters of vallenato the *juglares vallenatos* (vallenato minstrels).

Led by the previously mentioned Francisco El Hombre, and featuring important figures such as Rafael Escalona, Emíliano Zuleta (one of the Zuleta brothers mentioned above), Alejandro Durán, Leandro Díaz, and Colacho Mendoza, among other lauded personalities of the vallenato world, these *juglares* are nowadays considered to be the legends of the musical genre (and, by extension, of the whole of the Vallenato culture). Many of them already deceased, these figures are considered to be local heroes and—most importantly for the present purposes—of high cultural lineage. In other words, they usually came from, or moved within, what are considered to be middle-to-high social spheres of the Caribbean region, as is the case of the most prominent figure of them all, Rafael Escalona. Escalona was a songwriter from a wealthy family, who became close friends with García Márquez, and alongside him became one of the most important early advocators of this musical genre. One could say, then, that, from its inception, the culturalist project of vallenato sought to consolidate this musical tradition in the popular imagery as one of literary and social prestige, injecting it as it did with mythic and magical airs, and thus converting it in the *crème de la crème* of the Colombian tropical musical genres.

But not all vallenato was deemed equally worthy. On the one hand appeared these legends of vallenato and their music, deemed by the promoters of the culturalist project as the representatives of the authentic, traditional and prestigious vallenato (i.e., the “real” roots); but on the other one there existed an actually wider world of a more vulgar, allegedly more tacky and lowbrow strand of vallenato musics. In other words, despite the elite’s agenda of positioning vallenato at the top of the popular/traditional-music scale, the fact is that many currents of the commercial vallenato produced by the music industry from the

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79 For a complete historical study of the Vallenato culture, i.e., the culture of Valledupar and its surroundings (the so called *La Provincia*), see Gutiérrez Hinojosa (1992).
80 Wade points out how other members of the regional elite such as Tobías Enrique Pumarejo, Freddy Molina, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, also contributed in a crucial way to the vallenato culturalist project, at first perhaps as a reaction against the snobbish elites of the city of Santa Marta, who they thought looked down at them and their region. This way, the initial motivation for the promotion of this music can be linked to a sort of regional chauvinism with political goals. (Wade, 2002, p. 85)
1970s onward had wide appeal especially in the middle-to-low classes of both the Atlantic region and the country as a whole. Below the radar of the image of the mythic figures of the root vallenato classics emerged a considerate number of figures of high commercial success, who became popular heroes of the lower classes of the country. Amongst them stand out figures such as Alfredo Gutiérrez, Rafael Orozco, Jorge Oñate, or Diomedes Díaz. And before these highly commercial figures of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s—who helped popularize vallenato beyond its regional milieu—there had also existed artists of mostly popular extract such as Guillermo Buitrago, Julio Bovea, Pacho Rada, Luis Enrique Martínez, José María Peñaranda, or even “cumbia king” Andrés Landero, who had all related with vallenato-type of musics since as early as the 1940s—in spite of having composed and played many other types of musics as well. While specialized circles and academic commentary recognize the significance of many of these figures, for some reason they were left out of the main list of legends recognized by the elite representatives of the culturalist project. As in the case of the commercial figures of the 1970s and after, many of these artists were (and still are) associated with more “popular”—i.e., lower class—audience. All of them constitute what we could understand as the “underworld” of the universe of vallenato musics.\footnote{81}

According to this brief overview of the universe of vallenato musics, there exists a mythic, authentic strand of vallenato, which is constantly cultivated at the Festival in its supposed “original” version, on the one hand; and a lowbrow, more commercial strand, which—even if evincing many of the musical characteristics that are typical of vallenato—represents a vulgar, distorted version of the roots vallenato, on the other. Under this view, authenticity—i.e., a mythic idea of roots and a set of legitimate representatives—seems to be the central criterion of the vallenato scale of values, for it is obvious that issues of class and race are, in fact, perhaps the most decisive, extra-musical criteria. However, the most recent development of musics conceived of as vallenato slightly complicates the issue.

As mentioned, the figure of Carlos Vives and his pop-fusion musical project broke into the national and international scene during the early 1990s, creating a boom that represented an unprecedented success of Colombian tropical musics around the globe (particularly in Latin America and the United States), a success arguably even larger than the popularization of cumbia earlier in the

\footnote{81 The racial aspect of the constitution of this hierarchy is, not surprisingly, crucial. For a detailed discussion of the role of race in this and other musical traditions of the Colombian Caribbean see Wade (2002).}
twentieth century (see below). Now, even if the elements of Colombian (and sometimes international) tropical musics that fed Vives’s music throughout its history were varied, it rapidly became associated with, or simply known as, vallenato (new vallenato, undoubtedly, but vallenato after all). The reason behind this reductive denomination lies, no doubt, in the fact that the first tropical projects led by Vives—his 1991 album *Escalona “Un Canto a la Vida”* and his 1993 album *Clásicos de la Provincia*—were both solely dedicated to vallenato musics, in a strategic move that sought to link the figure of Vives with the most prominent legendary names of the vallenato tradition. Vives himself constantly and explicitly reinforced this early link, so as to constantly strengthen his image as the modern son and heir of the elite tradition of the vallenato legends of yesteryear. (Sevilla et al. 2014) Thanks, in large part, to this strategically created link, and despite a later diversification, Vives and his music were to be inextricably linked with the vallenato tradition, especially in the international scene. Behind Vives’s success appeared an important number of musical projects that sought to emulate his musical language, which at its core was conceived of as a fusion of elements of Anglo pop music and elements of Colombian tropical music (most notably vallenato). This new wave of pop-fusion tropical musics rapidly came to be known as tropipop, and—because of Vives’s original link to vallenato—it also came to be conceived of as either a new, stylized version of vallenato, or a new, yet fake, version of it. (Sevilla et al. 2014)

With the establishment of Vives’s new “vallenato” and the subsequent tropipop wave, the hierarchy of vallenato musics—in fact, of tropical musics in general—significantly changed. Suffice to say, for the present purposes, that this new vallenato created a wide appeal, especially within Colombian urban high classes across the country, a social space where prior versions of vallenato (whether the roots-type or the tacky, commercial one) hadn’t been able to fully reach. Though within specialized circles (especially vallenato critics who were radical defenders of the so called “roots” tradition) this new wave represented a heretic fusion with solely commercial purposes and was thus not worthy of representing the continuation of the vallenato tradition (Idem), within less specialized circles of Colombian society, and particularly within the urban middle classes, it emerged as a type of fused vallenato they could truly and wholly embrace. In other words, socially speaking, Vives and his heirs were granted the license of representing the modernized continuation of the roots vallenato and thus suddenly constituted the new *crème de la crème* of Colombian tropical musics and of vallenato. Within this admittedly quite ample,
more receptive view, both the legendary roots of vallenato and Vives’s modernized versions of vallenato (and other tropical musics) were somewhat paradoxically understood as expressions of the same lineage. Here, authenticity clearly could not serve as the defining criterion for the construction of a scale of vallenato musics (or at least not in the original more “rootsy” sense). Class and international prestige, on the other hand, had taken precedence as value judgments.

This account of vallenato and its internal hierarchy serves as a paradigmatic example of the later discussions around cumbia and salsa. Moreover, while Vives and his music are stereotypically linked to the vallenato tradition, they constitute the fundamental shift of Colombian tropical musics of recent years, and thus serve to depict the current hierarchy of, not only vallenato, but also the world of Colombian tropical musics in general. In fact, Fernández and Vila (2013) understand the phenomenon of tropipop as falling under the umbrella of cumbia and not vallenato, depicting it as “a more contemporary offspring of cumbia” (Fernández et al. 2013, 26). This more academic definition of the phenomenon partly derives from an understanding of the term “cumbia” as embracing more than its traditional varieties (see below), and including a wider gamut of musical developments originating in the Colombian Caribbean region and spreading across Latin America. This wider development, and thus also understanding, of cumbia naturally complicates the task of depicting a hierarchical map similar to that of vallenato. Accordingly, this dissertation inevitably proposes a quite reductive and biased version of such a map. Yet the reduction and bias is in part intentional, given that, as stated above, my interest is in presenting a cultural/social stereotype of the different cumbias, as it has been constructed variously in Latin America, Colombia, and of course Bogota.

Cumbia: the mother, the elegance, the commodity, the resistance

Though perhaps slightly idiosyncratic and bizarre at first sight, the subtitle that gives name to this section seeks to depict in just a few words the different worlds and views inspired in different circles by different cumbias. Here, the incessant repetition of the word “different” is not just a coincidence or carelessness in writing. It speaks of the particular complications and contradictions or paradoxes that arise when examining the phenomenon of cumbia. The word “mother,” for example, points to the
The nowadays more or less generalized notion that cumbia is the mother of all related rhythms is immediately put into question once one addresses the question of its origins in a more rigorous manner. For instance, an informal, oral account by Fredy Arrieta—a current performer of música de tambora (traditional tambora music, one of whose airs is cumbia) from the region of María La Baja—seems to immediately underscore the ambiguity of cumbia’s precedence over other airs: “gaita [a musical air similar to cumbia] is instrumental, and cumbia is a bit, like more cadenciosa [sensually calmer], but it includes singing. . . . I do not dare confirm that cumbia comes before gaita. . . . It is said that the first sones [airs] . . . were instrumental, and one of the oldest is the gaita, well it has to come first, it’s logical. Later, when they put lyrics into gaita . . . well, they start to compose porros and then cumbia and that sort of thing, but they’re not the same. Cumbia does exist. The base of cumbia is very much like that of gaita but you need to. . . . [be able to distinguish them]. . . . They are very similar, but a difference exists.” (cited in Convers and Ochoa 2007, p. 30; TBA) Arrieta is here talking about one of the two major types of traditional cumbia (allegedly a more “indigenous” cumbia), the other one being the more “black” cumbia from the region of the lower Magdalena river. In any case, judging from Arrieta’s reflection and similar ones, one can see how the idea of “cumbia-as-genesis” derives greatly from the significance it has acquired over the years. It is not, in other words, so much a temporal genesis, but a mythical or symbolic one. Noteworthy, in this respect, is the fact that even scholarly works like that of Delia Zapata (1962) oftentimes defend the notion of cumbia as “mother genre,” i.e., as originator of various other dances. Convers and Ochoa somewhat follow Zapata when they write that “it makes sense . . . to think that we are talking about the same origin for various genres that afterwards develop themselves with particular characteristics, in different regions, but that proceed from the same cradle.” (p. 32) These authors, however, do not commit themselves to suggesting that this cradle is necessarily cumbia. In other words, even if their discussion tends to clarify the notion of a common origin for various dances/airs, it also stresses the doubts around the notion that cumbia constitutes that common origin. This de-mythification notwithstanding, the notion of “cumbia as mother” persists in the popular imagery. Rafael Pérez, for instance, says: “I would continue to insist that all that comes from the cumbia. . . . Cumbia is everything: cumbia, gaita corrida, porro, respecting their differences. . . . You put a couple to dance, and it dances cumbia . . . well, if we dance gaita, then dancing is faster. But everything is cumbia.” (p. 32) Here is an eloquent testimony of the strength of cumbia in the popular imagery: indeed everything—even tropipop, according to Fernández and Vila—is cumbia.
will thus necessarily dispense with much detailed information about cumbia’s vast and multifaceted
development.83

Understood as the quintessential music genre of Colombian origin, cumbia’s story can be
summarized as follows. First of all, even if sparsely mentioned and briefly described in some written
sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cumbia was a cultural practice whose
development, up until the twentieth century, was largely based upon the characteristics of an oral
tradition. Given this lack of documentation, cumbia’s early development is, not surprisingly, largely
unclear. The uncertainty of its earlier history notwithstanding, by the beginning of the twentieth century
cumbia seems to have been clearly acknowledged as a fully established and matured cultural form of the
Colombian Caribbean region (Fernández L’Hoeste 2013). The reason for describing traditional cumbia as
a cultural form lies in the fact that, since its beginnings, rather than just a musical genre, cumbia has been
variously understood as a rhythm, a folk dance, a musical genre, a party site, and/or a party occasion
(Convers et al., 2007; D’Amico, 2013; Wade, 2002). In its traditional rendering, then, cumbia clearly
transcends its purely musical substratum.

This traditional cumbia was fundamentally a rural phenomenon, which gradually made its way
into small towns and cities across the region. It was thus associated with peasantry, but most importantly,
as the expression of mostly black and indigenous populations. This ethnic component was crucial not
only with regards to cumbia, but in relation to almost all expressions of Colombian tropical musics,
perhaps with the notable exception of vallenato (which was strategically considered of “whiter” origins,
83 A good summary about cumbia’s origin and development and its traditional organological
characteristics can be found in Chapter 1 (“Cumbia Music in Colombia: Origins, Transformations, and
Evolution of a Coastal Music Genre”) of Hector Fernández’s and Pablo Vila’s edited volume Cumbia!
(2013, pp. 29-48). The chapter includes synthesized, yet comprehensive, information about the
etymology of the term, and about the various instruments included in cumbia’s more traditional versions
and their possible origins (ff. 32–36). It also provides a quick overview of cumbia’s developmental paths
and its relationship with some other musical genres (p. 33 and ff.). Chapter 11 of the same volume (“On
Music and Colombianness: Toward a Critique of the History of Cumbia”) provides a valuable critical
discussion of many of the approaches on cumbia found in the most relevant scholarly literature on the
subject. It importantly includes a good critical overview of the different positions and hypotheses found in
this literature regarding the origin of the genre. Though not as comprehensive in its reach, Volume 1 of
Convers’ and Ochoa’s (2007) study and practice method about the traditional músicas de tambora
(tambora musics) of San Jacinto presents another valuable discussion around the question of cumbia’s
origin. Particularly valuable in their approach is the inclusion of various of the voices of actual current
performers of tambora music from the region, which gives a lively perspective about the subject, wherein
the obscurity of cumbia’s origin and the ambiguity of the term’s semantic field is highlighted (see previous
footnote).
thus its place as the elite of the *costeño* musics. See above). Early in the twentieth century, then, expressions such as cumbia were frowned upon by the elite and ostracized from the "good" sectors of society. These traditions were considered of less stature; an expression of uneducated and savage populations (Hernández 2014; Wade 2002).84

As explained in detail by both Wade (2002) and Hernández (2015), around the 1940s, the Colombian elites (both in the Caribbean and Andean regions) began to gradually change their perspective with regards to tropical musics of the country (i.e., *costeño* musics), including cumbia. This change was due to the confluence of several factors, among which stand out the emergence and development of both the radio and phonographic industry, and the effects in the country of the international boom of Afro-Cuban tropical musics (most notably the Cuban *son*) and of North American jazz (particularly in its Big Band version). The international success of these types of musics—many of them associated with the blackness that had been constantly rejected in Colombia and elsewhere—meant that the local elites could open up to feeling more comfortable about embracing similar musical traditions of the country. But the change of attitude was not automatic, nor did it imply that the more traditional, peasant versions of Colombian tropical musics would be instantly embraced. As in Cuba during an earlier historical moment, the music itself needed a stylistic transformation in order to become acceptable to the whiter elites, particularly those of the country’s interior. Such transformation came in the hands of educated *costeño* musicians considered to be white in the local context, the most notable of which were Lucho Bermúdez and Pacho Galán. Both of them took material from local musical traditions, such as cumbia, and created orchestrated versions of this music that included the “brassy” colors and the “jazzy” harmonies typical of the celebrated North American big bands and Cuban conjuntos of the time. Suddenly, white elites of both the Caribbean and the Andean region of the country celebrated the tropical musical tradition of the country—its música costeña—though only when camouflaged by the elegant “white” coats that constituted the sign of international sophistication.85

84 This phenomenon is not, of course, particular of Colombian tropical musics. Many musical traditions considered to have a large component of African or indigenous elements across the Caribbean region and across the Americas suffered a similar luck. For a discussion of a similar phenomenon in Afro Cuban musical traditions, for example, see Moore, R. (1997). *Nationalizing blackness: Afrocubanismo and artistic revolution in Havana, 1920-1940.* PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
85 With respect to race, Wade for instance writes that traditional musicians from *la costa* “were often branded as black or even African.” In the end, according to Wade, “whether it was to denigrate or
The middle of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a *genteel* type of cumbia—a cumbia “dressed as a frac,” as the famous phrase about Lucho Bermúdez’s strand of cumbia goes. This emergence didn’t mark, however, the disappearance of the traditions from which it fed. Meanwhile, the more traditional cumbia maintained its localized, racialized character. And even if the emergence of the more elegant cumbia was the most visible instance of its success, empresarios of the music industry also started promoting other popular forms of tropical musics, including cumbia, which stood midway between the more decidedly folk, roots version and the elitist big band version played at social clubs. Notable representatives of this, say, “middlebrow,” urban cumbia included the famous Corraleros de Majagual and Pedro Laza y sus Pelayeros, the former playing a crucial role in the international popularization of the genre (alongside Bermúdez). In short, this moment in history represented the beginning of the development of many different types of cumbias, which oftentimes only shared the basic rhythmic flavor that characterizes the genre (see below). From this moment onwards, in other words, there would be a proliferation of types of cumbias, constantly mutating in response to the forces of the market and the context to where it traveled. And though notably extending the range of the musical objects it started representing, from this moment onwards the term cumbia would lose its semantic instability with regards to its ontological status (dance, party, music, rhythm, or culture), to firmly start signifying just a musical genre.

After the first international successes of Colombian tropical successes led by figures such as Bermúdez and Los Corraleros, most notably in Mexico and Argentina, the path towards the decisive transnationalization of cumbia was paved. The first developments of a cumbia that already in the 1940s had begun to show signs of unique local adaptations in Mexico were followed variously, at different times, in several Latin American countries. While the influence of Colombian cumbia was probably felt all over the subcontinent, there were special cases in which cumbia arrived and was uniquely appropriated by the local culture so as to produce a particular strand of cumbia; one entitled to its own particular

exorcise, the apparent negritude of tropical music in Colombia was always a central concern.” (Wade, 2002, pp. 17, 22; TBA) On the other hand, Wade underscores the historical and cultural construction of the idea of closely relating certain musics and dances with the idea of sexuality. He thus writes that “the connections usually established in Colombia between the inhabitants of the Caribbean region, their music and dance, and their ‘warm’ sexuality, and which can be identified in multiple forms throughout the continent, are not imposed but constructed within a particular history that includes slavery, African cultural influences, and domination by a colonial power that regarded dance as sin.” (p. 29; TBA)
denomination. Such are the cases of cumbia norteña (1950s onward), cumbia grupera (1970s onward), cumbia rebajada (1980s onward), and cumbia sonidera (ff. 2000s), whose main spheres of influence include Mexico, the United States and parts of Central America; Peruvian cumbia (1960s onward)—pejoratively known as chicha—and its more modern offspring tecnocumbia (1990s), whose influence has been felt most notably in Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador; and the more recent cumbia villera, developed originally in Argentina beginning in the 2000s, but popularized around the continent through the modern channels of distribution brought along by the internet. Each one of these locally flavored cumbias has had its own unique story and development, responding in different ways to the particular conditions of each of the contexts where it has flourished.86

Despite their stylistic differences, one quickly notices that there are broad extra-musical commonalities uniting most of these local expressions of cumbia. A romantic view of cumbia would probably understand such commonalities as arising from the spirit that has been the essence of this cultural form allegedly from its inception. In a word, this spirit would be one of resistance. In other words, cumbia appears to have been destined to constitute a musical expression of and for the oppressed and the dispossessed. In less romantic terms, one can see how both the traditional Afro-Colombian cumbia and its various continental appropriations constitute the musical expression of impoverished populations, all of which are considered to be—for different reasons—at the bottom of their local social scales. In most cases, cumbia’s resistance has not been related to the appearance of confrontational or revolutionary lyrics, as is the case with musical movements such as South American nueva canción (the new song), Cuban nueva trova (the new trove), or North American folk rock of the Bob Dylan type. Its resistance is more about its promise of a cathartic redemption through celebration and dance. Amparo Lotero romantically paints a portrait of a plausible origin of cumbia in colonial times, attributing its appearance to precisely this type of promise. She writes how newly arrived African slaves “lacked instruments to produce music, but had to dispel the fatigue, the hardships and the terror of death. So they made flutes and gaitas with the reeds that grow in the swamps, drums with tree trunks and animal hides (cited in

86 For a quick description and overview of the various developments of cumbia throughout Latin America, see Fernández L’Hoeste (2007). For more detailed information in this respect, and more extensive reflections about particular processes of cumbia in different countries, see Fernández and Vila (2013). This volume also includes extensive additional bibliography on each of the different developments of the genre. For an account of cumbia’s arrival and development in Mexico, focusing on the role that issues like crime, delinquency, contraband, and drug dealing have had in that development, see Blanco (2005).
Convers and Ochoa, p. 2007, 29; TBA, emphasis added). Thus, supposedly, emerged cumbia: as a way to dance the woes of the world away.

Descriptions of cumbia's role in the various Latin American populations where it nested are of a similar vein. According to Fernández and Vila, for example, in Mexico cumbia was particularly attractive to the urban or rural working class because "with its happy lilting beat, so different from the melancholy of corridos and related genres, which encourage sorrowful nostalgia and hard drinking, [it] was the ideal companion for a long day at work or a festive night at the local dance club." (Fernández and Vila, 2013, p. 10) Like in Mexico, cumbia in Guatemala, Argentina, the U.S., Uruguay, Chile or Peru has tended to be the accompanying beat of usually working-class populations. It has been their vehicle of celebration, and at the same time of catharsis and resistance. Overall, then, one could say that cumbia has been special when compared to other successful Latin American transnational music genres such as Cuban son, Mexican rancheras and corridos, Argentine tango, or Brazilian bossa nova. As Fernández and Vila succinctly put it, unlike Mexican or Brazilian music, with its "established nationalist scheme," or Argentine music, an "Eurocentric project of culture" with "airs of superiority," cumbia has "usually arrived through the back door and in the hands of the dispossessed." (p. 10) As the following summary shows, the types of social appropriations of cumbia throughout Latin America have had this trait in common:

- in the case of Mexico, aside from the Colombian bands that visited and toured working-class circuits, it was its very citizens, who, returning from the United States, contributed to and accelerated a massive diffusion of the music. For Argentina, internal immigrants from the countryside and recent Bolivian and Paraguayan migrants, usually despised as bolitas and paraguas, performed a crucial role in the development of the bailanta circuit in Buenos Aires. In Peru, it was serranos, the recent arrivals from the Andes, who

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Lotero’s portrayal of the origins of cumbia is obviously more a fantasy than a documented fact. This particular account ignores the indigenous and European contributions (as small as they could have been) to cumbia and its early development, present in most scholarly accounts about the subject. The search for the tri-ethnic component is, in fact, a constant preoccupation in studies about the origins of musical styles or genres in Latin America. Zapata is an eloquent example of the emphasis of cumbia’s tri-ethnic characteristics. Focusing on organology and garments, she writes that cumbia is constituted by “drums of black accent, flutes of indigenous groan, dress of hispanic style” (cited in Convers and Ochoa, 2007, p. 30; TBA). Note also here the connotation of melancholy and suffering when referring specifically to indigenous population, and cumbia’s cathartic role in this respect.
developed an appetite for cumbia in the mid-1960s. *In short, cumbia’s arrival was so insignificant—by and large, it was consumed by people who didn’t seem to matter and who, as a rule, were not even visible to the state—that cultural establishments barely registered its presence.* (Idem; emphasis added)

This summary is quite useful for the purposes of underscoring the reputation of cumbia as a lowbrow-style music throughout the continent. Fernández and Vila find surprising that this style of music would eventually become the music of marginalized communities across Latin America, given that it first appeared in the international scene in its elegant, big band, version. In this respect, they ask how “even when cumbia came in through the front door—when Colombian orchestras like Bermúdez’s or Galán’s embarked on successful journeys to play abroad at high-society clubs—who could imagine that such happily infectious music would someday conceal a socially militant, culturally resistant agenda?” (Fernández and Vila, 2013, p. 10) This way, Lotero’s semi-mythic picture of a cumbia emerging in colonial times as a sort of powerful cultural space of resistance seems to find an analogous sense in the factual evidence of the genre’s transnational development during the second half of the twentieth century. This sense of resistance and fight is evident in Fernández and Vila’s overall description of the various cumbias that have sprung in different locations: “originating from social groups marginalized in the economic, cultural, or geographic sense, these styles of cumbia and the social groups that consume them have fought for recognition.” (p. 102)

But even if these marginalized groups view cumbia as in fact a way of fighting for recognition—as a form of both resistance and catharsis, that is—the fact is that cumbia has been frowned upon and minimized by the upper classes of every society where it has flourished. The generalized reputation of cumbia is that it is a tacky and repetitive music, made and consumed by uneducated people with obvious bad taste. Add its wide commercial appeal and you get one of the stereotypical recipes of *kitsch.*

Consider the following statements about cumbia, in relation with ideas surrounding kitsch: “cumbia is viewed as a slightly less complicated musical style, with slightly lower artistic quality” (Fernández and Vila, 2013, p. 90; emphasis added); “sonideros and their listeners vehemently reject commercial Mexican cumbias . . . as being *naco,* a slang word describing something that is ‘tacky’ and *excessively commercial*
or a person who is uneducated and lacking style” (p. 124; emphasis added); “to me, cumbia was música mersa (music for uneducated people). In my case (being a leftist), it didn’t mean ‘working-class music’ but unpretentious music that appealed to people (of any class) who did not know what ‘good’ music was all about.” (p. 5; emphasis added). It seems rather obvious, then, that most kinds of popular cumbias from across Latin America are deemed as tasteless, cheap, vulgar, trashy, crude—even within communities that cultivate cumbia in their lives, as in the case of Mexican sonideros.88 Perhaps with the sole exception of Bermúdez’s and Galán’s sophisticated Colombian style of the 1940s and 50s, when compared to other popular music genres, cumbia is, in a word, kitschy.

This is not to say that in Colombia, the “Bermúdezean” development of cumbia continued to dominate the landscape of cumbia and other local tropical musics. Besides the emergence of vallenato, the nowadays “king” of the Colombian popular genres (see above), cumbia continued to mutate and find new versions and channels of distribution and consumption. I had already noted that alongside Bermúdez and Galán, empresarios of the music industry had also started to promote a more middle-to-lowbrow commercial style of música costeña. This “lower” lineage of local tropical musics continued to develop, given its high appeal in rural and urban working-class sectors. In the 1970s, a new, highly successful, type of cumbia emerged in the country, a cumbia whose style owed a lot to a type of cumbia developed in Venezuela around the time, by artists such as Pastor López.89 Pejoratively known as chucu-chucu or raspa, this new style was produced by musicians and artists from the interior of the country, most of them from Medellín90 and its surroundings.91 Partly because of this fact, chucu-chucu was deemed as a fake

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88 Interesting, in this sense, is the fact that sonideros reject the more “commercial” types of cumbias. Sonideros are dj’s who mix cumbia samples and records in live parties, especially in Mexico and the U.S. Cathy Ragland defines their musical practice as an “idiosyncratic fusion of tradition and modernity, in which the roots-oriented sounds of a rural vallenato-style cumbia has been transformed into a genre distinctly Mexican and is combined with the sonidero’s space-age sound effects.” (Fernández and Vila, 2013, p. 133) The allegedly snobbish attitude on the part of sonideros is similar to that of many melomaniac collectors who are constantly in the search for rare musical objects, rejecting anything “mainstream,” “commercial,” or “widely known.” Dolan (2010) describes this attitude as being quintessential to the indie music spirit. For more information on the phenomenon of sonideros, see Fernández and Vila (2013, pp. 119–137).

89 The style also fed visibly from the unique appropriations of cumbia that had been developing in Peru since the 1960s. And although there’s no reason to think that it was influenced by it, one can also see stylistic and commercial parallelisms between chucu-chucu and the Mexican-American phenomenon of cumbia grupera. Most commentators see in this style of cumbia an important influence of other (at the time) recent international trends, most prominently that of American and British rock’n roll.

90 Medellín is the second largest and most important city of Colombia.
version of true costeño music, particularly, of course, by costeños themselves. The argument here was one of cultural essentialism: a tropical music produced and performed by people foreign to costeño culture can only be fake tropical music. Chucu-chucu was (and still is) thus viewed as an essentially paisa92 phenomenon, even if not all of the people involved were from Medellín, and actually many—both musicians and impresarios—were actually costeños. Yet beyond the issue of provenance, chucu-chucu was also frowned upon by different sectors of Colombian society as a whole—artistic bohemian circles, folklorists, rockero portions of young urban populations, and, of course, the high class—because it was considered to be a music of low quality, purposefully formulaic and repetitive, devised exclusively for commercial purposes. Chucu-chucu thus constituted a kind of heretic ill-treatment of the traditions of the nation; a watered-down version of both the rootsy and elegant traditions of cumbia, designed to superficially please folks with little criterion for musical taste (Hernández, 2015, pp. 209–220; Wade, 2002, pp. 215–223).

Both in its musical treatment and in its reception as kitsch, chucu-chucu could be conceived of as the Colombian version of the various Latin American cumbias that had recently began to develop throughout the continent. And as is the case with those cumbias, chucu-chucu proved to be a vast commercial success amongst middle and low classes of the time. Crudely pejorative critiques notwithstanding, and apparently unaffected by such critiques, vast segments of the Colombian population wholeheartedly embraced the more modern, easily digestible, new style of national tropical musics. If in certain Colombian circles of the 1970s chucu-chucu’s reception was particularly harsh, beginning around the 1990s its reception has been, perhaps ironically, much more positive. Simultaneously to the emergence of Vives’s new vallenato and the phenomenon of tropipop, chucu-chucu suddenly began to be seen through a decidedly nostalgic veil, this way acquiring a positive valorization. Similar to Dolan’s views of indie pop music, listened to in the 1990s, and in sheer contrast to the new developments of tropipop, chucu-chucu finds a new aura of authenticity. Its most beloved songs begin to be deemed as the “classics” of tropical music. They represent the festive music of the “good old days,” if you will, positively associated with family and a parent culture (Hernández, 2015, pp. 209-220; Wade, 2002, pp. 273-296;).

91 Famous chucu-chucu bands include Los Hispanos, Los Melódicos, and the late Sonora Dinamita. The most representative individual figure of the movement was Gustavo “el loco” (the crazy) Quintero.
92 People from the Medellín region are traditionally known as paisas.
The 2000s have brought a somewhat similar phenomenon of re-valorization of cumbia throughout Latin America (and the U.S. and Europe), only this time with respect to the whole of the Latin American cumbia tradition, including of course parts of the purely Colombian tradition. In fact, some of the musical projects included in the universe of Rolo ET (most notably Frente Cumbiero) have actually played an active part in, and constitute an eloquent example of, this twenty-first-century re-valorization of cumbia as a whole. I shall return to the nature of this phenomenon when discussing the specific dynamics of the tropical world in Rolo ET, below and in Chapter 5. Suffice for now to say that this re-valorization seems to have begun in Argentina in the early 2000s, where cumbia villera's alleged creator and main representative, Pablo Lescano, started to experiment with cumbia, mixing it “with electronic and psychedelic paraphernalia created with synthesizers.” (Férrandez and Vila, 2013, p. 213) Even if originally coming from the shantytown of La Esperanza in Buenos Aires, Lescano and his electronic experiments with cumbia were particularly successful at the Zi^z^ek parties, an avant-garde Buenos Aires nightclub. Cumbia, once one of the quintessential voices of the oppressed in Latin America (perhaps alongside salsa), suddenly started to be considered hip; it started, in other words, to be embraced by the ‘hip’ populations of Latin America and the world, and to be a protagonist of the channels of distribution and consumption of the alternative current known worldwide as afropop. As with Bermúdez or Vives before, though in a less mainstream fashion, cumbia once more became chic.

In sum, then, with cumbia we are confronted with multiple musical and cultural worlds, which oftentimes show mutating scales of value. Cumbia, in other words, constitutes a particularly complex universe, due to its various, highly localized, offsprings, and to the changes in its perception within its various geographical and temporal spaces of reception. Yet, just as one can trace very general musical characteristics that make all cumbias, cumbia, one can also see a tendency to understand cumbia (positively or pejoratively) as a music of and by the marginalized. Accordingly, recent revaluing of its various traditions notwithstanding, there has also been a tendency to understand it as a music of low quality, its traditional roots version and Bermúdez's elegant version being notable exceptions. The preference for cumbia by marginalized populations—but especially the preference for the most commercial, tacky versions of it—was, in fact, particularly annoying to some educated, left-wing, circles in Latin America. Argentinean scholar Pablo Vilas, a left-wing political activist himself, recognizes that “it
was irksome to [him] to acknowledge that, for some reason, cumbia was a type of music that especially appealed to working-class folks” (Férrandez and Vila, 2013, p. 5). To many in those circles, it was actually salsa the music that most properly represented and incarnated the authentic revolutionary spirit. Considering to be a music of a much more elevated quality, salsa was thus thought of by intellectual and bohemian circles as romantically constituting the ideal and legitimate musical medium of the working class. Having this in mind, allow me now to briefly examine the world of salsa, as it developed especially in Bogota.

**Salsa: the ‘good’ working-class music**

Salsa is like cumbia, in the sense of it having been originally a music of resistance, and representative of a marginalized population. And it is like vallenato, in the sense of it having been essentially a modern product, one which has been avidly exploited by the music industry and its traditional networks of distribution since its appearance towards the end of the 1960s. Originating in marginalized neighborhoods of New York City, salsa has since had a vast sphere of influence, especially throughout Latin America and within Latin American communities around the world.\(^93\) Literally meaning “sausage,” salsa’s name apparently derives from the fact that its music resulted from a blend of diverse musical elements. Musically speaking, salsa is, in other words, a mixture of various of the musical styles that were available to (usually young and poor) Hispanic American\(^94\) immigrants living in New York City around the 1960s. Accordingly, far from being uniform, salsa repertoire variously included elements from

\(^{93}\) For a detailed chronicle about salsa’s precedents and the processes that led to its emergence, see Rondón (2008). For a quick overview of salsa, including its origin, chief developments and main musical characteristics, see Manuel (2006, pp. 88–115). For discussions about the international popularization and worldview perspectives of salsa music, see Quinter-Rivera et al. (2003) and Wexer (2010). For a study on the development of salsa in New York City from a performer’s perspective, see Washburne (2008).

\(^{94}\) The immigrant population involved in salsa’s development was mostly from Puerto Rico, for which salsa is considered to be essentially a Puerto Rican phenomenon—at least as far as its first developments are concerned. In this respect, Peter Manuel writes how “it was really not until the late 1960’s that Newyoricans [Puerto Rican immigrants living in New York City] on a mass level began to recognize and affirm the uniqueness and vitality of their culture. This new self-consciousness demanded a new form of musical expression—or, perhaps, a reinterpretation of an older form.” (Manuel 1994) However, involved in the process were also immigrants from other Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries like Cuba or Dominican Republic, and to a lesser extent, populations from other Latin American countries such as Panama, Colombia, or Venezuela.
different styles and genres such as funk, rock’n roll, boogaloo, mambo, Puerto Rican bomba, and Cuban bolero and son. Such mixture notwithstanding, most authors agree in that most of the repertoire falling under the category “salsa” evinces a rhythmic structure that is based on the Cuban son, a genre which had been widely popularized since the 1930s and had inspired other popular tropical musical genres such as mambo and cha-cha-cha.

The 1970s witnessed an almost worldwide salsa boom, whose most visible musical product was the Fania All Stars, an ensemble of highly-accomplished musicians (of mostly Latin origin) constituted in 1968 by Italian-American impresario Jerry Masucci, who under his label Fania Records produced and promoted the band, taking it on tour around the globe. Driven by the popularity and enormous commercial success of Masucci’s All Stars, the boom of salsa rapidly spread throughout Latin America. Not surprisingly, then, salsa arrived in Colombia early in the 1970s, quickly propagating thanks to a combination of radio programming, record distribution and processes of immigration (Gómez, 2013; Waxer, 2010). At first particularly popular amongst African-derived, working-class urban populations of both the Pacific and Atlantic regions, salsa soon spread its popularity within all urban working-class sectors across the country, and within bohemian, intellectual circles of the country’s most important urban centers. This popularity soon led to the emergence of local salsa bands, to salsa’s inclusion in the repertoire of already-formed local bands dedicated to tropical music, and to the hybridization of existing musical forms such as cumbia (particularly in its chucu-chucu version).

Even with its expected particularities, the social map of salsa reception in Bogota was similar to that of the rest of the country. As amply documented by Gómez et al. (2013), the genre was

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95 Since salsa is strongly linked to (especially immigrant) Puerto Rican population and culture, the issue of the musical basis has been slightly controversial, some Puerto Rican authors suggesting that its fundamental structure derives from Puerto Rican bomba and not from Cuban son. In a discussion about the social and musical appropriation of Cuban musical elements by Puerto Rican and ‘Newyorican’ communities, which includes the workings of this phenomenon in salsa, Manuel (1994) addresses this issue, offering proof of the predominance of the Cuban son in salsa repertoire.

96 For a study on the phenomenon of the rise of Cuban son, its popularization and internationalization, see Moore (1997). For a critical discussion of Cuban national musical genres during the first half of the twentieth century, see Cushman (2005). For an overview of the transnational flows of Hispanic music genres from the perspective of one of its protagonists, which especially focuses on Cuban-derived styles, see García (2006).

97 The literary novel ¡Que viva la música! (Long live music) by Colombian writer Andrés Caicedo, first published in 1977, is an interesting half-fictional, half-real depiction of salsa’s early boom in Colombia, seen through the lens of a young writer who belonged to the revolutionary, intellectual circles of high-class Caleño society (i.e., from the city of Cali, Colombia).
enthusiastically embraced by the working class inhabiting the city, at first localized mostly in the city’s central and southern neighborhoods. As in other urban centers, Afro-Colombian and Afro-Caribbean immigrant population—particularly receptive to, and celebrative of, salsa’s “tropical” sounds—played a central role in the popularization of the genre. But as also happened in other cities (of both Colombia and abroad), salsa was also notably embraced by circles of educated, left-wing intellectuals and bohemians, who viewed salsa as an authentic musical expression of the (latino) working classes, its commercial popularity notwithstanding.

This view was founded first and foremost in the nature of the lyrics of early salsa, which—similar to the parallel phenomenon of hip hop—usually denounced social injustice and directly expressed the misfortunes of the marginalized population it first represented. The great impact of this type of lyrics was fundamentally due to the perceived authenticity of salsa artists, that is, the fact that most of them were “authentic” representatives of their social class and ethnicity. They were not perceived of, in other words, as having been commercially fabricated to constitute fake commodities. Moreover, there was the perception that salsa music was of greater quality than many commercial musical products of the time, which in the case of Colombia included the commercial cumbias (especially chucu-chucu) and vallenatos (Hernández 2015, 209). Within the universe of Latino commercial tropical musics of the 1970s, and to the eyes of the aforementioned intellectuals, salsa constituted something like the analogous of the serious art of the European artistic elites of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A recent confession by locally famous salsa dancer Charly Valencia (known as “El Negro Charly”), that in the famous Rolo salsa clubs of the 1970s people also enthusiastically danced raspa (i.e., cumbia in the chucu-chucu style), but were embarrassed to admit so, eloquently exemplifies this allegedly snobbish attitude from the part of

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98 Interesting, in this regard, is the phenomenon of cumbia grupera idol Rigo Tovar. Alejandro Madrid makes a similar case for explaining Tovar’s success amongst Mexican and Mexican-American populations (Fernández and Vila, 2013, pp. 109–111). Tovar himself stressed the authenticity of his product, in contrast to the fabricated ones of the middle- and high-class worlds. He once eloquently said: “I would panic if the middle classes, intellectuals, and rich people liked my music. . . . I am a naco [an ill-mannered person] and I sing for the nacos.” (cited in Fernández and Vila, 2013, p. 110) For Tovar and his followers, the world of the intellectuals was the fake one. Ironically, intellectual salsa fans (like Vila) tended to condemn Tovar’s type of musical product—whose Colombian analog would be Paisa chucu-chucu—judging it as merely a fabricated commodity.
said intellectual elites and of “hard-core” salsa fans in general, in favor of salsa and in detriment of musical styles like chucu-chucu or raspa (Gómez., 2013, pp. 62–63).99

After the 1970s, the development of salsa music brought with it a proliferation of styles and sounds, amongst which there emerged a commercial and oftentimes romantic version, typically deemed by salsa fans as a degradation of the original salsa spirit.100 Post-1970s developments of salsa outside of Colombia continued to be enthusiastically embraced by local musical markets. Yet salsa’s development within the country—Colombian salsa, in other words—also continued to flourish and evolve, influenced by, yet also itself influencing, various international styles. As mentioned before, the salsa boom within Colombia had stimulated the emergence of various local salsa bands,101 and, particularly in the case of the city of Cali, had resulted in a unique appropriation of the genre that eventually became an internationally recognized substyle of salsa, in and of itself.102 In a very wide sense, then, one could say that salsa had become an integral part of Colombia’s and Bogota’s musical landscape since early on. By the 1990s, the Colombian landscape of salsa was quite varied, including both national and international styles, vintage and modern sounds, underground and commercial versions. Despite this obvious variety, there tended to exist two general types of salsa—a legitimate one, and a fake one—especially to bohemian and intellectual circles of salsa aficionados in Bogota (Gómez, 2013). In other words, one could say that—distinct local flavors apart—for these aficionados the world of “Newyorican” derived salsa included essentially two types of sound: the raw, “authentic” sound of classic salsa, epitomized by the Fania All Stars, on the one hand; and a digitally processed, watered-down commercial sound on the other. This attitude within the circles of Rolo salsa aficionados in the 1990s was clearly reminiscent of the

99 In his novel Que viva la música (see footnote 100 above), Andrés Caicedo writes that “the people of Cali rejects Los Graduados, Los Hispanos, and other fabricators of the “Paisa sound” [i.e., chucu-chucu], made to the measure of the bourgeoisie [and] its vulgarity.” Referring to salsa in laudatory manner, he later adds: “Long live the Afro-Cuban sentiment!! Long live free Puerto Rico!! We miss Ricardo Ray [a famous member of the Fania All Stars]” (cited in Hernández, 2015, p. 209).

100 In salsa, the dynamics of authentic vs. fake products (variously named in the musical world as alternative vs. mainstream, independent vs. commercial, and so on), alongside the idea of an “original,” revolutionary musical spirit, is strikingly similar to the same sort of phenomenon within the world of rock music. For an early discussion of the latter, see Grossberg, L. (1993). The media economy of rock culture: cinema, postmodernity and authenticity. Sound and vision: The music video reader, 185-209.

101 Famous Colombian salsa bands include Fruko y sus Tesos, Grupo Niche, Guayacán Orquesta, and more recently, Bogota’s La 33. Moreover, when talking about Colombian salsa repertoire, one must necessarily include the various salsa songs composed and performed by Colombian singer Joe Arroyo (originally part of Fruko’s band).

102 For a detailed study on the development and evolution of salsa in Cali, which constitutes a unique adoption and transformation of the genre, see Waxer (2010).
one cultivated within the intellectual circles of the 1970s, according to which salsa represented a certain subversive and bohemian spirit that—during the post-Soviet ambience of the 1990s—seemed obsolete and in danger of extinction. Accordingly, bohemian circles of salsa aficionados in 1990s Bogota despised the more modern commercial version of salsa, while nostalgically revering the increasingly scarce, classic strand. Finally, even considering this internal split, salsa was still overall perceived as fundamentally a music of and for the working class. This is not to say that the local elites didn’t accept or enjoy salsa. On the contrary, salsa eventually colonized most social spaces. This fact notwithstanding, in no small part because of its origins, salsa remained mainly associated with the lower classes, pejoratively by high-class sectors, and proudly by intellectual sectors.103

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After briefly considering, within both regional and local contexts, some of the historically constructed scales of values that exist within the musical and social worlds of vallenato, cumbia, and salsa, we are now in the position to imagine, even if in a very general sense, the universe of tropical musics and their values, as they were socially perceived and experienced in the Bogota of the late 1990s.104

At the time young students beginning their respective music majors, the main protagonists of Rolo ET had at their disposal, within this universe of tropical musics, many of the musical materials from which they would nurture their subsequent musical projects. Perhaps it is better to say that they had

103 Even if shyly welcoming salsa and its language, the local high class was much more enthusiastic in the reception of Dominican merengue, starting especially in the 1980s. Of course, this other Caribbean musical genre had had its own story of transformation, which had eventually placed it in the category of sophisticated tropical musics (similar to what had happened with Bermúdez’s orchestrated cumbias in the 1940s). This transformation was due, in no small part, to the openly racist, chauvinistic project of dictator Rafael Trujillo, who looked to systematically “whiten” the musical genre, so as to fabricate a white Dominican identity through the potency of its most representative music. For more information on the history of Dominican merengue, see Pacini H., P. (1995). *Bachata: a social history of a Dominican popular music*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

104 In this respect, I consider crucial to stress the idea that these musics have been perceived in a certain way. I am here talking about stereotypical associations, which not always—actually seldom—coincide with the actual uses of the music. I am especially interested in this approach, since my intention is not to investigate the actual social landscape of the different musics, but rather to paint a general picture of how these musics are perceived in a particular context, in this case the context inhabited by the protagonists of the studied repertoire.
those materials at their relative disposal, given that, in Colombia, the late 1990s was fundamentally still a pre-internet era, and the big corporations of the music industry were still largely in charge of the selection and distribution of musical material.

Having this in mind, and taking the previous discussion into account, we can imagine a Bogota of the late 1990s in which tropical musics—but particularly vallenato—were pervasive, in a way that transcended the purely festive contexts with which those musics are typically associated. As Hernández notes, during the last fifty years or so in Colombia, what he calls “the imperative of joy” typically related to costeño and tropical musics has “colonized other spheres of quotidian life,” beyond said festive contexts. In Bogota, as in other cities, “public transportation, security booths, restaurants, neighborhood shops, and car workshops are just some of the city scenarios in which it is possible to listen to tropical dance music continuously for hours, not for the purposes of being danced to, but to serve as a background to the work activity or simply to fill the time.” (Hernández, 2015, p. 229; TBA) And so there was the pervasive vallenato (usually judged as tacky by the upper classes), alongside one or another (usually commercial) salsa, playing on the bus, the car, the taxi, the gas station, or the corner shop. There was also the relatively recent and trendy tropipop, with main star Carlos Vives playing in high-class dance and social clubs, airing constantly on national and international television and radio networks. But there were also less mainstream channels like private parties, or alternative salsa and rock music clubs located downtown, where one could listen to the All-Stars salsa classics, and where renditions of traditional, roots cumbias (and other Caribbean genres) gradually began to appear, alongside Anglo rock’n roll classics from the 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile, Latin American cumbias were almost completely absent from the mainstream channels of distribution. Some local radio stations dedicated to the transmission of so called “cantina music” sometimes included tecnocumbia, cumbia grupera, and cumbia norteña hits, the former mostly from Peru and Ecuador and the latter two mostly from Mexico. Colombian artist Marbelle was a famous local representative of these genres. Like those genres, her music—which was branded as tecnocumbia—was perceived of as of lowbrow taste, i.e., vulgar and of low quality.

Confronted by such a tropical musical landscape, saturated by more readily available material but always in search of the unknown and the difficult-to-access, Rolo ET musicians embarked upon different musical projects in which the tropical component played a central role. Within such a landscape, one in
which different social and aesthetic judgments towards different styles and genres coexist, the particular choice of materials by these musicians have not been devoid of meaning. On the contrary, within the mind of curious young students who subsequently became professional musicians and researchers, each choice has been replete with meaning—whether generated consciously as a particular aesthetic statement, or arising implicitly from the stereotypical scales of value of these tropical musics (as mapped above). What choices did these musicians make? What do those choices have to say about the tropical dimension of Rolo ET? What do some of the main protagonists have to say in this respect?

Before addressing these questions, a brief word is needed with respect to the worlds of tropical musics, as I have sought to construct them above. Peter Wade affirms that “oftentimes it is very difficult to link particular musical styles with equally particular class settings,” adding that similar observations have been made by other ethnomusicologists, most notably Mark Slobin. (Wade, 2002, pp. 32-33; TBA) Again, as noted in Chapter 1, I am here not ignoring this warning or arguing against this claim. I am parting from the assumption that music scenes such as those associated with Rolo ET might not necessarily seek to read the reality of musical practices in academic terms, i.e., as they are variously experienced, beyond stereotypes. On the contrary, they might be reading/reacting to that which has been culturally constructed, oftentimes so as to usher a statement—critical or otherwise—regarding those types of constructs, in musical terms. So, in the words of Fernández and Vila, I am “not advocating any sort of ‘homology thesis’ in this [study], that is, that there is a strict correspondence between particular cultural practices . . . and determined social identities” (Fernández and Vila, 2013, p. 13). As Anthony Giddens has argued from his post-structuralist point of view, “there are no essences that can be captured by appropriate linguistic formulations.” (cited in Wade, 2002, p. 33; TBA) But as Eco’s ruminations on semiology suggest, there are plenty of ways in which a fabrication—or in his own terms, a code—can give the impression of constituting an essence so as to falsely create a straight correspondence between those essences and certain linguistic formulations. Having clarified this issue, I shall now address the question about the ways in which Rolo ET has positioned itself with respect to the constructs surrounding tropical musics, through their unique choices and treatment of tropical musical material.
IV. The tropical intermusical world of Rolo ET

Rolo ET protagonists such as Mario Galeano, Pedro Ojeda, Eblis Álvarez, Javier Morales, Alejandro Zuluaga, Maria Angélica Valencia, plus a dozen others, all share similar musical and social backgrounds. Most of them report how, by the late 1990s, rock music had occupied a very special place amongst their musical experiences and preferences (including various substyles such as punk, metal, and psychedelic rock). Many would not disagree if one were to describe their 1990s version of themselves as rockers or punks. They were all, in short, young Colombian rockero: Rolo rockeros, to be more precise. As shown by Calle (2012), rock music had appeared in their lives in organic fashion, i.e., as a result of the aesthetic and social choices they had pursued, while being exposed to the social and musical medium in which they inhabited. Their various social interactions and networks—alongside the existing radio stations, local bands, cassettes and CD’s—had provided the matrix from which they had emerged as rockeros. Calle also points out the key role that jazz music began to play starting in the mid-1990s, a fact that many musicians report as having been a key experience and influence once they moved on towards their own subsequent projects. And, as mentioned before, most of them were already enrolled as undergraduate students in a music program with a clear focus on the Western Classical tradition, where they had thus started to officially (and less organically) study the history, the canonic repertoire, and the musical techniques associated with this tradition.

But as mentioned in the previous section, tropical musics were pervasive within their context. In other words, even if they did not consciously choose to musically identify themselves with the tropical sound world that surrounded them, they had nevertheless been absorbing it through inevitable exposure to its sounds. They might have considered tropical music as being just a natural part of their city’s and country’s soundscape; or as music to share with older relatives; as mere “background” music, if you will. But there it was, nevertheless. Two particularly prominent phenomena had highlighted the tropical component in Colombian and Rolo society during the 1990s: the emergence and commercial boom of the tropical, pop-fusion style of Carlos Vives; and the nostalgic, commercially strategic retread of the chucu-chucu cumbias of the late 1960s and 1970s, promoted and aired especially during the year-end holidays. This strategy of nostalgia, as is understood by Wade (2002, pp. 273-296), was also quite effective.
because, according to Hernández (2015), it perhaps served to solidify family ties across generations. Vives reached the youth—especially those aspiring to either express or achieve social prestige—and chucu-chucu reached the elder, becoming now a sign of the fraternal and nostalgic spirit of year-end celebrations, as opposed to a vulgar, fake music.

Galeano stresses the element of family celebration when commenting on their experience of the more consciously chosen “rocker” world versus the more “background” tropical world. “We came from a basically rockero environment,” he says. “We used to hear lots of punk, lots of trash, lots of metal. . . . The tropical thing [lo tropical] was something that was listened to at home. It was something that you listened to with the family. It was something that was part of, say, family parties; of ‘older’ people and that sort of thing.” (TroPs, 2016) Their relationship to tropical musics—particularly their relationship to these musics’ dance aspect—was essentially linked to a family environment. They would only discover their “own,” independent experience of tropical dance musics through the world of salsa. But not any salsa: classic, revolutionary, All-stars’ salsa. The salsa of the bohemian and intellectuals, which was seldom broadcast on the radio waves of mainstream radio stations. There used to be a dance club in downtown Bogota called Antifaz, which turned out to be particularly important in their approach to this world of salsa and other underground tropical musics. Galeano puts it as follows:

Antifaz . . . was a key site to open our ears. There were usually rock and salsa sets, mixed throughout the evening. . . . Our own social circle of young people, our generation, didn’t have that social space dedicated to dance, which fortunately opened up for us a lot through attending Antifaz practically every week during many years... And dance to, I don’t know, say, James Brown, Led Zeppelin, and then a set of Lebron Brothers and [Ray] Barretto... And this, say, bridge, I see it as an important issue to realize that the dance issue, the tropical issue [el tema bailable, el tema tropical], the Caribbean rhythm, the African rhythm, also spoke tons to us, beyond that relationship with the family.... (TroPs, 2016; TBA, emphasis added)
Galeano thus reveals how the tropical “issue” had been there all along (“spoke tons to us”), through the exposure to the music both during family parties or throughout the quotidian soundscape of the city. But there was another, perhaps less obvious, reason why they were able to embrace the “tropical” sound world both swiftly and enthusiastically: because of the intimate—albeit not necessarily evident—musical commonalities that exist between Afro-Caribbean and rock-related genres. Even if the most evident musical connection between both musical worlds occurs at the rhythmic level, the curiosity of Galeano and his friends quickly detected other overlappings. Finally, beyond the familiarity of the sounds for contextual and musical reasons, these young students also found new, highly attractive elements in the sounds of the tropical music that inhabited the space of Antifaz during those early years. The bonding, social experience of music, the until then unarticulated sonic kinship between tropical musics and their most beloved music, and the alluring seductiveness of newly discovered sound materials constitute chief reasons for explaining the particular attraction of these young group of musicians towards the sounds of tropical musics.

Galeano reports the intuitive and colloquial manner in which he and his friends discovered musical connections between the worlds of rock and tropical musics in the following terms:

[We started] to make these analogies between ‘the tropical’ and [the music] we used to [listen to]. . . . And something usually ‘clicked’… And [we said] things like: Juancho Polo Valencia... Well, he’s like a sort of ‘punketo,’ with a message and surrealistic lyrics... And [he has] a way of singing that [is] very different from the typical, ‘throaty,’ vallenato voice, and that sort of thing... And those analogies within our little circle of friends gradually pushed us towards seeking that other thing… (TroPs, 2016; TBA, emphasis added)

That “other” thing Galeano is referring to is, of course, a particular “tropicality,” that is, a newly discovered tropicality that had been there all the time, yet was only obscurely referenced within the tropical musical world that was amply accessible at the time (mainstream salsa, vallenato, and merengue, retreated chucu-chucu, Vives and his tropipop followers, etc.). Álvarez’s recollection of the issue is perhaps more systematically organized than Galeano’s more colloquial account of those times. He seems
to retrospectively rationalize what at the time were only intuitive connections with the sonic—particularly rhythmic—structures of the tropical musical world, while decidedly underscoring the alluring effect that the alternative aspect of the new sonic discoveries had. Accordingly, when asked about reasons that might elucidate the gravitational pull he and his friends had towards tropical musics (as opposed to, say, Andean musics), he offered the following explanation:

First [came a] more empirical procedure... Which is to say that we [already] had an approach to rhythmic musics with African bases: rock... And this African base is [also] common in tropical musics... It’s the same cell... So let’s say that the most empirical way to approach [other musics] is with tropical musics, and musics from the [Colombian] Pacific coast, and Ecuadorian-Pacific coast music, and Cuban music, and Haitian music, Jamaican music, etc., etc.... [It’s] partly because of this: the common bridge that is the African base... And on the other hand, musics from the interior [of Colombia] are closer to Classical music... They have more counterpoint, they have more melody, they are more solemn... And, in a certain way, at the time we wanted to get away from that... It basically represented that from which we wanted to get away... Because, precisely, bambuco was a music that was treated so as to better resemble the European sources; the European precedent... That’s sort of the empirical approach... I had been playing jazz, I had been listening to rock, I had been listening to punk... So the first thing that it’s going to get you, the most striking thing is listening to Gaiteros de San Jacinto playing a strong [contundente] part of percussion, or listening to Sexteto Tabala” (TroPs, 2016; TBA, emphasis added).

Three key ideas emerge from Álvarez’s account. First, like Galeano, Álvarez reflects on the common “bridges” between the worlds of rock and tropical musics, in his case highlighting what he dubs the rhythmic “African base.” Second, he makes sure to emphasize the musical distance that separates African-derived tropical musics from the Classical musical world from which they “wanted to get away.” And third, he makes reference to a positively shocking reaction that occurred when, at the time, they
encountered less known tropical repertoire. In Álvarez’s account once more appear the elements of musical familiarity and striking novelty—a common binarism in the annals of various forms of “world music.” More unusual is his overt reference to a search for an alternativity whose rationale cannot be put in purely sonic terms. Or, rather, an alternativity whose sonic component is fundamentally devised so as to constitute a statement regarding different musical worlds and their respective meanings. It is thus explicit in this account how, since the very beginning, the musical and aesthetic explorations of Álvarez and his friends sought to establish a position with respect to prevailing scales of musical values; particularly that according to which European Classical music constitutes the musical pinnacle of human history and is thus the one meriting serious study.

Here we are confronted with what seems like an essentially anti-snobbish attitude, somewhat related to the discussion which distinguishes serious art from kitsch. In this sense, the world of Caribbean tropical musics, considered as a whole, would be considered as the unrefined, yet highly valued, opposite of the world of Western Classical music. Understood in the broadest possible sense, tropical music could thus be thought of as valorized kitsch. But beyond the gross binary suggested by Álvarez, there is also the implication that within the world of tropical musics, some of them were more valued than others—some of them were considered particularly striking. This intra-tropical choice also speaks of the search for a different type of alternativity, one which, as we shall see shortly, likewise includes a component that seems to be speaking of social scales of musical values, this time with respect to the tropical musical world.

A first clue regarding the initial search and selection of tropical musical materials by these youngsters is Álvarez’s recollection of Gaitero de San Jacinto and Sexteto Tabala, as particularly “striking” musical references at the time. Galeano, on the other hand, mentions their keen interest in the figure of Juancho Polo Valencia. When asked to mention other early and subsequent tropical musical references, similar names come up: Totó La Momposina and other ‘cantaoras,’ Andrés Landero, Enrique Díaz, and Pedro Laza. Other sources of inspiration include various salsa orchestras—like the obscure, Colombian Afrocombo—and Cuban-type sextetos like Sexteto Miramar. Over the years, the list

105 Meaning literally “female singers,” this is the name given to the female singers of the rural/peasant tradition of música de tambora, of which a complete study with a pedagogical focus can be found in Convers and Ochoa (2007).
of tropical musical references naturally grew to include many other figures, ensembles, and bands. During
the 2000s, for example, the discovery and exploration of the vast universe of the various traditions of
Latin American cumbias was a significant musical and ideological input for most of them, but especially
for Galeano.

From the perspective of the worlds of tropical musics, as I have presented them above, a quick
glance at these (mostly early) musical interests immediately shows that the local musicians or ensembles
tend to belong to the underworld of Colombian tropical musics, both in terms of social reputation and
commercial output. Names like Landero, Díaz, or Laza are mostly linked with the peasant tradition of
costeño musics, each one respectively associated with cumbia, vallenato, and porro band tradition.
Moreover, they have all been deemed mulatos, i.e., as belonging to the “blacker” portions of society.
Their music has never been played in middle- or high-class social settings. Initially, their recorded musical
production had a mostly local impact, and since then, its target has been the middle-to-low (mostly rural)
classes. Their music has never been deemed particularly sophisticated. On the contrary, in terms of
quality and prestige, it has always been perceived as constituting the opposite of Bermúdez’s and Galán’s
elegant version of cumbias and porros. Such costeño music has been, in short, the epitome of rural,
lowbrow taste.

Granted, this description constitutes a quite generalized and abstract one. What could one say
about the music of these artists within a specific context? Within, say, the context of the middle-class of
the Bogota of the late 1990s? Musicians like Landero, Díaz, or Laza, or ensembles like Sexteto Tabala or
even Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto (which had had relative international success touring with cantaora
Totó La Momposina within the circles interested in the recently fabricated category of “world music”\(^{107}\)
were not widely known to the population in general. Their music did not play on the typical radio station.
Their records were not displayed at the typical cd store of the time. This music was clearly not

\(^{106}\) The figure of Andrés Landero constitutes an important exception to the local confinement of this music.
Landero is considered to be a mythic figure within the subculture known as “colombianos” in Monterrey,
Mexico. Broadly speaking, “colombianos” are working-class Mexicans of Monterrey who consciously
assume an alternate “Colombian” identity, expressed particularly through the consumption of legendary
Colombian cumbias and vallenatos. In this context, the music and records of Landero are considered to
be of maximum value. For more information on this subculture, see Fernández and Vila (2013, 95–97)
and Blanco (2005).

\(^{107}\) The mostly underground, international prestige of Totó and Los Gaiteros had been triggered by their
presentation during Gabriel García Márquez’s Nobel Prize award ceremony, early in the 1980s.
mainstream music. It did not generate interest in mainstream record labels. It was, baldly put, unknown and almost forgotten music.

So what put this music in the radar of these young Rolo musicians? What sparked the interest of undergraduate music students in this, until then, lowly esteemed music? Santamaría (2007), Hernández (2009), and Calle (2012) have variously commented on the importance of the proclamation of the 1991 Constitution, according to which Colombia was thereafter considered a fundamentally *multicultural* nation (see Chapter 1). This was a significant recognition, which highly impacted the nation’s cultural sector, both with regards to public policy and with regards to ideological postures. The proclamation in Colombia was, of course, deeply connected to a fundamental ideological shift that had been happening around the world, which partly derived from a significant transformation of the understanding of the concept of “culture” within Western culture.  

This transformation was nurtured significantly by the reflections triggered by the advent of a fundamentally postcolonial era. In any case, the official recognition of Colombia as a multicultural society brought along with it an institutional commitment to safeguard minority rights, which has in turn influenced the idea of different cultures coexisting within a nation. The official proclamation of multiculturalism sought to change the average citizen’s attitude towards marginalized populations and cultures. While this newly sought attitude has not been completely embraced by all sectors since the official proclamation of multiculturalism, it had a profound impact on various academic, intellectual, and artistic circles beginning in the 1990s. The recognition of various “forgotten” cultures within the nation thus sparked a new interest within circles of the young urban generation, which started to envision its identity in multicultural terms, and therefore sought to rescue the nation’s cultural capital that had been systematically excluded and exiled.  

This way, while in the 1940s and 1950s cumbia had to be “whitened” and “dressed as a frac” in order to be embraced and recognized by the country’s elites,  

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108 For a cogent, critical revision of this transformation, through the review of key intellectual works revolving around the issue, see Llosa, M. V. (2009). *La civilización del espectáculo*. *Letras libres*, (89), pp. 6-14.

109 This is not to say that prior to the 1990s there hadn’t been instances of circles interested in such things; but they were much smaller, specialized circles, consisting mostly of anthropologists and folklorists. In the 1990s, this curiosity started to grow and to appear in a wider variety of circles, and has grown significantly since then.
in the 1990s many—including Galeano et al.—sought to embrace it and recognize it in its rawer, rootsy, and “darker” version.\textsuperscript{110}

Satisfying such a curiosity in the Colombian, pre-internet 1990s was, of course, not nearly as easy as in the 2010s. For the eighteen-year-old version of the average Rolo ET protagonist, the search for material that was not readily available suggested a particular type of investigative activity, which at first was driven mostly by intuition. Galeano describes it as follows:

During the 1990s, there was a radically different scene [compared to] that of today, almost twenty years later. There weren’t a lot of places to see live bands, the connection between the musicians of Bogota and the ‘masters’\textsuperscript{111} of the ‘regions’ didn’t yet exist, which is another very important thing that has happened during the last twenty years… At that moment, expecting to run into a marimba or a tambora musician was something quite atypical, extraordinary… This implied a search, listening to music, a search of discography, going to concerts, starting to travel around the country, starting to get out of Bogota, going to \textit{la costa} [the Caribbean region], to ‘the Pacific [coast],’ and little by little doing this search… And those, let’s say, shortcomings that we had back then, of not having an atmosphere related to Colombian traditional musical practices, like a solid one, [forced us to] start inventing a new language, a way of getting close to that . . . approaching instruments in a very empirical manner, ordering the construction of marímbulas, buying gaitas, and starting to play them without even running into a real gaitero, but rather having just heard them around in a given record (TroPs, 2016; TBA).

With regards to his first investigative approaches and musical projects, Álvarez recounts a similar story:

\textsuperscript{110} At an international level, this attitude was materialized in the emergence of the category of “world music” or “world beat” in the music industry during in the 1980s. For a famous early critique about the emergence of this new category and its implications, see Feld, S. (1995). From schizophonia to schismogenesis: the discourses and practices of world music and world beat. \textit{The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring art and anthropology}, pp 96-126.

\textsuperscript{111} Galeano, as well as many professional musicians or music students of the urban centers, refer to folk music legends such as Juancho Polo Valencia, Andrés Landero, or Pedro Laza as “\textit{los maestros},” i.e., “the masters.”
We developed a sort of ideology towards *popular* musics, which was in part *reactionary*, and in part semi-scientific or investigative, though at the time we didn't call it that. We simply just got together and listened to a variety of musics. At the same time we started to generate different proposals. The first one I did, I did with my friend Javier Morales. It was called El Duo Latin Lover, where with a keyboard we started to do some merengues, vallenatos, *partly just kidding*. Later, towards the late 1990s, we created EPV, whose first concert we did at Universidad Javeriana, in Pablo VI auditorium. From there, we started to nurture our careers with those new ingredients, [we started to] buy instruments, learn ‘rhythms’ in a very empirical manner. And from then on, under the influence of various things, not only musical, but also philosophical, of different movements—among them Rodolfo Acosta’s movement, who brought important musicians, and had a discourse that was coherent and ‘Latin Americanist’—well, being very young, one empirically tried to reason that it was maybe a good idea to start working with material available (here) in Colombia... And I developed my career thereafter.

(TroPs, 2016; TBA, emphasis added)

In sum, those first steps were characterized by a feeling of artistic and identitarian curiosity, which at the time was influenced by a new atmosphere that promoted the rediscovery of various local traditions, and by the exposure to the ideas of a musical and artistic circle with a strongly ‘Latin Americanist’ ideology. Whether wholly triggered or simply strengthened by the latter, this juncture also included a strong anti-academic stance on the part of these young students, particularly with regards to a musical education that revolved around, and focused on, the tradition of Western Classical music. With regards to the causes of the emergence of this stance, Galeano hints at a conflict that existed between their more, say, *organic* musical interests and the academic offer of the official undergraduate music programs. But

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112 The translation here is literal. I believe, however, that Álvarez actually meant to say “revolutionary,” since he is referring clearly to an attitude that was rebellious with respect to the traditional norm of Western musical values, which is actually the opposite of the meaning of “reactionary.” Also, the word “popular,” in this sentence, includes both “popular” and “traditional” musics, as they are understood in the English language.

113 For information about this movement, see http://www.ccmc.com.co/.
more importantly for the present context, he underscores the pejorative outlook that exists within those programs towards the idea of pursuing a career centered on popular musics, an outlook that is reminiscent of the original art/kitsch debate and apparently persists within academic institutions: “because of the structure popular musics have in Colombia,” he notes, “and because of the way it’s frowned upon within musical circles to develop musical careers from a social standpoint, we all ended up pursuing a career whose studies focused on Classical music.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA, emphasis added) In this respect, and by way of a more retrospective reflection, Álvarez comments that “the problem is not academia, or academic knowledge… In our countries, the problem is colonialism in academia: certain types of knowledge that have been classified and arranged to serve the purposes of the creators of the academic system… The imposition of an academic system with standards that were not meant to represent, or were not inspired by, a particular community of people with a common past.” (NMC, 2015; TBA, emphasis added)

I shall return to some of the implications of this anti-colonial stance and its meaning within the music of Rolo ET in Chapter 5. Suffice, for now, to say that the search for an unknown underworld of tropical musics has not been only the result of a purely musical curiosity (i.e., the search for interesting sounds), but also of an overt ideological position that had much to do with defying reigning musical values within Colombian society; with respect both to the traditional opposition Classical/Popular (or Art/Kitsch), nurtured especially within musical academic circles, and to the more local highbrow/lowbrow dynamics, as it occurred in the world of tropical musics. In sum, right from the start, the musical projects included in what I here have dubbed Rolo ET have tended to be nurtured by a particular set of the world of tropical musics, judged under the light of the music’s position within the social world. Commercial, tacky vallenatos that pervaded the soundscape of Colombian cities especially in the 1990s; naco cumbias from throughout Latin America; indigenous and Afro-derived rootsy, folk cumbias from traditional peasant sites across the Colombian Caribbean; and underground local and classic international salsa are the main tropical worlds influencing and inhabiting the music of Rolo ET. This list constitutes, in short, a set of musics that speak of rebellion, of resistance; a set of musics that stereotypically represent devalued portions of the social fabric; a set of musics that has been rejected by elitists portions of society partly because of that stereotypical representation and partly because of its alleged low artistic value.
An anti-elitist stance seems to be, then, the predominant position of the protagonists of Rolo ET with regards to the election of tropical musical materials with which to work. It is a position, in other words, that is allegedly conscious of the social underpinnings of its musical choices. However, an examination of some of the purely sonic treatment of these materials brings new elements of judgment that complement and somewhat complicate what until now appears to be a decisively pro-kitsch stance. Through the examination of selected examples, in the next section I will show some paradigmatic ways in which Rolo ET treats some of the characteristic sonic traits of the intermusical tropical world on which it musically comments.

V. Alien tropics: the Rolo sonic tropicality

Throughout the whole gamut of pieces and songs that constitute the musical world of what I here have dubbed Rolo ET, there seems to be a tendency towards using a set of iterative treatments of tropical-musical traits, whether compositional or performative, which put said traits under a particular light. Such treatments, in other words, subtly or slightly transform those traits in such a way that, even though modified to a certain degree, they are still recognizable as in their original context, oftentimes resulting in a feeling of uncanniness. Here, I will refer to some techniques that, although adapted to the sonic (and thus aesthetic) particularity of any given project at any given time, appear quite pervasively throughout the core of the Rolo ET repertoire, as well as in music from closely associated projects. In general, one could say that most of these musical treatments can be understood or perceived as experimental playfulness. My thesis is that this allegedly naive musical playfulness is fretted with conscious signification on the part of the creators. It is, in other words, attempting to say something through this playful disturbance of created Ecoian codes. It is a game, so to speak, of code altering, so as to make a musical commentary about the music, and through it about Colombian society in general, and social values as they are negotiated in and through musical academicism in particular.

First in the list is a rhythmic phenomenon wherein there is a tendency towards a “de-syncopation” of rhythmic cells or phrases, whose syncopated feel is typical, i.e., a sonic index, of many Caribbean musical genres. This playfulness with the feel of the rhythmic figures creates a particular distortion of what constitutes an essential trait of the intermusical world presented in this chapter. Second appears a
tendency towards playing with the idea of “de-tuning,” taking the rule of equal temperament as the horizon from where to judge whether something is “in” or “out of” tune. Despite the hegemony of equal temperament in popular music around the world today, it is important to remember just how historically specific this musical structure is. Within the context of the modern Colombian Caribbean in particular and of the world of contemporary pop music of the West in general, the following of the precepts of equal temperament still tends to be valued highly, and remains a stereotypical index of good quality in music. Rolo ET seems to be playing with such Western ideas and preconceptions related to the notion of equal temperament, and with the significance that these ideas and preconceptions have in the value judgment of musical expressions. Unlike the first two, the third treatment is less uniform in its different expressions within the studied corpus of music. It pertains to different ways of exploiting a characteristic way of generating melodic and phrasal constructions in various expressions of Colombian music of the Caribbean coast. As similarly described by Convers and Ochoa (2007) and Bermúdez (2004), this characteristic musical resource has to do with the typical way in which melodies are constituted by the addition or juxtaposition of repetitive (albeit oftentimes slightly varied) small, fragmented motivic cells. The juxtaposition can be regular, but it is oftentimes not, if judged against the more regularized rhythmic patterns of the accompaniment parts of a given ensemble. The fourth and final element has more to do with a more general stylistic musical and intermusical treatment of cumbia in particular, which resonates with a recent stylistic trend that has transformed Latin American cumbia into a hip or chic genre within transnational spaces of alternative music, and which has allowed it to invade uncharted social territories of modern musical practice. In what follows, I will briefly expand on each of the four approaches I just mentioned, in order to then comment on their particular proceedings within specific examples of the studied repertoire.

114 While it is true that especially since around the mid-twentieth century there has developed a strong resistance in many (mostly academic) circles towards the once universal idea that tempered tuning was an index of good quality, that idea persists strongly in the collective imagination of many Westernized societies. Recent famous TV musical contests such as “American Idol,” “The X Factor,” or “The Voice” serve as clear examples of the perpetuation of such an idea. On the other hand, the aforementioned resistance has also served to idealize and romanticize non-tempered tuning, oftentimes conceiving of it as an index of identity, authenticity or alternativity, these values here standing in clear opposition to the ideas brought along by processes of colonization (see Santamaria BAMBUCO).
Tropical Syncopation and De-Syncopation: polyrhythms, *cinquillos*, *claves* and the regularization of “the flavor”

The rhythmic richness of most musical expressions from the Caribbean region is, in a word, breathtaking. Most of the rhythmic fibre of Caribbean musical genres is the result of its West African musical cultural heritage, a culture that arrived in the offspring of Western Modernity thanks to the dynamics of the infamous slave trade. The musical traditions of, especially, the *Yoruba* people took hold throughout the region, and developed subsequently through natural and varied processes of syncretism and hybridization. Such a rich and complex musical dimension amply exceeds the research capability of any one individual, let alone the limits of any one work of research by itself. Accordingly, I will limit myself to examining the appearance of a series of simple rhythmic cells that are pervasive throughout the music of the Hispanic Caribbean (including salsa and the Colombian-Caribbean genres). Even in their relative simplicity, these rhythmic cells constitute a crucial sonic trait of this ample musical world, their pervasive appearance allegedly contributing to the eventual sedimentation and consolidation of a musical topos in its own right.

Broadly speaking, and in isolation, the rhythmic behavior I have been alluding to can be understood as deriving from two basic cells: the so-called Caribbean *cinquillo* (quintuplet) and *clave* (see Figure 2). Of course, in actual usage, the rhythmic construction of any given melody does not literally correspond to any one of the cited pair, but its overall derivation from these basic cells is for the most part obvious, the literal design often consisting of variations such as diminutions, displacements, and the such. Various of the cited authors in this chapter have commented upon the appearance of these rhythmic cells within the particular repertoire of their interest. Convers and Ochoa (2007) recognize it as a fundamental rhythmic trait of the folk musical traditions of the *Montes de María* region in the Colombian Caribbean, Bermúdez (Year) cites them as representative constructions of vallenato melodies, Hernández (2015) adverts their pervasive usage in varied genres of Colombian “tropical” music, and Manuel (1994) recognizes them also as the fundamental rhythmic flavor underpinning son and its modern offspring.\footnote{Hernández here follows educational research by Colombian choral conductor Alejandro Zuleta.}
salsa. As mentioned before, the actual appearance and behavior of the cells varies from repertoire to repertoire. In Colombian Caribbean genres such as porros, cumbias, or vallenatos, for example, Colombian choral conductor and educator Alejandro Zuleta has found a particularly pervasive usage of a displaced and varied version of the Caribbean *cinquillo* which he has dubbed—in reference specifically to the Caribbean region of Colombia—"la célula Caribe," (i.e., the Caribbean cell, shown in Figure 3) [Hernández, 2015, p. 180].

Figure 2. Afro-Caribbean cinquillo, 3 + 2 clave, and 2 + 3 clave

Figure 3. *Célula caribe* from the Colombian Caribbean

Now, for Álvarez (2015), the standard quintuplet of the Western Classical music tradition—i.e., the appearance of five rhythmic attacks *equal in length* within one of the metricized temporal units of a given piece—can be understood as a kind of “regularization” of the Afro-Colombian, Afro-Antillean, or, more generally, Afro-Caribbean, clave. The connection between two rhythmic phenomena belonging to essentially distinct and independent traditions came to Álvarez’s mind precisely while listening to Caribbean music, in an attempt to “find an ‘analog’” of Caribbean rhythmic behaviors “in the Western musical tradition.” For him, the idea of using “regularized” *cinquillos* (i.e., “traditional” quintuplets) in many of Rolo ET’s Caribbean-flavored music is ultimately a “caricaturization of the clave.” I would add that,
through that highly symbolic element, this type of rhythmic alterations becomes more broadly a caricaturization of these music and their multifaceted meanings. Though at this point I am solely interested in showing some examples of the appearance and particular usage of the Caribbean rhythmic feel in Rolo ET’s repertoire, as it occurs at the sonic level, I shall return to this notion of musical “caricature” and its possible broader implications both at the end of this chapter and in Chapter 4.

**Out-of-tuneness, or the sound of the costeño popular heart**

Colombian avant-garde composer Carolina Noguera recounts a curious anecdote that I believe speaks eloquently to the academically invisible\(^{116}\) yet well-known dynamics surrounding the idea of tuning within at least some Colombian musical traditions and practices.\(^{117}\) In 2005 Noguera received the Beca de Creación (Creation Grant) from the Colombian Ministry of Culture for her work *Tres Suites Para Banda*. The work consisted of three suites for wind band that were inspired by some Colombian folk airs and—stylistically and timbre-wise—in the strong tradition of wind bands of the Andean and Caribbean regions of the country. Part of that inspiration had to do with the notion that many of these bandas de pueblo (smalltown bands) often play “out of tune,” at least when judged with respect to the system of equal temperament. The causes of this peculiar temperament—of this tropical color of the pitch pallet, if you will—appear to be obvious to the studied musician: the evident lack of quality, derived from a poor music education, judged by elite Western standards. The fact that many of these smalltown bands made up of amateur musicians—oftentimes by middle or high-school students—seems to support this claim.

Yet certain musical and scholarly camps—including most representatives of the NCM movement—find this particular musical temperament an sonic symbol of many Colombian traditions. Particularly in the Caribbean region, the fact that many of the music adapted for, and subsequently developed by, that region’s band tradition is originally not tuned according to the precepts of Western equal temperament is a fundamental argument for some NCM musicians. Part of the magic and the

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\(^{116}\) As far as the author knows, a discussion about the dynamics of the discussion about tuning with regards to Colombian musical practices has not been formally researched or at least officially published.  
\(^{117}\) The terms and content of the anecdote were collected in a personal communication with the author in September, 2014.
colorful identity of this tradition, they suggest, derives crucially from this facet of its sound world. It represents authenticity, i.e., the soul of a music that resists the colonization and standardization of equal temperament. The out-of-tuneness of the porro wind bands (constituted entirely by European-derived instruments), for example, idealistically represents the particular tuning of the indigenous gaitas of the tambora ensembles. A similar point of view could be made of the particular tuning of folk singers, which also become a voice of associated with resistance. In any case, to these circles, out-of-tuneness is no longer a deficit, but rather an asset and a source of pride.

Proudly taking part of this view, and through the use of various compositional and technical resources, Noguera constructed parts of her suite with this magical out-of-tuneness in mind. But when she traveled to some of the country’s regions in which her suite was going to be performed, she found an attitude of resentment on the part of members of various regional bands, who were not comfortable performing the suite as directed, because it allegedly caricatured, in disrespectful manner, the “low-level” bands from which many of them originally came. What constituted a romanticized view of this sound in the more academic circles of the big Colombian cities was understood as a mockery in the periphery. Noguera’s anecdote serves here as an eloquent introduction to, and explanation of, Rolo ET’s treatment of the pitch dimension in not few of their pieces and songs. The examination of the musical examples to follow will serve to provide an overview of some of the musical techniques by which an “un-tuned” universe is rendered possible in the studied repertoire, so as to create part of the particular tropical sonic aura of Rolo ET. Broadly speaking, one finds two general approaches to the issue: first, the construction of the illusion of out-of-tuneness through the creation of a subtly discordant harmonization of, or counterpoint to, a leading melody; and second, as Álvarez (2015) has expressed with regards to the approach found in Los Pirañas, an artificially performed de-tuning (whether through physical or digital means), which tends to be “organized” or “tuned” by the listener’s brain, due to an up-beat tempo. As

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118 For an explanation of the tuning and sonic mechanisms of these instruments, see Convers and Ochoa (2008). For a study about the tradition of bands in San Pelayo (i.e., the so-called porro bands), see Botero (1989).

119 Álvarez (2015) explains the phenomenon the following way: “That comes somewhat from the human perception of time… We tend to perceive things depending on speed… For instance, [in a song by Los Pirañas] we have certain dissonances… We don’t perceive them, though, because they go by so fast, that we end up hearing just the general design of the line, we don’t hear the dissonance… This is a very old technique… Western… It’s a technique [used] by Johann Sebastian Bach…where dissonance is used as coincidence of the moment, as a ‘wakeup call,’ but the brain is incapable of processing it… And then
we shall see, the overall consequence is again the construction of an uncanny sound environment, one which to the learned listener of the style is familiar but subtly bizarre.

Playing with the fragmentary: phrasing, deconstruction, and denaturing of the micro-formal processes of Caribbean genres

A third compositional/performative approach, which results in the simultaneous expression and alteration of typical characteristics of Rolo ET’s tropical intermusical world, has to do with the micro processes of musical form. Many genres of the Colombian Caribbean follow a melodic processual logic wherein musical phrases are the result of juxtapositions or additions of brief melodic snippets. The juxtaposed snippets are oftentimes either an exact iteration of a melodic cell or a slightly varied form (see, e.g., Convers and Ochoa, 2008, pp. 59–65). As in many African derived genres from the Caribbean and elsewhere, the melodic construction is not akin to the idea of development found in Classical music of the Western tradition (like the one found, for example, in the melodic themes of a typical sonata form movement). Melodic phrases are, rather, successions of similar fragments knit together, whose goal is less like the generation of a teleological curve leading to a climactic point, and more like a reiterative play of rhythmically lively musical figures. To the Western ear yearning for broader teleological constructions of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditions and styles, such a musical construction might be perceived as dull, repetitive, or uninspired; or it might represent a refreshing musical dynamic, which delights itself with the playfulness typical of an improvisational passage.

Here, as with the tuning aspect, views and judgments vary, depending on the ideological and aesthetic position with which one identifies. As seen at the beginning of this chapter, a process of musical form that is fundamentally based on incessant repetition of a few basic materials, without “proper” and/or “conscious” development, at some point tended to be judged as one of the landmarks of musical kitsch. Such gloating in the simplistic circling of musical materials was, in other words, an epitome of the shallow...
emotional effect sought by kitschy music. Yet, as also discussed above, the countercultural, decidedly pro-kitsch, currents of the second half of the twentieth century, in addition to the revalorization of non-Western musical traditions that had been previously objects of condescension, proposed a revision of the criteria of such condescension, including the resentment towards certain forms of allegedly trivial repetition.\textsuperscript{120}

Perhaps in agreement with the revision of the aspect of processes of melodic generation through repetition, or at least participating as a commentary within that historical discussion, Rolo ET approaches this aspect of Caribbean music in noteworthy fashion. Here, one can see a further emphasis on fragmentation. One can see, in other words, a foregrounding of the aspect of repetition, in which iteration is taken to the trivial extreme that perhaps was the origin of the criticism. This way, repetition and the “lack” of teleological development becomes slightly more obvious, and in some cases more mechanical, due largely to the digital environment and techniques involved. In the latter sense, Rolo ET’s treatment of small-scale repetition is in part a stylistic trait that connects this repertoire with contemporary genres of popular music such as EDM (electronic dance music)—perhaps even contributing to the plausible classification within such a genre of some of Rolo ET’s projects. Yet the peculiarity of the alteration of formal generation, which—apart from the aforementioned deconstruction of the aspect of repetition—also sometimes includes the alteration of a sense of regular phrasing that is typical of Caribbean genres such as cumbia, porro, or vallenato, constitutes in itself a stylistic aspect of Rolo ET that begs comment and interpretation, particularly with regards to musical value judgments, and thus to the discussion of kitsch.

\textbf{Musical Examples}

Following is a discussion of Rolo ET pieces or songs in which there appear oftentimes at least two of the phenomena just described, through various types of compositional or performative treatments. The particularities of such treatments depend on the nature of the project/band to which each piece or song is associated, as well as on the particular moment in the evolution of a given project in which that

\textsuperscript{120} For a scholarly example of the revision specifically of the aspect of repetition and its valorization in music, see García (2005).
piece or song was produced and published. Now, particularities and idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, one can distinguish the permanence of the general tendencies of the three approaches and their associated effects throughout projects and timelines. Accordingly, while analysis of specific pieces will present the use of varied means of musical elaboration, those means end up producing similar overall results. In more semiotic terms, particular instances of musical elaboration contribute to the consolidation of the same types of musical results. In the present reading, those musical types are understood as constituting a commentary on already established (or at least more solidly established) musical codes, in the Ecoian sense of the word. The goal here is, then, to provide an analytical commentary on each of the selected examples, focusing on the discussion of the aspects that tend to evince and reinforce each of the three approaches.

- EPV, “Cumbia”

Already in Álvarez’s and Galeano’s musical projects of the 1990s—during the sort of “pre-history” of the Rolo ET movement, so to speak—one can find traces of the musical approaches that I have just described, and that will pervade many of the projects and albums of the 2000s and 2010s. Even if Ensamble Polifónico Vallenato (EPV) was fundamentally an acoustic ensemble, and did not count as one of the later electronic and digital explorations, its musical production shows what one could understand as the “analog” version of the posterior “digital” procedures of de-tuning found in the later projects. As we shall see, this “analog” version—which fundamentally consists of using dissonant inflections of normatively more consonant musical environments—will still be present in projects like Meridian, therein complemented by digital and electronic alterations that will further rarely the effect (i.e., making it more alien). By “normatively more consonant musical environments,” I am referring to prototypes—as well as to specific tokens—of the intermusical world to which the music alludes. In other words, the musical creation is clearly referencing tokens or types of vallenato, but with evident alterations that nevertheless do not go as far as debasing the reference. It is by virtue of this relationship between the music and its references that I understand the following example and the phenomena henceforth described, as particular and
conscious alterations of already established Ecoian musical codes, with all their conventional associations and meanings.

As seen in Figure 4, in the case of “Cumbia” by EPV there is a particularly dissonant treatment of the harmonic and contrapuntal relations that appear throughout the texture. Besides the straightforwardly dissonant intervalic relations between the different melodic lines, there is a deliberate use of quarter-note tuning by the wind instruments, usually through the execution of micro glissandi. This deliberateness in the tweaking of the ideal, equal-tempered tuning of a given pitch speaks clearly of the search for an alternative atmosphere of tuning. Given the awareness about the expressions of un-tempered tuning—or less diplomatically, out-of-tuneness—within especially wind bands of the Colombian Caribbean region, such constant quarter-note wavering seems to be a clear index of that phenomenon. In the same way, the dissonant contrapuntal/harmonic relationships found in the excerpt, constitute a tweaking or alteration of a more consonant intermusical prototype. Or, put in the words of a formal analogy, the quarter-note waning through glissandi is to stable, tempered tuning, what the dissonant setting is to the consonant harmonic ideal (e.g., the diminished fifth to the perfect fifth). In sum, through both a harmonic distortion of an ideal musical type and a technical effect of de-tuning in the wind instruments, “Cumbia” is wittingly playing with a particular expression of tuning within a musical tradition, ultimately configuring an exaggeration of that phenomenon.
Meridian Brothers, “Salvadora Robot”:

More than a decade later, we find an example of a similar approach by the Meridian Brothers. With respect to the aspect of tuning, this example can be viewed as an electronic or digital version of the approach employed by EPV in “Cumbia”.

With regards to the genres to which it alludes, the Meridian Brothers’ “Salvadora Robot” can be described as a mixture between cumbia (particularly in its chucu chucu style) and guajira, a Cuban air that, alongside son, became one of the forms most adopted by, and adapted to, the style of salsa. The song starts with a very basic rhythmic structure, equivalent to the sum of the maraca and the llamador at the start of a cumbia. The instruments involved are all digital, and correspond to synthesized versions of the timbres of the percussion instruments maraca and llamador. This simple rhythmic base prevails throughout the song, and—alongside the equally simple, regularized, and repetitive rhythmic construction of the instrumental melodies—tends to create an almost childlike aura, due to the apparently desirable obviousness of said simplicity. In contrast, in “Salvadora” tuning is highly unstable. The key wavers

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121 All musical examples are transcriptions made by the author, except if specified.
between Ab and G natural, slightly tending towards the latter. Additionally, pitches are digitally processed so as to slightly bend in trill-like fashion, rendering the ambiguity of the key even stronger. Apart from generating the uncanny sensation of out-of-tuneness, this constant, undulating atmosphere contributes to an overall sense of instability. However, as explained more abstractly above, the universe of intermusical references (which here function as a sort of codal prototype) provides the horizon against which it is possible to ‘tune,’ ‘normalize,’ or ‘quantize’ this uncomfortable feeling of out-of-tuneness. Against a literal or textual instability stands the stability of an intermusical code.

Presenting the same structure of the upcoming first strophe, the introduction of the song includes a synthesized sound that corresponds to an ornamented prequel of the vocal line,\textsuperscript{122} and an heterophonic duo consisting of a guitar and a bass line (see Figure 5). Prepared with a slight distortion and vibrato, the guitar provides subtle ornamentations to the simple line expressed by the bass, which seems to be a digital reproduction of a double bass plucked with fingers, a clear index of the son-salsa complex. During the first part of the duo phrase, both melodic lines are equivalent, i.e., moving in parallel octaves, and thus consonant from a contrapuntal perspective. However, from a melodic perspective, there is already an element of dissonance at this point, given that the melodic line already includes a quite prominent tritone leap. This leap appears precisely at the moment in which the bass melody diverges from what would constitute the conventional melodic/harmonic structure of the intermusical code of salsa being alluded to by the bass line. Now, when the first divergence by the guitar appears during the second part of the phrase, it produces a quite dissonant contrapuntal relationship with the bass, in this case a harmonic tritone. Additionally, as seen in the example, the counterpoint between the duo and the synthesizer is also quite dissonant, reinforced by the fact that, as mentioned before, the synthesizer has been digitally processed so as to be in and out of tune and constantly waning with respect to the governing diatonic universe [see transcription → G vs C chords, Augmented 5th, Tritone, de-tuned 6th, etc.].

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\textsuperscript{122} This kind of introductory structure is common to many song traditions (including, for instance, the Western baroque and Romantic traditions), in which the actual strophe of the song is preceded by an excerpt that presents the same or ornamented harmonic and melodic structures of said strophe.
In general, then, one can see how a combination of melodic, harmonic, and contrapuntal events, plus a digital manipulation of sound waves, join to create an overall dissonant and unstable atmosphere. There are, however, factors that tend to undermine the apparent prominence of the dissonant feel. Similar to the comparative exercise done in “Delírio,” Example X presents an alternative, more “normative” version of the instrumental melodic lines of the strophes of “Salvadora,” within the context of a major key. This comparison serves to demonstrate how, as in other examples, the strength of the presence of the intermusical worlds that are being alluded to tend to provide a stable, though not literally present, horizon against which to judge said dissonant feel. The propensity to “normalize” the dissonant elements, the tendency, that is, to make them fit into a normally more consonant musical prototype, subtly tends to transform a straightforward feeling of dissonance into an obscure feeling of “something not quite fits but sounds familiar,” which is one understanding of uncanniness. At the same time, an in-tune voice set against this bizarrely familiar sonic environment tends to produce an overall feeling of out-of-tuneness,
fabricated through the sum of the described musical effects. Such effect is strikingly highlighted when at minute 1’05 of the recording (which appears to correspond to the montuno section of the song\textsuperscript{123}), a “normalized” version of the guajira appears, now without the subtle alterations of before (see Figure 6). With this more crystalline, harmonic and melodic reference of a guajira now literally sounding, the deliberate alteration of the previously heard strophes becomes more evident. It is, if you will, as if an obscure, unfocused guajira was suddenly brought into focus; a theme and variations whose theme appears after the variation. In the end, the comparison evinces more clearly the magnitude of the transformations, while at the same time confirms the close relationship between the prototypical intermusical world and Meridian’s song.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure6.png}
\caption{“Salvadora Robot” by Meridian Brothers. Normalized montuno section.}
\end{figure}

Apart from the harmonic and melodic play, “Salvadora” is also an example of the technique of artificial regularization of the melody’s rhythm. Especially within the space of the “normalized” guajira that first appears at 1’05, there is a cinquillo in the voice melody that tends to be regularized, the overall phrasing leaning toward a triplet feel. The melody from the instruments is likewise regularized, the guitar line settling into a more decidedly homophonic accompaniment, as opposed to a contrapuntal line. Finally, the song also exemplifies the treatment whereby micro-melodic cells that together constitute the melodic material are under constant, yet subtle, variation. In the end, the sonic universe of “Salvadora” produces an overall sensation of uncanniness, given the combination of synthesized timbres; de-tuned and oscillating pitch structures; basic, quasi infantile rhythmic structures (e.g., cumbia’s rhythmic base devoid

\textsuperscript{123} In Cuban son and in many salsas, the montuno section corresponds to the B part of an overall A-B structure. This section typically presents an increase of the rhythmic activity and includes a refrain sang repeatedly by a section of secondary singers (oftentimes joined by members of the instrumental band). Between the repetitions of these refrains, the lead singer improvises small verses called pregones.
of any ornamentation); a formal contrast between dissonant contrapuntal sections and consonant homophonic ones; all of it constructed through constant, quasi-hypnotic repetition of melodic cells with subtle, un-organic variations.

- FRENTE “Chucusteady”:

  There’s a certain irony, or perhaps straightforwardness in the name of this song. There is, first of all, the obvious reference to chucu-chucu, which is expressed diaphanously through the repetitive deluded rhythmic base of cumbia (ta-ca ta), so typical of chucu-chucu. There is also the minor mode and the harmonic simplicity, through the use of only three basic chords (i - iv - and v). As for the word “steady,” one can see it more elegantly expressing the repetitiveness and simplicity of chucu-chucu (so criticized by salsa fans), though there is also perhaps a veiled ode to such repetitiveness, sonically incarnated through an exaggeration of repetition. “Chucusteady” is, in other words, another eloquent example of a consciously sought foregrounding of the repetitive aspects of the intermusical world of cumbia in general, and chucu-chucu in particular. The excerpt from 1’40 through 2’00 is particularly eloquent of this technique, which is here used contrapuntally, and thus in a saturated fashion that borders grotesque exaggeration. Though particularly present within this excerpt, the type of fragmented construction of the melodic lines commented on by Convers and Ochoa (2008) and Bermúdez (2004), and which is so characteristic of musical genres of the Colombian Caribbean, appears throughout the song, through an enhancement of its melodic snippets, its hypnotic rhythmic base, and its harmonic simplicity that often leads to a feeling of stasis.

  Besides this general procedimental atmosphere, “Chucusteady” also evinces the idea of playing with syncopation and de-syncopation. Figure 7 shows one of such excerpts. Here, for instance, the use of insistent triplets, especially in the counterpoints and interludes played by the trombone, constitutes an evident example of the regularization of otherwise typically syncopated melodies. The insistent, obstinate nature of the principal theme is another demonstration of a similar rhythmic approach. Though not

\[1^{24}\] The modal harmonies, plus the appearance of IV in the cuts is also reminiscent of early rock harmonies, which implies a tie to the psychedelic aspect of this music (see Chapter 2).
consisting of quintuplets or triplets, the rhythm of the theme is quite regular and insistent; almost mechanical. As such, this rhythmic treatment stands in stark contrast to the one found in the richly syncopated and flexible melodies of the Latin Caribbean sounds. The contrapuntal reply by the trombone in triplets seems to be, in this context, both a distortion and a caricature of that regularity. Against this mechanical and regularized rhythmic insistence of the musical foreground, there appears an irregular flow, although this time at the level of phrasing, which one could understand as a sort of rhythmic middleground. The first phrase of the theme is constructed in such a way that it generates a phrasal accent in the second measure first, and then in the second beat of that second measure. The whole phrase finally rests on the third measure. We are here confronted by a three-measure phrase, with a fourth measure in silence that fills in the void, so to speak, of that irregular phrasing, so as to “normalize,” the phrasal flow (normal here being understood as binary phrasing).
Meridian Brothers, “Delirio”

“Delirio” by Meridian Brothers is a song that, according to the general feel of its rhythmic base, one could classify as either a champeta or a chandé, both of which are genres from the Colombian Caribbean, and both of which present overlapping rhythmic characteristics. Just like a majority of Colombian Caribbean genres, champetas and chandés evince rhythmic-melodic behaviors that include variations of the Caribbean clave and cinquillo. Figure 8 shows the first tune or main theme of the song, whose behavior exemplifies the technique of de-syncopation of a melody that, according to the sonic
code of Caribbean melodies, should have been presented in syncopated fashion. More particularly, we are here presented with an audible tendency towards the regularization of quintuplets. There is, in other words, an obvious reminiscence of the *cinquillo* pattern, or perhaps an *allusion* to it, artificially constructed by an allegedly learned listener due to the expectation provided to him or her by the musical context (i.e., by the code). The rhythmic ossias in between systems present alternative versions of the same melody, i.e., a possible reconstruction of what would be a more “normative” Caribbean version of the melody’s rhythm.

![Figure 8. “Delirio” by Meridian Brothers: Reduction of melody with alternative rhythmic versions](image)

Now, with regards to the pitch dimension, in “Delirio” one quickly notices the use of slight downward pitch “bends,” an effect achieved artificially through digital means. If played at a lower rate, these bends sound overtly as downward glissandi. Here is an eloquent example of the phenomenon described by Álvarez, wherein the fast tempo contributes to the perception of a more or less defined set of pitches, the brain being in charge of doing the “quantizing” or “normalizing” work. An extreme version of a literally un-recognizable set of pitches occurs at the end of the song, in its concluding arpeggio. This arpeggio occurs at a physically un-playable register and at humanly un-playable velocity. Of course, such a musical event is possible only through a digital, i.e., *un-human*, interface. I believe the physical impossibility of such sound effects is partly what renders this music alien, or perceivable as such. In such extreme instances, the “quantizing” capabilities of the brain are exhausted, and what is felt as uncanny in the case of un-tuned and waning melodies becomes simply extraterrestrial: the bizarrely familiar, absolutely unfathomable.
“Doctor Trompeta” is a song whose rhythmic base and harmonic sequence alludes to chucu-chucu, and whose bass line is designed in the style of vallenato. Figure 9 shows an excerpt of the song that starts at 0’40 of the recording. Here we can clearly see the vallenato-style, syncopated bass line. Over the harmonic base implied by this line, there appear running scales, in both ascending and descending fashion. The governing timbre of the scales is that of an artificially (i.e., digitally) synthesized sound, and they include—as in previously examined examples—fast glissandi, undulation and de-tuning. Certain scale fragments express partitions of a whole note scale, temporarily establishing a tonal universe that is alien to the diatonic world of the harmonic sequence implied by the bass line. The singing voice tends to partake of the structure of these whole tone scales, this way suggesting an out-of-tune singer due to the clash of the two harmonic/melodic worlds. The delivery of the singer (Álvarez) is also important in granting this appearance, especially due to the use of somewhat exaggerated glissandi (especially at these points in the transcription). Again, the plausibility of reading this as an allusion to performative out-of-tuneness, as opposed to simply the use of novel compositional techniques, here depends upon the familiarity of the musical context, which—bizarreness apart—is still close enough to an intermusical world where such a tonal configuration simply does not exist. Overall, one can say that the harmonic clash, synthesized de-tuning effect, and voice delivery generate an uncanny whole, where the stable diatonic and rhythmic base serves as accompaniment of familiar, yet slightly de-tuned melodies. Moreover, the rhythmic regularization of the ascending and descending scales also clash with the general Caribbean topical ambience, granting an infantile feeling to the whole.
“De mi caballo” is another guajira by Meridian Brothers, and, much like “Salvadora Robot,” includes a rhythmic base that is reminiscent of cumbia. In fact, while the melodic, harmonic, and textural ambience provides the stylistic umbrella of the guajira, rhythmically there is an overall evident emphasis on the off-beat accents, providing the guajira with a definitive a la cumbia flavor. Besides the percussion base and the singing voice, the two most prominent instruments are a synthesized double bass and a synthesized acoustic piano. Despite their corresponding lines occurring in parallel octaves, there is digital alteration of the tuning of the piano line, which makes the digital instruments to be slightly out of tune with each other. In other words, the lines do not occur in, but rather roughly in parallel octaves. As shown in Figure 10, the appearance of pedal tones, in what seems to be a synthesized distorted electric guitar timbre, contribute importantly to a sense of de-tuning, through trill-like waves of two notes. Besides the subtle alterations that destabilize the sense of tuning, there is also a slight de-phasing of the rhythmic attacks. Although this phenomenon is typical of Afro-Caribbean rhythmic textures, here it is digitally achieved. And just as discussed in relation to “Delirio,” the digital/electronic nature of the operation makes
the effect slightly awkward, due in large part to the artificial ratio of the de-phasing (which would not be easily measured by everyday human perception). On the other hand, while the de-phasing is gently perceivable, the rhythmic construction is clearly that of repetitive, incisive and regularized patterns. This way, while the bass and piano lines are clearly reminiscent of salsa piano ‘tumbaos’\textsuperscript{125}, they constitute a sort of “clumsy” version, due to their regularization or de-syncopation into sixteenth notes.

![Figure 10. “De mi caballo…” by Meridian Brothers: de-tuning and de-phasing](image)

Figure 10. “De mi caballo…” by Meridian Brothers: de-tuning and de-phasing

Figure 11 shows what would constitute a more typical version of the tumbao of “De mi caballo.” Similar to what happens in previously discussed examples, through a process of simplistic regularization, the syncopated rhythmic structures of the typical ‘tumbao’ are here rendered somewhat infantile. Again, in “De mi caballo” we find a curious combination of bizarreness, uncanniness, and apparent naivety.

![Figure 11. “De mi caballo…” by Meridian Brothers: regularized tumbao](image)

Figure 11. “De mi caballo…” by Meridian Brothers: regularized tumbao

\textsuperscript{125} “Tumbao” is a slang version of the word “tumbado” (literally lying down or tumbled). In salsa, it refers to the typical patterns of piano accompaniment, which are a landmark of this style of music.
● OMBLIGO, “Video que la”

Botero’s project “El Ombligo”—which consists of, in his own words, “these little songs, very short and instrumental, based on a deconstruction of the language of Mr. Andrés Landero,” (TroPs, 2016; emphasis added)—is characterized, among other things, by a particular, usually fragmentary, way of treating the melodic material with which it works. Botero’s use of the word “deconstruction” results quite eloquent in this respect. The creative process included first a stage of music analysis and selection of some of the most prominent stylistic traits of Landero’s idiosyncratic way of playing the accordion, followed by the design of highly improvisatory and aleatoric little pieces based on snippets of the selected material, inspired in part by the musical language and approach of jazz legend Ornette Coleman. Accordingly, the sonic result is a very interesting atmosphere where the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic feels and flavors of Landero’s cumbias are presented in a surreal ambience derived from the more improvisatory processes that generate the overall musical form. This approach generates in many of these songs a particular way of presenting the melodic material, that once more resonates with the organic processes of varied repetition of small cells that generate the melodic material in many Latin Caribbean genres.

If in the projects of Álvarez, Galeano, et al, the foregrounding of this aspect of repetition is achieved by means of quasi-infantile, sometimes clumsy, iteration of regularized musical figures, in Botero’s proposal the aspect of repetition is likewise highlighted, though this time through means that are proper of the overall improvisatory feel. I believe that in this case, the more jazz-flavored processes implicate a sort of “decontextualization” of Landero’s (or, more generally, cumbia’s) materials, so as to make them “float around” in a more random manner. As in Álvarez’s and Galeano’s music, this “decontextualization” (oftentimes achieved through temporal irregularity) foregrounds the musical material in un-natural fashion. In other words, what would naturally be part of the expected musical landscape (again, the musical code), and thus not particularly noteworthy in the musical experience, now suddenly becomes magnified. In the new context, the material is, as it were, forced to be listened to with an artificial awareness, i.e., an awareness not needed in the conventional experience of this music. And so suddenly the repetitive nature of the various tokens of the intermusical world is suddenly made more evident,
making it possible to read these songs partly as a commentary on the particular mechanisms of musical repetition of said intermusical world.

Figure 12 shows the introduction of “Video que la,” the psyche-tropical song that begins El Ombligo’s second album. Beneath it appears my reconstruction of the same material, forcing it to fit a more regular phrasing, a version which would come closer to the typical temporal organization of the world of traditional cumbia. As implied by this comparison, the temporal arrangement of this phrase—which functions as a sort of *basso ostinato* throughout parts of the song—is quite elastic, resulting in a feeling of surreal floating, rather than simply an irregular phrasal construction. This feeling of elasticity, as opposed to the feeling of irregularity against a certain temporal template, renders the constant iteration of the small motivic cells more organic than the machine-like iteration that is so typical of the style of, for example, Meridian Brothers. On the other hand, at the interior of this phrase, the execution of the musical figures varies between the expression of squared sixteenth notes and a suggestion of a triplet feel. There is, in other words, a play or instability of delivery between subdivisions of the underlying pulse, which never really seems to stabilize. Besides the juxtaposition of binary and ternary subdivisions, there sometimes appears a *superposition* of them, as shown in the example (times 0’21 and 0’45 of the recording). All these elements combined renders the temporal feel quite quirky, beats oftentimes falling in fuzzy regions of the underlying count. We are confronted, then, by a particular treatment of rhythm, which amounts to a peculiar rhythmic de-phasing.
Once the passacaglia-like introduction finishes, the incessant repetition of the motivic cell that pervades throughout the song continues along, but this time within a new tonal and harmonic context, far away from the original modal-diatonic context (Eb dorian). As seen in Figure 13, this new context is far more dissonant and complex, and its overall effect is reminiscent of the harmonic approach found originally in EPV, and then in the more digital environment of Los Pirañas or Meridian. The overall result is that of a distortion of the original context, so incessantly established by the repetition of the ostinato phrase. While it is less obvious that the play here relates to ideas or out-of-tuneness (here the goal seems to be more straightforwardly that of the harmonic experimentation so typical of free jazz), the similarity to EPV’s experimental approach necessarily connects El Ombligo’s approach in intertextual fashion. In any case, elements related to rhythmic plays of syncopation, de-syncopation, and regularization; to tonal and harmonic plays of contrasting referential systems; and a particular play of foregrounding and de-contextualizing of repetition can be found in Botero’s project, as exemplified in “Video que la.”

Figure 13. “Video que la” by El Ombligo: dissonant excerpt

**Electrocumbia: the stylistic blending of the new, ‘chic’ cumbia**

The following two examples will serve to highlight some musical treatments that occur within many of the studied projects, and which grant a particular stylistic color to the Caribbean base of the music. These treatments have served to connect Rolo ET and its peculiarities with a broader movement throughout Latin America, which has meant a particular rebirth of, in particular, cumbia, a rebirth that has propelled it to colonize and inhabit heretofore unimagined geographical and social spaces. Unimagined because—although still mostly outside the main commercial channels of the global music industry—these
new spaces are associated with middle-to-high-class populations, alternative or underground, yes, but no longer socioeconomically marginalized ones.\textsuperscript{126} This way, Rolo ET has had its role in this new transnational wave of cumbia (and associated musics), and its musical approaches and overall stylistic result have both nurtured and have been nurtured by it. The project that, in particular, was perhaps more self-aware of its role in connection to the transnational status of cumbia was Frente Cumbiero, for which I have selected two brief examples from that project, as a way of commenting on the broad stylistic blends and treatments of the Caribbean material that actively participate in that connection.

- FRENTE, “Aguanegra”:

In Frente Cumbiero’s “Aguanegra”, the base rhythm of cumbia is presented in its most basic form. In this sense, it is quite similar to the cumbia expression of chucu-chucu. There is a clear tendency towards a minimalistic use of musical materials, which are juxtaposed and superposed hypnotically throughout the song. In the ways in which it plays with musical materials and in its tempo, “Aguanegra” has a clear resonance with the practice of live sonideros and with “cumbia rebajada” (see discussion of “Analógica” below). The piece also includes timbres and repetition techniques, which are a clear index of modern Anglo EDM. In its minimalistic play of musical materials, “Aguanegra” also evinces the tendency in Afro-Colombian music from the Caribbean region towards presenting a melodic construction that is based on the addition of short snippets, which are repeated with slight variations throughout sections of a given song. In “Aguanegra,” we are confronted with approximations to musical construction derived from

\textsuperscript{126} Galeano, leader of Frente Cumbiero and Ondatrópica, comments on the way this international boom of cumbia started in the following way: “everything begins to change with the phenomenon of internet blogs, which happens around the year 2007, when the music blog starts. And alternative journalists start to try to find new information. This comes from the United States and Europe. They start to publish articles on cumbia. And then Franz Ferdinand goes to Peru and says in an interview that chicha and Amazonian cumbia is awesome. Then a blog from New York appears that says cumbia this and that and people start to open their eyes. And it is actually thanks to that movement, which is an outside look of what we are doing, that people start to realize and start calling us to play at festivals. They start inviting us to the events. And it is phenomenon connected to the internet a hundred percent.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA) In the context of the conversation, these comments were meant to highlight how the recent internationalization of cumbia throughout particularly Europe and the United States is one more example of the generalized phenomenon whereby cultural expressions from the peripheral regions of the world—in this case, Latin America—tend to only be valued only when recognition is granted in the power centers of the globe. I shall address the implications of this phenomenon within the ideological dynamics of Rolo ET in Chapter 5.
apparently different musical practices (e.g., traditional Afro-Colombian genres vs. modern EDM), but whose similar musical nature creates a bridge between both worlds. In other words, since mechanisms of constant musical repetition of short melodic snippets appear in both musical worlds, when both topical references merge in one place there exists a common ground that tends to produce a feeling of uncanniness, rather than one of evident “fusion.” This way, for a connoisseur of one or various traditions of cumbia, “Aguanegra” sounds like a cumbia; it is a cumbia in its own right, but with some strange elements, which mostly derive either from timbral elements (e.g., a cooked bass sound, rather than the traditional electric bass sound of cumbias from the 1960s onwards), or from the more mechanistic, machine-like ways in which the musical repetition of snippets takes place. On the other hand, for a listener more familiar with the Anglo EDM tradition, “Aguanegra” provides the necessary syntactic elements of repetition in order for him or her to feel comfortable in the virtual dance floor, the exotic elements being provided by the rhythmic and melodic feel of the cumbia language. Figure 14 shows a particularly saturated section of the piece, in which many of the main melodic materials of the song are constantly juxtaposed and superposed. Here, either the fully invariant repetition or the more digital (i.e., machine-like, un-human, etc.) type of variations of the material, tend to resemble the cut and paste techniques made possible by the developments in audio processing since the 1960s. The more “organic” type of melodic construction through repetition is now made fit into the syntactic nature of the digital world.
Beyond a mere description of the internal musical workings of the piece, in “Aguanegra” the play with overlapping elements of the rhythmic syntax of two interrelated musical worlds serves to preliminary signal the connection of this style of cumbia with a distinctly twenty-first-century sonic aura, where the “linguistic” elements of EDM are pervasive throughout a whole gamut of musical styles. In the next example, a similar effortless overlap will serve to provide a bigger picture of the connection between the internal, syntactic and stylistic, workings of this music and a specific subset of the world of twenty-first-century popular musics around the world.

- FRENTE, “Analógica”

“Analógica” is an example of a song in which various sound worlds coalesce to create a ‘chic’ kind of cumbia. First of all, herein appears a synchronic connection of the Caribbean worlds of reggae and cumbia, through a particular exploitation of a musical feature that is common to both genres and constitutes their most basic rhythmic structure: the constant and simplified emphasis on the upbeat. Performed traditionally by the llamador in cumbia (or alternative, usually percussion, instruments used in more recent styles of the genre), and by the more psychedelically oriented electric guitar in reggae, this semi-hypnotic rhythmic element should show more often, one would suppose, the familiarity between
these genres, given how it constitutes one of their fundamental sonic landmarks. This rhythmic DNA, so
to speak, though quite evident in both genres, has traditionally served as just a bedrock over which other
sonic elements interact to create the sonic particularity of both worlds. In “Analógica,” the elements that
separate them are blurred so as to highlight the commonality. However, the possibility of the blend, that
is, the possibility of hearing this song as reggae and cumbia simultaneously, derives not just from a
random, or rationally abstract musical exercise. This blend is possible primordially because of relatively
recent developments in the cumbia world, particularly those related to the changing ways in which it has
been consumed, especially in Mexico, thanks to technological advancements in audio registering and
playback.

In Monterrey, Mexico, starting in the late 1970s, a practice appeared wherein records of cumbia
started to be played by “sonideros” (cumbia DJs) at parties and gatherings of low class populations,
achieving great success.\textsuperscript{127} One of the defining features of the type of cumbia that started to flourish
within these venues was the artificial slowing down of those records, a phenomenon which eventually
came to be known as “cumbia rebajada” (literally slowed-down cumbia).\textsuperscript{128} Without it consciously being
the main goal, the slowing down of, for instance, Landero’s records (one of the idols of Monterrey’s
colombianos\textsuperscript{129}) brought that altered version of cumbia closer to reggae music by virtue of two things:
first, at this slower tempo, the effect of the cyclical upbeat attack of cumbia now resembled much more
that of most reggae music of the late 1960s and of the 1970s\textsuperscript{130}; second, the context and medium of
circulation (street parties, DJ technology, amplifiers, big speakers, etc.) was a clear heritage of the

\textsuperscript{127} Alejandro Madrid describes the more recent versions of this type of parties as a space where “roots-
oriented sounds of a rural vallenato-style cumbia are combined with the sonidero’s space-age sound
effects.” (Fernández and Vila, 2013, p. 22) Incidentally, the descriptor “alien” to describe recent styles of
music, including cumbia, has been present in various spaces of commentary, usually simply as a sign of
the metaphoric connection between the digital timbral characteristics of recent musical practices and the
idea of space, via the idea of humanity having been living in a so called “space age.”
\textsuperscript{128} Alejandro Madrid argues that such a slowing down had much to do with the natural speed of Mexican
musical and living styles, making cumbia more digestible for, and akin to, that culture’s idiosyncrasy.
(Idem)

\textsuperscript{129} The practice and culture of collecting and consuming Colombian cumbia classics (popular and
underground) became so strong amongst working class populations of Monterrey, that these people
started to call themselves colombianos (i.e., Colombians), even if having born in Mexico.

\textsuperscript{130} The first styles of reggae music were apparently slightly more upbeat than the style of the 1970s,
whose most visible representative was the music of the middle-to-late Bob Marley. The latter was to
become the reggae style stereotypically associated to the consumption of marihuana (hence, or because
of, the slower tempo) and Jamaican counterculture. The former became more associated with the
developments of ska music, a much more upbeat Jamaican style.
originally Jamaican practice of Dance Hall, a development wherein several types of reggae music started to be played at street venues or improvised party halls, through amplified speakers that were typically placed alongside or on top of the pickup trucks that were used to transport them, and which included the artificial alteration of the played records and a constant musical and verbal intervention by the DJ. The “cumbia rebajada” parties of the outskirts of Monterrey were, in other words, the Mexican versions of the Jamaican reggae parties that eventually came to be known as simply Dance Hall, and which influenced the appearance of the much more famous early hip-hop parties in New York City. This way, one can say that, sonically speaking, “cumbia rebajada” brought cumbia closer to the world of reggae.

But developments in Monterrey were not the only ones that contributed to make the potential kinship between reggae and cumbia evident. Since early on, the style of Peruvian cumbia was marked by its particular use of the electric guitar, which was inspired greatly by the developments of early rock-and-roll music in the northern hemisphere. Peruvian cumbia—nowadays generically (albeit mistakenly) known as chicha—impregnated cumbia with some of the timbral and stylistic characteristics of 1960s rock, which are coincidentally also fundamental features of reggae music. Thus, without consciously seeking it, relatively modern styles of cumbia began the sonic approach of the genre towards the sound world of Jamaican reggae.

Under this light, the conscious effort by Frente Cumbiero of adjoining and sonically fusing cumbia and reggae almost appears as a late exploitation of the original and ever-closer developing kinship between the two genres. Yet the apparently late timing of this conscious approach can be explained by the particular context of the cumbia scene of the 2000s. And the particularity of this scene, which in a few words suddenly saw the successful positioning of cumbia—a genre which, as previously discussed, had been considered to be almost exclusively a musical expression of marginalized populations throughout Latin America—amongst young, middle-to-high-class populations throughout Latin America and other parts of the world, most prominently in Western Europe. Cumbia, in other words, became growingly ‘hip’ within young crowds seeking alternative sound worlds. I shall return to some of the implications of this shift in the consolidation of Rolo Tropidelia in the last chapter. Suffice for now to say that this largely social shift in the reception and production of cumbia seems to have had its origins during the upcoming of Argentinean cumbia villera. In particular, the leading figure of Pablo Lescano generated an impulse of a
new sound of cumbia, which began to be treated within the sonic, acoustic, and social contexts of electronic dance music.\textsuperscript{131} According to Lescano himself, this experimentation was first largely successful at Žižek, a “trendy Buenos Aires nightclub . . . named, of course, after the noted philosopher Slavoj Žižek.” (Fernández and Vila 2013, 25) Cumbia suddenly became a sort of avant-garde sound within this ‘hip’ context, its generic association with resistance and blackness strengthening its welcoming.

The raising awareness by Frente Cumbiero’s leader Mario Galeano of cumbia’s current and past significance for and within Latin America came to him in part thanks to this evolution. Galeano’s realization of the transnational dimension of cumbia and of the networks of African-derived sounds circulating in a wide array of modern popular musics came to him while studying abroad. This newly found awareness generated in Galeano a series of preoccupations, chief amongst which was the decay of cumbia production within the new generations of Colombian musicians, or otherwise the disconnection of this production with the movements of cumbia outside of the country. Frente Cumbiero, alongside portions of the production of other projects within and akin to Rolo Tropidelia, are partly derived from this new consciousness and the research it inspired. In this sense, Frente Cumbiero is one of the main Colombian contributions to the new, hip’, wave of cumbia. Orbiting back to the sound world of its production, and of “Analógica” in particular, the merging of elements of modern electronic dance music, dubbing techniques (of which more will be said in Chapter 3), reggae, hip hop and cumbia produce a particularly hip’ cocktail, inasmuch as these elements provide both the familiarity of a young, modern sound, plus the revolutionary sounds of two musically related genres of the outskirts of the world, both of which speak about resistance; not to mention the crucial addition of what is now considered the language of resistance par excellence: hip hop.

Of course, here resistance has perhaps become a sort of a common place, i.e., a highly marketable fashion amongst the young, used solely for commercial and self-publicity purposes. I shall return to these ideas of resistance, revolution and counterculture within the studied repertoire in Chapter 3, in connection to the aspect of psychedelia. As far as the tropical sound world is concerned, my goal here was to point out how the gradual inclusion of—first analog (e.g., the slowing down in “rebajada” or

\textsuperscript{131} Cristian Alarcón describes Lescano’s new styles of Cumbia of the early 2000s simply as “much more mixed with electronic sounds.” As for the original audience congregating at Žižek, for which these new styles were conceived, he describes them simply as “more modern,” “eccentric” being the word used by Lescano himself (Fernández and Vila, 2013, p. 25).
the electric guitar in chicha), then digital (e.g., EDM effects)—technological features into cumbia eventually led to a stylistic transformation that aided the inclusion of the genre within the twenty-first century ‘hip’ clubs around the world. “Analógica” of Frente Cumbiero is a particularly eloquent sonic rendition of a reggae-plus-cumbia supertropical genre that is self aware of its hipness, yet of an alternative hipness. In other words, in its effort to be included in the highly appealing style of ‘hip’ or ‘chic’ cumbia, it also reaffirms its revolutionary and marginalized position at a global scale; for the Caribbean and Latin America continue to be a symbol of marginality in this scale. Here, then, we find a consciously sought paradox of hipness and marginality, whose implications and wider meaning I shall explore in the last chapter.

VI. ‘Magical Uglyism’: Caribbean kitsch as chic

Dolan reads in the new expressions of Anglo indie pop an aesthetic stance that assigns idiosyncratic—perhaps even unprecedented—meaning and value to the idea of authenticity. Here, authenticity is romantically understood as residing in an idealized local world, wherein the various sets of social values apparently resist the onslaught of a fake and ruthless modern world. This idealized world is sonically expressed through locally available musical tools, which are forged and molded by local folks, thus creating a music that is mostly untouched by the logic of the grand global musical markets. According to Dolan, in Anglo indie pop music, such a musical world is crucially represented by an aura of simplicity, embodied in a lo-fi quality ocean of sound. Within her interpretation of this musical genre, Dolan reinterprets traditional notions of musical kitsch, understanding its workings within this musical universe as precisely a value, instead of an anti-value. Indie pop thus “projects both a lack of presumption and an emphasis on its own self-aware identity as kitsch—*but as good kitsch*, that is, kitsch that is aware of its status as kitsch and does not attempt to masquerade as something with ‘class.’” (Dolan, 2010, p. 464; emphasis added)

I believe this last idea serves to connect eloquently with the underlying—or oftentimes, one could argue, actually overt—discourse about musical values within the porous musical world of Rolo ET, at least as it relates to its tropical allusions. I have shown throughout this chapter, on the one hand the
particular subsets of musical styles, genres, bands, and personae of tropical music that these projects have chosen to use as part of their musical and ideological fibre, and on the other hand a series of musical treatments of the musical language of many of these references that has eventually configured a very particular version of the Colombian Caribbean sound world. I would argue that, with respect to their outspoken musical references, Rolo ET takes pride in being one of the voices in charge of granting the value that their tropical intermusical world deserves; a value that Álvarez, Galeano, Botero, et al considered forgotten, unrecognized, or simply denied—judging largely from the typical discussions about musical values that occurred within the context of the traditional, Westernized academic environment in which they participated as musicians in formation. Yet I would also argue that, with respect to the technical treatment of that music, there emerges the perhaps veiled sign of new types of elitism. In their surely honest and enthusiastic embracing of forgotten and/or frowned upon musical expressions, there are also embedded musical approaches that complicate the spectrum of meanings residing in Rolo ET’s proposals, in relation to notions of musical values. Under this view, we would be dealing at best with a paradoxical phenomenon, and at worse with mere artistic self-indulgence.

What, in more detailed terms, would the elements of said paradox be? First, it’s worth noting that Rolo ET’s embracement of the varied Caribbean traditions from which it borrows or takes its inspiration is part of a larger phenomena, one which has been usually grouped within the broader context of the NCM movement. In his study of the flow of networks established between middle-class urban musicians and low-class traditional musicians from the Pacific region of Colombia, Hernández claims that, above all, what musicians coming from the urban centers yearn and seek through this relationship is a visceral connection to authenticity (Hernández, 2009). In this sense, the overlap of Hernández’s and Dolan’s interpretations is noteworthy. Apparently, then, the workings of notions of authenticity is similar in the context of both Anglo indie pop and NCM—or Rolo ET, for that matter. A search for a connection with some deeper, cultural or existential, truth seems to underpin these artistic approaches. And at the same time, through the discovery and appropriation of that truer soul, such approaches likewise produce a statement regarding musical, and ultimately also cultural, scale values. But in the case of Rolo ET, given the academic history and credentials of its human constituents, this statement appears less as an implicit underpinning, and more as an aesthetic manifesto. As I shall later show, this aesthetic manifesto is
likewise closely linked with the slippery notion of identity, and also closely connected with the ideological world underpinning the world of rock and roll.\textsuperscript{132} For now, though, it seems evident that there is an aesthetic, and allegedly also an affective, connection to a wide world of tropical lowbrow musics.

The question of how kitsch is finally (or not) constituted in the studied music remains. A first general reading of Rolo ET as musical kitsch stands on the late twentieth-century understanding of kitsch whereby it came to be understood as a general metonym for an aspiring pop culture. In this transformation of the sense of kitsch, it became related with not just middlebrow, but also \textit{lowbrow} taste; and, through that relationship with lowbrow and with the ugly—i.e., mere bad taste—it likewise grew ties with an aesthetic that came to be known as Camp. This is not the space to fully develop the notion of Camp, given how it constitutes a complex and varied world in and of its own.\textsuperscript{133} Suffice to cite what Susan Sontag (1964) considers to be, in her own words, “the ultimate Camp statement: it’s good \textit{because} it’s awful.” Sontag further develops how the ideas of good, bad, or good taste and bad taste intermingle and ultimately merge in Camp, which she thinks of as more an attitude than anything else:

The experiences of Camp are based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement. Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste. . . . The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating. The man who insists on high and serious pleasures is depriving himself of pleasure; he continually restricts what he can enjoy; in the constant exercise of his good taste he will eventually price himself out of the market, so to speak. Here Camp taste supervenes upon good taste as a daring and witty hedonism. It makes the man of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion.

\textsuperscript{132} Here, Grossberg’s (1983, 186) notion of rock’s “ideology of authenticity” seems particularly pertinent. According to Grossberg, this ideology constituted the fundamental form of relationship between fans and music within rock culture before the 1980s. Such form of relationship is, in fact, not very different from the driving force and ideological underpinning of radical folklorists regarding folk traditions, and connects in fundamental ways with both Dolan’s view of Anglo indie pop and Hernández’s view of the dynamics within NCM.

\textsuperscript{133} For an introductory reading about the what the allegedly “un-definable” notion of Camp is, or ought to be, see Sontag, 1964. More than an academic survey or critique about the concept, this essay is a sort of \textit{manifesto}, written by one of the main representatives of what, more than a style, constitutes an attitude, arguably a “way of life.”
Kitsch, as Camp, ought then to be enjoyed, or be about enjoyment: enjoyment of the awful, or, perhaps more to the point, of what is considered to be awful. This bridge between ideas of kitsch and Camp would seem particularly pertinent when one is talking about Caribbean tropical music, which has been stereotypically linked to—in fact oftentimes experienced as—enjoyment, while at the same time considered to be an expression of middle-to-lowlbrow taste, for the most part. The Colombian world of tropical musics is one that, as Hernández (2015) has painstakingly shown, has eventually become a musical topic, one precisely about joy, even if partly a mythic joy, given the fundamentally imaginary nature of all topics. In this sense, the urban, Rolo embracement and appropriation of such imagination of joy could allegedly constitute musical kitsch with a Camp attitude: raw, confrontational enjoyment of what the community of musical academia deemed as “bad taste,” but which pervasively surrounded their everyday lives or lay hidden in the geographical, social, and cultural peripheries of the nation, and thus had the potential of constituting a quite visceral expression of the identity of Álvarez et al.

Now, at first glance, it seems that pure Camp aesthetics, if applicable at all to music in general, would tend to focus on the aspect of (live or recorded) performance. Within Colombian tropical repertoire in particular, it would appear most notably in the repertoire of the Lucho Bermúdez/Pacho Galán type, embodied in the flashy performances by its respective bands, and especially by its respective singers. The more international and likewise flashy world of mambo and cha-cha-cha would appear to also have close links to the concept. Camp would seem to connect better, then, with the higher tiers of the tropical hierarchy; tiers which—through their self-proclaimed conviction that they constitute the better, more cultured, version of tropical musics—seem to also connect more closely with original ideas of kitsch. In the tropics, then, kitsch-ness and chic-ness appear to unite in that enjoyment so typical of the Camp attitude. In some senses, and in some of its projects more than others, Rolo ET appears to resonate with such dynamics of these mid-twentieth century higher tiers of tropical music. For even in the disguise of fostering and celebrating supposed bad taste, its musical approach is filled with academic refinement. Unlike, for instance, punk music, the seemingly rawness of the musical expression of, say, infantile and repetitive rhythmic structures or waning and dubitable tuning is achieved by rigorous and thoughtful

134 In her essay, Sontag herself cites mambo and cha-cha-cha singer “La Lupe” as an epitome of Camp in music.
musical and technological approaches. That dissent between elaboration and end result—i.e., between highly qualified musical processes apparently betrayed by a quirky sonic end result—is perhaps what separates Álvarez et al from Bermúdez et al. For the mid-twentieth century big-band, jazzy versions of cumbia and porro were conceived so as to be obviously refined. The elegant dress was consciously sought and meant to be obvious. But in Rolo ET, there is a play between refinement and kitschy simplicity—or sometimes just blunt ugliness—that separates the discourse from the experience. In many Rolo ET projects, in other words, kitschy Camp would appear as self-aware kitschy Camp (e.g., Meridian’s “Salsa Caliente” or “Delirio”). It would thus be not really kitsch or Camp, but a commentary on it. Such a distance could be speaking of the type of postmodern, cynic or ironic approach to kitsch, so typical of recent artistic trends such as lowbrow art or pop surrealism.

In the end, while the overlap between certain notions of kitsch and Rolo ET seem to be evident in ideological terms, in sonic terms such an overlap is far more obscure. In this case, unlike in indie pop, the search for authenticity—while equally sincere—does not abide in a low-fi sonic atmosphere of remembrance. In Rolo ET, kitsch-as-sound resembles more Adorno’s than Dolan’s ideas. Here, authenticity per se is not sonically re-valued through a lo-fi simplicity. The sometimes distorted or sometimes straightforward sonic references of the intermusical world appear sonically and socially de-contextualized, now brought into the new hip, alternative spaces of, not just tropical, but also EDM enjoyment. The forms, as Adorno would claim, have been devoid of their social underpinning. They have suddenly become a chic entertainment of distant populations. Or have they? Perhaps the idea that this music and its practice is actually performing a cynical or ironic distance could yield another interpretation. But before addressing the workings of a plausible ironic distance, a plausibly fundamental ironic stance, that is, I will address the other big conceptual and sound world apparently inhabiting Rolo ET: the element of psychedelia. The examination of the internal dynamics of this other universe within Rolo ET are needed in order to further advance in the hermeneutic deconstruction of Rolo ET’s alien enjoyment.
EXTRATERRESTRIAL PSYCHEDELIA: TIMBRE, ELECTRONICS, AND DISLOCATED TEMPORALITY IN ROLO ET

“To fathom hell or soar angelic,
Just take a pinch of psychedelic.”
Humphrey Osmond (1957)

I. Introduction

The decade of the 1960s was a particularly effervescent one. In the Fall of 1969, almost exactly a decade after a Soviet mission had managed to land the first human-made object on the lunar surface, a manned space mission from the United States finally succeeded at landing on the moon. The 1960s was thus a crucial decade for the space programs of the two superpower empires of the time and their race towards conquering outer space. This seemingly harmless competition was but a superficial sign of the profound geopolitical tensions characteristic of the Cold War, which at the time had the whole world feeling constantly as if on the verge of a catastrophe. While numerous Soviet and U.S. scientists contributed their skill and knowledge to their correspondent space programs in a bid to “win the space race,” thousands of young people in the U.S. and around the globe—troubled partly by the external circumstances produced by the tense political environment—began to seek an answer to such existential woes in the consumption of thought-to-be spiritually illuminating hallucinogenic substances. In broader terms, while the political and military establishments of the two superpowers of the time relentlessly sought the political conquest of the outer world—literally so, in the case of outer space—, ordinary young people of the Western world relentlessly embarked themselves in a particularly conceived spiritual conquest of their inner world.
Psychedelia, which, as we will see, constituted an originally U.S., 1960s cultural movement associated with a spiritual quest through the consumption of entheogens, came to fruition even as humankind developed and perfected machines that could send us voyaging through space. Both psychedelia and spaceships spoke of voyages: the former of an inner voyage that would lead us to the ultimate dissolution of the human ego, and the latter of an outer voyage that would constitute the ultimate triumph of the human ego. Divergent or unrelated as they may be, the fact is that psychedelia and outer space coincided as significant symbols of the 1950s and 1960s. Oddly enough, these two themes—watered down and transformed by historical, geographical, and cultural distances—seemed to appear again together some thirty years later, in the peripheral country of Colombia, this time in relation to the particular set of partly alternative, partly avant-garde, musical practices that I have here termed Rolo Experimental Tropidelia.

Plenty of questions immediately arise. What makes these musical practices psychedelic? What, in them, denotes or connotes outer space or extraterrestrial activity as it imagined by humans on Earth? Are the musical practices of Rolo ET in any sense intrinsically psychedelic or cosmic or alien? And if so, which of their constituting elements (visual, verbal, sonic, social, etc.) participate in the construction of psychedelic or alien allusions? Or are they rather conceived of as psychedelic, cosmic, sidereal, or alien? And if the latter seems to be the case, conceived of as such by whom and to what purpose? What allows for such a conception? On the other hand, are there any relationships between this apparent twenty-first century, third-world alien version of psychedelia, and the original, 1960s one? What would this be implying about these practices? Or is it a conscious effort by the artists of these practices to somehow imply these relationships? To what effect? What could we ultimately read of these alien- and psychedelic-type characterizations? What does it mean, in the practices’ particular context, to artistically embody or be perceived of as embodying the themes of psychedelia or outer space?

In order to address these questions, I will first briefly discuss the topics of psychedelia in its original understanding, of counterculture and rock culture, and of psychedelic rock and its sonic universe. I will then turn the attention to the use of the term “psychedelia” in Rolo ET, focusing around the idea of

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135 According to the oxford dictionary of English, “a chemical substance, typically of plant origin, that is ingested to produce a non-ordinary state of consciousness for religious or spiritual purposes.” Taken from: http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/entheogen
psycchedelia as a commercial cliché. I will then examine how the notion of psycchedelia could be expressing itself in the Rolo ET’s music, focusing around treatments of timbre, time, and formal processes. Finally, after considering how the theme of psycchedelia connects with a Latin American counterculture, I will offer a particular understanding of the connection between the concept of alienness and Rolo ET’s music, and the peculiar relationship between this peculiar idea of musical alienness and psycchedelia.

II. Psycchedelia

So, what is psycchedelia? The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as “music, culture, or art based on the experiences produced by psycchedelic drugs.” According to the entry, the term is a “back-formation” from the word psycchedelic, which in turn, the dictionary defines as “relating to or denoting drugs (especially LSD) that produce hallucinations and apparent expansion of consciousness [emphasis added].” Definitions of “psycchedelic” in both the Oxford Concise Medical Dictionary and the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology are, as would be expected, quite similar. The former defines “psycchedelic” as “describing drugs that induce changes in the level of consciousness of the mind” (Martin, 2015; emphasis added), while the latter more specifically as “relating to, or resembling a state of subjectively heightened perception and awareness associated with certain drugs.” (Colman, 2015; emphasis added) This last entry also defines “psycchedelia,” describing it as “the culture and phenomena associated with psycchedelic experiences and drugs.” In sum, and at first sight, psycchedelia seems to comprise all expressive cultural phenomena that are variously related to human experiences derived from the use of certain hallucinogenic drugs.

Now, etymologically speaking, all members of this family of words come from the combination of the word psycche or mind, and the Greek word délos, which means clear, visible, or manifest. (Colman, 2015) In other words, putting aside the original cultural implication of the term, and extrapolating solely

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136 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/psycchedelia
137 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/psycchedelic#psycchedelic__4
138 According to the entry, such drugs include “phenylalkylamines such as mescaline, STP, and ecstasy (2); indole alkaloids such as bufotenin, DMT, harmine, LSD, and psilocybin; and various other compounds such as ibotenic acid, myristin, ololiuqui, and phencyclidine.” (Colman 2015)
from its roots, psychedelia seems to denote a state of being where there arises a *clear, visible, or manifest mind*. This etymologically-derived sense of the word appears variously in all the cited definitions of “psychedelic”: expressions like “apparent expansions of consciousness,” “changes in the level of consciousness of the mind,” and “subjectively heightened perception and awareness,” can all be understood as relating to this ideal state: that of a manifest mind. Art historian Annie Dell’Aria describes this state as one “where the subject perceives things in the world with previously untapped powers of mind.” (Dell’Aria, 2011) As we shall see, this more philosophically-oriented imprint of the concept of psychedelia is crucial to the ideology—or, rather, *spirit*—of that cultural movement of the 1960s and all its accompanying expressions.

North American psychologist Timothy Leary is considered by many as the “messiah” of the cultural movement known as psychedelia, at least symbolically. In the 1950s, Leary was a professor of psychology at Harvard University. At some point during his time there, he read an account by banker Robert G. Wasson about an apparently “sacred communion” Wasson and a friend of his had in the mountains of Mexico, as a result of the consumption of what Wasson called “divine fungi.” The account inspired Leary to do some research on these “magic fungi,” which led him to travel to Cuernavaca, Mexico and try Wasson’s psychoactive mushrooms himself. He later asserted that “he had learned more about his brain, its possibilities and psychology in the five hours after consuming the mushrooms than in the fifteen years of research about psychology he had previously done.” (“Timothy Leary”, 2016; TBA)

After this experience, Leary returned to Harvard, where he led a series of research projects about psychoactive substances, whose therapeutical use he defended during the rest of his life. Soon after, however, Harvard decided not to renew his contract, as well as those of many students, teachers, and artists who supported his ideas. Despite this apparent professional setback, Leary continued to promote his ideas about psychoactives (also known as “psychedelics”) and their unmatched therapeutical, and ultimately spiritual, powers.140

139 The original article by Wasson, a former vice president of J. P. Morgan and Co. Inc., was called “Seeking the Magic Mushroom,” and can be found here: http://www.imaginaria.org/wasson/life.htm
140 Though Leary is considered a symbolic figure of the psychedelic movement, he is not its first or sole leading promoter. As Russell Reising and Jim LeBlanc (2008) remind us, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, a varied array of personalities throughout the social landscape of the United States studied and often advocated the use of LSD. Amongst them, Reising and LeBlanc highlight the figure of Henry Luce, founder of magazines such as *Fortune, Sports Illustrated, Life* and *House and Home*, who, in tandem with
In part as a response to his dismissal and in part as a defense of the importance of his line of research, Leary and his collaborator Richard Alpert wrote a letter that was published in the student magazine *The Crimson*; some of the ideas from that letter would become essential to psychedelia in particular and, by extension, to the whole of the countercultural movement of the 1960s. Leary and Alpert famously wrote that, with regards to the importance of continuing serious scientific research on the area of psychoactive substances, what was in question was not merely the chemical make-up of the drugs themselves, but rather “the freedom or control of consciousness, the limiting or expanding of man's awareness.” (Leary & Alpert, 1962) They later emphasized the crucial issue of “freedom” by stating how the traditional values were at stake—“academic freedom, freedom of consciousness, the freedom of the nervous system”—and by asking profoundly philosophical and ethical questions: “who controls your cortex? Who decides on the range and limits of your awareness? If you want to research your own nervous system, expand your consciousness, who is to decide that you can't and why?” (Idem)

In 1966, Leary founded the League for Spiritual Discovery, a kind of religion or spiritual practice that declared the use of LSD (or, more widely, of entheogens) as its holy sacrament. As LSD and similar substances were declared illegal shortly thereafter, the League was not able to survive openly as an official institution, yet its philosophical principles regarding the use of entheogens as the ideal path towards the expansion of consciousness and, ultimately, illumination, continued to be pervasive amongst members of the hippie countercultural movement in the United States and elsewhere. In large part due to the aura of respectable authority his scientific credentials gave to this leadership, Leary was famously described by president Richard Nixon himself as “the most dangerous man in America.” (“Timothy Leary”, 2016)

The combination of the spiritual, philosophical, and political ideas associated with the use of psychedelic substances soon turned this practice into one of the symbols of the countercultural movement, given how well the ideas of mind expansion and control of consciousness resonated with ideas of political freedom and individual rights, which were the crux of the counter-culture’s political

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141 The League for Spiritual Discovery still actually exists, information of which can be reached at [http://www.leagueforspiritualdiscovery.org/](http://www.leagueforspiritualdiscovery.org/)

his wife, “regularly hosted high-class LSD parties for social and cultural elites.” (Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 104) In their account, the authors also cite experiences with, and declarations about, LSD by other prominent figures, including statements issued by instances of the Roman Catholic Church itself, in which an interest in the spiritual potential of psychedelics was clearly expressed.
agenda. Not surprisingly, these ideas and practices also soon influenced the artistic expressions associated with the counter-culture, generating a whole gamut of psychedelic artistic and cultural practices, which is what we now know as psychedelia. Yet, beyond the particular ideas promoted by psychedelia, what could be said about the general dynamics and characteristics of this wider movement of 1960s counter-culture, of which psychedelia became symbolic? What, in other words, characterizes this movement more widely? Or, alternatively, what constellation of ideas becomes attached to psychedelia via its relation with the broader social and political movement in which it arises and develops?

III. Counter-culture, Rock culture, and Psychedelic Rock

In one of his many writings about the counter-culture of the 1960s, Theodore Roszak, eminent scholar of the phenomenon, describes the movement as follows:

[A] continuum of thought and experience among the young which links together the new left sociology of Mills, the Freudian Marxism of Herbert Marcuse, the Gestalt-therapy anarchism of Paul Goodman, the apocalyptic body mysticism of Norman Brown, the Zen-based psychotherapy of Alan Watts and finally Timothy Leary’s impenetrably occult narcissism wherein the world and its woes may shrink at last to the size of a mote in one’s private psychedelic void. (cited in Whiteley, 2003, p. 3; emphasis added)

Though brief and barely introductory, I believe this depiction provides valuable insights for the purposes of highlighting some key aspects of a movement, which otherwise is probably un-synthesizable. First, one can clearly get a sense of the wide and heterogeneous array of ideological (i.e., philosophical,

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142 In this regard, Dell’Aria writes: “The psychedelic aesthetic, proliferated through personal and domestic media such as album covers and posters, became aligned with the countercultural movement of the late 1960s and was heavily adopted by the American advertising industry in the mid-to-late 1970s.” And also: “with the increased popularity of mind-altering drugs such as LSD, ‘psychedelic’ came to be associated with both drug culture and the larger counterculture of the 1960s.” (2011; emphasis added)
political, spiritual, etc.) currents that feed the various components of the movement. Accordingly, one can envision 1960s counter-culture as an ideological fusion—a soup of ideas, if you will—which, dissimilar as they may seem or be, contribute to constructing a general sense of unity: Roszak’s “continuum of thought and experience.” Second, Roszak unequivocally signals the young—i.e., youth—as the population segment constitutive of the movement. The young are the “flag bearers,” so to speak, of 1960s counter-culture. The counter-culture of the 1960s becomes the symbol of youth, understood not in its general sense of one of the various stages of the human life cycle, but rather as a particular sociological phenomenon of the Western late twentieth century. With 1960s counter-culture, in other words, Youth, with a capital Y, was born. I shall return to the significance of this new-born sense of youth within the specific culture of rock music below. But first, let me further comment on Roszak’s brief portrait of 1960s counter-culture.

A third aspect to highlight in Roszak’s words is the implication that this somewhat ragtag youth movement was ultimately moved by a desire to, if not solve, then at least overcome, “the woes” of this world. Granted that, given the need to cherry pick from the available material, Roszak’s words here seem vague with regards to the type of woes—personal, social, existential (aren’t they all tied up anyway?)—being alluded to in this fragment. One can presume, though, that the term “woe” is here thought of as embracing all the intricate levels and possible types of troubles—the perpetual and the ephemeral, the personal and the collective, the existential and the practical, the abstract and the defined, the structural and the conjunctural; troubles that, in any case, under the essentially spiritual view of 1960s psychedelia, were all intimately related and seen to ultimately derive from one fundamental, spiritual, imbalance.

Yet however universal and atemporal the discussion would seem to be from a “psychedelic” point of view, the fact is that the particular socio-economic and political ambience of the 1960s (particularly in the United States, but also in many parts of the world due to a still incipient, yet already considerable, process of globalization) contributed significantly to the emergence of a countercultural movement. Despite the state of welfare in which most had grown up, the young early American representatives of the so called baby-boomer generation experienced first hand the existential turmoils caused by the Cold War and all the international war fronts it implicated, particularly the Vietnam war. The worldview and value system of this generation’s parent culture was not able to provide them with satisfactory answers to these
existential questions. On the contrary, such a worldview was thought of as being responsible for the instability and inequality that had the world on the verge of a disaster. Unable to find sense in that cultural milieu, many youngsters around the world sought for alternative roads that defied the prevalent cultural paradigm. Amongst those roads, of course, was the more spiritually oriented psychedelic movement (which Roszak somewhat sarcastically described as "Leary’s impenetrably occult narcissism").

Now, if not specifically one of those “roads,” rock music did become one of the most popular channels of expression of the countercultural movement. It became, in other words, the artistic representative of 1960s counterculture par excellence. Rock scholar Lawrence Grossberg explains rock culture’s success precisely as a consequence of its capacity to emotionally interpret and artistically embody the position of the young generations of the 1960s and 70s. His description of the emergence of rock culture as related to that epoch’s zeitgeist is worth citing at length:

There were identifiable conditions of possibility which enabled the rock culture to take shape and to occupy such an important place, not only in the cultural lives of its fans but increasingly in the cultural life of the society. . . . First, the ‘baby boom’ created a very real population explosion, creating a youth generation which had enormous consequences for postwar society. . . . It was implicated in the growing ideological contradictions of America’s sense of its own youthfulness. Consequently, rock functioned as a statement of, and response to, the particular forms of alienation determined by the contradictory structures of empowerment and subordination into which the baby boom was placed. Second, the appearance of certain rather apocalyptic events, experiences and statements. . . increasingly presented the world as meaningless, history as irrational and the future as impossible. . . . In the postwar context, [these events, experiences, and statements] had very real effects. They produced a crisis of sorts in youth’s ability to connect the meanings and values which

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143 One could say that a common ground to all these roads (Roszak’s list of ideological inputs) is a general antagonistic position towards the dominant culture of the time. One might also argue, though, that this originating principle was thereafter generalized into a more “abstract” rebellious position, i.e., one in which oftentimes there is no real awareness of the specific object of rejection: a rebellion for the sake of rebelliousness itself. Such is the view of some of the participants of the Rolo tropidelical movement, for whom counterculture has nowadays unfortunately become a cliché of alternativity. (See section below).
they inherited . . . to the historically defined affective or volitional possibilities of survival and empowerment. Increasingly, gaps seemed to appear between the ideological possibilities of controlling one’s life and the affective impossibility of intervening into the future. Everyday life seemed to be increasingly marked by places where youth was unable to anchor its maps of what the world means in its maps of what can and should matter. Rock, then, articulated the intersection of this historical experience of ‘postmodernity’ with that of the alienation of youth. (Grossberg, 1993, pp. 199–200)

Here, Grossberg seems to explain the epoch’s “woes” or “existential turmoils” in terms of an alienation of a youth that was unable to connect with inherited values, all of which resulted in an apocalyptic vision of a world with little or no future. If psychedelia was, for Roszak, one possible answer to such an incommensurable state of being, for Grossberg rock music—or, rather, the emergence of a rock culture—was another particularly significant one, at least as far as young people are concerned. Yet in the 1960s, these two “answers” were hardly separable. Of course, from his standpoint, Grossberg is speaking of a larger rock culture, i.e., a culture that eventually extended and expanded well beyond its original temporal, geographical, and cultural milieus. But the fact is that the Anglo-Saxon rock culture of the 1960s was intimately bound to psychedelia, and both of them, in turn, to the countercultural movement. At this point in history, in other words, rock and psychedelia constituted two sides of the same coin. And that figurative “coin” was, for all intents and purposes, a fundamental part of counterculture’s “currency,” so to speak. As Sheila Whiteley writes, in reference to the more progressive strands of 1960s rock (most of which are now included under the “psychedelic rock” category), “it appeared that the counter-culture and musical innovation were inseparable.” (Whiteley, 2003, p. 4; emphasis added) Accordingly, rock musicians of the time were recognized as primordial figures both of and within counterculture. Not only did they “voice its concerns,” but they also provoked a “reaction through their own musical and personal confrontation with the mainstream culture.” (Whiteley, 2003, pp. 3-4) Psychedelic rock—or acid rock, as some call it (see footnote 149 below)—thus became the musical
representative of the more general 1960s countercultural confrontation. It became, in other words, the most prominent artistic symbol of 1960s counterculture and its values.

Besides being closely associated with 1960s counterculture in general, psychedelic rock was obviously also an important expressive vehicle of psychedelic culture in particular. Psychedelic rock was, in other words, one of the most important channels of communication of psychedelia’s most iconic themes. As previously discussed, most important amongst said themes was the call for a true spiritual awakening, which amounted to something like what Reising and LeBlanc call “snapping out of a daze.” (Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 14) According to these authors, a true psychedelic awakening would ultimately result in an “unusually beautiful and profound reality,” where there would emerge a “complete fluidity and total interpenetration of all life forms.” This way, psychedelia seemed to fundamentally speak of a sort of “beyondness of ordinary perception.” Accordingly, psychedelic culture and all its forms of expression, including, of course, its music, could be ultimately understood as constituting a “social critique of ordinary existence,” thus contributing its own bit to the greater phenomenon of 1960s counterculture.

Through its multipledimensions—visual, verbal, and sonic—psychedelic rock was said to interpret, represent, and express psychedelia’s fundamental ideas. Though its visual and verbal components probably rendered the psychedelic themes more explicitly (given the more less stable semiotic structure, that is), psychedelic rock’s sounds by themselves were also thought to speak of psychedelia’s transcendent message of union and love. Richard Neville, co-editor of the counterculture magazine Oz, famously wrote, for instance, that all sounds from the most representative rock bands of the counter-culture “seemed somehow associated with acid and universal love.” For Neville, all these bands “celebrated the acid experience and revived our faith in each other.” (Cited in Whiteley, 2003, p. 5) More recently, scholars Reising and LeBlanc similarly wrote that “musically, psychedelia generated great interest in matters of the intellect, the spirit, ecstatic merging, hallucinatory clarity and meditative innerness, even the fate of the species.” (2008, p. 104) Viewed this way, psychedelic rock fundamentally constituted a sort of spiritual music, which spoke of connections that transcended our (ironically) noisier worldly relations, and was there to help “save the world.” As such, psychedelic rock constituted an important part of the countercultural response to the contemporary woes of humankind. Or, to use
Roszak’s previously cited words once more, it constituted one of those spaces “wherein the world and its woes [would] shrink at last to the size of a mote in one’s private psychedelic void...”

To a certain extent, Roszak’s words seem an uncanny, certainly ironic, resonance of the now famous exchange between Aldous Huxley and Dr. Humphrey Osmond in the 1950s, from which the term “psychedelic” is thought to have emerged for the first time. “To make this trivial world sublime, take half a gramme of phanerothyme,” wrote Huxley. To which Osmond responded: “to fathom hell or soar angelic, just take a pinch of psychedelic.” A fairly recent interpretation of the album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, by The Beatles—perhaps the most iconic psychedelic rock album of all times—serves to demonstrate the familiar view of psychedelic rock as fundamentally constituting the artistic dimension of psychedelia’s therapeutic essence. For Reising and LeBlanc, this album is all about “fixing holes.” In this regard, they write: “looking within themselves and looking without at the often lonely wastes of the Cold War West, the Beatles suggest some possible ways of fixing holes, making things better, and soaring in Technicolor beyond the mundane greys of Liverpool, London, New York or California.” Like psychedelics, then, The Beatles—and, one supposes, psychedelic rock in general—were also seeking to “shrink the world and its woes,” “fathom hell or soar angelic,” or “make this trivial world sublime.”

This Romantic view of 1960s psychedelia in general, and psychedelic rock in particular, is still quite pervasive, especially, of course, amongst 1960s counterculture sympathizers. But even to more skeptical minds, such as Roszak’s, psychedelia’s cultural significance is undoubtable. One can see that despite Roszak’s obvious incredulity towards Leary’s psychedelic manifesto, his words seem to highlight the centrality of psychedelia to the countercultural movement as a whole. In other words, even if for Roszak the desperately sought resolution of the woes of the world was not really happening at a communal transcendental level (as psychedelia would have it), but rather at a vacuous and isolated personal space (“one’s private psychedelic void”), his words are a recognition of psychedelia as a historically significant phenomenon. In the 1960s, then, psychedelia and rock were two intricately related phenomena of a major countercultural movement that clearly went beyond mundane politics. In other words, rather than specifically a political movement, the 1960s countercultural movement should be

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144 What Roszak found illusively contradictory in psychedelia (the search for a communal connection inside one’s own brain), some found paradoxically beautiful. For instance, in 1966, Sidney Cohen famously referred to the phenomenon as “The Beyond Within.” (cited in Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 103)
understood more widely as a cultural phenomenon. Crucially nurtured by the spiritually oriented phenomenon of psychedelia, and artistically embodied in psychedelic rock’s multi facetious fabric, 1960s counterculture “[striked] beyond ideology to the level of consciousness, seeking to transform our deepest sense of the self [and] the environment.” (Roszak, cited in Whiteley, 2003, p. 12) As exemplified by the lyrics of one of the movement’s most iconic songs, “San Francisco” by Scott McKenzie, this notion was already palpable for the protagonists of psychedelic counterculture: “all across the nation, such a strange vibration, people in motion, there’s a whole generation with a new explanation, people in motion, people in motion…”

Having briefly explored the overall significance of, and relationship between, psychedelia, rock music, and counterculture, the question remains as to what the specific workings of psychedelic expressions are—particularly, of course, with regards to psychedelic rock. In the next section, I will address this question by first briefly examining psychedelic art in general, and then focusing on the particularities of psychedelic rock and its sonic universe.

IV. Psychedelic Art, Psychedelic Rock, and the Psychedelic Sound

Psychedelic Expressions: Image vs. Sound

As previously stated, beyond the specific allusion to human experiences triggered by certain hallucinogenic drugs, the term “psychedelic” is also said to refer to a particular style of rock music originating in the mid 1960s, characterized by “experimentation” and “drug-related lyrics” (see below), while an alternative sense has it denoting an “intense, vivid color or a swirling abstract pattern.” ¹⁴⁵ Both of these secondary dictionary definitions allude to the particular artistic expressions that accompanied the emergence of the psychedelic culture of the 1960s, that is, what we now know as psychedelia. Closely related, the most prominent and innovative artistic expressions of psychedelic culture were music and visual art. As exemplified by the last cited dictionary definition of the word “psychedelic,” most formal characterizations of psychedelic visual art tend to emphasize its colorful, circular and/or swirling designs.

¹⁴⁵ https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/psychedelic#psychedelic__4
The Oxford Companion to Western Art, for instance, defines psychedelic art as "characterized by intense, swirling patterns and the use of bright, often sharply contrasting colours [sic]." (Parfitt, 2001) And The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art likewise tells us how "the psychedelic visual style used bright colors, kaleidoscopic effects, fractal and paisley patterns and surreal and fantastic imagery." (Dell'Aria, 2011)

Having emerged in the mid-1960s, and dependent as it was on that particular (counter)cultural atmosphere, psychedelic art—according to some accounts—"declined steadily throughout the 1970s, and by the early 1980s it . . . ceased to exist." (Parfitt, 2001)

However, as the visual component of the Rolo tropidelical movement demonstrates (see, for instance, Fig. 1), the colorful swirling patterns that so idiosyncratically characterize that body of visual art continue to be used, perhaps evoking—if not strictly its psychedelic connotations—at least its countercultural ones. I shall return to these hypothetical connections later in this chapter, though focusing my attention not on the visual component of ROLO ET, but rather on its sonic and conceptual dimensions.

Now, besides it being a particular scholarly interest, the focus on the musical aspect of the movement is actually a testimony to the music’s centrality to that movement, which was also the case with 1960s psychedelia. In other words—as is the case with the visual component of ROLO ET—psychedelic visual art of the 1960s actually played a subsidiary role within psychedelic culture. In reality, of all the psychedelic artistic expressions, psychedelic rock music (also known as acid rock\(^{146}\)) seemed to be of chief importance, other forms of expressions (especially visual art) being closely associated with, or revolving around, that musical style and practice. Art scholar Annie Dell’Aria comments, for instance, how psychedelic art of the 1960s was presented “commonly in the form of album covers, posters, and live-music light shows,”\(^{147}\) clearly showing the centrality of the musical medium and its role in inspiring other artistic creations.\(^{148}\) Another general description of psychedelic art has it mainly originating in the hippy

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\(^{146}\) The term “acid,” here, refers directly to LSD, known colloquially as an acid drug.

\(^{147}\) Following is another relevant description of extra-musical elements circulating around psychedelic music of the time: “colorful and eccentric clothing, elaborate light shows that mimicked hallucinatory movements, and posters with distorted lettering and shapes were visual accompaniments to the music.” (Cohen, 2013)

\(^{148}\) To show the centrality of the musical medium within psychedelia doesn’t mean that there were no psychedelic artistic expressions that were “independent” of the musical phenomenon. “The exhibition Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era (2005–6) represented a shift in the scholarship surrounding psychedelia that forged strong connections with more art historically accepted avant-garde practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Artists such as Robert Indiana, Lynda Benglis, Kenneth Anger (b 1927) and Andy Warhol, therefore, are part of psychedelic culture, music and visual style.” (Dell’Aria, 2011)
community in San Francisco “with artists such as Stanley Mouse, Rick Griffin, and Alton Kelley, who were commissioned to produce posters for rock musicians such as The Grateful Dead and Jimi Hendrix.” (Clarke & Clarke, 2010) And yet another recounts how this art “was usually created specifically for posters advertising rock concerts, and might therefore be more precisely categorized as a type of graphic design.” (Parfitt, 2001) As a cultural expressive phenomenon, then, psychedelia was primarily represented by the substyle of rock known as psychedelic or acid rock, with all other media revolving around its dynamics.

This hierarchical relationship doesn’t mean, however, that the visual component of psychedelic rock wasn’t important. Despite being subsidiary—and just as it happens nowadays with Rolo ET—the visual art (or graphic design) accompanying concerts, record covers, publicity, etc., became an almost inextricable part of psychedelic rock and its identity. This phenomenon is actually not particular to psychedelic rock, but seems to be an important aspect of rock culture in general (and, perhaps even more generally, of Western late twentieth-century popular culture as a whole). Grossberg (1993) emphatically underscores the importance that images have had within rock culture since its inception. Its role is, in other words, distinct throughout the different phenomena that comprise what Grossberg calls the rock “map.” (see ff. 187–190) One can say that, in general, though, the visual aspect of popular music movements (or styles, or genres, or however one decides to call them) such as psychedelic rock play an effective and important role in defining said movements. Images are, in sum, definitive identity markers. The case was not different with psychedelic rock, nor is it now different with Rolo ET. Yet my main question about the sonic definition of psychedelia remains. Was there—is there—a sonic psychedelia?

Before addressing this question, allow me to first comment on the particular pitfalls surrounding the interpretation of psychedelic artistic expressions (though I believe some of these pitfalls could be certainly generalized in other terms to include many other forms of art). Psychedelic expressions, including, of course, visual art, were usually understood as either representing, or directly deriving from, psychedelic experiences. According to Parfitt (2001), for instance, “this style was intended to duplicate and complement the effects of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD.” Dell’Aria (2011) likewise characterizes psychedelic art as allegedly “made under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs.” More specifically, in what is a clear allusion to the imagery and ideology of Leary’s version of the psychedelic experience, she recounts how psychedelic art in the 1960s “was meant to appear inspired by a hallucination or ‘trip’ from
psychedelic drugs, and therefore represent [...] a ‘true’ form of perception.” (2011; emphasis added).

Here, Dell’Aria’s cautious use of words points to an apparent two-folded nature of psychedelic artistic expressions (whether sonic, visual, or otherwise). Did a particular artifact appear to be inspired by the use of psychedelic drugs? Or was it actually inspired by said use? Kenneth Gloag’s definition of psychedelic rock somewhat reproduces this anxiety: “a type of rock music associated with the hippie subculture during the 1960s and said to be intended to evoke or accompany use of the drug LSD (‘acid’)” (2011; emphasis added)

The question of whether a psychedelic painting or a psychedelic song evokes, or actually derives from, a psychedelic experience is a difficult one to answer. In other words, except if judging from an honest account by one of the creative minds behind a given artistic artifact, it is difficult to conclude beyond any doubt whether said artifact is the actual consequence of a psychedelic experience, or whether it constitutes only a representation of such an experience (or an aspect thereof). Specifically with respect to music, claims about a certain song or album resulting from a psychedelic trip or hallucination, for example, must therefore always be treated with caution. The general consensus around this issue, though, is that psychedelic artistic expressions sought to somehow “depict” a particular state of consciousness, whether by the memory of it, or by its immediate, simultaneous, translation into a given medium (sound, painting, words, etc.). The search for the universe of psychedelic sound or music, then, threatens to be fraught with slippery questions of a phenomenological nature, that is, if one is actually searching for the validity of the correspondence between psychedelic experiences and psychedelic music (or art). Another path, wherein psychedelic music is understood more as an Ecoian cultural code (see Ch. 1) than as the expression of a particular experience, might be more appropriate for addressing the issue; particularly because, as Jacob Cohen asserts, “originally, psychedelic rock (or acid rock) reflected the LSD experience, but it eventually came to represent a musical style less strongly associated with its initial connotations.” (2013)

So just as in the case of the universe of ideas, words, images, and musical sounds that constitute, for instance, the topic of Alegría Costeña (see Chapter 2), I believe that the answer to the question of what musical psychedelia constitutes, must be approached from the point of view of its historical and cultural construction, rather than from the collection of any essential sonic attributes. This is
not to say that psychedelia, understood as the particular cognitive experience a human being has when under the effects of hallucinogenic substances, would not suggest certain sonic phenomena. It may well be that what we deem as discursively (i.e., verbally) constructed attributes may have in fact derived from that particular experience, but the fact remains that it is methodologically quite difficult to prove any essential connection (at least parting from the abilities that my particular expertise grants me). So independently of the existence or not of a straightforward causal connection between a psychedelic experience and what we know as psychedelic music, the fact is that there is a cultural—both musical and discursive—construct that we now know as psychedelic rock, which we can trace both through its musical and its discursive components. For the present purposes, I am interested in tracing some of the ways in which the academic community has described psychedelic rock, in order to get some sense of how—according to this discursive construction—psychedelia supposedly sounds. This, in order to then find plausible connections that may help us understand the use of such a word in the studied repertoire.

**Psychedelic Rock, Psychedelic Sound**

Psychedelic rock\(^{149}\) and its new musical vocabulary is said to have originated in the West Coast of America, particularly in the San Francisco bay area.\(^{150}\) (Whiteley, 2003, p. 13) First constituting an underground scene, it later inspired a wave of mainstream psychedelic pop. As previously mentioned, this music was closely “associated with the hippie subculture” of the 1960s, and, although introducing new musical vocabulary, fed from different musical styles that were popular at the time. As Cohen explains, “stylistically speaking, psychedelic rock [drew] from 1960s R&B, rock, country, and folk music as well as on extended improvisation by such jazz artists as John Coltrane and noise experiments by avant-garde composers including Karlheinz Stockhausen”\(^{151}\) (Cohen, 2013).

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\(^{149}\) Iconic bands include “Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, and The Byrds in the USA, and early Pink Floyd and late Beatles in the UK.” (Gloag, 2011)

\(^{150}\) “Though the origin of this substyle of rock music is now conventionally associated with the San Francisco musical scene of the mid-1960s, this association might have been actually constructed and reinforced by the media of the time. In this regard, Jacob Cohen writes how “in 1967, high-profile media coverage of events such as the Human Be-In and successful concert promotion by impresario Bill Graham framed San Francisco as the center of the psychedelic scene.” (Cohen, 2013)

\(^{151}\) A simple comparison of Cohen’s description of psychedelic rock with Canepari’s description of EPV’s music shows some stylistic, and even philosophical, overlaps between the two: “their name was also their mission, because they were determined to revive the traditional Colombian vallenato style, mixing it with..."
However, psychedelic rock musicians, who initiated and inspired the strand of rock known as progressive rock, did not just lightly include these various musical elements. On the contrary, following the philosophical guidelines of psychedelia and counterculture, they consciously sought an element of meaningful innovation in their musical explorations. In Whiteley’s words, this music’s “stylistic complexity [and] the elements of surprise, contradiction and uncertainty suggested alternative meanings which supported the hippies’ emphasis on timeless mysticism.” (Whiteley, 2003, p. 4; emphasis added) As Whiteley argues, progressive psychedelic rock musicians of the time embraced the countercultural notion of a deep sense and transformation of the self in a way that profoundly affected their approach to musical creation. Rather than basing their “music-making” solely on existing fashions (i.e., what was readily available), musicians started to pursue a more personal—thus oftentimes experimental—approach to musical creation. It is interesting in this regard to note how, in his analysis of psychedelic elements in songs by The Beatles, music theorist Naphtali Wagner suggests that the search for an original—i.e., personal—musical expression is one of the main reasons behind what he calls the “emergence of the Beatles’ psychedelia,” which is perhaps one of the most popular instances of psychedelic music of all time. (Wagner, 2008, p. 90)

In any case, together with its “stylistic complexity,” psychedelic rock’s experimental approach yielded some distinctive musical results. Generally speaking, the countercultural philosophical underpinning of this approach would naturally result in a defiance of musical conventions: if, in general, counterculture was a current that sought to contest a parent culture, psychedelic rock was likewise a musical style that sought to contest a mainstream musical culture (popular or classical). Whether experientially accurate or not, this homology and psychedelic rock’s rebellious nature is clearly present in scholarly commentary about the phenomenon. In some of his analysis of songs by The Beatles, for instance, Wagner (2008) tends to characterize the sound world of psychedelic rock in relation to the

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rock, punk and free-jazz. As they affirmed in an interview, they wanted to 'play whatever and see what happens.'” (Canepari, 2014; emphasis added)

152 According to Gloag, for instance, the improvisational nature of psychedelic rock’s approach, which resulted in “the production of extended compositions,” was the element that most “paved the way for the [subsequent] development of progressive rock.” (Gloag, 2011)

153 Most authors writing about psychedelic rock emphasize its innovative, experimental character. For instance, Reising and LeBlanc characterize psychedelic music in general as one seeking to “recreate the aural thrill of the LSD experience” through what the authors find as “bracing and innovative attempts.” (Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 107; emphasis added)
horizon of the Western classical musical tradition. In his analytical reading of the album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, he devotes his attention primordially to tonal aspects, which can be more readily understood in terms of traditional Western voice leading or harmony rules—or rather against those rules, in the case of Wagner’s idea of sonic psychedelia. For Wagner, psychedelic sound appears to mean anything that contradicts the conventions of common practice Western harmony. In this sense—and in concordance with the ordinary understanding of 1960s counter-culture as precisely *countering* a parent culture—the “psychedelic” sound world is understood as an aesthetic ideal “diametrically opposed” to the aesthetic ideal of the classical world, whose music “reflects lucidity and sobriety,” and possesses “clarity of form, tonality and text” (Wagner, 2008, pp. 76 and 90). Under Wagner’s view, anything “psychedelic” would (sonically) negate this type of characteristics.

Other characterizations of musical psychedelia also tend to imply that psychedelic sonic phenomena are perceivable as such because they fall out of a given norm. Allan Moore, for instance, comments how in The Beatles’ “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” apparent references to LSD “are supported by *abnormalities* in texture and production” (Moore, 1997, p. 33; emphasis added). Contrary to Wagner, Moore does not explicitly state what the “normal” musical frame of reference would be in this case. Yet the implication that such a frame exists, and that psychedelia occurs as a result of the sonic distortion of, or distancing from, this reference is, I think, sufficiently clear. Even if questionable, this understanding of what sonically constitutes musical psychedelia should come as no surprise. After all, since psychedelic experiences are normally associated with *altered* states of consciousness, sonic expressions of these experiences would homologically consist of *altered* states of otherwise normative sonic phenomena.

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154 With regards to the song “Strawberry Fields” by John Lennon, Wagner, for instance, writes: “Lennon’s use of four-six chords in the intro comes from the world of classical music, but a series of successive parallel four-six chords is not consistent with the traditional rules of harmony and creates a *sense of instability associated with the psychedelic world.*” (Wagner, 2008, p. 89; emphasis added) Similarly, commenting on the musical characteristics of “Lucy in the Sky,” Wagner writes how “tonal ambiguity is one of the main effects of psychedelia in the song.” (p. 85) In his analysis of songs by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Wagner characterizes Lennon’s expression of psychedelia as being more “externalized,” while McCartney’s as being “soft,” i.e., surrounded by a more “normative” tonal grammar and sonority.

155 These “abnormalities” include, in Moore’s words, “the drifting of the double-tracked voice; the Indian tambura; the phasing on the bass; what sounds like a Leslie speaker through which the guitar is played; and . . . the general avoidance of a drum beat in verses’ first strains . . . , which allows a sense of impressions simply to waft in.” (Moore, 1997, p. 33)
As is the case with Wagner’s reading of sonic psychedelia in *Sgt. Pepper*, or Moore’s specific remarks about “Lucy,” one could say that, in general, descriptions of psychedelia “as sound” tend to include terminology that oftentimes imply (or sometimes overtly signal) a normative frame of reference that is being contested or broken. Whiteley considers, for instance, that psychedelic music generally implies a “breakdown of structure” at some or various levels, though without specifying what she means by “structure.” (Whiteley, 2003, p. 14) For her, psychedelic music tends to include “relationships (foreground, background) and collages which provide a point of comparison with more conventionalised, i.e. normal treatment.” (p. 12) Again, what constitutes those conventions or normal treatments remains perhaps tacit, but we can assume that Whiteley has in mind the hegenomic rules of common practice Western harmony. On the other hand, beyond his remarks about tonal behavior in Beatles’ psychedelia, Wagner broadly characterizes the psychedelic sound world using terms such as instability, strangeness, or surrealism,156 all of which imply a fallout of a given norm. For him, in order for the music to speak of states associated with psychedelia (e.g., “hallucinations, dreams, or the supernatural”), its musical manifestation must include a variety of “strange” elements that produce “a sense of detachment from reality.” Amongst these strange elements, Wagner includes items such as distorted sound, tonal disorientation, and what he describes as “fusion of successive musical units on the macro and micro levels.”157 (p. 76)

Wagner’s choice of items is not gratuitous. Psychedelic rock’s musical defiance, as it were, of a parent culture, tended to concentrate more on certain elements of the musical discourse than on others. As Cohen writes, in psychedelic rock, “particular attention was paid to expanding and altering conventions of form and timbre.” (Cohen, 2013; emphasis added) While in Wagner’s account, the notion of “distorted sound” straightforwardly pertains to timbre (i.e., quality of sound), the notion of “fusion of musical units”—

156 With regards to the oftentimes found relationship between psychedelia and surrealism, it is interesting to consider the following words by André Breton about the latter: “automatic writing, practised with some fervour, leads directly to visual hallucination” (Cited in Lebaron, 2002, p. 27) Another excerpt of Breton’s thought about surrealism also uncannily resonates with ideas of psychedelia regarding the search for a fundamentally holistic experience of the world: “. . . there exists a certain aspect of the spirit where life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, communicable and incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictory. One might search in vain for any other central force in Surrealist activities than the hope of finding this point.” (p. 27)

157 Wagner, on the other hand, describes psychedelic lyrics as “surrealistic, nonsense, and enigmatic texts, frayed at the edges, usually based on free association and constituting a broad ground for hermeneutic analysis.” (Wagner, 2008, p. 76)
speaking as it is about a particular treatment of time—ultimately pertains to form (here understood as the particular emergence and organization of a sound structures through time). Other accounts likewise focus on the particular treatment of these two elements as a trademark of the style. Referring specifically to the formal aspect of psychedelic rock, for instance, Gloag underscores “the extended use of improvisation and the formlessness” of this music, as one of its most typical traits. (Gloag, 2011; emphasis added) Also in regards to form, Cohen signals the use of “accumulative form”—up until then a completely unexplored formal strategy in the world of rock ‘n roll—as a representation in sound of “sensations or impressions of psychedelic drug experiences.” And with respect to the timbral aspect of this music, he comments how “timbres became warped, distorted, and unfixed,” as exemplified, for instance, by the use of “fuzz and wah-wah pedals,” of “organs with rotating speakers,” or of “tape loops and guitar[s] played backwards.” (Cohen, 2013) Finally, in a clear reference to the centrality of timbre to this style of music, iconic legend John Lennon himself described his (and others’) psychedelic experiments as fundamentally consisting of “looking for new sounds and ways to distort existing ones.” (cited in Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p.120)

Still other typologies of psychedelic soundscapes tend to insist on the same elements of timbre and form, though perhaps generalizable to ideas of sound quality and musical temporality. At the same time, particular treatments of these elements tend to imply ideas of irregularity, circularity, fuzziness, and/or colorfulness. In his comprehensive study of Anglo psychedelic rock from the 1960s to the 1990s, Jim DeRogatis (1996) lists some musical techniques that, in his view, are responsible for sonically evoking the nature of psychedelic experiences. He mentions things such as “circular, mandala-like songs [form/time]; sustained or droning melodies [circular time], altered and effected instrumental sounds [timbre]; reverb, echoes, and tape delays that create a sense of space [circular time], and layered mixes [implying again an idea of space] that reward repeated listening by revealing new and mysterious elements [time]” (DeRogatis, 1996, p. 10; emphasis added). Whiteley’s list includes “the manipulation of timbres (blurred, bright, overlapping), upward movement (and its comparison with psychedelic flight), harmonies (lurching, oscillating [circular time]), [and] rhythms (regular, irregular)” (2003, p. 12). Reising and LeBlanc, on the other hand, provide us with a slightly more abstract (perhaps more psychedelic?) description of the psychedelic sound world, in which an intricate, synesthetic, relation between the aural and visual dimensions of the human experience seems to be essential. Yet the allusion to timbre and
form/time can still be understood as implied. In their depiction, audiovisual features that relate directly to the “LSD trip” or the “psychedelic trance” include “aural synesthesia [sic] in which sounds seem to burst into vibrant colours [achieved through timbral manipulations]; the buzz with which individual sounds seem to blend into pure sonic energy; the wash of sight and sound in which it is difficult to distinguish foreground from background and vice versa, and the elasticity of space and time that expand and contract [idea of circularity].” (2008, p. 106; emphasis added)

But not only general typologies of the psychedelic sound world point to ideas related to (oftentimes circular) time, form and/or timbre. Many specific readings of albums, songs or fragments of psychedelic rock within the scholarly literature likewise allude to these elements of the musical discourse. Ian MacDonald comments, for instance, how Sgt. Pepper’s “sound—in particular its use of various forms of echo and reverb—remains the most authentic aural simulation of the psychedelic experience ever created.” (cited in Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, 106; p. emphasis added) Reising and LeBlanc cite a cataloguer of psychedelic music who likewise describes this album as “literally emanat[ing] drugs,” due, in part, to its “complex and aurally stirring music.” (p. 106; emphasis added) Speaking of “Lucy” in particular, MacDonald describes it as circling “lazily on melodic eddies in an iridescent stream of sound.” (p. 107; emphasis added) Moore, on the other hand, speaks about the “cooked sound of the electric organ” that provides this song with its dominant psychedelic atmosphere. (Moore, 1997, p. 85)

With regards to the song “Within You Without You,” included in the same album, Reising and LeBlanc comment how the use of Eastern instrumentation—i.e., its exotic timbral configuration—makes it sound “otherworldly” and transcendent. Implicitly signaling an element of temporal circularity and formal irregularity, they underscore its “lazy metre,” which “wanders into and out of ¾, 4/4, and 5/4 throughout the piece.” They furthermore relate the drone of the tambura used in the song with “the energy with which all things animate and inanimate seem to buzz during a psychedelic session.” (Idem; emphasis added) And, to round it all, they also speak of the “bends and swerves of the dilruba,” and the “shifting metres of the piece [that] destabilize regular, everyday tempo and introduce a drifting timelessness into the

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158 The authors also underscore the use of certain timbres within the psychedelic musical language, specifically in relation to the psychedelic notion of spiritual revelation: “psychedelic rock has used alarm clocks, chimes, bells, effects of clocks ticking and other effects to signal…psychedelic awakenings [of consciousness].” (Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 111)
composition.” (Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, pp; emphasis added) Other readings by the same authors that tend to revolve around similar aspects include an account about “Lovely Rita,” by The Beatles, in which they highlight the “pianos heavy with echo [time and timbre], subtle sound effects nearly buried in the extensive instrumental and vocal layering [timbre], sped-up vocals [time], and the 33-second jam with which the song concludes, awash with psychedelic buzz [time/form].” (p. 117; emphasis added) Finally, speaking of “A Day in the Life,” they write how “the electronic echoing and distancing effects [time/timbre] serve to expand the musical space of the piece, and the quickened and stumbling metre of McCartney’s segment . . . create a sense of both expanding and contracting time.” (p. 119; emphasis added)

What, in sum, can we say about sonic psychedelia judging from these accounts? Expansion and contraction, elasticity, blur, buzzing, bending, swerving, drifting, stirring, lurching, oscillating, iridescent, colorful, bright, eddies, echoes, delays, reverbs: a myriad of terms, anyway, that show a clear tendency towards verbally describing sonic psychedelia in terms of a particular treatment of the timbral and temporal dimensions of the musical discourse. In synthesis, we find that an idea of colorfulness is pervasive with respect to timbre, and that ideas of circularity or irregularity (plus perhaps some times arbitrariness) are pervasive with respect to time. Globally speaking, moreover, there’s a tendency in these readings to imply the eventual emergence of musical saturation, wherein distinct dimensions tend to blur and unite in one “psychedelic wash.” To use two particular terms from one of the above-cited hermeneutic readings, psychedelic music tends to resemble an “iridescent eddy,” i.e., a circular movement of sounds that are counter to a main current and cause a small whirlpool, and which project luminous colors that seem to change when heard from different angles. Hermeneutic rubbish, one might think. Or maybe less

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159 In particular, the authors refer to the sitars and sitar-like sounds as “psychedelically rich and evocative,” which begs the question of why would sitar or sitar-like sounds be considered “psychedelically rich.” (Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 105) There appears to be in this remark a (not so) veiled relationship between a particular imaginary of psychedelia and exotic sounds. Is this bias author-specific? Or might it be coded somehow in more collective imaginaries of psychedelia, which end up spilling into homologies between its primordial ideals and its sonic symbols? It appears from this reading that there is a conventionalized association between psychedelia and the use of sounds that are conventionally associated with a certain cultural and geographical landscape (in this case India). More than a sonic equivalent of psychedelia, the rationale between this association might have more to do with an alternative reading of life; an homology, in other words, between an alternative path and a foreign culture. Accordingly, in their account of “Within You Without You,” Reising and LeBlanc straightforwardly assert that the reliance of the song on Indian sounds “exemplifies psychedelia’s rejection of many things Western in favour of what it saw as the exoticism of Eastern spiritual traditions of psychic liberation and transcendence, literatures and soundscapes.” (p. 109)
stingly, one might notice that such a verbal depiction is too abstract—or, on the contrary, perhaps too specific—to be useful in any significant way.

As expressed above, though, my interest here is not to investigate the essential validity of any of these readings. I am not interested, in other words, in seeking the true meaning of what psychedelic music ought to be or sound like. There are various epistemological and methodological pitfalls surrounding such a question (even more so than those surrounding musical hermeneutics in general, I think). Consider, for instance, the following reflection by musicologists Richard Middleton and John Muncie about the problems revolving around descriptions of psychedelic music:

> Psychedelic elements in musical style are typically interpreted as such by reference to a sub-culture of drug usage; in other words, they are defined in this way primarily because hippies said they should be. A whole group of connotations, arising from our knowledge of the drug culture, then settles on the music. But this culture has already been defined in this way partially because of the existence in it of this particular kind of music. The meaning of drug usage is affected by the meaning of the associated music… The system is perfectly structured internally…but has no necessary purchase on it from without.”

(cited in Whiteley, 2003, pp. 15-16)

Here, Middleton and Muncie essentially posit a chicken-and-egg scenario regarding psychedelic culture and its associated music. They signal a fundamental problem of circularity in possible interpretations of psychedelic music. As stated above, most of these interpretations assume that the nature of psychedelic musical expressions could result either from a correspondence between the creator’s actual psychedelic experience during the creative act and the musical creation per se (i.e., the song), or from what the creator imagines (or recalls) this type of experiences to be. They could be, in other words, the unmediated musical expression of an actual psychedelic state of mind, or the mediated representation of an imagined psychedelic state of mind. Yet this type of homological view of the phenomenon does not take into account the cultural feedback that nurtures it. As Middleton and Muncie
aver, descriptions of this music are based upon the workings of a drug culture, whose definition
nevertheless partially derives from the music itself (talk about psychedelic circularity!).\textsuperscript{160}

Now, a \textit{topical} approach to the issue, conceived of in terms of Eco’s cultural codes, tends to
minimize this problem; for what matters here is not necessarily the origin, or process of construction, of a
given code, but simply the fact that it exists. In this sense, my findings about the (mostly) scholarly verbal
construction of a “sonic” psychedelia serve to preliminarily describe a culturally constructed sonic code,
one which precisely associates certain sonic phenomena with an at least \textit{proto}-topical notion of
psychedelia. Synthetically put, the expression plane (i.e., set of signifiers) of such a sonic code would
consist of the following elements (in practice, usually combined in various ways):

1. A certain universe of particular musical timbres, fabricated by either textural or
   technological effects (or both).

2. A particular (oftentimes effect-driven) treatment of the overall temporal dimension of
   music (e.g., artificial delay effects), whereby a perception of a particular kind of circularity
   (in some cases) or irregularity (in others) is usually achieved.

3. A particular treatment of the formal dimension of music, whereby a perception of
   irregularity, randomness, arbitrariness, and/or individual-type of bursts is usually
   achieved, judged with respect to normative formal prototypes (whether popular or

\textsuperscript{160} Consider, for instance, Whiteley’s position, according to which psychedelic rock music “suggests that
there was a homology between musical and cultural characteristics” (Whiteley, 2003, p. 4; emphasis
added). She sets out to argue, in other words, that “different styles of progressive rock have common
codes which convey a musical equivalent of hallucinogenic experience” (p. 12; emphasis added). Taking
into account Middleton and Muncie’s warning, the argument behind this sort of “romantic” vision of
psychedelic music is quite problematic. Moore (YEAR) is, for instance, quite critical of Whiteley’s reading,
accusing her of ultimately being a fan dressed up as musicologist. Moore considers Whiteley’s reading of
psychedelic sounds as straightforward sonic imprints of both psychedelic experiences and psychedelia’s
philosophical spirit to be uncritical. For Moore, her observations seem to be inspired more by her desire to
make her experience as a fan fit into a formal discourse than by a thorough and critical investigation of
the problem. One can similarly criticize Reising and LeBlanc’s “romantic” view of Beatles’ psychedelia.
Take, for instance, the following comment about \textit{Sgt. Pepper}: “It would be difficult indeed to find a greater
account of the flourishing of the imagination under the influence of psychedelic substances.” (Reising and
LeBlanc, 2008, p. 106) Rather than a balanced scholarly observation, this remark resembles instead the
type of commentary one might find in an album review, included in a popular periodic publication such as
a magazine or newspaper. In a similar vein, these authors seem to be particularly enthusiastic with
respect to the importance of psychedelic rock in the history of late twentieth-century popular music,
stating that “psychedelic music enacted the most significant revolution within popular culture and
produced some of its most brilliant and most influential musical artefacts, both in terms of their enduring
appeal and of their influence on subsequent musical evolution.” (p. 107)
4. The occasional emergence of a particular kind of textural saturation, usually achieved by means of a combination of the first three elements.

5. A particularly bizarre (usually syntactical) treatment of the music’s harmonic and tonal dimensions that is abnormal with respect to the tonal grammar of Classical Western music.\textsuperscript{161}

Having briefly discussed the universe of ideas revolving around psychedelia, including its spiritual and political overtones and part of its expressive mechanisms—and having also roughly established the sonic imagery that constitutes the cultural code “psychedelic music,” according to a series of scholarly commentary on the matter—it is now time to consider the why’s and how’s of the use of such family of words within the world of Rolo ET. While the consideration of an essentially extra-musical sense of this use is in order (i.e., a use in which what stands out are the political or spiritual aspects that are nowadays conventionally-associated with psychedelia), the next section will also seek to explore whether a musical sense can also be said to fuel the association, all the time taking in to account the opinions of some of the protagonists of the Rolo tropidelical movement. As we shall see, both musical and extra-musical components of Rolo ET support the appearance of the terminology in association with the movement on the one hand, and the reinforcement, yet also fine-tuning, of the Ecoian (proto)code of “psychedelia” on the other. Finally, although primarily as a complementary phenomenon, the next section will also preliminarily examine the so called “alien” or “extraterrestrial” facet of this tropical psychedelia, from a musical perspective. What, then, does this provocative appellative of “alien psychedelia” mean?

V. Psychedelia in ROLO ET: debate and analysis

\textsuperscript{161} An iconic example of a practical instance of this code would be “Within You Without You” by The Beatles, which is, according to Reising and LeBlanc, “a song whose lyrics, timbres, rhythms and tonalities constitute almost a dictionary of psychedelic imagery.” (Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 104)
“Meridian Brothers and Los Pirañas take tropical and traditional music—especially salsa and cumbia—to a new dimension of *psychedelia* and *experimentation*, with an *irreverent message.*” (García, 2014; emphasis added, TBA [Meridian/Pirañas])

“A sonic sensibility based on the meeting of psychedelic rock and folkloric explorations with more traditional strains of Colombian pop.” (Mmonatau n.d. [Salvadora Robot by Meridian])

According to the site Jenesaispop,¹⁶² “If The Residents had been born in Colombia they would be called Meridian Brothers.” (cited in Adad, 2015; TBA)

“they start with the music and bang!, the brain starts to feel vertigo, trying to seek an answer to what they play, while the body unconsciously dances in reverse, and the eyes splash out of their orbits.”

(Adad, 2015; TBA [Meridian])

Interestingly, there seem to be no explicit remarks from people involved in the production of the music regarding the psychedelic nature of its sounds. I had this point in mind when I recently had the chance to sit down and have a conversation with Rolo ET musicians about, among other things, the common association by journalists and fans of “psychedelia” with Rolo ET. To my suggestion that—even though there seem to be no overt remarks from those involved in the production of the music—maybe there have been intimate moments in which they thought to themselves “Wow! This music I’m making is really psychedelic!”, Eblis Álvarez, composer and contributor to various so-called “tropidelical” projects, immediately and bluntly replied: “never.” To the same question, Santiago Botero—leading composer and producer of the two music volumes titled *El Ombligo* and subtitled *Canción Psicotrópica y Jaleo*—similarly (though more reflectively) replied: “I honestly have never been identified with the term ‘psychedelia.’ If I use it in my records, it’s due more to a question of the sound of the word itself… And also, if you think of ‘psicotrópica,’ which includes the ‘tropical’ theme, well, you know… But as far as the music is concerned, I’ve never thought of it as particularly ‘psychedelic,’ no.” (Botero, TroPs, 2016; emphasis added)

Álvarez’s and Botero’s remarks contrast with commentary in the electronic media, both by journalists and internet users, in which characterizations of this music tend to allude to the psychedelic theme. In more than a few Youtube clips of the repertoire, anonymous commentators of the public forum respond to particular video clips highlighting the apparent psychedelic quality of the experience.

Comments on the Youtube clip of the song “Monstruo Prometedor” by Los Piráñas, for instance, include remarks such as “good mixture of sounds, very psychedelic,” “psychedelically sensational,” or just simply, “acid.” Apart from “avant-garde and playful,” Natasha Mmonatau, music journalist and reviewer of albums for afropop.org, interestingly describes the sound world of Meridian Brothers as fundamentally a “psychedelic soundscape of fear and fancy.” (Mmonatau n.d.) Similarly, entertainment journalist Chucky García contributes to the association between this music and psychedelia, by presenting netizens with a compilation of songs by Álvarez he calls “Cancionero Psicodélico” (“Psychedelic Songbook”). (García, 2014) And other comments, though not straightforwardly using the word “psychedelia” or “acid,” can be thought to allude to the theme by commonly describing the experience revolving around this music as having a particular effect on the brain or the mind (e.g., “a brain blowout”), or as being particularly colorful (e.g., “music filled with sounds that transport color”).

How might one explain the use of the term “psychedelia” or “psychedelic” in verbal descriptions, categorizations, or even titles of these various musical projects? How do the artists involved feel about that characterization? Is the psychedelic facet of those projects the result of a personal, more intimate, search, of which the music is one particular expression? Or is it quite straightforwardly a musical (i.e., aesthetic or artistic) search? May it derive from a commercial strategy deployed by one or various of the agents of the productive chain—e.g., musicians, visual artists, producers, etc.? Or is the use of the term strategically employed by one or various of the agents of the receptive chain—e.g., critics, journalists, etc.? Is the origin of this denomination, perhaps, a perception of the audience, in such a way that maybe

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163 All comments are my translations. The respective original comments read as follows: “buena mezcla de sonidos, muy sicodélico [sic]” by commentator Jorge Beltrán; “sicodelicamente sensacional [sic]” by commentator Antonio Totto; “acid” by commentator Nicole Campo. The material may be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVn2K0wK9d4.

164 Both Mmonatau and García include psychedelia in their descriptions of the musical style of these bands. Garcia, for instance, writes: “Meridian Brothers and Los Pirañas take tropical and traditional music . . . to a new dimension of psychedelia and experimentation, with an irreverent message.” (García, 2014; emphasis added, TBA) And Mmonatau likewise comments how Meridian Brothers presents “a sonic sensibility based on the meeting of psychedelic rock and folkloric explorations with more traditional strains of Colombian pop.” (Mmonatau n.d.; emphasis added)
a first, anonymous description of a given song using such terminology started to grow virally, until it became naturalized and understood as a fundamental constitutive element of these musical projects? Parting from the point of view of some of the protagonists of the Rolo tropidelical movement, in the following sections I will consider various possible explanations for the emergence of the association between psychedelia and the studied repertoire.

**Protagonists’ thoughts on Psychedelia**

Álvarez is quite critical of the way in which the term “psychedelia” is habitually used these days. “Nowadays it’s a very innocent term,” he comments. “It’s a term used by people who only now are approaching a certain musical style, and they say: ‘oh, look, your music is very psychedelic.’” (Álvarez, TroPs, 2016; emphasis in the original) The evident ironic tone of this remark speaks of his frustration at what he finds is a very shallow understanding of the word. Add that this shallow conception is being used to characterize his own music, and the frustration starts bordering on plain anger. Perhaps this is the reason why Álvarez prefers to fully dismiss the term, pointing out that it is “oversaturated [and] losing its validity, to the point that it currently [inhabits] a hyper-superficial territory.”165 (Idem; emphasis added)

Álvarez’s apocalyptic vision is somewhat moderated by Galeano’s more pragmatic point of view. While Galeano agrees that the current use of the term tends to be uninformed and shallow, he sees it deriving from a highly stereotypical association between the term and certain subject positions that originated in the countercultural ambience of the 1960s. For Galeano, psychedelia is a term “that denotes that counter-culture, that alternative ‘thing.’” And so, for him, certain (usually alternative) musical media seek to constantly exploit this now-automatic link for publicity purposes, this way constantly reinforcing the stereotypical and superficial components of the association: “it’s very typical, for instance, for media like Vice166—which always seek to include oddities in the mix—to use such words, which will always be

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165 Álvarez’s adjectival use of the term “hyper-superficial” uncannily resembles certain critiques or characterizations of postmodern culture (see, for instance, Braudillard ([1981] 1994)).
166 According to its website, Vice was founded in 1994, as a monthly print publication, in Montreal, Canada, and is now “a global medium for youth that includes a magazine, events, music, online, television and documentaries, operating in more than 30 countries worldwide.”
associated with a hippie, with the scruffy guy, with the pothead, or with that alternative 'thing.'” As a spontaneous response to Galeano’s comment, Álvarez ironically affirms that, in the end, that’s precisely the type of subject one wants to become (a hippie, a scruffy guy, a pothead). Even if intended as a joke, Álvarez’s response serves to ironically underscore the commercial motive behind the stereotypical usage of the term by certain media: you are young, you are alternative, you want to express this alternativity, ergo you want to consume this music. So, in the end, more (or perhaps less) than an oversaturated concept that speaks of a hyper-superficial world, for Galeano the term “psychedelia” nowadays tends to be used simplistically as a cliché of alternativity for publicity purposes.

Botero tends to agree with Galeano, albeit recognizing that musicians themselves often contribute to the stabilization of a given term in relation to a given musical practice or language. In Botero’s view, this contribution normally appears only after certain circles of reception have begun using the tag. For Botero, the use of tags to describe musical practices is, in principle, “a question of marketing, by journalists [and/or] musicologists; they say: ‘your music is this.’” (Botero, TroPs, 2016) Citing jazz as an example, Botero explains how most tags appear first in reception, yet musicians end up adopting the term for what he considers are reasons of survival: “you have to survive in your musical circle, be able to sell yourself. In the long run, you want to survive doing what you do, so you start playing the game: saying ‘yes,’ and making reference to what others say your music is, using the terminology. So you end up adopting that term. And a snowball is generated, and it grows and grows and grows.” (Idem) Botero sees the birth of musical “genres,” “movements,” or “currents” arising from this dynamic, which then, in retrospective, allows for people to say things like: “oh, yeah, this is what happened at this or that time.” (Idem) Yet he is keen to emphasize that when people make music with a real creative impulse, they oftentimes don’t really know what they’re actually doing, at least in terms of tags. In the case of his so-called “psychetropical” music, for instance, he comments: “I never said ‘hey, I’m gonna make this band or this project about psychedelic songs.’ No, that wasn’t the case.” (Idem) Even so, the subtitle of two of Botero’s albums ended up being Canción Psicotrópica y Jaleo (Psychetropical Song and Jaleo167), and so

167 Note how, in the case of term “Jaleo,” which really doesn’t have any good alternative translation, the universe of ideas associated with it is quite nebulous and indeterminate. In my experience, and after asking about its meaning, there’s really no consensus around the issue. In Eco’s terms, contrary to what
this way, his contribution to the association between his music and “psychedelia”—however one wants to understand it—became evident.

If Botero underscores the ideal, tag-free, nature of musical creation, Álvarez sees the current adoption and mixed use of musical tags, precisely as a sign of the *declination* of real musical innovation.

Even if, in theory, nothing ever comes “out of the blue,” Álvarez finds that—contrary to what happens nowadays—in the past *new* music used to emerge more often. For Álvarez, we now find ourselves in a “cultural vortex,” in which—musically speaking—“globalization” has come to mean “something like a mixture of everything with everything,” not many of those things being really “new.” In this regard, he comments: “nowadays, I think that the end of the hour has come, in the sense that it is now very difficult for a new city to appear, isolated from that global environment, wherein a new style can be created. So now everybody takes things, from Elvis Presley to The Knife, and mixes it all to eventually make something that is thought to be new, but it isn’t.” (Álvarez, TroPs, 2016) Álvarez blames the possibility of immediately accessing information for this decline in creativity. “Globalization has caused imagination to be constrained,” he argues, adding that “the moment you have an immediate ocular reference—and when I say ocular I’m referring to something like watching, that is, information that enters immediately—[the] small step between imagination and the established, disparate freedom of the brain is lost.” Seen in this light, the use of tags such as psychedelia is alternatively understood as a commercial strategy of *newness*: a way of masking a supposed current decline of creativity. “So nowadays everybody says ‘psychedelia,’ ‘groovy,’ ‘jazzy,’ ‘jam,’” says Álvarez, “and they grab those tags and mix them, with the hope of creating another new product,” which serves the music industry quite well in their ultimate

*In this regard, Álvarez comments as follows:* “I’ve always been very interested in how imagination works, with regards to the creation of something ‘new’ [Álvarez’s scare quotes]. And yes, everybody says that no one can create anything from nothing. But, in fact, there used to be new things—that is, rock ’n roll was something new, psychedelic music itself was something new, free jazz was something new. But, at the time, they were the product of someone being isolated or in a sufficiently small environment; [someone] who had access to the few available information at hand and all the crazy [*disparatadas*] connections of his/her own mind… It was something that was barely ocular, something very internal, in which a crazy idea is mixed with a familiar image to create something new, combined with a personality factor. I don’t know, right now Ornette Coleman comes to mind: someone with a particular personality, a limited information within his own environment… at this time there was television, radio, the jazz circles and schools… But it wasn’t like nowadays, where you can simply click on anything and see what’s going on in Japan, the last Berlinesese hit, or the last from Frente Cumbiero.” (TroPs 2016; TBA)
purpose of selling. In this view, then, tags replace content. They are no more than just vacuous
“templates journalists have,” which are then repeated “like a tsunami.”

At first view, then, according to some of the protagonists of the studied repertoire, the use of the
word “psychedelia” would appear to have no bearing on the real significance or content of this music.
Rather, what would here explain the usage of the term is a timely commercial appropriation of the word
by certain media, added to a subsequent snowballing repetition of the word in association with this
musical movement. Furthermore, the success of the commercial strategy—i.e., the reason why the term
“caught on,” so to speak—would be due to a combination of the attractive sonic quality and universality of
the word,¹⁶⁹ and its nowadays-shallow, yet highly appealing, allusions to a watered down and
commercially coopted idea of alternativity. On the other hand, more academically-oriented commentary,
like the present one, would also be contributing to the stabilization of the tag with respect to the
repertoire, as has happened before with other musical genres whose tags are now “set in stone.”

However, other “between-the-lines” comments by the same protagonists strongly suggest that
there are other elements—both musical and philosophical—that might justify the association, and might
have therefore helped trigger the commercial (and academic) “tsunami” that has led to the description of
the movement as “psychedelic.” Álvarez, for instance, acknowledges that yes, he was in fact “influenced
by a series of musics that could be considered ‘psychedelic,’” and—sonically speaking—“that’s where a
connecting bridge exists.” He adds that, coincidentally, “it just so happened” that his “scientific"
experiments with electronic music “started to sound ‘psychedelic.’” (Álvarez, TroPs, 2016) Two related
implications arise from this observation. First, we see an acknowledgement by Álvarez that—beyond the
shallow understanding of “psychedelia” that is promoted by today’s music industry—there is, in fact, a
sonic psychedelia. But more importantly, we notice an acknowledgment that his music can be perceived
as in fact sounding “psychedelic”; in other words, that despite today’s perhaps improper use of the term, a

¹⁶⁹ In this regard, Galeano’s comments are quite eloquent. According to him, Rolo Tropidelia is partly
described this way because people seek to “attach a striking word to it.” He believes the word is
“attractive to everybody.” He comments how already in the 1960s, even artists of Colombian tropical
music like Michi Sarmiento—who had no profound link to the philosophical underpinnings of Californian
psychedelia—had songs about psychedelia. Galeano, a devoted audiophile of Latin American tropical
repertoire, says that the psychedelic theme begins to be pervasive almost immediately: “we’re gonna
listen to the theme of psychedelia in vallenato, cumbia, reggae, rock ‘n roll, in all type of ambiances.” He
then adds that this proliferation of the word soon renders it one of the most well known terms around the
world and within all social spheres: “practically any person—a person, for example, from the rural areas, a
peasant—recognizes the term ‘psychedelia.’ It’s a word used by everybody.” (Galeano, TroPs, 2016)
properly understood musical “psychedelia” can in fact be traced in this repertoire. In what follows, then, I will address and discuss the possible musical connections that exist between Rolo ET and the general idea of psychedelia, both from the perspective of some of the protagonists of the movement, and as they are sonically expressed in this body of music.

Sonic Psychedelia in Rolo ET

With respect to the musical (i.e., exclusively sonic) elements that may be contributing to reinforce the association between psychedelia and Rolo ET, one can recognize two broad musical realms in which this sonic connection is particularly evident. The first one relates to the particular sonic quality of the involved musical sounds, i.e., what is generally known as musical timbre; and the second one relates to a particular treatment of time, both in terms of local rhythmic organization and of more general formal approaches. The location of “psychedelic” musical elements within these realms is by no means a surprise, for, as previously discussed, discursive rationalization of sonic psychedelia tends to focus on sonic expressions (or representations) of a particular experience of space and time, allegedly derived from the consumption of certain hallucinogenic substances. In other words, certain musical treatments of timbre, time, and form in the studied repertoire can be understood as particular expressions (i.e., tokens) of some of the set of signifiers of the code “psychedelic music,” as previously defined (see above).

Timbre

All interviewed participants of the Rolo tropidelical movement seem to easily find timbral commonalities between their own music and the Anglo Saxon psychedelic music of yore.¹⁷⁰ As discussed above—whether in fact as an attempt to sonically depict a psychedelic experience, or as a process of conventionalization by association—particular musical timbres seem to be understood as quintessentially

¹⁷⁰ My use of the word “yore” in this context is not arbitrary or merely poetic. On the contrary, as is also the case with the particular tropical intermusical world found in the repertoire, the choice of certain timbres to a certain extent points nostalgically to both the sonic and ideological ambience of 1960s progressive rock.
psychedelic, at least as far as their origins are concerned. Comments by Galeano et al. appear to reinforce these (by now conventional) associations. Galeano himself, for instance, comments how this musical style “contains some musical elements with which psychedelic rock explored a lot.” Such elements include “certain organ or synthesizer timbres, certain electric guitar sounds, the length of the songs, recording techniques, the use of delay, [and] the use of reverberation,” all of which are, in Galeano’s words, “very much present in what [they] do.” (Galeano, TroPs, 2016) Likewise, Botero mentions similar elements that are present in his own music, such as “the use of reverberation(s), delay(s), the organ, vibrato, [and attempts] at disfiguring sound.” (Botero, TroPs, 2016)

Noteworthy here is Botero’s use of the word “disfiguration.” Álvarez speaks similarly of the particular way in which “the vibrato of the organs [of the 1960s] blurred the sound,” something that is referenced and imitated pervasively in the Rolo tropidelical style. (Álvarez, TroPs, 2016) Both the terms “blurring” and “disfiguration” resonate with the understanding of musical psychedelia as a transgression of the sonic parental culture of the West, and tend to appear frequently in descriptions of psychedelic rock (see above). At the same time, though—beyond the idea of a sonic cultural horizon against which a transgression is proposed—the idea of “blurring” or “disfiguring” sound might seek to mimic the psychedelic experience, in which there emerges a “blurred” or “disfigured” sense of reality. In this respect, Álvarez reminds us that timbral effects reminiscent of 1960s psychedelia (particularly delay and reverb) are fundamentally spatial effects, i.e., “effects that give us an artificial sensation of space.” (Idem) Yet in the first psychedelic artistic circles, this “artificiality” might have been seen to correspond to the psychedelic sensation of space, wherein a constant spatial vibration is perceived. This spatial quivering, then, is sonically expressed through an artificial reinforcement or distortion of the natural acoustic vibration that is produced by the reverberation of sound waves within any given space. In this sense, an amplification of the natural acoustic phenomena of delay and reverberation would be analogous to an amplification of the visual vibration of space that is experienced through the use of hallucinogenic substances. And by extension, a particularly insistent use of such spatial effects in a certain musical style—which in the end are perceived also as timbral qualities of the music—would tend to render that style sonically psychedelic. Or would it?
In theory, a consistent use by a musical style of certain musical elements that are typical of a previous musical style would generate an unequivocal association between the two. Yet as Reising and LeBlanc (2008) warn, the appearance of certain sound effects such as delay, reverberation, or distortion—which at the time of their emergence were quite particular and stylistically situated—is now much more pervasive, and thus less stylistically specific. An automatic association between these effects and musical psychedelia, added to the pervasiveness of their use nowadays, would imply calling myriad of current popular music styles “psychedelic,” which is obviously not the case.\textsuperscript{171} What stands out in the case of Rolo ET is the insistent and foregrounded use of such timbral and spatial effects. Moreover, the inclusion of particular old (i.e., 1960s or 1970s) organ timbres and vibrato, in addition to the now generalized delay and reverberation effects, creates a particular timbral cocktail that seems to be more intimately related to 1960s rock than other current popular repertoires.

Table 1 shows a list of some Rolo ET musical pieces and the types of instrumentation and effects they use. While obviously not covering the totality of the pieces produced under the umbrella of what I here have called Rolo ET, the list serves to exemplify the pervasive and particular use of certain musical elements belonging to the musical category of timbre, which were originally a trademark of psychedelic music of the 1960s, and whose use is highlighted by the protagonists of Rolo ET themselves, in relation to characterizations of their music as “psychedelic.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meridian</th>
<th>Electric Guitar(s)</th>
<th>Vintage / “Cooke’d” Organ(s)</th>
<th>Delay(s)</th>
<th>Reverb(s)</th>
<th>Tremolo(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Dinamita”</td>
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<td>XXX</td>
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<td>“El Gran Pajar de Los Andes”</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Guaracha U.F.O”</td>
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<td>XXX</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Salsa Caliente”</td>
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\textsuperscript{171} Reising and LeBlanc’s original warning is as follows: “with today’s recording techniques and the widespread, routine use of synthesized sounds, a great deal of twenty-first-century pop music could be construed in some way as psychedelic. This was not the case in 1967, however, in an era when four-track recording techniques and the association of ‘flower power’ and colourful imagery with LSD and other spiritual intoxicants were commonplace.” (Reising and LeBlanc 2008, 107)
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<tr>
<th>Frente(^{172})</th>
<th>“Cumbietiope”</th>
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<td>“Pitchito”</td>
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<td>“Analógica”</td>
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<td>“Aguanegra”</td>
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<td>“Ananas Tornillo”</td>
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<td>“Chucussteady”</td>
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<td>Pirañas</td>
<td>“Sir de Gusano”</td>
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<td>“Hueles a Espíritu Jóven”</td>
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<td>“Monstruo Prometedor”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romperayo</td>
<td>“Que viva la vida y que muera la muerte”</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Alegría por un zumo de naranja”(^{173})</td>
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<tr>
<td>“En tu cara y con bonche”</td>
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<td>“Vol. 5”</td>
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<td>“Reb”</td>
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<td>“Animal Pequeño El”</td>
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<td>“Afanosa La”</td>
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Table 1. “Psychedelic” instrumentation and effects in Rolo ET’s music\(^{174}\)

**Time Circularity and Displacement**

As mentioned in the previous section, musical effects that were systematically exploited by psychedelic rock such as delay and reverberation are fundamentally related to a notion of circular vibration. Though perhaps perceived sometimes as a particular distortion or manipulation of the quality of sound (i.e., as a timbral phenomenon), delay and reverberation effects are artificial temporal manipulations of audio waves or signals, which in turn create a particular sensation of space. In theory, delay could be thought of as a particularly radical instance of the more general phenomenon of reverberation, which can be defined simply as the rebound of audio waves against (mostly solid) matter within a given environment. Depending on the topographic characteristics of that environment and the

\(^{172}\) If the piece has also “dub” version, the latter will usually include additional reverb and delay given by the “dubbing” process.

\(^{173}\) Version: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLjVEmRYDAo

\(^{174}\) More than one “X” means either that the effect is particularly strong, or that there are at least two discernible effects of that type.
levels of resonance of the pertinent matter (i.e., the extent to which an audio signal is absorbed or rejected by a given surface), the combination of the various audio rebounds will produce a particular sound ambience. When a given environment's level of resonance is particularly high (i.e., when audio signals tend to significantly rebound against a surface, as opposed to being absorbed), the level of reverberation is also said to be high, and the perception of echo is heightened (as would happen, for instance, inside a big church).

Artificial audio delay effects produce a similar phenomenon. Such an effect occurs when a given audio signal is played back artificially (momentarily or repeatedly), some time after the original signal has been actually produced. In this sense, the artificial “playback” of a signal produced thanks to recording technology conceptually resembles the natural “playback” that occurs when a signal rebounds against a surface in the environment. These delayed playbacks—whether artificial or natural—produce an echo of varying degrees, which depend on the rate of the delay. In any case, the overall consequence of reverberation or delay can be described in terms of circularity: a (controlled or uncontrolled) repetition of an audio signal, for a lapse of time, within a given space (virtual or real).  

While reverberation evokes a sonic experience of a particular spatial configuration (artificial reverberation effects often seek to virtually reproduce a space in the real world—e.g., a chamber, a church, an auditorium), the phenomenon is essentially a temporal one. Without the natural delay produced by the time a given signal has to travel before rebounding on a surface, the complex relations produced by reverberation wouldn’t exist. When resonance is artificially controlled so as to produce slow rates of reverberation (i.e., significant delay of signal reproduction), a particular phenomenon of sound circularity and irregularity starts to emerge. The mixture of the original signal and its subsequent delayed reproductions create an uncanny feeling of circular listening. In a real musical situation, the delayed signals mix with new signals, or, in more colloquial musical terms, old notes mix with newly played notes. Sound tends to blur and a constant sonic deja vu emerges. While such an experience can occur in highly resonant environments like a cathedral, an artificially controlled delay can produce controlled rates of

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175 Both Philip Tagg (2013) and Serge Lacasse (2000, 2005) develop the idea of a virtual sounding space with the upcoming of reproduction and recording techniques, which allows for the artificial fabrication of particular sound ambiances. According to the authors, this resource has proved crucial to the creation of musical meaning in twentieth- and twenty first-century musical productions, since it opens up the possibility of playing with various ambiances at the same time.
repetition, producing effects that are often associated with early psychedelic music. Psychedelic pioneer Art Kleps (who actually lived with psychedelia messiah Leary for periods of time) pointed out, for instance, that "Indian music is perfect for stabilizing a high because it in no way encourages you to notice the passage of time." According to Kleps, this type of musical language produces the sensation that "time has stopped passing and instead is sort of loitering around shooting the shit with space." (cited in Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 109; emphasis added) Like the type of musical language Kleps references, a delay effect can produce a similar hypnotic effect, allegedly bypassing the passage of time, and—in the specific case of an artificial delay effect—incidentally also producing a saturation by repetition. In short, when time is artificially made to "loiter around" incessantly, one may end up listening to the same thing, potentially at varying rates, over and over again, while other audio signals keep emerging from different sources. And while all this happens, the process keeps repeating itself, producing something like a textural snowball.

If for Kleps, a hypnotic musical repetition constitutes a perfect musical match for a hallucinogenic state, the phenomenon of listening to the same thing at different rates and at the same time is, for Álvarez, one of the quintessential sonic depictions of psychedelic experiences. Many pieces and songs by Meridian Brothers, Los Pirañas, Chúpame el Dedo, and even Frente Cumbiero present the listener with polyrhythms that produce precisely this effect. Álvarez explains it this way: "the different parts are all polyrhythms. This is an interest I've had for some years, and I often compose melodies at different speeds and time signatures, but related to a master tempo. This effect actually divides the perception of the music, giving it an unusual effect, like something familiar but moving faster or slower than expected." (Cited in Ableton, 2015; emphasis added) This purely musical interest creates an effect that resembles the micro-offset of delay or reverberation, but now at the level of meter or hypermeter. Álvarez's words, on the other hand, make it quite clear that the appearance of simultaneous difference of speeds or meters in the music is particularly effective because of an expectation: "something familiar," he says, that is slightly "manipulated" temporally so as to "move faster or slower than expected." As we shall see, it is not

\[176\] In this regard, it is interesting to ruminate on the following words by Henri Lefebvre: "modern science suggests that rather than think of space as a container or bodies as 'things' in space, we grasp the organism as a center for the production of space around itself—space is not external to the body but generated by it. . . . Such analysis needs to be completed by a rhythm analysis in which time is then grasped in its spatial form." (Cited in Berland, 1993, p. 35; emphasis added) For detailed information about Kleps's thoughts, see Kleps 1975.
Álvarez’s source of inspiration for the development of his rhythmic system was originally Curupira, an iconic group in the NCM movement that has served as inspiration for many others that have followed its footsteps. According to band’s founder and leader Juan Sebastián Monsalve (NMC, 2015), the classical musical tradition of North India and the music of French composer Olivier Messiaen’s have been fundamental influences in the development of the particular musical processes that drew Álvarez’s attention and are now a trademark of Curupira’s music. Monsalve highlights Messiaen’s use of musical planes, in which each instrument or ensemble of instruments constitutes an independent universe, and the vertical result of the combination of said planes is of secondary importance. What matters composition-wise is rather the simultaneous individual development of each of those planes. “[This] texture of ‘planes’ is one of the textural resources that Curupira uses the most,” says Monsalve, adding that part of the goal of this approach is the generation of complexity within a familiar topical frame of mostly Colombian folk musics. (Monsalve, NMC, 2015)

According to Monsalve, Curupira’s use of this type of texture was perhaps taken to the extreme in their first album Pa’lante pa’trá (2000), but has continued to feature prominently in their subsequent productions. Given the prolific output of the band, examples of this planar logic abound. Yet, for the present purposes, it will be enough to address a few specially representative examples, one of which was particularly inspirational for Álvarez. The pieces “La Arriera” from Pa’lante pa’trá, “El Tropel” from El Fruto (2012) and “La Esquizofonia” from Regenera (2013), are all eloquent examples of the use of metrically independent planes, which are nevertheless coordinated under a master pulse.

In “La Esquizofonia,” for instance, half of the band plays a porro in 4/4 meter, while the other half plays a currulao in 6/8 meter. In this case, the common subdivision corresponds to an eighth note, and a

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177 In many instances, the independent component is not solely related to meter. There are also musical constructions with harmonically and/or tonally independent planes, like for example in “La Esquizofonia,” where, in Monsalve’s words, “each plane has like its own harmonic universe.” (Monsalve, NMC, 2015). In the current discussion, I choose to emphasize the metrical component because of its relation to the temporal manipulations that will characterize Álvarez’s approach.
sort of master pulse appears at the level of the quarter note.\textsuperscript{178} Figure 15 shows the distinct metrical planes that overlap with each other in this song. Functioning in 4/4 meter appears the line of the bass, whose loop returns every two measures. Against this line, part of the percussion ensemble, including the *marimba chonta*, insistently marks the 6/8 rhythmic base that is so characteristic of currulao. The eighth note being the common subdivision, the first pulse of both meters coincide every three 4/4 measures, or—conversely—every four 6/8 measures. But since the binary loop of the bass occurs every two of its measures, the first pulse of both the 6/8 and 4/4 phrases really only coincide every six 4/4 measures (or eight 6/8 measures). During this time, the background metrical and phrasal offset generates a peculiar feeling of circular (i.e., regular) displacement, which—temporarily resolved every few measures—appears anew when the two planes start to go out of phase again. In “La Esquizofonia,” then, the listener confronts two independent musical universes,\textsuperscript{179} which are nevertheless brought to coexist within a slightly uncanny whole.

\textbf{Figure 15. “La Esquizofonia” by Curupira: metrical superposition}

“El Tropel” works in similar fashion. Once more, Curupira superimposes two distinct dances—this time a joropo and a cumbia—whose respective meters are usually understood and written as compound binary and simple binary. The polyrhythmic structure of the piece consists of a melodic theme whose total length is of thirty eighth notes (i.e., five 6/8 measures or a 30/8 hypermeasure), against which a cumbia in 4/4 is superimposed. Consisting of a *llamador*, an *alegre*, and a *maracón*, the cumbia ensemble makes its

\textsuperscript{178} I say “sort of” because in currulao there seems to be an ambiguity with respect to which should be considered the basic pulse: some rhythmic lines appear to stress a 3/4 meter (i.e., a quarter note pulse), while others a 6/8 meter (i.e., a dotted-quarter note pulse).

\textsuperscript{179} This piece is, in fact, also an example of *topically* independent planes, in which two distinct genres from the Colombian Atlantic and Pacific regions are brought to simultaneously coexist. This topical division is what inspires the song’s name, which literally translates as “the schizophonia.”
entrance at the beginning of the third reiteration of the theme. However, this entrance does not correspond to the beginning of the cumbia phrase as such. It is rather a prolonged upbeat that lasts eight eighth notes, for which the cumbia's first beat appears to fall only on the ninth eighth note of the third reiteration of the original theme. A third rhythmic plane, constituted by the bass and the tambora, enters at the outset of the fifth reiteration of the melodic theme, performing loops of fourteen eighth notes (i.e., 14/8 measures!). At this point, the cumbia ensemble is in the middle of one of its 4/4 measures. The first beat of all three planes will theoretically coincide only every 210 eighth notes! Like in “La Esquizofonia,” then, in “El Tropel” Curupira superimposes different rhythmic structures, each one of them corresponding to a “familiar” folk-music universe. While each structure follows its own circular logic, the sonic result seems to uncannily blend them, supposedly under a given master pulse.180

While these two pieces clearly exemplify the idiosyncratic use of Messiaen-esque types of planes in Curupira, it is the earlier “La Arriera” the one that produced a significant impact on Álvarez’s musical imagination. Perhaps with a bit of exaggeration, he claims that “all [of his] musical language comes from that piece. From there I took all my music, my way of composing,” he affirms. (Álvarez, NMC, 2015) What specifically drew Álvarez’s attention was its polyrhythmic construction, which gradually increases as the piece develops. In contrast to the more blatant superposition of outrightly independent musical universes we find in the previously commented pieces, “La Arriera” presents more delicately constructed polyrhythms at its outset. In other words, the planes are not so straightforwardly defined in terms of distinct musical genres (each one with its own metrical configuration), but rather in purely rhythmic terms.

Figure 16 shows a partial transcription of the first twenty-seven measures of the piece, in its original album version.181 Here we can trace the existence of three interrelated, yet rhythmically distinct, planes: the electric guitar plane, the bass and tambora plane, and the maracón/llamador plane. As shown in the example, all planes can be fit to work within the same 4/4 meter. The submission to this meter of the electric guitar and bass lines becomes particularly evident once the percussion ensemble—especially

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180 Theoretically defining a master pulse in any of these polyrhythmic constructions would be, to a certain extent, arbitrary. I believe the “perceived” master pulse (that is, if any is perceived at all) would be dependent on each particular listener. [this not as arbitrary as you make it sound] The question of whether there is, in fact, an experienced “master pulse” in these musical examples, and of what this master pulse would be in musical terms, remains an interesting one to eventually be studied within the field of musical cognition.

181 A recording of the piece can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ7iaUbcTaM.
the llamador and the maracón (m. 19)—enters. This entrance produces a metrical stabilization that is not really found in "La Esquizofonia" or "El Tropel," where the different meters of the distinct genres constantly collide with each other. Yet before this stabilization occurs, the rhythmic play of the—at that point isolated—guitar and bass lines creates a polyrhythmic feel derived from their phrasal construction (i.e., the rates at which their respective loops occur). Right from the start, for instance, the line of the bass presents a 3 + 3 + 2 quarter-note loop. While at its outset the phrasal feel of the guitar line is not quite clear, the more constant reiteration of the guitar’s gestures around m. 12 presents us with a clearer picture in this regard: we also find a 3 + 3 + 2 quarter note loop that is nevertheless not in synchrony with the one that continues to appear in the bass. A few measures later enters the tambora, performing a rhythmic unison with the bass. And precisely at m. 19, the maracón enters establishing the 4/4 cumbia base, against which the out-of-phase (and now-subsumed) 3 + 3 + 2 loops of the other two planes continue their (irregular) march. Finally, shortly after this polyrhythmic base has been established, the gaita enters with the main melodic theme of the piece. This theme in itself also has an irregular loop construction (in this case of 4 + 3 +3 +3 +3 eighth notes), which sounds against the established base.
A decidedly binary cumbia with irregular internal loop phrasings has gradually emerged. And by the time the main theme enters, this cumbia sounds pristine, as if it had thus been established since the beginning. Yet the real polyrhythmic game—the section that caught Álvarez’s attention back in the early 2000s—will appear some time later. At minute 2’01 of the album version begins a sort of interlude, in
which the texture is reduced, and a two-voice polyphonic dialogue commences between the bass and tambora plane and the gaita and guitar plane (see Figure 17). In this interlude there is an acceleration of the melodic line played by the gaita and the guitar that resembles a metric modulation, all against the irregular, yet steady, phrasing of the bass line. This acceleration somewhat anticipates what will happen beginning at minute 2'26. Here, a melodic fragment played again by the gaita and the guitar is twice presented at the ongoing tempo, but soon afterwards the same fragment is played one and a half times faster (quarter note = triplet quarter note), while the cumbia base continues at the original tempo. The melodic fragment then reverts to the original tempo and again back to the accelerated version multiple times, until around minute 3'19, the fragment appears at twice the tempo, the rhythmic base still unaltered. Up to this point, this, say, “flirtation” with different tempi does not succeed at altering the steady cumbia base. But finally, 3'38 minutes into the track, the overall pulse follows the melodic acceleration, and establishes itself at a rate that is one and a half time faster than the original one (i.e., the beat is now a triplet quarter note). At this point, then, the whole ensemble sounds at a new tempo, and the polyrhythmic relationships succumb to the acceleration.
All the sections in which a part of the musical whole (one of Monsalve’s so-called planes) accelerates by itself have something in common. In Álvarez’s terms, “at these moments we feel as if two bands were playing at the same time, one on top of the other one, [but each one of them] at a different pace.” (Álvarez, NMC, 2015) Yet, at least in the case of “La Arriera,” one could say that these different paces are governed by an overall pulse, or, as Álvarez puts it, “there is a common time,…a common temporal axis on top of which different things could sound at different paces.” (Idem) In the end, what captured Álvarez’s attention was the particular musical split that was generated by the use of this type of polyrhythmic constructions. In this regard, Álvarez comments: “one of the concepts that interested me about this piece . . . is the fact of being able to feel two things at the same time [sic]. At the time—[early 2000s]—this was a concept. But during the years 2002 to 2007, I devoted myself to devising a system in which I could create this type of effects, because I realized this had an important consequence to [the act
of] perception. That is, you perceive this thing, and then it appears as though this thing split itself (original: se desdoblara). So you start feeling doubly, something double...” (Idem; emphasis added) Not surprisingly, then, this musical logic—but more importantly, the perceptual effect it seeks—is prominent in many of the more decisively tropidelical pieces of Álvarez’s repertoire. And a similar effect can also be found in other tropidelical pieces in which it appears more in relation to, or as a subproduct of, certain effects (such as particular ornamental uses of delay), than as a conscious compositional approach.

“Monstruo Prometedor”\textsuperscript{182} by Los Pirañas is a particularly eloquent example of Álvarez’s idiosyncratic use of Curupira’s polyrhythmic structures. Released in 2012 as part of the album Toma Tu Jabón Kapax, this electronic chandé\textsuperscript{183} (possibly also understood as partly alluding to the more modern champeta) consists of an irregular juxtaposition of two basic rhythmic-harmonic patterns (A and B), each of them more or less constantly associated with a distinct thematic material. Figure 18 shows the intro and first appearance of the A theme. Here, as in “La Arriera,” the micro phrasing is irregular. The bass plays two basic melodic patterns (a and b), each of them corresponding to one measure. The sequence of these patterns during the eight introductory measures is: a + a + b + a + a + a + b + a (or 2 + 1 + 3 + 1 measures). If in “La Arriera” the original irregular pattern of the bass in the introduction appeared equally throughout the piece (regular irregularity), in “Monstruo,” the sequential design of A-type bass lines varies more or less randomly, enhancing the feeling of familiar unexpectedness (or unexpected familiarity). And while in the B sections, irregular patterning is precluded because of the appearance of only one type of melodic pattern in the bass, more globally, the irregular and random juxtaposition of A and B sections reinforces the feeling of unexpectedness produced locally within the A sections. In other words, the overall formal plan of the piece, which basically consists of irregular juxtapositions of A and B sections, mimics the irregular and apparently random behavior of the bass patterns in the A sections.

\textsuperscript{182} A version of this piece can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVn2K0wK9d4.  
\textsuperscript{183} Afro-Colombian native rhythm from the country’s Caribbean region.
On the other hand, various sections of the piece presents us with Curupira-like polyrhythms, here taken to an arguably un-human dimension. Figures 19 and 20 show rhythmic reductions of portions of two of these excerpts, which start around 2'04 and 3'40 minutes into the piece, respectively. In the first excerpt, which corresponds to an A-type section with a/b bass patterns, a particularly insistent repetition of a descendent melodic cascade is played by the heavily synthesized electric guitar. This gesture is somewhat reminiscent of the first cascade-type gesture that appeared during the first A section (see EC in example 3.X). While up to this point EC has also appeared insistently and irregularly, the rhythmic disposition of this second cascade is visibly much more controlled, so as to produce a meticulously measured displacement with respect to the ongoing rhythmic base. Judging from this description, the similarity with Curupira seems fairly straightforward. Contrary to the Curupira examples, though, the exact measurement of the displacement is not so easily quantifiable. As shown in the example, in traditional notation, the exact place of displacement can only be suggested as being close to one of the beats of the underlying rhythmic base. This way, in the first appearance of the cascade, the second pitch tends to coincide with a first beat; in the second one, the third pitch tends to coincide with a first beat (two measures later); in the third one, the fourth pitch; and so on and so forth. At minute 2’12, the cascade appears eight times in a row, two times faster, generating this way an acceleration similar to the one observed in “La Arriera.”
While the first excerpt shows a more "traditional" polyrhythmic construction, the second excerpt constitutes a really radical instance of micro displacement (whose exact measurement could only be thought of in terms of irrational numbers). This time, the number of planes participating in the various displacements is now four, all of them being variously displaced with respect to the plane of the rhythmic base. Starting around 3’40 minutes into the piece, the first line that appears off phase consists of a repetition of a pitch F. Judged against the rate of the original quarter note, this line is in quarter-note triplets, but played in a tempo that is approximately 10% less than the original one! If played at the original tempo, a note of this line would of course coincide with the first beat of a measure every three attacks. With the slight reduction of tempo applied at this point, the end result is that the triplets are constantly displaced, if ever so slightly. While this displacement continues to occur in systematic fashion, around six measures later a second plane enters displaying the same conduct. Similar to the previously discussed plane, this new plane consists of a constant repetition of a pitch E, in quarter-note triplets,
slowed down in the same proportion. The entrance of this line does not coincide with a new cycle of the first one, and so the F and E planes are not only out of phase with the rhythmic base, but also with each other. A similar third plane enters some time later, over the pitch G#, and with an identical rhythmic behavior. Finally, EC makes its entrance towards the end of this section, with a similar rate of displacement. The polyrhythmic feel of this whole section is quite puzzling: apart from the already described millimetric displacements, the insistent—almost neurotic—repetition of pitches (which, by the way, together create a highly dissonant pitch set) generates a mind blowing musical dizziness. Add that most sounds include high levels of delay effects, and said dizziness threatens to become almost total disarray, any sense of stable rhythmic horizon threatening to collapse.

So what does all these musical polyrhythmic effects have to do with psychedelia anyway? Consider, first, Leary’s description of the peak of a psychedelic session, according to which a subject “experiences direct sensation. The raw ‘is-ness.’ He sees not objects, but patterns of light waves. He hears not “music” or “meaningful” sound, but acoustic waves. He is struck with the sudden revelation that all sensation and perception are based on wave vibrations.” (Leary et al., 1964, p. 61 in Reising and Le Blanc 2008, p. 119; emphasis added) In musical terms, a raw perception of wave vibrations would imply the total collapse of musical “meaning,” i.e., of any sense of system, syntax, and/or structure organizing the sounds. In a psychedelic session, this collapse occurs in the listener, and derives from a special cognitive condition that arises from the consumption of entheogens. Attempting to produce such a phenomenon in purely musical terms—i.e., deriving from the organization (or, in this case, disorganization) of the sounds themselves—requires a very special effort. Extreme rhythmic, tonal, and textural saturation like the one found in “Monstruo” would come close to producing such an effect. As one commentator writes with regards to this music, “they start with the music and bang! the brain starts to feel vertigo, trying to seek an answer to what they play, while the body unconsciously dances in reverse, and the eyes splash out of their orbits.” (Adad, 2015; TBA) Or as Reising and LeBlanc comment with regards to a similar musical situation in “A Day in the Life,” by The Beatles, “the chaotic buzz of the aleatoric gestures threatens to break down all distinctions among musical forms and meaning.” (Idem) Instead in “Monstruo” the displaced gestures are not precisely “aleatoric” (though one might perhaps think so), but rather clinically measured so as to produce an extreme circular saturation.
The reading of this particular fragment, and, more generally speaking, my overall description of this particular treatment of time as possibly relating to psychedelia, admittedly resembles the types of readings about psychedelic rock previously cited. In other words, my own wording of the hypothetical perceptual effects of these phenomena might be conducive to generating a relationship with psychedelia (dizziness, disarray, displacement, mind blowing, etc.), this way falling in the trap of circular interpretation described by Middleton and Muncie above. Yet my point is precisely to show a connection between certain sonic phenomena in Rolo ET, and the code “psychedelic music,” as established precisely by those readings. In other words, certain musical treatments in Rolo ET (like the delay-type displacement being commented) tend to fit, as it were, that discursively constructed code.

But what does Álvarez himself have to say in regards to this possible connection? Is this type of polyrhythms somehow “psychedelic”? First of all, Álvarez did not develop this rhythmic system seeking to sound “psychedelic.” He is quite emphatic in clarifying his intentions (or, in this case, non-intentions). His motivation and interest was purely musical, or compositional, if you will. And this interest was so profound that he scientifically devoted himself to devising a system that is nowadays pervasive in his music. He summarizes it as follows: “parting from a temporal axis, I manage to create two ‘times,’ without needing an arbitrary superposition of two musics (that is, putting that song on top of this other one [like in “La Esquizofonia” or “El Tropel]). Rather, through music theory, I manage to create two ‘times’ at the same time.” (Álvarez, NMC, 2015) When experimenting with potential polyrhythmic structures and with the technology that was necessary to bring them to live, it never crossed his mind that through this systematic theoretical development, his music would end up acquiring a “psychedelic” imprint.

Nowadays, Álvarez does recognize that the perceptual effect brought about by these electronically enhanced polyrhythms could be described as psychedelic, partly because they “create . . . planes of ‘defocusing’ [desenfoque].” This type of polyrhythmic displacements have, in other words, “an important consequence to [the act of] perception,” where things you aurally perceive appear to split themselves and “you start feeling doubly . . . something double.” Or triple or even quadruple, like in “Monstruo.” For Álvarez, it is this type of perceptual effect that explains “many of the characterizations that have been made about Meridian Brothers or Los Pirañas”: what he calls “this supposed psychedelia” (Álvarez NMC 2015; emphasis added).
Because, similar to the blur produced by his polyrhythms, “psychedelia consists of . . . accessing other sensory levels, and often times, the effects of psychoactive drugs are [also] described as a blur.” And so it happened that—although Álvarez got interested in this type of perceptual effects solely from a musical standpoint (and despite not having “consumed drugs, or anything like that”)—when he read “a couple of articles” about psychedelia and its effects, he thought: “‘Oh, of course! Psychedelia!’” (Idem; emphasis added). Of course. For as Dr. Albert Hofmann, discoverer-synthesizer of LSD-25, once wrote, “the true importance of LSD and related hallucinogens lies in their capacity to shift the wavelength setting of the receiving ‘self,’ and thereby to evoke alterations in reality consciousness.” (cited in Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p.107; emphasis added) Indeed, “shifts of wavelength” seems to be an ideal expression for accurately synthesizing the kind of de-phased, insistent, circularity that is so typical of the polyrhythmic constructions presently under discussion. If we think of musical pulse in terms of wavelength, we could say that in these polyrhythms, various musical planes produce slight shifts in the original “wavelength.” These phrasal shifts are, moreover, enhanced by delay effects that produce similar consequences at quantum rhythmic levels. The sum of all these micro, medium, and macro shifts ends up constituting a sort of fractal structure of circular displacements (or, to further pursue the analogy, “wavelength shifts”), which goes from the quantum level of the small reverberations to the medium level of the polyrhythms, and—in the case of “Monstruo”—even to the macrostructural level of the overall form. In this sense, this particular treatment of time in music would constitute a quite eloquent musical depiction of psychedelic experiences. The constant circular and colorful distorted glow of reality reported in such experiences would here be finding a musical analog in the insistent circular and colorful (timbre-wise) polyrhythmic structures like the ones found in “Monstruo.”

Now, before moving onto a brief discussion about formal strategies in some of the studied repertoire and their relation to psychedelic music, one final thought around this idea of time displacement is necessary. For although a band like Curupira also employs polyrhythmic techniques similar to the ones found in Rolo tropidelical repertoire (e.g., Pirañas, Meridian, Frente etc.), Curupira itself is not really described as being particularly “psychedelic.” So what is special about Álvarez’s polyrhythms that makes

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184 His original term here, like at the beginning of the current paragraph, was “desenfoque,” which I previously translated as “defocusing.”
them more “psychedelic”? In examples such as “El Tropel” or “La Esquizofonia,” we saw how the perceived polyrhythms derive from the superimposition of two distinct musical worlds. In these examples, the apparent musical coalescence appears to be forced onto the listener. In reality, one could hypothetically anticipate that in an actual listening experience, a given individual could choose to (consciously or unconsciously) “follow” any one of the given planes. A listener could, in other words, aurally prioritize one of the musical universes, in which case the other ones would constantly be out of phase with respect to the aurally focused one. Assuming that all the topical universes are familiar to a given listener, he or she could be able to eventually change the aural focus at will (or unconsciously), and the “on-phase” and “off-phase” structures would constantly vary. “La Arriera,” on the other hand, is special in that its polyrhythmic structure truly comes from a displacement or “wavelength shift,” if you will. Perhaps this is why Álvarez emphasizes the idea of displacement as fundamental to the particular polyrhythmic structures he seeks. He is able to “create” multiple times (wavelengths) “without needing an arbitrary superposition of two musics,” in other words, without “putting that song on top of this other one,” like happens in “La Esquizofonia” or “El Tropel.” In the end, as Monsalve himself puts it, “some interesting gaps are created between [the various planes].” (Monsalve, NMC, 2015) and, for the listener, the end result could be similar to the one predicted by Álvarez: the perception of something familiar moving faster or slower than expected. In sum, then, we can only talk about a sonic depiction of Hoffman’s alteration of reality when familiar musical objects that have first presented a normative conduct with respect to an original pulse, at some point move out of that original phase.

Formlessness and Improvisation

Botero finds a slightly different link between the sound world of his own project and the psychedelic music of the 1960s. To him, an important contributor to that music’s particular aura was the element of improvisation. “Improvisation as such,” says Botero, “has [an] element in common with the psychedelic movement.” This element is, in his own words, “that freedom of creating whatever, with any given instrument.” Since free improvisation lies at the heart of Botero’s methodology of musical creation,

186 Monsalve here uses the word destases, literally meaning off-phases or de-phases.
part of the sonorous result of his “psychetropical” albums shares this “improvisational aura” with the language of 1960s psychedelia. Furthermore, Botero stresses how in pieces whose main generative method is collective free improvisation, “the language of each of the musicians playing has a lot to do” with the sonic result. In the case of Botero’s music, a psychedelic sonic atmosphere may be deriving from individual contributions to the whole. Such contributions may include, for example, “the use of reverberation(s), delay(s), the organ, vibrato, [attempts] at disfiguring sound.” Yet, in his music, due to its improvisational character, the use of these elements—and by extension, the final sonorous result—is not carefully planned. Botero puts it this way: “when you’re improvising . . . you’re trying to search for your own voice, and find a creative channel that will allow you to arrive at a compositional exercise . . .. Often times you don’t know what [this result] will end up being. But the search for sound [lo sonoro] leads you there.” (Botero, TroPs, 2016) “There,” in this case, is the psychedelic sound world.

In Botero’s psychetropical project, this type of approach certainly yields pieces in which, as stated above in relation to typical features of sonic psychedelia, one finds a particular treatment of the formal dimension of music, whereby a perception of irregularity, randomness, arbitrariness, and/or individual-type of bursts is usually achieved. An eloquent example of such a piece is “Vol. 5” from El Ombligo’s Canción psictrópica y jaleo Vol. 2. As seen in Figure 21, the piece starts with a section whose rhythmic base and feel clearly alludes to cumbia. The piece’s improvisatory feel is clear from the beginning. Harmonically speaking, a hammond-type organ presents a dissonant E-minor based chord with tremolo, and constant, seemingly randoms attacks. Under that chord appears the bass line that presents a pedal on the pitch A. This harmonic configuration (Em/A) already produces a feeling of instability and incompleteness, as if the piece started midway through. After around 6 measures of play around the pitch E, the organ finally presents a glimpse of a melody. This melody turns out to be, however, quite fragmentary. As seen in Chapter 2, all the pieces included in the project El Ombligo are based on the melodic language of cumbia idol Andrés Landero. Accordingly, “Vol. 5”’s initial melodic material is actually a deconstruction of one of Landero’s improvisational-type of melodies, hence its fragmentary feel. Because of its fragmentary nature, the melody never really achieves to become a thematic line; on the contrary, a couple of melodic snippets are juxtaposed in repetitive fashion, contributing to the improvisational aura.
In addition to this initial harmonic and melodic instability, the tempo throughout the whole introductory section fluctuates. The piece starts with a slow tempo (as a cumbia rebajada) and immediately starts to gradually accelerate. The acceleration becomes more prominent once the fragmented melody enters, and ends in a sudden halt that falls on the weak beat of the measure. Immediately after this halt, the cumbia rhythmic base appears once more at *primo tempo*, and the process repeats itself in similar fashion, throughout the different fragments of the initial section. This initial “cumbia” section is divided into three fragments with an A-B-A design, each of which presents similar improvisatory, fragmented characteristics.
Figure 21. “Vol. 5” by El Ombligo, Section A: unstable theme

Figure 22 shows a timeline with a general description of the subsequent events in the piece. The initial section finishes around 0’50 seconds into the recording, after which the music starts a process of gradual disintegration that makes one re-evaluate the initial perception of the first section. In other words,
if the first section had a feel of instability, the whole development following that initial presentation of the materials makes that instability seem fairly stable and, in a sense, thematic. The reprise of the initial section towards the end of the piece, even if brief, consolidates the feeling that, in fact, this unstable atmosphere corresponds to the theme of the piece, the whole piece functioning in the manner of an A-B-A jazz standard. The “real” improvisation actually takes place during the development section B. This improvisation will continue to use fluctuation of tempos, sudden halts, and fragmentary and ductile melodic development. Even if the tempo fluctuates at a local level, the whole section consists of a gradual, but big acceleration. Within this gradual accelerando, musical materials start mutating until around the two-minute mark, the cumbia base disappears in an explosion, giving way to a chaotic section that subtly suggests the emergence of a rock beat. This beat is then decisively confirmed. Suddenly, we are listening to a rock song, and the psychedelic allusion becomes crystal clear.
Figure 22. “Vol. 5” by El Ombligo: Formal Timeline

From 0'00 to 0'50 see Figure 21

0'50 Cumbia rebajada
Cumbia pattern beat reverses, starting visibly on 1'23 onwards

1'45 Disfigureation of melodic harmonic design
Organ is highly dissonant (ineffable, indistinguishable)

2'00 Base explodes into chaos
New beat is subtly suggested... → Rock beat
Intermittent, schizophrenic repetitions
Appears in harmony

2'20 Beat again disappears
Ecstatic playing

2'29 Ascending melody in organ. Repeated E - F♯, A - C♯
Very funny in context

2'36 Totally inarticulate random chords
Free improvisation
Beat disappears individuality

2'47 Silence/general pause
Psychedelic outburst
Meltdown

2'48 Long percussion (snare) upbeats

2'51 Recapitulation

3'10 New theme enters: reminiscent of chicha... → Squared rhythm
Organ solo, then brass and drum
Gradual accelerando
Acceleration transforms cumbia into almost Punk beat

3'57 Last chord and glissando

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The most eloquent connection with the psychedelic theme is, however, yet to come. During the following minute, the steady beat starts to become unstable, constantly mutating and eventually disappearing into what seems an ecstatic-type of playing. Accompanied by increasingly arbitrary melodic mumbling and the inclusion of increasing harmonic dissonance, this process eventually leads to a complete disintegration around minute 2’36. We are here confronted with a totally inarticulate section, with seemingly “random” chords and the complete disappearance of an intelligible beat. Such a musical “meltdown” can be understood as representing an eloquent musical analogue of the ecstatic psychedelic outburst, where all sense of individuality is lost. After this psychedelic type of meltdown, the music eventually finds a way out of this chaos, so to speak, and a varied reprise of the initial section is presented. While within the universe of Rolo ET “Vol. 5” is perhaps the most eloquent example of the type of formal processes found in psychedelic rock music, other examples within the studied music present similar processual logics, whether at a local or at a global level. Other such pieces include “Monstruo Prometedor” by Los Pirañas, “Josefina” by Chúpame El Dedo (see Figure 33), “Me Llaman Cumbiambera Adolorida” by Meridian Brothers, or “Ika” by Frente Cumbiero. Finally, while this study focuses only on recorded versions of the repertoire, in regards to this particular aspect, the examination of live versions would be especially valuable and fruitful. It would surely yield observations that would render the allusion to psychedelic formal processes even more evident.

Now, the link between improvisation, its formal implications and psychedelia goes beyond sound itself. According to Botero, “composition in the instant contains that subversive act of ‘doing whatever you want in the moment,’ [which] doesn’t fit ... in academia.” While in academia “they always tell you what you have to do, and what’s right or what’s wrong,” in free improvisation “it’s whatever you want to do.” (Botero, TroPs, 2016; emphasis added) This subversive character Botero sees in free improvisation—and, by extension, in his own music—clearly echoes the countercultural, subversive facet of psychedelic music of the 1960s. The wider philosophical issue of freedom, which was at the crux of the reflections by psychedelia advocates (see Section II above), appears to also be at the crux of free improvisation. The improvisational aura in both of these languages appears to be sonically speaking about the grander issue of freedom of conscience, of real human choice. In Botero, we might accidentally hear psychedelia, yes, but more than that, we witness a statement about truly free artistic creation as a fundamental landmark of
human freedom. And this interpretation serves to revive this forgotten—or perhaps trivialized—aspect of psychedelia.

Like Botero, both Álvarez and Galeano show a somewhat nostalgic respect to the original sense revolving around psychedelia. For Galeano, “psychedelia actually represents . . . a type of alternative culture, or a form of counterculture that opposes certain structures that Western culture has traditionally had with respect to sex, drugs, family, politics, the economy, and a whole lot of other things . . .. In the end, the countercultural movement of the 1960s tried to put a stop [to this way of thinking], and, say, the establishment, saw it as something oppositional, alternative, difficult to explain, freaky, which interfered with what is morally acceptable, with what is sexually acceptable, with the economy.” (Galeano, TroPs, 2016) For Álvarez, psychedelia was likewise originally “a genuine search, obviously, as counterculture to North American moral repression.” There were “a lot of people taking this thing seriously,” who view psychedelia “not as a drug or even a party-related ‘thing,’ but really as a new alternative to society,” he adds. (Álvarez, TroPs, 2016) In the end, all three interviewed musicians coincide in feeling content with the association of their projects with this countercultural, deeply alternative, sense of psychedelia. Yet the question remains as to what the particular nature of this “new” countercultural, alternative, psychedelia is. In other words, if Rolo ET is in fact somehow countercultural or deeply alternative, what exactly is it countering? In the Latin American, Colombian, or Rolo context of the twenty-first century, what is Rolo ET being alternative to? And, moreover, what would that alternativity be?

VI. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: LATIN AMERICAN PSYCHEDELIAS AND THE QUESTION OF A SITUATED COUNTERCULTURE

Before offering some preliminary thoughts on the matter, it is important to point out that—even if psychedelia first emerged in the North America of the 1960s, associated as it was to a wider countercultural zeitgeist—it eventually (and relatively rapidly) reached different cultural contexts, where it was adopted in unique ways. This culturally situated versions of psychedelia obviously developed their own psychedelic expressions, including, of course, musical ones. In the same way that rock music became a global phenomenon, the particular progressive strands of rock, largely triggered by the
emergence of psychedelic rock, also influenced the emergence of revolutionary popular musics (whether in a political, musical, or other sense) around the globe. And, of course, these localized popular musics developed and expressed their own flavor, even when clearly influenced by musical explorations of other popular musics like psychedelic rock. In sum, various facets of 1960s counterculture, including its music, developed around the globe in distinct ways.¹⁸⁷

In order to begin to ponder the possible countercultural vibrations of Rolo ET and their particular significance, I would like to first briefly consider three such Latin American phenomena of the time that profoundly influenced both the musical and philosophical outlooks of the movement: Brazilian Tropicália, Peruvian chicha (and its later development, tecnocumbia), and Jamaican dub.¹⁸⁸ In a sense, we could perhaps say that many of the elements (musical or otherwise) that allow for a description of Rolo ET in terms of “psychedelia” come more directly via these phenomena, than via the original Californian version of psychedelia. For although most of these musicians admit having been influenced by Anglo-Saxon countercultural, psychedelic rock, most also stress the primordial significance of the influence of Tropicália, chicha, and dub in their respective musical projects.

From a musical standpoint, we could say that the three phenomena—but particularly Tropicália and chicha—owe part of their constitution to 1960s psychedelic rock. In chicha, the unique use of the electric guitar—especially timbre-wise, but also harmonically—clearly alludes to its use in the progressive strands of 1960s rock music. Tropicália, on the other hand, can be musically described as an innovative and miscellaneous fusion of elements of psychedelic rock with elements of various Brazilian native musical languages. As the reader must have probably inferred, its name is actually a sort of self-proclamation of this musical fusion—i.e., tropics + psychedelia—very much like my own proclamation of Tropidelia with regards to Rolo ET. Even if the musicians of Rolo ET have not self-proclaimed themselves as constituting a Rolo “Tropidelia,” the parallelisms between the musical elements from which both currents borrow clearly stand out. Tropicália’s artistic heritage in Rolo ET is, in this sense, quite obvious.

¹⁸⁷ For a discussion about a particularly distinctive way in which hippie rock music was adopted in Chile, for example, see González (2012). For a broader discussion of local vs global expressions in Brazil, which includes not only rock, but also genres like rap and reggae, see Béhague (2003). For a reflection about the extent to which 1960s counterculture can be said to be global, parting from a discussion of the particularities of the student movement in 1960s Brazil, see Langland (2006).
¹⁸⁸ For more detailed information about: Tropicália, see Dunn (2001a) and (2001b), and Basualdo (1995); Peruvian chicha, see Fernández L’Hoeste (2007) and (2013); and Jamaican Dub, see Potash (1997) and Veal (2007).
Finally, while dub consists of an essentially post-production manipulation of musical material (i.e., technological manipulation of already recorded and produced music), many of its processes of manipulation are closely related with effects that originally were strongly associated with psychedelic rock practices, like most notably the so called delay effects. Musically speaking, then, many of the timbral and effect-driven elements that, according to our established code of sonic psychedelia, provide Rolo ET with a psychedelic quality of sound, can also be found in the particular languages of Tropicália, chicha, or dub.

But beyond sonic commonalities (or, for that matter, differences), the legacy of these phenomena in Rolo ET has more to do with their achievements as singular and profoundly identitarian artistic practices. In other words, they have served as unique inspiration for Rolo ET, in the sense that they constitute clear examples of the development of a distinctively local, experimental musical movement. In the cases of Tropicália and chicha, we find successful examples of attempts at generating really groundbreaking musical movements through the innovative usage and unique appropriation of native and foreign elements. In the case of dub, we find the emergence of a really unprecedented approach to post-production musical manipulation, constituting one of the few technological innovations that—having originated in the peripheries of the world during the second half of the twentieth century—has had a deep and profound impact in most of the recent popular musical languages and techniques worldwide.

In this sense, for both Galeano and Álvarez, dub was a revelation. It was, in other words, the first affirmation that the use of technology in music was not something that needed to be imposed from outside. Arising partly by chance, partly by necessity, and within a particular social context, dub was the first seed of the development of various musics, including hip-hop, and various subgenres of the subsequent world of electronic dance music, such as Rave or Dance Floor. From an identitarian perspective, Álvarez believes that the phenomenon of dub should serve to light a sparkle in Latin American (and other peripheral) communities, in the sense that—for him—it constitutes perhaps the most important referent of a profoundly groundbreaking movement originating in the periphery. It is, in other words, a particularly eloquent instance of a distinctively Latin American development of technology, and, as such, constitutes an important referent and inspiration for those searching for a locally relevant musical technological development. Partly derived from Peruvian chicha, tecnocumbia constitutes another example of such locally relevant appropriations of both foreign musical languages and technologies.
Tightly knit with the emergence of House culture in the 1980s, and partly understood as an electronic development of previous cumbia languages such as chicha, for Álvarez tecnocumbia was able to “reform” the logic of imported machinery “thanks to a sociocultural process.” In both dub and tecnocumbia, then, reformed machines became “a structural [expression] of a local social movement.” (Álvarez, NMC, 2015)

Unlike Jamaican dub, Brazilian Tropicália constituted a broad cultural movement with overt political stances and various kinds of artistic expressions. However, like Álvarez’s reflections on the significance of dub, its political overtones were also crucially related to issues of identity, albeit in a different way. In this respect, Christopher Dunn defines it as “a high-impact movement…that appropriated local and foreign musical styles and relativized prevailing notions of cultural authenticity.” (cited in Langland, 2006, p. 63) Dunn furthermore shows how this movement, which was led by iconic figures of Brazilian music such as Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, and Tom Ze, sought to “expose the fissure between their nation’s idealized image as a peaceful tropical ‘garden’ and the daily brutality visited upon its citizens.” (Idem) The tropicalist movement arose in the aftermath of the 1964 military coup in Brazil, a context in which, according to Victoria Langland (2006), both politically leftist artists and university students energetically promoted the necessity of raising political consciousness by means of art. Inspired and nurtured by this politically troubled ambience, and despite the censorship exercised by the right-winged military dictatorship, Tropicália soon constituted “the most sophisticated cultivation of popular song in the history of Brazilian popular music, and the most overt and active involvement in politics and cultural changes as witnessed in their modern urban experience.” (Béhague, 2006, p. 80)

If, from outside, Tropicália was viewed as a distinctively Brazilian (i.e., local) phenomenon, within Brazilian culture it actually opened up profound questions about identity. Tropicália stood in between two opposing musical phenomena: what came to be called Musica Popular Brasileira (Brazilian Popular Music or MPB) on the one hand, and what was called Jovem Guarda (Young Guard) on the other. While MPB had profound nationalistic aims, the Young Guard sought to internationalize the local scene. The most radical (usually left-winged) nationalist student movements widely supported MPB, and considered the Young Guard “a vacuous and purely commercial imitation of foreign styles.” (Langland, 2006, p. 62) In the context of this musical rivalry, Tropicália actually came to represent a critique of such ideological

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189 Langland describes MPB as “an outgrowth of bossa nova that merged nationalist and protest song traditions.” (2006, p. 62)
radicalness. As Béhague writes about Veloso, “his early provocative combinations of folk, traditional, pop, and art music, he cultivated trendy international styles, always in a strongly imaginative and personal (Bahian) manner. In so doing, he sparked renewed national debate over the “Americanization” of Brazilian popular culture, cultural imperialism, and colonialism that began in the 1940s with Carmen Miranda.” (Béhague, 2006, p. 85; emphasis added)

But, how does all this relate to Rolo ET? In Chapter 5, I shall return to a more elaborate discussion about the ultimate significance in Rolo ET and its current context, of these and other musical and ideological connections. Suffice it, for now, to point out some initial observations on the matter. First of all, it is interesting to see that—contrary to what happened with Tropicália in the Brazil of the 1960s—in the Colombian context of the 2000s the music of Rolo Tropidelia tends to be seen mostly as a “nationalist” or “regionalist” expression, rather than an “Americanization” or “internationalization” of local popular musics. It doesn’t seem to be mediating between two opposing currents, as was the case with Tropicália. Álvarez’s stance about what dub represents for him is particularly telling in this regard. Under his view, particular treatments in Rolo ET of, say, delay effects, drum ‘n bass samples, or dubbing techniques, are ultimately constituting a statement about identity; because embedded in these techniques lies a further evolution of a technological development that is quintessentially Latin American. In this sense, one could understand Rolo ET as a musical movement that is seeking to follow the (proverbial) footsteps of Jamaican dub. It would be seeking, that is, to become an important referent of a development of a musical language and a musical technology that is not, in Álvarez’s words, “imposed on us from outside.” (NMC1, 2015)

According to this view, then, one possible reading about the countercultural connection of Rolo ET’s alleged psychedelia would understand this movement preliminarily as countering a vague, still undefined, “outside” culture (in place of a “parent” culture). Yet, as we shall see can be implied from the discussion on irony in the next chapter, one could also read in Rolo ET the somewhat distanced and relativizing critical stance of the Brazilian version of musical psychedelia. One could, in other words, find critical paradoxes behind the apparently manifest regionalist stance. Using words that could easily be paraphrased so as to be referring to rock music’s early evolution, Latin American music critic Russell Slater points out that Rolo ET members have now “toured internationally, as well as finally won critical
and public approval, while maintaining the revolutionary spirit that will ensure that the evolution of Colombian music is not ready to stop yet.” (Slater [Detmer], 2014; emphasis added) While implying the importance of gaining approval—international approval, that is—Slater is nevertheless keen to emphasize the value of maintaining the music’s “revolutionary spirit.” What exactly the critic means by “revolutionary” is certainly unclear, but also certain is the term’s conventional allusion to countercultural expressions such as rock. Without knowing it, Slater might be poking the wound, so to speak: how can a music keep its revolutionary spirit, while gaining approval? And if “revolutionary spirit” means countering an imposed, outside, culture, how to maintain it while gaining international approval?

The cooptation of rock music by mainstream culture is said to have stripped off its most revolutionary facets, many of which first appeared in the spiritually-oriented strand known as psychedelic rock. Originally a music revolutionarily devised by youth, it became part of a broader musical culture commercially designed for youth. Having witnessed this process, Rolo ET is perhaps not simply traversing a similar road, but critically commenting upon it, with and from a regionalist perspective. A Latin American psychedelia of the twenty first century ought to be understood as a complex phenomenon, in which all of the meanings of psychedelia are put into play, while at the same time the artists themselves play with them. British LSD researcher Karl Jansen once drew attention to the commonalities between LSD experiences and the theoretical goals of psychoanalysis. Both, he wrote, seek to bring “deep contents of the unconscious into consciousness.” (cited in Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 113)

Psychedelic experiences, moreover, commonly provoke “psychic incompatibility with the old order, once certain illusions have been shattered” (p. 116) Perhaps these notions could help us understand part of the significance of the Rolo tropidelical phenomenon as alien psychedelia. They could be synthesizing the particular type of musical catharsis or critique embedded in, or expressed by, Rolo ET. Perhaps Rolo ET unconsciously seeks to bring other, alien, worlds into this world. Or its regional culture to other cultures. Or perhaps, on the contrary, alien tropidelia ironically negates psychedelia’s original utopia. Judged against the code of a celebratory tropical kitsch, in other words, psychedelia might alternatively become a dystopia.

Before further developing these ideas into a broader interpretation of Rolo ET’s significance within the current Colombian landscape, I will first tackle the idea of musical irony and its possible
workings within the studied repertoire. Among other things, the next chapter will allow us to think about the extent to which “psychedelia” (or the tropical element) can be understood as contributing to the configuration of irony, or—even more categorically—the extent to which it can be reinterpreted as irony. In the present context, an understanding of psychedelia as irony might perhaps make it tempting to somewhat clumsily tweak Humphrey Osmond’s famous psychedelic aphorism and claim: “to unearth tropics’ real frenzies, just pinch a disc of ‘psyche-dances’.”

VII. ADDENDUM: ROBOTIC IMAGINATION AND THE PARADOX OF AN ALIEN PSYCHEDELIA

So what about alienness? In what ways do ideas revolving around this concept work in Rolo ET? In Chapter 1, I mentioned how the letter “E” in my chosen acronym conveniently fits various characterizations of this music. It could be standing for “experimental,” for “electronic,” or for the more metaphorical “extraterrestrial,” an adjective which, by the way, also inspired the denomination “ET” of this musical movement. On the other hand, in Chapter 2 I showed how many of the musical treatments of tropical-derived musical materials could be understood as “alien,” in the sense that they de-naturalize and/or distort conventionalized musical behaviors, without completely. Thus understood, those treatments are, simply put, “alien” to the referenced musics, and are largely responsible for the uncanny perception of a sort of “extraterrestrial” tropical ambience. But beyond this unique re-appropriation of typical musical materials of tropical music, and viewed from a less analytical, more commonsensical perspective, the adjective alien is used in this music in relation the type of electronic sonic ambience that is pervasive in most of Rolo ET projects. In terms of the possible meanings of “E” of the acronym ET, the experimental sense of the letter would be more closely related to the types of techniques described as constituting an “alien tropicality,” while its electronic sense would more trivially relate to the pervasive use of electronic media or instruments.

Now, consider the following account of the music of Meridian Brothers, written à propos the release of their album *Salvadora Robot* in 2014. In the review, the author describes this band’s aesthetic as reflecting “a merging of the organic and inorganic.” He writes how in this album, the band’s “signature skewed sound has evolved into a complex futuristic cosmos. Galaxies collide and merge in this
overwhelming burst of rhythm and electronic-infused cumbia.” He likewise describes how “jarring, nasal vocals weave with a layer of playful drums in ‘La Tristeza,’ launching the listener into outer space on a bed of detuned and effects-ridden guitars.” In sum, for the reviewer, the album “builds off the band’s recurring motif of human and robot, organic and inorganic, to blast far, far off into the cosmos.” (Mmonatau, n.d.; emphasis added) We find here an interesting catalogue of the type of ideas that surround the notion of “alienness,” as it is typically associated with this music. This constellation includes adjectives like “futuristic,” “robotic,” “inorganic,” and space-related terms like “outer space” or “cosmos.” In this respect, the comments section of the youtube clip of “Monstruo Prometedor” by Los Pirañas offers an interesting and eloquent reaction to the song that states: “what a blow to the brain, extremely intense,” followed by the question, “from which galaxy do these dudes come?”

As mentioned before, a trivial reading would tend to explain the use of this constellation of terms in association with this music as arising simply from the fact that it uses a wide array of the state of the art, electronic and digital technology, nowadays available to musicians. This technology is, of course, typically associated with the so called space-age. In this sense, any type of music with a pervasive use of this type of technology could be read as constituting the epitome of space-age type of music. Granted, most of this terminology might be probably being used in this more trivial sense. After all, such descriptions appear in the typical spaces where commentary about this music can be found: internet sites, forums, blogs, journals, reviews, etc. Such spaces are for the consumption and use of the general public (in this case probably represented by seekers of alternative sounds [see above]), and thus probably tend to play with conventionalized notions around musical practices. But my intention here is not to say that this type of associations or uses are less valid. On the contrary, as stated in my philosophical and theoretical approach (see Chapter 1), these conventional webs of associations are precisely the ones that help generate the Ecoian type of codes that underlie the collective understanding of any sign system, which in this case is music. I nevertheless wish to propose a more subtle, perhaps more obscure, complementary explanation for the perception of alienness in some of this music; one which goes beyond the ones already mentioned, i.e., the use of experimental techniques that rarify otherwise naturalized musical languages and the use of technological equipment conventionally associated with the constellation of ideas surrounding the current space-age.
Human Imagination, Electronic Interfaces

In Rolo ET, the creative mind behind most of the digital processes that provides this music with its electronic and digital ambience is Álvarez. However, Álvarez’s use of audio digital technology for the purposes of creating music is far from standard. As opposed to many artists, musicians, and producers of the popular electronic music world, Álvarez was not musically raised within that ambience, and his creative approach is thus not fundamentally shaped by the working logic of digital musical machines. Álvarez’s own comments in this respect are worth extensive citing:

I consider myself alien [!] to electronic music [pun not intended, but noted]. In other words . . . I wasn’t ever a member of a movement. The basis of someone’s personality develops itself to a great extent during his or her teenage years, or during his or her 20s. There comes a time in which it is impossible to organically enter any type of movement. So for me . . . computers are still a tool. What I do is search for means, parting from the ideas that result from creativity. The phenomenon of creativity is, in the end, an idea you want to capture. But I stayed a bit with the classical school, in which you capture [creativity] in a score or directly into sound. The computer is an external actor, which I use as a tool. Of course, my study got to a very sophisticated point, so it would appear otherwise, but the original concept is this one." (NMC, 2015; TBA)

Álvarez thus entered the world of electronic musics from a unique perspective, which in the end led to a unique approach. Early on, he never “studied” the logic of electronic music as such, so his approach was guided by the more “abstract” way of thinking about musical composition, which according to him is the more “traditional way” of doing it—at least within the world of Western classical music. According to Álvarez, within this world, music is considered to be an abstract language, which before being interpreted or executed in traditional musical instruments, resides fundamentally inside the
When he eventually explored the world of electronic musics, his approach was, as he puts it, more “scientific” in nature. After studying the phenomenon, he concluded that there are “only three ways of ‘doing’ electronic music,” or, as he calls it, “music with electricity”: recording, artificial production of sound (i.e., digital synthesis) and the processing of those sounds. (NMC, 2015; TBA)

After searching for referents, the first one of which were the schools of academic electroacoustic composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen or Pierre Schaeffer, Álvarez realized that many had used technology, not just as a tool, but as a structural component of music. The available computer software of the 2000s provided ample possibilities of using digital technology precisely in this way. It offered, in other words, the possibility of not only manipulating the material production of sound at will, but also of devising the processual aspects of musical composition according to the possibilities offered by programming language. As Álvarez puts it, “it’s the machine as generator of sound, it’s the machine as generator of musical material, in order to create this art” (NMC, 2015; TBA). He ultimately realized that he could use technology “as a medium of production of musical material, and not only as a tool to develop ideas coming from the mind.” Back in Bogota after studying abroad in the mid 2000s, and finding what he described as “this renaissance of Colombians or Rolos making music with traditional musics and with urban musics,” he discovered other styles “which also used technology as the axis or structure of the musical discourse.” (Idem) In this respect, he highlights the structural use of the electric guitar in Peruvian chicha, in which signal processing constitutes a fundamental axis of the musical discourse.

Álvarez’s use of electronic musical media constitutes, then, a merging of approaches: that of the “traditional” classical or acoustic composer of the West, which abstractly imagines and devises musical structures that materialize themselves through performance; and that of the electronic music world, which makes structural use of the technology being applied to musical creation. In Meridian Brothers in particular, the merging of both approaches creates an uncanny result, judged from the perspective of the typical expectations of an electronic music ambience. Álvarez describes this result as “a bit abstract . . . a conceptual thing, that parts from science itself, and manifests itself in the ideas I had before. [The ideas] which the composer has and transfers without going through an electronic interface, I started doing with electronic music.” This way, the interface is used as a prolongation of the composer’s mind. The abstract ideas of the “traditional” composer are created, developed in tandem with the interface, as well as
processed and executed through it. Rather than limiting creative possibilities through standard uses, as tends to happen in the world of popular electronic musics, open programming gave Álvarez the opportunity to model the interface according to his abstract imagination. He puts it the following way:

“I was fortunate to encounter a tool that came to me somewhat as a coincidence, which is the language of open programming… and this made me skip the interface. The interface can be either a friend or an enemy. There are people who make music solely through an interface. They see the sampler and they want to play it, they see the keyboard and they want to play it, they see the digital turntable and they want to play it, but I create music from abstract ideas, and then you capture them in a sonic medium… I wouldn’t have been able to handle a Sampler, because I wouldn’t have found any sense to it. I would have found limitations. An interface is a limitation that—being visual—locks us into that visual world. Whereas when you have an imaginary result of something, then you can create your own interface. When you create your own interface, you are able to use technology as a tool to capture [what] you have imagined. Open programming gave me the opportunity of creating my own interfaces, in order to achieve the musical result I sought.”

(NMC, 2015; TBA)

Perhaps this is why Álvarez prefers “stable” and “controlled” musical environments, even if the end result of his music does not necessarily evince that property. While in response to a question asked about the challenges of electronic music live sets and the use of the available technology, Colombian DJ Daniel Broderick answers that he prefers a set with more emotion, and less stability, Álvarez decidedly positions himself in an opposite ground: “I’m with stability,” he firmly asserts. His answer is not surprising, given how his methods of composition are largely based on the so called “old school” or “classical school” of the Western musical tradition, in which processes of musical imagination are subsequently put on paper or captured in actual sound.

A somewhat ironic situation arises. In the music of Meridian Brothers, Los Pirañas, or even Chúpame El Dedo, we encounter a sonic world that—given both the quality of the sounds and the tools
used in the production of those sounds—is understandably related to the electronic world or, put more bluntly, to machines. With regards to the “alien” or “extraterrestrial” characterization of this music, then, a first obvious interpretative impulse has it deriving from the machine-like sonic (and visual) illusion created by the robotic quality of, for example, the music’s timbre. Moreover, a central role of a given technological interface (e.g., a sampler, a beat box, etc.) in the design of the musical discourse tends to reinforce the idea of a music in which the human element—Álvarez’s imagination—is diminished, and the non-human, robotic, or inorganic elements—the perceived alienness—are, on the contrary, augmented. Yet a somewhat twisted logic might make one see the phenomenon under a different light: the listener of this music is presented with a musical language ordinarily associated with the prescriptions of nowadays-popular electronic music interfaces. In other words, there are expectations founded by an underlying Ecoian code of associations. It turns out, however, that the musical discourse has actually been musically “cooked” in a composer’s imagination a priori, an in tandem with the interface, through the tool of programming language. In a subtle manner, then, there arises an uncanny feeling about it all. The perception of alienness could be deriving, then, from the coexistence of two very different compositional logics that are brought together in a musical practice that usually epitomizes only one of them.

So yes, the perception of alienness appears to come from the fact that electronic or artificial sounds are prominent factors guiding the listening experience, and from the implication that the role of the human mind is significantly restricted by the possibilities offered by the use of interfaces. But in Rolo ET, in many cases this ambience is being highly controlled by the composer’s mind, in the manner of the Western classical tradition of composition. Alienness is just an appearance. The extraterrestrial feeling is produced not just by space-age effects, but by the unconscious impression that the processes are not as robotic as they appear to be. In this sense, in Rolo ET alienness is, in sum, a mask.

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What to say, in the end, about the merging of the worlds of psychedelia and robotics in Rolo ET? While The Beatles’ psychedelic Sgt. Pepper—the most iconic psychedelic album of all time—plays with various dichotomies such as live versus recorded music, enlightened and not-yet-enlightened states of
being, differing epochs, imagined versus real worlds, inside and outside experiences; most of the projects of Rolo ET tend to resolutely turn the scale towards the electronic, the robotic, the un-human, albeit perhaps only in appearance. More than evoking early musical psychedelia, this tendency seems to underscore Rolo ET’s allegiance to more contemporary musical practices that could be typified as the electronic music world. While the original sense of psychedelia and its first musical manifestations speak of the desire of blending one’s being with the surrounding universe; Rolo ET’s opaque electronic language might constitute an invitation to ponder about our artificiality, to the extent that it evinces the plausibility of merging our creative imagination with digital interfaces. This invitation seems to no longer be a transcendental one, at least in the traditional, spiritual, sense of the term. It could be understood to remain a philosophical one, though. The collusion between musical creation and digital programming inevitably triggers the question of whether we could conceive of our own imagination—our own self, even—as being analogous to an artificial coding. The simultaneous reunion of musical materials associated with such different constellations of ontological ideas surely creates a paradox. In Rolo ET, musical depictions cohabit of two very different conceptions of the disintegration of the self—one towards spiritual holism and the other one towards artificial compartmentalization. One might ask whether this kind of paradoxical play of sound worlds and musical approaches can somehow be read as ironic. As it turns out, I believe irony is at the heart of many of Rolo ET’s musical expressions, a topic to which I now turn my attention.
HAVING FUN MAKING FUN OF “FUN”: IRONY IN ROLO ET

“Irony must not be commented upon; its identifying rhetorical nature lies in its indirection.”

Umberto Eco

I. Introduction

There's irony all over, irony everywhere. . . . It's definitely that balance . . . between totally opposing aesthetics, . . . the conflict between being serious and avant, and just playing swinging shit . . . a polar pulling between cleanliness and dirtiness, between knowing rules very well and breaking them. . . . There's a certain kind of pull between opposite impulses. . . . A certain kind of inventiveness outside of . . . what is acceptable. (Don Byron, quoted in Monson, 1994, p. 291; emphasis added)

Though expressed in the 1990s by Don Byron, a jazz musician then active in Chicago, these thoughts resonate quite well with my observations regarding the aesthetics and philosophy of Rolo Experimental Tropidelia. Whether through straightforward parody or in more subtle fashion, here too, irony seems to pervade. For starters, consider the following description by Markus Detmer of the project EPV, which, as stated before, can be considered the founder of the Rolo Tropidelic movement of the 2000s:

Ensamble Polifonico Vallenato started as a joke, a parody of the bad vallenato music a bunch of University students would hear on the bus into campus. Their idea was simple: 'to play whatever and see what happens.' The resultant music was as heavy as rock, as acidic as punk and as far-
out as the most left-field free jazz. At the heart of it all was fiery accordion and acerbic vocals, often playing in call-and-response, just like the classic vallenatos of yore. The lyrics formed a big part of the group's identity; they were deep, *sarcastic* and *surrealistic*, and revelled in toying with Colombian clichés. (Detmer, 2014; emphasis added)

Despite differences in time and place, some of Detmer’s remarks on EPV’s music somewhat resonate with Byron’s commentary about his own musical practices: to “play whatever and see what happens,” to “kind of invent outside of what is acceptable,” to include the conflicting and opposing aesthetics [languages] of swing and the avant/serious on the one hand, or of vallenato and rock, punk, and (ironically) left-field free jazz, on the other. It would seem, then, at first glance, that musical irony flourishes where irreverence inspires particular plays of sounds; particular juxtapositions or overlapping of musics with their own particular topical overtones. Soon after the quoted remarks, Detmer states that in ensuing musical projects by the same musicians the music stopped being a parody. Perhaps overtly so. For one could argue that irony continued to lie, and still lies, at the crux of these musical projects.

Similar comments about Colombian tropidelical music lend further support to the hypothesis that irony constitutes a central element of the movement’s overall discourse. Commenting on the music of the band Puerto Candelaria from Medellín, musicologist Carolina Santamaria highlights their “very intelligent use of irreverence as a musical strategy.” She notices how their pieces “toy with the expectations of the listener, using familiar elements within unusual contexts, or leading towards musical situations that seem wrong.” (Santamaria 2007, 17; TBA, emphasis added) Once more, we find ourselves with a strange, unexpected combination of dissimilar musical elements and the use of what is supposed to be musically “wrong,” or—in Byron’s words—“outside of what is acceptable.”

In the present chapter, I will argue that the conscious use by the participants of the Rolo tropidelical movement of musical “wrongness” or “weirdness,” and of conflicting (often times opposing!) musical languages—both central elements of the aesthetic values of the movement—can ultimately be read as a vehicle for the configuration of irony. In the end, we shall see that even if irreverence by itself does not necessarily imply the existence of irony, in Rolo ET the former tends to function often times as a sign of the latter.
For the purposes of the present argument, I will first discuss what other authors have understood by irony in general. While it will soon become evident that any attempt to categorically define irony is a chimeric enterprise, in this section I will nevertheless strive to reach a working definition that, with Eco’s understanding of codes as horizon, can serve as a basis for the subsequent discussion. With this in mind, I will briefly browse through works about musical irony, in order to ruminate on what this particular strand of irony might mean and how it might work. In the end, I will focus on Robert Hatten’s semiotic understanding of the concept, which, revolving around his ideas about markedness and topical troping, presents an interesting framework for the analysis of ironic troping in the studied repertoire. Subsequently, I will discuss specific examples of musical irony in Rolo ET, which tend to fall under three main categories: irony through parody, irony through “wrongness” or “weirdness” (elements out of context), irony through the clashing of musical languages. Finally, I will venture some hypothetical interpretations regarding the ultimate meaning and purpose of the appearance of irony in Rolo ET.

II. Theorizing Irony

A well-founded academic enquiry dictates that before discussing whatever it is that we could conceive of as “musical irony,” we should first attempt to define irony itself; if not through our own empirical research (or “informed” experience), at least through the examination of the work that other authors have pursued on the subject. Unfortunately, and perhaps ironically, Stephen Zank reminds us that one of the most obvious “traps” in a study about irony is “that of trying to define or redefine it, on grounds of elegant and informed demurral by others.” (Zank, 2009, p. 2) Not only that, Zank seems to think that rather than crisply defining whatever it is that people understand or have understood by irony, attempts at divining the phenomenon have just been able to, at best, “ensnare” it. In his study of irony and sound and the music of Maurice Ravel, Zank, who of course would not dare bypass the academic exigencies and who therefore diligently studied the “informed demurral by others” on irony, shows us how most rigorous studies on the subject (whether theoretical, typological, or otherwise) have tended again and again to defer to other studies, rather than defining or—most eloquently—not defining the term. In other words, in their classical studies on irony, authors like Douglas Muecke, Erich Heller, or Vladimir
Jankélévitch have done more to not define irony (or rather to not commit to propose their own definition), than to provide a clear-cut theoretical account of the phenomenon. Zank’s observation serves as an eloquent example of the particular complexity of trying to understanding irony, at least in abstract and as a formal phenomenon.

So, in the face of this ironic conundrum, how should we go about defining irony, at least for the purposes of a discussion about irony in Rolo ET? Falling consciously into the inevitable “trap” mentioned by Zank, I will follow the steps of the “masters” of irony and defer to other studies on the subject, if not to categorically define irony, at least to provide a list of characteristics—a constellation of ideas, if you will—that tend to constantly appear in relation to the phenomenon of irony, so as to construct a conceptual space from where to feed the discussion.

A general working framework might show that, in general, theoretical definitions or characterizations of irony tend to relate to one or more of the following generic ideas: deception, incongruity, ambiguity, duality or negativity. Moreover, discussions on the phenomenon of irony often times stress its experiential and pragmatic nature, and highlight its non-structural, accessory nature. Accordingly, to certain authors context becomes an essential criterion for the configuration of irony. And while some authors address the question of irony without regard to the difference between production and reception, others tend to locate irony prioritizing one end of this spectrum.

**Irony as deception, incongruence, and inappropriateness**

In searching for a broad characterization of irony, one could start by saying that most authors that have approached the subject never fail to mention the most colloquial, and thus most common, understanding of irony: to “say” one thing while meaning another one (the latter usually tending to be the opposite of the former, “literal,” meaning). Musicologist Mark Evan Bonds reminds us, for instance, that “in rhetoric, irony is a trope by which the speaker, through various clues like gesture, tone of voice, or context, conveys precisely the opposite of what he says.” (Bonds, 1991, p. 84; emphasis added) Similarly, literary scholar Marianne Shapiro comments how irony “negates on the figurative level what is positively affirmed on the literal level.” (Shapiro, 1985, p. 12) In both cases, irony is understood as a
figure of speech in which the real meaning of a statement does not appear in the expression of the statement per se. The truth value of a statement is, on the contrary, concealed. In some respects, then, irony is not unlike lying.

Now, even though not all lies constitute an irony, all ironic events could be seen as a lie of sorts. Indeed, deception appears to be an essential element in most understandings of irony. For instance, already in his *Scienza Nuova* from 1725, philosopher Giambattista Vico defines irony as “composed of falsehood by means of a reflection which wears the mask of truth” (cited in Shapiro, 1985, p. 10; emphasis added). Similarly, for Shapiro irony tends to produce “connotations of misrepresented meaning, deceptiveness, and dissimulation.” (p. 6) Irony as deceit is likewise implied in Douglas Muecke’s classic study on the subject. Muecke mentions a series of devices and criteria that are commonly associated with irony, among which he includes the existence of a contrast between appearance and reality. (Muecke, 1970, p. 24-48) Construing irony more as an intentional scheme devised by its producer than as an interpretative action, Muecke adverts to a “confident unawareness” on the part of the receiver, that an appearance is in fact just an appearance, turning the receiver into a “victim of irony” (Idem).

Beyond irony’s potentially deceptive nature and the particular workings of irony as a rhetorical trope, in a more general sense we can conceive of irony as resulting from any “incongruous situations and events.” (Shapiro, 1985, p. 6) Indeed, incongruence seems to also be an essential element of anything considered to constitute an irony. In his more formal definition, for example, linguist Salvatore Attardo considers an utterance $U$ to be ironic if $U$ is, in the first place, “contextually inappropriate.” (Attardo, 2000a, p. 3; emphasis added) By contextually inappropriate, Attardo means that $U$’s presuppositions (i.e., expectations) are not compatible to those of the context in which $U$ is being uttered. Here, there exists an incongruence between the utterance (or expression) and the context. For irony to be configured, though, $U$ must not only be inappropriate, but also relevant to that context.

Resonating with Attardo’s definition is the one provided by musicologist Robert Hatten, according to whom irony “is a higher-order trope inaugurated by the *contradiction* between what is claimed (or observed, or done), and a context that cannot support its reality (or appropriateness)” (Hatten, 1994, p. 172; emphasis added). For Hatten, contradiction and inappropriateness are key aspects of the rhetorical configuration of irony. Here too, incongruence can be seen to exist at a couple of levels: between the
contradicting terms (Eco’s functives of a code [see Chapter 1]) and between the utterance and its context. Both Attardo and Hatten (among others) mention context as being definitive to an understanding of irony as an actual phenomenon. Yet before addressing the role of context in the constitution of irony, let us first consider irony’s accessory (as opposed to structural) nature.

The accessory nature of irony and the role of context

For Marianne Shapiro, there is no doubt that irony is fundamentally an accessory phenomenon. In other words, it is something that cannot be materially found in any linguistic structure. In terms of Eco’s theory of semiotics, whatever it is that makes irony happen, while dependent on a given code, is not an integral part of that code’s structure. Since the occurrence of irony transcends that structure, the study of irony is pertinent only to the study of what Eco calls “the practice of sign production,” as opposed to the theory of codes itself (which despite sometimes being inferred from practice, does not depend on it).

Shapiro explains it as follows: irony is “fundamentally of an accessory character, a non-linguistic phenomenon that most simply signifies that something is not what it seems to be without telling what it is. . . . Ironic meaning in itself is never lexically derived.” And she then continues by affirming that irony “has everything to do with attitudinizing and with language use, and nothing to do with language structure.” (1985, pp. 10-11; emphasis added) For Shapiro, this accessory nature of irony is what ultimately generates ambiguity, since the meaning of irony cannot be grasped in any positive terms. Perhaps this is also the reason why traditionally the grasping of irony has been thought to be dependent on the existence of an “informed” receiver. In Shapiro’s words, “an ironic utterance cannot be interpreted as such without the foreknowledge that it is one, but since that foreknowledge is not to be found within linguistic structure, it does not have to produce an ontological basis. As a diacritic sign and a qualifier, irony does not even have to affirm its opposite implicitly. This certified, ratified ambiguity can make irony a rallying point for confusion and chaos screening themselves from value judgment. It may afford the user a chance to become a ’temporary sophisticate’.” (Idem; emphasis added)

Given irony’s accessory, non-structural, nature, for many authors, context plays a crucial role in the possible configuration of irony. We have already seen how both Attardo and Hatten condition the
occurrence of irony to the contextual inappropriateness (or unsupportiveness) and relevance of a given
utterance. Also, in accordance with literary critic Cleanth Brook’s definition, to Shapiro irony is “entirely
bound by its context.” (Shapiro, 1985, p. 12). Finally, following a more experimental approach, scholars
Rachel Giora, Ofer Fein, and Tamir Schwartz also foreground the crucial role of context commenting that,
while the positive term—in other words, the first, “salient” or literal, meaning of an utterance—doesn’t
require context, the grasping irony definitely does. (1998, p. 84)

Yet “context” can be conceived of in different ways, all of which add up to build the broader
context that provides the information necessary for the configuration of irony to happen. On the one hand,
we can think of context as simply the surrounding environment present at the instant when irony occurs.
We can also think of context as the actual cultural code (i.e, in the Ecoian sense of the word) that governs
both the structure of the utterance (the positive term), and by extension, the possible “hidden” meaning
behind the utterance, which is the signature of irony. We can think, also, of the contextual cues, which are
usually provided by the producer of the utterance (whether written or not), and which provide clues of a
secondary meaning, not entrenched in the utterance’s structure or code.

I suspect that these cues are precisely those which Shapiro calls “attitudinizing,” or, more
generically, those that have to do with the use of language, as opposed to its structure. For Shapiro, irony
is fundamentally “a performative stance.” It “describes a whole gamut of behavior” (1985, p. 6; emphasis
added) This view evidently highlights the performative or pragmatic aspect of the configuration of irony,
though this “performance” ought not to be solely understood in its most traditional sense, since this
traditional understanding would not apply to a written utterance, for example. A more general way of
conceiving such cues is what Attardo calls “markers of irony,” whose goal is to make irony’s processing
simpler. Following are some of the markers of irony recognized by several authors, and listed by Attardo
(2000, pp. 8-9) in his discussion:

- Intonation
- Nasalization
- Exaggerated stress
Other phonological means (e.g., slowed rate of speaking, syllable lengthening, pauses, laughter, etc.)

Morphological means (e.g., expressions such as “so to speak”)

Typographical means (e.g., “scare quotes,” exclamation points, etc.)

Kinesic markers (e.g., winks, nudges, etc.)

Context

The performative facet of irony tends to put the ontological weight of the phenomenon toward the side of the producer, a view that casts the shadow of a needed foreknowledge of the context (surrounding environment, code, and cues) from the part of the receiver, in order for him or her to grasp the existence of irony (see footnote 10, above). In fact, views that consider irony to be deceptive implicitly fall under this view. So beyond the idea that irony generally implies incongruence, ambiguity, discrepancy, or deception; beyond the fact that it is considered accessory with respect to the structure of the code that governs a given utterance; beyond the general consensus that context (widely understood) is crucial to the configuration and grasping of irony; and beyond the suggestion that performative cues or markers of irony often times accompany its occurrence for the purposes of processing; the existence of the spheres of production and reception still begs the question of the dynamics of these two poles in the configuration of irony. Where in this spectrum, in other words, does irony occur?

Agency, intent, and indeterminacy

Shapiro’s stress on irony’s accessory character leads her to fully warn about the ambiguity implied in any interpretation of irony. This accessory character, she says, “is what allows misunderstanding about whether a given text is a ‘spoof’ (or wholly ironic) or not, and allows for perfectly divergent opinion on the question.” (1985, p. 11) Such ambiguity still appears to be a problem of interpretation, for one assumes that a producer of an utterance is well aware of the existence or lack of irony. For Hatten, not just awareness, but also agency and intentionality from the part of the producer are
key to the configuration of irony. Irony entails, in his own words, “an intentional inappropriateness…such that we can interpret the contradiction as meaningful” (1994, p. 173; emphasis added). Intent is also crucial in Attardo’s construal of the concept. Additionally, though, a knowledge of that intent is necessary for its interpretation. “The purpose of irony grounds its interpretation,” he writes, “since it determines the relevance of the ironical sense, after the ironical intention has been determined.” In other words, “the rhetorics of irony [are] foundational to its semantics, and not vice-versa.” Irony is “a gamble that [the producer] takes.” (2000b, p. 16) In the end, for Attardo, the purpose that grounds the interpretation of irony lies in the rhetorical and social effects that a producer is seeking to accomplish.

Many understandings of irony implicitly tend to view it as a phenomenon of production. Attardo’s construal is quite explicit in this regard, and thus serves as an eloquent example of this position. An eloquent example of the opposite position is that of philosopher Linda Hutcheon. While Attardo prioritizes production over reception, and focuses on the intent and agency of the producer (plus somewhat on the expression per se in relation to its context), Hutcheon thinks that the receiver’s response—sometimes even without regards to the producer—is as also fundamental to the materialization of irony.

After at first having herself associated the practice of irony to specific phenomena, in her later work Hutcheon warns against such stereotypical associations. Irony should thus not be paradigmatically considered “a keystone of poetics, a paradigm of criticism, a mode of consciousness or existence that raises questions about the self and the nature of knowledge, a philosophical stance vis-a-vis the universe, an informing principle of personality, or a way of life” (1995, p. 3). Rather, Hutcheon conceives irony more neutrally as just a “discursive practice or strategy” that is “verbal and structural.” (Idem) Under this more neutral view, the “ideal forms” of irony cited by Hutcheon become merely particular instances of irony, whether as intent or as consequence.

Herein lies Hutcheon’s most significant contribution to the discussion about irony. Rather than worrying solely about the producer’s intent of irony, Hutcheon introduces the notion of “discursive communities” of active producers and active interpreters, wherein irony can happen, momentarily, in any part of the communication spectrum. Thus conceived, irony becomes a “kinetic—indeed, almost ephemeral—event that can ‘happen’ between speaker and auditor” (Reksovna, 1995, p. 972). Hutcheon introduces interpretive agency and indeterminacy as potentially playing a role in the occurrence of irony,
even when a particular producer is not intending to be ironic. For her, judging from the “circumstantial, textual, and intertextual environment of the passage in question,” (i.e., the traditional context), an interpreter can actually “make irony happen.” (1995, p. 143; emphasis added) Hutcheon thus liberates irony from being exclusively a domain of production. She goes as far as to say that interpretative agency and indeterminacy are built into the structure of irony itself.

Hutcheon, of course, never denies that intent and agency from the part of the producer are often times also “structural” to certain occurrences of irony. Her view of the phenomenon is particularly relevant for an interpretative exercise like the present one. Liberating irony from the condition that a producer has to intend it for it to happen also liberates an interpreter from the burden of proof of agency. This “liberation,” though, in a certain way avoids the question of why certain phenomena are more prone to be interpreted as ironic than others. Granted, this is not Hutcheon’s purpose, given her cited work is fundamentally a revision of perhaps frozen and/or conventionalized ways of analyzing or viewing the subject. Ultimately, while Hutcheon’s irony might happen at the production or interpretative levels indeterminately or arbitrarily, what I would like to highlight next is that, from an Ecoian standpoint, irony can only occur with the existence of a code as a horizon. Irony, in other words, presupposes an Ecoian code.

**Codes and irony**

In Chapter 1, I showed how in his treatise on general semiotics, Umberto Eco envisions a theoretical space where the rules that define different codes can be observed and analyzed without regards to the actual usage of said codes (though these rules, since they are culturally defined, often times can be inferred from practice). In Eco’s view, the idea of referentiality is not relevant to the configuration of this space, meaning that the operation of a semiotic system does not depend on the actual reality of its “objects/referents.” For Eco, the existence of lies demonstrates precisely that a semiotic system—i.e., a code—can exist independently of the actual reality of the elements of its content plane. “Every time there is a possibility of lying we are facing a semiotic function,” he comments (Eco,
Thus is the nature of codes, in the Ecoian sense of the word. And it is precisely this understanding of codes that allows for a semiotic understanding of irony.

Eco famously wrote that “semiotics is not only the theory of anything that can be used to lie, but also of anything that can be used to make laugh or disturb.” (Eco, 1976, p. 107; TBA, emphasis added) Keeping in mind that in many accounts irony is implicitly or explicitly associated with lying and with humor (and by extension with laughter), according to Eco’s remark, semiotics would constitute an ideal framework to theorize irony. We have already discussed the relationship between irony and deception.

As for irony and humor, they are intuitively related, though certainly not identical. As Attardo reminds us, there are instances of “humorous irony” or “ironic humor,” though non-humorous irony or non-ironic humor are also quite common. (Attardo, 2000a, p. 12) Yet what interests me here is not the intricacies of that specific relationship, but the way in which Eco’s characterization of laughter—whether as the result of humor or irony, or both—in terms of his theory of codes and sign production, can very well be applied to the workings of irony in general. Let us consider, for instance, the following comment by Eco: “Laughter constitutes the collateral effect of an improper use of the code and of the discovery of an internal contradiction of the code. . . . We must consider both the ridiculous and the frightening a consequence of a particular contradiction of the code” (Idem, pp. 106-7; TBA, emphasis added). Paraphrasing Eco, irony could be conceived of as the result of “an improper use of the code,” whether by a producer or a receiver (interpreter). Resonating with irony’s generic sense of “saying one thing while meaning another one,” an Ecoian sense of irony would understand it as exposing an “internal contradiction” of a code.

Semiotically speaking, then, the manifestation of irony implies a very particular use, or “tweaking,” if you will, of a given code. In another passage of his treatise, Eco writes: “in sending or receiving messages, both the transmitter and the receiver must individuate networks of PRESUPPOSITIONS and of possible LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES. The interchange of messages, judgments, and references contributes to the modification of codes; this is a social work that can be done either publicly or surreptitiously, so that the phenomenon of sign CHANGE is crossed with that of CODE COMMUTATION, as can be seen in different rhetorical and ideological discourses” (Attardo, 2000a, 228; TBA, emphasis added). It is my contention that, independently of its varied construals, irony could be seen as a phenomenon of sign change or code commutation. In other words, when irony happens—however
ephemerally—there arises a process of \textit{surreptitious} code modification. This modification would typically be temporary, i.e., it would last no longer than the length of the ironic occurrence. Yet, as implied in Eco’s remarks, it could happen that a more consistent and repetitive “improper use” of a code, for the purposes (or as an interpretation) of irony, could eventually entail the appearance of a newly culturally constructed code, no longer necessarily performed or interpreted as irony. I will return to this consideration in the last part of the chapter, with regards to the possible effects of ironic code transmutation in Rolo ET. Suffice for now to say that, from a semiotic standpoint, irony can be construed as a surreptitious and temporary modification of a code that can occur indeterminately, whether as a result of a producer’s intent, an interpretative act, or a combination of both.

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Having consciously and inevitably fallen into Zank’s “trap,” I hope to have successfully \textit{not} defined the elusive concept of irony, choosing instead to probe various of its understandings and construals. Tentatively, and for the present purposes, I understand irony as a fundamentally temporary \textit{phenomenon} of code transmutation, whose particular characteristic is that of incongruence (oftentimes opposition) between the code’s conventional signification and the actual intended or interpreted meaning. In the end, what needs to be highlighted is the crucial role of the idea of a semiotic code in the process, for it is this code that provides the fundamental contextual framework from which the transgression of meaning is constructed (whether via production or interpretation).

In the following section, apart from briefly mentioning some of the most significant scholarly works produced in relation to the subject of musical irony, I will focus on what I consider a particularly pertinent variation of the idea of Romantic irony and on Robert Hatten’s semiotic construal of the phenomenon. The goal will be to build a working model for the explanation of musical irony in the studied repertoire.
III. **Musical irony: a (semi)semiotic perspective**

Speaking of the divination of irony throughout history, Stephen Zank comments:

> One may observe that for a good two millennia irony has been conveyed chiefly by *sound*, by the sound of words spoken, whether written or not. But it has been conveyed, too, by other means such as gesture or visual representation, and one may therefore observe, too . . . that irony and a variety of perceptual modalities including sound, and *musical sound*, are promisingly conjoined. (Zank, 2009, p. 2)

Sound, then, seems to oftentimes play a significant role in the materialization of irony. Not surprisingly, many of Attardo’s “markers of irony”—intonation, nasalization, exaggerated stress, and other phonological means like slowed rate of speaking, syllable lengthening, pauses, laughter, etc.—relate to sound. But what about *musical sound*? Would any of these "markers" be pertinent in a musical context? How would they work? How, in other words, can music be said to convey irony?

It seems fairly obvious to think that in order to comprehend the ironic sense of an utterance (literary text, music, verbal expression, painting, etc.), a person first processes the literal meaning of that utterance, and then grasps the (usually opposite) “secondary” meaning that configures the irony. Experiments conducted by Giora et al. confirmed that, in fact, salient meanings tend to be activated before less salient meanings emerge in the mind of an interpreter of a given utterance. The researchers minimize the role context plays in the interpretation of the literal, *salient*, meaning of a linguistic expression: “the meaning of a linguistic expression is considered salient in case its interpretation can be directly computed from the *lexical meanings* automatically associated with entries *before any extra inferences based on contextual assumptions have been derived.*” (Idem, 84; emphasis added) But what would a “salient” meaning be in music, analogous to that of linguistic expressions? Is it possible to think of an analogous “processing” of irony in musical utterances? What would a “lexical meaning”—minorly influenced by contextual considerations—be, in the world of music?
Before addressing these questions in more detail, allow me to briefly mention some academic approaches on the subject. Authors that have addressed the question of musical irony don’t usually use a semiotic framework as the basis for their discussion. In general, most studies assume the more colloquial general understanding of irony, without much theoretical problematization. More specifically, within the field of musicology, many have had interest in ruminating on the workings of Romantic irony (or related strands of irony) in works belonging to the canonic musical repertoire of the Western academic tradition (e.g., Longyear, 1970; Dill, 1989; Bonds, 1991; Burnham, 1994). Others provide hermeneutic readings of irony in non-Western repertoire, most of which are not primordially centered on the sonic aspects of the music, varying instead from contextual observations, considerations of musical performance, and ethnographic data (e.g., Monson, 1994; Gibbons, 2011; Solomon, 2012). Esti Sheinberg’s study of the music of Dmitri Shostakovich (2000) and Stephen Zank’s study of the music of Maurice Ravel (2009) are examples of full-scale studies of the work of a specific composer in which irony (amongst other related characteristics) is interpreted as a crucial element of that work. In both studies, many aspects including aesthetics, philosophy, biographical data, and musical language are brought to bear on the interpretative reading of the authors. Finally, examples of readings of irony in which the interpretative focus is the relation between music and other media include Timothy Koozin’s study of Toru Takemitsu’s music for film (2010) and Jairo Moreno’s reading of Gottfried Weber’s analysis of Mozart’s music (2003).

To my knowledge, the only author to have specifically addressed the subject of musical irony within a semiotic framework (though with hermeneutical purposes) is Robert Hatten. In his now classic study of Beethoven’s music, Hatten explains how shifts of levels of discourse occur in music when there are obvious contrasts of style or stylistic register, shifts that may occur successively or interruptively. While in the former case one musical fragment comments on a previous one, in the latter “a [musical] entity appropriate to a context is displaced by an inappropriate one.” (Hatten, 1994, p. 174) This wording immediately brings to mind definitions of ironic processes cited above. Hatten understands musical irony as arising from the juxtaposition or overlapping of usually contrasting musico-topical ambiances within a piece (which he generically calls troping), in such a way that it is this contrast that allows for the appearance of the secondary meaning that ultimately configures the irony. In a way, such a view is not so different from the more intuitive one by jazz musician Don Byron, whose remarks opened this chapter. For
Byron, let’s remember, experimenting with totally opposing aesthetics and conflicting musical languages in the same “piece” (“serious and avant” versus “swinging shit,” for example) is clearly an index of irony.

Hatten’s construal of irony helps to underscore once more the need for an established (aesthetic, conventional) horizon against which to judge musical irony, in accordance with the view of irony as the temporary transmutation of an Ecoian code. Now, whereas in Western instrumental classical music such a horizon might be provided specifically by formal conventions or genres, we can more generally think of musical topics as conceptual tools that help us delineate the horizons of reference for each case. In view of the lack of other verifiable communal musical constructs of signification, musical topics (or at least pre-configurations of them) constitute the foundational code against which irony can be thought to exist, or—in terms of the present understanding of irony—the code that is susceptible of ironic transmutation.

Musical topics, codes, and the location of irony in Rolo ET

Following Monelle (2006), we can understand fully constituted musical topics as sets of sonic constructs that participate in wider cultural codes (i.e., in relation to cultural themes that transcend mere sound), and that by virtue of being repeated in consistent association with those codes, end up becoming conventionalized musical signifiers. As Hernández (2011, 2015) construes them, also following Monelle, musical topics constitute sedimented meanings. Now, the more sedimented a given set of the possible meanings of a sonic construct becomes, the less open to interpretation it is. In other words, the more a given culture (or a given human group within a certain culture, or a given individual within a certain group) determines a particular set of signifieds for a particular set of sonic signifiers, the more straightforward interpretation becomes within those cultural, human, or individual limits. Referring specifically to tropes (i.e., particular expressive renditions or uses of topics), Hatten explains it as follows: “through frequent use, a trope may lose its interpretative freedom (or force) and acquire a more limited correlation. This process is comparable to the ‘life cycle’ of a trope in language. . . . The cycle accounts for a gradual decrease in indeterminacy and a corresponding increase in definition as a result of frequent use. A ‘dead’ or ‘frozen’ metaphor is one that has become a relatively fixed correlation. (1994, pp. 188-189) In Eco’s
terms, such overly determined tropes would constitute *over-codified* expressions, hence the idea of a growingly "frozen" meaning (or set of meanings).

As seen before, rhetorical resources such as irony depend upon the existence of codes, like musical topics or tropes, in order for them to be able to emerge or for somebody to be able to grasp them. The less culturally codified an expression is, the more difficult it becomes to communally establish or suggest the occurrence of irony. In the same line of argument, the less a given individual knows the logic of operation of a given code, the more difficult it is for that individual to grasp the sense that something might be intended as ironic. Taking into account Hutcheon’s reflection that irony can arise at either the level of production or reception (or sometimes both), it might also be that—according to the codes that a given individual has incorporated throughout his or her life—he or she might understand something as ironic, when in fact it was never meant to be that way. Herein an example of the many pitfalls of interpretation, especially with regards to the constitution of irony. So before moving on to the discussion of the plausible emergence of irony in the music of Rolo ET, allow me first to comment on the subjective dynamics of my own interpretation, so as to more concretely define the space within the production-reception spectrum wherein irony might be emerging in the present case.

At first instance, the mere fact that this is an “individual” interpretative exercise implies that the configuration of irony is occurring clearly at the level of reception, in this case my own. In this sense, the interpretation of some of this music as ironic is based upon my own historical appropriation, experience, understanding and construal of the various types of musical codes I find within the repertoire. However, this historical, at first *intuitive* (or at least perhaps less conscious), codal construal has been significantly nurtured and thus also transformed by the musicological research that first led to, and subsequently was inspired by, the present project. This research constituted a more conscious process of analysis and appropriation of some of the most prominent musical codes found in the music of Rolo ET, for which the interpretation takes into account some ideas that complemented my own, say, “informal” cultural experience with new sets of data. In this sense, my interpretation includes both the original cultural musical codes that I carried within me, and the cultural musical codes of certain musical expressions, as they emerged in the research process. My own intuitive codes were, in other words, at least *intellectually* transformed through this process, even if oftentimes confirming or reinforcing my own previous
experience. Through this process, the interpretation became less individual, and more communal, insofar as it revised and took into account a more collective experience of pertinent musical codes, as they were discussed and presented in the previous chapters. But more importantly, this revision of a more collective understanding of said codes crucially also included the examination of the experiences and ideas of Rolo ET’s own members. This examination allowed for an assessment of the ways in which these members experience and construe certain musical codes. So even though an interpretative act like the present one tends to locate the configuration of irony within the reception part of the spectrum, the collected information about the position and experience of Rolo ET members with respect to the pertinent musical codes allows me to also propose an informed speculation with regards to ironic intent. For as we shall see shortly, further comments from these members will somewhat confirm humoristic and ironic happenings or purposes within their artistic and musical activity. In sum, then, I am proposing an interpretation wherein it is possible for people that share a certain amount of cultural information or capital (in this case, Rolo ET members and myself) to partake on the emergence of irony in some of this music, and thus to understand it and perhaps even enjoy it simultaneously at both the levels of production and reception.

In any case, I believe it is the understanding of Rolo ET’s sound world as being configured by a given set of culturally defined musical codes that allows for the possibility of reading certain sonic phenomena as musical irony. These codes—some of which could be understood as already constituting musical topics (such as the “topic of joy” in certain Caribbean tropical musics [see Hernández, 2015])—provide us with more or less fixed sets of signifiers that are conventionally associated with these musical practices. The particular play amongst these limited constellations of ideas, as it were, found in the music, can give us some clues about the actual materialization of irony or irony-like phenomena. Parting from the present discussion about the phenomenon of irony, and taking into account the discussion advanced in Chapters 2 and 3 about the most prominent codal constituents of Rolo ET music and the way they are in fact materialized, I will now proceed to discuss specific mechanisms by which one can understand irony to be emerging in some of the studied music.
IV. Workings of Irony in Rolo ET

Ironic as parodic intertextuality

As demonstrated above, in much of the theoretical discussion around irony, this rhetorical trope tends to be generally understood as one generating a contradiction between the expected meaning of a given utterance and its ultimate interpretation. No matter how explicit or implicit this contradiction is (the degree of explicitness being usually related either to the clarity by which the utterance is expressed or to the degree of codal competency of a given interpreter), this structural definition largely remains. However, the contradiction must not necessarily emerge in relation to the underlying workings of a usually abstract cultural code. As Wilmott writes, “irony can arise from intertextual difference, rather than tacit contradiction.” (Willmott 1996, 2; emphasis added) I believe this is a nice distinction that Willmott makes, and seems particularly pertinent to the present study (and examinations of musical irony in general). With respect to the semiotic framework I have established above, Willmott’s distinction speaks of a configuration of irony whose contradiction does not happen against the background of a generic code, but rather in specific relation to a particular text, or, in this case, piece or fragment of music. While the chain of semantic implications beyond the specific piece being referenced will necessarily be related to the more generic codes indexed by or underlying the piece, the understanding that irony has occurred might only need said intertext or intermusical (see Chapter 1).

One possible example of this particular type of mechanism is that of ironic parody, given that—not unlike parody in general—perhaps the essential trait of this mechanism and of its unique way of triggering irony would be the explicit reference to a previous text or piece of music. Like happens with most other terms, the term “parody” has a rich and complex history of meanings and associations, as well as a rich and complex semantic diversity at any given time and place. Diachronically and synchronically, in other words, parody has had and continues to have multiple, nuanced understandings. For practical purposes, I will here follow Mario Valdes’s synthetic understanding of parody as that of a comic mimicry of one text by another text. (Hutcheon and Valdes, 2000, pp. 24-25) Under this pretty generic view, there is in parody a dialectic between two texts, one of which is usually being somewhat ridiculed by the other
Accordingly, the understanding that something is a parody (i.e., the grasping of the usually comical dialect between the text being exposed and the text being referenced) presupposes a minimum knowledge of both these texts by any given interpreter. In specifically musical terms, this condition implies that both musical pieces or fragments of music participating in the dialectical relationship must be present in the listener's imagination or memory, in order for the comic intent to work.

A propos intent, this understanding of parody also assumes that there is, in fact, a conscious creative intent behind any parody or parodic event. However, I believe there could be instances of musical passages of unverified intent that could be grasped as fully or partly parodic. As mentioned before, if we follow Hutcheon and allow for irony to occur anywhere within the spectrum production-reception, the question of intent when it comes to interpreting irony in general, or parodic irony in particular, becomes less of a crucial condition. In other words, if a given musical piece or fragment is understood or perceived of as referencing another musical piece or fragment, then parody is understood to be happening, independently of intent. On the other hand, the degree of intentionality, which is to say, the amount of awareness by its creator(s) that a musical piece or fragment resembles a preceding (or even contemporaneous) musical piece or fragment can widely vary. From a straightforwardly intentional intermusical reference (e.g., a musical quote) to a completely unconscious reference to an existing musical piece there exists a wide spectrum of possibilities. I believe this is possible precisely because creations never emerge from a complete vacuum, and so possible not completely conscious intermusical fragments are to be naturally expected. In this sense, my own interpretation of seemingly parodic fragments in the music of Rolo ET do not seek to rely on the intentionality of parody. I am, in other words, not so much interested in parody as a category, but rather in observing how what appear to be parodic-like mechanisms can be seen as constituting irony, precisely by giving the impression of referencing specific instances of Rolo ET’s intermusical world.

However, there are some general clues provided by Rolo ET members that intentional parody is perhaps more pervasive than one might think, though I suspect the explicitness of particular referenced musics is likewise intentionally diminished. In other words, while parody (i.e., quotes of, or references to, specific pieces) might pervade, it does so obscurely, making it more abstract than specific. Perhaps the most obvious clue that parody is part of the expressive tool kit of (at least some of) Rolo ET’s musical
projects comes not from their sonic world per se, but from their visual—specifically scenographic—one. Consider, for starters, the following comment by journalist and blogger Oscar Adad about Meridian Brothers: “the sound, which seems to come from tropical, electronic and experimental music is complemented by dislocated stories narrated by a singer who changes personalities from song to song.” (Adad, 2015; TBA, emphasis added) Adad’s idea that the singer—in this case, Álvarez—is constantly changing personalities comes essentially from performative choices such as the dressing, the way of singing, or the way of moving, complemented by surrounding elements such as the stage’s decoration, the looks and behaviors of the other musicians, or the venue; the mise en scene, if you will. Here, my use of terminology related more directly to the world of the theater and plays than to the world of music and concerts is not incidental. It is, on the contrary, deliberate. For what is implicit in Adad’s commentary is the theatrical, and thus parodical, nature of Meridian Brothers, a characteristic which sometimes also emerges in the context of the activities of other Rolo ET (or related) projects. In this respect, Álvarez’s own words are, in fact, quite eloquent:

You hear me speaking and you hear my super-Rolo accent [i.e., an accent typical of someone from Bogota]: the very well pronounced s’s and all that… But when I sing, I sing like a Costeño… I bought into the whole story. As a matter of fact, before recording, I listen to Enrique Díaz (who is one of my main influences) and I imitate his style, singing in the same manner: not pronouncing the s’s, not including certain words. But that is not really me! So I invented the tale that this is not real music. This is fake, false music; it’s a play. As simple as that. This is a play… We are not salseros, we are Rolos… I can’t just imitate, I don’t know, Nirvana [the grunge band originally from Seattle, U.S.A]… I can’t be a history of artistic society… So in the search for this identity, I had to find some discursive resources, among them, history—i.e., I realized this had in fact happened—and theater. So I started to learn—like an actor—to sing like Hector Lavoe, like Cheo Feliciano… In the last records I’ve produced, I’ve tried to imitate the style of Enrique Díaz… In these records you listen to a fake, Costeño accent… This allows for a lot of criticism, but I got involved in
the process and that’s the way it went… (NMC, 2015; TBA, emphasis added)

Álvarez speaks specifically of *sonically* imitating various singers such as salsa stars Héctor Lavoe or Cheo Feliciano or obscure vallenato legend Enrique Díaz. In this respect, we are talking specifically about a *sonic* type of parody. Note, however, that here the parody does not necessitate of a particular musical piece or intertext. We are dealing with a slightly more general parodic exercise, where the sonic referent is, to use the famous term coined by the French cultural semiologist Roland Barthes, the distinctive *grain* of the voice of a particular singer. As mentioned above, this attempt at imitating a particular voice is oftentimes accompanied by the whole theatrical enactment that surrounds a specific artist.

Figure 23 shows, as way of an example, an image taken from the original videoclip of the song “Salsa Caliente” by Meridian Brothers. The band members are all dressed in flashy, satin-like garments, which would be the expected clothing in the context of a glamorous festive occasion in which a salsa, or perhaps more specifically a cha-cha-cha or mambo, ensemble would be playing. The alleged “elegance” of the selected dressing speaks of what would probably be a high-class celebration or venue. However, the venue where the band appears playing constitutes a rather peculiar place. While the performing stage certainly includes visual signs that index, in general, a celebratory context (i.e., a context appropriate to the performance of salsa), the type and combination of objects in the scene creates a high level of ambiguity with respect to the specific type of celebratory context that is being referenced. Therein we see a set of what could be living room or bedroom lamps; we see a black tablecloth with skulls and crosses (probably referencing Mexico’s “Día de los Muertos”); we see another tablecloth with a drawing of a caricature; we see a human face drawn on what appears to be a human-head shaped cardboard; and of course, we see, microphones, microphone stands, musical instruments (including an unused piano) and laptop computers, all of this against the background of what seem to be white and pink, tent-like curtains. The combination of objects in the scene is certainly surreal. Overall, there is a feeling of uncanniness, probably derived from a very unique combination of otherwise familiar elements. In any case, the dressing and stage do not entirely correspond with each other. I shall return to commenting this
discordance in the next section. Suffice, for now, to say that the scene is clearly conceived of in theatrical, parodical terms. Which the specific intertextual reference is remains unresolved, but the parodic spirit of the visual setting is otherwise evident. The scene appears to be intended, in sum, so as to caricaturize typical elements of a cha-cha-cha, mambo, or salsa setting.

Figure 23. Image from the videoclip of “Salsa Caliente” by Meridian Brothers\(^\text{190}\)

While the visual aspect of the videoclip gives us enough evidence that it is probably intended as a parody, certain sonic aspects of the song can be understood as being conceived of in the same spirit. First, before the song even starts, one hears the voice of the typical announce of band in a live, tropical venue. The intent here is clearly parodic, even if—to the best of my knowledge—the audio is referencing a generic type of character (i.e., the live venue announcer) instead of a specific one. Once the song starts, the first obvious element that speaks of parodic intent is once more the voice. As can be confirmed by his words cited above, Álvarez is here clearly attempting to imitate the voice of a typical salsa singer (high-pitched, nasal, with Hispanic-Caribbean accent, etc.). As for the general ambience of the song, it appears to allude specifically to boogaloo, a North American genre that was quite popular in the 1960s, which fused Caribbean-derived rhythms with North American musical traditions such as rock ’n roll, blues,

\(^{190}\) Taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=___narBCKAK78.
or funk, and which was later appropriated by salsa musicians of the late 1960s and 1970s. Not surprisingly, the song mixes the elements proper of salsa with musical elements associated with psychedelic music of the time, particularly the use of the electric guitar and the unique timbre of the hammond-type organ. While, by themselves, some of the sonic elements of the song might be enough to read in the song a parodic intent, their combination with the visual elements—not to mention the minimalistic lyrics (in English, “I want to dance the hot salsa”)—undoubtedly support a reading of “Salsa Caliente” as a musical parody. The question remains as to whether this parody constitutes or not an irony. Before addressing this question, though, let me first examine a couple of additional examples.

Well before engaging in the more mature projects of the 2000s, Álvarez et al. (excluding the outside figure of Botero) started their experimentation with unique musical treatments of Colombian tropical musics in their seminal project EPV. Their penchant for parody or parodic approaches to musical creation was evident even then. With respect to parody, one could say that EPV already included the proverbial seeds that were to bear fruit particularly in and through Álvarez’s Meridian Brothers. In EPV’s “Son,” for example, there are musical elements that somewhat resemble the sonic treatment found almost fifteen years later in Meridian’s “Salsa Caliente.” The song starts with an introduction that provides little information as to what the genre of the song is going to be. It consists of an incisive, undulating pattern of two perfect fifths separated by a whole tone, played in a rather unprofessional manner by an otherwise clean electric guitar (see Figure 24). Accompanying this gesture appears an arpeggiated electric bass line. Generally speaking, one could say that the harmonic ambience and instrumentation of this introduction seem to be indexing music of a popular vein, though specificities of genre or style are hard to pinpoint. However, the rhythm of the bass line clearly corresponds to the rhythm of the bass lines of the more modern cumbias (particularly chucu chucu) or vallenatos of the 1970s onwards.
After a few repetitions of this introductory pattern, there appears a percussion cut played by a caja vallenata (main percussion instrument of the traditional vallenato ensemble), which serves as a long upbeat to the powerful entrance of the whole ensemble (circa 0’15 of the recording). Once the remaining parts of the ensemble enter, the sum of especially the rhythmic patterns and the instrumentation makes it clear that we are listening to a vallenato, though evidently not a typical one. The main melodic line played by the accordion, the subtle contrapuntal lines played by wind instruments, and the overall harmonic ambiance are all highly dissonant. The listener is confronted, in other words, by a freaky, modernist version of a traditional vallenato air: a schoenbergian vallenato, so to speak. This type of combination might make one think of the type of tango arrangements and compositions devised by Argentinean bandoneonist and composer Astor Piazzolla throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Except Piazzolla’s modernist tangos were highly sophisticated. EPV’s modernist vallenato “Son” is, on the contrary, intentionally conceived of and performed so as to sound rough and coarse. As such, it constitutes a further example of the type of musical approaches discussed on Chapter 2, which seek to
sonically represent or—in the context of the present chapter—parody the type of sonic ambiences that are typical of lowbrow musical manifestations of the Colombian Caribbean.

But beyond the juxtaposition of such clashing expressive musical languages, to which I shall later return (see below), more pertinent to the present discussion is the appearance of seemingly arbitrary shouts, sometimes verbally eloquent, sometimes onomatopoeic. For anyone vaguely familiar with Colombian festive traditions in general, and Caribbean festive occasions in particular, these shouts immediately bring to mind the typical behaviors of the musical manifestations that accompany such occasions. Vallenato music, in particular, is oftentimes punctuated by this type of shouting throughout different parts of a given song. This phenomenon appears both in live and recorded renditions of this music. Many times, these shouts are dedications of the song to a given personality or lover. Álvarez’s first shout, “¡para Colombia!” (i.e., “to Colombia!”), appears to clearly fall under this category, though the dedication to the whole of the country, as opposed to a particular personality or group of people, seems a bit odd. In any case, just as discussed with regards to Meridian’s “Salsa Caliente,” in EPV the non-singing verbal cues throughout the song are clearly parodic in nature. And also as is the case with Meridian’s song, EPV’s “Son” includes a style of singing that is clearly attempting to imitate a typical, standard vallenato voice (of the time).

In the case of “Son,” however, the parodic intent goes further than just generically referencing typical behaviors of joyous musical revelry, or typical vallenato singers. As seen in Figure 25, the beginning of the main verse’s melodic and rhythmic structure (as well as the established vallenato aura) suspiciously resembles the verse of the mythic vallenato song “Plegaria Vallenata,” by vallenato minstrel and legend Alejo Durán. As previously mentioned, whether this resemblance was intentional or not by EPV’s members is, in this context, largely irrelevant. At most, the confirmation of intentionality would help one categorically declare “Son” as a musical parody, which in the end pertains chiefly to theoretical and ontological considerations about the category “parody.” The point here, however, is not whether “Son” is or not properly a parody, but the fact that the similarity demonstrates a viable intertextual relationship, at least from the perspective of some knowledgeable listeners. And that such a relationship triggers questions regarding its nature: whether the correspondence could be understood, for instance, as a commentary or a homage (or both); and if understood as a commentary, which type of commentary. The
relationship implies, in other words, not only the correspondence that links both texts, but also critically a distance between both texts, whose specific nature becomes worthy of interpretation.

1) “Plegaria Vallenata” by Alejo Durán (intro) and 2) “Son” by EPV (theme)

A similar case occurs with Santiago Botero’s song “Vol. 5,” included in the second album of his project El Ombligo, and previously discussed in the context of Chapter 3 (see Figures 21 and 22). As seen in Chapter 2, Botero’s project can be straightforwardly understood as a deconstruction of the music of cumbia idol Andrés Landero, particularly with regards to his melodic idioms. In the specific case of “Vol. 5,” however, a listener knowledgeable of cumbia might also be tempted to hear between lines, as it were, another very famous cumbia by José Joaquín Bettín (colloquially known as “Juaco” Bettín) called “Cumbia Sampuesana.” If in “Son,” the intermusical relationship with “Plegaria Vallenata” fundamentally arises from the almost literal similitude between the melodies of both songs, in “Vol. 5,” the intermusical relationship with “Cumbia Sampuesana” is somewhat more abstract, due to the lack of a straightforward literariness. Absence of literal reference notwithstanding, there are more musical elements linking both
songs than just the melody (see Figure 21 and 26). First of all, both songs share mode (E dorian) and meter (2/4). The rhythmic base at the beginning of “Vol. 5” is clearly alluding to a cumbia (whether it is a cumbia in its own right, or it is a representation of a cumbia—a commentary, if you will—is less clear.) The instrumentation of both songs is similar, though a significant difference is that the leading melodic instrument of the original recording of “Sampuesana,” the accordion,” has been replaced in “Vol. 5” by a hammond-type organ. However, this type of replacement in cumbia was not at all uncommon, especially in the 1970s. More specifically, both evince a behavior in which the leading instrument (accordion or organ) expresses fundamentally an E-minor harmony, while the bass line suggests an A-major harmony. Even if this behavior is less consistent in “Sampuesana” (where it happens every other measure) than in “Vol. 5” (where it happens throughout its initial cumbia section), its particular harmonic aura helps link both pieces, especially when other similarities are considered alongside this one.

As for the melodic and overall temporal behavior, one can advert similarities of some aspects that, in isolation, could be considered fairly common in the world of early Colombian popular cumbias, but whose particular combination in both pieces also links them more closely. First of all, we have a bass line whose incisive rhythm is mostly in quarter notes. Above that, we find a first melodic gesture that presents an arpeggiation followed by a pause in a long note, while the bass continues its incessant beating. Closely afterwards we start hearing faster arpeggiated gestures that tend to lead and rest in longer notes. This overall process results in a gradual melodic acceleration. In “Sampuesana,” however, the process is much longer (Ex. 4.X shows just one cycle). “Vol. 5” presents a condensed, much more accelerated, version of this conduct, whose first cycle finishes in the middle of m. 11 (see Ex. 3.X). The difference in the length of the cycles, alongside the elastic treatment of tempo in “Vol. 5” versus the more stable one in “Sampuesana,” has to do with the decidedly more experimental—arguably more psychedelic—language of the more recent piece, as was discussed in Chapter 3. Even so, “Sampuesana” also evinces some elastic or irregular behaviors in terms of phrasing, if not tempo, that can be somewhat read in the overall irregular treatment of time found throughout “Vol. 5.” In any case, the slightly more abstract similarities are enough so as to be possible to “hear” a sort of “hidden memory” of “Sampuesana” in Botero’s “Vol. 5.”
Figure 26. “Cumbia Sampuesana” by Juaco Bettin (first section).

Of course, as mentioned before, the whole of Botero’s Ombligo project is, in a sense, parodic in nature, the intertext here being the whole of Landero’s corpus. In fact, some of the melodic cells of “Vol. 5” come directly from fragments of some of Landero’s improvisations, and those cells appear in many other pieces of both Ombligo’s albums. So my point with “Sampuesana,” which is not a “confirmed” intertext, is the same as with EPV’s “Son” and its relationship with Duran’s “Plegaria.” In a way, I am here following Klein’s (2004) postmodern approach and understanding of music intertextuality (see Chapter 1), as a phenomenon that escapes the domain of production, and is able to also inhabit the spaces of reception, even if sometimes independently from the question of creative intent. “Vol. 5” might not be a
parody of “Sampuesana,” strictly speaking. But to hear “Sampuesana” while hearing to “Vol. 5” is to find
parodic relationships. In this sense, the understanding of these (and many other) Rolo ET pieces as
oftentimes fundamentally parodic in nature implies understanding there is a distance between them and
their intermusical world. And to understand this distance as ironic is ultimately to question their identity as
actual cumbias, vallenatos, salsas, or champetas. But the question remains as to why these types of
inter textual or intermusical distances can be considered to be ironic.

When it comes to ironic occurrences, Bonds comments on how it’s common to encounter a
“juxtaposition of sincere sentiment and ironic distance,” whose location throughout the production-
reception spectrum is dependent on the nature of each particular case. (Bonds, 1991, p. 84) Allow me to
speculate a little around this thought. Without regards to the actual “intention” of the artists or musicians
involved (composer or otherwise), one could question the degree of sincerity in a particular musical
expression, solely from a listener’s perspective. As (or if) this question looms larger, the probability that
the listener perceives the expression as perhaps ironic increases. When, for example, Álvarez shouts
“para Colombia” (“to Colombial”) or “óyelo” (“hear it!”) at the beginning of “Son” by EPV, the sincerity of
the sentiment of these dedications is, to me, certainly doubtful. In fact, all of the onomatopoeic
expressions throughout the song seem to be performed with “ironic distance,” rather than “sincere
sentiment.” But why is this so? Linda Hutcheon’s (1995) views on the nature of irony are helpful in
addressing this question.

Hutcheon conceptualizes parody as “repetition with a difference.” In her view, parody implies “a
critical distance . . . between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a
distance usually signaled by irony,” thus generating what she calls “ironic ‘trans-contextualization’ and
inversion.” (cited in Monson, 1994, p. 290; emphasis added) She adds that irony in parody “can be playful
as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive,” finally stating that “the pleasure
of parody’s irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in
the intertextual ‘bouncing’ . . . between complicity and distance.” (Idem, emphasis added) First of all,
Hutcheon’s understanding makes us realize that it is perhaps not repetition but difference which signals
the type of ironic distance that can occur in a parodic exercise. In the case of Rolo ET, the level of
contrast between the pieces and their plausible intertexts is as big or perhaps even bigger than the
commonalities. The contrast is given by the type of mechanisms that, as seen in Chapters 2 and 3, are the ones perhaps responsible for qualifiers such as “alien” or “extraterrestrial” in relation to this music. The inclusion of widely contrasting musical languages and elements, or the oftentimes conscious amplification of what would otherwise be derived from “clumsy” or “unprofessional” playing, are ingredients that make the original intertext appear as caricatured within a bizarre (or even sometimes grotesque) ambience. In fact, Hutcheon’s “degree of engagement” might sometimes come loose, to the extent that the caricatured intertext gets lost, which could be understood as irony at its highest.

Álvarez, in fact, openly admits to the deceptive nature of some of his music, even though it is not entirely clear whether this deception results to a greater extent from the “ignorance” of certain listeners, or from the obscure and sui generis quality of the music’s sonic universe and the also obscure relationship between said universe and the visual aspects of the musical projects (whether we’re talking about the visual setup of a live performance or about the visual aesthetic of a recorded or animated video). Álvarez considers funny that certain people sometimes refer to a song by Meridian Brothers as “that interesting, weird salsa those boys play” (TroPs, 2016), when in fact the song’s rhythmic base corresponds to a completely different musical practice (a Colombian cumbia or bullerengue, for example). While the outfits, the instrumentation (timbre), the visual setup of the venue, and the general sonic atmosphere to some might yell “salsa!,” the music’s rhythmic structure “quietly,” yet decisively, asserts “cumbia.” Such a deceptive perception obviously depends, to a certain extent, on a listener’s level of expertise. Yet Álvarez stresses how this “deception” is actually more common than one might think, even with apparently “competent” listeners, i.e., listeners who have had experience with these types of music for long enough. In such cases, the configuration of irony escapes the listener, and becomes a sort of triumph for the musician. In Bonds’ words, in such cases “the listener becomes a victim of the composer’s wit, not an accomplice.” (1991, p. 84; emphasis added)

Apparently, then, it is indeed a fact that in some cases the “weird,” sonic or visual, elements of this music are bizarre enough that a certain parodic intent remains ungrasped, or “lost in translation,” if you will. In any case, the inclusion of elements that are decidedly contrasting with respect to the parodied texts—e.g., the discordant visual and sonic elements in “Salsa Caliente,” the Schoenbergsian atmosphere in “Son,” or the psychedelic-experimental temporal processes in “Vol. 5”—generate a distance that
transcends the homage, at the same time blurring the music’s identity, in terms of genre. So circling back to Hutcheon, I believe that through the nature of the elements of “difference” applied in its parodies, Rolo ET clearly takes a critical, ironic distance with respect to their intertextual world. This distance, however, doesn’t mean that there does not also exist a “sincere sentiment.” I believe that Bonds’ suggestion that “sincere sentiment” and “ironic distance” are oftentimes combined in ironic occurrences applies in the case of Rolo ET, both from the point of view of production and of reception. In other words, while singing like a vallenato or a salsa star or while fabricating an improvisational cumbia, Rolo ET members are both taking a distance from the original social meanings and uses of these popular musics (see Chapter 2), and sincerely enjoying them as part of their musical identity.

One final, alternative reading of these parodic exercises would understand the irony to be happening not necessarily with respect to the intertexts as such, but with respect to the outlandish musical elements that apparently aid in depicting those intertexts as caricatures. In other words, retaking the discussion on musical kitsch of Chapter 2, it might be that those popular, usually lowbrow, intertexts are being put alongside avantgarde, experimental musical techniques, so as to make a commentary about the snobbish attitude that places the latter above the former. The irony would be the actual non-sincerity of the avant-garde pose. Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in the middle. The parody cannot be meant to be sincere, either from the popular, lowbrow side of the spectrum, or from the avant-garde, experimental one. There is a double non-sincerity, expressed candidly through parodic exercises. In any case, the obscureness granted by the highly contrasting elements of difference and repetition in these parodies makes them distance themselves from the genres they are supposed to be parodying. Simply put, in these parodic pieces we are not hearing salsa, cumbia, or vallenato; we are not hearing twentieth century dodecaphonism or 1960s psychedelia; we are witnessing a commentary on those practices, which is why the practical relationships with these pieces are usually not straightforward. It is not clear whether one should dance, listen, comment, or whether one should listen to this music in the car, in a theater, or in a bar. The joke is, then, largely on us, the listeners.
Musical ‘Wrongness’ and ‘Weirdness’: putting the sounds out of context

According to Shapiro, literary texts present one of two main ironic strategies: "one dictates that a text is a bundle of arbitrary linguistic signs that can be joined together only on the basis of internal principles of coherence, and proceeds to uncover the flaws in that coherence. The other reduces everything to text, exorcising the presence of the world. Both make omnivorous claims for literariness. Both rhetorically point to a single meaning unit (or series of such units) with the addition of a negative stamp or qualifier that is supposed to displace or disorient the receiver of the message. *This kind of procedure allies irony and the grotesque in literature. In the grotesque one element is estranged from a certain posited norm and/or seen to contain unrelatable elements.*" (1985, p. 15; emphasis added) As we shall see, this description of the strategies and consequences of irony in literature—particularly with regards to the allegiance between irony and the grotesque—resonates emphatically with some of the observed phenomena in the studied music (sonically or otherwise).

At the beginning of the previous section, I briefly commented on the odd combination of the objects that appear together in the videoclip of Meridian Brother’s song “Salsa Caliente,” and which serve as stage decorations. Each one of them in isolation, or put in a different context, do not particularly stand out. What stands out here is the unconventionality of their appearance within the specific context of what would appear to be the flashy concert or gig of a salsa band, judging by the musicians’ apparel. Beyond possible readings of what these objects or their combination might mean, what interests me here is to point out how a set of objects put out of context, or, rather, put within a context in which they appear weird or unconventional, immediately puts into question the original (should we dare say lexical?) meaning of this context; what Giora et al. call the salient meaning. In the case of “Salsa Caliente,” judging from both the music and the overall (i.e., undetailed) visual setting, the salient meaning would be, once more, a flashy salsa concert. Yet the details of the decoration inevitably produce second interpretations, or, like in irony, possible secondary meanings. They produce, as it were, second guesses: is this a private party? Is the occasion the celebration of a Mexican holiday? Why is there a piano not being used within the context of a musical presentation? Might this presentation be part of a play? Why are there simultaneous references to ambiances as contrasting as a glamorous show and a domestic space? I believe that in the
music of Rolo ET, an analogous treatment of sonic elements produce a similar ambiguous effect. Such a
treatment thus puts into question the otherwise salient meanings of the various intermusical worlds found
in Rolo ET; meanings which—through a process of conventionalization—have been gradually
sedimenting themselves, thus making them less open to interpretation. In this sense, the visual example
of “Salsa Caliente” serves as a visual analog of a sonic configuration that tends to generate rhetorical
ambiguity due to the conscious “misplacement” or “highlighting” of musical events.

Now, in musical terms, the idea of “misplacement” is perhaps easier to understand. I have
already put forth various examples in the previous section that can be understood in such terms. For
example, the appearance of Schoenbergian harmonies and melodies within the context of a lowbrow,
Colombian vallenato could be easily conceived of as “misplacement.” I argued how this type of stylistic
“misplacement” helped to generate the type of distance that could be understood as ironic between the
two texts. And a similar idea will reappear in the following section within the context of the discussion
about troping and irony. In any case, such musical “misplacements” tend to generate gross contradictions
when the combined musical elements come from musical worlds so far apart from each other (in this
case, particularly in terms of “social” and “cultural” distance). Hatten emphasizes precisely the
appearance of contradiction as an essential element of irony, noting that a potential for interpretative
reversal is particular of this trope. In irony, according to the author, this reversal “rhetorically enhances the
intended meaning by the exaggeration of its opposite.” (Idem; emphasis added) Exaggerated musical
“misplacements” could thus be fulfilling this rhetorical role.

But what about the idea of “highlighting”? Does irony always need to occur via the exaggeration
of the opposite, as Hatten suggests? I believe that in Rolo ET, exaggeration of the opposite is not the only
tool used to enhance a secondary, intended or perceived, meaning. More subtly, a secondary meaning—
or at least the questioning of the primary salient meaning—is achieved in the form of an eccentric
highlighting of sonic bits of information that are usually mixed holistically in the experience of listening.
This “bringing to the fore” of diminute elements puts these elements out of context, yet not because they
don’t belong to that context (as in the case of “misplacement”), but rather because they either temporarily
abandon their traditional role, or are slightly tweaked in a manner that attracts attention. In other words,
the “highlighting” of certain musical elements is not usually expected within the stylistic context where
these elements traditionally appear. However, in Rolo ET these unusual musical events do not fully disassemble the general sense of the original experience, as it would be expected to happen. In Eco’s more semiotic terms, these processes create a disruption in the original code, but not fully dismantling it, this way allowing the code to serve as a horizon and thus provide the primary, salient meaning upon which irony operates.

If, as just mentioned, examples of musical “misplacement” had already been offered, albeit in the context of the discussion around ironic parody, examples of odd musical “highlighting” had also appeared previously, particularly in the exemplification of some of the musical treatments of tropicality in Chapter 2. In that context, the goal was to explain some of the recurrent ways in which musical idioms that are typical of tropical genres are musically re-worked in Rolo ET, so as to create its particular, allegedly oftentimes extraterrestrial, brand of sonic tropicality. Many of those techniques and corresponding musical exemplifications could be brought to bear on the present discussion, precisely because, in many cases, such techniques could be understood as ultimately achieving an uncanny highlighting of tropical musical idioms. This is a particularly accurate description in the case of the effects of rhythmic de-syncopations/regularizations or melodic de-tuning discussed in that chapter. The de-syncopation (or tendency towards regularization) of iconic rhythmic idioms of Caribbean tropical musics such as the *cinquillo* immediately puts such an event under the spotlight. Given the fact that, in many cases, the regularization is not taken to a literal extreme, rather constituting a generalized tendency, one could suppose that a listener knowledgeable of these musical worlds and their musical behavior would tend to “regularize” (which in this case would literally mean de-regularize) the quirky behavior. The uncanniness of such an effect relies precisely on the subtlety of transformation, so that the familiarity of the overall sonic ambience does not completely disappear. Álvarez’s thoughts, in this regard, are particularly insightful. Commenting on the use of standard, Western quintuplets in some of this music, Álvarez explicitly depicts it as a disrupted version of some of the typical rhythmic figures of Caribbean tropical music: “I think the quintuplet is like the Afro-Colombian clave. Afro-Colombian, Afro-Antillean, Afro-Caribbean… It’s a kind of “regularization” of that clave. It’s basically a caricaturization of this clave.” (NMC, 2015; TBA, emphasis added) In describing it as a caricature, Álvarez explicitly hints at the idea that the resource is meant in an ironic way.
Now, even if a large portion of the musical excerpts provided in Chapter 2 would suffice to exemplify the use of either musical “misplacement” or “highlighting,” as I have here construed them, a few additional examples will serve to further clarify their workings. Consider, for instance, the brief excerpt from “Me Meé en la Zebra” by Chúpame el Dedo, shown in Figure 27. Chúpame el Dedo’s particular sound world derives from the fact that the “band” is really just a duet. The timbral ambience consists of mostly electronically synthesized sounds, oftentimes joined by acoustic percussion instruments (most notably a drum set), all of which serve essentially as the accompaniment of a sometimes singing, sometimes reciting, and sometimes shouting voice (or voices). Throughout “Me meé en la zebra” (“I peed on the zebra”), whose rhythmic base resembles that of a champeta, the rhythm of the different musical lines—executed by drums, synthesizers, and voice—tends to be aligned as would be normally expected. The cited excerpt occurs within the context of what could be understood as an instrumental interlude in conventional terms. At this precise moment (minute 1’01 of the recording), the synthesized bass line starts to notably be displaced against a rhythmic base that continues to incessantly repeat the champeta-like groove. The displacement is, of course, only temporary, and so the phenomenon is fleeting. Technically speaking, the rhythmic “tweaking,” so to speak, appears to have been achieved synthetically, i.e., through an artificial slowing-down of the corresponding line. If one wanted to measure the specific rate at which the line was slowed down, the most approximate answer is that what used to be sixteenth notes now appear to be eighth note triplets. However, the ratio is just approximate, and so the effect of the displacement is particularly uncanny. We have, in sum, a regularized, displaced rhythm, within the context of an electronic champeta. A line that had been functioning normally within the proposed texture is suddenly highlighted, through a quirky behavior that could be easily mistaken for a performance error, if it wasn’t for the fact that we are actually dealing with the official recording of the song. It logically follows that such musical clumsiness is, as a matter of fact, consciously desired.
Figure 27. “Me meé en la Zebra” by Chúpame El Dedo (excerpt).

Figure 28 shows the main theme of Frente Cumbiero’s “Aguanegra,” as it appears around 1’31 into the recording. Here, the more or less straightforward melodic line, played by the accordion, is accompanied by musical lines that had not appeared before. The nature of this musical counterpoint is of particular interest here, because it once more evinces signs of slightly odd musical behaviors that I believe tend to catch the attention of the listener, partly because of the oddness per se, but partly also because of their novelty in the song’s texture. The music of Frente Cumbiero is perhaps the less—to use my own term—extraterrestrial one amongst the set of music I have here dubbed Rolo ET. Accordingly, the appearance of obviously quirky, ironic elements in its music is less plausible. This is perhaps the reason why Frente is the band within Rolo ET whose social function can be more clearly defined as pertaining to contexts of dance celebration. This is not to say that other bands do not appear in celebratory or party venues like, say, dance clubs, but it is a fact that the music of other Rolo ET projects is less conventionally conceived of as purely “dance” music. In “Aguanegra” we find, then, a special instance of a musical event that can be associated with the techniques I have been describing heretofore. In this excerpt in particular, we encounter two lines offering a bizarrely outstanding counterpoint to the original, rather standard main theme. On the one hand, there is a line of relatively long and paused notes, played by a significantly “cooked” synth that includes upward bends. On the other hand, there appears a line that juxtaposes long notes with rapid arpeggiations, played by a keyboard with a vintage, bell-like timbre. In both cases, but especially in the line played by the “cooked” synth, we find the phenomenon of displacement, amplified in this case by the de-tuning effect provided by the bending effect. Overall, these lines create a secondary temporal atmosphere that destabilizes what up to that point had been a rather squared cumbia. Because of the combination of the sudden sense of instability and the subtlety of the means by which it is achieved, the effect is again one of uncanniness. Both the overall cumbia code and
the specific “Aguanegra” code that has been established throughout the rest of the song are suddenly disrupted by these de-phasings. Whether these musical elements constitute a “misplacement” or a quirky “highlighting” is here less obvious, but since these counterpoints are new to the texture, and their novel timbres suddenly provide “Aguanegra” with a more electronic/psychedelic atmosphere, I believe “misplacement” would be a more adequate category.

Figure 28. “Aguanegra” by Frente Cumbiero: bizarre counterpoint

A propos Frente Cumbiero, the dub versions of this band’s themes, arranged and manipulated masterfully by dub legend Mad Professor, provide an interesting probing ground for the categories under discussion. Of course, in the case of Mad Professor’s versions, the issue of compositional intent by the members of the band is clearly resolved. Whatever musical effects arise in these versions are clearly a subproduct of the arrangement, and thus cannot be linked to Rolo ET’s musical style and aesthetic. Yet I find interesting that through the techniques of dubbing, the effect of musical “highlighting” becomes quite evident. And even if such effect is not intended here necessarily as ironic, it does create a distance with the original text and its original codes, so as to render an interpretation of irony possible. In Chapter 2, I used Frente’s “Chucusteady” in order to exemplify particular ways in which the formal process of repetition of melodic snippets, so typical of Caribbean musics, appear in the studied music. In “Chucusteady”’s dub version, Mad Professor chooses which line of the texture to highlight. Lines like the ones played by the clarinet and flute, which consist basically of ornamental trills, here are suddenly
brought to the foreground. If one is familiar with the original song, or even just with the typical wind arrangements of the musical traditions of the Colombian Caribbean, the sudden amplification of such ornamental lines produces a particularly uncanny effect. Apart from having been artificially put in the spotlight, these ornamental snippets appear now doubly ornamented, due to the inclusion of high levels of reverberation. This way, lines whose traditional role has them as secondary elements within the musical texture suddenly are in command of that texture, which puts them completely, albeit also deliciously, out of context with respect to the governing musical code.

As a final example, let us consider a couple of excerpts from “Salvemos Nuestro Folclor,” a puya (i.e., a sort of upbeat cumbia), by Los Pirañas. The title of the instrumental piece itself, “Let’s Save our Folklore,” seems to be a serious plea on an issue that, especially in certain sectors, tends to be quite sensitive and serious. Out of any given context, a verbal plea to save our folklore could be understood as being part of some sort of nationalist activism. And yet the sonic world of the song tends to question the actual meaning of the title, to say the least. At the start of the song, a synth with a hammond organ type of timbre and a clear vibrato plays an isolated F-major chord, followed by an electric guitar solo that serves as the introduction of the melodic material of the subsequent main “theme.” I purposely use scare quotes around the term theme, given its peculiar—one could say, almost anti-musical—characteristics. The theme, properly speaking, starts in the minute 0’11 of the recording, where the main ensemble (drums, bass, and guitar) starts playing together (see Figure 29).

![Figure 29. “Salvemos Nuestro Folclor” by Los Pirañas: main theme](image)
The theme and its introduction are both presented by an electric guitar whose careless sound and undercooked timbre gives one the impression that it is being played by a poor performer using unsophisticated technology. However, a closer look at the sonic characteristics of these guitar lines shows that—ironically—Los Pirañas have actually used state-of-the-art technology to generate such an unsophisticated ambience. An examination of the envelope of the attack shows that the initial stroke of the guitarist’s pick has been almost cancelled, and so the sound of each note appears barely off the actual place of the attack. Such an effect makes everything seem slightly displaced with respect to the metronomic beat of bass and drums. Additional to this displacement, all guitar pitches are slightly bent downwards (apparently due to both the performing technique and a synthetic effect). And so not only the rhythm, but also the tuning is approximate. Moreover, the melody of the theme is constantly wobbling and circling, showing no coherent direction or phrasing. The melodic fragments that constitute the theme appear in seemingly random fashion. Except for the occasional cinquillo, the rhythm of the melody is quite basic and squared, completely removed from the type of syncopated rhythms of the Caribbean genres that gives them their flavor. On the contrary, the rhythmic structure equals the theme to perhaps a dry technical exercise, and tends to communicate an immature, childish aura. In spite all of these irregularities and examples of “bad” musical construction, the speed at which these melodies are played is high enough so that these details—especially those concerning the displacement and de-tuning—are slightly lost, creating once more an uncanny effect. The brain of a given listener will probably attempt to “normalize” the experience, taking clues from the surrounding main codal ambience (tropicality) and aided by the speed. Even so, various elements are here oddly highlighted, so that they appear slightly out of context: the cinquillo within the context of an unexpectedly squared melody; the slightly displaced attacks, which would normally occur within the context of many popular musics and particularly tropical musics, but whose combination of artificiality and uncanny consistency puts them in the spotlight; the out-of-tuneness, which again is pervasive in, for instance, Colombian tropical musics, but whose artificial insistence, accompanied by the directionless melody, brings it to the fore in an uncomfortable way.

As for the idea of “misplacement,” a clear example in this piece is the appearance of the completely decontextualized F-major chord. In terms of musical structure and form, the element recurrently appears, in such a way that one could say it is formally motivic. It is part of the design of the
piece as such, and thus not necessarily decontextualized in formal terms. But in topical or codal terms, as well as in harmonic terms, this chord clearly transcends the governing ambience of the piece. Figure 30 shows an interlude towards the middle of the piece in which this chord from the introduction reappears, this time against the background of the ongoing puya. The bass is expressing an E (sometimes major, sometimes minor) harmony, which works almost as a pedal throughout large portions of the piece. Over this E center appears this trembling and echoing F-major chord, expressed through the bright color that is so distinctive of the hammond organ timbre. Its timbral garments and accompanying effects immediately index the psychedelic spectrum of Rolo ET’s sound world. In addition to the global codal contrast and the local harmonic clash, in this section the chord is attacked in irregular, seemingly random, fashion with respect to the governing meter and in constant crescendos. If there were an epitome in Rolo ET of the idea of musical “misplacing” I have been advancing, this chord could probably be it.

Figure 30. “Salvemos Nuestro Folclor” by Los Pirañas: interlude

Circling back to issue of the title, one can advert how such a sonic atmosphere and musical construction relate in uncomfortable, discordant ways with the original sense of the title as an activist plea, seeking to stand up for “our folklore.” If one were to avoid subtlety, one could easily offer an interpretation in which the sound world is doing exactly the opposite of what the title is demanding: it degrades folkloric roots through a consciously sought musical poorness, and fills the sonic space with musical outsiders. Of course, more subtle interpretations are, as always, in order. Perhaps one could understand the piece is offering a caricature of the current state of “our folklore,” from which we have to save it. Or perhaps the piece is a sonic drama representing the troubles of “our folklore.” In any case, even if the title is not considered, the sound world and sound mechanisms of the piece create a distance
with the topical or codal worlds it uses. It becomes a caricatured reference of those worlds. Through the decontextualization of otherwise conventional behaviors, this and other Rolo ET pieces generate a secondary meaning; a space between the referenced musical practices and its own practice, so as to create a *commentary*. In more theoretical terms, we have a scheme in which the semantic implications provided by the governing musical codes inhabiting the sounds in these pieces correspond to the salient meaning of the expression; in which mechanisms such as what I here have dubbed “highlighting” or “misplacing” correspond to the markers of irony; and in which the semantic dimension of the commentary that arises from the distance produced between the music and its intermusical world constitutes the secondary, contradictory meaning of the expression.

### Playing with codes: ironic troping in Rolo ET (or the case of hybridization as irony)

The expression “playing with codes” in the title of this section—which seeks to make explicit reference to Kofi Agawu’s musical semiotics classic *Playing With Signs*—alludes to the appearance of juxtapositions and/or superposition of musical codes (sometimes equated to genres) in Rolo ET, which could be understood as contradictory. The reading by which such code games might be understood as generating a contradiction—and thus constituting an irony—is possible thanks precisely to the culturally constructed semantic implications of said codes. Such an understanding ultimately allows one to re-interpret certain mechanisms of musical fusion, hybridization, troping or however one might like to call this sort of phenomenon, as potential tools for constituting musical irony.

The idea that *particular* combinations of codes can configure an ironic musical commentary comes directly from Hatten’s (1994) construal of musical irony. What I more generally here call “codes,” in his model are fully constituted musical topics. Musical topics materialize themselves in pieces through the appearance of their characteristic musical tokens (i.e., materialized musical signifiers, expressions, etc.), and in the case of Beethoven’s music—as understood by Hatten—they provide the semantic information necessary for the constitution of a certain expressive ambience. But since more than one topic can manifest itself in any given piece (either simultaneously or as a juxtaposition), at any given point one is usually more dominant, thereby dictating the overall expressive tendency at that precise moment. From
the interchanging dynamics between topics or topical ambiences, which he calls troping, Hatten derives expressive curves that yield what he calls expressive genres.

When the discussion specifically about musical irony comes, Hatten writes that “the operative level of irony must be interpreted in terms of the governing expressive genre,” later adding that “[i]t is the ability of a musical style to cue shifts in levels of discourse that helps support ironic reversal.” (Hatten 1994, pp. 184-85; emphasis added) Hatten, in other words, sees the possibility that instrumental music can express irony through a particular configuration of topical—or in more general terms, codal—troping. In more colloquial terms, in music, a particular interaction or conversation, if you will, of semantic dimensions governed by a particular musical code can produce the sort of semantic reversal that can be interpreted as irony. In Beethoven’s universe, “levels of discourse” are usually understood particularly in terms of the type of social hierarchies or scales implied by topical ambiences. But since oftentimes the codes constructed around musical practices are actually based upon associations of the sounds with a social sphere, including, of course, its set of values, I believe the argument can be extrapolated to various musical practices outside the realm of Classical Western music.

For the sake of exemplifying in more concrete ways how one could more generally understand this idea of “troping” and its potential ironic implications, allow me to first use a visual example taken from the Rolo ET world. Figure 31 shows a photo collage of Romperayo, which has become an icon of the band in Rolo alternative circles. The background of the image is a photograph of a street of a traditional, (nowadays) middle-class neighborhood of Bogota, which is located relatively close to the downtown of the city. In the background of this picture you can see some of Bogota’s iconic eastern hills, and more to the front some more recent commercial buildings. In the foreground appear the four members of the band sitting down, dressed in just swimsuits, and holding seemingly random objects and musical instruments. That the image is constructed as a collage is evident. Not unlike many musical examples already examined, the technical skill of whoever put the visual collage together is actually not very good. On the contrary, it is visibly poor. As with the music, such evident carelessness is not derived from lack of skill; it is most probably intended.
Now, aside from quality, the technique of collage already speaks of a combination of sorts. Visually speaking, it oftentimes combines dissimilar images, with different meanings, and from different—sometimes even contradictory or opposite—contexts. Bogota (as I suppose is the case with many other cities) is in itself particularly and chaotically collagistic. A glance at the background photograph is but a small proof of that fact. But what is more obviously discordant in this image is the relationship between place and people. Bogota is a cold city (judged by local, tropical standards). Costeño\textsuperscript{s} from the Caribbean region of the country actually refer to it as “la nevera,” i.e., “the fridge.” And so encountering such an exotic and apparently relaxed clan of people, dressed in swimsuits, right in the middle of Bogota’s streets would be, to say the least, surprising. It would probably produce a chuckle or two. But the point here is that the two main images of the visual collage—the metropolitan city and the beach guys—have fundamentally discordant semantic implications, which are nurtured by underlying cultural codes. Here we have an example of a particular, simultaneous use of contrasting visual codes that allow for a reading that interprets the image as ironic (at least at some levels).

This visual example would obviously correspond to a simultaneous kind of troping, given we are not dealing with a motion picture. In music, such simultaneous troping would theoretically be occurring

\textsuperscript{191} Taken from http://www.freim.tv/escucha-aqui-el-nuevo-lp-de-romperayo/
whenever there exists a fusion of languages, but with a minimum distance between each other so as to allow a reading wherein one is interpreted as a commentary on the other. This is an important distinction, because most musics can be understood as fusions, and many of them are not ironic in nature. In the case of Rolo ET’s music, I believe it is precisely the type of bizarreness that sometimes emerges from such fusions—for example through either of the two techniques just described in the previous section—which allows for the double-layered interpretation that is the sign of irony. And naturally, the consideration of extramusical elements such as interviews, visual resources, and lyrics also provide ample support for this type of reading.

Now, in the section about parody above, I have already put forth some examples in which the simultaneous use of contrasting musical codes can be understood as the main dynamic that allows for the configuration of irony to happen (whether at the production or the reception level). A particularly eloquent example was the expressive clash generated in EPV’s “Son,” by the appearance of atonal, modernist techniques within the topical ambience of a typical Colombian vallenato of the 1990s. And of course, the very nature of the concept of musical “misplacement” discussed throughout the previous section would fall under a category of simultaneous troping. The excerpt with the F-major chord in “Salvemos Nuestro Folklor” constitutes another eloquent example of such simultaneous troping. In fact, many of the musical examples included in all the three intermediate chapters could be re-examined so as to advance an inquiry about whether an ironic intent or reading could be plausible, either of them deriving from a particular fusion of musical languages and their respective codes.

But what about musical irony derived from the juxtaposition of musical codes (or perhaps a combination of both)? Before exemplifying the possible workings of this model in Rolo ET and its plausible interpretations, allow me to first tackle the critical issue of the hierarchy of these codes within a given piece. Whether the ironic reversal is produced by a musical commentary that occurs synchronically with the other code or one that occurs diachronically, it is important to bear in mind that, as Hatten adverts, the interpretation of that reversal must be done with regards to a given horizon. In the context of Hatten’s analyses, that horizon is, as mentioned before, the governing expressive genre of the piece. Of course, Hatten’s construal implies that the musical piece is able to produce a sort of expressive narrative. While one could pursue a similar line of argument with respect to at least some of Rolo ET’s music, I find
it unnecessary. One can take the gist of Hatten’s argument and talk about the governing aura of a given piece, or a given fragment of the piece. In most cases, the sonic ambience is governed by its tropical aura. In more colloquial terms, this means that most songs or pieces of the repertoire are usually heard as cumbias, porros, champetas, puyas, salsas, boogaloos, etc, instead of as blues, hard rock, trance, or art music. Of course, this music falls within a spectrum in which this categorization is sometimes absolutely clear, and sometimes it becomes ambiguous. And, as we shall see, many excerpts within the songs or pieces musically shift in structural ways, so as to now be understood as expressing another genre. This last phenomenon is precisely the type of diachronic codal combination that can sometimes produce ironic effects. In such cases, the appearance of the generic “shift” is analogous to Hatten’s idea of “shifts in levels of discourse.” What—in the context of Rolo ET—could the meaning of the term “levels” be, must of course be at least preliminarily addressed, which I will now do in relation to a few musical examples.

"Josefina" by Chúpame El Dedo and “Vol. 5” by El Ombligo both present overall musical behaviors that pertain in a particularly eloquent manner to the idea of ironic troping by juxtaposition. “Vol. 5” has already been discussed, in Chapter 3, with regards to the appearance of complete sonic dissolution as an eloquent analogue of the type of dissolution reported to happen in psychedelic experiences (see Figures 21 and 22); and in the present chapter, with regards to its intertextual, arguably ironic, relation with “Cumbia Sampuesana.” Alongside “Josefina,” this piece now serves to exemplify the type of shifts between musical codes, which can be seen to configure the type of reversal that allows for irony to emerge. Figures 22 and 33 present annotated formal layouts/timelines of “Vol. 5” and “Josefina,” respectively, which show how in the formal processes of both pieces there are permanent shifts of the governing codal ambience. These shifts occur more gradually in “Vol. 5” and more unexpectedly in “Josefina,” the latter type producing a much more disconcerting, or perhaps comical, effect (not unlike the one produced by the visual collage of Romperayo presented above). As seen in the examples, the genres alluded to in “Vol. 5” are fundamentally cumbia and classical, psychedelic rock (though with a beat more associated with later rock styles like hard or glam rock); while in “Josefina”, the two main ambiences consist of champeta and punk rock (or to some, perhaps, a certain substyle of heavy metal). Of course, many other musical elements, which do not have a profound incidence in terms of the genre of the piece,
decorate the corresponding governing codal ambience generating allusions to still other musical worlds, such as EDM (in "Josefina" particularly techno) or experimental or free jazz. Such elements could also be interpreted as making a commentary with regards to the predominant code, but my interest here is centered around the significance of the appearances of straightforward rock-like sections within the imperant tropical ambience.

Figure 32. “Josefina” by Chúpame El Dedo: 1) Champeta Section vs 2) Punk Section.
“Vol. 5” and “Josefina” are examples in which both the governing or imperant codes and the shifts of discourse are particularly clear. “Satanás” by Meridian Brothers, on the other hand, presents a different picture (see Figure 34). While one could correctly argue that the rhythmic groove tends to generically resemble that of cumbia, it does not do so emphatically or decidedly. In fact, this would be a pretty “watered-down” cumbia, so to speak. This tendency is provided by the percussion section, which tends to subtly emphasize the offbeats in the manner of a cumbia. On the other hand, because of the low-beat tempo and the timbral and acoustic characteristics of the ensemble as a whole—hammond- and church-type organs, electric (probably synthesized) bass, significant levels of reverberation, clean tenor voice, psychedelic electric guitar (in some excerpts)—this slight emphasis in the offbeat might also be associated with reggae music. At first instance, then, “Satanás” appears to be missing a clear predominant genre and its associated codal implications.

When the principal melody is considered, which in a homophonic song like this one constitutes one of the most salient musical elements, the issue of the predominant code becomes even more ambiguous. We are confronted with a melody with a weird rhythmic combination of constant, regular figures followed by irregularly syncopated ones. While one could argue that the syncopated sections would reinforce a possible tropical ambience, the fact is that the rhythmic combination as a whole, together with the fact that a great majority of each phrase sits on just one note, suggests something like a recitative-type of melody. One can, in fact, notice that the rhythm responds largely to the prosodic accents of the verbal phrases, just like a recitative tends to do. Finally, because the phrases tend to begin with a rising gesture that then rests on a single note, just like psalmodic recitations of the Gregorian chant repertoire work, there is also a suggestion that this could be a sort of hymn or sacred declamation. The rest of the harmonic and melodic accompaniment, which here plays more of an ornamental role, complicates the picture further. Timbre-wise, the type of organs used might index psychedelia, but the playful, detached (i.e., staccato) manner in which they are played, in my mind creates associations with other musical and social contexts like fairs, circuses, or even sports venues. This type of allusions implies a semantic space whose general categories speak of concepts like childhood or children, and celebration or games.
Figure 33. “Josefina” by Chúpame el dedo. Formal timeline.

- **Intro** (0'00)
- **Theme** (0'05) - Analogous to psychedelic chaos (dysphonic version, not enlightening)
- **Interlude** (0'19)
- **Theme** (0'37) - Punk beat
- **Theme** (0'55) - Punk/Metal
- **Re-Intro** (1'13)
- **Interlude** (1'30)
- **Theme** (1'35) - Cut Cumbia
- **Cumbia** (1'40)
- **Interlude** (1'58)
- **Theme** (2'06) - Cut Cumbia
- **Cut Cumbia** (2'25)
- **Theme** (2'43)

- **Solo Synth and Bass**
- **Synth and Bass** + Percussion + Voice
- **Punk beat**
- **Synth 2 (treble)**
- **Voice**
- **Voice**
- **Voice**
- **Voice**

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Figure 34. “Satanás” by Meridian Brothers: strophe theme

Under this view, the initial sonic world of “Satanás” can thus be described as highly surreal and semantically ambiguous. The simultaneous combination of elements are here fused in such a way that it would be difficult to ascribe the roles of governing code and side commentary. As for the diachronic disposition of codes, we find instrumental sections in which the predominating role of the electric guitar (whose improvisational gestures somewhat stylistically resemble the theme of “Salvemos Nuestro Folclor”) tend to highlight the psychedelic aspect of the overall ambience. We also find sections in which the percussion instruments disappear, this way highlighting the declamatory/ritual aspect of the original
reciting melody. Most of the song, however, consists of repetition of the main strophe (shown in the example). The shifts of level are here, if existent at all, quite subtle.

This semantic ambiguity of the song, in which no shifting cue is decisive, makes the appearance of the last, decidedly celebratory, section of the song a strikingly meaningful event. Here—over the repetitive, minimalistic base that up to this point tends to create a sort of hypnotic effect—appears a set of wind instruments and what seem to be onomatopoeic shouts, a sonic ambience that clearly reference the type of celebratory revelry that characterizes many festive, carnivalesque occasions in Colombia. Because of the subtle allusion to cumbia of the rhythmic base, the shouts and music of these wind instruments are immediately associated with the famous tradition of the porro band, which originated in the town of San Pelayo, Cordoba, located in the Caribbean region of Colombia. What had been a mere suggestion of cumbia, now appears clearly defined as wind band porro. And suddenly also the subtle suggestions of celebration, fair, and circus find their materialization in the carnivalesque ambience of the typical festive occasions where band porros are usually played. This submission of the song’s sonic world into the ambience of a tropical carnival provides the type of reversal shift suggested by Hatten. In this case, the commentary seems to be directed at the more solemn, declamatory melody, which had seemed to subdue under its aura all other elements. In this case, the synchronic combination of contrasting musical codes needed the perplexing juxtaposition of a porro carnival, so as to decidedly make its point. Grotesque partying, in the end, produced a stunning reversal of, or commentary on, the previous sacred chanting. I shall return to the possible ultimate meaning of the codal dynamics in “Satanás” in the last chapter. For now, suffice to say that the gist of Hatten’s ideas of ironic troping can also find a place within the context of the music of Rolo ET.

But if the irony in “Satanás” pertains partying versus solemnity, what about the juxtapositions found in “Vol. 5” and “Josefina”? Is cumbia “opposed” to psychedelia? To futurism, aliens, space, galaxies? To EDM? And if so, in what manner? In Hatten, oftentimes the ironic reversal pertained not only the semantic dimensions of topics with respect to the narrative curve of the piece, but also the formal function of a given passage. Syntactic considerations, which could also be understood as configuring a musical code, were in other words also significant to any given hermeneutic reading. In the present discussion about Rolo ET’s music, the condition of functional location or process is absent, or at least not
considered in the sense used by Hatten. However, we might think of location or process, not in terms of a formal procedure within a work, but rather in terms of the use of certain music or sets of musics. For example, we might consider how, in general, there is the view that, in their original context, rock and roll and related genres grew in opposition to dance music genres such as disco or later house. Even more generally speaking, in other words, there are musical worlds associated with dance and celebration and musical worlds associated with a different type of experience that precludes dance. Moreover, dance and celebration are seen, in particular contexts or from certain ideological points of view, as more superficial or, inversely, less profound. Even within dance musics there sometimes exists that distinction. In Chapter 2 I showed, for example, how intellectual salsa fans tended to despise and dispose of chucu chucu as a superficial music that served as futile escapism, robbing people of their critical consciousness. Likewise, from the point of view or rock fans, dance music genres are seen as uncritical and superficial. In this sense, the gradual or sudden appearance of rock-related genres within a tropical piece of music generates a particular type of contrast, which could be read as either a degrinatory or, on the contrary, a laudatory commentary about tropical music. In any case, from the point of view of the codified associations of these musical worlds, rock and tropical music—within the context of the same piece—seem to constitute opposites. There are also ways in which to understand them as similars, a point to which I will return in the concluding section.

We have, in sum, a model of musical irony that presupposes the existence of communally constructed codes of signification; a model, moreover, wherein the musical discourse is understood as able to “shift” between “levels of discourse,” so as to hypothetically configure ironic reversals; and, finally, a model wherein the occurrence of such reversals, and of irony in general, must be judged or interpreted with regards to what in his construal Hatten names “the governing expressive genre,” and I here have adapted as the governing codal ambience, of a given musical piece. In the end, given how different accounts of musical irony describe it from the standpoint of expressive dissonance emanating from codal interaction (like for instance that of Hatten, who rigorously studies the phenomenon in the music of Beethoven from a semiotic perspective, or that of Byron, who more intuitively describes it according to his own practice and the one surrounding him), one could eventually think of extrapolating the observations made around the music of Rolo ET, so as to more generally probe them within different types of
repertoires or musical traditions. Perhaps it is at the level of solidly constituted Ecoian musical codes that irony could arise generically in music. In this sense, musical codes—especially when constituting musical topics in their own right—would be the closest musical analogue of the so called “lexical meanings” of the verbal languages (see above). Of course, since in music all such codes are always first contextually constructed, there can’t be any pure “lexical meaning” properly speaking. However, the more over-codified a musical code becomes, the more it resembles a “lexical meaning,” due to the ever growing degree of conventionalization it suffers.

V. Metamusical Ironies: Rolo ET’S Postmodern Version of Romantic Irony

By way of an epilogue, and before offering some final thoughts about the contents developed throughout the chapter, I will briefly comment on how in Rolo ET—beyond the specificities of the music per se—one can read a particular kind of irony that springs from the movement’s overall aesthetic approach, and that I believe can be related with the concept of Romantic irony. Rolo ET’s aesthetic approach is here essentially conceived of in terms of the stance that its members have towards the intermusical worlds they use, as it emanates both from their overt ideological position and from what my analysis of their musical approach implies in this respect. Also crucial in this discussion are, once more, the sets of culturally constructed meanings of the different intermusical worlds found within Rolo ET, as they are defined by the semantic spaces of their corresponding sets of codes. As we shall see, the combination of Rolo ET’s musical aesthetic and performance practices tends to create a twofold experience for the consumer of their music, one in which their music can be taken at face value and another one in which it can be seen as a commentary on the various musical traditions involved thereof. As such, the second, more reflective, experience tends to produce a kind of self-consciousness on the part of the listener, who once submerged in this secondary dimension is not able to engage with the music in the traditional way. This sort of musical commentary on music itself—this meta-music, if you will—relates intimately with the notion of Romantic irony. But what exactly is Romantic irony?

According to Hatten (1994, p. 173), of the fifteen types of irony listed by Douglas Colin Muecke in Irony and the Ironic (1970; Methuen, pp. 8-13), two of them—dramatic irony and Romantic irony—have
had a significant role in music. The first type of irony occurs when in a dramatic context, there is an obvious difference between the actual versus the pretended expressive state or intentions of a character. Romantic irony, on the other hand, "moves beyond the figurative trope, or even sustained dramatic irony, to the level of the author’s (composer’s) detachment and self-critical consciousness, not only from writing (composing) but from life as well" (Idem, p. 174), As Hatten observes, Romantic irony is thus a highly serious type of irony, which embodies and exhibits a highly critical perspective of life and art. In Hatten’s words, "irony is inflated to a kind of cultural trope at the level of philosophical contemplation." (Idem) In more technical, perhaps less transcendental, terms, Bonds distinguishes between the traditional sense of irony, which is that of "saying one thing and meaning another" versus that of Romantic irony, in which "artworks overtly call attention to their own techniques of artifice." (Bonds, 1991, pp. 67-68) Bonds adverts how "a work can be interpreted either at face value or as a comic commentary upon itself," the latter of which "points specifically to the technique of irony." (p. 67; emphasis added) Later in his discussion, Hatten likewise defines the concept as a "self-conscious awareness and commentary on the work as it emerges, either compositionally (as creative act) or temporally in performance (as ongoing discourse)." (1994, p. 202)

Now, instrumental music seldom represents in any obvious way something we might actually find in the real world. In this sense, instrumental music cannot produce the type of illusion that, for instance, theater—with its greater and more specific capability of representation—might produce. Because of its ineffable quality, instrumental music cannot easily express irony in terms of specific referentiality. Here is where Bonds reminds us of a particular kind of illusion—the concept of "aesthetic illusion"—which talks about a particular kind of state that is voluntarily sought and achieved by the art spectator. Accordingly, for Bonds "the concept of ‘aesthetic illusion’ refers not to specific qualities within the art-work itself, “but to the attitude of the beholder that culminates in a willing suspension of the consciousness of one’s physical presence before a work of art” (1991, p. 81; emphasis added). In the artistic practice of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, Romantic irony is thus understood as a resource through which the artificiality of a work of art is brought to the conscience of an audience, this way undermining the aesthetic illusion that presupposes the ideal artistic of the time. In reference to the music of Joseph Haydn, Mark Evan Bonds explains it as follows: “within a broader aesthetic context, [the techniques used by Haydn] were
perceived to undermine the traditional premise of aesthetic illusion, thereby creating a sense of ironic
distance between the work and the listener” (1991, p. 57). Hence the idea of artworks “overtly [calling]
attention to their own techniques of artifice.” (pp. 67-68)

While we can’t properly speak of Romantic irony in the artistic work of Rolo ET, there is a
conceptual substratum of both Hatten’s and Bonds’ understanding that could be applicable in the Rolo
tropidelical context. Consider, for instance, Bonds’ characterization of Romantic irony as one that
“precludes the traditional suspension of disbelief on the part of the [listener],” which in turn “undermines
the basic pretense of aesthetic illusion” necessary for an adequate experience of art. (Bonds, 1991, p. 69;
emphasis added) The social function and aesthetic foundation of the artistic activities of the Rolo
tropidelical movement are clearly different from those of the elite artworks typical of the eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century Western-European world, to which this idea of Romantic irony is clearly more
applicable. However, one might think of analogs in the Rolo tropidelical context for both the “aesthetic
illusion” and the “traditional suspension of disbelief” of the listener, or—in more general terms—of the
“experiencer” of the music.

In the context of a party, for instance, an illusion might not arise specifically in relation to the
“artistic objects” that are being experienced (as is the case with aesthetic illusion), but rather in relation to
the activity itself (i.e., the party) within the larger context of a person’s life. In Colombia, parties—and by
extension, the music associated with them—tend to function as carnivals, i.e., as a pause or recess from
“ordinary” life. They temporarily suspend the quotidian flux of everyday life. Ideally, then, there arises the
illusion of a worriless, ever-festive life. In this case, suspended is the common disbelief that such type of
life is in fact possible. Yet, having established a possible analogy between different types of “illusions”
and “disbeliefs,” the question remains as to how an irony somewhat analogous to the Romantic irony of
nineteenth-century Europe can be seen to be working in the music of Rolo ET.

Both in Colombia and abroad, most live performances of Rolo tropidelical bands occur within the
context of a party or festive occasion (mostly public or semi-public venues such as bars, discos, clubs,
etc.). Moreover, as seen especially in Chapter 2, a significant part of their intermusical world comes from
a tropical repertoire that is conventionally associated with parties or festive environments, and part of
which has contributed to the creation of what Hernández (2015) calls the topic of costeño joy. Moreover,
as suggested by the use of qualifiers such as “alien,” “extraterrestrial,” or “robotic,” other sonic components in the music of Rolo Tropidelia either allude to, or quite simply rely on, techniques originated in the world of electronic (i.e., non-human) music. The fact that these techniques have become a quasi-global index of electronic dance music (commonly known as simply EDM) and its particular festive environments, immediately enables an association between Rolo ET and these other, not particularly tropical, party worlds. On the other hand, the relationship established in Chapter 3 between Rolo ET and psychedelia (widely understood as a modern countercultural trope), generates a different type of large-scale association. In some senses, however, the psychedelic experience also speaks of a state of interruption from, or contrast to, what is understood as “everyday” life in the modern West. Even if in different ways, and with different (philosophical) implications, the tropical and electronic party worlds and the psychedelic experience all create the momentary illusion that a different, more pleasurable and/or spiritual life is possible.

However, the particular ways in which these diverse worlds are treated in Rolo ET through different media (sonic, visual, verbal, etc.) suggest an ironic distance not unlike the one described as Romantic irony. In other words, one can trace a gulf between the sonic, visual, and verbal discourse of Rolo ET projects, the performance practice of its bands, and the illusory experiences evoked by its constitutive intermusical worlds. Precisely because of the ironic distance suggested by their musical treatment of these intermusical worlds, a given “experiencer” might not automatically navigate the musical experience as it is traditionally experienced by the typical consumers of the referenced musics. Even if on a dance floor at a certain urban dance club, the uncanniness of the music might temporarily make a certain dancer to “zone out,” as it were, of the typical experience of the dance floor. Allow me to complement the argument with an anecdote. Informally talking about these musical projects, a fellow colleague once recognized that it was impossible for her to “party” with their music, even if the music—primarily because of the predominance of tropical elements—was supposed to play the role of precisely animating parties. She commented how she got distracted by all the “little noises” that appeared here and there, and so for her the listening experience was closer to that of an avant-garde concert than that of a tropical party.
My colleague’s anecdotic account resonates with the following anecdotic account about the first concerts of EPV, this time by Galeano:

The concerts we did at Javeriana, in Pablo VI… For example, there was a part of a piece where, out of nowhere, we started to make a countdown from 10 to 1 in order to celebrate the new year, right?… Like a [new-year’s eve] family party… In any case, we started screaming “Happy New Year!” like in May, right?, a concert in May!!… And we threw an enormous amount of balloons from the fourth floor of [the building]… Like a shower of 200 balloons all over us… And that is part of the social [aspect], more so than of the musical [one]... so of course [the festive Christmas tradition] had something to do…

(TroPs, 2016; TBA)

Galeano’s anecdote confirms on the one hand the essential theatrical spirit of much of this music, and on the other hand the fact that the social practices surrounding these musics are being commented upon, precisely as if it was part of a play, instead of being reproduced by them as part of a linear heritage.

Of course, one must suppose that this type of double experience of the music—one real, one reflective—does not actually happen to the majority of what I have called “experiencers.” And the type of distance between the experience and the reflection on it will vary from band to band, or project to project. The point is, however, that most of this music has the ability to point towards itself and its constituent elements, at the same time that it is pretending to serve the function that the musics of its constituent elements have traditionally played. Hence the idea of a possible twofold experience, one in which an “experiencer” is absorbed by the experience (as it should supposedly be), and another one in which this sort of “party illusion” or “escapist illusion” collapses, in a manner analog to the collapse of the “aesthetic illusion” of Romantic irony. Be it as it may, the fact is that through the innovative forces and peculiar musical treatments in their music, Rolo ET is certainly participating in the creation of alternative modes of experiencing these musics. This way, it contributes to a gradual shift of the established musical codes, associating new listening and partying experiences to these sounds. According to Shapiro, one of two main ironic strategies presented by literary texts is the one that “dictates that a text is a bundle of arbitrary
linguistic signs that can be joined together only on the basis of internal principles of coherence, and proceeds to uncover the flaws in that coherence. (1985, p. 15; emphasis added) In general, I find an uncanny resemblance of some of Rolo ET’s allegedly ironic procedures with the strategy described by Shapiro. Perhaps one of the (perhaps unintended) consequences of some of the music of Rolo ET is that it “uncovers the flaws” in the apparent coherence of the musical codes it uses and references. In such a deconstruction, Rolo ET members have fun making fun of fun.

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What to say, ultimately, about what irony actually means in Rolo ET, or, alternatively, about the meaning of the emergence of irony in the context of Rolo ET? Common interpretations of irony’s purpose in the current postmodern context (which to Hatchen are full of interpretative pitfalls) tend to understand irony variously as critique, as counter-culture, as entropy, chaos, or anarchism, as deconstruction, or as nostalgia, amongst others. All these interpretations imply the existence of a “hegemonic” culture, whether real or imagined (Hebdige, 1976; Slobin, 1992). While one could see how many of these nowadays conventional interpretations could make sense in the case of Rolo ET and the emergence of irony thereof, there are other interpretations that I see particularly fitting to this case. We could imagine that irony constitutes a fundamental component in the search for building a particular niche of consumers. In this sense, irony could be conceived of as strategic marketing, or as a trademark of “alternativeness.” More romantically, that is, beyond or outside purely commercial considerations, one could also think that irony is an essential creative force driving this artistic enterprise.

Yet one that particularly convinces me is the reading according to which irony is meant to function as a veil. The distance from the intermusical world that is provided by irony is, in a sense, a distance that prevents these musicians from making a passionate or dogmatic aesthetic or ideological commitment to these musics. Brackett speaks of a type of parody he dubs blank parody, where there is “no hint of deprecation or homage.” (2002, p. 218) In this understanding of irony in Rolo ET, parodic intertextual references, whether to a particular piece or to the general code of a particular intermusical world, are not necessarily meant to deprecate or to pay tribute. They are perhaps more a way of commenting on the
sticky issues of authenticity and identity. Grossberg comments how in the 1980s, in postmodern pop there emerged a form of authenticity that has “increasingly become a self-conscious parody of the ideology of authenticity, by making the artificiality of its construction less a matter of aesthetics and more a matter of image-marketing. . . . Authenticity is seen as just another style.” (1993, p. 203) By engaging straightforwardly in parodic expressions, by producing parody in obvious, oftentimes grotesque, ways, or by “mimicking parody” blatantly; Rolo ET appears to play a twofold game in which, on the one side there is seemingly a call to embrace identitary traditions for the sake of authenticity (e.g., “we were born here, we should listen to, and play, our stuff”), yet on the other side—as the opposite (i.e., ironic) meaning—there is a critique to this same idea (e.g., “hey people, all authenticity is constructed and thus artificial”). After all, Rolo ET members seem to be saying that authenticity is, in the end, a theatrical exercise, even if most of the times it occurs at an unconscious level. So we encounter Álvarez singing as Emilio Díaz in some of his songs, or as Cheo Feliciano in others. Rolo ET seems to be saying: “who are we, but a sum of reproducible codes, anyway? Which reproductions are quintessentially more authentic? Let’s embrace our traditions simply because we enjoy them. But most importantly, let’s play, and have fun with them, avoiding the trap of understanding this embracing as a moral superiority.” As Grossberg says, new cultural formations tend to stress the fact that all authenticity is valid, yet at the same time illusory: “the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge and admission of your inauthenticity.” (Idem, p. 206)

Shapiro considers that irony is actually a way of life. For her, irony “denotes an entire Weltanschauung.” (Shapiro, 1985, p. 6) Galeano’s comments on his and his friends’ approach to life might confirm that the irony inhabiting their musical projects might actually come from a way of living: “[our music has] a kind of approach in the ironic, in the humorous, which is part of our culture, of the idiosyncrasy of the Colombian people… [This] was also something that hooked us: the joke… For instance, Pedro Ojeda, who is the other partner with whom we’ve worked so much… well, he’s a guy that comes a lot from, like, theater… and aside from that, he’s a very funny character… This topic of the joke, of humor, of irony, has been very present amongst us at all levels: when we gather around to have a beer or when we gather around to make music.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA, emphasis added)
One interpretation about the possible meaning of irony in Rolo ET remains still to be discussed. For Bonds, irony can be “an expression of disdain for the world,” (Bonds, 1991, p. 63) and for Hatten, “an easy refuge for the disenchanted.” (Hatten, 1994, p. 173) In the next and last chapter, I will advance a hermeneutic reading comparing and contrasting Rolo ET with perhaps the most internationally famous, recent development of Colombian tropical music: tropipop. In that context, Rolo ET irony will be interpreted as a particular commentary—as precisely an expression of disdain and disenchantment—with regards to certain aspects of the recent political history of Colombia. This way, I will attempt to propose a reading of the phenomenon of Rolo ET, seeking to ground the analytical observations about their music, now in relation to the wider, yet also specific, context in which the phenomenon emerged and developed. I hope to show that, ultimately, the meaning of “making fun of fun” in Rolo ET might actually and ironically be a critique of a colombianness that is mythically depicted as “joyful no matter what.” Rolo ET’s “fun,” in other words, deconstructs this myth and exposes it as being merely a hypnotic and escapist, tropical joy.
THE ALIENATION OF JOY: FROM THE MAGICAL REALISM OF “THE LAND OF FORGETFULNESS” TO THE PSYCHEDELIC UGLYISM OF THE TROPICS OF OBLIVION

“I think artists must have [the political implication of art] present. Oftentimes [you hear]: ‘art for art, music for music, sound, drum.’ No, the drum is a political thing, the marimba is a political thing, the electric guitar is a political thing, using a violin is a political thing.”

Mario Galeano

“In the midst of bullets, we shall party on.”

Luis Fernando Valencia

I. Introduction

The sentence that serves as the second epigraph to the present chapter corresponds to the title of a little piece for guitar duet that I wrote with a friend during the early 2000s. Around that time, I remember having traveled abroad for a little over a year and, while away, having thought with particular intensity about the situation of Colombia, my country of origin. The peculiar intensity was probably due to the distance and longing produced by being away, as well as to the type of perspective this distance and longing tends to provide. In the early 2000s, under the leadership of president Andrés Pastrana, the government of Colombia had embarked upon a peace negotiation with the left-wing guerrilla group, FARC, in yet another attempt at ending the armed conflict that this guerrilla and Colombian state had been fighting since the 1960s. Colombia was once more attempting, in other words, to finally end the cycle of violence that had become customary in recent times.

192 The original title of the piece in Spanish is “En medio de las balas seguiremos rumbeando.”
The 1980s and 1990s had been particularly violent decades. In the 1980s, Colombia had been witness of a brutal terrorist urban war that had been triggered by the drug cartels, as a way of fighting the attempts by the government of the time of legalizing the extradition of drug lords like the infamous Pablo Escobar to the United States. After many years of barbaric violence and intense persecution, Escobar was finally killed in Medellin, in 1993. His demise was received with hope by a majority of Colombians. Escobar’s death was supposed to constitute the final fall of the Medellin cartel, a fall which was thought to end at last with the violence suffered for so many years. The expectation was partially fulfilled, though unfortunately only in the big urban centers of the country. For throughout the 1990s, violence in the rural areas of the country actually intensified and grew barbaric. This intensification was partly due to the failure of the peace talks that had taken place between the government and FARC in the early 1990s, which had led that guerrilla group to escalate the conflict. On the other hand, levels of violence had also soared because of the growth and strengthening of paramilitary groups that, in the face of the abandonment by the government of many parts of the national territory, had decided to take in their own hands the fight against the leftist guerrillas, producing tragic massacres throughout the country.

By the beginning of the 2000s, Colombia was on the verge of being a failed state. FARC and AUC (the acronym that identified the national army of paramilitary groups at the time\textsuperscript{193}) controlled large portions of the territory. Both groups financed themselves mainly through drug trafficking. These armed groups had gradually become the greatest drug cartels of the world, filling the vacuum that the demise of the strong drug cartels of the 1980s and early 1990s had left. Colombian citizens like myself had become accustomed to seeing all sorts of violent acts and massacres on the daily news. Within this gloomy perspective, Pastrana’s peace negotiations appeared to be a sort of last resort; a last chance at reconciliation. When the negotiations failed early in 2002, the majority of the country fell into rage and despair. Initiating a ferocious military offensive against groups outside the law like FARC and AUC seemed to be the only option left, with yet another cycle of intensification of violence as the inevitable consequence.

This was, in summary, the situation I encountered upon my return to Colombia from my travels abroad. Still a music undergraduate student at the time, one of the facts that most caught my attention

\textsuperscript{193} The acronym AUC stands for “Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia,” which translates into English as “United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia.”
was the enthusiasm with which Colombians everywhere kept attending parties and celebrations every week or even every day. My generation called such gatherings “rumbas,” a usage of the word that is probably derived from the Afro Cuban music genre, though most wouldn’t be aware of its ascendancy. In such “rumbas,” the predominant music was always music of the tropical kind. As seen in Chapter 2, Colombians all over the territory had for a long time now adopted a strong taste for tropical or Caribbean musics, whether Colombian or not. To me, this celebratory spirit was in clear dissonance with what had been happening in Colombia for decades now, and it was this dissonance that inspired the title of my little piece. It appeared that our destiny was to live in the midst of bullets. And in the midst of bullets, Colombians would continue to celebrate; we would keep on “rumbeando,” partying, dancing tropical music. In retrospective, what other option did we have?

Nowadays there are readings like the ones found in Hernández (2015) or Blanco (2009) that tend (or at least try) to understand this behavior as perhaps escapist or cathartic. Most of these readings agree in characterizing the typical music used in celebrations—i.e., tropical music—as one particularly capable of inspiring joy or happiness, though in the case of Hernández (2015), not necessarily because of an inherent quality of the music itself, but rather because of the existence of a partly mythic, partly motivated, cultural construct. It surely cannot be merely coincidental that in the 1990s and the 2000s there was a boom of Colombian tropical musics of many kinds, which was especially pervasive in urban centers, and which reached perhaps unprecedented international success through the figure of tropipop star Carlos Vives. Inspired and led by Vives, the genre of tropipop skyrocketed, reaching high levels of popularity especially in the 2000s. Meanwhile, a set of usually more alternative musical bands and ensembles grouped under the name NCM (see Chapter 1) also started their own artistic evolution, many of which—even if commercially less successful—were likewise tropically flavored. Within this political and musical context appeared the musical projects that I have here dubbed Rolo ET. So after having examined Rolo ET’s sound world in the previous chapters, the question now arises as to what is the nature of the relationship between these musical projects and at least parts of the different contexts in which their evolution took place.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Rolo ET’s tropical sound world, evincing signs that allows us to understand it both as a statement about identity, as well as an ambiguous stance on musical, cultural,
social, and academic values. In Chapter 3, on the other hand, I discussed Rolo ET’s relationship with the musical and cultural theme of psychedelia, and found connections that explain the understanding of this music as contestatory, yet awkwardly sophisticated. Next, in Chapter 4, I showed how in Rolo ET there oftentimes seems to exist a consciously sought obscurity of the musical language that, occasionally mixed with straightforward humor, can be understood as constituting an ironic statement. Suggestions about the semantic implications of Rolo ET’s sound world notwithstanding, my attention in these chapters has focused on the ways in which this sound world has been constructed, discussing referents, techniques, and particular strategies of combination of those referents and techniques. In this last chapter, I seek to shift my attention from the “how” to the “what,” so as to provide at least some provisional answers to the question of what, if anything, is Rolo ET actually trying to “say” through its music and its actions, in this case particularly with respect to its surrounding political context.

With this goal in mind, I will first advance a hermeneutic reading of Rolo ET’s position with respect to Colombia’s recent political history, using Carlos Vives and tropipop as a contrasting case of study, Sevilla et al. (2014) argue that both tropipop and the various bands of the NMC movement of which Rolo ET is a part can be thought of as deriving from Carlos Vives’s innovative proposals. I believe that, even if Vives was an inspiration to both, a part of the semantic dimension of the music of Vives and tropipop on the one hand, and that of Rolo ET on the other can be understood as opposing each other. I will argue, in fact, that Rolo ET’s commentary about Colombia’s recent state could be understood as a reaction or a response to the one proposed in tropipop. In this sense, establishing the vision of Colombia found in tropipop, through the figure of Vives and one of its most iconic songs, provides a horizon against which to judge and understand Rolo ET’s alleged position. After this comparative, hermeneutic exercise, I will discuss the political significance of Rolo ET, this time seen not through the lens of the music itself, but rather through the activities and choices its members have made in pursuing their artistic goals. In doing so, I wish to evince and discuss some of the paradoxes that appear to arise between what Rolo ET might be saying (mainly, a statement about identity) and the way it chooses or is perhaps forced to say it (mainly, through transnational channels, supported mainly by Anglo-Saxon industry and circle). Finally, taking into account the hermeneutic-oriented discussion of this chapter, I will proceed to make some final reflections and conclusions in an attempt to bring partial closure to my analysis as a whole. In the end, of
course, much of what will be said throughout the chapter is, as are all interpretations, informed speculation. But as Botero himself says regarding artistic creations, his own included, “if you do something, it will inevitably have a political impact; someone will necessarily interpret it.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA) So be it.

II. Carlos Vives, Rolo ET, and contemporary Colombia: a forgotten magical land (ruled by the Evil One)

“In Colombia, amid social injustice, political repression, and general violence, nationalism can be viewed in an uncritical manner as something good, as a naive and festive negation of the current situation of the country.”

Darío Blanco (emphasis added)

Carlos Vives has been arguably the most important pop musical artist of Colombia in the past two and a half decades. While many others have had significant influence on certain social spheres during the same period of time, Carlos Vives has transcended regional and national borders, becoming an international phenomenon within the world of commercial recorded music.\(^{194}\) As mentioned in Chapter 2, his musical production is nowadays traditionally associated with vallenato (and to a lesser extent, cumbia), given how this was the genre that catapulted him to fame.\(^{195}\) It should be remembered, though, that the overall musical universe found in the many albums produced by Vives and his band “La Provincia” since their 1993 debut album *Clásicos de la Provincia* covers a varied range of musical

\(^{194}\) The influence of Vives’s music has not only reached the people of Latin America. His musical production has reached the entire world, making Vives the most famous ambassador of modernised Colombian Vallenato and Cumbia. For more information on the phenomenon of the production of Carlos Vives and his band “La Provincia” see Sevilla et al. (2014).

\(^{195}\) Before experimenting with Vallenato and musics from the Caribbean Colombian region, Carlos Vives had been a singer and actor installed in Bogota, with most of his musical activities relating to the (at the moment) very incipient Rock local scene. After successfully performing as the lead role in a local television soap opera called “Escalona,” which fictionally narrated the life and adventures of mythic Vallenato composer Rafael Escalona, and in which Vives impersonated Escalona and sang many of the composer’s iconic songs, the actor and singer decided to follow the musical road that had finally given him positive recognition and has since dedicated his musical career to the production of (mostly) Colombian Tropical music. (Sevilla et al., 2014)
rhythms and dances from Colombia’s Caribbean region, including cumbia, porro, champeta, and vallenato, among others.

Carlos Vives and La Provincia’s most iconic song has to be “La Tierra del Olvido” from their 1995 album by the same name. It constitutes an audiovisual synthesis of what Manuel Sevilla et al. dub mitopaisaje (mythoscape), which the authors define as a discursive construction of a mythic image of Colombia. This mythic image accounts for a particular understanding of what the essence of being Colombian ought to be. In other words, Vives’s project in general, and this song in particular, draw a particular picture of an imagined “colombian-ness” (“colombianidad”) through an intricate web of different media expressions (Sevilla et al., 2014). Given its symbolic importance, by being both the first hit originally composed by La Provincia and an emblem or metonymy of the whole project since that 1995 album, a close reading of its sonic universe—more particularly, of its sonic codes and topical constituents—provides a first step towards understanding the role of sound in the configuration of the varied meanings of Vives’s project within the context of contemporary Colombia.

The song starts with a short acoustic guitar introduction, whose presentation of a chord progression in arpeggiated fashion may recall familiar Western musical codes of “introduction,” such as the tradition of the prelude for solo instrument. At the same time, while the choice of a plucked string instrument tends to suggest an association with Western popular music culture in general, the specific type of instrument and its timbre (acoustic folk guitar) creates an association with folk musics, and clearly places the song within the realm of contemporary Western popular musical practices. The nature of the chord progression (I – V6 – bVII – vi in C Ionian/Mixolydian) reinforces the latter association, particularly in relation to Anglo-Saxon pop musical culture. We can say, then, that from certain instrumental, textural, and harmonic perspectives, the short introductory fragment of “La Tierra del Olvido” sounds decidedly Western. More particularly, we can say that it carries intersubjective codes that make it sound modern and popular, albeit with the type of nostalgic “bend” of indie-pop languages that resort to the use of “folksy” sonic ambiences.196 In sum, it appears to subscribe to a network of musics whose origin lies in recent Anglo-Saxon popular musical idioms and styles.

196 See Dolan (2010).
Yet when you look at some rhythmic aspects of this introduction, another network of musics comes to mind. As seen in Figure 35, the bass line's rhythm is syncopated with respect to the proposed metrical organization. Syncopation in the bass line corresponds in this case to a syncopated harmonic rhythm. Each new chord of the progression anticipates the metric strong beats. As shown in Figure 36, such rhythmic behavior is common in many Caribbean musical styles and genres, like the Cuban *son* or its more transnational successor, *salsa*. A somewhat analogous behavior can also be found in some versions of the rhythmic bases of Afro-Colombian dances such as *porro* or *cumbia*, as well as in some *vallenato* airs. The presence of this Caribbean sonic world is, of course, not strange. Many Colombians would probably categorize the song as simply *vallenato* (or modern *vallenato*). As subtle as it may seem, this rhythmic characteristic\textsuperscript{197} of the introduction—which will appear throughout the song—is, in fact, a key ingredient for which the song is perceived as a *vallenato*, but more generally, as tropical music.

![Figure 35. “La Tierra del Olvido” by Carlos Vives: syncopated bass lines in 1) first strophe, and 2) chorus](image)

\textsuperscript{197} The rest of the rhythmic gestures in the arpeggio strengthen such associations with different types of Caribbean musics.
We are confronted, in sum, by a musical fragment inscribed with several sonic codes that give way to various possible associations. Do we hear an introduction that sounds like vallenato, but which is part of an Anglo-Saxon popular song? Or do we hear a tropical song, perhaps a vallenato or a cumbia, with Western, Anglo-Saxon(ish) musical garments? Most listeners familiar with Caribbean tropical musics would probably pick the latter, supported in crucial ways by what follows in the song: the appearance of an accordion, the inclusion of Caribbean percussion instruments playing a tropical rhythmic base, and the vocal qualities of the singing voice, among others. All these elements are indeed musical indices of “tropicalness” or “Caribbeanness,” and as such, they account for the song’s tropical sound. Yet while one also finds a pervasive appearance of Anglo, pop elements throughout ‘La Tierra del Olvido,’198 for the average consumer of this type of music the song is still essentially tropical: perhaps pop cumbia or vallenato, but primarily tropical.

This preliminary dissection of musical association in Vives’s iconic song serves as a starting point for a consideration of the role that sound elements have played in the constitution of the song’s current iconic status. The song was first published in 1995, as part of Carlos Vives’ third ‘tropical’ album,199 “La Tierra del Olvido.” It was his second album working with ‘La Provincia,’ which would become his base band throughout a major part of his musical career and production. Moreover, this was the first album containing ‘original’ compositions; as briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, both of the first two albums were actually compilations of traditional vallenatos written and/or composed by some of the mythic juglares vallenatos (vallenato minstrels), such as Rafael Escalona or Alejo Durán. One could say, then, that ‘La

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198 Examples of such elements include harmonic progressions, timbre and instrumental formation, and melodic aspects, both composition and interpretation-wise. On the other hand, such Anglo pop elements occur both at the sonic and visual levels, once one takes the accompanying video into account.

199 Vives’ first album was a compilation of many of the songs used throughout the television series ‘Escalona,’ a fictional series based on the life of Rafael Escalona, who is considered one of the mythic founding figures of Vallenato. His second album, ‘Clásicos de la Provincia,’ was For a full discography of Carlos Vives’ work see:
Tierra del Olvido’ was Vives’ first successful single of his own. Over the next twenty years after its release, Vives has produced and released more than eight full albums with original compositions, plus several live, single, and cover albums. Most of these albums have had high commercial success, for which the list of iconic and beloved songs of Vives’s virtual songbook has increased significantly since then. And yet, for all that considerable size of musical material that is now associated with his artistic persona, “La Tierra del Olvido” remains perhaps the most special one.

Besides it being the sort of original point of departure of Vives and La Provincia’s musical and ideological project, the song has been re-edited a couple of times during the last decade. I believe these re-editions have been crucial in reinforcing the ideological backbone of the whole artistic project, even if the purpose behind them was perhaps essentially a commercial one. In a sense, these new versions also served to perpetuate the validity of the project, to give it new life; or, differently put, they can be thought of as an attempt at nurturing the emotional underpinning that had first imprinted Vives’s project with such high and arguably unprecedented success. But what is the nature of this alleged emotional underpinning that was now being reinforced (or perhaps revived) through these new versions of “La Tierra del Olvido,” Vives’s adored sonic icon? Even if controversial and necessarily partial, a rigorously analyzed answer to this question is shared by Sevilla et al. (2014) in their multi-approached investigation of Vives and his project. As briefly mentioned above, a central thesis of this work is the idea that the fundamental, if perhaps often unseen, result of said artistic project is the creation of a mythoscape, whereby a distinct idea of “colombianness” emerges. What this particular idea of colombianness is, as interpreted by Sevilla et al., requires, of course, its own adequate space. My aim here is therefore not to fully reproduce the claims by these authors regarding this idea, but rather to use it as a trigger to depict a broad picture of the essential spirit of Vives’s imagination of Colombia as it has been constructed through “La Tierra del Olvido” and its various versions in particular.

Before returning to its sonic world, a brief examination of some of the song’s extra-musical components is in order. The name of Vives’s iconic song (and album) is telling, yet at the same time also ambiguous, with respect to the artist’s mythic idea of “colombianness.” In the present context, a first problem that arises from a possible interpretation of the song’s name and its symbolic role is one

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200 Info about actual authorship.
201 Carlos Vives’s full discography can be consulted at http://www.carlosvives.com/discografia/.
regarding semantics and translation. The Spanish word “olvido” can be understood and then translated variously as forgetfulness, oblivion, absentmindedness, oversight, or even obscurity. When combined in the phrase “la tierra del olvido,” any one choice of meaning yields a different perspective. In a sense, the full or intentional meaning of the song’s name is essentially inscrutable. Are we talking about “a forgotten land”? Is it “a land where one goes to forget”? Is it “the land of oblivion,” or even more transcendentally, “a godforsaken territory”? In abstract, one supposes any of these translations might be a plausible interpretation. What happens, however, if more ingredients are taken into account?

Besides the song’s title, the lyrics are the only other element that is basically immutable throughout the song’s various versions, live or produced. As can be seen in Example X, the song is basically about a love story. There is no explicit reference to specific names or places, but rather just a suggestion of an enamoured man (given Vives is the singer) declaring his love through his singing. Now, throughout its first lines, the first strophe is actually somewhat mysterious and straightforwardly pastoral in spirit. It starts by proposing an analogy between images of nature and some other thing of which we don’t hear until the last line. This other thing turns out to be about the waiting of a man for his beloved’s return. Yet while the analogy is finally clarified, the actual meaning or nature of this wait is still ambiguous, not in a small degree due to the aforementioned ambiguity of the phrase that gives name to the song. In any case, the implication is that the man is presently residing in a place he calls, let’s say, “the land of forgetfulness,” and he is longing for his lover’s return to it. The second strophe, musicalized in the same way as the first one, speaks more directly of the type of feelings this man has for his beloved, and some of the consequences these feelings have in his everyday life. Finally, the chorus is a straightforward declaration of the man’s love, and speaks of the crucial role of his beloved in his life, as implied by the somewhat tragic phrase “without your love I die”.

(Excerpt follows)
What could one say, then, about the meaning of the song’s title taking its lyrics into account? I believe the answer is that the lyrics do not clarify the issue much more. The mystery of what this “land of oblivion” is remains equally cryptic within the context of the situation being described. So a next element to examine in the search for possible answers is the visual one, provided in part by the art of the original production, and in part by the visual material of the three different music videos that have been produced in tandem with the three versions of the song. Image X shows the art of the original album cover of Carlos Vives and La Provincia’s La Tierra del Olvido from 1995. This is, incidentally, the same image used by Sevilla et al. for the cover of their published book about the topic, which I believe is not a trivial

Figure 37. Lyrics of “La Tierra del Olvido,” by Carlos Vives (1995, TBA)
coincidence, for the authors also decide to name the book *Travesías por la Tierra del Olvido* (which translates something like “Voyages around the Land of Oblivion”), implying that the whole world of Vives's project is precisely this mysterious land. Under this view, the so called “land of oblivion” becomes, in other words, a metonym for the whole of Vives’s realized artistic vision.

Like the first strophe of the song, the image is full of a pastoral spirit. It constitutes a sort of slightly surrealistic collage wherein the human figures of the music band, led by an oversized drawn version of Vives in the center, are shown as immersed in the immensity of a paradisiacal land. As suggested by the picture, this paradisiacal land includes the sea, a waterfall being fed most probably by a river or creek, a hilly, tropical jungle, perhaps a lake, and a high-altitude mountain range. Furthermore, a chain of smoke suggests the existence of an alleged indigenous human group, living somewhere within this magical territory. The appearance of tropical flora and fauna appears to further strengthen an association between the image and an idea of magic or exoticism. The image is, moreover, plagued with what one could understand variously as paradoxes, oppositions, or contradictions: the sea next to rocky, snow-peaked mountains; juxtaposed bodies of fresh and saltwater; the sun and the moon, or night and

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day; a small, tropical bird of allegedly hot climates (i.e., of low altitudes) and, in the background, the flying figure of the imposing condor of the Andes (i.e., of usually high altitudes); an oversized human torso and head of Vives immersed in water, alongside the three small-sized figures of Mayte, Acosta, and Cuadrado, respectively the *gaitera*, the guitarist, and the accordionist, all icons of the first version of Vives's band La Provincia. In sum, one is confronted by a paradisiacal, probably unreal, tropical fantasy land.

Now, while the specific juxtapositions of the collagist image are set in an unrealistic manner, due in part to the restrains of the drawing space, the image is in fact clearly referencing a real place—the *Sierra Nevada* and its surroundings—which actually includes many of such extreme juxtapositions, sometimes even at plain human sight! The *Sierra*, a quite unique snow-covered mountain range, is located in the North-Eastern region of Colombia near the city of Santa Marta, and constitutes a sort of symbolic heart of the Caribbean region. The range starts to rise right on the seashore, and continues to grow up until its snowy peaks, reaching an altitude of 5,700 meters (18,700 feet) above sea level, just 42 kilometers (around 26 miles) away from the coast line. Accordingly, the flora and fauna that can be found in the range rapidly changes, from the typical one of the hot, tropical environment of the Caribbean coast, to the more scarce one of the cold, tropical high mountaintops. As for the human constituency, the *Sierra* has mostly been inhabited by Kogui and Arhuaco, pre-Columbian, indigenous groups, and is nowadays protected under environmental and cultural laws. Image 39 shows a picture of the *Sierra* that clearly resonates with the art of the album’s cover, showing a low-altitude spot of the *Palomino* river surrounded by a typical tropical vegetation in the foreground, and the more rocky, snowy peaks of the range in the background.
Back in 1995, Vives and La Provincia thus decided to choose this mythical place as the visual point of departure of their project. The original music video\textsuperscript{204} of “La Tierra del Olvido” confirms the association, which in any case would have been obvious to most people knowledgeable of Vives’s costeño background and of La Sierra, through the album cover alone. Parts of the Sierra appear prominently in the video, the national park Parque Nacional Tayrona, located towards the coastal part of the range, being perhaps the central site of shooting. In the video, aerial shots show both the mountainy range’s snowy peaks and coastal sites. And while it is fairly obvious that these scenes were shot from an air vehicle such as an helicopter, within the story and the world of the video, the viewer is induced to imagine that a flying condor is, in fact, the beholder of those sights. The suggestion that one is watching through a condor’s point of view is possible because the bird is shown flying in the foreground immediately preceding other aerial scenes. Being the condor not only a Colombian national symbol in itself, but also an index of the spirit of the broader South American Andean region, its appearance in this context is quite significant. Through the quasi-surrealistic, tropical/pastoral images associated with La Tierra del Olvido—through, for example, the highly suggestive “land-water-air” connection between the

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Sierra_Nevada_taken_from_Palomino_river.jpg}
\caption{Picture of the Sierra Nevada taken from the Palomino river\textsuperscript{203}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{203} Taken from: https://www.flickr.com/photos/recondoontheroad/8155859537.
\textsuperscript{204} The music video can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DlOYcs9UHXk
mythic Caribbean sea, the mythic Sierra and the likewise mythic condor—Vives and La Provincia achieve to trigger several plausible meanings.

Taking into account these preliminary considerations about the original imagery of the album and the song, the until now cryptic phrase “land of oblivion” or “land of forgetfulness” suddenly appears to suggest slightly more tangible associations, beyond the purely geographical one. But before considering what these associations might be, or—more importantly—might mean, I would like to first draw attention to another important element of the imagery included in the original music video, which complements the already freighted significance of both the chosen location and the image of the condor. As mentioned before, the lyrics of the song speak clearly of a love story. In the music video, the viewer is clearly informed about the specific characters involved in this story. They turn out to be a couple of peasants from the Colombian Caribbean region, a conclusion which can be drawn from things like their physical features (both of them typical mulatos, i.e., with slightly dark skin color), their garments, their activities (e.g., the male peasant can be seen fishing with an atarraya or cast net), their living accommodations (they appear to live in a humble hut-like house), and, of course, the region alluded to, that is, the vicinity of the Sierra. In one iconic scene—the one in which he is first introduced—the male peasant is shown walking through a path in the midst of the jungle while pulling a pack horse. He is walking towards the camera, and on the way he meets a Kogui Indian, who is walking through the same path but in the opposite direction (i.e., away from the camera). Apart from Vives and the musicians of the band, which during the introductory scene had appeared playing around a campfire at night on a beach, this Indian is, in fact, the first actual character that appears in the video, i.e., the first character inside the actual story. So character-wise, and besides the aforementioned condor, the story really centers around the mestizo peasant couple, while momentarily featuring just one more human character: an anonymous Kogui Indian, index not only of the Sierra Nevada per se, but also of a lost, or perhaps forgotten, pre-Columbian world.

These additional observations of the imagery of the music video provide a tighter focus to possible hermeneutic considerations about the meaning of the song’s title. First of all, one could venture an interpretation whereby the meeting of the Kogui and the mestizo peasant is one between a mythic past and a likewise mythic present. The meeting between apparently discordant timeframes provides a sort of
timeless space for the simultaneous emergence of, and connection between, different stages of the country’s or region’s history. Of course, Koguis have not been actually extinguished. The indigenous group continues to exist and evolve in contemporary Colombia. But while they also constitute a portion of “the present” alongside mestizo peasants, a possible implication of Vives’s approximation is that they are actually a forgotten present, and are actually perceived by a majority of “modern” listeners as a representation of the past. In other words, in the imagination of most Colombians (and perhaps Latin Americans in general), such indigenous groups might most probably be associated with a mostly unknown pre-Columbian epoch, thus the idea of a mythical past. And while the peasants might be more easily conceived of or imagined as part of present populations of the Caribbean region, they are shown through a pastoral veil that tends to idealize those populations and their customs, thus the idea of a mythical present.205

The original imagery of “La Tierra del Olvido” suggests or proposes a very particular view of being Colombian. First, as more broadly explained in Chapter 2, Vives’s proposal strengthens a Colombian identity that had been displaced towards the Caribbean region, at least—or perhaps especially—in musical terms. More simply put, it strengthens the idea of Colombia as essentially a tropical nation; or perhaps more precisely, it proposes an idea of “colombianness” whose representative cultural idiosyncrasy is that of its Caribbean soul. However, while Vives’s specific proposal can be understood as the continuation of the political and cultural project that catapulted vallenato to stardom, it also represents a break point in that process. Vives’s popularity largely exceeded that of the mythic figures of vallenato, i.e., the representatives of the vallenato of yore. Actually, it was Vives’s success that popularized said vallenato beyond the very specialized circle where it used to thrive. And so with Vives, a mythic representation of Colombian Caribbean culture, famously found in Garcia Márquez’s oeuvre, and iconicized in “La Tierra del Olvido” by the territory of the Sierra and the meeting of the present and past folk traditions, suddenly starts to reach millions of Colombians and Latin Americans around the globe. Vives seems to be replicating that old strategy of searching for the soul of a nation or a culture in its folks

205 What I here call a “pastoral” type of idealization of, in this case, a peasant population is not far from some of the ways in which the literary movement of “magical realism,” which has been intimately associated with the oeuvre of Gabriel García Márquez, operates with respect to folk topics. The “magical” aspect speaks of such an idealization, which in the ideology of magical realism is not regarded as such, but rather as a reality that outside itself is impossible to understand, for which is judged as fantastious. For more information about magical realism see.
and its folk traditions, and of artistically drawing a mythic, idealized version of them. He massively reminds the consumers of his music of the forgotten Colombian indigenous heritage, and of how it still lives among us, alongside the more recognized but still ostracized peasants. And in this invitation to remember—i.e., in this task of visibilization—Vives invites his listeners to feel proud of that heritage and to rejoice in that pride.

These admittedly still scant ideas about the meanings emerging from the imagery of “La Tierra del Olvido” tend to resonate with the aforementioned idea of a mythoscape suggested by Sevilla et al. (2014), which is essentially understood as the conceptual universe created through the material means of the various media (verbal, visual, sonic, etc.) involved in Vives’s artistic project Now, while this conceptual universe nowadays is constituted by the sum of Vives’s career, one could say that the essential seed of said mythoscape was planted in this album and its iconic single. In other words, while the subsequent course of Vives’s career incorporated new elements and layers of signification that eventually molded the mythoscape, the conceptual spirit of “La Tierra del Olvido” continued to be the sort of guiding principle of the meaning of the whole enterprise. Yet, throughout the years, the iconic status of the song and the significance of its embedded meanings, was not automatically sustained by it having been the symbolic origin of the whole artistic and conceptual enterprise. Its status and significance were subsequently reinforced by the appearance of two additional versions of the song, one published in 2012 and the other one in 2015, whose musical and audiovisual productions incorporated significant, if not necessarily structural, changes. In both cases, changes in the music directly derived from the collaborative nature of these versions, which is to say that Vives and his band La Provincia were no longer the only musicians involved in the recording of the music. Both versions included guest artists and musical ensembles and bands, each of which was in charge of performing or recording certain portions of the song usually at different times and places, sometimes also uniting their proverbial voices to sing and play virtually together. Such approach resulted in a couple of collage-type versions of the song, not only musically but also visually, for the music videos focused primordially on capturing each of the artists or musicians participating at any given point of the song. And since in both versions artists were located at different places within Colombia, the primordial geographical and symbolic locus was extended to include more varied portions of the nation’s territory.
Now, even though both versions contain similarities, they also diverge in some aspects. The 2012 version was made under the initiative and auspice of the project “Playing for Change” (henceforth PFC), in partnership with the Americas Business Council Foundation. The idea of the project PFC is, according to its co-founder, Mark Johnson, “to show people enough different cultures using music to uplift themselves, so that we can see the connections we all have.”\textsuperscript{206} In connection to this general idea, with respect in particular to the production of PFC’s version of “La Tierra del Olvido,” the project’s website communicates the following:

This video features over 75 musicians across the country of Colombia. Throughout our journey we have learned that music is the greatest tool for healing broken countries, cultures and hearts. With this video we set out to unite and inspire the people of Colombia so they can move forward from years of conflict and create a positive future. Listen to the music, see the smiling faces, and remember that we are going to make it as a human race!!\textsuperscript{207}

Both PFC’s description of the version of the song and the version itself, with all the layers of significance achieved through the multiple media involved in its production and reception, trigger myriad of plausible hermeneutic implications, only a couple of which interest me in the present context. First, the collaborative nature of the project suddenly makes explicit what in the original version was only suggested implicitly, i.e., the idea that one of the central purposes of the song is the call for a spirit of harmonious coexistence within diversity. The new version, in other words, more literally realizes the implication of inclusion of the various populations of the Colombian nation (symbolized in the original video by the Kogui Indian and the peasant couple; the mestizo, urban upper-class figure of Vives; or the decidedly more regional figures of Egidio Cuadrado, the accordionist, or of Mayte, the gaita player), all of them living within one “magical” and “forgotten” territory (symbolized originally by the Sierra). According to the PFC’s website, the version includes both internationally renowned and more local folk/street artists.

\textsuperscript{206} \url{https://playingforchange.com/}

\textsuperscript{207} Taken from: \url{https://playingforchange.com/videos/la-tierra-del-olvido/}. The site includes the video of the PFC version of the song, alongside the featured musicians.
such as Carlos Vives, Totó La Momposina, Roy Rodríguez, Juan Carlos Victoria, Manuela Mejía, or Jorge Parra Jr.; and equally diverse music ensembles such as Sexteto Tabalá & Las Alegres Ambulancias, the Orquesta Sinfónica Juvenil Batuta (Batuta Symphonic Youth Orchestra), or Tambores del Cabildo; all of them playing in different sites and cities around the country. The visual collage is complemented by the inclusion of musical elements that are likewise more broadly representative of the sounds of the nation. Such sonic universe includes, for example, ancestral percussion ensembles, brass arrangements that index the band tradition of the country, salsa *tumbaos,*\(^\text{208}\) electric guitars, a small symphonic orchestra playing by itself as a postlude to the song, and, of course—that quintessential index of the Colombian Caribbean—the guacharaca.\(^\text{209}\) In sum, then, the viewer is presented with a much more obvious mixture of people, places, and sounds stereotypically related to racial and cultural categories, whose sum more closely approximates to the racial and cultural variety of the country as a whole. This, partly collagist, partly fusionist, experience is punctuated at the end when Totó la Momposina—perhaps the most internationally renowned folk artist of the country—sings, in declamation, and over the accompaniment of symphonic strings.\(^\text{210}\) the words “Colombia, tierra mestiza”\(^\text{211}\) (Colombia, mestizo land), as if reinforcing the idea of united diversity.

A second significant novelty of this new version, in this case derived from PFC’s description of the project rather than from the artistic product itself, is the allusion to Colombia’s internal conflict in connection with the song. With this move, “La Tierra del Olvido” suddenly became (or at least sought to become) an icon not only of an abstract and mythic idea of colombianess, but also a symbol and expression of the urge of reconciliation of a country that has been hit by an armed conflict for decades.

\(^{208}\) Slang name for the piano figurations that constitute the typical accompaniment of salsa music.

\(^{209}\) On the other hand, the absence of the accordion, nowadays considered to be the primordial index of vallenato music, and thus also a quintessential symbol of the Colombian Caribbean, is noteworthy. It perhaps speaks of the conscious desire to disconnect the song from its already created association with new vallenato, so as to make the connection with a broader idea of colombianess more plausible, at least sonic-wise.

\(^{210}\) I believe it is worth noting how the overlap of the folk, indigenous and black world represented by Totó, and the white European world represented by the orchestra functions as a sonic representation of the mestizaje about which she is singing precisely at this moment.

\(^{211}\) These words are complemented by other ones that also seek to highlight Colombia’s beauty and variety, this time not in terms of its people, but in terms of its topography, flora and fauna. Totó thus sings: “Colombia, tierra hermosa, llena de mares, llena de montañas, de pájaros, de pájaros, ay de árboles.” (Colombia, beautiful land, full of seas, full of mountains, of birds, of birds, oh of trees.) Incidentally, these words briefly remember the pastoral spirit of the original video, therein strongly reinforced through its visual imagery.
believe that the connection of the song with the Colombian armed conflict or, more generally, with a
tendency towards violence that unfortunately has in itself become a more gruesome, yet more realistic
idea of “colombianness,” was plausible fundamentally because by 2012, there already existed a
constructed notion of “La Tierra del Olvido” as an index of a different, more romanticized, kind of
“colombianness”: one of a diverse, yet also magically united, nation. If the first version invited the listener
to recognize or remember a perhaps forgotten cultural diversity, hidden in a magical forgotten land, so as
to proudly embrace that magical diversity; the PFC version reproduced that invitation, perhaps no longer
implicitly in relation to the prevailing political position that before the 1991 Constitution had cherished
uniformity over inclusion, but rather explicitly in relation to the ways in which violence per se has
pummeled and divided the nation for over at least the last five decades.²¹²

In 2015, three years after the PFC version was released, Carlos Vives released still another
version of his classic, this time included in his album Más Corazón Profundo: en vivo desde la bahía de
Santa Marta. The release was conceived of as essentially a tribute to the origins of his project, which
fitted quite well with the twentieth anniversary of the original publication of La Tierra del Olvido, Vives’s
iconic album. This third version, as mentioned above, shares some elements with the PFC version. In
general, it is also an approach whose mixture of fusion and collage constitutes its most visible
characteristic. It replicates the idea of a collaborative musical project, in which various artists or
ensembles visibly participate in the recording and shooting of the associated products. However, this time
the majority of artists are renowned artists of the national and transnational music industry. The version
features (tropi)pop stars such as Fanny Lu and Fonseca, rock star Andrea Echeverry, and reggeaton star
Maluma. Alongside them appear more folk-oriented artists or ensembles such as Cholo Valderrama (idol
of música llanera, i.e., of traditional music from the Colombian region known as Eastern plains), Herencia
de Timbiquí (folk ensemble representative of the Pacific region), and Coral Group (folk ensemble
representative of the archipelago San Andrés and Providencia, located in the Caribbean sea). This new
lineup of music artists is slightly less oriented towards symbolizing diversity and harmonious coexistence

²¹² The message at the beginning of the music video, which appears in silence, in white letters against a
black background, is a clear evidence of the explicitness of the invitation: “this song unites over 80
musicians across the nation of Colombia and offers a peaceful moment in the nation’s 50-year war. No
matter how much division and struggle we face in life, we can always persevere with the power of music
and love.”
than the one found in the PFC version, or at least such a goal seems to be less obvious. The appearance
of current renowned popular artists taints the allegedly more altruistic nature of PFC’s version, apparently
rendering the tribute version much more purely commercial in nature. This feeling is reinforced by the
overall reigning sonic atmosphere of the tribute, which for the most part tends towards an Anglo pop-rock
feel that had been diminished significantly in the PFC version, and that had been subsidiary to, or at the
most balanced with, the Caribbean tropical feel in the original one.

However, the original pastoral, nationalistic spirit persists here in obvious ways, sometimes even
strengthened, particularly by the visual treatment of the music video. While in the PFC version the camera
angles almost exclusively focus on capturing the musicians while recording (all of them are actually using
headphones and microphones), the 2015 tribute version goes back to the original approach of using
aerial shots that visually prioritize the scenery of natural landscapes over that of human figures. Such an
approach allows the viewer to constantly contemplate beautiful landscapes, all of which are
representative of iconic regions of the country. If in the PFC version diversity was construed essentially in
terms of human and sonic components, in the tribute version diversity is understood in mostly
topographical/geographical terms. This is not to say that the human and sonic aspects do not contribute
to the overall construction of the message in this latest version of the song and its music video. There are
still musicians that represent the folk spirit—and thus the cultural soul—of different regions, and the music
momentarily enters the domain of regional musical idioms, most notably in a couple of excerpts in which
the sonic aura of the Colombian Eastern plains and the Antillean universe of the Colombian Caribbean
explicitly appear almost in isolation. But the fact remains that the visual prioritization of site in the music
video puts this aspect at the top of the hierarchy, at least in relation to the conceptual leitmotif of diversity
and romanticized unity. This prioritization becomes even more evident by the appearance of captions that
inform the viewer of the site he or she is currently watching. In this sense, the music video also becomes
a sort of tourist advertising, one of whose main goals is to “showcase” Colombia’s landscape and magical
territories for “selling” purposes. For the potential tourist, then, the video can potentially be viewed as an
invitation to visit this “paradise,” as an Antillean voice literally says in English towards the end of the
video. But for the national viewer, a viewer which is probably familiar with the classic song, the tribute
version is a new reinforcement of the spirit that resided implicitly in the original version, and that gradually
emerged and developed both through the evolution of Vives’s career and his music, and through the release of the new versions of the 2010s.

Now, while both the tribute version and the original version include no explicit reference to the topic of violence or armed conflict, I find particularly valuable a hermeneutic reading that places the whole evolution of the song and its embedded meanings with respect to Colombia’s recent political context. For these purposes, I would propose considering the short history of “La Tierra del Olvido” as a symbol or referent not only of the evolution of Vives’s project in itself, but also of the uprising and evolution of tropipop, a music genre that he inspired (if not straightforwardly created) and which blossomed especially during the late 1990s and the 2000s. This hermeneutic approach towards the phenomenon of Vives and tropipop is not new. While authors like Wade (2002) and Hernández (2015) both have addressed the significance of the various dynamics of Colombian popular tropical music throughout significant portions of the twentieth century in relation to the sociopolitical landscape of the nation within said period, it has been Blanco (2009) who has ventured a quite poignant critique of particularly tropipop and its political underpinnings or implications.213

Shortly put, Blanco advances an argument according to which the uprise of tropipop as a preferred musical genre of especially urban, high-class sectors of the Colombian population served a political purpose quite effectively, whether consciously or not. Blanco observes how the boom of tropipop coincided with the two consecutive presidential periods of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010), a right-wing politician of liberal origins who became a political phenomenon by convincingly winning the presidential election of 2002, having started his first run with virtually no traditional political support. Most of the strength of Uribe’s successful run had been nurtured by the support of ample sectors of the Colombian population, who felt worn out and rageful after the failure of the peace attempt between the government of president Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) and FARC, the oldest guerrilla group still active. There was at the time a wide consensus that Pastrana’s government had given FARC excessive concessions, in terms of temporal and geographical space, and that FARC had used those bona fide offerings for their own

213 Hernández actually takes Blanco’s critique as an important point of departure for his own analysis, pointing out that Blanco’s point of view, as overtly ideologically driven as it is, does not provide clues about the factual reasons that support said point of view. Hernández thus sets out to investigate why and how the associations between a certain music (in this case tropipop music) and a certain emotion (in this case happiness) actually come to exist, associations which Blanco assume to be just evidently true and which are fundamental to his argument.
benefit, never really showing true will for peace. Many Colombians thus felt betrayed by the guerrilla group, and Uribe’s hard-hitting speech, which promised an all-out, strong military offensive against all criminal groups, but especially against FARC, was naturally well received and embraced throughout the country.

The change of guard between Pastrana and Uribe thus represented a 180-degree shift of policy, at least with regards to the political treatment of Colombia’s internal conflict and all of its associated phenomena and effects. Uribe’s was an era associated with a military pacification of the country, due in no small part to the official propaganda of those years. The perception especially of the urban population of the country gradually started to change, from a sense of instability and restlessness to a sense of security and national pride. During the 1980s and 1990s, Colombian society had seen a significant escalation of violence, first in relation to the uprising of the powerful drug cartels of the 1980s (especially the Medellin Cartel led by the infamous Pablo Escobar), and then in relation to the intensification of the armed conflict especially in rural areas, due to the military strengthening of both FARC and right-wing paramilitary groups, who fought each other crudely for both political and economical reasons. While the security within the cities had mildly increased after the intense persecution and weakening of the aforementioned drug cartels, during the 1990s the rural violence in the country grew dizzily and reached unprecedented proportions and cruelty.

By the time President Pastrana took office in 1998, with the central pledge to advance a peace agreement with FARC, numerous parts of the territory were basically under the tyrannical and violent domain of either FARC or AUC (i.e., Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, a grouping of all the paramilitary groups of the country). While the rural population of the country suffered harshly the effects of the conflict, the urban population felt literally trapped within the limits of the big and small cities, the only relatively safe places left in the country. The upcoming of the Uribe presidency, with its aggressive military offensive against FARC on the one hand, and its parallel political negotiation with AUC on the other, eventually meant a break, especially for those urban populations, which gradually started to feel safe about leaving the city limits for either business or recreational purposes. The alleged pacification brought along by Uribe’s policies, alongside an improvement in the country’s economic performance indicators, created an aura of optimism and national pride, especially, though not exclusively, in urban sites. Uribe’s
Landslide reelection in 2006 was apparently an eloquent proof of the satisfaction of a majority of the country’s population with the policies of Uribe’s administration, particularly with regards to the military treatment of the armed conflict.

However, certain minority sectors, represented by left-wing critics like author Blanco himself, were not just dissatisfied with the dynamics and ideology of Uribe and his governmental consort, but blatantly outraged by what they considered a smokescreen military policy that concealed gross social problems and diverged the attention away from the economic exploitation of the national territory by private multinational enterprises (which was, in the end, the more cynical goal of pacification). As expressed by Blanco, with regards to the armed conflict itself and the apparent process of pacification of the country, such sectors were also bitterly critical, despite the almost unanimous support for the Seguridad Democrática (Democratic Security), which was the famous brand of Uribe’s policies in this regard. On the one hand, some considered Uribe’s negotiation with paramilitary groups overly generous (leaving various serious crimes basically unpunished), and on the other hand there were at the time now proven suspicions that amongst the casualties of the offensive against FARC, some military units had camouflaged hundreds of bodies of innocent civilians of poor origin, in order to artificially inflate the number killed supposedly in combat. These innocent casualties came to be infamously known as falsos positivos (false positives), for Blanco and others a terrible euphemism used to alleviate the cruelty of these assassinations. And even if Uribe’s direct responsibility with regards to these crimes is unclear, left-wing sectors believe that he should be held at least politically accountable, since the motivation for such actions within the military was due in no small part to both operational pressures and reward policies that sought to stimulate the military solution against FARC at any cost.

Initiated and inspired by Vives’s proposal and success, and, in the most general terms, constituting a merging of tropical and both Anglo and Latino pop musical elements, Colombian tropipop happened to thrive during the Uribe era. Now, the nature of the relationship between this genre (in fact, many musical genres) and the political and ideological context within which it evolved and developed is, at best, obscure. As Blanco comments, the lyrics of tropipop songs seldom (if ever) make explicit reference to political events, past or present. Nor is there an explicit and publicized political activism by tropipop’s principal figures. Establishing a relationship between, in this case, Pastrana, Uribe, FARC,
AUC, and tropipop is thus fundamentally a speculative hermeneutic exercise. In Blanco’s reading, because of many of its characteristics, tropipop constituted a perfect musical “soundtrack” for the era of Uribe’s Democratic Security. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it served as an instrument for setting up the sort of emotional backbone that supported the political enterprise of the time in an ideal way. According to Blanco, tropipop was light, uncritical music, whose only purpose was to generate superficial happiness; to make people enjoy themselves and their lives in gratuitous fashion. Under this view, this experience created a sort of anesthetic effect, which made people actually feel the well-being that the government was interested in publicizing as a direct consequence of its actions. For Blanco and many left-wing sectors, such an emotional anesthetic effect was ideal for the purposes of camouflaging and making invisible phenomena like the falsos positivos, political corruption and authoritarianism, or the economic exploitation by domestic and foreign private interests.

How do the various versions of Vives’s “La Tierra del Olvido,” with their vague verbal referentiality, their mixture of modern, traditional, and exotic sounds, and their seductive and provoking visual imagery, fit within Blanco’s critical purview of tropipop as a political tool? As we have seen, the evolution of the song and its multiple layers of signification consolidate a general message of a romanticized, pastoral patriotism, wherein the idea of recognition and inclusion of Colombia’s human and cultural diversity is emphasized. Overall, then, the various layers of signification of the song and its versions amount to a general idea that can be seen to resonate with some of Blanco’s ideas. In the grand scheme of the song’s history, the yearning of one lover for the other one found in the lyrics of the song (“thus I wait for your return to the land of forgetfulness”) can be reinterpreted as a yearning for a new romanticized version of the nation. It can be understood as an aspiration of a “return to a land that has been forgotten.” In this sense, the land becomes a metonym for a particular experience of live within a physical territory, which is to say that it represents an experience of a harmonic coexistence between the past and the present, the modern and the traditional, the Andes and the Caribbean, the mountains and the plains, and so on and so forth.

214 Now, while at first instance this patriotism speaks directly of Colombia as such, it could be extended to signify a romanticized sense of Latin American-ness, wherein the whole gamut of peoples and territories are recognized and unified in its diversity. This relative semantic flexibility might account partly for the song’s and Vives’s success at a transnational level, making possible an identification beyond ideas solely revolving around Colombia.
As commented by Sevilla et al., when it first appeared in the 1990s, this particular message embedded in "La Tierra del Olvido" came as a very welcomed emotional and moral support to a population traumatized by the horrors of the urban war against drug cartels that had occurred with particular intensity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The aforementioned subsequent frustrations regarding the internal conflict involving FARC and AUC, which eventually propelled Uribe and his policies to the presidency, made this yearning for a romanticized, harmonic and pacific coexistence more pertinent. Under this view, Uribe’s era of pacification appeared to finally represent the arrival of this promised, and once forgotten, land. “La Tierra del Olvido” suddenly appeared to start to materialize itself, albeit perhaps in a deceitful way, as Blanco would argue. Deceitful or not, the overall sentiment triggered by this particular song was, no doubt, quite convenient to the interests of Uribe’s administration.

Now, the two 2010 versions of the song took place not within the context of Uribe’s Democratic Security, but within the context of the presidencies of Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe’s former Minister of Defense, whose electoral campaign promised to continue Uribe’s policies. However, once elected, Santos completely changed the approach towards several issues, most notably the one regarding the treatment of the armed conflict with FARC. His government rapidly made secret contacts with this guerrilla group, for the purposes of advancing a path towards a peace negotiation. The efforts of Santos’s administration eventually borne fruit, and a negotiating table was established with the insurgents in Havana, Cuba, in November 2012. In November 2016, after four years of arduous negotiation, the government and FARC finally signed a peace agreement, which is currently being implemented.215

The PFC and tribute versions of the song thus appeared within a totally different context, at least with regards to the issue of the armed conflict, which has been central to most Colombians in recent history. Taking into account Santos’s surprising turn with regards to the treatment of the FARC problem, it is difficult not to associate the release of the PFC version of the song in 2011 with the desire to establish a peace negotiating table with FARC (and potentially other armed groups like the ELN guerrilla), which at the time had started to appear growingly plausible, even though no official agreement had yet been

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215 A succinct, yet comprehensive report in English about some general aspects of the armed conflict with FARC and the development of the peace negotiations in Havana can be found at http://colombiareports.com/colombia-peace-talks-fact-sheet/. For detailed information about the various complex facets of the Colombian armed conflict, which is centered on the history of FARC, their evolution and the recent attempts at attaining peace, see López (2016).
reached. The message by the PFC organization that accompanies the song clearly lines up with what would increasingly become the official propaganda, that is, the call for peaceful reconciliation amongst all Colombians, despite differences of opinion, ethnicity, culture, and so on and so forth. The potential political sense of the song, which up until this moment would have required a speculative hermeneutic exercise such as Blanco's in order to emerge, appears here to become explicit, in connection with a new era in which the search for peace through negotiation was now the official agenda. Though clearly more commercially oriented than the PFC one, the 2015 tribute version can likewise be associated with the new political climate, especially considering it echoed in more than one way the more explicitly political version, something which might induce a listener to consciously or unconsciously retrieve the same type of message.

Now, one could naturally question the need to reinforce the reconciliation message once more through a new version of the song that nevertheless resonates with its immediately previous version in several ways. Especially since, after all, the negotiation table with FARC had been successfully established in 2012, and had been advancing towards a definite solution, i.e., towards the signature of a peace agreement. But the fact is that Colombian society did not swiftly and unanimously support Santos's bid for a negotiated solution once he came into power. Because Santos was elected categorically in 2010 thanks mostly to his promise of continuing Uribe’s policies, his abandonment of Uribe’s Democratic Security, obviously disconcerting to most of Uribe’s followers, damaged his image in significant ways. His efforts to succeed at bringing the negotiations with FARC to a happy ending were not just not appreciated by many, but blatantly criticized as a treason by those who saw the negotiations as basically a capitulation to organized crime. By the time the tribute version of “La Tierra del Olvido” was released, the negotiations were well under way, and had received a crucial support by what had been a tight race towards the presidency in 2014, which Santos had barely won against Uribe’s candidate, Óscar Iván Zuluaga. While the government and FARC had already achieved preliminary agreements on some of the topics that were under negotiation, the political climate was still quite tense, with nearly half or more of the country still unconvinced of the benefits of a negotiated solution. This majoritary disagreement became evident when in September, 2016, president Santos summoned all Colombian citizens to vote a plebiscite in which they could express their agreement or disagreement with the peace agreement that had finally
been finalized. Though by a small margin, Colombians voted against the agreement, which unleashed a profound political crisis. The government and FARC proceeded to make some amendments to the signed text, which nevertheless were not enough for the detractors of the agreement. The persisting opposition notwithstanding, in November 2016 Santos decided to pass the peace agreement through Congress, in which he had a majority of political supporters, this way finally succeeding at granting it legal status. With this context in mind, a reading that connects the appearance of still another version of “La Tierra del Olvido” in 2015 to the nation’s political climate of the time is thus not unreasonable.

Taking into account the hermeneutic reading I have advanced here through the examination of various of the song’s elements and of its short history, and independently of issues regarding intent, it appears as though—in the psyche of the nation—Vives’s real-magical land of forgetfulness has been irrevocably tied with the actual reality of the nation’s calamities. And it has been thus tied as a symbol of a land that actually exists beneath and beyond those calamities; a land that is magical, yes, but also real, as García Márquez would have it. “La Tierra del Olvido” perhaps invites people to actually experience such a land in their imagination. It momentarily reminds people of the real-magical Colombia. The Colombia that, to supporters (and now nostalgics) of Uribe’s policies, perhaps started to actually emerge under Uribe’s administration. A Colombia that, on the contrary, to critics of Uribe’s policies and supporters of a negotiated peace, perhaps speaks of a fanciful utopia, which is to say a dangerous promulgation of an unreal Colombia.

Under the former view, the spirit of Vives’s “La Tierra del Olvido” would ultimately be dangerous because of its potential deceitfulness, that is, because of its potential to create a highly emotional and uncritical experience of a Colombianness that tends to mask the actually unmagical reality of the country. The song would potentially be able to generate such an experience through the incitation of a joy that—similar to what Sevilla et al. argue—is mythically associated to Colombia’s alleged real-magical heart. Ultimately, then, one could understand the sense of the word “olvido” in the title of the iconic song and album as either explicitly indexing a proverbial magical land that has been forgotten and we ought to rescue (a proverbial land in fact momentarily reified in the experience of performing or listening to the song); or subliminally indexing an experiential place where one tends to forget or ignore the aforementioned unmagical reality, aided in no small part by the allure of a magical land potentially
constructed in the imagination of a listener through the sum of the song’s various signifying elements. I believe that the so called alien or psychedelic version of tropicality that I have been discussing thus far could be read precisely as a sort of expressive antidote to this hallucinatory or anesthetic effect found in “La Tierra del Olvido,” or, as Blanco argues, in tropipop as a whole. If, in other words, Vives provides us with a mythic forgotten land, or perhaps a land where one forgets, symbolized by the mythic Sierra; Álvarez et al. provide us instead with a perhaps more realistic (definitely more pessimistic) godforsaken land where—as is literally expressed in “Satanás” by Meridian Brothers—it is Belcebu himself who governs; a land whose symbolic locus is no longer a majestic mountain on the Caribbean shore, but the more pedestrian, labyrinthic, corners of the chaotic Rolo streets.

“Satanás,” Rolo ET and Colombian Politics

Like with the reading of Vives’s song, an interpretation regarding Rolo ET’s musical production and its potential relationships with a part of its surrounding context (in this case the recent Colombian political context) requires a speculative hermeneutic leap. If the goal is seeking such possible connections, having no explicit commentary from the musicians or artists involved about the meaning of the sounds, images, or words in relation to said surrounding context renders speculative hermeneutics mandatory. Now, when asked explicitly about the relation of their diverse projects with Colombia’s recent political dynamics (or with the world of politics in general), Rolo ET protagonists all tend to be either dismissive or distracting (TroPs, 2016). In general, Botero admits not having given it much thought, actually. Both him and Galeano tend to address the issue, not from a specific political position somehow expressed through their musical production, but rather from the point of view of the political value of independence (or at least the attempt to be independent), to which I shall return. Perhaps unlike Botero and Galeano, Álvarez does not eschew the issue of specific political undertones or overtones in his music, in relation, that is, to the political dynamics of the country. However, while explicitly expressing his sympathy for so called leftist ideas (he actually believes most musicians and artists evince that ideological
tendency\textsuperscript{216}), his position is one of extreme reticence when it comes to the use of an artistic product, in this case, his music, as part of an explicit political activism. “I believe that, at this point, an artist . . . doesn’t have to get involved in the mainstream political movement,” he argues, given that most of the information people get about the current political dynamics constitutes a sort of “mirage.” (Álvarez, TroPs, 2016; TBA) With respect to Colombia’s armed conflict, he believes that, in the end, everybody wants peace; but the way in which to achieve that so called peace is what drive people apart. “Who wants to get involved in that ’shit’\textsuperscript{217} [sic],” he states. For him, explicitly tying an artistic production with these dynamics is to risk it becoming few more than simply a fetiche; an artifact with no artistic independence, serving a different, usually contaminated, purpose. In his own words, “today music lends itself to creating a fetishistic subjectivity around something and that is very dangerous nowadays.” (Idem; TBA)

While Álvarez is quite explicit in expressing his reticence towards getting his music involved with mainstream politics, he nevertheless lets some ideas fall into the cracks of his own discourse, as it were, providing an eventual critic, like myself, with a hermeneutic window from where to advance an informed speculation. If, according to Álvarez, getting into politics through music nowadays is somewhat like “getting into an abyss,” that doesn’t preclude him from speaking about certain situations through his music and lyrics; situations that one would think typically derive from a given political zeitgeist. As admitted by Álvarez himself, oftentimes through his lyrics he calls out “certain situations that [he] sometimes consider[s] outrageous, unfair, and disguise[s] them into another type of situation.” (Idem; TBA, emphasis added) Before further developing an interpretation of the political meanings within Rolo ET’s music, in comparison specifically to the ones found in tropipop, I would first like to point out that Álvarez here directly admits to the opaqueness of his language. Granted, he is talking specifically about his verbal, not his sonic or musical, language, but the admission allows for the possibility of reading a reverberation between the two expressive media or levels of expression. The discussion about sonic irony in the previous chapter finds here a resonance at the level of verbal expression, at least with

\textsuperscript{216} I believe that in the context of the conversation, Álvarez was probably thinking mostly of recent/contemporary artistic or musical movements, especially those of the popular vein (or at least having ties with the popular world). It was interesting to hear him express how “if there’s a right-wing musician, he either makes punk or ‘vallenato paraco’,” the latter referring to the relatively well known association between some vallenato production and the Colombian, right-wing paramilitary phenomenon of the last three to four decades (see Chapter 2). (Álvarez, TroPs, 2016; TBA)

\textsuperscript{217} The original word he uses is “mierdero,” derived from “mierda” (literally, shit), and meaning something like “a space full of shit,” whether that space be real or virtual.
regards to the tendency in some of this repertoire towards evincing a particularly indirect semantic connection between signifiers and signifieds (an essential characteristic of the recourse of irony; see Chapter 4). So while Álvarez et al. might feel perhaps outraged or simply just amused by eventual attempts at offering a particular political (or social, or existential) reading of their lyrics or their music, Álvarez’s comment speaks of the actual existence of such meanings, even if encrypted through the opaqueness of the lyrics or the music.

In speaking to Álvarez, I was lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one specific symbolism hiding behind the song “Satanás” by Meridian Brothers, a symbolism that once again provides clues not just about the existence of a perhaps veiled political meaning underlying Rolo ET’s musical products, but also about the particular nature of this meaning. When asked about what, if anything specific, was behind the lyrics “Satan, you are the patron of Colombia” (see Ex X), Álvarez admitted to have been thinking about the current president of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, when he first got elected into office. As mentioned before, at the time of his first election, Santos was seen as incarnating the continuation of Uribe’s policies. He was, in other words, the heir of Uribe’s political legacy. His mandate was to reinforce those policies and that legacy, especially with regards to the military offensive against FARC. He was elected, in short, to help “finish” Uribe’s work in that regard.

Álvarez’s exact words were: “well, that song I did when Santos was going to become president. . . . Yes, I was really thinking about Santos when I made that song.” (Álvarez, TroPs 2016; TBA)
Satanás, eres el hombre de mi vida
Con tu capa al viento, con tu cuerno infernal.
Satanás, tú tienes ojos de fuego,
Tienes humor de viejo, tienes suerte de escapar

Satanás, no me dejes sola
Estoy triste y vacía, y no dejo de llorar
Satanás, eres un hombre bueno
Eres honrado y honesto, nuestra familia mantendrán

Satanás, déjame afilarle la barba
Déjame lavarte la ropa, quiero servirte y bailar
Satanás, eres el genio de la historia,
Toallas las mujeres te conocen, como el que nunca perderá.
Satanás, llevame contigo al infierno,
Séremos unidos y eternos, te dedicaré mi devoción.

Satanás, seré miembro de tu logia,
Eres el patrono de Colombia, gobiernas nuestra nación.
Satanás, cuando seas presidente
Le daré consuelo a la gente, tendrán justicia e igualdad.
Satanás, tú me hiciste mujer
Yo te haré un hombre, bajemos al mundo a reír...

Satan, you're the man of my life,
With your fallen beck, with your infernal horn.
Satan, you have eyes of fire,
You have an old man's humor, you're lucky to escape.

Satan, do not leave me alone,
I'm sad and empty, and I can't stop crying.
Satan, you're a good man,
You're righteous and honest, for our family you'll provide.

Satan, let me shave your beard,
Let me wash your clothes, I want to serve you and dance.
Satan, you are the genius of history,
All women know you, like the one who'll never lose.
Satan, take me with you to hell,
We'll be united and eternal, I will dedicate my devotion.

Satan, I'll be a member of your lodge,
You're the patron of Colombia, you rule our nation.
Satan, when you become president
You will give comfort to the people, they will have justice and equality.
Satan, you made me a woman
I'll make you a man, let's go down to the world to laugh.

Figure 40. Lyrics “Satanás” by Meridian Brothers
Álvarez’s confession regarding the overall sense of the song—basically an analogy equaling Satan with Santos—gives one a significant clue about the ideological underpinning of Rolo ET’s protagonists with respect to the local’s political conundrums, most of which have been revolving around the problem of the internal armed conflict. More particularly, the confession also serves to somewhat fix, as it were, the semantic field of the song as a whole, a privilege (or perhaps disenchantment?) that is seldom available to a critic. In this sense, unlike the case of “La Tierra del Olvido,” where the cryptic use of “olvido” maintains the song wide open to interpretation, in “Satanás,” possible hermeneutic readings become a lot more limited due to Álvarez’s unexpected confession. However, diverse, or even diverging, readings are still possible. At a first general glance—taking into account that, at the time of Santos’s first election, his presidency promised to actually be a third presidential period of Uribe’s Democratic Security, though now in the head of Uribe’s former Minister of Defense himself—Álvarez’s song can be initially read as a scathing critique not just against Santos, but more generally also against Uribe, his political points of view, and the actual implementation of those points of view. In other words, it could be read as a critique against what is locally dubbed as Uribismo, which is the name given to the political ideology associated with Uribe’s points of view, and which—as most political ideologies—promises to constitute the way to utopia.

Even if Santos’s bid for the presidency was largely understood as a continuation of Uribe’s policies, the then candidate was sure to also imprint his campaign with a complementary message, in the sense that after an eventual military victory over the guerrillas (Uribe’s alleged ultimate wish and promise), there would finally come a time in Colombia of unprecedented prosperity. This is why Santos dubbed his own governmental plan Prosperidad Democrática (i.e., Democratic Prosperity), a name that resonated in obvious ways with Uribe’s flagship policy, Democratic Security. This way, Santos’s campaign presented Democratic Prosperity as the natural next stage of Democratic Security. In “Satanás,” one finds what seem to be obvious connections with Santos’s promise of prosperity, once one takes into account Álvarez’s confessed analogy. Lyrics like “Satan, you're a good man, you’re righteous and honest, for our family you’ll provide,” or “Satan, when you become president, you will give comfort to the people, they will have justice and equality,” thus appear straightforwardly related to the typical promises of many political
campaigns, including, of course, the one led by Santos in 2010. Álvarez’s own political predilection is enough to conclude that, if Satan here means Santos, the lyrics, somewhat like the sounds (see Chapter 4), are to be understood as ironic. But even if the analogy hadn’t been verbally confirmed, the general semantic field revolving around the word or signifier “Satan” provides the elements to arrive at the same conclusion. In Eco’s semiotic terms, many cultural codes in which the word “Satan” is the expressive term of the code tend to associate this term with allegedly the worst of existing beings, which is to say that no real good can come from it. Accordingly, such evil could not really provide the long waited prosperity and equality to large portions of the Colombian population. In this sense, Satan providing prosperity would be contradictory, hence the irony.

There’s also the possibility of understanding such statements, not as evidently ironic, but rather as straightforward, even natural, ideas. This understanding is possible if one takes into consideration that popular image of the sellout of one’s soul to the devil. This image could provide an explanatory frame for other portions of the song’s lyrics. Consider, for instance, the following few lines: “Satan, you’re the man of my life”; “Satan, let me shave your beard, let me wash your clothes, I want to serve you and dance”; “Satan, I will be a member of your lodge”; or lastly and eloquently, “Satan, take me with you to hell, we’ll be united and eternal, I will dedicate my devotion.” Taking such lines into account, one could understand the expectation of finally acquiring prosperity as a result of the infamous bargain. Yet the idea that Satan is an honest and righteous man who will bring justice and equality clearly goes beyond the scope of a transaction that is usually understood as egotistic in nature, that is, one not particularly seeking a communal, but rather an individual welfare. I believe it is the equivalence between Satan and a politician that provides a logical sense to such contradictions, many of which are evidently ironic in nature. What “Satanás,” in the end, is perhaps depicting through its murky and slightly surreal rhetoric is that very Colombian phenomenon wherein citizens end up casting their vote either because of their naive belief in usually non-structural, short-term promises, or as a result of an actual bargain in which the vote has been literally bought by the politician’s campaign.219 Through this connotation, the song might be ultimately

219 In Colombia, “vendió el voto por un tamal” is a famous expression that is used colloquially to describe such a practice. It literally means that someone sold his or her vote for a tamal. Tamal is a famous and inexpensive, nowadays widely craved, local dish that is associated with poor, usually rural, populations. Here, the use of tamal seeks to advert to the terrible fact that such a valuable right—the right to elect who will govern a community of people—could be traded for a cheap and especially temporary good. Yet I
understood as a critical commentary on the incomprehensible phenomenon whereby many (in this case) Colombian citizens either abandon or don’t realize their potential critical outlook towards the nation’s situation, caving repeatedly to a well crafted mirage, constructed repeatedly by a political elite.

Beyond the general political sense of the song that I’ve been discussing, I would like to point out a few specific details of the lyrics, the imagery, and the music itself that I believe connect in provocative ways with the mythic construction of the Caribbean region in general (as found, for example, in Vives’s songs) and of its music in particular (as painstakingly explained both in Hernández, 2015 and Wade, 2002220). First, [as seen in Chapter 4], “Satanás” is sonically constituted by a well crafted blend of elements that trigger a series of different intermusical associations, for which a precise definition of the genre of the song is difficult to pinpoint, at least in first instance. In other words, there is no clearly established hierarchy wherein a certain set of elements stick out as more prominent than others. The song includes, for instance, timbral elements that connect it with psychedelic pop. Its harmonic and melodic stasis plus playful accompaniment rhythms could make one think it is a children’s song. That same playful accompaniment in staccato,221 in union with its artificial sonic atmosphere and its clownish psychedelic organ triggers associations with some sort of circus ambience. This inextricable sonic blend notwithstanding, the song contains an overall rhythmic base and feel that undoubtedly connects it with the world of cumbia (or cumbias, in plural); an uncanny cumbia, for sure, but a cumbia nonetheless. The association with the Colombian Caribbean and its airs naturally also derives from the knowledge of the band, i.e., the type of musical references it has tended to use, cumbia or vallenato being a prominent one.

Regardless of this knowledge, the song itself ends up revealing its cumbia essence—perhaps more specifically its porro essence—when in the last interlude musical elements that were indices of other musical worlds elsewhere in the song suddenly align themselves with the tropical feel (see Chapter 4.

Once this tropical, festive interlude appears towards the end of the song, the sense of the circus-like ambience that has been pervasive throughout the song appears to suddenly crystallize in more concrete ways. Nicholas Cook (1994 and 1998) argues that meaning in music is almost never concrete, believe that at the same time it also inadvertently points to the fact that hunger is such a primordial necessity to many populations, that for such populations even one meal is at least as valuable as the right to freely vote is to many others not suffering from such shortage.

For additional details, see discussion in Chapter 2.

Here, the bass constitutes an interesting element, for its rhythmic feel and structure participates both of the “circus”/“child” music world and the cumbia world, especially in its chucu chucu version.
but it isn’t completely open to any interpretation either. In other words, within the context of a certain culture in which a certain number of Ecoian musical codes have been established, a set of sonic structures can imply a limited number of possible meanings; a constellation of meanings, if you will, which is normally nevertheless sufficiently ample so as to accommodate a variety of interpretations. In support to his argument, Cook shows how the association of a certain image or set of images with a musical fragment tends to limit the semantic space of this fragment, which is to say that the number of possible meanings reduces significantly because of the appearance of the other expressive medium in relation to the music.

In similar fashion, in “Satanás,” the universe of possible meanings or senses given by the suggestion of circus-like sounds is reduced by the interjection of the still festive, yet more decidedly tropical, fragment. As discussed in Chapter 4, through the apparently disorganized intervention of brass-like instruments above the cumbia-like base, as well as through the simultaneous appearance of what appear to be festive onomatopoeic human shouts, this section clearly alludes to the Colombian tradition dubbed colloquially “bandas de pueblo” (small-town bands). These bands are usually main protagonists of festive occasions, especially those associated with times of carnival. The Caribbean or tropical flavor links this section more specifically with the locally very famous tradition of the “banda pelayera” (bands from the town San Pelayo, located in the Colombian Caribbean region), whose repertoire is mostly constituted by porros, and which is clearly associated with festive occasions or epochs, once more, such as carnivals. Throughout the song one hears a rhythmic base that appears to allude to the Caribbean tradition of cumbia; timbres, synthetic delays and improvisational sections that generate associations with psychedelic and electronic music; playful accompaniment patterns that suggest semantic spaces associated with ideas such as circus, games or children; and—as if any oddness was still missing—a recitative-type of melody that triggers associations with the tradition of Gregorian chant and specifically the practice of psalm recitation. And suddenly, as a sort of coda section, now enters a section that subdues and dissolves all these dissimilar elements into a tropical revelry, which constitutes a clear index of the type of mythic construction of “colombianness as joy” discussed extensively by Hernández (2015).

While the sonic dimension of irony suggested by the combination of these elements was discussed in Chapter 4, it becomes now possible to venture a more specific interpretation of this sonic
irony that seems to materialize in this finale, taking into account on the one hand the lyrics of the song and their political overtones, and on the other hand the imagery of the song’s videoclip (see Figure 41). Perhaps echoing the obvious, yet alluring monotony that characterizes the song (as sound), the imagery of this videoclip is unchanging. It basically shows—against a blue background—a drawing of an anthropomorphized goat, standing up in two bended feet, and dressed in tuxedo. The goat is, of course, a symbolic representation of Satan himself. With what appears to be a smiley face, the goat holds a Colombian flag on one of its hands (or paws?), while pointing the other one upwards. The goat is wearing an elongated crown that has a flower inside, and a thought-box with a question mark appears on the right hand side of its head, perhaps so as to depict it as clueless. Throughout the videoclip, the only elements that move are its eyes (which open and close), its right hand (which moves up and down), and the question mark (which likewise ascends and descends). All three elements move always at the same time and in the same fashion. Yet the rhythm of the animation is not synchronized with the sonic events of the song, at least not in obvious ways.

![Figure 41. “Satanás” by Meridian Brothers: art from music video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efsowswXggM)

We have, in sum, a clumsy obsessive animation of a candid and elegant, clueless goat version of Satan, accompanying an oddly gelatinous cumbia that explodes at the end in a carnivalesque band porro.

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222 taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efsowswXggM
whose lyrics constitute a surrealist, ironic ode to a recently elected president that promises to deliver prosperity to the Colombian people, a prosperity that will finally arrive once the job of annihilating the left-wing guerrilla that represents the crux of the Colombian problems is done. The combination of the three media appears to clearly crystallize the meaning of the constituted irony: prosperity will certainly not come; this candid leader is actually deceitful and clueless; we should not continue to engage naively, or perhaps apathetically, in tropical revelry, making us believe we are essentially joyful, regardless of the barbaric state of things. In other words—questioning the title of the little piece for guitar duet mentioned in the introduction of this chapter—why do we continue to celebrate in the midst of bullets? The appearance of the words “I want to serve you and dance” towards the middle of “Satanás” is probably uneventful, taking into account the random and awkward nature of the lyrics heretofore. But considering this reading, they turn out to be quite eloquent of the ultimate meaning of the song. Colombians will continue to serve a corrupt political elite that blames all national problems to the existence of a terrorist, left-wing guerrilla, and which uses this well publicized blame for their personal gain. In the end, we still have our joyful tropical music—our porros, our cumbias, our vallenatos, our tropipop—that reminds us of our essentially joyful hearts, and of our beautiful, magical and forgotten land, where all is well.

Álvarez says that “in the end what people want is peace. They want to be calm, they want to eat well, they want to live a comfortable and sophisticated life. And the funny thing is that political imaginaries make us confront each other when in the end we want the same thing.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA) Perhaps this is why “La Tierra del Olvido” is such an icon and such a commercial success and “Satanás” will probably remain an oddity, an anti-icon, if you will. Because Vives’s hit song speaks of that real-magical promise, attempts to sonically provide it, while Meridian’s cult song seeks to comically reveal the actual, unmagical and gruesome reality. If Sevilla et al. (2014) provide us with a general argument regarding Vives’s construction of a colombianness based upon a mythic conception of, in first instance, the Caribbean region, Hernández (2015) offers us a detailed reading that seeks to explain the generalized, mythic idea that Caribbean or Costeño music is joyful or provides joy. I believe “Satanás,” through the sum of the senses suggested by its lyrics and its sounds, can be read as a challenge to, or a critique of, such mythic constructs. As authors like Hernández or Blanco have suggested (or I myself have been suggesting throughout this chapter), these constructs have been politically instrumentalized in diverse ways
throughout the recent history of Colombia. Taking these arguments into account, “Satanás”—serving somewhat as an epitome of the diversity of music found in Rolo ET—can also be read as a critique of such ways of instrumentalization of music or art. It thus constitutes itself as an expression of artistic and political independence, taking evident distance from conventionalized ways of understanding the musical expressions from the Caribbean region. This way, and whether consciously or unconsciously, “Satanás” and Rolo ET contribute to a subtle transformation of sonic codes that are now traditionally associated with a certain universe of ideas, synthesized by Hernández as tropical joy.

Granted, this type of reading could be viewed or criticized as, in a way, a romantic type of reading, in the sense that it idealizes Rolo ET while perhaps unfairly stigmatizing tropipop and especially Vives. It depicts this community of artists and musicians and its artistic production as a sort of uncontaminated space of political expression, somehow magically untouched by, or liberated from, the illusion inflicted upon a majority of citizens by the actors of the political mainstream. Rolo ET’s critical, arguably oftentimes ironic, stance—achieved by a particular quirky use of codal constructs—is here viewed as signifying a sort of resistance against the typical manipulation by the traditional political powers. In the same way that in Latin America in the 1970s salsa was construed by intellectuals as the appropriate revolutionary music, while at the same time chucu chucu was frowned upon by these same intellectuals as illusory, commercial music (i.e., kitsch!); the present reading tends to give Rolo ET a sort of intellectual license, at least in terms of its political significance, while conceiving of tropipop as politically dangerous because of its contribution to the emotional maintenance of the political veil. At the same time, this reading also feels convenient if one is a romantic of the traditional—sometimes forgotten, sometimes ignored—significance of cumbia as a music or an expression of resistance. From the allegedly vulgar commercialization of cumbia’s most tacky version, chucu chucu, in the 1970s; passing through the also tacky and tastelessly emotional nostalgic versions of the 1990s (see Wade, 2002, Ch. 8); and finally wrapped, as it were, in the mellow and cosmetic, tropipop versions of the 2000s (not to mention the purely digital, electronic versions that filled national and international EDM nightclubs in the same decade), cumbia is seen in the present reading as finding once more its original expression of resistance in the oftentimes extraterrestrial versions of Rolo ET. The reading thus returns to the sounds their nature of resistance, giving it a particular allure, via the tool of intellectual hermeneutics; hence its danger.
Under this light, then, it seems necessary to consider alternate readings, or contradictory and complementary elements that can account for at least some of the other layers that together constitute the richness and complexity of the studied music in relation to its context. Accordingly, and against the horizon of considering Rolo ET as a critical language or expression with regards to what seems to constitute mainstream political propaganda in Colombia, I would now like to evince how possible readings of Rolo ET like the one being advanced can shift when the phenomenon is viewed from slightly different perspectives. In particular, in the next section I will address the idea of independence, understood both as political and nonpolitical, taking into consideration some thoughts on the matter by Álvarez et al. Using cumbia as the main musical vehicle.

III. The village, the brotherhood, the globe: alternativeness and in(ter)dependence

“Satanás” by Meridian Brothers is a quite peculiar example in Rolo ET of an expression that straightforwardly references political dynamics. Granted, the specific association with Santos is not explicit, yet, as I have shown, the lyrics are quite suggestive in this respect. So while Álvarez is quite reticent when it comes to the relationship between (his) art, (his) music and what he dubs mainstream politics, I believe his activism against the establishment of such a relationship is precisely a demonstration of the type of involvement he is denying. Botero and Galeano, on the other hand, don’t even reference Álvarez’s “mainstream politics” when asked about a possible association between (their) music and politics. Their answers point out to a different type of political involvement, one that does not abide in the music (or art) per se, but that rather arises from the nature of their artistic decisions, in terms of the practical and philosophical ways in which they have managed and approached their projects. Generally speaking, their emphasis regarding the political significance of their musical career and projects (and here Álvarez joins them emphatically) is on two interrelated issues: independence and recognition. Now, while in the case of Rolo ET one could say that the issue of independence connects deeply with perhaps a more general (and thus less specifically situated) philosophical and political position, the issue of recognition is contrariwise related to a more specific phenomenon revolving around identity and minorities, both important aspects of recent political activity worldwide.
First, with regards to the issue of independence, Galeano constantly stresses the fact that their music does not tend to circulate through the traditional channels controlled by the big corporations of the music industry. "We are totally outside the record industry and the radio," he comments, and highlights the role the internet has played in the development and eventual success of their projects: "it is the internet that gave us [an] empowerment." (TroPs, 2016; TBA) For him, beyond the artistic or musical content of the products per se, it is the action of the artist or musician that is charged with a political significance: "the decisions that you make [in terms of] what music you record, how you record, how you release the album, where you play, what kind of graphic art you [choose for your] product, your work . . . all [these things] contain a message that doesn’t have to be said in a pamphlet. You don’t have to [explicitly] say it: ‘this or that is representing independence or the alternative.’ No, because, in and of themselves, things are making a comment on the political moment." And he adds that “[the fact that we decided] to make our albums independently rather than going after the big mainstream record companies knocking on the door for fifteen years, that is a political act . . . counterbalancing the establishment.” (Idem; emphasis added)

Botero likewise stresses artistic independence, at first instance also as a sort of political statement directed towards an established structure of power, which could be colloquially summarized as “us, the weak independents” versus “them, the powerful mainstream,” or David versus Goliath. He accordingly asks himself: "if they can do it, why can’t I [do it]. And why rather not do something altogether. And why, instead of believing in such and such festivals, do our own festival; why instead of believing in other labels, make our own label; instead of believing in that or other music, make our own music. Why do we have to wait for them to invite us to play, instead of inviting ourselves to play. This is where I think the social function of [this type of projects] is.” (Idem; TBA) Botero’s reflection regarding independence goes, however, slightly beyond that purely political understanding. In a somewhat romantic fashion, he also points out to a more philosophical or perhaps existential aspect of artistic independence, understanding it as the only way to express the authentique uniqueness of a human being, irrespective of any specific identity. For him, “it is not so much [about] creating ‘ourselves’ but creating ‘yourself.’ Everyone has something important to say and to do.” (Idem; TBA, emphasis added)
From just these few comments, one can easily see how both the ideological position of Álvarez et al. regarding the issue of artistic independence as well as the corresponding actions and decisions deriving from that position resemble the recent ideological and active dynamics of the so called indie music genres around the world.\footnote{For an overview of the dynamics and nature of indie music genres, see Dolan (2010), which is also briefly discussed in Chapter 2.} As Dolan (2010) points out, anything defined as “independent” can only do so if it compares itself to another space which is not considered independent. In other words, in the recent dynamics of the music industry, the idea of independence exists fundamentally because of the existence of an (admittedly vague) idea of a mainstream. Independence can only define itself against that mainstream, a fact that is confirmed by Galeano’s insistence on proudly expressing his and his friends distance from the mainstream music industry. Now, in addition to the cited comments, a quick glance at the characterization of the platforms, social spaces, and/or labels that have supported a significant portion of Rolo ET’s music confirms the association or membership with the aforementioned musical category. Consider, for instance, the general description of the Distritofonica, a collective of Rolo artists and musicians that provided the space, resources, and symbolic brand to the early productions of, for example, Meridian Brothers:

Distritofonica is born in the year 2004, with the goal of generating a supporting platform for the independent music of Bogotano young musicians whose aesthetic parting point is the encounter between the traditional languages of the coasts, the interior and urban musics (jazz, rock, electronic, erudite), in order to develop an open and plural language, consistent with the guidelines of contemporary musical avant-gardes.\footnote{“La Distritofonica nace en el año 2004 con el fin de generar una plataforma de apoyo a la música independiente de jóvenes músicos bogotanos que toman como punto de partida estético, el encuentro entre los lenguajes tradicionales de las costas, el interior y las músicas urbanas (jazz, rock, electrónica, erudita), para desarrollar un lenguaje abierto y plural consecuente con los lineamientos de las vanguardias musicales contemporáneas.” Taken from: \url{http://www.ladistritofonica.com/es/quienes-somos/la-distritofonica/quienes-somos} (accesed on11/2/16)} (TBA, emphasis added)
Consider, likewise, the description of Soundway Records, the British label that has supported most of the most recent production of projects that are well within the orbit of the space I’ve defined as Rolo ET like Meridian Brothers, Ondatrópica, or Los Pirañas:

“Soundway Records is a British-based independant [sic] record label founded and run by English DJ and music producer Miles Cleret. It started in 2002 with the release of a compilation of Ghanaian music from the 1970s: "Ghana Sounds: Afrobeat, Funk & Fusion in ’70s Ghana". Since then the label has released a series of critically acclaimed compilation albums and re-issues of African, Caribbean, Latin and Asian music from the 1950s - 1980s. These include the well-received Nigeria Special, Ghana special & Kenya Special compilation albums that Cleret spent years compiling. Since 2012 the label has issued a series of original contemporary releases as well as re-issuing older music.”

(emphasis added)

Both descriptions overlap significantly, even though they explicitly reference and focus on apparently different musical worlds. But this appearance is only accurate—actually quite obvious—if one focuses solely on the trivial fact of, say, geography. For one can also see in those descriptions an analogical relationship that arises from understanding the relative positions of subjects and sites of production on the one hand, and of the musical materials or cultures of interest on the other. Educated, middle-to-high class, folks of Bogota and England would represent the former, while traditional and/or alternative musical cultures and practices of the periphery, thus understood in relation to those urban centers, would represent the latter. The term periphery, in this case, would not only be conceived of in purely geographical or cultural terms, but also conceptually, as signifying alternative and avant-garde musical languages.

Now, underlying both descriptions is also the crucial issue of the search for, or the question about, authenticity, even if most likely as an ideological chimera or an idealistic aspiration. Hernández (2009) has already addressed this issue with regards to the phenomenon of young educated musicians

225 https://www.soundwayrecords.com/about (accesed on 11/2/16)
from Colombian urban centers (particularly Bogota), who in the late 1990s and early 2000s started to increasingly seek and establish closer relations with traditional musicians from Colombian provinces, particularly in the Caribbean and Pacific regions of the country. In his study, Hernández concluded that authenticity was a key component of this dynamic. As is largely the case of indie music genres, the search of these youngsters was also a search for their roots. Hernández found that for these youngsters authenticity was perhaps the principal defining feature of all “true” roots and, by extension, of all “true” artistic expressions.

Dolan (2010) comments extensively and emphatically on this aspect and its workings within indie music genres, particularly in Anglo indie pop. As in the dynamics of the phenomenon Hernández studied in Colombia, authenticity seems to be a crucial component of said genres. It is, however, also quite problematic, or, in Dolan’s words, paradoxical. Glossing a theme widely developed by Lawrence Grossberg throughout his work on rock and roll, Dolan here reminds us how the history of rock can be understood as a history of increasing and decreasing authenticities. In short, what this means is that within the formal or informal spheres of rock criticism, musical production has been valued depending on how “authentic” the music is perceived to be. This value judgment becomes particularly crucial in indie music, whose defining feature is the search for achieving an authentic, rootsy sound, an approach and spirit that allegedly opposes the logic of a mainstream music industry whose main goal is achieving commercial success above anything else.

Of course, this idealistic approach is not devoid of controversy. Dolan, for instance, sees a paradox in much of indie pop, which I believe would apply to indie music in general. For her, in both its sounds and its defining rhetoric, this music “depends upon, and simultaneously deconstructs the concepts of authenticity and truth.” (Dolan, 2010, p. 458) As is evident from the analysis of the sound world I have been advancing throughout this work, in the case of Rolo ET there is little of the intention found in much of Anglo indie pop of achieving a lo fi quality of sound, which constitutes the most significant sonic index of the underlying aesthetic of authenticity driving that artistic enterprise. But as seen especially in Chapter 2, many techniques in Rolo ET music do tend to intentionally reference or point towards what would constitute “authentic” cultural expressions or “true,” uncontaminated folk roots, even if sometimes in ironic fashion, as suggested in Chapter 4. Perhaps what is most particular of these
independent musicians and their projects in relation to this issue of authenticity, at least with respect to the repertoire analyzed by Dolan, is their use of sophisticated musical languages and techniques, many of which are clearly hi fi, even though the consciously sought sonic results appear sometimes quirky or even clumsy, i.e., technically lo fi. In “indie” Rolo ET, then, authenticity appears in unique ways. It does so through sophisticated and technological sonic innovation whose inspiration lies nevertheless always in cultural “roots” that are oftentimes invisibilized in the mainstream channels of music circulation. On the other hand, authenticity and truth, as philosophical principles, are expressed by the sole fact of choosing to be independent; of choosing to make those roots visible, albeit innovatively. It appears to be, in the end, a chain of authenticities: the uncontaminated and thus authentic traditional roots seem to find in projects like those of Rolo ET their true descendancy; but not because they sound the same, but because they develop their sounds “truly,” allegedly outside commercial considerations.

Now, this stance is again obviously an idealistic one, and Rolo ET protagonists are not unconscious of this fact. Contradictions naturally arise when either the critic or the artist tries to sustain readings that depict a given artistic enterprise, like Rolo ET, as, say, ethically unstained, whether this cleanness is political, economical, or otherwise. The discussion around authenticity has, of course, many pitfalls, and the stance according to which, in music circles, establishing a relationship with the big labels is automatically a sign of fakeness or a compromise of one’s authenticity is quite problematic. Dolan points out two perhaps contradictory issues hiding behind the typical discourses of authenticity within indie pop that I think are pertinent to the present context: one regards the economic model of production and distribution, and the other one regards the perils of the appearance of elitism precisely where the idea of mainstream subsides. I shall return to the latter issue in the closing sections of the chapter. First, some comments regarding the problem with the economic model.

Citing rock scholar Keir Keightley, Dolan signals the unavoidable fact that music circulation and trading in indie music does not and can not escape the logic of the late twentieth century economic system, and that the distance from that logic is only a matter of degree: “indie rock’s valorisation of non-major label productions and of the act of purchasing music directly from bands themselves at gigs, missed the fact that indie and mainstream musical consumption are both part of consumer capitalism, different only in the degree of their complicity. Indie rock is defined by its concern for the scale of
consumer capitalism, rather than by its radical rejection of an economic system. This concern with reduced scale may also be glimpsed in indie culture’s investment in the miniature: in boutique record stores, 45 rpm singles, small runs of home-made cassettes, or the reverent recreation of miniature models of past eras or albums.  

(Keir Keightley in Dolan, 2010, p. 460)

In short, the fact that a certain circle of musical production and distribution decides to distance itself from, or to not be dependent upon, the economic infrastructure provided by the big corporations of the music industry does not mean that there logic of transaction is essentially different. This is a fact of which Rolo ET protagonists are quite conscious. Álvarez et al. know, in other words, that their enterprise still follows a capitalist logic, and so the transparency or authenticity of their art cannot be accounted for through an understanding of their activity as that of, say, a non profit organization. Álvarez, in particular, feels that we are presently born inside a system from which there is no current escape. While he is obviously unsympathetic with this system, he feels that there is no real option but to fight it from the inside. When we are born, he says, we are already in hold in the neck by what he dubs “the economic claws.” So, simply put, in order to physically survive—in this particular case by producing your own music—you must abide by the rules of the system. Botero thinks similarly, actually subscribing to Álvarez’s thoughts on the matter. Accordingly, and beyond internal ideological conundrums, he shows what I believe is simply a practical stance with regards to the issue of the economic system. Botero believes that there is currently “an international interest in what is happening here [in Colombia]; there is a fetish around it.” He then adds that, given that interest and the economic opportunities it generates, “you can easily decide whether you want to ride that wave because you also want to make a living from [the production of your own music]. You want to generate an industry. In the long run, [in other words], you also want to buy your groceries with that thing.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA, emphasis added)  

Keightley’s succinct description of the type of activities that are characteristic of the indie music circles actually describes almost literally many of the activities adopted by Rolo ET, both with respect to its musical production and to the distribution of the musical products. Perhaps no other quote can be as eloquent in showing Rolo ET’s (probably conscious) allegiance to the indie music worlds that have been developing around the globe, indistinctly of the sonic results as such. Dolan adds a comment regarding the fetiche of the obscure collection that strengthens the connection with Rolo ET, particularly when one thinks of Galeano’s activities as a music lover and collector. She writes, “devoted indie fans rarely confine their research to indie music. Rather, any music, particularly that shrouded in obscurity, may pique the curiosity of the indie listener: forgotten albums of the 1970s, psychedelic Brazilian music, jazz, early music, . . . All of this is to say that the actual process and work of collecting indie music is an essential part of the process of creating the indie aesthetic.” (Dolan, 2010, p. 465)
These few comments show an evident awareness that their enterprise necessarily follows a capitalist logic, and that, in the end, they do want to make a living from their musical production. But it remains nevertheless important for them that their entrepreneurial activities are independent from the mainstream channels, even if this decision implies working with international labels from the Western power centers, like, for instance, Soundway Records or the project Incubator.\textsuperscript{227} Now, such a decision might appear to be generating a further contradiction or paradox, given that, as Álvarez comments, their projects constitute what in legal or political terms is currently known as a minority, partly because of their independence from the financial and logistic support of the mainstream companies. Alongside other similar (even overlapping) artistic and musical projects, the group of artists whose production I here have dubbed Rolo ET is ultimately seeking to be recognized and legitimized. They not only want to do so independently. A crucial feature of this “minority,” for which they want to be recognized, is their allegiance to both their territorial and cultural region: whether it’s Bogota, Colombia, or—significantly—Latin America. So achieving that recognition and legitimation as an independent, say, Latin American musical or artistic minority (which, as Botero’s comment about the fetish around Colombia’s independent scene suggests, has already been happening), could be seriously questioned if significant parts of its support comes from non-Latin American grounds.

Galeano, however, does not see a problem or contradiction in the fact that many of his projects or those of his colleagues have been produced outside Colombia, usually with the financial and logistic support of international labels or companies. “Why?” he asks, “because we are not part of the record world of Colombia. We are not in Warner, we are not in Sony, we are not in the radio stations, we are completely outside of that Colombian industry.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA) It is obvious from his comment that this industry is, in fact, not Colombian at all, but rather the local space of the transnational mainstream.

\textsuperscript{227} Incubator is the project that provided support to Frente Cumbiero’s project of producing an album alongside Dub legend Mad Professor. The description on its facebook page is as follows: “Incubator is the new project that the British Council develops between Latin America and Great Britain, in order to create a dynamic network between producers and emergent Latin American and British musicians, so as to become a platform for the interchange and collaboration between musical talents from both music industries.” (British Council, Facebook page for Latin American countries, 2008; TBA) Original text is: “Incubator es el nuevo proyecto que el British Council desarrolla entre América Latina y el Reino Unido, con la finalidad de crear una red dinámica entre productores y músicos emergentes latinoamericanos y británicos, y convertirse en una plataforma de intercambio y colaboración entre los talentos de ambas industrias musicales.” Taken from: https://www.facebook.com/notes/british-council-venezuela/incubator-presenta-powering-the-music-industry/33445856919/ (accessed on 11/2/16)
music industry. On the other hand, he stresses the fact that—despite being located in the center powers of the world—the labels, companies, and projects that have supported many of the musical production of the Rolo ET combo represent the independent music industry. It would appear, then, in other words, that the philosophical, ideological, and aesthetic aspects that drive the artistic enterprise are considerably more meaningful than purely geographical or cultural considerations. Yet Galeano’s ideological defense does not hide the fact that perhaps practical issues sometimes make ideals inevitably succumb. Galeano himself points out that, for instance, vinyl pressing—a particularly famous pursue of current independent musical scenes—is unfortunately not available in Colombia, and is hardly available elsewhere in Latin America. Ultimately, whether the defense of establishing relationships with labels from traditionally hegemonic centers is philosophical (i.e., the sharing of ideals) or practical (i.e., certain resources are only found there), the goal of expressing and representing a certain cultural identity remains a top priority for these musicians. In this line, Galeano tends to downplay the significance of their involvement with international independent labels. For him, the fact that Bogota remains the home base of these musicians is, for instance, not trivial. It constitutes a significant symbol of an independence that is not purely abstract or ideological, but rather highly committed with their cultural identity. These thoughts inevitably raise the question about the particular dynamics and significance of identity within Rolo ET, which must be necessarily addressed before attempting to draw some conclusive remarks about the various facets revolving around the political significance of Rolo ET.

IV. The village, the hood, the globe: the voice of which brotherhood? The voice of which margins? (return to elite kitsch)

Up to this point, I have attempted to show some ways in which the music, the activities, and the ideology of the members of Rolo ET suggest different type of engagements with, and conceptions about, Rolo ET’s surrounding context, particularly in relation to politics. Through a hermeneutic reading of two iconic songs of the genres tropipop and tropidelia, I have suggested the appearance of two contrasting visions of Colombia thereof: an idealistic, magical one versus an apocalyptic, cynical, one, which could be interpreted as a critique of the first one. I have then shown how Rolo ET members have consciously engaged in a particular way of addressing the activities of musical production and distribution, which
shows evident connections with the dynamics of the various worlds of so called indie music around the globe. I have shown that, in addition to a fetish for the traditional and/or the obscure, perhaps the most significant coincidence has to do with the particular value given to independence, which is defined mostly with respect to the established rules of the mass music industry. However, as with indie music in general, in the case of Rolo ET, independence from that system also seeks to guarantee the enough freedom so as to not sacrifice authenticity. At first, then, independence is understood as an ethical or philosophical principle, irrespective of cultural particularities. And for Rolo ET protagonists, such an attitude, plus the coherent actions that derive from it, constitute in and of themselves the most eloquent political manifesto.

Now, as discussed especially in Chapter 2 and throughout portions of the present chapter, I believe that the type of musical referents that are appreciated distinctly by Rolo ET members, as well as the eventual musical choices and processes that define the particular sound world of their different projects, suggest that the topic of identity is at the crux of the whole Rolo ET enterprise. In other words, there is a conscious and keen interest on the part of the members of Rolo ET in constructing and solidifying a creative space that is representative and expressive of a certain identity. In the end, even if the idea of artistic independence could be understood in purely abstract terms, that is, regardless of specific cultural concerns; in the case of Rolo ET, independence is inextricably tied to the search for both the expression and the recognition of a particular identity construct. In more colloquial terms, in Rolo ET independence is not only a matter of keeping a distance from the transnational processes of mainstream musical production, but crucially also a matter of being distinguished from and against the hegemonic powers that forged the economic system within which cultural goods nowadays are forced to transit. Rolo ET is not only allegedly engaged in a philosophical and ideological battle against that system, but also allegedly engaged in a political and ideological battle against the lingering phenomenon of colonialism. In Rolo ET, then, the word independence is crucially twofold, signifying both artistic or creative independence, as well as political independence and recognition.

In musical or artistic terms, Álvarez et al. point out to the fact that, historically, artistic artifacts have tended to gain acceptance in many peripheral regions of the world like Colombia only after they have been celebrated, assimilated, and eventually also produced in Western centers of power like Europe or the United States. This need for foreign legitimation is, for them, a pernicious sign of cultural
dependence. And even though (or perhaps because) it has become a habit that is difficult to destroy, Álvarez et al. feel that changing this phenomenon should be an important part of the goal of peripheral artistic movements that seek to be as independent as the “economic claws” allow them to be. Galeano puts it this way:

“They have always wanted to tell us that artistic movements come from outside—that this artistic movement was made in London, that psychedelia is from San Francisco, that punk was born in New York, that the French school of composition… And all this Eurocentric theme, which is a discourse we must begin to overcome, which we must begin to tackle… I think that, beyond the musical content as such, that’s the great strength [this movement] has… There are a lot of people here who have projects, and each of them will have different influences: one will be more electronic, another one more acoustic, one more vocal, another one more instrumental… And to be able to reach a common ground so as to constitute a School is very tough… We nevertheless group ourselves around this concept of ‘New Colombian Musics’ [his scare quotes], and that’s what makes us feel that something is happening… [Addressing the audience]: the mere fact that you are here—50, 60 people—already speaks of something very interesting that is happening.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA)

For Álvarez, the whole artistic movement or enterprise is likewise linked to a desire of decolonization. As briefly touched upon in Chapter 3, with respect to the subject of psychedelia, Álvarez strongly highlights the value of various types of innovations that took place in Latin America throughout the 1960s and 1970s: first, the emergence and development of the “dubbing” techniques that took place.

228 For Botero, the issue of legitimation is inherent to the economic system in which the cultural goods are produced, distributed, and consumed. In this respect, he argues that, “as long as we keep insisting in that we have to have records, in that we have to sell them, and in that we have to pay for a ticket to go to a concert, which is fine, then legitimation is something inherent to this process [the process of creating, producing, and distributing music].” (TroPs, 2016; TBA) In this sense, whether external or internal, international or local, legitimation will continue to be a factor in musical creation, for which complete independence of such concerns remains only a chimera.

229 Comments were collected in the context of an open-door talk, for which Álvarez et al. often talked explicitly addressing the corresponding attendants.
in Jamaica, and that eventually had a crucial influence in the developments of most current popular
musics around the world; second, the stylistic innovations with regards especially to the ways of using the
electric guitar in cumbia, which took place in Peru and imbued that genre with that very particular
psychedelic flavor that is the signpost of precisely the Peruvian brand of cumbia; and third, the conceptual
and sonic experimentations of Brazilian Tropicalia, which sought to merge both local and international
musical elements of the time in an innovative and politically provocative style with a particular identity.
Álvarez signals these developments as crucial references for contemporary artistic and musical
enterprises of the Latin American subcontinent that, like Rolo ET, are sincerely seeking to create a
cultural expression authentically grounded in, and truly representative of, its surrounding human context.
For Álvarez, these examples or referents show us that the issue of the provenance of the resources is, in
the end, irrelevant. In other words, it doesn't matter if technological or musical resources like the electric
guitar, computers, or even sound referents like psychedelic timbres, are not originally from a particular
territory or culture. As long as one assimilates and appropriates oneself of these resources in ways that
are meaningful and connected to the human cultural fabric that is the source of the creation, the artistic
results will embody that particular identity in the best possible manner. In this sense, the allegiance with
foreign labels does not automatically delegitimize these goals, especially if said allegiance does not imply
the sacrifice of the independence needed to authentically pursue said goals, but rather stimulates it.

Now, in practice, Álvarez et al. believe that the internet has been a key factor in the emergence of
independent phenomena like Rolo ET. It has empowered such independent enterprises, although still
only to a certain extent, given that the aforementioned phenomenon of foreign legitimation remains in
place. For Álvarez, the acceptance of any music (whether we're talking of a given a genre, a style, or a
band) passes first through a subjective feeling of trust. If one is convinced that this or that music is good,
i.e., trusts in it, then the music is accepted and therefore valued and consumed. But for him, the issue of
trust sometimes is like a myth. This idea explains why the international acceptance of a given music then
derives in its local acceptance, when at first the latter didn't exist. That international acceptance creates a
myth around the music. The same artifact is suddenly valued differently. So, for Álvarez, automatic trust in
the value and quality of the music is a key component in the process of decolonization. And internet is a
key resource in generating that trust, without the need of first passing the test, so to speak, of hegemonic
channels. He puts it this way: “one of the first factors of de-colonization is trust, because trust in itself is what makes that a collective group start producing better and more refined culture. . . . Internet is the only thing that creates that trust, that myth of trust, in which, yes, the music made by Bomba Estereo is in fact good. That’s the myth: [that] the music is good.” (TroPs, 2016; TBA)

Ideally, then, aided by less supervised channels of communication such as the internet, the emergence of this new independent trust empowers and stimulates the growth and sustenance of musical or artistic independent projects such as Rolo ET, which are cemented in, and expressive of, a particular cultural milieu. And eventually, this stability translates into actual recognition, which in the end is probably the ultimate political goal of peripheral artistic movements such as Rolo ET: to restore at least some balance to the equation of power relationships between center and periphery. As Álvarez comments:

All this [enterprise] seeks to go to the same place social movements go: feminism, the gender movement, minority movements. In the end, we also are a Latin American music minority. . . . Of course, for minorities, the issue is about legal representation: that they may be recognized as an indigenous group, that they may be recognized, I don't know, as equal marriage. So in the same way, for us, it's about being recognized as industry. That’s what this is all about. . . . They [now] name us, they recognize us, and that is like having legal representation. It's having achieved something. (TroPs, 2016; TBA)

Taking into account the elements heretofore discussed, Rolo ET could be synthetically characterized as a more or less defined conglomeration of artists and musical projects based in Bogota, whose musical production and ideology suggest a critical standpoint with regards to the most recent political events in Colombia; whose musical and entrepreneurial choices are meant to express a posture that defends and enacts artistic independence and authenticity; whose artistic enterprise seeks to constitute an example of a peripheral artistic practice that succeeds at achieving recognition without having followed canons imposed by the cultural centers of powers; and one of whose central preoccupations is, accordingly, to contribute to a process of cultural decolonization in their home ground. From this characterization, one can see how Rolo ET seems to be peripheral in more than one way, or,
differently put, periphery—in a political sense—seems to be at the crux of the Rolo ET enterprise. Both through its musical production and ideology, Rolo ET tends to consciously and proudly constitute itself as peripheral or marginal. In terms of musical style and musical production and distribution, for example, Rolo ET is clearly located at the margins of both the local and global spaces of musical consumption. The various coincidences between the modes of operation of indie musics and Rolo ET constitute another example of this desire to be understood as marginal, understood here in a positive way.

Clearly conscious of this fact, Rolo ET members consider themselves as constituting a minority, or—as expressed by Álvarez above—sometimes even posit themselves as representing a minority. But which minority they represent remains unclear. Or rather, the type of minority they could be allegedly constituting or representing appears to mutate depending on the scale of view one chooses to consider. For example, with respect to the global community, Rolo ET could be considered an index of Latin America in general, a subcontinent that, politically speaking and with respect to the whole of the international community, could be conceived of as allegedly marginal. But within Latin America itself, Rolo ET participates of a series of independent and alternative musical enterprises that exist throughout different urban centers of the subcontinent, and which represent a minority within that grand cultural landscape. A similar situation emerges when analyzing Rolo ET’s position within the context of Colombia alone, when judged with respect to, for example, tropipop, vallenato, or reggaeton. And, even more significantly, Rolo ET constitutes a minority within the recent musical movement dubbed NCM (New Colombian Musics; see Chapter 1), a movement considered to be a minority in and of itself in the Colombian context. In other words, Rolo ET seems to contain several identity types, all of them marginal, which emerge or submerge according to the context being considered. Who is, then, this “us” Álvarez is referring to, which has achieved a certain degree of recognition? Who does Rolo ET represent?

One could venture several answers. One could follow some romantic vestiges inhabiting the thoughts of Álvarez et al. and say that Rolo ET seeks to represent a particular type of “Latin American-ness.” That its cumbia or salsa sounds carry with them the essence of the Latin American soul, which transcends the borders of any given nation. Or one could say that the clumsy, quirky sounds through which, say, cumbia and vallenato are sometimes expressed, arguably in ironic fashion, are representing the voice of many who consciously or unconsciously are critical of the current situation of the Colombian...
nation. Or one could equally argue that Rolo ET represents the voice of a sophisticated urban minority of Latin American or Colombian alternative youngsters, who seek to express their allegiance to both their idealized rural or indigenous roots and their Anglo-flavored countercultural upbringing. Or one could alternatively say that Rolo ET represents a truly authentic, yet innovative, Colombian folklore; that it cultivates and transforms the forgotten roots and frowned upon popular musics of the Colombian people, and through that cultivation and transformation it pays homage to these musics and their people.

Whatever the case may be, I believe all these answers contain a dose of idealization. For the fact is that the particular sum of desires that together could allegedly be constituting Rolo ET’s ideology and respective production and actions tends to render the artistic enterprise somewhat elitist. Dolan’s claims that “indie’s preoccupation with and fetishisation of the local and the obscure runs the risk of trading the mainstream for elitism,” and that “it has value precisely because it appeals (or appears to appeal) to a smaller elite segment of society” seem quite pertinent in the case of Rolo ET. (Dolan, 2010, p. 460) The interesting mixture that constitutes Rolo ET’s sound world, plus the actual ways its musicians enact their ideological positions regarding art and politics, could well be making that an honest bid for independence, originality or alternativeness be read merely as sophisticated snobbery. Such a reading would in my view be ironic, given that—as seen in Chapter 2—many of these musical projects and their unique developments were in no small part motivated by an anti-academic stance. Shortly put, the formal academic experiences that Álvarez et al. had as young music students in Colombia left a significant imprint in all of them. They were an essential cause of the anti-colonial stance promulgated by many of the members of Rolo ET, who early on found it problematic that formal academic music programs in the country were all modeled according to Western musical canons of music education. So if they considered that such an education tended to inculcate an elitist and snobbish attitude that eventually instills the denigration of local popular musics, the assessment of their set of musical projects as a reverse type of elitism becomes, to be frank, quite ironic.

The issue of representation in Rolo ET remains, then, quite ambiguous, to say the least. The laudable intention of paying homage to until recently devalued Colombian traditional and popular musics is achieved in the sound world in interesting and sophisticated ways. These sounds certainly transcend in these projects, but in that transcending they become devoid of the human fabric where they originated.
So while the sound world of Rolo ET clearly index these musical traditions, they end up not representing the communities and cultures that produced them.

After having opened up a discussion throughout this chapter around the political meanings that can be seen to emerge from the music of Rolo ET, and from the ideology and the correspondent actions of its members, I would now like to offer some final thoughts about my hermeneutically oriented research around these tropical musical projects and their sound world. What have these projects—some more experimental, some more festive, some more extraterrestrial, some more psychedelic—in the end, achieved? How could one round the observations made throughout this work regarding on the one hand the significance and modes of construction of these projects’ sound world, and on the other hand their political significance and dynamics? More generally speaking, what could one say, taking into account the whole of this discussion, about the ways in which sound in music interacts with its context to suggest emergent meanings? What could one say, moreover, about the way established sonic codes are used in order to create old or new meanings within the context of a given cultural ambience? In the following and last section, I venture some preliminary answers to these questions, with the hope of at least partially bringing some closure to my analysis of Rolo ET.

V. EPILOGUE: the alienation of joy or the sonic myth-switching of the Colombian tropical heart

I set out to examine the sound world, musical approaches, and ideological stances of a particular set of musical projects that have been developing in Bogota, Colombia during the past fifteen to twenty years, and that I have here dubbed Rolo Experimental Tropidelia, or Rolo ET. My initial curiosity was triggered by informal commentary about this music, mostly gathered in the local musical scene and throughout the virtual world of internet blogs, youtube videos, and reviews. Part of my goal was to make sense of those descriptions, seeking to understand the mechanisms of signification that enabled the emergence of certain associations, connections, and characterizations in regard to this music. But I also sought to make sense of the reasons why such a particular set of musics were able to bloom as they did at the moment in which they did. In approaching these questions, I was particularly interested in
examining the cultural meanings embedded in Rolo ET’s sound world, attempting to make sense of its particular intermusical choices and of its unique musical approaches. And through the observations gathered about their distinctive musical and ideological rhetorics, I wanted to ultimately offer one possible interpretation of what these rhetorics were ultimately trying to say; I wanted to make some sense of the meaning of Rolo ET, as a current cultural expression.

My account of the sound world of Rolo ET sought to address its intermusical worlds and its coded cultural meanings, as well as the examination of the appearance of unique treatments and re-appropriations of those inherited musical worlds. This account served to corroborate, yet also to offer a nuanced interpretation of the parting conceptual scheme, according to which certain sonic components were metaphorically related to certain ideas in an arguably systematic fashion, and which yielded the adjectives used to describe the musical phenomenon, i.e., experimental (or alien), tropical, and psychedelic. Accordingly, I commented upon the tendency to conventionally associate a unique musical use of technology—particularly with regards to its timbral effects, its tonal un-definition, and its irrational division of time—with various notions related to outer space, robotics, or in-organicity. Similarly, I examined the logic by which timbres and spatial effects that appear to be extracted from the sonic world of psychedelic rock, as well polyrhythmic configurations that yield mind boggling metrical overlappings, could be related to cultural notions of psychedelia and accounts of psychedelic experiences. I, on the other hand, showed the types of tropical (under)worlds typically referenced in this music, and showed some uncanny ways in which they are accounted for in the sonic fabric. I ultimately showed that, while a majority of this music evinces typical tropical rhythmic bases, the unique appropriation of tropical musical materials, together with the cultural meanings associated with the specific intermusical references therein used, yielded a very particular take on this tropical inheritance, which—purposefully playing with words—I dubbed tropical alienness.

Now, since the tropical component is what resides at the heart of Rolo ET, what ultimately, in purely musical terms, contributes to generate an interpretation about Rolo ET’s aesthetic and ideological stance with regards to Colombia’s tropical inheritance is precisely the dynamics between those sound worlds. Both my discussion about musical irony in Rolo ET and the comparative hermeneutic exercise between tropipop and Rolo ET were precisely attempts at making sense of some of these dynamics. If
Rolo ET’s inherited notion about “tropicalness” is, as painstakingly shown by Hernández (2015), strongly and mythically linked to the idea of joy, what is Rolo ET’s musical re-interpretation of this idea? What is Rolo ET saying about “tropicalness,” i.e., about our mythic experience of tropicalness, through the dynamics of their unique sound world? Even if the musical phenomenon of Rolo ET is still too recent and perhaps too stylistically specific, I believe some possible answers can be ventured from their musical proposal itself, if we conceive of those dynamics as seeking to subvert and play with established Ecoian codes of musical signification.

Eco writes that “semantic fields give form to the units of a given culture and constitute a specific organization (or vision) of the world.” Therefore, he adds, “they are submitted to phenomena of acculturation, of critical revision of knowledge, of value crisis.” Finally, using the metaphor of chess to explain these ideas, he writes that “the motion of a piece changes the whole physiognomy of the game.” More technically understood, if within a given established code, “a term modifies the “zone of content” that it usually transmits, other related terms are deprived of “many of their prerogatives of meaning.” (Eco [1976] 2005, 126; TBA) Applying these ideas to the phenomenon of Rolo ET, we could say that the unique appropriations of musical materials that are freighted with culturally constructed meanings is an eloquent example of Eco’s “critical revision of knowledge.” The unique, allegedly extraterrestrial, modification of “musical terms,” the particular troping between styles and intermusics, the ironic rhetoric, all these elements contribute to modifying the “zone of content” of those terms, as defined by previously constructed codes. At the core of Eco’s theory of codes is the fact that these are, because of their cultural grounding, plastic. Yet whenever a code becomes solidly established, usually through the reinforcement of its established correlations, any attempt at “critically revising” it becomes subtly subversive. I believe that part of the success of Rolo ET is that—by actively participating in both culturally asserted codes (i.e., tropical joy or psychedelic subversion) and codes “under construction,” so to speak, (e.g., electronic music)—it can surreptitiously move between embracing the codes and subverting them.

Subverting a code means, in my view, de-naturalizing it. Or, in other words, making its cultural underpinning obviously apparent. As Viktor Shklovsky states, one of art’s fundamental roles is precisely to de-codify: “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the
difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. . . . Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects." (Shklovsky 1917, 16) The fact that, understood as systems of signification, aesthetic objects like music present almost an overlap between their expression and content plane (Eco's ratio difficilis) perhaps contributes to this role. For when the attention can be drawn effectively towards the object per se, its conventionally associated meanings tend to disappear: things are perceived rather than known. Interesting a propos this idea is the fact that part of what psychedelic experiences do is to bring “deep contents of the unconscious into consciousness.” (British LSD researcher Karl Jansen; cited in Reising and LeBlanc, 2008, p. 113) Psychedelic experience commonly provokes “psychic incompatibility with the old order, once certain illusions have been shattered” (Art Kleps; cited in R and L 2008, 116)

I believe the extraterrestrial, experimental, alien (or however one likes to call it) approach by Rolo ET tends to do precisely this: joy has been shattered. Instead of irreflective joy, we live uncanny joy. We ask ourselves about joy, and about whether we should be feeling it or living it or not. In Rolo ET joy is, in other words, alienated (pun intended).
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